Dr. Lee's Guide to Essay Test Taking, Term-Paper Writing, and Life

You have in your hands a "guide" to help improve your writing and test-taking skills. Not only is the content of the guide important, but so is the style, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and organization. For one thing, notice that there is a title on the first line of this page; the title is centered, the font is a bit larger, and it is in bold face type. Was it effective? You knew, from the second you picked it up, what type of information you were likely to encounter; you didn't have to guess. Correct? That is an effective title (even though the truth was stretched a bit with the "...and life" part -- consider it creative license).

This guide is designed to help you get a high score on your writing assignments in my classes including History of Psychology and Psychology of Learning. It is also a fairly decent guide to help you write papers and answer essay style questions in general. The guide is organized into eight main sections with each section set off by it's own heading that has been capitalized and put in bold face type. This is done so that the information is provided gradually in small, digestible portions instead of one big gagging bolus. Please organize and divide your papers into small, digestible portions though the use of headings. Granted, while taking an in-class essay exam you probably will not have the luxury or time to use headings, but you should still organize your answers to the best of your ability!

INTRODUCTION

During this semester you will be asked to produce something written. This may be a Term Paper based on your own research on a historical figure or philosophical debate, answers to essay questions on a Take-Home Exam, or answers to short essay style questions during an in-class exam. All of these assignments are designed to test your understanding and retention of the material presented during lecture and/or covered in your textbook. In the case of the Term Paper, you need to go beyond this material and research your paper using outside sources also. As we all know too, too well, writing papers and taking tests can be a royal pain. Normally, taking a test involves reading your textbook, studying the material, and "cramping" everything into your brain until you are completely convinced there is not enough room left for even a simple thought let alone a more complex nugget on which to ruminate. "Ruminate" is a great word don't you think? When you write your paper or your test answer(s), you do not have to try to impress me with your use of vocabulary. More often then not, words are used incorrectly. When that happens, the flow of the paper is broken terribly by the reader's attempt to determine what on earth you meant by that word! Use words you know! Of course, you may also want to "ruminate" occasionally and come up with an equally cool word; just do it correctly!

WHY A TAKE-HOME TEST?

The majority of your midterms will be the in-class, no notes, no book, no cheating, no kidding type of test. One test, a "Take-Home", is quite a bit different. A Take-Home Test allows you to use your book and, in fact, STRONGLY ENCOURAGES IT. Notice how the phrase "STRONGLY ENCOURAGES IT" is in all capital letters? That is a clever little element of printing style designed to convey EXTREME IMPORTANCE. Thanks to the internet and email, we now have ways to emphasize words and ideas simply by placing them in all capital letters. Underlining words can work well too.

Instructors are responsible for providing you with information and guidance on a variety of different topics. Of paramount importance for this particular class is the attempt to introduce you to information regarding the psychology of learning. An additional goal however is to give you an opportunity to 1) practice your writing skills; 2) refine your writing skills; and 3) apply these writing skills to a new topic area. I'm going to guess that many of you have already started noticing that you are being asked to write in many more of your classes. This is NOT (note the capital letters!) to cause more work and/or anxiety in your life. It really is designed to empower you with the ability to convey your message clearly and accurately in written form. No really........, that is in fact why it is done.
Writing under pressure while taking an in-class test is one way of challenging you; an essay question on an in-class test requires that you convince me you have a bit of a deeper understanding of the course material than that assessed through the use of a multiple choice test. Another quite different challenge, is to use a Take-Home Test that will allow you to set your own pace, gather your thoughts, research your topic, and write answers to questions without a severe time limitation. Take-Home tests are not necessarily easier than in-class tests but many individuals feel less anxious while taking the test and therefore feel better able to collect their thoughts and write more coherent answers.

**THE TEST**

You will be given essay questions designed to (1) make you think about the chapter(s) you have just read; (2) organize the material in a way different from that of the textbook's author; (3) summarize the material in a meaningful way; (4) process the information more deeply; and (5) convey the information you have just learned about the psychology of learning while practicing and improving your writing skills. You may find that a Take-Home Test in this class is difficult but not extremely so; all of the answers are there, you just need to take your time and look for them. You will need to read the chapter(s) thoroughly, read the questions thoroughly, and then research your answers by re-reading the chapter(s). You will be required to type your answers. Please use a 12 point font size with 1 inch margins on all sides. There is no real page limit, but each answer will probably take at least 2 pages of text.

**ORGANIZATION**

Organize, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE! First, organize the chapter(s), then organize your thoughts, then organize your answers. Use headings; they help a great deal. Organization really is the key to a concise, accurate, and compelling paper. Lead your reader carefully and purposefully to exactly where you want them to go then give them your take-home message. This will help eliminate repetition and guarantee that the main points of your answers are addressed adequately.

**CONTENT**

You will be given a number of questions and each will need to be addressed in detail. Remember, these questions are designed to have you summarize the information in the chapter(s); writing only a couple of lines will not suffice.

When asked to "support your answer with relevant research" you must cite then describe the studies. Be specific. Citations must include the name of the investigators and the year of their publication. It is not enough to say that "the textbook says...". For example, say something like "Allison & Ayllon (1980) found that university students benefited from immediate feedback on their performance" rather than "Researchers found that students can benefit from immediate feedback on their performance." Or use the sentence "University students benefited from immediate feedback on their performance (Allison & Ayllon, 1980)" instead of "Students benefited from feedback." Be sure to define your terms. Keeping with the same example, you will need to define "feedback" -- what did Allison & Ayllon (1980) mean by that term? You must then go on to tell me what Allison & Ayllon (1980) is all about. What did they do? What were their results? How did they interpret their results? Why is the study relevant?

If the question calls for an experimental design, then design a good experiment. Remember details such as your n per group, number of groups, independent variable(s), dependent variable(s), control groups, random assignment, controls for experimenter and subject expectations, consent of human or animal ethics committees, etc.

And last, be sure to interpret your data. A table or a graph summarizes the data and presents it in a clear (hopefully), easily understandable format. You usually do not have to reiterate what is presented in a graph or table but you must tell me what it all means! You need to conclude something based on the data. For example, you draw a graph similar to the one shown below.
You do not need to tell me that the value of the dependent variable goes down as the level of your independent variable goes up -- I can see that. What you need to tell me is that your independent variable (graphed along the x-axis) has had a substantial effect on your dependent variable (graphed along the y-axis); to be specific in this case, the drug MDZ impairs memory.

**SPELLING, GRAMMAR, AND STYLE**

Yes, I'm afraid that spelling, grammar, and writing style are important components in any paper including this Take-Home Test. Perhaps this is not what you want to hear, but style really can make the difference between a good and a not-so-good assignment.

Spell-check please. In today's age, misspellings are not an option. After you let the computer run through and search for misspelled words, you have to follow up by looking for words that are correctly spelled but used incorrectly. For example, there and their, effect and affect, which and witch, very and vary, are all words that will make it through spell-check but have very (not vary!) different meanings. If you would like a good online dictionary and thesaurus please check out and bookmark http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary. Unfortunately, grammatical errors are far more common than spelling errors. Many computer applications, such as Microsoft Word, have grammar-checks as well as spell-check options. Please check them out.

This next statement may sound rather silly at first pass, but it needs to be said: Please use multiple paragraphs. Usually paragraphs are greater than 3 sentences, and a section with a heading usually, but not always, contains 2 or more paragraphs. A paragraph should not be one sentence long, regardless of how long that sentence may be (that last part is a joke just in case you are not laughing yet). AVOID LONG, RUN-ON SENTENCES! They rarely, if ever, make any sense.

Notice that a parenthetical clause was just used to convey a joke (parenthetical clauses are considered by many to be examples of poor writing style; ........ooops). If a point you are trying to make isn't important enough to warrant it's own sentence, then it is probably not important enough to include. Minimize your use of parenthetical clauses. Also, notice that this guide is written in the third person; avoid referring to yourself using words and phrases such as "I" or "we". For example, instead of writing "...notice that I wrote this guide...", the chosen phrase was "...notice that this guide is written...".

Make sure that the number of subjects determines the number of the verb; for example, "numbers" (plural noun) "determine" (plural verb) whereas "number" (singular noun) "determines" (singular verb). By the way, my grammar-check option just caught that I made an error in that last sentence. Last, but not least, please, please, please use past tense when writing about studies that have already been done. Be consistent. This guide is completely written in the present tense, that is, virtually every verb is in present tense. But..., your test answers should almost certainly be written using the past tense. For example, you should write "Allison & Ayllon (1980) found that university students benefited from immediate feedback..."
on their performance" rather than "Allison & Ayllon (1980) says that university students can benefit from immediate feedback on their performance."

If you would like to write a bit better and need a good pocket guide to writing style, please purchase Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* (Strunk, W. & White, E.B., 2000; *The Elements of Style*, 4th Ed., Boston: Allyn & Bacon). It's a good investment.

**PROOFREADING**

Please proofread your papers. Even the experts have someone else proofread their papers; sometimes they are called editors, sometimes they are called friends. You have many options on campus. You have each other, but this may not be the best option unless you know for a fact that the person you ask to proofread your paper is a very good writer. The better option is to ask for assistance in either the Learning Assistance Center, at (562)985-5350 or Writer's Resource Lab at (562)985-4329. The counselors there can help you write your paper and provide a proofreading service.

**SUMMARY**

Based upon the heading, you should know by now, with a great degree of certainty, that this section will be used to summarize the main points of the rest of the guide.

- Use an effective title, center it, and put it in bold face type.
- Organize your thoughts then convey your organization through the use of headings.
- Do not try to impress me with your vocabulary; use words you know.
- Use print styles such as underlining or all capital letters to convey importance.
- All of the answers are in your textbook, just take your time and look for them.
- Type your answers using a 12 point font size with 1 inch margins on all sides.
- There is no real page limit but each answer will probably require 2 or more pages.
- Organize, organize, organize!
- Cite and describe relevant research.
- Define relevant terms.
- If asked, be sure to design a good experiment and provide details!
- Interpret your data.
- Use spell- and grammar-check.
- Bookmark the online dictionary and thesaurus: http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary
- Use multiple paragraphs and avoid long, run-on sentences.
- Minimize your use of parenthetical clauses.
- Write in the third person; avoid referring to yourself using "I" or "we".
- The number of subjects determines the number of the verb.
- Use past tense and be consistent.
- Good resource: Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*.
- PROOFREAD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- Contact the Learning Assistance Center, (562)985-5350 or Writer's Resource Lab (562)985-4329.