

# Essay Writing

## The Basics



The Learning Centre • <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au>

### What does a good essay need?

*An academic essay aims to persuade readers of an idea based on evidence.*

An academic essay should answer a question or task.

- It should have a thesis statement (answer to the question) and an argument.
- It should try to present or discuss something: to develop a thesis via a set of closely related points by reasoning and evidence.
- An academic essay should include relevant examples, supporting evidence and information from academic texts or credible sources.

### 1. Starting the essay

*Although there are some basic steps to writing an assignment, essay writing is not a linear process. You might work through the different stages a number of times in the course of writing an essay.*

#### Start work early

You can't write a successful essay unless you give yourself enough time to read, research, think and write. Don't procrastinate or leave it until the last minute; start as early as possible.

#### Define the question and analyse the task

Writing down everything you know about a topic is not enough to make a good academic essay. Analysing, then answering the essay's question or task is central.

- Be sure that you understand exactly what the question requires you to do.
- Identify the key words (like discuss or analyse) and clarify the approach you are required to take.

*See The Learning Centre guide 'Answering Assignment Questions'*

#### Construct an initial plan

Your starting point for an essay is your initial response to the topic or question. This response is based on what you already know. However, this is only the starting point. You then need to research, question your response and find some answers.

#### Draw up an initial essay plan:

- Work out your initial thoughts and ideas about the topic and write a preliminary essay plan to help guide your research.
- An essay plan can help you work out how you will answer the question and which information you will use. Essay plans also help with structuring an essay.

As you begin to write and research your plan will probably change.

*See The Learning Centre guide Essay & Assignment Planning*

#### Basic steps in writing an essay

*In no strict order . . .*

- Analyse the question and define key terms
- Establish a possible thesis/ point of view
- Research the topic. Use credible academic sources for support and evidence.
- Take notes from your readings.
- Write an essay plan and organise your ideas
- Write your first draft to include your introduction, body and conclusion
- Set the draft aside for a day or two, then read it through and make changes
- Edit and redraft your essay
- Have a friend/parent/colleague read it
- Complete or check your references and bibliography
- Final draft completed - hand it in

## 2. Researching the topic

*A feature of most academic writing is that it draws on the work of other writers and researchers. Therefore, reading and researching are vital to essay writing. Researching provides the knowledge and evidence that allows you to develop a thesis and argument to answer the essay question.*

### Reading for the essay

Start reading early so you have plenty of time to familiarise yourself with the topic and develop your ideas. When you look at your readings more closely, remember to read with a purpose. Ask yourself:

- *What do I already know about the topic?* Start with what you know. If a topic is unfamiliar, do some introductory reading. See your lecture notes and course readings for help.
- *What do I need to read to be able to answer the essay question?*
- *Is this material useful to my topic/argument?*
- *Can I use this material to support my answer?*

### Make notes from the readings

It's important to take/ make notes from what you read. Your notes will be the basis of your essay.

*Don't take notes during your first reading.* If you are reading photocopies, underline or highlight relevant information. You can return to it when you re-read and take notes.

*Always make notes with the question clearly in mind.* You must use evidence to support your argument, so look carefully for relevant information. This can include summaries or direct quotes from texts, useful examples, case studies or statistics.

*Make a note of any sources of information.* Copy down the bibliographic details of everything you read. Include author, date, title, publisher and place of publication. For journal articles, include volume and issue numbers. This will help with referencing.

See *The Learning Centre guide Effective Note-making from Written Text*

## 3. Organising your ideas

*Begin organising your research and ideas into an answer.*

### Essay plans

After you've researched and your ideas are more developed, write a second essay plan. It will help you work out how to answer the question and how the essay will be structured. After you do some research and notemaking, draw up a second plan:

- Decide on a possible answer to the question (in terms of the research you have done)
- Decide on the information you will use to answer the question.
- Look through your notes and choose examples to provide evidence to support your answer
- Decide which points you will discuss, and in which order
- Write all this down in point form and this will be your essay plan

### Reading lists

If you are given a list of suggested readings, consult as many as possible. Otherwise, locate relevant material in the library. Use the catalogue to perform topic and subject searches. Once you have your readings:

- use the table of contents and the index to find relevant material
- skim through the text to locate specific information
- when you find something you need to read closely, flag the pages with a post-it note so you can return for a close reading
- photocopy useful sections of texts so you can underline and make notes.

### Thinking it through

Essay writing requires both creative and critical thinking.

- *Creative thinking* encourages you to broaden your ideas. Try techniques like brainstorming or mind mapping.
- *Critical thinking* encourages you to narrow the focus or scope of your ideas (for example, asking why an example is important to your argument).

**Your essay should be balanced:** that is, it should include a range of information and viewpoints from different authors that explore the key arguments and relevant aspects of a particular topic.

Don't only include evidence that agrees with what you are arguing; if there are different or opposing views, then they need to be examined.

You need to evaluate differing arguments - explain why one argument is more convincing than another and how they relate to the conclusion your essay arrives at.

## 4. Writing the essay

### Drafting

Write a first draft to try out the structure and framework of your essay. A draft essay will help you work out **how** you will answer the question and **which** evidence and examples you will use; and **how** your argument will be structured.

Once you have a draft, you can work on writing well. Your first draft will not be your final essay; think of it as raw material you will refine through editing and redrafting.

### Structure

Structure your essay to communicate your ideas and answer the question. All essays should include the following structure:

#### 1. Introduction

The introduction moves from general to specific. This is where you:

- open with a short orientation (introduce the topic area(s) with a general, broad opening sentence (or two);
- answer the question with a thesis statement; and
- provide a summary or 'road map' of your essay (keep it brief, but mention all the main ideas).



#### 2. Body

The body of your essay consists of paragraphs. Each is a building block in the construction of your argument. The body is where you:

- answer the question by developing a discussion.
- show your knowledge and grasp of material you have read.
- offer exposition and evidence to develop your argument.
- use relevant examples and authoritative quotes.

If your question has more than one part, structure the body into sections that deal with each part of the question.



#### 3. Conclusion

The conclusion moves from specific to general. It should:

- restate your answer to the question;
- re-summarise the main points and;
- include a final, broad statement (about possible implications, future directions for research, to qualify the conclusion etc).

However, NEVER introduce new information or ideas in the conclusion - its purpose is to round off your essay by summing up.

### Essay paragraphs

Each paragraph in the body of the essay should deal with one main point/ aspect of your answer.

Each paragraph should contain:

1. a **topic sentence** that states the main or controlling idea;
2. **supporting sentences** to explain and develop the point you're making;
3. **evidence**. Most of the time, your point should be supported by some form of evidence from your reading, or by an example drawn from the subject area.
4. **analysis**. Don't just leave the evidence hanging there - analyse and interpret it! Comment on the implication/ significance/impact.

Finish off the paragraph with a **critical conclusion** you have drawn from the evidence.

#### Tips for effective writing

*Start writing early - the earlier the better.* Starting cuts down on anxiety, beats procrastination, and gives you time to develop your ideas.

*Don't try to write an essay from beginning to end (especially not in a single study session).* Begin with what you are ready to write - a plan, a sentence. Start with the body and work paragraph by paragraph.

*Write the introduction and conclusion after the body.* Once you know what your essay is about, then write the introduction and conclusion.

*Keep the essay's question in mind.* Don't lose track of the question or task. Keep it in mind as you draft and edit and work out your argument.

*Revise your first draft extensively.* Make sure the entire essay flows and that the paragraphs are in a logical order.

*Put the essay aside for a few days.* This allows you to consider your essay with a fresh eye.

*Proof-read your final draft carefully.* Check spelling and punctuation.

## 5. Referencing the essay

All academic essays **MUST** contain references. Referencing guards against plagiarism, a serious academic offence.

Make sure you are familiar with the referencing style your Faculty or School requires; many will have guides specifying the system they prefer. Often Schools/Faculties don't mind which system you use as long as it is consistent. If this is the case, use the system you are most comfortable with.

See *The Learning Centre guides on plagiarism and on various citation styles*

## 6. Editing the essay

*Most essays are dramatically improved by careful editing. If possible, put your essay aside for a few days before you begin to edit. This gives you time to think further about your answer and arguments and return to your work with a fresh perspective.*

Don't panic if/ when you find faults in your essay - this is part of the process. If you find that you need more information, or your argument has holes in it, keep calm and concentrate on fixing the problem.

Once you have a well-organised and fairly complete draft:

- Check the overall structure of your essay; does it have a clear introduction, body and conclusion?
- Make sure that each paragraph has a clear main point that relates to the argument. Make sure that the paragraphs are arranged in logical sequence.
- Revise sentences. Make sure the words you use mean what you think they mean. Check punctuation and spelling. A good dictionary is a useful tool.
- Check transition signals. Be sure that a reader can follow the sequence of ideas from sentence to sentence, and from paragraph to paragraph.

### Questions to ask yourself

- Have I answered the question as directly and comprehensively as possible?
- Does the argument make sense? Is it balanced and well researched?
- Is the evidence relevant to and supportive of my argument?
- Have I used a consistent citation style? Have I referenced all my quotes and paraphrases?
- If there were any special instructions or guidelines for this assignment, have I followed them?
- Have I remained within the set word limit?

## 7. Handing the essay in

*You haven't completed your assignment until you've handed it in.*

It's important to READ the assignment guidelines in your course outlines and to follow them. Find out how your lecturer/tutor would like assignments presented, and make sure you comply with their requirements.

### In general:

- Make sure you know the date the assignment is due. Submitting late work usually incurs a late penalty.
- Make sure you know where and to whom your assignment should be submitted.
- Most assignments require a cover sheet (available from your school office).
- Don't submit your essay in a plastic folder or sleeve (unless you are asked to do so).
- Ensure your essay is formatted correctly. Use double-line spacing and a readable font (size 12 at least). Number pages and set wide margins.
- Print on one side of the page only.
- Staple your essay in the top left-hand corner.
- Keep an extra copy for yourself.

### References

Cuba, I 1998, *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science*, Harper Collins.

Emmerson, L (ed.) 2005, *Writing Guidelines for Social Science Students*, 2nd edn, Dunmore Press, Southbank, Victoria.

Oshima, A & Hogue, A 1991, *Writing Academic English*, Addison-Wesley.

University of Toronto Writing Centre, *Some General Advice on Academic Essay Writing*, Online resource accessed 1999.

Prepared by The Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales © 2010. This guide may be distributed for educational purposes and adapted with proper acknowledgement. Email: [learningcentre@unsw.edu.au](mailto:learningcentre@unsw.edu.au)