

BASIC ESSAY WRITING SKILLS IN OBERSTUFE

1. You must write your essays...

- ... *not* on single pieces of paper, but in essay books, *i.e.* ordinary A4 copy books with lined paper of good quality. Fold the pages down their middle and write on one half only.

2. Basic text information

At the beginning of every essay, every report, every minutes you write you must tell your reader explicitly what you deal with. In text analyses you must always mention the text type (or genre), the title and the author of the text you intend to analyze. The first time you put down the title and name of the author, neither may be abbreviated. Examples:

- Jack Stanton, the main character of Joe Klein's novel *Primary Colours*, is still the rather obscure governor of an unimportant Southern state when he first tries to reach a national audience by
- William Shakespeare's sonnet "CXVI" tries to answer the question what true friendship is. It begins with an exhortation on the part of the speaker

3. The correct tense...

... in text analyses of whatever kind is the simple present:

- (a) If you analyse a narrative text that is written in the simple past, you must – when discussing elements or aspects of that text – turn the simple past of the text into the simple present. This also applies to integrated quotations and short independent quotations (the technique is demonstrated in no 5). Quotations that are longer than five lines (handwriting) may remain in the text's original tense.
- (b) Summaries must be written in the simple present tense. (All the other German rules for summaries apply as well: just the gist of it; non-metaphorical language; no quotations etc.)

4. Quoting titles

The following rules apply not only to school essays but to any kind of formal writing. Get used to the internationally accepted standards by using them now.

When quoting titles, you must make a difference between the titles of (a) *autonomous* and (b) *contributive* publications.

- (a) Autonomous publications are not *part* of a book or newspaper or magazine but constitute the book or newspaper or magazine *as a whole*. In the titles of autonomous publications, when writing by hand or using simple typewriters, you must underline singly every word:
 - F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel The Great Gatsby; William Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth; an article in the New York Times; an essay in Time magazine

(If you use a computer or have your text printed professionally, titles of autonomous publications must be *italicized*. In handwriting or on simple typewriters, where there are no italics, you underline the title words instead. – Apart from the above example, titles of autonomous works are italicized in this paper.)

- (b) The titles of contributive publications are set between quotation marks. Contributive publications are all those texts that can only be published as *part* of an autonomous publication: newspaper articles (as part of a newspaper), poems (as part of an anthology), essays and letters (as part of a collection of essays or letters) etc.:
 - Robert Frost's poem "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening" is one of the most popular texts of America's literary heritage.
 - In the 1998 summer edition of *Around The Globe*, Neil Rhodes, in his article "A Compassionate Heart", portrays the varied career of Elizabethan playwright Thomas Dekker.

5. Levels of writing

Keep levels of writing apart from each other in order to avoid ridicule. Do not write:

- John kisses Mary repeatedly on page 15. Then they drive around in John's a lot car between p. 17 and 18.

These sentences mix up the level of the narrative (the story of John and Mary kissing and driving around) with the level of your text analysis (what people can glean from p. 15, 17 and 18). Instead write:

- John kisses Mary repeatedly (cf. page 15). Then they drive around a lot in John's car (cf. p. 17-18).

6. Quotations: General rules

Quotations are an important tool in text analyses. You use quotations to prove (or at least to make plausible) the results of your text analysis. Whatever you quote must be identical with the source – that includes misspellings or dated spelling.

We make a difference between (a) *stand-alone* and (b) *integrated* quotations.

- (a) Stand-alone quotations consist of one or more sentences. These sentences are (usually) grammatically complete, *i.e.* they consist of a predicate, a subject and other parts of speech.
 - In his article "A Compassionate Heart", Neil Rhodes characterizes Thomas Dekker's artistic reputation at the beginning of the 17th century: "Dekker's success as a social commentator in his prose pamphlets is at least equal to his success as a dramatist. The most satirically effective of these is *The Gull's Horn-Book*, published in 1609, which gives advice on how to be cool in Jacobean London." (p. 15)
- (b) Integrated quotations consist of parts of sentences (*i.e.*, one or more words or parts of speech from an original text) that you integrate into your text analysis in order to make a point or to illustrate a result. An example from a text analysis of Sue Grafton's crime novel *O Is For Outlaw*:
 - On the morning after her attempt to break into Doctor Kerrigan's practice, Kinsey Millhone wakes up "feeling logy and out of sorts" (p. 210). To wake up completely, she decides not to remain in bed but to work out at her gym, where she does "leg extensions and leg curls" (p. 211).

Take care that your punctuation is logical: Do not quote commas or other punctuation marks of the original text if they do not fit into your own sentences.

- (c) If you want to leave out (or change) one or more words or parts of the punctuation in a quotation, you *must* indicate the omission (or the change) by inserting three dots in square brackets: [...]. Do not just put down three dots: They are sometimes used by writers to build suspense or to show a character's hesitation in speaking.
 - In chapter III of his novel *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the first meeting between Gatsby and the narrator: "He smiled understandingly [...]. It was one of those rare smiles [...] that you may come across four or five times in life." (p. 69)

7. Quoting verse

When quoting verse from a drama or a poem, you must mark the ends of a line by a slash:

- In Rupert Brooke's sonnet "The Soldier", the author adopts the position of a patriotic young soldier who, contemplating the possibility of his own death in action, speaks or writes to his friends or relatives: "If I should die, think only this of me:/ That there's some corner of a foreign field/ That is forever England." (l. 1-3)
- In act III, scene 1 of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, Hamlet must decide whether he wants to revenge his father, whom he believes to have been murdered, or whether he will leave the matter alone: "To be, or not to be, that is the question:/ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them." (p. 277f., l. 56-60)