

Writing an Essay

1. Structure

Your essay should have a clear, coherent structure. This should include:

- An introduction which explains the topic and its relevance, and how you propose to tackle it. Try to give some sort of contextual information. If the subject matter is particularly large you can use the introduction to state the limits of the material that you will be covering in the essay and why you have chosen to focus on certain issues.
- The main text, clearly organised into paragraphs. This will discuss the evidence relevant to the topic and the various arguments put forward by different scholars. You should organise this logically, for example chronologically, by types of evidence, by methodological aspects, or some other clear structuring principles.
- Conclusions, in which you summarise your main findings in relation to the topic/question. Briefly outline their wider relevance or implications.

Do not be afraid to put forward your own opinions in the main text and conclusions.

1. Writing your introduction

This should really set the parameters for your essay. There are many ways to introduce an essay and you should consider doing one or more of the following:

- clearly stating the purpose of the essay;
- defining the topic &/or key terms;
- establishing its parameters of the essay: context, background and/or importance of the topic;
- perhaps highlighting a significant problem or controversy to be addressed;
- or identifying a gap in the literature;
- providing a brief outline of the main arguments to be addressed/approaches to be covered.

Basically, an introduction tells your reader what your are trying to do, why is this important, and how are you going to do this: i.e. you need to introduce your case study / core material and your theoretical/methodological approach(es) - in a couple of sentences).

2. Main Text

The essay is meant to demonstrate that you have understood the question and subject matter and have thought about it. It is therefore necessary that you use your own words.

Please do not copy page after page from your source books and be sure to fully reference the opinions and ideas of others. We are more interested in reading what you have to say on the subject. Moreover, continually quoting from source material is lazy writing and suggests that you do not really understand the question or subject matter.

a. Development of your argument

What is the essay question asking you to do? Make sure you answer the question!!! Have you been asked to compare *and* contrast? To evaluate/consider/discuss? To describe/outline? Is the basis of the question a statement/quote? (perhaps read the source of the quote!!!)?

You should present your arguments in a logical order to present a clear case and the format of your essay should be easy to follow. Think about presenting the basic background information first - clearly and succinctly - to give the context to your essay. This should probably be one (may be two) paragraphs. Gradually build up your argument - which should be based in the academic sources. This means you need to be critical of the sources you are using, questioning what you read and weighing up the arguments. Think about the problems and limitations as much as the strengths. What evidence can be used to support or debate this?

You will need to evidence your argument: think about specific examples which will support your claims or analysis. You should also think of using examples to demonstrate that you understand key issues and complex concepts. And of course, you always need to cite your material! You need to avoid making sweeping generalisations, which you cannot substantiate. Remember also, that in the humanities absolute proof is not possible - you are weighing up evidence to reach *your* conclusion.

Main steps in an argument:

1. present your thesis/question: the key idea, theory, concept
2. Proof: provide (convincing) evidence/examples to support thesis: reasons, appeal to authority, empirical data, etc.
3. Evaluation: test your evidence and provide counter-arguments. For this you will also need specific examples: provide evidence to support/argue against your case (positive and negative)
4. Conclusion: therefore, this shows that...

Good practice: lay out the outline of your paper before you begin and when you finish you should read through it carefully: does it make sense? Do the arguments flow in a logical order? Have you organised your information well, grouping similar pieces of information in the same paragraph?

b. Writing style

A clear writing style and good grammar will help the reader to understand your arguments.

- In general, avoid really long sentences as it is easy to lose the thread of your argument.
- Consistent spelling mistakes detract from your overall presentation: use a dictionary and the spell check on your computer. Check spellings of names and places; if these are wrong it suggests that you have not read the literature closely.
- Always read through your essay before you submit it to be sure that minor errors have not crept in.
- Keep to the word limit. If an essay is too short you will not be able to do justice to the question and subject matter. Similarly, avoid over-running the word limit.
- Do not waffle: a concise, clear essay is better than a long rambling piece.

3. Writing your conclusions

Your conclusions should serve two specific functions:

- firstly you should summarise and bring together the main areas covered in the writing;
- secondly, you should give a final comment or judgement on this and perhaps even make suggestions for improvement or speculate on future research.

Essentially the conclusions allow you to reflectively review the arguments. You should not introduce new material. Also, your conclusions should be brief.

4. Referencing and Bibliography

The essay is also meant to demonstrate that you have researched the topic thoroughly. Your first source of reference material should always be the library. Please use the internet sparingly and with care, as the material on it has not always been through the usual channels of academic validation.

Please ensure that you have an adequate bibliography and that you source material and the opinions of scholars with in-text references. Any verbatim quote should be fully cited, including page number. Likewise, specific arguments or references to specific materials should include a page number. A reference to a generic argument/perspective need only include author and date, eg. (Petru 2018).

The bibliography should be listed at the end of the essay and should include all the publications you have consulted and cited in the main text. You only need to list a citation once only in the bibliography. Always order by author alphabetically (and then by date if there is more than one work by the same author). Do not use bullet points

BOOKS:

Author DATE *Title*. Place: Publisher

ARTICLES FROM EDITED VOLUMES:

Author DATE Title of article/paper. In *Title of Edited Volume*. Page nos. Place: Publisher,

ARTICLES IN JOURNALS:

Author DATE Title of article/paper. *Journal Title* volume number: page numbers.