



Academic Writing Skills

Aims of the Session.

To consider the requirements to write at HE.

To assess the criteria required for what constitutes a good essay.

To consider note taking strategies.

To consider and understand key words used in essay titles in Psychology.

Essay Writing

Coursework is designed to assess the Students understanding of the subject area / module topic.

A well structured essay that demonstrates good understanding of the question is fundamental.

Failure to communicate / demonstrate the understanding = lower marks.

Writing

Analysing the Task

If you are uncertain about the requirements – ASK YOUR LECTURER

Preparing a Plan

Don't 'suffer in silence', thinking everyone else knows it all and you are the only one with a question

Collecting relevant information

Ask during class if possible, as you are unlikely to be the only one with that question

Writing up

If each of you asks when you don't understand something, you will construct knowledge as a group

Checking your writing

Analysing the Task

What is the question?

First step is to clarify the question itself. 'Unpack' the question

Locate the **Topic** and then the **Purpose**

Topic - what is the question about

Purpose – what type of information is needed to answer this specific question?

Example

Discuss the main methods of diagnosing schizophrenia

Purpose

Topic

Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of common schizophrenia treatments

Purpose

Topic

Purpose

Topic

Failure to identify the topic of the question is likely to produce an assignment which lacks direction and irrelevant to the question.

This will score badly when marked.

Introduce the topic clearly in the first couple of sentences

Purpose

After identifying the topic the next stage is to identify the purpose.

What is the question about this topic that I need to answer?

It's about schizophrenia... but what aspect?

Check the assessment title at the end of every paragraph to confirm that you are still on topic and each paragraph has contributed to the assessment answer

Example in Psychology

‘Discuss Erikson's theory of Lifespan Development with particular reference to Adolescent stage.’

What is the **topic** and the **purpose** of this question?

Topic: Erikson's theory

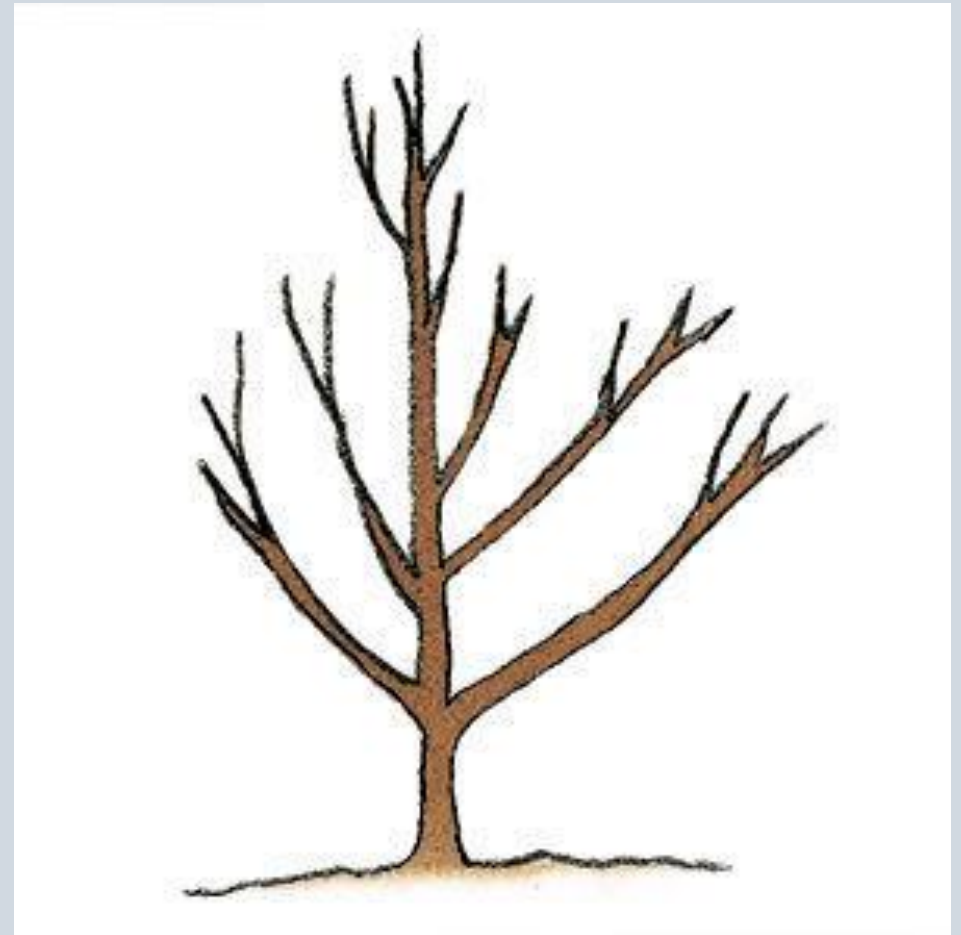
Purpose: to discuss the adolescent stage of his theory

Next.....

Planning

Structuring

Drafting



What constitutes a “good” Essay

At Level Four it is one that...

Shows knowledge and understanding of the topic.

Shows an understanding of the specific information required to answer the question

Coherent essay organisation

Evidence of using the correct terminology

- Information
- Sources
- Critical Thinking
- Structure

Guidance for writing an essay

Introduction

An introduction provides some background to the issues that will be explored in the essay, and indicates how the topic / question will be addressed.

Provide a context for your discussion.

The order of the material in the introduction signposts what is coming up

It is useful to write the final version of the introduction AFTER you have written the main body of the essay.

You will know then what you need to introduce

Structure of Introduction

Sets the context for the whole essay

Introduces the reader to the topic.

Introduces the reader to the rest of the Essay

- Revert back to question.

1 – 2 paragraphs

Make sure there is distinction between Introduction and “meat” but not via subheadings.

Structure: Main body of essay

Main Focus: Answer the Question.

Demonstrate Understanding of Area/Question – also evident in the literature you include

Demonstrate Effort - Read, Read, Read – but wisely

Back up with evidence where possible – use strong sources

Critical Thinking. Use literature where possible to support any questions/criticisms

- Also wording e.g. ‘This could appear to suggest...’

Coverage of literature

Ensure that your essay covers a reasonable amount of information relevant to the question that you are addressing.

Try to present a balanced argument, which often means finding information for and against a particular position.

Include current literature – though you may need to consider some ‘classic’ theories and research studies.

But remember...marks may be lost where old sources are used when more up to date literature (books/studies) are available.

Structure

- ▶ There should be a clear progression of ideas.
- ▶ The type of ordering used is highly individual and will also depend on the question.
- ▶ Ordering need not necessarily be chronological (particularly if this does not form a logical argument).

Clarity of argument

Most essays present an argument, which means that there is often more than one theory covered and conflicting perspectives.

You must try and indicate how a particular piece of evidence relates to theories that you are discussing (does it lend support or challenge).

Using research evidence effectively to clarify your argument is a very important aspect of essay writing.

Studies reported should be relevant and this relevance should be made explicit in your work.

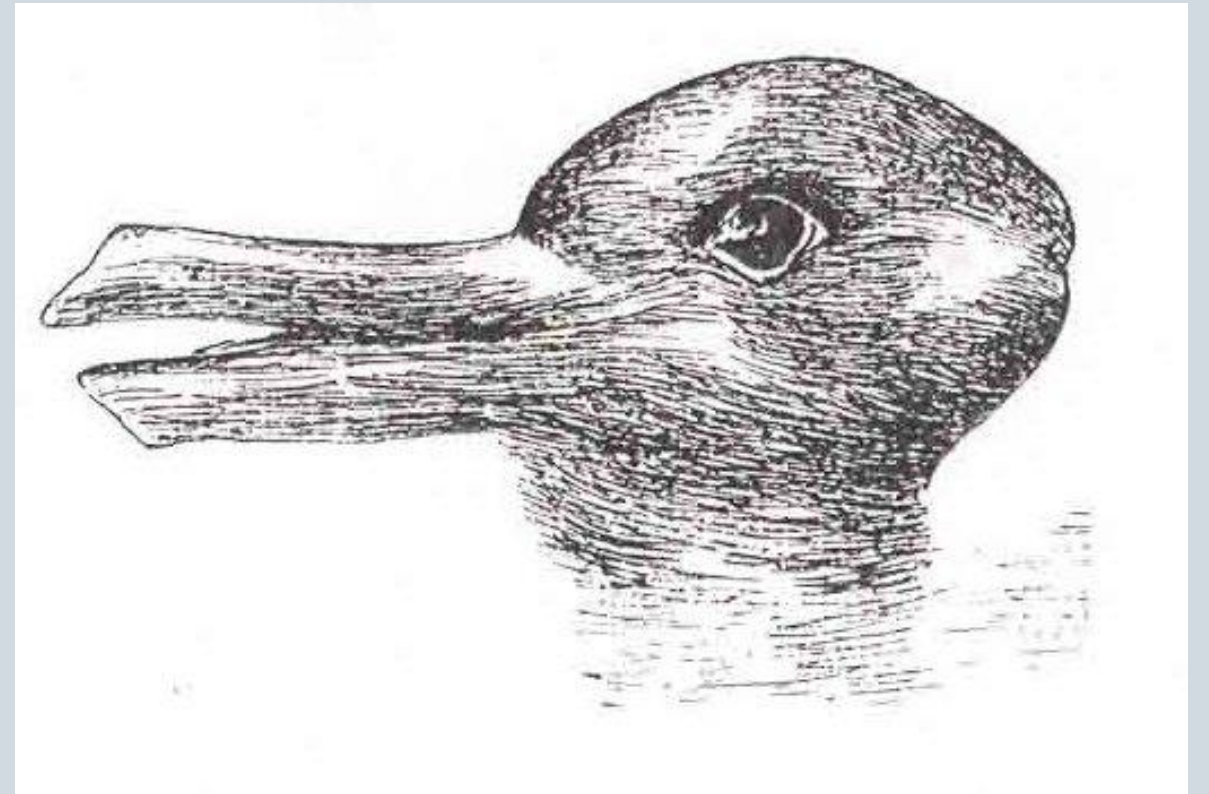
Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis and Interpretation

Individual interpretation based on your own decision regarding literature

This will influence your discussion and conclusions

Make sure your conclusions have been supported by the essay arguments and your choice of literature



Critical analysis

Are the arguments plausible?

Do they ignore important pieces of evidence?

Do they explain what they are supposed to explain?

Have they been interpreted accurately?

Do I need more empirical evidence?

We want to see that you understand what you have read.

Opinions are of little value unless they are supported by or grounded in, some kind of research evidence.

Read



But not everything!



Be selective

Plan your reading.

Group your literature into sections to use in certain parts of the essay

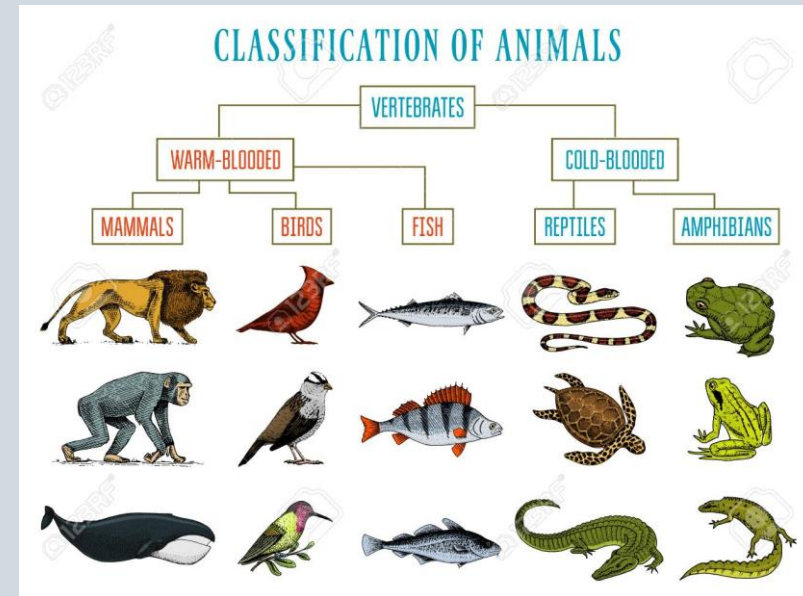
Don't keep reading to avoid starting to write!

ORGANISATION

Keep your notes in good order.



Don't throw it all in and expect the marker to make sense of it for you



Aim for this: Clarity and Coherence

Main essay content

Sources of Evidence:

Indicate reading, effort and understanding



- **Empirical**

- Journals
- Text Books.... Not just ANY book.
- Internet?
- Lecture notes?

- **Anecdotal** (usually best avoided)

- Real life examples (including Biographies).
- Hypothetical examples.

Empirical vs. Anecdotal

Empirical

Expected in academic submissions.

- More “scientific”
- Demonstrates appropriate reading
- Selecting the relevant evidence to
support your writing

Anecdotal

- Can be useful e.g. to introduce a topic, as an example to illustrate a point
- Should not be relied upon, used to replace empirical psychological evidence, used in every submission
- Preferably they should not be used at all

Main Body of Essay....

Other points to consider:

Flow - No topic/paragraph hopping.

One paragraph should lead to the next. Use linking sentences.

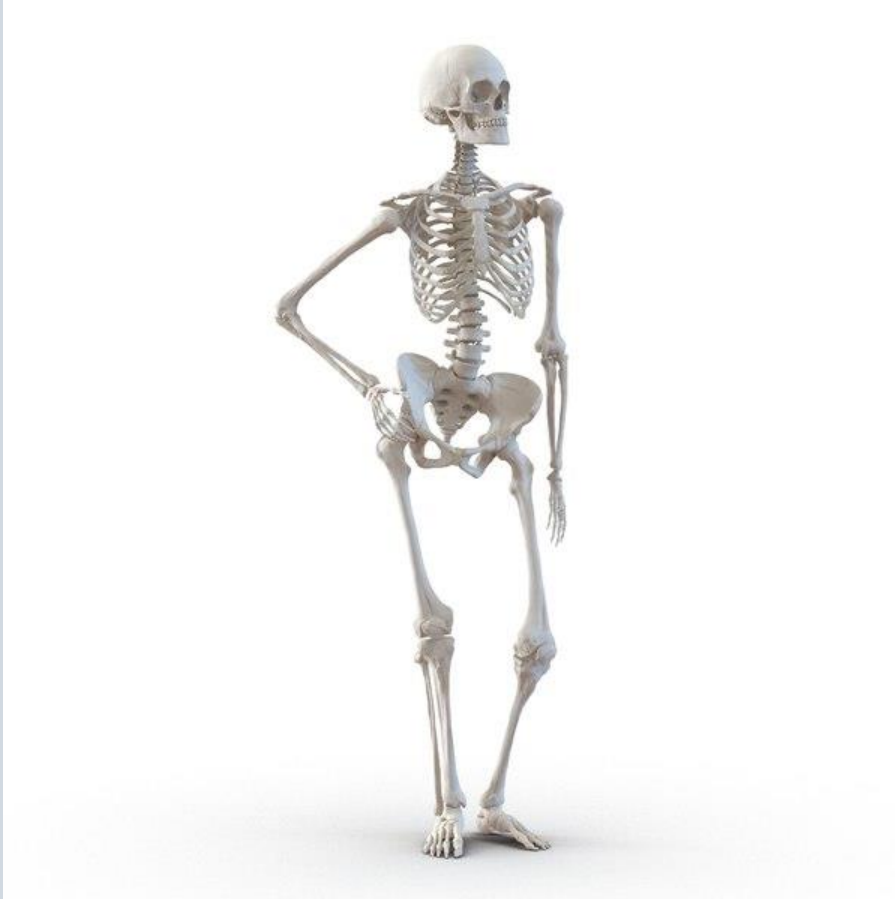
Sub headings = Not unless instructed to.

Critical Thought.

- Demonstrates understanding and viewpoint

Spelling, Grammar and Presentation.

Structure your answer.



Aim for a skeleton structure early on in the process.

You can flesh it out later with more detail

You can use *temporary* subheadings to locate where the different sources of information

Conclusion

Include a brief summary of the main arguments

- No new ideas, research etc. here

Draw your ideas/points together.

- Comment on strengths and weaknesses of the work and speculate on possible gaps in the literature.

Do not just repeat sentences from the main part of the essay.

Writing style

Try to cultivate an objective and authoritative tone.

- Do not be too chatty and informal – instead, write in the **third person** (no 'I', 'we', 'you', 'your', 'our', 'me', 'us')

Keep language simple and sentences a reasonable length.

- BUT, use the correct terminology (if you are uncertain, use a psychology dictionary)

Do not use long words simply to sound clever – the point of the essay is to clearly communicate your ideas on a given subject

Read through your work and check that you understand what you've written (better still get a friend to comment)

Formal Writing

Avoid emotional and subjective forms: e.g.

‘Shocking’

‘The author’s argument is ridiculous and I don’t agree with it.’

Rather, be more OBJECTIVE:

‘It could be suggested that the author’s argument has not been fully developed’

‘It would appear, from the literature, that the theory has omitted consideration of...’

Formal Writing

I'm

It doesn't

There's no



I am

It does not

There are no ...



Check you work carefully

Use

- i) Dictionaries
- ii) Spell-check programmes
- iii) Reference books: grammar, style, thesaurus etc.
- iv) Referencing guideline (APA referencing style)

Make sure what you have written makes sense to another reader

Get someone else to read it

Read it aloud to yourself

Tips

Offer own viewpoint without using “I”.

Use existing reference/s

‘A feasible notion was brought forward by...’

‘A large number of research has supported...’

‘This Author...’

Proof read

Get a 2nd opinion. We often see what we think we wrote, so can miss errors

Presentation

Make sure it is legible.

For essays, report and general written work: Use **Times New Roman** font style. Font size **12**.

Unless instructed otherwise

Academic Style

Critical rather than descriptive writing: But will require some level of description

Draw on the opinions and findings of experts: Use evidence to support your views

Draft/edit: Do not be afraid to change things e.g. the order of your discussion points

Persevere and learn from feedback:

Do not just check your grade – it will not tell you why you received it, nor how to improve.

We write individual feedback to help you improve – READ IT

Using direct Quotes

Limit your use of direct quotes in essays

- They use up your word allowance
- Can suggest that you don't understand what the quote means

An assignment that has become “reliant” on quotes might also demonstrate a true lack of understanding on the topic.

- Write in your own words – demonstrations of accurate knowledge and understanding can improve your grade

As an example

Essay 1.

Piaget (1932, p.54) wrote “Children’s games constitute the most admirable social institutions. The game of marbles, for instance, as played by boys, contains an extremely complex system of rules, that is to say, a code of laws, a jurisprudence of its own... All morality consists in a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought in the respect which the individual acquires for these rules”.

As an example

Essay 2.

Piaget, in 1932, compared moral judgment to a game of marbles, he claimed that morality is a system of rules which requires interaction between people. This helped form his judgements on when children acquire moral judgement.

Tips

The “dreaded” Word Count.

The aim of a word count is to demonstrate that **you can answer the question** in a concise manner.

- Don't waffle or write a book chapter.
- Shows lack of understanding
- Penalties for going over the limit – An attempt to advantage yourself
- Under the word limit – Penalising yourself – Less to attach marks to

Summary

What is a Good Essay? Checklist

Have you answered the question in the title?

Have you drawn on a good range of up to date and relevant material?

Do you show a grasp of the main issues / theories?

Have you presented a critical analysis and not merely a description?

Have you written objectively with appropriate evidence?

Is the essay reader friendly and logical?

Is the work your own and is the work of others made clearly visible?

Have you adhered to word limits?

Have you referenced properly?

Stages of writing

Think about the title

Gather appropriate information

Make a plan

Organize material to fit your 'story'

Write the first draft

Review the draft in light of the title and 'good essay characteristics'

Write the final draft

Read (or better still get someone else to read

Title

What is the title asking you to do? – look for key words (compare, contrast, evaluate, consider, discuss).

What do you understand by the question?

If you are unsure about requirements – ask!

Planning

Get some notes down on paper – by reading you will have an idea of what others think – but don't forget what you think in relation to the evidence.

Avoid scrappy notes and aim for some organization. This will lead to a logical plan.

Writing something down gets you over 'clean page syndrome'!

Use notes to find themes or arguments you will cover