

## Special Problems

Almost all the foregoing advice is posited on the supposition that the student-essay-tutor axis is relatively unproblematic – and in the vast majority of cases this is likely to be true. However, it is also true that any number of problems, irritations, and potential dilemmas can lurk beneath the surface of an otherwise healthy-looking batch of essay scripts. They are often the sorts of difficulties which can take up many hours of a tutor's time and sometimes drive them into stressful perplexities which it is the purpose of these guidance notes to alleviate. These problems may for convenience be put into two groups – those created by some failure of understanding or achievement on the part of the student, and those created by the relationship between tutors and either the courses or the institutions for which they are marking.

### Misunderstanding the question

Sometimes a student may simply fail to understand the purpose of a question and produce an essay which offers 1500 words of perfectly reasonable argument – very little of which is relevant to the issues concerned. This often happens when students develop particular enthusiasms or they have a personal axe of some sort to grind and use the essay as a vehicle for doing so. (For instance, I once had a student who had just become a religious fundamentalist, every one of whose essays, no matter what the original question, was converted into a zealous and frighteningly bigoted tract claiming that his religion was misunderstood and the object of international conspiracies.)

The problem for tutors in such instances is that whilst the original question has not been directly answered, the quality of the essay may nevertheless be good enough to warrant some sort of recognition. It may sometimes seem unfeeling and churlish to 'fail' an essay which is otherwise accomplished and well articulated.

The solution to this problem will depend upon the type of course being undertaken and the stringency and rigour of its requirements. On a study skills course which is preparing students for entry into further and higher education it might normally be possible to allow the student to re-submit the essay, or even to award a grade to the essay for what had been