American Studies
— Single Honours American Studies
— Dual Honours American Studies
— English and American Literatures

Study Skills Guide

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Introduction

Essay writing is the primary means of assessing your performance as a student (whether as a submitted essay or written in an exam environment), so it’s important for you to try to develop your essay-writing skills as far as possible. What follows outlines just some of the skills that will help you write better essays.

Most people accept that there is no single, standard way to write an essay or to develop effective study skills. Everyone who writes an essay will have their own styles of working and writing. The likelihood is that you’ll already have some of the skills described in this guide. One of the early things to develop is a sense of your own strengths and weaknesses. One of the most important purposes of this guide is to encourage you to be self-aware. It should prompt you to recognise your own particular needs, and to think about and take responsibility for your own independent learning. Rather than passively receiving knowledge, you have to work at understanding issues and concepts, and developing your own abilities.

To succeed you must take an active approach to learning.

However, there are certain skills you will definitely need to develop to write good essays. Applying certain principles will support your learning and help you in your assignments, and there are also standards by which you will be assessed. This guide attempts to set out what is expected of you and offers examples of ways to achieve it.

What are essays for?

Many people see essays only in terms of assessment and grades. However, it is just as important that essay-writing allows you to assess your own progress. In the process of writing, you generate ideas and clarify thoughts, and this gives you a good idea of how well you understand the subject and how well you can put this into practice. It is hard to be a successful student if you don’t know how much you have understood or what you have achieved except for when your tutor tells you. Furthermore, essays are also important chances for you to pursue your own interests. You have to be both academically disciplined and intellectually creative to write a really good essay, and this helps you find and express your own voice.

You will, though, still get essay grades. Essays are set as tasks to measure your success in meeting the objectives of a module. That is to say, an essay provides evidence of knowledge, understanding and skills on the basis of which your tutor can assess your progress. We have developed a series of assessment criteria to give you a better sense of how any essay will be assessed: knowing these criteria may help you to plan your work.

A weak essay tends:
• to be poor on presentation and expression;
• to wander off the point;
• not to have selected the most relevant material;
• to either argue a case that isn’t worth arguing (being self-evident, too familiar, or implausible), or that would need better evidence;
• to show failures of understanding or knowledge;
• to draw on too little information or too few details;
• to just list material rather than have a coherent, purposeful structure;
• and to be descriptive rather than critical or analytic.

The essay requires greater attention to all aspects covered in this guide.
A middle-range essay still tends:
- to be over-descriptive;
- to rely too heavily on secondary sources (i.e. opinions of critics);
- not to develop an argument very far;
- and to be lacking in originality.

It may be a potentially much stronger essay, held back by weaknesses in structure, research, in-depth thinking, or application.

A high quality essay usually:
- is well-researched;
- shows intelligent structuring;
- balances secondary and personal material;
- is written and argued persuasively and critically;
- and shows creativity, flair, and original thinking.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Range</th>
<th>Quality Level</th>
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<tr>
<td>70% and over</td>
<td>First Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>60-69%</td>
<td>Upper Second Class</td>
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<td>50-59%</td>
<td>Lower Second Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-49%</td>
<td>Third Class</td>
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What follows…

If you’re keen to write the strong essays described above, you will need to develop effective habits of organised study; and to be effective these habits have to give you regular feedback, so that you can stay fully aware of what you are doing and how well you are doing it. To begin with, each stage of essay-writing requires essential learning and study skills that you will also need to develop for other purposes. Hence this guide focuses on time management and note-taking as well as the more obvious writing skills, such as planning, structuring, argument and communication.
1 Time Management

Writing an essay is one part in the on-going process of learning and studying, and each part takes time.

The better you manage your working time, the more effectively you will work, and the more free time you will have. Poor time management is one of the main reasons why students under-perform and/or feel excessive stress. Yet the principle of good time management is simple:

- Plan ahead and prioritise your tasks.

So, draw up a schedule for your weekly workload each semester. Set down formal commitments (classes, lectures, etc.), and then mark out all your deadlines. If some of them clash (e.g., essays from different courses to be submitted in the same week), then bring some deadlines forward yourself.

At all levels it pays to think and plan ahead. Just as you must buy the set texts before the bookshop has run out, so you must get to the library before your choice is limited to the books others have left behind. It is also effective in terms of simple psychology: it is easier to stay motivated when you have turned what can seem limitless work into a series of specific goals. Organising your working time and tasks into smaller, more manageable parts, lets you remain in control, and gives you positive feedback. The tasks don't seem so overwhelming if you address them piece-by-piece.

- Planning is not an extra activity or an extra claim on your time, but the basis to using your time more efficiently.

The best organisation is often the simplest: draw up a list and tick things off as you do them. When you have an essay assignment, itemise the tasks involved and, being realistic, allocate blocks of time to each stage so that you can spread the work and meet the deadline. The point of the exercise should be clear: having made a plan, at any point you can immediately see how far along you are.

2 Note-Making

Good note-making is itself a skill to develop, and an effective system is important to all aspects of learning and studying.

Think ahead: when the time comes to revise for exams, you need clear, concise, and well-focused notes. When you sit down to plan and write an essay you want to have a file of clear, relevant notes. You should have a range to draw on:

- Notes made from your reading of the main text / primary source
- Notes made from lectures and seminars
- Notes made from critical works / secondary texts

At the same time, don't shut your intellectual eyes when you close an academic book: you and your studies are part of a world of information and events. For example, politics students should take note of current affairs. Making notes or, better, collecting cuttings from quality newspapers about American politics is a good way to keep up to date with what is happening, and will provide useful material for your essays.

- Always make notes with a clear sense of purpose in mind.
Lecture notes should be outline sketches, not an attempt to transcribe every word. In particular, you should pay more attention to the key stages of the argument than to the supporting illustrations. This allows you to listen attentively so that you understand what is being said, using your notes to signpost the essentials. Leave space to fill out your notes afterwards.

Seminar notes should be even briefer sketches. In a class, you need to be attentive and also to participate; afterwards is the time to look over your notes and use them to stimulate further thought. This is, in fact, the last of three stages in seminar work. You must prepare for classes; you have to contribute to classes; and you need to follow up on what happened in them.

Seminars do not begin when you walk in nor end when you walk out.

Making quality notes on the main text forms, for literature students, a key element in the essential critical practice of making a close textual reading. To make a "close reading" you need to have read the whole text and grasped its basics of plot, character, and theme. Having identified these, you can move from the general overview to a detailed, line by line analysis:

1. Select a particular passage or chapter which focuses the key issues. Construct detailed accounts of how "character," "image," and "plot" work in your chosen section.
2. Locate metaphors and consider implications of their kind and use.
3. Consider the relation between events and what different characters say or think about events. Pay attention to point-of-view, and be alert to ironic or multiple interpretations.
4. Think through any marked formal features of your chosen section, and/or of the work as a whole. What makes it distinctive, and how does this relate to its central concerns?

However, much of your note taking is likely to happen when reading a critical work or secondary source. The following tips may well help you make good use of your time and effort.

1. Check the index and then skim the work to see if it is going to be worthwhile.
2. Some people prefer to find and read through the relevant part, before they make any notes.
3. Think before you take notes, making sure that you understand the ideas, and questioning whether you agree with them. Then put the ideas into your own words (this shows the degree to which you have understood).
4. Don't waste your time: be selective. Quality counts, not quantity.
5. You will want to use some parts as quotations: be accurate (double-check the original and your copy), and make sure you have all you need for references (bibliographical details, page numbers, etc.). This saves time in the long run.
6. Take time and care as to how you lay your notes out. You want to be able to use them efficiently: don't crowd the page so that they are hard to read and impossible to add to: make use of headings, coloured inks, highlighter pens.
7. Keep your notes well-organised so that you can find things.
3 Planning and Structuring

Before you can get from notes to writing you have to plan and organise your material.

Before you spend time on this essential stage, you need to be sure that you have the right material. What is the right material? Firstly, it must be relevant to the essay title. Consider the title carefully, and re-read it regularly. You need to understand the key terms and the directions in the title to know what is or is not relevant. Avoid simple mistakes, like confusing "compare" (find similarities) and "contrast" (find differences).

Wherever your planning goes next, you should always keep the essay title in mind. The title, and your response to it, should be the crucial factor in shaping the essay. Planning and structuring depend upon generating a response to the question.

One way people come to an answer after reading material (as described above in section 2) is to try jotting down their thoughts quickly. This breaks the ice, generates ideas, and gives the writer something to start from. Much of this early material may be dropped later, as the writer moves on to more analytical and organised critical thinking, but a ‘brainstorming’ session early on can help establish first directions. Just as any plan is better than no plan, and all plans can be changed to suit your needs, so too with structure and ideas. You need to get something down. Knowing that you will change it can actually be a great help: it makes you aware that you learn by doing, and that the process can be extended and refined.

However, there comes a point in planning when you have to stand back and evaluate your approach. This is the time to question your assumptions, and to look for contradictions in your argument. Does it add up? Can you take the argument further? Is it interesting or challenging enough - or is it too adventurous: do you have the evidence to support your argument? Ask yourself questions at this stage - before you find yourself half way into an essay that has no clear argument, or one you can't develop with any conviction.

4 Arguing Your Case

The essence of structuring your material is putting the argument in its most effective order.

Some people see an essay as a narrative, with a beginning, various episodes, and an ending. Your argument is the plot: you don't want to reveal the whole conclusion, but you do need to start from the right place to get there by a convincing route. Others (particularly those in the discipline of politics) see an essay like a court case: after an opening statement, you present your case (pro or con), and then summing up at the end.

Whichever approach you adopt, your essay has to take your reader with you, and that means making it clear you are going somewhere. Your beginning may be a certain thesis, or proposition - you intend to show X, or to question Y, or to examine Z - and you proceed through various parts as evidence towards a conclusion. So divide your material up, and think carefully about the sequence. Map out your essay in outline, so that you can see it clearly all at once.

An example of this process follows. Don't be fooled by the focus on a literature question: for all essays—whether literature, film, geography, politics or history—the general principles are the same.

Every essay needs a central thesis and progression towards a conclusion
For example...

**Essay Title:** Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Democratic Poem

**Thesis:** You intend to argue that the form of Whitman's poem embodies his ideas about democracy.

**Part 1:** Set out what democracy meant to Whitman, and what aspects of his poem you are going to examine. Establish your thesis, the range of your material, and the sequence of your main points.

**Part 2:** Dividing your ideas into sections, divide up each section paragraph by paragraph into points and evidence.

**Part 3:** Consider objections to your argument, material that might contradict it, and make your conclusion.

In this sketch, **Part 1** signals what you intend to do and how you are going to do it; **Part 3** shows your awareness of possible counter-criticisms, and that your argument has had to be strong enough to survive them.

**Part 2** is where you build your argument and supply evidence. You don't have to spell out the logic at every step of the way, but there does need to be a logic. Signalling the key stages of your case can be helpful to the reader, and it enables you to keep a grip on what the main points of your essay are.

Typically you work by asserting a general point, and then supplying detailed evidence to support it. You move from a large claim ("Song of Myself" is democratic in addressing the whole of America as its readership.) to precise analysis (Whitman calls to the President and the prostitute in exactly the same way, using the same sentence structure so as to act out stylistically his refusal to see any social or moral hierarchy.), etc.

Your essay will have a larger structure, by which you move from an initial thesis, address it using evidence, progressing towards a conclusion. This structure should involve delivery of evidence to make a convincing argument. However, there is also a structure to each of the essay's parts and paragraphs. Each paragraph will play a role in sustaining the argument.

However, since you are rarely arguing in terms of "right" and "wrong", there are always alternative readings: arguments generate counter-arguments. It is always important to remember that "evidence" is not "proof". Bear this in mind when using or quoting from critical works: critics argue - but so can you. This also applies to tutors and lecturers. Take issue with them: they advance interpretations, not the last word on a subject.

On most subjects you'll be asked to write on, there are a number of viewpoints or critical interpretations. You should expect to position yourself in relation to critical interpretations. Who do you find convincing? One way of starting an essay, therefore, is to cite a critical argument (especially one that seems convincing), in order to challenge it.

For example...

Numerous critics have interpreted "Song of Myself" in terms of Whitman's democratic values. Critic X is typical in arguing that the common sentence structure used to hail President and prostitute alike acts out verbally the poet's "refusal to see any hierarchy". That is to say, equality in style demonstrates, as well as states, Whitman's vision of equality in social value. [so far so good - your reader has followed the line of argument, and probably goes along with it: now for your counter-reading...] But it is surely a questionable vision that depends upon a "refusal to see". Whitman's democratic vision, so clearly stated and demonstrated inside his poem, can only convince by ignoring the reality outside it, where President and prostitute did not have an equal place in society. Critic X is typical in seeing the poet's vision, but not the blindness to reality it requires.
5 Writing: First Draft

After you have researched, made notes, thought about the subject, jotted down ideas, made a plan, or two, of your argument, outlined a structure, only then can you begin writing. Everyone works in different ways, but to begin with you may not know your way, the one that really works best for you. So here are a couple of suggestions.

Option One: Put all your notes and outlines and texts together, and double-check that everything you want is there. Then, if possible, spread your notes out around you, so that you can really see all of your material all at once. If you have too many sheets of half-relevant notes, it is worth re-doing some, or using a system of colour-coding to link up ideas on different pages.

Option Two: Gather all the most important ideas you've discovered on one sheet of paper. Work out how each is relevant to your argument, and build a structure from the list you've generated.

Whatever system you use, be in control of your material before you begin.

Most important of all, as you actually write, remember what it was that you wanted to say: if a line comes out confused you will only have to go back and rewrite it. Keep reviewing your work in the light of your title. Keep in mind the gist of your argument and the structure of your essay. Make each paragraph serve a particular role in making your argument: present the material in an order that the reader can understand and follow it. Don't forget the importance of writing in strong, clear sentences. And, as you write, don't close your mind off to new ideas: there's always room for a bright new thought, or an inspired turn of phrase.

For many, writing often means word-processing: typing your essay is highly recommended. Word-processing certainly improves presentation, and makes editing much easier. However, word-processing does involve some extra considerations. If you work directly onto a PC you may miss out a first draft altogether, and rewriting a rough stage is often where you rethink the most effectively. Also, it is especially important that you don't let busy machines in the PC labs or faulty disks wreck your deadline. Allow time: the responsibility is yours.

Word-processing is an essential skill: take this opportunity to develop it.

Take advantage of the one-hour Word Processing and I.T. Skills courses offered by the Library. Just go to the Help Desk in the I.T. Suite and ask for details.

6 Editing: Final Draft

The difference between first and final drafts may be tiny, but is often critical. It may be a matter of correcting spelling, or noticing that your essay was meant to be about slavery in the North, not the South. More likely is the realisation that some paragraphs are weak, sentences muddled, or a key point is not made clear. As you read your draft, ask yourself questions, such as:

• Is your main argument well-focused?
• Is the essay interesting?
• Do the paragraphs link up and follow logically?
• Is descriptive material justified by analysis?
• Have you thought through the implications of your argument?
• Have you corrected grammar and spelling errors?

Editing is a vital part of the process: allow time for it.
7  Presentation and Style

Spelling, punctuation, grammar, prose style — these all affect the power of your essay and influence its grade.

Poor presentation will undermine your work. On the other hand, don’t be fooled by the brilliance of word-processed appearances: it won’t make a weak essay any stronger. As for style, aim to be fluent and succinct. Rework what seems clumsy or repetitious.

Always get the basic conventions right, such as italicising book titles.

Basic Style

Spelling

Use a dictionary (or a spell-checker, with care: it can’t distinguish between same-sounding words; e.g., “there” and “their”). Take note of your most common errors, and make sure that you don’t repeat them; you may lose marks if you do.

Punctuation and Grammar

There is no easy equivalent to a dictionary here, but again, when errors have been pointed out to you, make sure that you don’t repeat them. Once you have been reminded of the distinction between “its” and “it’s”, it’s likely that your tutor will view its confusion as a sign of poor concentration. Remind yourself that commas, semi-colons, dashes and full-stops are all there to break up sentences, and so help the reader to make sense of them. The main test is clarity: is it clear, or is it ambiguous? When in doubt, read it through again, and re-write if necessary. Avoiding long and complex sentences can avoid some mistakes. Remember that the reader has to be able to follow the argument. On the other hand, all sentences must be grammatically correct and punctuated.

Advance (Academic) Style

Style is individual. Nobody else talks like you, and nobody else writes like you. But remember that, in an essay, the distinctive personality of your style must also match your purpose and your reader.

Assume a generalised reader who is sceptical — but persuadable — and familiar with the historical/political events, or with the text (you do not need to summarise plots or events), but who does not have the set text or literary work in front of him/her (you need to quote key lines and maybe give their context).

You might find it helpful to read your essay out to a friend, as a way of anticipating objections. Alternatively, read it aloud to yourself: if it isn’t clear or persuasive to you, it is unlikely to be clear or persuasive to your reader. Give yourself time and distance to reflect on your essay: when you are in the middle of writing, it is hard to stand back and be constructively critical. Read it as if it were someone else’s work.

Clarity is essential: developing and communicating strong ideas and arguments is hard if your language is confusing. Once you have clarity you can introduce emphasis and variety.

Emphasis means constructing your sentences so that the main point is given prominence. It also means using your paragraphs to make a point. Variety of construction can help here. A short, final line can deliver a crisp punch after a series of quite long sentences.

Watch out for lack of variety. Line after line structured in the same way makes for dull reading. Likewise, watch out for not just repetition of ideas, but of phrases. Six uses of “it is obvious that” on
one page strains the reader's patience, and may imply a deeper problem: that either it is far too obvious to need stating, or that it is not obvious at all.

Look at the style of writers you especially enjoy, and take note of their techniques. You don't want to mimic their voice, any more than you want to imitate their critical position: you must develop your own, but you can learn from good models.

Always keep the reader in mind: both what he/she knows and needs to be told.

Four Problem Areas

Presentation:

**Paragraphs** are important in terms of both style and structure: they get too long when you have failed to break up your argument into parts, or to separate one idea from the next. On the other hand, when they are too short you risk fracturing your argument. A paragraph is a number of sentences on one theme and, as a unit of argument, should contain its "case", the evidence for that case, and (sometimes), the claims that run counter to that case. So, don't think in terms of a certain number of lines; think in terms of the unity of your paragraphs. Take time to consider your breaks carefully.

**Quotations** have to be incorporated into your essay carefully. Long quotations should be set apart. Short ones should be included inside a sentence or paragraph, unless you want to make a special emphasis, or are quoting lines of poetry.

Quotations must be accurate (always use the spelling of your original source, e.g., if it is in American English), and they have to make sense. If you are quoting only a short phrase, make sure that it forms a proper part of your sentence, and is grammatically correct just as if the words were your own. (See the “hierarchy” example above.) Quotations longer than a phrase are usually introduced by a colon - and again, they need to make sense as sentences:

Critics have commented on the way Whitman's language embodies his ideas on democracy: "to act out stylistically his refusal to see any social or moral hierarchy".

The slice of quotation here isn't a complete sentence. You should either include it inside your own:

Critics have commented on the way Whitman's language embodies his ideas on democracy, noting, for example, that he uses "the same sentence structure in order to act out his refusal to see any social or moral hierarchy".

Or you can quote the whole original sentence. You have a range of options to choose from. Again, take note of how other (scholarly) writers use the conventions. And finally, ask yourself: *why am I using this quotation?* Does it support a point you have made, or one you are about to make? You can’t just leave it there and hope it works. Analyse and discuss how a quote supports your argument.

**Advanced Style:**

The personal pronoun — *I* — becomes a problem when it is over-used. It tends to draw attention to itself too much, to over-emphasise what needs no emphasis — namely that something is your opinion. There are usually other ways of phrasing that avoid the repeated use of *I*, and there are impersonal substitutes, such as "the reader".

But, *I* isn't the same as "the reader": "I think that Whitman is a democratic poet" is not the same as "The reader thinks..." On the other hand, "Whitman makes a convincing democratic poet" solves your problem. It is obviously *you* thinking and stating this, but you avoid the personal pronoun.
8 Style Sheet

Style conventions can be difficult to manage at first, but with practice you will master them. Since footnotes for references and a bibliography of works used are essential for all Assessed Essays, you are well advised to follow the layout conventions closely and consistently.

However, tutors place the highest priority where you should; on the strengths of the essay itself.

Footnotes/Endnotes

Footnotes, remember, are numbered in sequence and placed either at the foot of each page, or all together at the end of your essay as endnotes. If you’re writing a literature essay based on a particular text, you do not need to footnote quotations from that main text (e.g., The Great Gatsby, in an essay on that book): page references can be given in the body of your essay, and you give details of the edition used in your bibliography.

However, when quoting from another work in your essay, follow this layout:


   Author's name - comma - title of work (preferably in italics, although underlined will do) - open bracket – p – stop – space – page number – close bracket – full stop.

   This is the layout for the first time you quote from a work. After that you can keep the reference inside your paragraph and avoid another footnote:

   The spirit of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" contrasts sharply with the "ambulatory paranoia" of Rimbaud's travels (p. 26).

   You have a choice here of referring to "Miller" or to "Assassins". That is, to an abbreviated form of either the author's name or the work's title, whichever is more suitable, so long as it is clear. Try not to let such references clutter up your sentences, by placing them at the end where possible. Alternatively, you could do it this way:

   The spirit of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" contrasts sharply with what Miller calls the "ambulatory paranoia" of Rimbaud's travels (p. 26).

If quoting from a text within a text — i.e. an essay by one author in a collection of essays, or a short-story in a volume — follow this layout:


   Author's name – comma – title in inverted commas – year of the piece (if known / appropriate) – comma – then the work it is in, italicised – and then the page numbers of the article – followed by the particular page cited. (If you have only referred to an article in general, you give just the page numbers of the article.)

Internet Citations

A superb source for internet citations can be found at: http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~africa/citation.html
Each academic discipline has slightly different conventions: if in doubt you should ask your tutor. What matters most is that your references are consistent and give the details so that a reader can trace your sources.

Bibliography

Books –


Notice the entirely different punctuation, and also the indentation after the first line of an entry.


Articles –


If you've downloaded an article in a PDF format (that is, with page images the same as the paper version), there is no need to include the URL in the bibliography. Just proceed as in the example above.

Note that in a bibliography you are expected to include all the relevant information: i.e. to cite also the publisher, and details of the first publication if it is not the same as your edition - compare the two Henry Miller citations.

So long as you have been careful and consistent you will not lose marks.

9 And Finally: Evaluation

Your essay isn't over when you hand it in. When you get it back from your tutor it will be graded and commented upon.

If you don't understand the grading, then ask: make sure you are aware of your tutor's criteria. If you don't understand your tutor's comments, ask him / her to explain them.

Be sure that you understand what you need to do in order to develop and improve. You should use your tutor to help you to recognise your strengths and weaknesses, and if you have any problems, talk to your tutor about them. He / she is not there only to mark your work. But, finally, you must rely on your own self-assessment, your own motivation, your own curiosity and desire for development.

Above all, use your essay to learn for the next one.
10 Summary

- Take an active approach to learning
- Maximise your work by managing your time
- Plan ahead and prioritise your tasks
- Get into the habit of making high quality notes
- Read and note with an eye to what is relevant
- Allow plenty of time at the planning stage
- Think around your subject and consider various approaches
- Reflect on the material you can select from
- Structure your argument and evidence carefully
- Map out your outline: Thesis / Evidence / Conclusion
- Be aware of your prose style
- Allow time for editing
- Don’t start to write until you are ready
- Check your argument is persuasive and your style fluent
- Learn from each essay

11 Prompt Sheet

- Choosing the title
- Reflecting on the title
- Initial thoughts
- Listing the key tasks
- Timetabling the tasks
- Research
- Note-making
- Ordering and reviewing notes
- Sketching a structure
- Writing a draft
- Restructuring if necessary
- Editing and proof-reading
- Completion of final draft
- Submission by deadline
- Tutor’s assessment
- Self-assessment for further improvement …

Always allow yourself time to reflect on what you are doing, and how you could be doing it better...