Medical essay writing

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Today we’re talking about ...

1. Writing about medicine
2. Essay marking criteria
3. Essay questions & workshop
4. Essay feedback – student examples
5. Writing under pressure
6. Writing concisely and coherently
7. Tips to make your essay stand out
8. Essay writing do’s and don’ts
9. Online resources to help you with your writing
1. Writing about medicine

“The cardinal sin in medical writing is not grammatical error but obscurity.”

Stanley Gilder

The key challenge for all medical and scientific writers – whether journalists, academic writers, feature writers or technical writers – is clarity in communication without oversimplifying scientific and medical issues and concepts.
1. Writing about medicine
General tips

**STRONG**
- Writing with the intended audience and assessment criteria in mind
- Writing clearly, with focus and direction
- Making a great first impression
- Showing an understanding of research and the body of evidence
- Correct spelling, grammar and punctuation

**WEAK**
- Hard to read
- Difficult to understand
- Unclear
- Lacks proper spelling and grammar
- Unnecessarily complicated
- Misleading
- Misrepresentative of the facts
- Lacking evidence
1. Writing about medicine
Focus on writing quality

Improving the **quality** of your medical writing will result in a better essay.

- Learn how to write complete, grammatically correct sentences
- Study your own writing and know your strengths and weaknesses
- Know your intended audience – the examiner – as well as what is being assessed (selection criteria)
- Read other people’s writing
- Listen to feedback and criticism, and learn from it
- Become an expert in your subject matter
- Be confident
- Be original
- Study the craft of writing
- Stick to the essay writing formula (introduction/body/conclusion)
- Write in the third person
- Use evidence to back up your points
2. Essay marking criteria

Five equally weighted domains
1. Capacity to produce a logical argument
2. Flexibility
3. Capacity to communicate
4. Judgment, experience and maturity, ethical awareness
5. Ability to set psychiatry in a broader context.
2. Essay marking criteria

Domains are weighted according to their relevant to the question

1. The candidate demonstrates the ability to communicate clearly
2. The candidate demonstrates the ability to critically evaluate the statement/question
3. Information cited in the essay is factually correct
4. The candidate demonstrates a mature understanding of broader models of health and illness, cultural sensitivity and the cultural context of psychiatry historically, and in the present time, and can use this understanding to critically discuss the essay question
5. The candidate demonstrates appropriate ethical awareness
6. The candidate demonstrates understanding of patient-centred care, the recovery model in psychiatry, and the role of carers
7. The candidate is able to apply the arguments and conclusions to the clinical context, and/or apply clinical experience in their arguments.
8. The candidate is able to draw a conclusion that is justified by the arguments they have raised
3. Essay questions
Type of essay question

Critical analysis
• Discuss
• Critically evaluate
• Critically appraise
• Compare and contrast
• Debate
• Consider the breadth of the issue
3. Essay questions
Before you start writing

“There can be no health without mental health”

• Read the question twice
• Break it down
• Identify and highlight the key words/points
• Spend several minutes planning the general structure – decide the most important points to include
• Historical, political, social, clinical

Planning your time
2-5 minutes – planning
20-45 minutes – writing
2-10 minutes - revision
3. Essay questions
Planning

“There can be no health without mental health”

WORKSHOP TIME!

Themes / breadth of issue
- Determinants of mental health
- Burden/prevalence
- Care and treatment
- Socioeconomic inequalities
- How physical/psychosocial problems affect mental wellbeing
- Historical context
3. Essay questions

Planning

Introduction
• The meaning/definition of the term health
• The meaning/definition of the term mental health
• A sentence supporting the statement
• A sentence that gives a different view/disagrees with the statement

Paragraphs 1 and 2
• Discuss/give examples of situations in which a person can be physically and socially healthy but not mentally and therefore would not be considered to be healthy

Paragraphs 3 and 4
• Discuss/give examples of how the term health is used/has been used to describe the physical and/or social health of an individual with the mental health being ignored/not referred to

Conclusion

“There can be no health without mental health”
3. Essay questions

Introduction

“There can be no health without mental health”

• State your argument or proposition (thesis statement)

Example:
The World Health Organization’s (WHO, 2007) proposition that “There can be no health without mental health” implies that mental health is intrinsic to health, yet a clear distinction between mental health and physical health still exists today.”

• Define key terms

• Place the question in its scientific/medical context as well as social, historical, cultural and political

• Outline how you intend to approach the topic and what you intend to discuss in the body

• Show your examiner you understand the importance/significance of the question

Tip: Percentages and figures are powerful tools for illustrating factual information (eg mortality/morbidity, incidence, 5-year survival rates, socioeconomic burden, prevalence)
3. Essay questions

**Body**

- Crystal clear and persuasive
- Use your essay plan
- The body should contain the key ideas you outlined in your introduction, divided into 3 or 4 separate paragraphs
- Each paragraph discusses a distinct issue related to the subject, eg historical/political/cultural/social
- Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence
- The body should develop the subject matter in a logical way, using relevant information and evidence/quotes/references to support the topic sentence
- Topic sentences can stress continuity or highlight contrasting arguments
- Linking sentences – the first sentence of your second paragraph should link to the previous paragraph and introduce the main idea of the next paragraph
3. Essay questions

Topic sentences examples

HISTORICAL
The idea that insanity was fundamentally different from other illnesses, that it was a disease of the mind rather than the body, only developed towards the end of the 18th century.

- Show knowledge of historical context

MEDICAL DEFINITIONS
The fact that both the public and medical professionals still make a distinction between ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ health perpetuates the assumption that mental disorders are disorders of the mind, not body, and that they are fundamentally different from other illnesses.

- Show knowledge of contemporary medicine

DISEASE CLASSIFICATIONS
Against this background it is instructive to examine the status of mental and physical disorders, and the allocation of individual syndromes to broad groupings of disease, in contemporary classification of disease.

- Show knowledge of disease classification

SOCIAL
The linguistic distinction between mental and physical illness, and the mind/body distinction from which this was originally derived, still encourages many lay people, and some health professionals, to assume that the two are fundamentally different.
3. Essay questions

Conclusion

• Briefly restate the argument/purpose
• Summarise the key points
• State your conclusion persuasively
• Back up your reasons for your conclusions
• Don’t introduce any new ideas
• Pose a question/suggestions for further research
3. Essay questions
Final review

• Use the final 5 minutes to review and correct mistakes
• **Depth**: Has your analysis of the topic been covered in sufficient depth? Have you used enough credible evidence to support your own statements?
• **Interesting**: Is your essay interesting and engaging?
• **Structure**: Does the introduction clearly state the topic and how it will be dealt with? Does the body contain clear links between paragraphs? Does the conclusion refer back to the topic and summarise the key arguments?
• **Clarity and flow**: Does it flow well?
• **Originality**: Is your writing original and independent? Is any paraphrasing written in your own words?
3. Essay questions
Example #2

“We may not have eliminated social stigmatization of symptomatic individuals with mental illness, but improved treatment has helped many of them make their symptoms and dysfunction less visible and less problematic.”

WORKSHOP TIME!

Themes
• Public attitudes towards mental illness
• Historical/political context
• Stigma associated with mental illness (justifiable?)
• Socioeconomic benefits of focusing on improved treatment?
3. Essay questions

Example approach

• Over the years there has been a greater community awareness of mental illness and improved attitudes as a result, however the degree to which this has led to reduced social stigmatization needs to be examined. Over the last x amount of years there have been vast improvements in our ability to control visible symptoms of mental illness with medication and different therapies. People with mental illness are functioning in the community without the need to be incarcerated. This change in social circumstances has, however, brought with it a different set of challenges/problems.

Paragraph 1

• Explain what is meant by social stigmatization/ Give historical perspective on social stigmatization
• Give information on cultural differences with respect to social stigmatization

Paragraph 2

• Consider present day situation and whether or not there has been a considerable reduction in social stigmatization

Paragraph 3

• Consider the historical situation re housing mentally ill individuals in institutions versus not

Paragraph 4

• Discuss the challenges/problems, eg increased homelessness and the mentally ill being disproportionately represented amongst homeless individuals. Is their dysfunction really less visible/problematic if people with mental illness are homeless/on the streets?
3. Essay questions

• Cognitive psychologists have shown us how our intuition can be fooled. We can be gullible. Critical thinking is required to avoid common fallacies. Metacognition can help us monitor our thinking and avoid mistakes.”

• To what extent do you agree?
  • How would you convince someone who doesn’t agree?

• Historical examples
• Counter arguments
• Clinical vs anecdotal evidence
4. Student essay feedback

COMMON FEEDBACK

• Acknowledge your previous arguments by using linking words and sentences
• Every paragraph should contain a form of evidence (research, quotes, statistics, facts) to back up your points
• Focus on structure and plan your arguments before you start writing - this will help you to produce a more structured, rounded essay
• Avoid unnecessary phrases such as ‘is an interesting thought’ and ‘another thought would be’ – get to the point straight away
• The beginning and end of the introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion should be clear (leave an extra line, for example)
4. Student essay feedback - examples

ESSAY QUESTION
• "The way in which the human user represents the self in cyberspace is fascinating, complex and, with respect to our human nature, ultimately revealing."

FIRST PARAGRAPH - STUDENT
• “David Brunskill expresses his fascination for the interaction between the human self and the cyber space; which finds both complex and revealing. However, it leaves us with subtle paradox of how ‘social avatars’, which are designed as a guise for human users, can be ultimately revealing of the human nature and what is it that they give away?”

SUGGESTION
• “When David Brunskill expressed his fascination for the interaction between the human self and cyberspace, he left us with a subtle paradox: social avatars, which are designed to disguise human users, can be ultimately revealing of human nature. Some people use avatars to hide aspects of themselves which aren’t liked or wanted, while others use them to explore desires that are supressed by social norms. This exaggeration of the gap between the ideal and real self also has concerning mental health implications.”
5. Writing under pressure

“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”

E.M. Forster
5. Writing under pressure

Analysing the question under pressure

- Read the question over in your head more than once
- Identify and underline any words that need to be defined – or words that identify the scope of your essay
- Rewrite the question in your own words
- Practice at home with example questions
5. Writing under pressure
CREAM SPACE HIT

Clinician
Consider aspects of clinical experience, your own experience as a trainee is valid here

Research
Significant authors

Education
How would you educate the public, colleagues and other specialties.

Advocacy
Consider your role as a consumer advocate

Manager
Put yourself in a manager’s shoes

Spaces
Are there any gaps in the essay?

Political
Is the issue at hand influenced by socio-political factors?

Assets
How would you allocate resources effectively?

Culture
Consider cultural issues

Ethics
Hippocratic oath, code of ethics, Stigma/sexuality. Know the College Code of Ethics.

Historical
Name-drop historical names – but be credible
Understanding of the history of psychiatry and literature

Information Technology
Use of social media, internet and self help programs.

- See more at: blog.psychscene.com/psychiatry-essay-writing-ranzcp-exam/#sthash.b156V2dr.dpuf
6. Writing coherently and concisely

"Writing is a craft you can learn. You need tools, not rules."

Roy Peter Clark
6. Writing coherently and concisely

General tips

- Third person
- Tense use
  - Present – generalisations, scientific facts, statements made by you as a writer
  - Past – used to report/describe past research findings
  - Present perfect (a past event that has present consequences), ie “Studies which have explored xxxx include …”
- Avoid vague words
  - Verbs (seems, could, may, might, deal with)
  - Nouns (issue, thing, situation)
- Make your points straight away
- Replace phrases with single words
  - “The group of psychiatry students sat their exams”
  - “The psychiatry students sat their exams”
6. Writing coherently and concisely

General tips

• Omit unnecessary words
  • “Because” or “as” instead of “due to the fact that”

• Avoid qualifying words (words which mean the same thing)
  • “Separate” instead of “separate out”
  • “In retrospect” instead of “looking back in retrospect”

• Avoid saying the same thing twice
  • “Evaluating these hypotheses would require further testing and additional research”

• Avoid awkward phrasing
  • “There are several theories, all of which have been put forward by ...”
  • “Several theories have been put forward by...”
7. Make your essay stand out

Tips to shine

“If the reader is to grasp what the writer means, the writer must understand what the reader needs.”

George Gopen
7. Make your essay stand out

Tips to shine

• Remember: your examiners are reading dozens of essays
• Include interesting facts
• Be aware of your vocabulary – find the balance
• Show the examiner that you have thought about the subject and important issues (ie ethics)
• Take care with your presentation
• Approach with a different/unique angle
• Leave with a lasting impression
• Address marking scheme
8. Medical essay writing do’s and don’ts

“Never say more than is necessary.”

Richard Brinsley Sheridan
8. Medical essay writing do’s and don’ts

Do

• Write succinctly to demonstrate that you understand the topic well.
• Write in the active voice, ie the subject of the sentence performs the action; it does not receive the action.
• Practice A LOT! Don’t just practice – ask for advice on how you can improve
• Prepare essays from previous years
• Write legibly – practice writing well so your examiner can actually read your writing
• Practice your speed of writing
• Pay attention to spelling and grammar

Don’t

• Repeat information; it wastes time and shows an unplanned essay.
• Use an excessive amount of facts – this gives the impression that you can’t answer the question
• Get side-tracked. Ask yourself, am I answering the question?
• Use clichés and idioms
9. Online resources to help with your writing

“I think I did pretty well, considering I started out with nothing but a bunch of blank paper.”

Steve Martin
9. Online resources to help with your writing

- Grammar Girl
  - [http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl](http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl)
- Essay Style and Structure (Sydney University)
- Improve Your Academic Writing (Next Scientist)
  - [http://www.nextscientist.com/tips-improve-your-academic-writing](http://www.nextscientist.com/tips-improve-your-academic-writing)
- The Science of Scientific Writing (American Scientist)
  - [www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/the-science-of-scientific-writing](http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/the-science-of-scientific-writing)
- Improve Your Academic Writing (University of Essex)
  - [www.essex.ac.uk/myskills/how_to_improve_your_academic_writing.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/myskills/how_to_improve_your_academic_writing.pdf)
- 50 Writing Tools (Roy Peter Clark)
- How To Construct An Essay (Josh May)
Good Luck!

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