Guidance for writing assignments for Professor Peter Patrick

These guides are written with Peter’s second and third year courses in mind (LG232, LG254, LG449 and LG654), but they still contain a lot of useful general tips.

- **Web citation style**

**Writing essays - some advice**

**Writing exam papers: some advice for LG232**

**Hints on how to tackle data problems in exams**

**Web citation style**

Here are some tips for giving simple web citations in your essays. They basically follow the printed-text type of reference except for 2 key points: giving the website address, of course, and also giving the date on which you accessed it (since many websites change contents often, or even disappear).

**Example 1, text:**

"M Morgan, a prolific writer on the topic of African American discourse (see e.g. the 10 works listed in Patrick 2002)"

**Example 1, Citation:**

[include this in the References section at the end:]


In this case you can find the "last updated" info at the bottom of (all) my webpage(s). It’s a common feature, but isn’t always there. It’s comparable to the “edition” information for a published work. Some webpages will not have such information, however. It may be relevant too, or instead, to list the name of a sponsoring organisation, e.g. for an official page simply maintained by someone (the apparent “author”) who works for the organisation that appears to be the “actual author”.

**Example 2:**

http://linguistics.osu.edu/research/publications/jpcl/ is the website for the *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*. It’s maintained by creolist Shelome Gooden, as the fine print at the bottom indicates: *Webpage last updated May 8th, 2002 by S.Gooden*

But the “real author” of the page is probably the journal itself.


Here you could also give “Ohio State University” or “John Benjamins Publishing Company” as the ‘publisher’ if you like, since OSU sponsored the webpage, and JBPC sponsors the journal, but it probably isn’t necessary.

**Writing essays – some advice**

- Read the directions
- Do not reproduce the question or directions
- Introductions and conclusions
- On quoting
- Historical development of ideas
- Linguistic detail
- Beware of these words

Here’s some advice on things that are good, or bad, to do in an essay for my classes. This is not a recipe for success, or a complete guide to essay-writing, but it may help you avoid disasters, and keep you from losing those few niggling points on otherwise good work that so often affect your final
marks. All the advice below must be adapted to the question at hand. Read this carefully first, and then feel free to ask me about anything that isn’t clear to you.

Every instructor has their own preferences, partly based on general academic practice, partly on what is normal for their field, and partly on their own personal (dis)likes. Where “general academic practice” is divided, I indicate my personal preferences below, and explain why they are worth following.

The Undergraduate Students’ Handbook for our Department gives advice as well – please consult it – but note that it does not all necessarily apply to the tasks I have set you. (It also embodies one author’s personal (dis)likes, which I may not agree with, so don’t take it as the last word! See eg my comments below on reproducing the question.) There are also online resources of a general nature, both at Essex & outside – you may find them useful, but the same warning applies to them. The handbook also gives or directs you to university rules (eg, about cheating), and departmental regulations and procedures (eg, for lateness, assessment, extensions etc.), both of which must be followed. These are clearly distinguished from the “Advice” section. My comments here are intended to supplement the latter, for my courses only. Many of the comments below are also useful guides to writing exam questions for me – though this task differs from essay-writing in several ways. See a separate guide for that here.

Read the directions
Writing assignments is stressful (esp. when you do it at the last minute!). To the marker, it sometimes seems as if students have not read the directions very carefully. There may be lots of good reasons why that happens. Still, if directions are clearly given in print, or on the course page, there is no excuse for not following them. If you don’t understand the question, by all means check with me – perhaps I didn’t write it as clearly as I might have, and it needs clarification. Do ask, otherwise you may lose marks for failing to understand it correctly.

Some things are pretty plain, and should be easy to follow. If it says “No more than 1 or 2 quotes, and keep them short”, I don’t want 3 or 4, or 1 very long one, etc. If I say “Indicate the length of your assignment by using WordCount”, then please DO it! (Don’t include references, or any appendix, in the count.)

Sometimes the instructions ask you questions, eg, “How are they similar or different in their methods? goals? assumptions? Do they share a framework?” In a general assignment, where the instructions cover several different choices of readings, it may be that not all questions apply to your selection. If you don’t understand how the questions apply after thinking about it for a while, ask me. There may be a simple answer. You may also come up with questions worth addressing on your own, but it’s a good idea to check with me, to be sure.

In short, read the directions early and think them over, then contact me if something isn’t clear.

Do NOT reproduce the question or directions
On this point, IGNORE what it says in the student handbook. In essays for me, DO NOT repeat the question I asked you, or the directions I gave you. (There is no need. When we send assignments off to external markers, we always send them copies of the questions.) Just give the title of the assignment, or – if it is a critical review – clearly, but briefly, identify the works you are reviewing (e.g., “Rickford 1997, Labov 1982, and Wolfram 1998” – the place to give full references is either at the end or in footnotes.)

In any case, if you do repeat the question at the head of your essay (despite these directions!), you are not permitted to count it towards the length of the assignment. Especially don’t do this if your essay is on the short side – it will look like you are padding, and marks will be taken off for missing the length limit.

Introduction and conclusions
Many people are taught in school that in an essay you should spend half a page introducing what you’re going to do, and then half a page at the end summing it up.

To me, in a 3000-word essay, this is often a waste of time, unless done very well. There isn’t a great deal of space, and you must use it economically. What you were taught above is not wrong – it’s just
the first step. Now you are advanced, you must take the second step: **compress** your intro/summary (if any), giving just what is essential.

I strongly suggest you just start in on the question (without reproducing it! see above), or give me a **couple of lines at most** of intro. When you're done, please DO take a **sentence or two (only!)** to tell me the outcome – eg, which of two positions you think is correct, or with what degree of certainty the data support your conclusion, etc., as the question demands. (Being evasive or wishy-washy here is NOT a virtue.) Please, do NOT give waffly general intros and summing-up conclusions with few (new) facts or statements in them. A “conclusion” which only repeats, or rephrases at length, what you’ve already said is completely unnecessary. It may be viewed as padding and wasted space. If you fail to cover something important to the question, please don’t claim you “ran out of space” because of a long intro or conclusion. You may be penalised for leaving out the important info. On the other hand, you will NOT be penalised for **failing** to have an introduction or conclusion, so long as it’s clear that you have addressed the question.

**On quoting**

**FEW QUOTES IF ANY and KEEP THEM SHORT!** I really mean it. Established authors use quotes for various good reasons. But you are writing an essay for me based largely on things I told you to read – I’ve already read them myself – and I know what the author said. What I DON’T know is whether you understood it. Quoting won’t tell me that either, it only shows me whether you can copy and spell correctly (mistakes here make your work look really poor) – and it suggests you have no ideas of your own to write. Instead of quoting, refer to their ideas (and cite their work) in a way that shows me you have processed the ideas and can apply them independently.

**Historical development of ideas**

Be sensitive to historical development of scholarship. That means, at the most basic level, look at the dates of the articles you’ve read (the dates they were **written**, not the dates they were **published** in an anthology – you can always check with me), and ask, **What does this imply?** There had better be a good reason for first summarizing an article from 1998, then one from 2000, and then one from 2001 – **BEFORE** presenting one from 1981! Things have changed – controversies may have been settled, or errors of thought and fact corrected – new positions may have arisen, old ones may have been revived and improved – the significance of certain facts may have changed. If you have Qs about this, consult me – it’s part of my job to make sure you understand – but do not present things as if there were no development, or as if views held in 1981 are better informed than those of 20 years later. (The 1981 views may be still largely correct, and newer views may indeed be wrong – but you must acknowledge any specific and relevant changes that have taken place.)

**Linguistic detail**

Sociolinguistics often involves both technical linguistic matters, and concerns of wider social and/or political importance. Students often find these social issues more accessible and attractive to write about. However, in every essay you should be sure (and sometimes I explicitly ask you) to give appropriate linguistic detail. In other linguistics courses this may go unsaid, but here it is necessary to think about it – ie, don’t leave out the linguistics!

An essay about, say, a vernacular dialect or discriminated language, which includes sharp and productive observations about the social significance of speech or signing, may be excellent on those aspects. But if you are expected to, eg, identify and discuss features of a language variety, or analyse a construction, support or critique a hypothesis with data, or relate data to patterns of change and variation – and you fail to do it – you’ll be marked down.

Two ways people typically do not meet this criterion are:

- **Focusing on a single example** in good detail, but only on one. (It’s certainly possible to do this in a paper, appropriately – but that would be in an essay designed to focus on just one construction or feature – which is a different sort of paper from one that asks you to describe or survey a variety, or to draw broadly on linguistic evidence in an argument.)

- **Reproducing**, with few or no changes, a **list or lists of features** discussed in a source reading, with little or no original analysis. (This is like too much quoting: it falls under the heading of things you don’t need to say, because they were already said, perhaps better, in the source.) Merely copying a list only suggests you have nothing to say about the linguistic elements in question. What I do need you to do with such a list is to show your own thinking by your judicious selection of features, and your original analysis of them, or comments on them. You
may decide to group several together because of some similarity, or select one from each of several different types (eg, phonology, morphology, syntax; or unique, regional and general; etc., as fits the question), and then show how the selection or grouping is relevant to your argument.

Beware of these words
Below are some words that have precise meanings, and are very important to use correctly in essay writing. They’re trouble words because students often haven’t paid attention to how they are used in academic writing, and throw them around carelessly. The result is often that, while we may be willing to believe your ideas are good, what you’ve written down is either wrong, contradictory to something else you’ve said, or simply makes no sense. So check your use of these and similar words carefully!

**Cause - correlate**
Two things may be correlated, but that doesn’t mean that one caused the other; be careful about which one is correct.

**Imply - infer - thus - therefore - whereby - consequently**
These are all words which invoke reasoning or argumentation, a key component in essays. Some are explicit, some implicit. If you use thus/therefore you had better make sure A really does follow from B! Look up the difference between imply/infer. Students often use, eg, thus – and then leave out the argument which connects A and B. Make your argument explicit, instead.

**Assume/assumption - presume - claim - presuppose - prove**
More reasoning words. Student essays frequently claim an author assumed something that she in fact asserted, observed, postulated, hypothesised, argued for, demonstrated or even proved! These are all words of evaluation, and they have a positive or negative ring to them in academic contexts. It sounds negative to say an author “assumed” something she should have “argued for” – and if in fact she did argue, reason from data, or even prove it, you may be marked down. ("In fact" is another one – only use it about facts, please!)

**Deduce - induce - infer**
Not all logical reasoning is deduction, though that’s a term most people are familiar with from Sherlock Holmes – look up induce and infer, too. To deduce is to reason from the general to the particular, or from clearly stated premises to conclusions that are logically necessary. To induce is to reason from particular observations to a general statement, principle or law. Infer is used in various ways: a common one is to derive or conclude something by reasoning – so it doesn’t distinguish between deduction and induction. (But it does differ from imply.) If you’re not comfortable with these distinctions, use a simpler term like argue or reason.

**Theory - model - method - hypothesis**
These are not the same things, but students are often unsure of what the difference is. Theories are more elaborate and precise things than students often assume: not every observation, idea or opinion by an author is a theory ! Models are generally less abstract than theories: models are more like plans, designs, or sequences, they are representations of the structure of something. Methods are quite practical and explicit procedures used to do things. Hypotheses are carefully formulated predictions which a researcher may test. (Note: Just because a researcher formulates a hypothesis does not mean she believes it is correct. Just because a researcher discusses someone else’s hypothesis does not mean she shares it. These are common mistakes.) Be especially careful about using

**Superlatives – sweeping language – denials or negatives**
Academic writing tends by nature to be careful and precise (or even timid! which is not good). That may not be your most natural style, but you’re being marked on how well you can learn it. (I’m encouraging you to be precise – not timid.) If you claim that “most linguists” accept something which seems dubious to me (though some actually do), or argue that “the best analysis” is X, or assert things like “Sound change never comes from the lower classes” or “Women generally speak more standardly than men”, or make a negative claim on the basis of limited knowledge (eg, “There is no evidence that all Caribbean Creoles were once pidgins”), it sets off alarm bells for me as a reader! Always give specific evidence for claims; avoid extreme declarations of this sort.
Writing exam papers: some advice for LG232

- Read the question carefully! If it asks for 3 things, do all 3; if it asks you to answer them in order, do them in the right order; if it asks for examples, be sure to provide them.
- It will never be wrong to provide specific linguistic illustrations, or to cite appropriate findings from the literature, if they are relevant – in fact these things are normally expected, and may even go unsaid in the question.
- Before you go into the exam – and esp. when writing it – be aware of the meanings of the following terms, and use them carefully. A perfectly sensible statement can be turned into apparent nonsense by substituting one of them for another, or for other items!
  - assumption/assume
  - assertion/assert
  - hypothesis
  - prove
  - claim
- Be especially careful too about using superlatives, sweeping language, denial or negatives.
- Do not waste time in an exam recopying, or even paraphrasing, the question at the start – or even writing a summary conclusion at the end. We know what the question is – it's a waste of time to repeat it! Just tell us what is needed. This is no time for fancy writing.
- Don’t waffle on for pages – get to the point right away. Don’t tell us loads about the methodology of a study if it’s not relevant – just proving you remember such facts doesn’t get you any credit unless the question requires it. It’s often possible to have a complete and correct answer, that receives full marks, and yet is very brief. (On the other hand, if you don’t have all the relevant information, being brief will not help you!).
- Be decisive if possible. Taking both sides of a question will not help you if only one side is right. A “balanced” view that includes wrong ideas or conclusions is worse than a “one-sided” view that is largely correct: it only shows you are afraid to take a position. On the other hand, if you do take a position, don’t go overboard by claiming that all other positions are wrong!
- Do not make up facts! If you’re not sure you remember correctly, that’s one thing. But do not manufacture things in the hope that we won’t know whether they are true. If you make up a hypothetical example, label it as such. But a real one is always better, and may in fact be expected.
- In a quantitative problem, you should interpret the data and summarize what it means. But you should not simply repeat what is in a table or graph – it makes for very boring reading, and does not show anything other than that you can read! Focus on identifying a pattern, and give specifics, but don’t re-tell every line of a table or chart. (You may need to do this for yourself, as you’re understanding it – but you can do that on scratch paper, and don’t have to put it into your answer.)

Specific points about Sociolinguistic Variation (ie, Mistakes NOT to make!)

- Social stratification is a synchronic phenomenon. Linguistic change is by nature a diachronic process. A problem that is about change in progress may ask you to give evidence of social stratification. You can usually do this from evidence at one point in time, or one age group. It’s not necessary to appeal to diachronic evidence to prove stratification.
- A linguistic change in progress doesn’t affect every sector of a speech community at the same rate – it starts in one group (the “leaders”) and spreads to others. Nevertheless, we speak of a change taking place over the whole community – there is not a separate change for each social class, or sex-group. Exception: It may sometimes be that part of the community is not participating in a change (eg African Americans in NYC sound changes) – the evidence for this kind of conclusion is clear, and was discussed in class.
- By the same principle, a change in progress may occur at different times, in different linguistic environments of a sociolinguistic variable. This does not mean that each environment is a separate variable. You should certainly compare the environments – qualify your claims explicitly by environment – then see to what extent it’s possible to generalise over environments. Don’t spend all your time on the first environment, or the one for which a graph is given, if the question asks you to consider several.
- Change from above is not the same as hypercorrection! They may go together, but they are not interchangeable.
- Be sure not to overgeneralise about major patterns of variation and change in the literature. Classic example: mistakenly claiming that “Women tend to use prestige variants more often
than men”. This is only valid under certain circumstances – which we covered in class! – and elsewhere will lead you astray and lose you marks.

- Don’t confuse variants with variables. It is nonsense to say that e.g. “Middle-class speakers use the (Ing) variable more than WC” when you mean “the [Iŋ] variant of (Ing)”. Also remember to use ( ) for (variables), // for /phonemes/ and [] for [phonetic forms].
- If you are given numbers in a table – linguistic indexes – or percentages, it is generally not possible to combine together numbers from separate cells. You can eyeball them and refer to a general trend of high or low, but do not try to add, multiply or divide them – they are based on different numbers of tokens. If you don’t understand this paragraph fully, you should especially not try to combine them.

Hints on how to tackle data problems in exams
(Some of these also work for essay questions.)

Your exam for LG232 will have one section of data-analysis problems, and one section of essays. This is no secret. The data-analysis problems concentrate on language variation, and usually involve quantitative data (though you never have to do anything more than simple arithmetic, and not necessarily even that – you will be allowed to bring a calculator, but it is not necessary).

Don’t be scared of answering problems with data. They’re actually the easiest kind. Much of what you'll need to do, you have already learned in class – especially when we went over how to read and interpret chart data.

First, don't panic! Think, “I can do this” and go right to looking at the data. If you panic you'll spend 10 mins panicking and 5 looking at the data; if you don't, you have, say, 15 mins to examine the data. (This isn't a magic number; just make sure you spend enough time but not too much.)

1. Inspect the numbers (or the graph – whatever your data source is) for the overall, Big Picture. There’s always one. We don't give you problems where the data are so complex you can't spot a trend.

2. If it's a table with numbers, you might find it handy to sketch a rough graph or chart. In this exam, such a chart won't be collected or marked; it’s just to help yourself. (Graph paper should be provided in case you want ti, but it should not be collected with the exam booklet, or marked if it is.) Doesn't have to be perfect in detail, but make sure you set up the axes and dimensions properly. You shouldn't have to do any complex math! but might find it helpful to do simple proportions or calculate percents (eg, 10/37 = roughly 1/4). In this exam you will be able to bring a calculator if you want to.

3. Having identified the overall pattern(s), put it into explicit words. You must be able to state your understanding of what’s going on in a sentence, otherwise it's no good. Usually, it isn’t enough to just restate the numbers in a table or chart – generalisation, explanation and interpretation are required, too – but putting them into words is a good starting point for developing your understanding.

4. Next, identify any exception(s) to the overall pattern, and put it into explicit words too. You have to decide whether an apparent exception is a real and significant one, or not. The size of a deviation can be a clue, but remember: a very small difference can be crucial sometimes; or, it can be real, yet insignificant.

5. Most sociolinguistic problems involve some complexity in the social factors (eg, age, sex, class, ethnicity etc.) that help explain variation. Sometimes the factors interact, so that they do not always have a unitary effect. (Sex and social class are a typical example: eg, males of the WC may use some variable less than women of the WC, while males of the MC use it more often than MC females – so there’s no general statement about what males do.) Be prepared: EXPECT such complexity, and look for it as a possible exception to a broad pattern. Use this as a check on the broad patterns you have identified.

6. Some problems involve data sets where the data are presented in steps, and you are asked to answer them in steps. In this case, read the whole problem through first, but do the steps in order. You may be asked to give a judgment at an early step, based on what you know so far; here, it would be wrong to try to give the ultimate answer based on knowing everything. We are interested in knowing how your reasoning changes, given different information. Make sure to give your conclusions explicitly at each step.

7. In fact, in general, you should be explicit about your reasoning and your assumptions. This is especially true if you think you may not have understood something completely, or gotten it
wrong! If we know where you went wrong, we may be able to give you partial credit. E.g., if you make a wrong assumption, and then depend on it more than once, we may be able to mark you down for it only once – IF you make your logic clear to us.

8. This goes also for terminology: make clear how you are using a term, or gloss it briefly (e.g. "A dialect – in the sense of a single language norm – blah blah blah..."). Then if you use the term wrongly we may be able to give you credit for the intention as explained in your gloss. It’s always good to be explicit (though NOT always good to be repetitive!).

9. Separate the reporting of facts and data – whether in the problem, or from the literature you’ve read – from your own analysis or interpretation. In your answer, write this in a way that makes it obvious, eg separate paragraphs or labels such as "In my opinion", "As reported by Labov" etc.

In our revision class, we will go over a sample data analysis problem, employing this approach.

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