Tutorial 6: Essay writing

This is a short summary of points discussed in tutorial on 23 March 2016.

What makes a successful essay?

- Look at writing guidelines and marking criteria (in your course handbook)

- Answer the question

- Pay attention to structure and content

- How long should it be? - There is no specified length, and this is for a good reason. All relevant points should be covered, but reaching a specific word count is neither necessary nor sufficient to guarantee a good grade

- Will I get marked down for grammar/spelling mistakes? - If you look at the marking criteria, none of them mention spelling and grammar. Careful writing and good language contribute to a well-constructed essay, but minor spelling or grammar mistakes will not impact your grade.

- Will I get marked down for bad handwriting? - Your handwriting does not need to be pretty, but the person grading your essay should be able to read it. It's worth practising hand-writing an essay beforehand; most of us are rarely in situations where we hand-write for extended period of times nowadays.

- Do I need to know more than has been covered in class? - If you know everything that has been covered in class and write an impeccable essay, this is enough to get you a low A. For a higher grade, you need to evidence of outside reading. Stay tuned to the science news (Technicolor zebrafish!) and/or to other things you read, hear and see. Be curious.

How to write a good essay

Basically, there are four steps:

1. Collect thoughts/ideas

2. Plan the structure

3. Write the essay

4. Read it again

You should plan your time so that you can do all of these things within the hour allocated to you in your exam.

How to structure the essay

Every essay needs to have a beginning, an end, and a bit in the middle. The main part ("bit in the middle") is the most important. The introduction and conclusion can (and should) be short, basically just setting the scene (introduction) and wrapping it up (conclusion).

The structure of the main part needs to be thought through and logical, but there is more than one possible correct way. For instance, the question in your practice assay was why zebrafish is a good model organism and what recent research had been done on it. Here are two different possible structure

Elias's structure

1. Why is zebrafish a good model organism?

   (a) reason
   (b) another reason
   (c) another reason
   (d) ...

2. What work has been done on zebrafish?

   (a) study
   (b) another study
   (c) another study
   (d) ...

Calum's structure

1. One feature that makes zebrafish a good model organism

   (a) Explain feature
   (b) Describe an example of a study that uses this feature

2. Another feature that makes zebrafish a good model organism

   (a) Explain feature
   (b) Describe an example of a study that uses this feature

3. ...

4. ...

How should I practice essay writing?

Simulate exam conditions! I.e. sit down in a quiet room, give yourself an hour, write by hand etc., just like you would during the exam. You can look for essay questions from previous exams

How can I improve?

- Grade yourself

- Get together with a friend and read and critique each other's work

How can I study for the essay?

- Go through essay topics from previous years. Write rough essay plans

- Make a list of lecture topics covered. Consider making (rough) essay plans for each topic

- If you want to improve your writing skills, have a look at the Manchester Academic Phrase Bank (`http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/`). It offers building blocks for creating the sort of sentence pattern common in academic writing. For instance, they offer typical sentences you can use for "compare and contrast" type arguments. It is well worth spending some time looking through their web pages and familiarising yourself with the examples there. This will give you handy tools for expressing your ideas, so you can focus on content and don't have to worry about formulation during the exam.

Did you say Technicolor zebrafish?

Why yes, I did. See `http://today.duke.edu/2016/03/zebrafish`