

writing a Cambridge essay: some tips

1. Take advantage of standard works of reference for your topic: consult the *OCD*, *Brill's New Pauly*, and *BMCR* for the standard and current points of debate on the topic. Consult the *Cambridge Ancient History* and, if the topic is literary, the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*. There may very well be a *Cambridge Companion* or *Oxford Handbook* volume that covers your subject. Consult JSTOR and *L'Année philologique* if you really want to get serious and deal with articles as well. **Practically all these references are available free online within Cambridge.** Links can be found at the bottom of my website—add them to your browser's bookmarks.
2. If you don't know what an English word means (or even if you do), by all means look it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*—again free online within Cambridge (www.oed.com). And invest in a good thesaurus: the recent editions of *Roget's* by Penguin are outstanding.
3. Be aware that lecturers' bibliographies tend toward completeness rather than selectivity: you don't have to (and in fact simply *can't*) read every item on a bibliography.
4. Find three or five points (ideally *not* two or four) you want to discuss. At an early stage of the writing process you can think of these as simply 'bullet points' or topics. This process is sometimes called 'discovery' from the Greek εὑρεσις (also παρασκευή) and Latin *inuentio*.
5. Find at least three things to say about each bullet point.
6. How to organize the points? Here's where the work gets more interesting. In order to give your essay some movement, and draw your reader in, the points should ultimately be arranged in the order of a syllogism:
 - a) We know that X is a subset of Y.
 - b) We know that Y is a subset of Z.
 - c) Therefore X is a subset of Z.
7. Each bullet point, in other words, should now be expressible as one intelligible sentence, rather than a vague 'point'.
8. In a short essay, each of these three sentences can stand as the summary for each of three paragraphs.
9. Each paragraph in turn can also have the shape of a syllogism: the sub-sentences prove the summary sentence of each paragraph.
10. The essay's last summary sentence, c) above, is the essay's *thesis*.
11. Begin your essay with a paragraph of introduction and end that paragraph with a forecast of your thesis. *Suggest* your thesis: do not state it baldly.
12. In the course of the essay, make the reader feel as though he or she is going to come to this conclusion *by themselves*—you've gently sprinkled a trail of evidence that *they* have had the pleasure of piecing together.
13. Do not summarize: a huge waste of time and space in a well-written essay.
14. End your essay—either at the end of the last paragraph or with a brief new one—with a *zinger*: you have just expressed your thesis in this last section, now think, if this is true, where will this take us now? Think laterally for this: in literary studies, for instance, this could mean finding some interesting contextual tidbit. Think of something you haven't really addressed at all so far. You may also find some neat quote in primary or secondary sources. Leave your reader with a clear declaration of your thesis but then soften the blow with something amusing, unexpected and erudite.