Discipline of History - Tips on Writing Essays

- There is no one correct way to write a history essay - nor one single right answer to any essay questions.
- Before, during and after choosing a question or topic (you will usually have a choice), think hard about its precise wording, and all the different possible meanings or interpretations, both obvious and implicit.
- Try to get a broad overview of the subject area before you start detailed research. Use your textbook or some other general source. The more you know, the less time you will waste reading and taking notes on material not directly relevant to your essay.
- Make a very basic concept plan of how the essay might develop before you have done much - even any - library research. Just a few points on a bit of scrap paper will help clarify your ideas and guide your reading.
- Planning is crucial: work out how much time you have to spend in reading for the essay, and how much time to write it - then double your estimate of writing time.
- Keep all your notes and photocopies for the essay in one clearly labelled folder (with your name and a contact number / address), or the electronic equivalent.
- Try out your ideas and thoughts for the essay on friends, family members, pets, etc - the more you have to explain them to others, the clearer they will become to you.
- Essays need a beginning (introduction), middle (body of text - exposition and argument), and an end (conclusion, or summing up - preferably not a bald summary, but with a twist, paradox or reflection.
- Essays also need signposting - help the reader by first saying what you are going to say, then saying it, then saying that you've said it!
- Try to avoid taking too many notes - always consider why you want to know or remember the material in question before you note it down. Put direct quotes in quotation marks, so as to distinguish someone else's words from your own.
- The most common faults in essays are lack of an argument - not lack of information - and weakness in communication (that is, problems of written expression and style).
- The best way to improve your essays is to spend more time writing them.
- Read your final draft out aloud, either to yourself or someone else - you'll be surprised at how many improvements can still be made before it is submitted.
- Read the marker's comments carefully - and ask if you don't follow their meaning.