Notes for writing MA assignments

These notes are a culmination of ideas and comments which we frequently put on student drafts and final papers. They are here to help you as you write.

* Proofread your work. Presentation is one of the criteria on which work is marked. These issues may not seem important, but they all have an impact on whether, and how, your work can be understood by the reader. In doing so, be aware of the following issues:
  + Ensure that you write in complete sentences – verbs, nouns, objects. Beware of sentences starting with words such as, “Building on…” “Continuing…” – it’s easy to miss that these are not complete.
  + Make sure that the words you’ve chosen are the correct ones, especially if using autocorrect. It’s easy to mistake their for there, affect for effect, practice for practise. [THIS LIST](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/usage/commonly-confused-words) might be useful. [THESE](https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/15-common-grammar-gripes-avoid.html) [LINKS](http://authority.pub/common-grammar-mistakes/) might help, as well.[[1]](#footnote-1)
  + Check other grammar issues – correct use of apostrophes, capitalisation of words, use of semicolons, etc.
* Abide by academic conventions
  + Use the (Bath) Harvard format for citations. It’s easy to do but the format must be followed. There is information on the library webpages, [HERE](http://www.bath.ac.uk/library/infoskills/referencing-plagiarism/harvard-bath-style.html).
  + Assume that all statements as of fact need to be supported by the literature. You can say that the sun rises in the east without support – but a statement that “most teachers prefer to do X” needs support.
  + Try and avoid using universals – all, none, every, none. It’s much better to rely on evidence and, supported by the literature, to say, “Most”, many, often…
  + Avoid using italics, bold and underlining for emphasis; these are more journalistic conventions, rather than academic. The same is true of using punctuation, such as exclamation marks. Make your points through persuasive argument, rather than typesetting.
  + Use reputable sources. These include peer reviewed journal articles and books from reputable publishers. Web based articles can be used but they lack the weight of peer reviewed sources.
  + Strive for an academic tone – take your cue from the journal articles you’ve been reading to prepare for writing your paper.
* Structure is important
  + Ensure that your reader always knows what has been shown and what is to come. The best way to do that is through signposting – say what you are going to do, then tell the reader what you have done.
  + To do this, your paper needs to have a clear beginning, middle and end.
  + One of the best ways to ensure that your reader can follow you is to create a detailed outline of your paper – even paragraph by paragraph. Look at everything you’ve included in your paper, and see how/if it furthers your argument. If it doesn’t do that, remove the passage. If there are gaps – where you expect your reader to leap from one idea to the other – fill those gaps so that your reader has a secure path to follow.

1. Even if it sounds odd, data is a collective now – “The data show” not “The data shows”. Data are… not is. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)