

WRITING AN ESSAY

A student's guide to essay writing technique

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OVERVIEW

The writing of essays is a major form of assessment at the tertiary level so you will probably be faced with the task of writing an essay at some point during your course. For some, the thought of having to write several thousand words in answer to a single question is mind-boggling, to say the least. If you are one of these students, the following guide may help calm your fears and lead you along the path to good essay writing.

However, it is difficult to develop good essay writing technique – essay writing is hard work. It is more than just writing; it also involves researching, reading, analysing, judging and editing. A successful essay is a well-thought out, well-planned and well-written piece of work.

The style, content, approach and presentation of essays differs according to the discipline or subject for which it is written, and specific criteria may be outlined in your subject or course material, check this carefully.

This booklet is only a general guide aimed at developing good essay writing technique and should be adapted to your specific needs.



WHERE TO START.... DEFINE THE TOPIC

The first step is to determine what the question requires. Identify any words which tell you how to approach the question. Some of the most commonly used terms and their meanings are listed below.

Describe – give a written account

Explain – make plain; make known in detail

Illustrate – use a figure, diagram or example to explain or make clear

Outline – give an account, indicating main features or general principles

Summarise – give a concise account of the main points, omitting details and examples

Compare – note the similarities and differences

Criticise – make a judgement about the merit of theories and opinions, or about the truth of statements, and back this by discussion of the evidence

Discuss – investigate or examine by argument debate, giving reasons for and against

Review – make a survey of, examining the subject critically

Define – (clarify) set down the precise meaning of a word, term or phrase. Show that the distinctions implied in the definition are necessary

Evaluate – make an appraisal of the worth of something, in the light of its truth or utility; include, to a lesser degree, your personal opinion

Interpret – explore the meaning of; make clear and explicit; give your own judgement

The next step is to identify and define key words, specific terms and concepts. This can be done using your own understanding, in the context of the subject, or by consulting a dictionary or encyclopaedia. You should use these key words as a focus for your essay to ensure that you are answering the question.

Now try to rewrite the question in your own words to make sure you understand the meaning of the question and what it is asking you to do. Do not change the meaning or scope of the question to one that you would prefer to answer.

At this stage, you should be starting to formulate ideas and arguments in your mind. Note these down and use them as a basis for further investigation into the topic.



PLAN YOUR TIME

Normally you will have a limited amount of time in which to complete your essay. It is important, therefore, to start early and to plan your work so that you have sufficient time to spend on each stage of the essay writing process, that is:

1. **Research**
2. **Note-taking**
3. **Planning**
4. **Drafting**
5. **Redrafting**
6. **Final editing**
7. **Publishing**

A well researched essay written in a hurry with little revision is not going to achieve the best results!

FINDING THE INFORMATION.... THE RESEARCH

Your texts and the reading lists given make a good starting point. If you are able to **visit a library**, use the subject catalogues, journal indexes and library staff to assist you in finding other relevant material. Browse through the library shelves for items with similar call numbers to those on your reading lists; consult encyclopaedias and other reference works. Check different forms of material, such as journals, reports, government publications, newspapers, audio-visual items for more up-to-date and detailed information – much of this can be done using **the internet**

You may also be able to contact other students with whom you could share materials and ideas. Perhaps you could **form a study group**, with each member contributing to the research.

Primary Sources (official documents, statistics, original statements, theories, laws, interviews) should be used as source documents for information on a topic and **Secondary sources** (reviews, critiques, interpretations, etc) for analysis and opinions on a topic. A wide range of secondary sources should be read to obtain a balanced view of a topic.

When reading secondary sources, be critical. The writer's opinion should not dictate your views. Consider a number of different views, and then formulate your own attitudes and opinions. This will ensure that your essay is an original piece of work and not just a regurgitation of someone else's views.

Original ideas and interpretations are essential.



READING STRATEGIES

When you start reading for your essay, you may find yourself faced with several problems, such as:

- Too much to read in the time available- be selective when searching the net.
- Material which is difficult to understand
- Difficulty in selecting material that is relevant and appropriate to the essay topic.

What you need is a reading strategy. The most effective technique for academic reading is **skimming**.

The use of signposting, that is, the use of key words or sentences, aids the use of skimming technique. Begin by reading headings, sub-headings, etc., which give you an indication of the overall skimming by paragraphs. The opening sentences of each paragraph in a passage often provide an outline of the development of ideas in the passage.

Skimming enables you to sift enough information from the passage to decide whether it is relevant to your topic, in which case you need to read it more thoroughly. If it is not relevant, you should move on. Skimming, therefore, enables you to decide what material you need to read in more detail and what can be skipped.

Try this exercise - skim through a chapter in one of your textbooks. Write down, in note form, the first sentences of each paragraph; this becomes your summary of the chapter. Now read the entire chapter to see if you have covered all the main points in your initial summary.

Reading in this way is not a skill which comes naturally, however, and you may feel that you are missing something which might be important. When you are reading for an essay you are reading for a definite purpose, searching for specific information, and you don't have enough time to read everything word for word. It is important to read with the question or essay topic constantly in mind.

As you are reading, you will want to write down pieces of information as you go – ideas, facts, quotations, opinions, diagrams. This also requires some kind of strategy or technique.

TAKING NOTES

Note taking is a personal thing and should be done in a way which suits your purpose.

Why take notes? –

- To summarise ideas and argument;
- To select relevant points;
- To help you to digest the material;
- To continually clarify your understanding of the topic.



There are three principles which need to be built into your notes:

Identification of the source of your notes. This should include all the bibliographical details, i.e. Author, title, place of publication, publisher, edition, date and page reference. This will form the basis for your bibliography, so ensure that it is complete.

Flexibility enables you to re-organise your notes when planning and drafting your essay. Loose-leaf sheets or cards have the advantage that they can be reshuffled easily for this purpose. If you are going to use this format for your notes, you should record only one idea or point on each card or sheet. Cards are also useful for organising your bibliography.

Space for writing comments, cross-referencing, etc. Leave wide margins and double space notes.

HINT: Keep a note of questions and ideas that spring to mind and of your own reactions to what you are reading. When you come to plan your essay you will find these flashes of 'insight' a great help.

ANALYSING THE TOPIC

When you have done all your reading, go back to the questions and rethink the topic. Review the ideas and arguments you formulated at the beginning in the light of the information you have obtained from your reading. Review your notes, especially if you have made them over a fairly long period, to refresh your memory. Check that you are on the right track and that the information you have gathered is relevant to the question and answers that question.

Now that you have done the initial preparation you should be ready to plan and write your essay.

WRITING THE ESSAY

Before attempting to write your essay, you need to organise your ideas into a cohesive form - draw up an outline. An outline can take many forms, but is primarily an essay **plan**. This initial plan does not necessarily show the final form your essay will take.

You may find that as you write, the direction of your essay changes or your point of view alters and you have to go back and revise the plan. The outline should reflect the basic structure of your essay, which should have three main parts:

INTRODUCTION	What you are going to say
BODY	Saying it
CONCLUSION	What you have said



The **INTRODUCTION** should clearly express your point of view and give an indication of how you are going to develop your ideas and arguments. You could also include a definition of terms, or a relevant quote; or you could pose questions which you intend to answer in the body of your essay.

The **BODY** should encompass a logical development of ideas and should cover all parts of the question (topic) in a direct and concise manner. The outline should include a summary of the main points you wish to make in your essay, in the order you want to deal with them. This summary should be used to ensure that your development is logical and coherent, that you have covered all areas of the essay topic and that there are no contradictions or inconsistencies in your argument.

The **CONCLUSION** should draw together all the points which have been made in the body of the essay and sum up your arguments. It should refer back to the topic, thus giving a sense of unity or completeness. This sense of unity can also be achieved by matching the structure of the conclusion to the structure of the introduction, or by referring to key words or ideas expressed in the introduction. The conclusion, however, should not be simply a repetition of the introduction.

Remember that the final paragraph should make a good impression on the reader; it is your final word on the topic!

The First Draft

You will need to write at least two drafts of your essay. The purpose of the first draft is primarily for you to sort out what you want to say. The main aim is to put something down on paper; to get your ideas and words flowing. Continuity is important in writing the first draft, so try to get through it in one sitting.

You may have problems in getting started! If so, don't worry about trying to get the beginning right, try to write the introduction quickly and then go straight into the main part of the essay. You can go back and rewrite the introduction later.

Allow plenty of space in your first draft for later revision. It is a good idea to use only one side of the paper, double-spaced, leaving wide margins. Even better, use a word processor or a wiki to write your essay so you can revise it on the screen.

Once you have done the first draft, even though you may not be happy with it, you are over the hardest part of the writing process.

The Redraft

Try to have a break for a day or two before going back to revise your first draft. This will enable you to look at it more objectively and pick out faults or errors in the writing or structure.



Redrafting should be done with the reader in mind, and involves looking at the style, as well as the flow of arguments and ideas. Read through your essay, preferably aloud, to check the flow and sense of the sentences. This is often a good way to check the sound of the essay. You could also have someone else read it if you are unsure about something.

The length of your essay also needs to be checked to make sure that it corresponds closely with the word length specified. The set word length is often an indication of the depth of treatment required and writing too much or too little could lose marks.

NOTE: It is often necessary to read through and revise an essay several times in the redrafting process.

Checklist for redrafting

1. Is your essay approximately the required length?

If it is too long, check for irrelevant or insignificant points, repetition, lengthy sentences or paragraphs that could be shortened or made less wordy. Simplify sentences and confine your arguments to three or four major points.

If it is too short, check for points that you may have left out or for areas where you may require more in-depth treatment. Make sure that you have presented a balanced argument, not just one side of the story.

2. Have you answered the question?

Make sure that you have answered the whole question. Address each part of the question and cover both sides of an argument or comparison.

Make sure you have interpreted the question correctly – answer the RIGHT question.

3. Have you defined terms?

Ensure that you have defined terms in the question, as well as any terms you have used in your essay that are technical or which may be misconstrued.

4. Is your essay logically ordered?

Organise your arguments into a logical sequence, for example, from the most important to the least important, or chronologically.

5. Is there a balanced argument?

Present all sides of the argument. Draw a conclusion(s) at the end and summarise your own point of view.

6. Does your essay have a proper introduction and conclusion?

Are your sentences and paragraphs properly constructed?

A paragraph should be used to develop one idea. When moving on to the next point, start a new paragraph. Sentences should be simple. Very long sentences are hard to follow and understand and your argument becomes lost.



7. Are the voice and style appropriate?

Essays should be written in an objective and impersonal style. Minimise the subjective use of “I”. Always give reasons or evidence which back your views. The language should be formal English. Do not use colloquial expressions or abbreviations, such as ‘don’t’.

The style of academic writing is generally objective. The approach you adopt should be:

Analytical	NOT	Impressionistic
Objective	NOT	Subjective
Rational	NOT	One-sided

And the tone

Serious	NOT	Conversational
Impersonal	NOT	Personal
Formal	NOT	Colloquial

EDITING AND PRESENTATION

The final version of your essay should need very little rewriting. The main purpose of editing your essay is to check the correctness of spelling, grammar, punctuation and paragraphs and to achieve good presentation.

If you have used direct quotations in your essay, ensure that they are:

- Appropriately referenced (see Referencing and Bibliographies)
- Used sparingly
- Specifically related to the point you are making
- Properly integrated into the flow of your argument

Short quotation (less than three lines) should be written in quotation marks within the body of the text, and longer ones indented, without quotation marks.

If you have included diagrams or tables, make sure these are clearly labelled with a title, and number if there is more than one.

The following is a list of questions you need to ask yourself when you are editing your essay:

1. **Is an abstract/synopsis/summary required?**
2. **Is your spelling, punctuation and grammar correct?**
3. **Have you set out and referenced quotations correctly?**
4. **Are your references/bibliography correct and consistent?**
5. **Have you presented your essay well? Does it meet the requirements?**



PUBLICATION

Some subjects have specific requirements regarding publication. Make sure you follow them and ask your teacher if you are unsure. The following basic requirements of presentation should be incorporated into your essays and assignments:

- Include a cover sheet containing your name, contact address and phone number, Unit name and number, full title of assignment, teacher's name, due date
- Type your essay, double spaced
- Use A4 page size
- Leave a wide right margin to be used for comments (approx. 5cm)
- Number the pages
- Footnotes and bibliography should be included, and should be of a consistent format (see Referencing and Bibliographies)
- Keep a copy of your assignment and note the date posted/submitted
- If submitting a hardcopy, ensure the pages are securely stapled or clipped into a folder

SYNOPSIS

Some subjects require a synopsis as part of an assignment. A synopsis is a précis, or summary, which outlines the main theme or argument of the essay. Its purpose is to display the logical structure of the essay. A synopsis is usually about 200 words and is included on a separate sheet at the beginning of the essay.



EVALUATION CRITERIA

1. **READING/PREPARATION**
Have you read widely? Have the main arguments or information relating to the topic been covered?
2. **FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**
 - a. Is the bibliography adequate?
 - b. Is the use of footnotes technically correct and consistent?
 - c. Are footnotes used sufficiently/too much?
3. **EVIDENCE**
Do you adequately support your points with evidence, rather than offering unsupported assertions? Are your statements too vague?
Are there factual errors and/or misconceptions?
4. **CLARITY OF EXPRESSION**
Do you meet grammatical requirements? Are your sentences easy to understand?
5. **INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION**
 - a. Is there an introduction setting out your approach to the question? Is your understanding of the requirements of the question stated in the introduction?
 - b. Is there a comprehensive conclusion? Does it bring together the points made in the essay, and show how they provide an answer to the question?
6. **ORGANISATION**
Does the essay proceed logically from one point to the next?
Is the paragraph structure well thought out?
7. **ARGUMENT**
Are there irrelevancies? Are your arguments balanced?
8. **BALANCE AND COMPLETENESS**
Are the various aspects of the topic covered adequately or do you give too much emphasis to some aspects and ignore others? In cases where writers take a conflicting view of the issues covered by the essay question, do you give adequate consideration to the various interpretations?
9. **ORIGINAL/CRITICAL THOUGHT**
Is there evidence that you have critically evaluated the ideas and information you have come across in your reading? Is there evidence that you have arrived at your own conclusions on the basis of your reading? (You may well end up agreeing with one or more authors, but is there evidence that you have thought through your viewpoint?)



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