

So you want to get a first in your essay: a guide for the frustrated

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[This is written with Politics students in mind, but I think it probably applies to most social science and humanities essays. But I'd be interested to know if people from other disciplines have other ideas. Also, this addresses one small part of essay writing, for much more comprehensive advice see Ursula Hackett's excellent [How to Write Brilliant Essays](#).]

The problem:

You got a 65 or maybe a 68 in your essay. It's what you keep on getting. You're sort of pleased that you didn't get a 2.2, but it would be nice to tell people that you got a first, wouldn't it? And that guy you sit next to in seminars who never has anything interesting to say (he inexplicably called Plato 'Platon' in the 8th week of term) managed to get a first, so why can't you? All of your essay feedback is generally positive, if a little vague. The marker probably made some ill-defined comments about the 'structure' or about the 'coherence' or 'cogency' of the argument, or maybe some suggestion that you needed to take the argument 'one step further' or engage 'more critically' with the reading. You don't really know how to translate these abstract comments into concrete action and when you asked the lecturer they either said something pompously unhelpful, like 'essay writing is an art, not a science', or they made some comforting noises that 'you're on the right track! Just keep doing what you're doing and you'll get there!'. All of this is useless to you and your pursuit of that elusive 70+ mark.

Here are my strategies to take your essays from 65 to 70+. I'll give you some examples later on—no, don't just skip ahead to the examples—but it's much more important that you can see how to do this for yourself. This is not just about how you *write* essays, it's how you *think about* writing essays.

The solution:

If you're getting 65-69 then you're doing most things right. You've shown that you understand the material, you've critically assessed some of the different arguments and come down on one side or the other, you've quoted some of the major thinkers or studies and their main conclusions and you've shown how they're vulnerable to criticism. In short, you've answered the question. So what's missing? The crucial ingredient: your imagination! What your marker wants to see, above all else, is that you've *really* thought about the question and reached your own reflective judgment. You might be thinking 'but I really *did* think about the question!' and while I believe you, that's not the same as persuading your marker (who's marking 50 other essays on the same topic) that you've *really* thought about it.

Before looking at what you should be doing, it's worth analysing what you probably have been doing. What I want you to do is to think about your essay like a journey along a road. The way that I've chosen to represent this is as a Y (it's a simple road, there are no roundabouts in this world). You start your journey at the bottom of the Y and you start to write your essay. You do what you have to do at the start of any essay: say what you take the question to mean, make some introductory remarks about why the question matters, indicate in general terms how different people have answered it and so on. Pretty much everyone travels on the same path for this bit of the essay. But then you reach the crucial point in the essay (in the first two paragraphs) where you need to decide how you're going to answer the question. This is the two prongs of the 'Y', or the fork in the road. Are you going to say 'yes I do agree with the unrepresentative and cherrypicked statement you've chosen for the essay question, Dr Lecturer' or 'no, I see through your cheap attempt to manufacture consensus, I

renounce thee, Dr Lecturer'? This is the most crucial sentence in your essay, let's call it the **thesis statement**. It's your answer to the question. Essay marks, course grades, and degree classifications all turn on this one sentence. It's the entire point of writing the essay and everything in the essay is about defending the thesis statement. So how do you come up with a good thesis statement? Well most essay questions encourage a binary (or sometimes ternary) answer. Think about the form that most questions take:

- 'Some cold-hearted dead man claimed that, "blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah" (1689). Do you agree?'
- 'Was this horrific and unprecedented development in human history caused by simplistic cause A or simplistic cause B?'
- 'Adherents of theory A claim that blah blah blah, whereas adherents of theory A+I vehemently disagree and claim that blah blah blah blah. Who is right?'
- 'Is this millennia-old concept/institution/human practice actually bad? Answer with reference to some recent inconsequential event.'
- 'Critically assess (in 1500 words) the importance of something in the magnum opus of this thinker of unparalleled significance.'
- 'X will lead to Y'. Discuss.'

More specific/less facetious versions of those same questions:

- 'In the *Second Treatise* John Locke claimed that 'being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions'. Do you agree?'
- 'Is Donald Trump's 2016 electoral success best explained by socio-economic inequality or by racial resentment?'
- 'Defensive realists, such as Waltz, claim that states are primarily security-maximisers, whereas offensive realists, such as Mearshemier, claim that states are primarily power-maximisers. Who is right?'
- 'Is democracy just a way for the many to oppress the few? Answer with reference to Brexit'.
- 'Critically assess the role of alienation in Marx's early thought.'
- 'Ever closer union will be the downfall of the European Union'. Discuss.'

There are other more imaginative ways of asking essay questions, but the same rules are going to apply to those too. The point I want to make is that there are some obvious ways to answers those questions, which you might want to avoid. So:

In the Second Treatise John Locke claimed that 'being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions'. Do you agree?



'Yes I agree'/No, I don't agree'

'Ever closer union will be the downfall of the European Union'. Discuss.'



'Ever closer union will be the downfall of the EU'/'Ever closer union won't be the downfall of the EU'

'Defensive realists, such as Waltz, claim that states are primarily security-maximisers, whereas offensive realists, such as Mearshemier, claim that states are primarily power-maximisers. Who is right?'

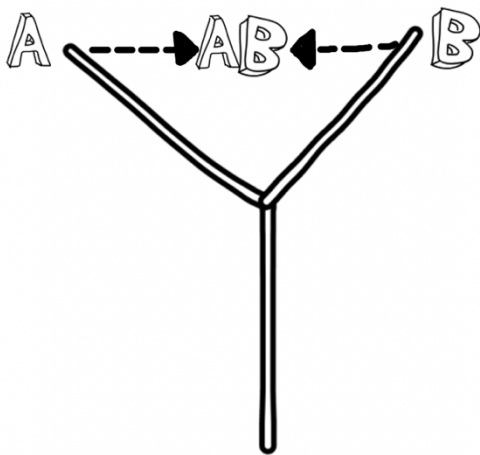


'Waltz is right'/'Mearsheimer is right'

I want to show you that those obvious answers won't get you a first. Let's take one of the above questions that everyone knows something about—'*Is Donald Trump's 2016 electoral success best explained by socio-economic inequality or by racial resentment?*'—to see how different strategies work. I don't know the answer to this question, so I'm just making up different answers on the spot to illustrate my pretty drawings. The point is that you can make up answers like this too.

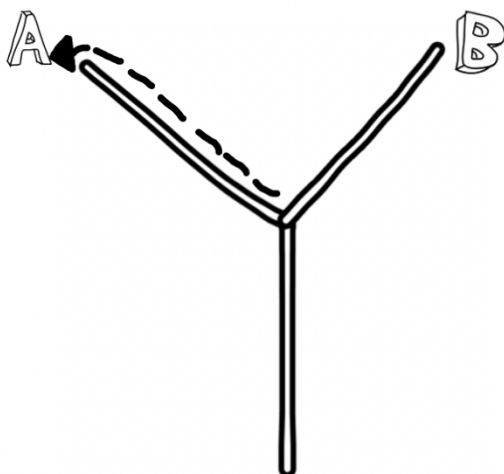
So here are the two strategy roadmaps that students mostly use, which **won't get you a first** (the names are supposed to dissuade you from using them).

THE COWARD



In '**The Coward**' the essay starts the same way as any other essay. You explain what happened in the 2016 election, why it was worthy of attention and why it demands an explanation. But when it gets to the fork in the road (where you have to decide what to argue), you've got scared and tried to take both road A and road B, perhaps by doing a quite ambitious conceptual splits. So your thesis statement becomes: 'Both socioeconomic inequality and racial resentment played a role in Trump's electoral success'. You then spend the essay looking at the pros and cons of each explanation before reiterating your thesis statement: 'both factors were important in deciding the outcome of the 2016 election'. What's wrong with that? Well everyone in the world who's thought about it at all agrees with you! It's the easiest conclusion to reach because it's obvious that these two factors played a role. All the literature says so! That's why it's the cowardly answer: you're not really disagreeing with anyone. This is the archetypal essay for a solid 65. It's not that it's terrible, it's just not brave enough to keep me (the marker) entertained.

THE DULLARD

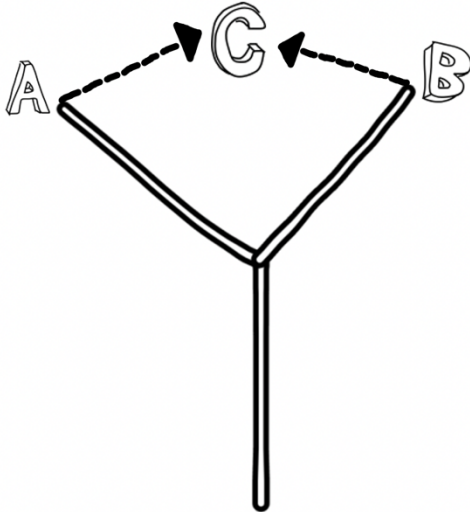


In '**The Dullard**', things look a little better. The essay starts in the usual way, but the Dullard isn't plagued by the doubts of the Coward and you're pretty damn sure that it was socio-economic inequality that led to Trump being elected. So your thesis statement becomes: 'Racial resentment was irrelevant to Trump's electoral success, which can be entirely explained by socio-economic inequality'. In fact, it's so obvious to you that you're not even going to bother with racial resentment at all. You're a hardcore economic determinist and it's all about the Gini coefficient for you. Well ok, that's a forceful argument, but it's got one problem: it's almost certainly wrong! Now I'm not telling you why Trump won the 2016 election. It's really not my area of expertise. What I am telling you is that almost no essay question is this clear-cut. It's not like lecturers ask you 'What's more delicious, a pineapple or a big bag of dust?'. If they're giving you two (or three) options then you should at

least assume that they're plausible options. But even if you do consider the other explanation and argue why racial resentment was such an insignificant factor, the essay is still going to be, wait for it: dull. Why? Because it seems like you've looked at the two options and picked one without ever *really* reflecting on the question, or the arguments, or the evidence. So you might get a 68 for the Dullard, but you'll never get a 70.

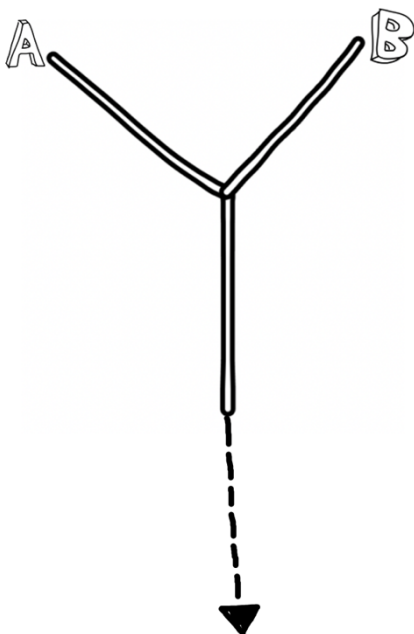
If those are what you should avoid doing, what **should you do instead**? Well here are three alternative strategy roadmaps for writing an essay that could (if you do all the other things right) get you a first. The idea behind all three is to show that you've *really* thought about the question.

THE EXPLORER



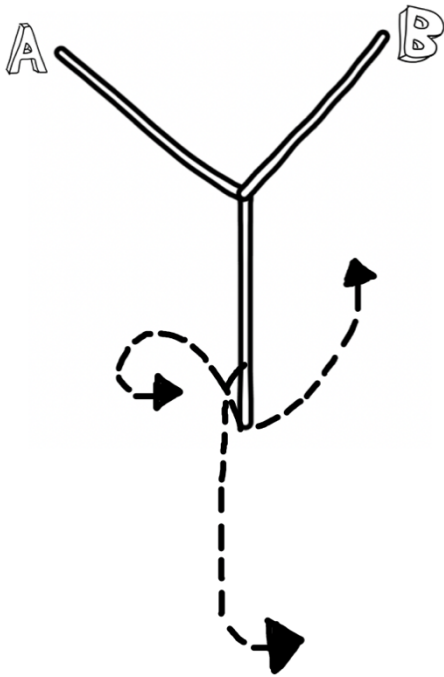
In **'The Explorer'** it looks like you're doing something quite similar to the Coward. What's the difference? In the Coward you sat on the fence and said 'this is too difficult, I can't decide so I'll hedge my bets and include a bit of both'. But the Explorer does something else. Like the Coward, the Explorer recognises that there's truth on both sides. Socio-economic inequality *and* racial resentment did play a significant role in Trump's election. But rather than just admitting that, the Explorer takes the argument further by creating a 'synthesis' (Hegel fanboys look away now, things are about to get faithless). Rather than relying on the two options you were given by the question, the Explorer says as their thesis statement: 'But wait! There is another option! I argue that socio-economic inequality and racial resentment are not separate phenomena, they actually overlap in significant ways that help to explain Trump's electoral success. In fact, it's racialised socio-economic inequality that explains Trump's 2016 victory.' And with one fell swoop, the Explorer is on their way to a first. Now they've got to do a bit more here to show how their synthesis works and how it differs from the discrete explanations offered in the question, but the hard bit is coming up with the synthesis (by exploring the alternatives), the rest will come naturally.

THE NI NI



'The Ni Ni', which is suddenly in French because it's nicer than 'neither...nor' and I like to pretend that I'm not a monoglot, is a more aggressive version of the Explorer. Rather than trying to synthesise the two options, the Ni Ni goes on the attack by rejecting both options. The strategy here is to reject the binary offered to you in the question and advance an entirely different alternative. That means there are lots of options to choose from and you need to be careful to pick a good one. Arguing that Trump's victory is best explained by his penchant for ill-fitting suits follows the Ni Ni strategy, but probably won't really work as an argument, so try to find something more plausible. For example, your thesis statement could be: 'Neither socio-economic inequality nor racial resentment were the decisive factors in Trump's election. Instead I argue that it was Hilary Clinton's milquetoast neoliberal policy platform that failed to mobilise the traditional democrat voter base in swing states.' This strategy doesn't mean completely rejecting the role of the other factors, but it does mean arguing that they weren't the most important causal factors. This approach shows the marker that you've considered the options and found them lacking, but you've also been diligent enough to advance an alternative.

THE DOUBTER



'The Doubter' is the riskiest strategy. It's a bit like the Ni Ni because it rejects the terms of the question, but rather than rejecting the two options and identifying an alternative, the doubter goes even further by questioning the entire basis of the question. Any question, even the most seemingly obvious, makes all sorts of assumptions that are partly hidden from view. The Doubter looks to expose and undermine those assumptions and, in so doing, question the validity of the question. If a question isn't valid then the only good answer is to show *why* it isn't valid. If the question is, "The marketisation of higher education in the UK has been a big success." Discuss.' then any good answer is going to scrutinise what 'success' means or question whether 'marketisation' can even be applied to higher education. Ok, so the example. Your thesis statement here would be: 'The question assumes a narrow understanding of electoral success. While Trump did win the electoral college in 2016, he lost the popular vote and in 2020 he lost the electoral college too. I argue that electoral success should not be defined in terms of a one-off victory but by the capacity of political actors to build sustainable long-term voter coalitions'. Like the Ni Ni the options here are endless. You could argue that American democracy is so gerrymandered and its representatives so bought and paid-for that the question of 'who wins?' doesn't even make sense. You could argue, with Braudel, that elections are 'surface disturbances,

crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs' and that Trump's election victory is best explained by the geological patterns in the southern United States and the corresponding fertility of the soil. The Doubter is the strategy to let your imagination run wild. This is risky because its success depends partly on the marker. Some markers will interpret this strategy as 'failing to answer the question'. They're wrong because any good answer to a question will interrogate the terms of the question, but you need to be explicit that you *are* answering the question, just in a different way.

Two caveats to the solution:

- The prudential caveat: these strategies are meant for students who are struggling to get from a 2.1 to a first, not for students who are struggling to pass courses or get from a 2.2 to a 2.1. All three recommended strategies are risky and more difficult to execute than the Coward and the Dullard. Sometimes being cowardly and dull is the right thing to do! Only use these strategies if the first paragraph of this document accurately describes your situation.
- The ethical caveat: there's a certain sort of sententious person who thinks that essay writing is a sacrosanct activity and that one should only argue what one truly believes in one's heart to be true. To do anything else is to spit on Kant's grave and bring shame on the learned institution which you represent. This is, of course, stupid. Writing an essay is an intellectual exercise and you can try out as many different arguments as you want to. You don't need to truly believe all of them, and anyway, who really knows what they think before they try to write it down? So I've got no time for that moralising and puritanical self-seriousness. But, you shouldn't take what I've said here as an endorsement of devil's advocacy or contrarianism. There's no particular honour in profaning pieties because you can and there's not much value in taking a kneejerk contrarian position because no one else holds it (and I wish someone would tell professional philosophers this more often). That's not to say that you shouldn't be controversial, but that controversy for controversy's sake rarely makes a good essay because it will be apparent to the reader that you don't really believe what you're saying and that you haven't *really* thought about the question.