

A GUIDE TO ESSAY WRITING AND REFERENCING: WRITING AN ESSAY

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These notes are designed to help students understand the importance of writing during their training at the AA, to understand the nature of an essay, and to provide advice on how best to prepare to write an essay, and how to plan it. It may be that some lucky individual students already possess a proven way of doing this and if this is the case then they can continue with their method and the habits that suit them. But experience teaches us that very few students have thought about the issue carefully and have developed a successful solution to the problems involved. Hopefully this guide will help them to approach the question in an intelligent way.

Architecture and writing

Often students take a negative view of the role of essay writing in their work as students at the AA. I have often heard it said that students feel that their 'real' work as students is design and learning to design. In this sense students often experience the obligation to write essays as a rather unwelcome supplement, as if essay writing is an onerous diversion from their real work. And so the first issue to be addressed is why essay writing is a vital part of a student's work. Firstly, essay writing is central to the overall objective of enabling a student over a five year period, to develop an individual identity not just through their design work but through the capacity to articulate an independent and critical intelligence in respect to architecture. At the end of five years students should know what they think and should be able to justify that in terms of argument. One of the central functions of writing essays is to develop a skill in argument, which is the student's own argument. This skill determines their capacity to explain and justify their own design work and to assess the designs of others. These are skills, they can be learned and the best way to learn them is to practice them. The second point which needs to be made is that professionally speaking, arguing in both speech and in writing is a fundamental dimension of the work of an architect and someone who lacks the skills will soon find themselves severely disadvantaged in practice. To this should also be added the general point that architects need to be able to describe architecture and architectural projects in words whether written or spoken. But the verbal description of architecture is a complex skill. We may think that architecture is best represented by plans, elevations, sections, etc. and we may use various forms of imagery to describe buildings and projects but this does not dispense with the centrality of the word. A student who graduates without having acquired the skill of describing buildings will not be able to animate their relation to architecture with the power of speaking or writing. The essay is a crucial starting point of being able to represent architecture in discourse. It is a skill just as much as drawing.

What is an essay?

An essay is the attempt to answer a question through argument and the presentation of evidence for the argument. In this sense a good essay requires a good question. You cannot write an essay on a topic. It makes no sense to write an essay on the architecture of Michelangelo or of Le Corbusier. A topic is just a title. It provides the student with no definition of the essay - which is a problem to be solved. All that a topic invites is information. But information can never be the basis of an essay even though information has a subordinate role as evidence. This is why from the beginning reliance upon sources of information such as Wikipedia or encyclopaedias, or even scholarly books can never provide the basis of an essay. Of course information or 'facts' are crucial in the field of evidence. You cannot construct a reasonable argument which doesn't have evidence or which runs counter to the evidence. In this sense an essay is by its nature hybrid, it is an argument but one which must appeal to the evidence. In practice this means that every time you use a fact in an essay it must be in support of an argument. An essay then is an answer to a question based upon an argument which in turn justifies itself by reference to evidence or facts.

But what is an argument? This is worth asking because the answer is to some extent counter to the ways in which some educational systems have developed. There are still some systems in which a certain privilege is accorded to an official 'line' whether that is expressed by the lecturer or manifest in a textbook. In this case learning, memorizing, and repeating the 'line' is the desired outcome. If anything the essay would simply be a test to the student's capacity to reproduce the 'line'. This is absolutely what we do not mean by an essay. Taken to an extreme this is actually what we would call plagiarism. Perhaps this is why there is still some confusion about what the AA and other universities mean by plagiarism. Had one been brought up in an authoritarian educational system, the uncritical reproduction of the official 'line', be it the professor's or the textbook's, then what we call plagiarism would presumably be judged as a virtuous form of the completion of an academic task. We do not take this view at all. While we would hope that you find lectures helpful and interesting and while we insist that you read more than you do, the objective of the essay is not to reproduce them but to ask you what you think about them. In this sense the essay is a subjective response to a question. You ask yourself what you think about the question and your essay will be guided by your conclusions. In this way you are using the essay to come to a decision about what you yourself think. This may take the form of agreement with what you've read or it may take the form of violent disagreement. But in either case what is important is what you think. Only in this way can you come to learn what you think. Perhaps you will change your mind next year but this doesn't matter, you will still be using the basic skill of asking yourself what you think now.

We have established that an argument must be made from a subjective point of view. It must be from your point of view. But that does not mean that it is what we might call 'merely subjective'. An essay is not just the dogmatic presentation of personal opinions. While the whole essay is from a subjective point of view, at the same time it is controlled by the need to justify your claims and perhaps to changing your views in the light of the evidence which you have been studying. An argument is different from the expression of an opinion because it is constructed via the use of evidence. The evidence you use will support your argument. Central to the nature of the essay is this connection between the argument and the evidence. To establish your argument you need to select and present evidence that supports it. Sometimes this might involve your need to deal with the fact that your argument is in opposition to other arguments. In this case you will use evidence to reject the opposing arguments. So the fact that the essay is subjective, is your own argument, nonetheless has to be justified in terms of evidence. We might think of evidence as the public space of arguments. My definition of the essay is one which both insists upon its subjective character, that it is your answer and what you think but that this is quite different from it being just a personal expression of feeling and intuitions. You are as it were subjecting your subjectivity to the public forum of evidence. The essay is both subjective and public. You can see then that it follows the basic logic of design- of a private creation transformed into a public object.

Preparing for the essay

Having tried to explain what an essay is, let us look at the stages of preparing for it. Obviously it is here that you will be preparing by consulting a range of sources. It would be too much to call this research but it has about it the elements of research and the skills which you acquire here will enable you to undertake larger projects than just the essay. Assuming that you have attended the lectures and have done the reading indicated by the course bibliographies and assuming that perhaps in conjunction with your tutor, you have formulated an appropriate question at a certain point you will be ready to prepare the essay. You should regard this preparation as a vital and independent stage. Many students still leave no gap between the research they have been doing and starting to write the essay. It is as if they are largely concerned to get the essay 'done'. This is a minor but real piece of insanity. You cannot start writing without knowing what to write. You need to prepare for the essay by thinking about the essay. Some will do this with a piece of paper, some will do it by going for a walk, and some will ask a

friend to listen to their proposal. Each person will probably find a different way of performing this task. You should follow whatever device seems to suit you. But in one way or another it is a vital and indispensable moment. You are asking yourself what you think and you are coming to some sort of conclusion. As we have already implied, those conclusions which will form the outline of your argument need to be fitted together with the evidence for them.

Planning the essay

Many students' essays do the students a real injustice. The essay they produce, one can tell, is not nearly as good as it could have been. This is not necessarily about the quality of the student or the amount of research done, it stems solely from the student's failure to plan the essay and therefore to organize the argument of the essay. They could have done it but they didn't. No one can write an essay expecting to answer the question as a result of just writing it. You must make a clear distinction in your mind between the structure of your argument and the process of writing. In other words you must have a plan which contains both the argument you wish to make and what is a separate issue, the sequence in which you are going to make it. If perhaps out of urgency if you think you will just start writing and hope that the argument will miraculously appear, you will inevitably produce a much poorer essay than you are capable of. You cannot burden the process of writing with too many simultaneous tasks. If we look at this problem carefully we see that there are in effect three quite separate tasks. The first we can call the argument as such or the 'logic' of the argument. You should put down, and it need not take more than half a sheet of paper what the overall argument is and how it connects to different pieces of evidence. The second stage is a somewhat different task - it is how you are going to sequence the first stage in a continuous piece of writing. You may, for example, decide to start the essay in a way which is different from a logical sequence of your argument. Often successful openings concentrate upon the nature of the question rather than stating the logical sequence of the argument. Often conclusions return to the opening paragraph as a way of ending the essay. The end of an essay is rather different from the conclusion of the essay. If the first stage is a plan for the logic of the essay, the second outline concerns a plan of the sequence of the essay- what we might call the rhetoric of the essay. In all events this process of planning the essay should leave you in no doubt about what you are going to argue and how you are going to argue. You are now ready to write the essay, and can now concentrate on the literary task of writing it in as clear and interesting a way as you can. You are no longer burdening the writing with all the other tasks of organization within the essay. You now know at every moment in writing the essay what is coming next. Indeed if you have planned properly, you yourself will no longer be burdened with the anxiety of what you are going to say next. You already know. I would hope at this point that you begin to experience the pleasure which can come from writing. If you experience it as a dreaded punishment, it almost certainly means that you haven't prepared the argument.

The essay and the paragraph

This section is implied by the previous section but looks at the problem from a functional point of view. The essays you are asked to do are really very short. But even in a short piece of writing it is worth breaking it down further into basic units. We might say that the basic unit of an essay is the paragraph. In an essay of say 3,500 words there are only a limited number of paragraphs - perhaps between ten and twelve. There is here a useful convergence between the number of paragraphs and the number of points which you might make in the essay. Each paragraph is the place where you make a point, an element of your overall argument. In this case we can look at the essay overall in which it is useful to think of the first paragraph as a statement of your overall argument. Paradoxically the first paragraph is really a statement of your conclusion. Apart from anything else this makes it much easier on the reader. It is as if the reader is now in the position of immediately seeing what it is overall that you wish to argue. The reader can now understand where you are going in the essay. This is very important. Too often students write essays without any sense that the essay is designed to be read by someone else. Too often one reads an essay which might in itself be full of interesting observations.

But at the same time one has no idea where the essay is going and you begin to suspect that the writer did not either.

These points establish a kind of strategic link between the opening paragraph and all subsequent paragraphs. Indeed what is true of the essay as a whole is true about each paragraph. One can regard each paragraph in terms of an opening sentence which establishes the nature of the point that the rest of the paragraph argues for as well as presenting evidence that supports the argument. This advice should not become a mechanical formula for the essay but it is certainly worth applying it to the plan for the essay. The actual essay will deal with the plan by drawing it back to considerations of the essay in terms of its literary composition. But I have never seen an essay which suffered from too much clarity.

Footnotes and Bibliography

Overall these notes are designed to help students think about how to do an essay. There are of course published guides on how to write an essay but they tend both to be very obvious and not very concerned with how skills of argument and writing are in fact part of the general skill of an architect. But such guides might be useful in establishing a number of conventions such as how to present footnotes and bibliographies. My only observations on these issues would be that footnotes are mostly used by students to identify the source of a quotation. Obviously students must always acknowledge quotations, or they risk being accused of plagiarism. Certainly the correct way to acknowledge a quotation is to provide the source with a footnote. But there are other uses of a footnote. Sometimes one will have some very interesting piece of information which one wishes to express to the reader although it may not be relevant to the argument. It might confuse the reader if it were in the main body of the text. In this case it is better to put it as a footnote and to free the main text from it. Sometimes it is worth putting in your own thoughts in a footnote if they do not directly bear on the argument.

Conclusion

Although these notes were intended to deal with issues which are not usually part of the practical guides to essay writing, they also I hope serve as a justification for the importance of essay writing. An essay is an opportunity to develop your skills in argument and writing. These skills at an intellectual level are an absolute condition of acquiring an independent identity as an architect. Like all skills it is neither natural nor spontaneous, it develops only through and with practice. In professional terms it cannot be overstated how important these skills are. Without them, a student would emerge into a professional world with one hand tied permanently behind his or her back. It is the means through which you will be able to translate your design skills into a public world of architecture. The practice of architecture requires skills of analysis, of advocacy, and of analysis. The architect is by definition a public intellectual. No one can and no one can afford to neglect the centrality of these skills. Their effective employment is one which is both required and rewarded in architecture. I hope you find these notes useful and I am more than willing to discuss them individually with students during the year.