

THIS WORKED FOR ME



Introduction

My friend, and once long time colleague, Dr Kyle Phillipots was generous in writing what follows. He cannot know the impact he has had on my career.

I saw him then, and still do, as someone with intelligence. A deep thinker. Someone whose company I have always enjoyed. He is challenging, yet supportive, bright, with a dry wit.

Had it not been for his actions, I may never have embarked on a more academic path to complement the practical and entrepreneurial parts of my life. In some ways, he inspired me to continue my studies, not through words, but through example.

I still remember him, dressed in a rather ridiculous set of robes and cap, afforded to him by his PhD, as I collected my own Master of Philosophy. A few years later I wore an equally ridiculous cap and robes.

I only wish I had known him well enough at the beginning of that journey to have read the advice he now offers for you to consider.

We have shared a few beers over the years. Although I now rarely, if ever, drink alcohol, I still raise a glass to him and thank him for sharing his hard earned wisdom.

My credentials for giving you advice:

I have been involved in education all my life and have taught in schools, colleges and universities. I have a Masters degree in Managing Education and a PhD in Politics. But I think my main 'qualification' is that for a long time I failed as a student. I didn't want to learn, I wanted to play sport and learning was just an interlude, a rest time between playing.

Not surprisingly, I scraped in to university with the bare minimum qualifications and spent four years there, my course was Physical Education. I continued with the playing... and achieved the lowest possible pass, a 3rd Class Honours degree.

I started my teaching career and enjoyed that for around 10 years. Being a PE Teacher is great when you are young and full of energy, not so good when you are older and can't keep up with the kids. I had also, by this time, married and we had two young children. It was time for me to take stock and think about what I was going to do for the next 30 years. My wife, who I had met at university, was much more focussed and hard-working and had completed her Master degree and somehow managed to persuade the professor in charge that, despite my lowly qualifications, I was brighter than I looked.

I think I was intelligent, but school, university just didn't work for me and I think, that part of the problem, apart from my inherent laziness, was that I had never been taught how to write an essay. We were taught the facts about whatever subject was being taught, but in English and History, essay writing, the structuring of a piece of work was missed out of the curriculum. I still have some of my school books from that time and my essays lack structure and therefore coherency. I certainly didn't spend anytime trying to develop something that would read well and mostly just focussed on achieving the word count that the teacher had demanded. We were expected to count the words ourselves and make a

note of the count at the end of the essay. Said teacher had probably never heard of the Mark Twain ending in a letter to his friend.

“I apologise for such a long letter, I didn’t have time to write a short one.”

Brevity is something to be admired. Mine were certainly rambling as I strove to find the last few words to up the count. It was quantity rather than quality that we were being taught.

If I was going to be able to write well enough to satisfy the demands of the university, I had to up my game. I did some research and thought carefully about my own style and came up with a strategy that certainly helped me. I am not saying that all of this is original, but I have gathered this in and used it with some success.

To begin with, it is probably a good idea to actually answer the question you have been set. In higher levels of education, you may be invited to set your own title, but you still need to know what you should be writing about. It is the verb in the title that is most important. Here are some typical verbs used and a brief description of what the person who set the title wants from you.

DESCRIBE: This is a fairly low-level requirement. You just have to give some basic overview of what happened. For example ‘Describe the events leading up to the outbreak of War in 1914’. The answer should describe what the different countries were doing, what they wanted and what steps they were taking that ultimately led to war. There is no need for detailed explanation or analysis.

EXPLAIN: Using the same topic ‘Explain the events leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914’ requires some further detail. It demands that you go a little further back in history and explain why each of the countries felt they had to go to war, what were their fears and what outcome did they want to achieve.

ANALYSE: This demands still more detail, more background and greater discussion about the motives of the leaders and how they persuaded their populations to support the need for the war.

For more on this, look at the YouTube Video ‘19 Academic Verbs that every student needs to know’

So, once you understand what the question actually demands, then you need to start the preparation. So still using the First World War as the topic, you should read some general books, or chapters in books about the war and the countries involved. That should give you a general concept about the essay you are going to write and the themes you will cover. In the first read through it would be useful to note the pages/chapters/sections that you found to be particularly relevant. This will help you later when you make the notes that will enable you to structure the essay.

Once you have developed a general theme and structure to the essay, you should now start the note taking from the books you have read. It is important that you make your own notes, rather than copy down verbatim from the source book. This will help you in two ways. Firstly, taking what you have read and then re-writing it in your own words, will help you understand better the point you are to make. Then, when you translate your notes in to a sentence or paragraph in your essay, you will be better able to demonstrate your understanding. The second benefit is that you reduce the chance of plagiarism.

Next step is, as the Generals of that war will have done, to develop a plan and for fans of the Black Adder series covering that war, you could even develop a '*cunning plan*'.

The plan should give your essay the structure to enable you to make the succinct points you want to make (remember Mark Twain!). As a very general rule, you will need an introduction which should in brief cover the points you will cover throughout the essay, it tells the reader what to expect (Here is what I am going to say). This should be followed by four or five sections, perhaps chapters in very long essays or a thesis. (Here is what I am saying) and finally a conclusion or a summary (Here is what I have said [Summary] and Here is what I have said and here is the evidence that justifies my conclusion).

I always wrote out my plan longhand on paper. I found it was easier that way to see it rather than have to go back and forth on the computer. Use headings...Intro....Section One etc, (you might give want to give these headings, either before or retrospectively).

Now go back to your notes and decide where the points you have made will best fit in your essay section these off with different coloured pens or just section them and give a shorthand (Intro, 1, 2, 3, 4, Conc). Then, when you are putting together each of those sections (or Chapters) you know where in your notes the relevant points are and you can use them, then put a line through them so you know what has been used. When you have done this you are almost there. The last part is to read what you have done with a very

critical eye and be your own editor. Make sure it makes sense, cut and paste (or just cut) where you have to. The read it again, and again and once more for luck. `

For my thesis, I then asked three people whose opinion and understanding I valued to read through it for me. The problem with reading your own work is that it becomes almost too familiar, you know what you mean so, perhaps are not critical enough. Plus, by this time you are possibly so sick of it you just want rid of the damn thing.

Anyway, this worked for me, it also worked for my wife and we achieved what we set out to do. It will work for any length of essay, but it is probably of most value for longer pieces of work such as a thesis as the sheer volume (100,000 words plus) can be overwhelming.

One last thing. Find the best time and the best way that works for you. For me, because I was working, it was in the evenings, after the girls had gone to bed...around 7.30 I would start and work through until 11 or 11.30 I found it a struggle to concentrate for more than a couple of hours at a time, so I learned to take breaks around the two hour mark, sometimes when I was in the flow and the words just came out so easily, I would just plough through to complete that bit. I would eat and drink during the breaks, but to properly give my brain a rest, I certainly didn't want to read anything such as a newspaper or a novel, I played a mindless, pointless video game. I found it helped empty my mind and so when the break was over, I was mentally refreshed. Again it worked for me. My wife just did some housework. I was very supportive of this and would leave the washing up for her to do. I was such a thoughtful husband.

Tony Bennett (based on the thoughts of Dr Kyle Phillpots)

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