



# Essay writing guide

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# Essay writing - what is good writing?

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## The Importance of Writing<sup>i</sup>

Of all areas of studying and learning, the most challenging is writing. The reason why writing is especially demanding is that it forces a very deep and powerful type of learning to take place. When making the effort to use the ideas of the subject that you are studying and saying something for yourself, then it may be said that you are learning. The ideas only become a functioning part of your thought processes when you can call on them in expressing yourself to other people.

## What is an essay?

You are no longer in high school, so most study at a tertiary level requires **an analytical, not a descriptive, approach**. Written work must present an argument. Essays are generally answers to questions which ask whether or not you agree with a certain statement, or which ask you to discuss something critically, to assess a statement, or to make a choice. University essays are therefore arguments for or against certain propositions.

An argument is a series of generalizations or propositions, supported by evidence or reasoning and connected in a logical manner, that lead to a justified conclusion. You must sustain your argument by giving evidence and reasons.

**Assertions do not constitute an argument.** You must support your opinions with good evidence and valid reasoning. What counts as good evidence and valid reasoning you will learn by experience, and by consulting your lecturers. Being critical may mean determining whether or not the evidence available justifies the conclusions that are drawn from it; or it may mean uncovering and questioning the assumptions which underlie theories.

Essays give you a chance to show what you can do: that you understand the question asked; that you understand the issues involved; that you have done the appropriate amount of reading. Having got that far, you must then show that you can communicate your

understanding to others.

**Make sure that you actually answer the question.** If you are asked to assess, or to choose, or to discuss--do it! Do not write down everything you know about the subject: it may not all be relevant. Your lecturers are often not looking for 'correct answers'. There is no 'line' for you to follow. They are concerned with how well you make your case. Whether they agree or disagree with your judgment is not essential to your mark. Disagreement does not lead to bad marks; bad essays do.

If there are important arguments against your position, do not ignore them; deal with them honestly. Give those who disagree with you a fair go. Try to meet their arguments with better ones. Scholarship is not a matter of political point-scoring: you must respect evidence and superior arguments. Your argument should be consistent, and the **language used should be clear, grammatical and precise**. Furthermore, an essay is a finished piece of work, not a draft or a series of notes.

## What does an essay look like?

Writing tends to be a very private process. You know what your essays look like and what comments your lecturer returns them with, but you have very little idea what other people's essays are like and what comments they receive back. One of the most valuable aids to developing your own style and ability is to have the opportunity to see how other students have responded to the same task: not because you want to copy someone else's style, but to broaden your vision of what is possible when you are answering an essay question. If you are studying with other students, you could arrange to meet from time to time to read each other's essays; or if you can't meet you could exchange essays by email.

Exchanging essays is a way of gaining insight into your strengths and weaknesses, by comparing your approach to that of your colleagues. It is unlikely that you could copy someone else's style even if you tried. Since it is your ability that you are trying to develop, it would be counterproductive. **However; do not plagiarize.** This is a quick route to getting thrown out of University.

The idea of letting others see your work is rather daunting at first, but once you have broken the barriers of privacy, other students can often be at least as helpful as a tutor in finding ways forward. All this being said, be careful to avoid plagiarizing fellow students' work. This can result in severe penalties.

## Some Common Mistakes in Essay Writing and Paper Presentation

### The Shotgun Technique

This is putting down everything you know about the subject, and is a common fault. It is like firing a shotgun and hoping that some of the many pellets hit home. The question you are asked or the topic you are set will be specific, and not of the form 'What do you know about X'. Some students feel that by putting down all they know, they impress. Unfortunately it usually works the other way round, and persuades the reader that you are not very bright.

If you find you have a tendency to put down everything you know, rather than answer the question, it helps to practice making skeleton answers. When you are actually writing an assignment, stick to the skeleton. If you are told that your answer is unfocussed, waffle or vague you might be suffering from this fault. In this case, you need to focus more on the question asked and stick to the main elements of the answer.

One rather mechanical but effective way of doing this is to refer regularly to the words of the question as you write. Naturally, it should not be done so often that it jars or starts to look silly. It may not be impossible to get side-tracked if you keep referring to the words of the question and dropping them into the text, but it does require a certain talent. When you think you have finished the essay, it is useful to read it over with the question in large letters in front of you and keep glancing at this. You should see if your answer is relevant in this way. Keep asking yourself the question 'What is in, that should be reduced in importance, or taken out?' - then have the courage to do whatever is necessary.

### Getting side-tracked from the very beginning

Never start off any assignment, be it written or oral, by saying 'Before I deal with the question set, I will....' or 'Before we can tackle this question we must....'. You have been set a topic or question and must answer it. If you side-track yourself from the very beginning, you will not impress the marker. You will probably persuade them that either you are not very intelligent, or else you wish a different question had been set, because you know more about it, and therefore intend to change the question for yourself.

### Skimpy (brief) lightweight work

This results in an essay that is too short and lacks sufficient content. If you find it is a problem of yours, the solution is easy - you need to do more work! If you receive such a criticism, take heed. When you think that you have finished writing the essay, you should read it over and ask yourself 'What is out that should be in?' - then put it in. If you cannot answer that, then either you have a perfect answer, or you definitely need to read more.

### Badly organized/structured work

If you find this is a problem of yours, you might find that it helps to practice making skeleton answers using old exam papers or questions in a textbook. You need not write out the actual answer. When preparing the skeleton, seek out some logical order (e.g., who was involved, why did it happen, what were the results) and organize your points under your main headings. You could try several different approaches, one skeleton answer for each. You might have to think about what to put in and how to organize better, and you may find it difficult, but the actual process of doing this is part of learning and improving. Be aware that it might take some time before your effort pays off and your work improves. But be reassured that you will be more effective when approaching an issue for the rest of your life.

### Too Personal Answers

This can be a problem for some. If it is, **you are advised to avoid the word 'I'** and be careful not to express your personal views too much, unless the question actually asks what you yourself think. It is safer to keep it in third person whenever possible. The passive tense is often the best, although some now think this is an old fashioned way. If you start saying 'I think' then it can easily become too personal and it may cause you to say what you think without sufficient evidence to back it up. Alternatively, you might be failing to express one or more standard explanations that others have proposed. Using the active tense is often more vigorous in language but can backfire. If you are not sure what is meant by active and passive tenses, 'The ball was struck' is passive; 'I struck the ball' is active.

# Essay writing II - Planning and research

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Many courses at the outset offer several topics for essays. Choose one carefully and begin working on it early. Fit your preparation and writing into the framework provided by essay deadlines in other courses. This will avoid a frantic, last-minute rush.

Essays are often best done when the topic interests you, but beware of becoming consumed by it: your capacity for scholarly analysis may be impaired, or you may neglect your other course work.

## What is the question asking you to do?

Begin by carefully examining the key words and concepts in the question. Pay particular attention to the difference between commonly used words. For example:

**compare** - examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their similarities and differences;

**contrast** - examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their differences;

**analyse** - consider the various components of the whole and explain the relationships among them;

**discuss** - present the different aspects of a question and problem;

**evaluate** - examine the various sides of a question to reach a normative judgment.

## Analyze the question

Once the topic has been clarified, you should break it down into its component parts. This enables you to decide what material is relevant to the topic. Suppose, for example, that you chose the following question: 'Is a two party system necessary for the existence of representative democracy?'. An appropriate answer would focus on these components: · the nature of representative democracy; · the role of political parties in representative democracy; · the characteristics of a two party system; · weakened by, a two party system; a conclusion setting out your evaluation of these points and their general contribution to the topic. You thus

have the basis for the next step: outlining your essay.

## Outline

After analyzing the question, the components should be organized to form an essay outline (or plan). The outline helps to ensure that your essay has a coherent, logical structure. It also facilitates the preparation of your essay by guiding your reading, note-taking and writing. Outlines also enable you to assign relative weighting to the different components of your answer by differentiating which points are central, and which peripheral. They will thus assist your research effort.

Outlines, however, are not set in concrete. Be open to revising your outline as your research progresses, but always check that the new outline continues to address directly the essay topic.

## Brainstorming

As you begin to consider the question in detail, you can usefully jot down all the ideas that occur to you on a piece of paper and maybe rough out a sort of skeleton answer. In the first place this may be easier to do starting with a circle in the middle of the page and extending lines out as ideas occur to you. If you find a more formal approach like a list works better for you, then use that method. Once you have lots of points jotted down, in the order they occurred to you, then you can move to the next stage which is where you tentatively put numbers by the points.

There will be more than one possible way and you are seeking the one that seems best fitted to you. These numbers will become the different paragraphs or sections of the essay when you write it up.

## Calculate the organization of your essay

Often you will be given a clear indication of the limits of an essay. Going a long way above or under a word limit will usually result in you being penalized. The following example will help keep you on track and will also assist in your planning.

Example based on a 1500 word essay;

**INTRODUCTION** - 100 / 150 words

**BODY**- 1000 / 1300 words This maybe 3 - 4 main ideas of 300 - 400 words each - Roughly - These may then divide into 3 - 4 paragraphs per idea

**CONCLUSION** - 100 / 150 words

After doing your sums you then can start your research. Check your lecture notes, and any other notes you may

already have that are relevant to the title set. Go to the textbook (and as many other textbooks as you think helpful) and read the relevant parts.

**Wide reading is essential if you wish to submit a good essay.** Without wide reading you will not have the breadth of knowledge necessary to evaluate the worth of the materials and to put their themes into perspective. Effective research depends on knowing what to look for, so always keep your essay outline in mind.

The reading requirements are, of course, related to the nature of the subject and the topic. Some topics may require a detailed analysis of a small number of texts; yet it is rarely sufficient to read only one or two books on a particular topic. Most lecturers issue reading lists to help students choose material, but these should only be considered as starting points.

Then use the library catalogue and search for anything that might add to your knowledge, reading and noting what you find. Further references may be compiled by using bibliographies in textbooks; by looking at the subject index in the library; and by consulting periodical indexes in the library.

The following types of sources may generally be used:

- General texts
- Specialized texts
- Journal articles
- Newspapers and news periodicals
- Abstracts, CD-ROM Databases
- World Wide Web (though the web should be used cautiously and **many lecturers do not approve of Wikipedia as a source**)

NOTE: In all your reading, be alert for stated and unstated assumptions which affect the character of the argument.

### Note-taking

Use your essay outline as the basis of taking notes from your readings. Try not to photocopy large slabs of readings: it often delays the hard work of reading and thinking; unhappily, it sometimes substitutes for them.

Be organized in your note-taking: maintain an order that you can follow and that will be of assistance in writing the essay. Such an order might be provided by your essay outline. How you choose to make notes is up to you. You may prefer connected sentences of commentary, or point form. If there is an apt quotation you wish to use for illustrative purposes, copy it and

record its details carefully. Keep an accurate record of the full reference. Write down the page from which you obtain each piece of information, even though it may not be a direct quotation. **However; be careful not to over-quote. Quotations should be used sparingly and not in lieu of your ideas.**

Then you should go over all the notes you have taken, read them and think about them, jotting down all your ideas or criticisms as you read. At this stage you might usefully add to or totally remake the initial skeleton outline.

At this point, it is useful to discuss the issue with others if possible. This will help you to organize your thoughts and identify weak points in your arguments, and might give you some new points to incorporate or help adjust the balance of your answer. Techniques for organizing copious notes virtually all involve effort and a bit of trial and error of different ways of tackling the question. Some advocate writing all the main points on small cards and shuffling these around and comparing outcomes. Others like to skeleton outlines, each on a separate piece of paper.

### Useful Strategies

Draft each paragraph on a separate page; one idea- one paragraph, then rearrange them into a logical order.

Tackle the introduction and conclusion last.

# Essay writing III - Writing, revising & presentation

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## Writing and revising

The essay should be a coherent and logical piece of analytical prose. In the first place it should answer the question set. In the second place it cogently argues, carefully documents, and clearly expresses your case. The structure of the essay has three parts: an introduction, the body of the essay, and a conclusion.

The **introduction** should introduce the topic to be discussed and prepare the reader for what is to follow; it needs to be concise. It should summarize briefly the overall theme or argument of the essay, indicating the main points to be made.

The **body** of the essay is the place to present your argument.

The **conclusion** should restate briefly the key arguments and their implications.

In sum, the structure of your essay should follow the rule: say what you are going to say, say it, and say what you have said.

## Utilizing reference material

You need to be aware of how much your essay is direct quotation (where you use the words of another writer exactly), how much is indirect quotation (where you paraphrase or reword information gained from a reference source), and how much is your own wording.

As a rough guide for introductory level subjects Elms (1994, p.33) suggests “that you limit yourself to one quarter of your essay for direct quotations, one half to indirect quotations [paraphrasing], and the remainder for integrating the other information.”, but I personally feel this is a much too generous for direct quotations, which should be more sparingly used. Some quotations are desirable and can be insightful, but over-employment can lead to the impression that the writer has nothing of any originality to say and to a lack of critical evaluation. **Don't string together lengthy quotations.** Check with other lecturers who may differ in their view.

## The draft

You will find it helpful to write more than one draft. Use the first draft to map out your ideas within the framework of your essay outline. Second and subsequent drafts must pay more attention to wording and style.

## Essays are not just exercises in research; they are also exercises in communication.

Attention to matters of style will help to ensure that your presentation is clear, concise and direct. Your research efforts deserve the clearest and best presentation possible. There are many important issues in presentation to which you should give due attention, but consistency is one of the most important considerations.

One problem that worries a lot of students is how much to include, where to draw the line, and when to stop. Part of your learning process is to gain such skills and so any anxiety and struggle involved is not necessarily a bad thing as it can definitely pay off for you. You should bear in mind there is no clear answer to such questions: they depend on the particular approach you decide to adopt when answering the question, as well as on factors like how intelligent, hard working and creative you are. If you are aiming for a bare pass or a high distinction, the answers will again be different. Answer the question definitely, but also consider if there are deeper issues.

## Presentation

You should if possible type or word process your assignments, and you should double space the text. This makes it easier to read, pleases the marker, and allows more room for comments.

Double spacing encourages the marker to note ideas and suggestions throughout your text, and in this way you tend to get more written comment or response. It is traditional to send all manuscripts to publishers and journals in double space, so academics are used to seeing it in this form and generally prefer it.

If you cannot type using all your fingers, you are strongly advised to learn now. It is easy to obtain a computer program that will teach you to type, either through the University or cheaply through advertisements for typing tutors in computer magazines. Some of the packages have a fun typing game that encourages you to practice.

**Always** include a title page attached to your essay. This is a separate one to any that the university provides.

**Always** include the sources of other people's ideas or direct quotes.

**Always** include a List of References on a separate page at the end of an essay. **Do not call it a bibliography.** They are References. You are advised to read the companion referencing guide that can be found on my web page (or wherever you got this!).

**Do not** separate your essay into subheadings unless you have been instructed by your lecturer to do so (lecturers may differ in this requirement).

**Do not** use first person unless you are told to do so. This should be a formal and objective piece of writing, so don't personalize it by saying "I think ...". This does not mean that you should not have an evidence-based opinion. Just avoid the first person when expressing it.

**Do not** use any colloquial phrases, work-related jargon or clichés. Be original and **formal in your expression.** Remember who your audience is. If you want to use abbreviations use them in full first with the abbreviation in brackets afterwards. This is especially true for Three Letter Abbreviations (TLA). Thereafter you can use the TLA.

Use full sentences to communicate your ideas. Each sentence should make sense on its own. Check your spelling. Use a spelling checker, a Dictionary or a Thesaurus when you are writing, but do not rely on the spel chequer! Nothing beats proof-reading afterwards.

Usually you will not use tables, graphs or lists of facts in an essay, but if you do use them then use them sparingly and **always** talk about what they say in the text. Again though, it will depend on the faculty or lecturer. Check your course requirements, unit outline, lecturer or tutor. I do not object to these things if used in moderation as they can be illuminating, but they are worthless unless the text explains what is significant about them and why they are there.

## Referencing

The most commonly used systems of referencing are the Harvard system or APA system. You are advised to read the accompanying reference guide.

### Referencing within the text

**Anything that is not common knowledge should be referenced** - when you are using another person's ideas or drawing conclusions based on a combination of your ideas and those of another person's, you need to acknowledge this by giving their name and the year of publication.

**Paraphrasing** - this is putting an idea from a text into

your own words. For example;

Smith (1994, p. 52) believes that scholarship is more important than inspiration when preparing good assignments.

It has been stated that scholarship is more important than inspiration when preparing good assignments (Smith 1994, p.52).

Note that neither of these are direct quotes.

### Reference list at the end of the essay

This will be in the form of a Reference List – or References (not a bibliography please), showing all the sources that you have used in your essay

Do not include material that is not cited in the text of your essay.

### Think you have finished?

Having written an assignment put it aside for a few days. The time lapse will allow you to develop a new perspective on your work. You may be more objective and pick up any obscurities or inaccuracies. It is also a good idea to give it to a friend or partner to read and see if it makes sense.

### A Note

Do get your assignments in on time. You lose marks for being late and in addition, once you fall behind your study and writing schedule it will be difficult to catch up. When this happens, everything tends to become late.

# Instruction terms

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Instruction terms are commonly used in essay and examination questions. They suggest the approach you should take towards the subject. The exact meaning of these terms will vary depending upon the subject. The following indicate what they normally mean for essays and exam questions.

Tips:

- Take care
- Think carefully about the meaning of these terms in relation to the remainder of the question.
- Try to understand exactly what an instruction is asking you to do - but be reasonable.
- Don't look for problems where they might not exist.
- If in doubt, ask your tutor.

## **account for**

Explain the reasons for, giving an indication of all relevant circumstances. Not to be confused with 'Give an account of' which asks only for a detailed description.

## **analyse**

Study in depth, identifying and describing in detail the main characteristics.

## **argue**

Put forward a proposition, then illustrate it, discuss its significance, and defend it against possible counter-charges.

## **assess**

Examine closely, with a view to 'weighing up' a particular situation. Consider in a balanced way the strengths and weaknesses or points for and against a proposition. In conclusion, state your judgment clearly.

## **comment**

State clearly and in moderate fashion your opinions on the material in question. Support your views with reference to suitable evidence or explanations.

## **compare**

Look for similarities and differences between two or more things.

## **contrast**

Deliberately single out and emphasize the differences and dissimilarities between two or more things.

## **criticize**

Give your judgment about a statement or a body of work; explore its implications, discussing all the evidence which is available. Be specific in your examination.

## **define**

Set down the precise meaning of something. Be prepared to state the limits of the definition. Take note of multiple meanings if they exist.

## **describe**

Give a detailed and comprehensive account of.

## **discuss**

Investigate and examine by careful argument. Explore the implications and the advantages or disadvantages. Debate the case and possibly consider any alternatives. This is probably the most common instruction term. It is inviting you to say something interesting in response to the topic in question. You can choose your own approach.

## **evaluate**

Make an appraisal of the worth of something in the light of its truth or utility. Emphasize the views of authorities as well as your personal estimation.

## **explain**

Make plain. Account for. Clarify, interpret, and spell out the material you present, giving reasons for important features or developments.

## **how far...**

Similar to questions which begin 'To what extent...'. You are expected to make your case or present your argument, whilst showing an awareness that alternate or even contradictory explanations may exist. Careful assessment and weighing of evidence are called for.

## **illustrate**

Make clear and explicit by the discussion of concrete examples.

## **justify**

Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions. Answer or refute the main objections likely to be made against them.

**outline**

Give the main features or the general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasizing structure or arrangement.

**relate**

Show how things are connected and how they possibly affect, cause, or resemble each other.

**review**

Make a survey of, examining the subject critically.

**state**

Present the main points in brief, clear form.

**summarize**

Give a concise account of the main points of a matter, omitting details and examples.

**trace**

Follow the development or history of a topic from some point of origin.

*Revised from a number of previous versions by J.H. Ratcliffe, Sept 07. Available at [www.jratcliffe.net](http://www.jratcliffe.net).*

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<sup>i</sup> *I'm not one to reinvent the wheel, so this guide has been adapted from the web site of Charles Sturt University student services ([www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/index.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/index.htm)) which in turn has drawn on material from Australian universities and other sources for advice and examples. Particular mention must be made of the following: Bucknall, K.B. (1995) *How to succeed as a student*. Griffith University: [http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/stubod/stuadv/stu\\_advice.html](http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/stubod/stuadv/stu_advice.html); Lovell, D.W. (1995) *Essay writing for students in politics and the social sciences*. Australian Defence Force Academy: <http://www.pol.adfa.oz.au/essay.intro.html>; Nothedge A. (1990) *The good study guide*. Open University: Milton Keynes, U.K.*