Area-specific feedback pack

GUIDANCE FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC SUBJECT AREAS

Hi, everyone!

One piece of feedback we often get from our researchers – many of whom write across a wide range of disciplines – is that it can be difficult to know exactly what is expected in different kinds of briefs. This is largely because a good essay doesn't always mean the same thing – conventions can change dramatically depending on the subject area.

We wanted to review this carefully so that we could better advise everyone – both researchers and internal staff – about how our expectations can change in different disciplines. To do this, we went through a large number of QC and customer amendment requests (as well as looking at customer feedback) and noted the common problems which arose in different types of orders. The result of this review is this pack: within this, you'll find dedicated advice for a range of subject areas.

We hope that careful consideration of this feedback will be helpful for everyone. It will save time for researchers, both during the initial writing stage and the QC amendments process (indeed, it will hopefully minimise the need for certain types of minor amendments at all) . Internal staff can also benefit from bearing these tips in mind, as we can use them to ensure greater consistency during the QC process – we understand that it can be frustrating to receive conflicting information, and we want to work hard to minimise this in future, too. Perhaps most importantly of all, we hope it will lead to even better outcomes for our clients, which benefits us all in the long run!
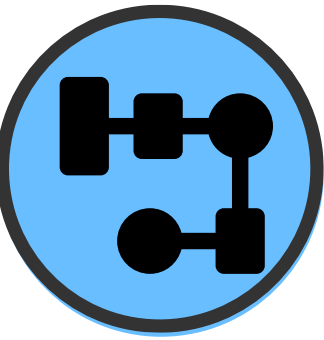
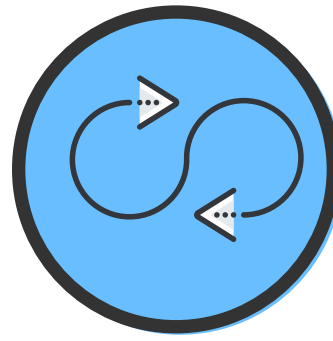Kind regards,

All Answers

CONTENTS

COMMON QC ISSUES - GENERAL

LACKING ANALYSIS/CRITIQUE

Even low-level briefs should contain a relative amount of critical analysis – it is in these kinds of orders (e.g. Undergraduate 2:2, Masters Pass) where this criticism is most recurrent. Each concept/study should be evaluated and critiqued: what are its strengths and what are its limitations? How relevant is it to the central question? Is it generalisable or applicable to the question at the centre of the piece? All of these factors should be considered and remarked upon in academic work. Naturally, more detailed and nuanced analysis is expected in higher level briefs, as this is the factor above all others that renders them 'higher level', but the vast majority of pieces should contain criticality to some extent.

INCLUDES IRRELEVANT CONTENT

Focus is one of the most vital components of a brief achieving the desired grade – unfortunately, when this slips, it severely impacts the quality of the work. Going off on an unrelated tangent is one of the most common manifestations of this. To maintain a tight focus, make sure that every point that is developed and expanded on relates closely to the central question: if you cannot summarise succinctly why an idea is related to the question, it is likely that the point is a tangent! Ensure that pieces of throwaway information do not make the final draft of the work: word count is too precious a commodity to waste on irrelevant information.

REFERENCING ERRORS/ UNSUITABLE SOURCES

While it is understandable that an error or two is made in utilising referencing during the production stage of a brief, and QC do aim to rectify any errors where they are noted, it is ultimately the researcher's responsibility to check that the referencing is in the correct style and is followed throughout the brief. A quick 'Control + F' search through the document before submission is a good way to ensure that in-text citations and reference list entries match up. In terms of sources, it is a good general rule to try to include sources published within the last ten years wherever possible to reflect modern thinking (particularly in disciplines where change is fast-paced, such as science), though of course in some cases, using older sources is pertinent or even essential. Trying to minimise use of non-academic sources, such as websites or blogs, is also a way to maintain the calibre of sources used.

NOT LINKED TO THE QUESTION

It is easy, especially with low level pieces, to think that citing one or two references is sufficient evidence for something: it is usually not. A source cited does not show how something does or does not support the central question; rather, **why** this is the case should be noted. It is vital to ensure that the focus of the work is maintained throughout – every paragraph should link in some way to the central question or theory, and if this is not possible, it is highly likely that the paragraph lacks relevance in the first place!

UNSUPPORTED ASSERTIONS

Academic work requires that statements made are supported by previous theorists or studies to show their relevance and validity. Sometimes it can be tricky to know when a statement does or does not require a reference; in these instances, the best principle to apply is whether or not this is 'common knowledge'. If you are confident that it is, no reference will be required; if not, cite a source. If you are unsure, citing a source is the safer option. For example: a statement like 'many nurses are not sure about the proper guidelines for infection control' is an unsupported assertion, as we could not know this for sure without having consulted a source which collected data on this.

LACKING DETAILED SUBJECT OR SECTOR KNOWLEDGE

We do understand that sometimes briefs are picked up by researchers who, while highly qualified in a related subject, have not got direct qualifications in a particular area. This may mean that highly subject or sector specific jargon or practices are unfamiliar to them, as each subject has particular nuances. However, it is still vital that these things should be understood and worked with when completing a piece. The best way to combat this potential issue is to ensure that the topic is very thoroughly researched, as doing this extensively should help to ensure that all key points are covered. Asking questions when not entirely certain if an approach is correct is another good way to ensure this is not being missed.
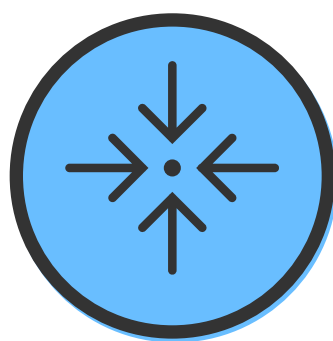
FEW LINKS TO MODULE MATERIAL

Assignments are the culmination of particular modules of learning and intend to assess what has been learned as a result of this: if the work does not show engagement with this material, this will naturally impact on the grade given. Obviously, this aspect is partly the responsibility of the client, as researchers cannot necessarily know all of the content a particular module may contain given wide institutional variance. However, it is prudent to consider which topics closely interlink with the one at hand to try and ensure that all of the relevant points are covered, even if no specific guidance is given.

Area-specific feedback:
✓ Art, Media and Literature/ Languages

REFERENCING

In subjects which fall within these disciplines, we would likely expect to see fewer secondary sources used than in fact-based disciplines (e.g. science), as many topics within this umbrella are reliant on interpretation of ideas, meaning that there are no 'right or wrong' answers, per se. However, this is not to say that we don't expect to see rigorous critical engagement, nor that we will not challenge unsupported assertions where they are present. The AK guidelines about number of sources per thousand words – which can be accessed via our Help section – should still be largely followed.
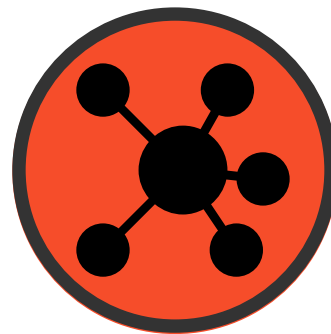
TECHNICAL JARGON

Some briefs in these areas – particularly English Language and Literature, Linguistics and Media – might require an extensive usage of technical 'jargon' related to a specific area. While there is nothing wrong with this in itself – indeed, it is essential for some pieces of work – it is important that all terminology is clearly defined to demonstrate an adequate understanding of it. It is important to ensure that usage of jargon does not overshadow the core of the argument. Take a minute to check that themes are clearly and logically grouped, and that all terms are explained in a logical and clear way.

FOCUS

Because of the nature of briefs under these subject groupings – especially the fact that they often rely on interpretations of an idea – it can be very easy to go off on a tangent when writing them. This often takes the form of wasting words outlining a concept or building up the contextual background, as opposed to actually answering the question at hand. It's important to strike a balance between these factors to ensure that a well-focused piece of work is produced.

COHESIVENESS

This issue is partially linked to the problems identified with focus; word count can be a limiting factor within a brief, so trying to cover too much content can result in a feeling that a writer is jumping rapidly from one point to another. Again, there's a balance to strive for: there may be many points which need to be mentioned in some way to demonstrate a good understanding of a topic, but the best approach is usually to select 2-3 central ideas and concentrate your analysis on these.

LINKS BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The single most common element that we find when reviewing feedback within the Business and Management subject area is that there is a lack of critical application of theory to real-world business contexts. Assignments are often based on a particular industry, company or case-study; as a result, applying findings of theoretical discussions to practice is pivotal because this is the only way to fully demonstrate your understanding of the theory and its relevance to the case being discussed. Often, we find that an appropriate strategy is identified, but this is not followed up with discussion of the real-world resources an organisation may have, which affects the implementation of any recommendations suggested.

USE OF EXAMPLES

A piece which fails to engage with real-life examples can suffer from similar problems to one which fails to make adequate links between theory and practice. Requirements often ask for specific examples to be included in the work, but this element is sometimes missed to the overall detriment of the piece. The main reason that this is important is to show support for the points you've made: it's not enough to assume that because theory suggests one interpretation that this is always true in practice. Indeed, you may be making an argument **against** a certain theory's viewpoint - it's extremely important in such cases to back this up with a suitable example.

JUSTIFICATION

Another prominent issue is that justification for recommendations given (particularly in the case of Marketing and Strategy reports, but in other orders as well) are not always explained rigorously enough. Often, we find that while the benefits of a recommendation are discussed in a good level of detail, the selection of that recommendation is often not fully explained in terms of why this course of action was chosen, as opposed to any other options which may have been presented. An explanation of why other options have been deemed less suitable is a critical part of justification, as without this, there is no evidence that you have chosen the **most** suitable recommendation.
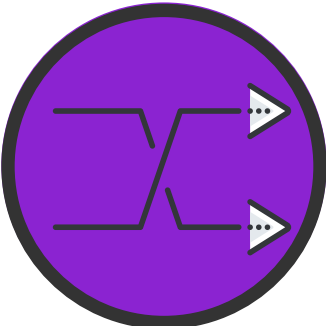
SUITABLE USE OF EVIDENCE

A lack of evidence is another common problem we encounter within Business and Management briefs. This often related to environmental analysis (both internal and external) lacking authority in the form of sources to support the analysis. These kinds of analyses (especially PESTLE) require information sources to be reviewed in order to ascertain which elements will impact on the relevant business environment - because of this, the majority of points raised should feature a supporting reference. A lack of relevant secondary data is also an issue which has been noted in some types of order - where qualitative analysis is strong, quantitative analysis is sometimes weaker. It's important to ensure that a balance is struck to demonstrate full engagement with the subject and its corresponding data, as this will impact on the recommendations which come later.

APPLICATION OF MODELS/ TOOLS

The use of models or tools is common in briefs throughout this discipline; with this comes the risk that these are either applied incorrectly, or - more frequently - have been only nominally applied, and are weak in their application. This is particularly recurrent in strategic management assignments, and the tool which is frequently misapplied/ lacks sufficient analysis is a VRIO/VRIN analysis, so this should be watched out for with these kinds of briefs in particular. It is pivotal to ensure that any requested model or tool is applied correctly and meticulously to avoid this issue having a negative impact on the work.

FLOW AND PRESENTATION

In briefs within the Business and Management subject grouping, the most major issue related to presentation occurs when figures (tables, graphs and diagrams) are included: often, these are not labelled correctly or appropriately, information is missing or these are too large (with some tables spanning across several pages). Of course, we understand that the latter problem is sometimes unavoidable, but figures should be presented in as concise a manner as possible. The key thing here is to use your judgement to ascertain whether or not all of the information within a table, for example, is wholly necessary; if not, this should likely be condensed.
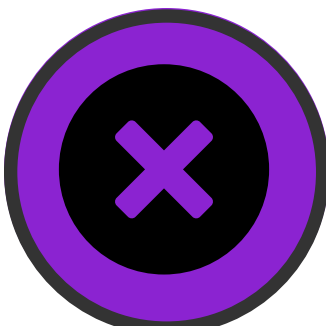
Area-specific feedback:
✓ Education
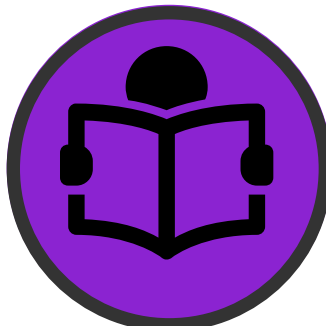
LINKS BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

By far the most frequent issue we find in Education briefs is a disconnect between theoretical ideas on teaching/learning and the ways in which these apply in practice. Even in formal essays, most courses require a student to show an understanding of Educational theory by providing examples and explaining how to apply them in the classroom. There is often a reflective element built into this, too (though this will depend on the brief's instructions). Ultimately, the way in which you do this will be dependent on the individual brief's instructions, but clear links between theory and practice – and an understanding of strengths and limitations – should be evident in any Education brief.

RELEVANCE OF SOURCES

The sources used in an Education brief tend toward one extreme or the other in terms of age. There are a great deal of seminal sources, which are decades old in many cases; however, outside of this, we would generally expect to see sources from within the last ten years to reflect current notions of best practice. If a source which is not seminal – but is older than ten years – is used, appropriate critique should be present, and its inclusion justified. It's also important to remember that conceptions of good practice can, in some contexts, vary between sectors – using sector-specific texts can help to avoid any confusion. For instance, citing a text based around Secondary schools if you're discussing FE may result in inaccurate application of principles.
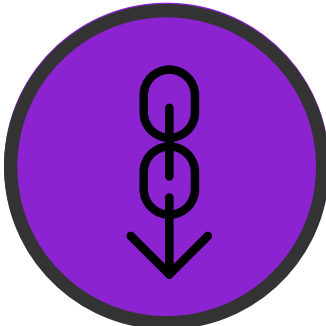
CRITICALITY

Education briefs always require a degree of critical engagement: this may be directed towards existing theory, methodological elements of Educational studies, personal practice (as seen most often in reflective briefs) or a combination of all of these, in some cases. The key principle to bear in mind here is 'show, don't tell': demonstrate your understanding of an idea by outlining its strengths and limitations in the context of a 'real-life' situation wherever possible. It is also important to note the issues that may occur when generalising specific findings from studies to wider educational practice: age of learners, the age of the study, the location and level of the group and the research design itself can all impact on the applicability of findings.

COHESIVENESS

Many elements of teaching practice and Educational theory interlink very closely; as a result, it's easy to veer off onto a tangent when writing. While showing evidence of wider reading is good, and demonstrating an awareness of how theories and ideas overlap is an excellent attribute, it's important that this does not impede the brief's ability to answer the central question. Try to avoid applying any more than 2-3 theories in detail (unless this is specifically requested in the instructions) – it's fine to namecheck other relevant theories, but it's best not to develop too many in too much detail because this eats into the word count and prevents more relevant analysis from taking place.

Area-specific feedback:
Health, Sciences, and Sport/Exercise Science

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Work in subjects from a scientific discipline will almost always be required to engage with a topic on a critical basis. Usually, a rigorous evaluation of facts is required, not simply an interpretation. The briefs that we see which fail to engage critically to an appropriate extent usually include an abundance of information about what something is, but not **why** it is, or **how** it affects the issue being discussed. **All** of these factors need to be considered to attain a higher grade.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Briefs within the sciences often are – or include – literature reviews. This type of brief requires you to locate, identify and critique literature which is relevant to the subject at hand: the critique should focus on both how the literature relates to the specific question being explored, and on the methodological strengths and limitations of each study. We often find that critique in literature reviews is limited to one or the other of these elements – it is important to strike an appropriate balance and spread the critique over both areas.

RECENCY OF SOURCES

Whatever the discipline you're writing in, it's a good general rule to try to stick to using sources which were published within the last ten years. There are some obvious exceptions to this – for example, every subject area has texts which would be considered seminal and can be engaged with regardless of their age. However, in fast-paced disciplines like the Sciences, where accepted ideas and notions can shift fundamentally in a short space of time, it is especially important to ensure that current sources are used to avoid the risk of providing information which is no longer accurate.

TONE

A detached and impartial tone of writing is particularly critical within the Sciences. The issues that biased writing causes can take two forms: the first is that critical analysis of information may come down too heavily in favour of one side of an argument, resulting in the piece presenting a biased argument. Alternatively (particularly recurrent in Health briefs), we sometimes note a tone which could be considered as 'judgemental' – a brief from the perspective of a practitioner (Nursing, Social Work, etc.) should never appear to make judgements about a patient/client, as this often violates practice guidelines.

ENGAGEMENT WITH KEY CONCEPTS

Briefs within the Sciences often require the writer to engage with several technical concepts simultaneously; it is easy when doing this to neglect or slightly misinterpret a certain element. Subject knowledge does come into play here, and rigorous research will always help to avoid this issue. It's a good general rule to ensure that all concepts being discussed are given a brief definition, then you can move on to provide information which links their relevance to the central question. This needn't be too extensive, but it helps to ensure that key terms and ideas are not simply glossed over.

Area-specific feedback:
✓ Law
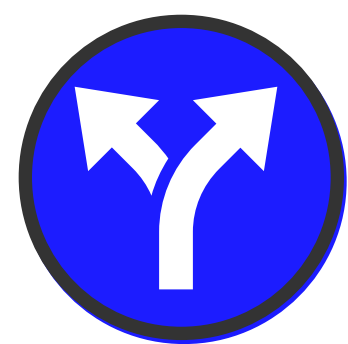
CRITICAL ANALYSIS
The most common problem we identify within this area is that the work produced lacks analysis. In law briefs, descriptive content is important in a variety of situations, such as distinguishing cases or providing factual contrast in problem scenarios. However, descriptive content should always be kept to a minimum: analysis in the form of legal reasoning, independent/academic critique and concluding remarks are what evidence understanding and engagement with the topic being discussed. Analysis is necessary irrespective of grade ordered, but will obviously vary in detail and/or amount based on the standard required.

ATTENTION TO DETAILS OF SCENARIO
We often find issues where a researcher has not paid sufficient attention to the facts of the question/scenario. Not ensuring that all parts of question are appropriately discussed essentially means work is hindered from the beginning. This issue arises most often in problem scenario questions: here, every fact is included for a reason and must be discussed. If a particular fact seems irrelevant (i.e. it would not change the outcome of your answer), note why. A further discussion as to why it would not change an outcome is itself analysis of the facts and will substantially increase the brief's standard.

QUESTION STRUCTURE
In certain instances, researchers will repeat themselves or include unnecessary information within their briefs which lowers the quality of the rest of the content. This issue occurs mostly in problem questions, but is also present in essay style questions. Lack of signposting or subheadings where appropriate also causes work to lack fluidity, making it more difficult to understand. For essays, we recommend making a skeleton plan first to ensure flow; when producing problem question pieces, unless otherwise instructed, use the IRAC method of problem solving.
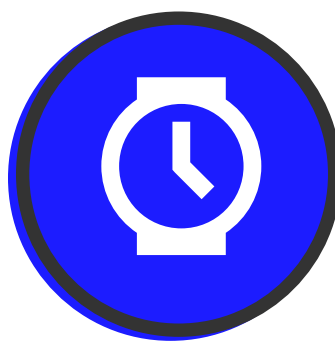
UP-TO-DATE LEGAL KNOWLEDGE
Occasionally, key areas of coverage are either completed incorrectly or the area is neglected entirely. Sometimes this is inadequate because out of date legal knowledge has been relied on. Obviously, much like missing facts by mistake, this causes the standard of a brief to drop substantially. Make sure that the research conducted for the work's production is expansive and detailed, as well as covering the most recent developments in any given area of Law.
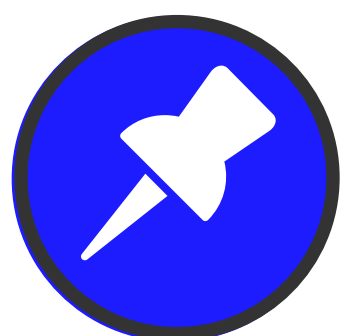
REFERENCING AND PINPOINTING
The improper use of references takes place in many forms and includes issues such as lack of appropriate authority – e.g. secondary sources when primary sources are to be used, or out-of-date legislation; use of entirely the wrong referencing style; and simple formatting errors. Read the client's referencing requirements to ensure the correct style is used and make sure that all assertions that concerns legal authority are provided a primary source. Lack of pinpointing is also a very common issue. All quoted material, extracts from a judgment or paraphrased ideas must be pinpointed, as should legislative provisions. As a rule, a reference must be pinpointed until specified otherwise.

Area-specific feedback:
Politics and International Relations
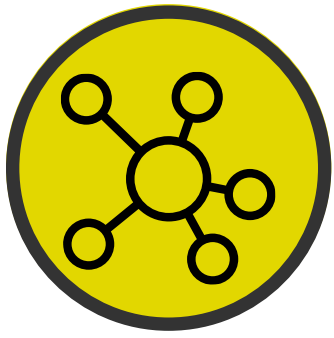
TECHNICAL JARGON

Politics and IR subjects often require you to engage with multiple bodies of work; lots of government documents, organisational reports and highly specific terminology will likely appear in any given brief. It's very important, however, to ensure that deploying this jargon does not impede the structure, flow or level of critique which is present in the work. A clear definition of a term should be provided, but unless the term is strictly relevant to the question, it should not be expanded upon in detail: make sure that all terminology being used has a direct link to the question being answered.

FOCUS

The subjects we tend to discuss within this grouping frequently overlap with numerous other topics, and it's extremely important to make sure that, while information is appropriately contextualised, there is not a major focus on additional information which is detrimental to the central question being addressed. In this subject area, the issue of focus is also sometimes linked to the issue of using a lot of jargon; again, ensuring that overuse of technical terms does not impede the flow of the work is pivotal.

QUALITY OF SOURCES

As noted above, there are a wide range of bodies which you may need to show an understanding of within a Politics/IR brief. As a result, there are numerous different source types which you might encounter aside from traditional books and journals; reports, organisational documents and journalism often feature heavily in these kinds of briefs. However, it's important to balance the need for different kinds of sources with academic appropriateness, depending on the level of the brief. Introductory textbooks or public blogs, for example, are likely to be sources which will not be suitably authoritative.
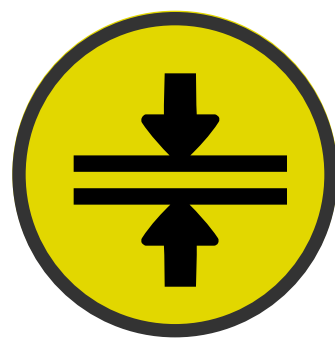
APPROACH

Understanding the approach which is required for different briefs is usually a case of carefully checking the order instructions; however, in this subject grouping, the type or brief or the stance which is wanted can sometimes be ambiguous. A balanced perspective is usually required, but often, clients will ask that you demonstrate a view of some sort. It may also be that a case-study, or another way of demonstrating ideas outside of the standard essay format, is needed to show an understanding of key principles in practice. If you do not feel confident that you understand the client's requirements on either of these points, please ask so that we can establish this.

Social Sciences/ Computing/ Mathematics*

* Note: the majority of feedback refers to the Social Sciences. Where it also applies to Computing and Mathematics, this is explicitly stated.
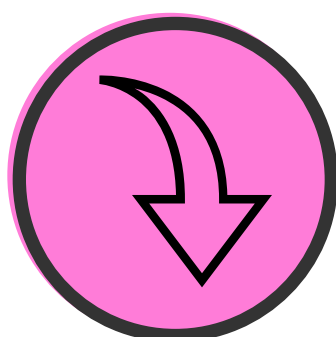
DEPTH OF ANALYSIS

Analysis is an important component of almost any essay or assignment. Social Sciences subjects usually require the writer to demonstrate extensive engagement with secondary sources, and with this comes the need to critically analyse key ideas. Sources cited should not be treated as absolute, indisputable fact; rather, the age, location and methodological background of studies, or the standpoint of the writer, should be actively discussed, and their applicability to the central question's focus should be clearly determined. In addition, independent analysis should also be present. The writer should be able to draw their own relevant conclusions, and make prudent analytical points based on the ideas expressed within sources.
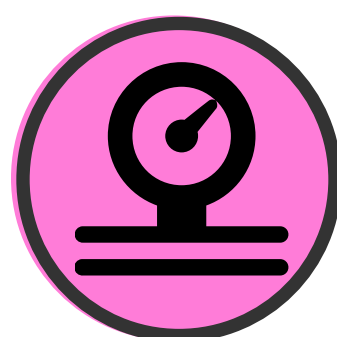
BIAS

In Social Sciences briefs, discussion often centres on issues which are quite divisive, and on which perspectives are split into extremely different categories. It's easy to fall into the trap of elaborating too much on one side of an argument, particularly when the evidence which exists is overwhelmingly in favour of a specific perspective. However, no matter how clear it is that one stance or idea is generally accepted, it is vital to include a counter-argument which considers the alternative perspective/s on the subject. Doing this will show that the subject has been researched comprehensively, and will assist with the depth of analysis.

FOCUS

In line with the issues related to depth of analysis and the risk of bias, an issue which often crops up in Social Sciences briefs is to do with lack of focus. Other than the two issues discussed above (both of which ultimately relate to focus), the main way in which a flawed focus manifests is in the appearance of tangents. As many ideas within the Social Sciences overlap, it is easy to get caught up in outlining definitions of different terms or theories for the sake of clarification; however, this becomes problematic when it takes up large chunks of the word count because it ultimately impedes the writer's ability to comprehensively answer the question. Try to stick to discussing no more than 2-3 ideas in detail to avoid irrelevant information.

ACCURACY OF STATISTICS

While Social Sciences and Computing/Mathematics are very distinct disciplines, a commonality they share is that frequently, statistics will be employed in one capacity or another. Where any detailed calculations or statistical tests are employed, it is vital to check and double-check that these have been completed correctly: if these are submitted with errors, they usually have to be completely re-done, which wastes both researchers' and the QC team's time. This is time which is better spent in rigorously checking the accuracy of statistics prior to submission.