**Sunday, October 11, 2009**

**The Tao of word count**

Students often take word counts far too seriously, and at the same time not seriously enough. The instant you see the phrase "word count" in the assignment book you start to worry about entirely the wrong things. You focus on the minutiae - does the title count, do the section headings count, does the bibliography count, the references in the text, are you sure?? are dates one word or three, what about hyphenated words, do footnotes count, do quotes count, if you put somebody's initials in do they count, what about appendices, how much can you go over without being penalised, how much can you go under without being penalised, what about words in diagrams, what about words in tables, and so on and on and on and on and on.  
  
Instead of writing the assignment, you're worrying about the word count all the way through. I can tell this because often the first question that is asked is "How far can we go over without being penalised?" The answer is usually 10%. Then you set out to write to the word count + 10%, which is entirely the wrong way to do things. If I give you a 1000 word essay to write, I'm interested in you writing 1000 words, not 1100. The extra 100 is for you to stop dinning in my ear about diagrams, references, dates and hyphenations, because you have a whole hundred word buffer to deal with that stuff.  
  
Assignments are exercises in conciseness. That's what we aim to teach all the time. The reason why is that conciseness aids learning. If you can explain something concisely, that means you've learned it well, and you can explain it well. If you can't explain something concisely, that means, nearly always, that you haven't yet learned it well enough, so you need to revisit it - or you need to revisit the way you've explained it.  
  
So when you've written your 1000 word assignment, and it comes to 1105 words, you look at what you've written. And the question in your mind should not be "Is that part of the word count?", it should be "Which bits can I write more concisely?"  
  
However, boundaries do need to be reasonably clear, so here is a handy and short three part guide to what to look for and what to do. I should note, by the way, that my students will get more detailed guidance than this before their first assignment.  
  
1) Check up on, be familiar with, any guidance given for this course and this assignment in the course companion and the assignment book. Make sure that you're aware of them.   
  
2) After that, when it comes to small things - the dates, the section headings, initials and so on - aim at the word count, and let the buffer (10% or whatever is stipulated) take care of the rest.  
  
3) For the big things - quotes, tables, footnotes, diagrams - go on the following principle. What you've written is either there to gain you marks, or it isn't. If it's there to gain marks, then you should regard it as part of the word count. If, as some students have tried to argue from time to time, it's not, then what the heck is it doing there?????  
  
Follow those basic principles and you won't need to worry about word count any more, so you can concentrate on writing the best assignment you can.  
  
Simples.

Source:

http://reallyusefulknowledge.blogspot.com.au/2009/10/tao-of-word-count.html