

1

WRITING ESSAYS AND DISSERTATIONS

HOW THIS SKILL TOPIC CAN HELP YOU

The 'crucial skills' part of this Skill Topic aims to help you to:

- identify the purpose of the essay and who the audience (reader) is and what's needed for both;
- choose and use language suitable for your purpose, audience and topic;
- structure your work;
- develop an argument;
- proof-read work and improve language, spelling, punctuation, grammar and style;
- review what you did and use feedback to improve your essay writing in future.

The 'enhanced skills' part of this Skill Topic is shorter: it helps you operate to a higher level. As well as all the 'crucial skills' outcomes, you'll be able to:

- identify what you want to achieve from the essay;
- choose methods and adapt what you do to help achieve them;
- plan your work over an extended period (e.g. for a dissertation);
- use language and style to convey a particular effect;
- sustain an argument;
- make complex points in different ways, showing your own understanding/analysis/critique, using examples or evidence your audience can understand and relate to;
- critically review what you did to improve what you do in the future.

CRUCIAL SKILLS

C1 Why is this Skill Topic important?

Assessed essays are used across higher education (HE), many exams require answers to be written in an essay format and students often have to do a dissertation (like a long essay) at the end of courses. Being able to write good essays may be very important for your learning and your grades.

Essays are commonly used in subjects relying on words (rather than symbols or images) to communicate ideas, such as in the humanities, arts or social sciences. However, other courses (e.g. science; computing; visual arts) may include at least one essay.

Some students coming into HE are new to essay writing. They may have done courses at school or in further education that didn't require essays or it may be a long time since mature students wrote one. Even for those who've just come from courses where essays were often used, what's needed at HE is likely to be quite different.

This Skill Topic will help anybody who needs to write an essay or a dissertation. It'll also help if you have to write in the format of an article that might be included in a journal. Use it to help you write a particular essay; use it again when you have an essay to write until, eventually, you only need to refer to it as a reminder.

C2 Other Skill Topics you need to use together with this one

There are several other Skill Topics that will be helpful when you're writing your essay.

Skill Topic	Title	How it relates to this Skill Topic
7	Finding, using and analysing information and evidence.	The content of your essay includes the information and ideas you've found, with evidence to support your argument.
8	Plagiarism and referencing.	You must correctly cite and reference all the works you've used in your essay. This is very important.
9	Making notes.	You'll be making notes on the information and ideas you're finding for your essay; good notes will help.
15	Handling time and pressure.	In order to get your essay written on time, you'll need to manage your time well. If you have other assignments too, you may need to manage pressure.

C3 Why are essays used? What are their key features?

Essays are rarely used in situations other than formal education, professional exams or for journal papers (other written communications, like reports, are more common). So why do courses use them? Essays do something very different from other ways of communicating in writing and what they do is very important for HE.

Essays allow assessors to see how much you've understood a topic, how well you can see the underlying issues and if you can make valid connections between ideas. Essays help you learn about a topic by allowing you to explore it and to think it through.

An essay doesn't have the fairly rigid structure of a report. It isn't a collection of items like a portfolio. It isn't short and snappy like a brochure. It isn't visual like a poster. It's fairly long and it flows, following a logical line of discussion. It means the writer can explore ideas in what's known as a 'discursive' style i.e. it allows you to amplify or extend what you're saying.

Essays do have a common structure: a title, an introduction, followed by a number of paragraphs and a conclusion, with a list of references or bibliography at the end (see Skill Topic 8 'Plagiarism and referencing'). However, this structure is fairly loose, compared with that of a report, and this both makes it valuable and makes it hard. The relatively free format of an essay gives you enough scope to either show how well you grasp something or to reveal how confused your thinking is about it. This Skill Topic will help you see how to avoid the latter.

C4 The purpose of your essay, your audience and what's needed for both

Your purpose and audience (reader) need to be considered together. For an essay your audience will usually be the tutor who's assessing it but if in doubt, check (e.g. some dissertations are placed in libraries/learning centres for others to see).

What will the person reading your essay want from it? Rate your awareness of the following purposes: 1 very aware; 2 aware; 3 this is news to me.

Purpose	Rate your awareness of this (1–3)	Comments
To understand what you write.		Poor spelling/grammar/etc. affects how well the reader understands your work and has a huge impact on their opinion of it.
To follow the thread of what you are saying.		If they can't follow it, it has a huge impact on their opinion of your work.
For the contents to be relevant to the title.		Irrelevancies will distract and confuse the reader.
To see what you know about the topic.		Information you give needs to be accurate.
To see how well you understand the topic.		This means not just repeating information but explaining it.
To see if you grasp essential principles.		... rather than getting bogged down in details.
To see how logically you think.		HE aims to develop reasoning skills. Logic is shown through your structure and 'argument'.
To see how you connect ideas together in a way that can be justified.		This is known as developing an 'argument'; it's a key HE skill.
To see how critical you are.		This is a key HE skill. You need to question ideas or information, not just accept them as 'true'.
To see how well you use information.		Information has to be applied to your topic, not just repeated out of context.
To see if you apply academic conventions.		To make sure you aren't plagiarising; so abbreviations you use are understandable

Which of the above do you find easy and which are more difficult? What else do you find easy or hard about essay writing? Your own purpose in writing this essay could be to focus on areas you need to improve.

My purpose for this essay

C5 What's your topic? What does the title mean?

Being clear about the topic is where students start either to go down the right or wrong track. If you include irrelevant things in your essay or if you don't put what you write in an order that helps the reader follow it (your 'structure'), it may be because you haven't thought through what the title or topic really means.

The following encourages you to analyse your title. It may seem basic, but doing this can avoid later difficulties. If you can decide on your own title, ensure that it indicates your focus (if not, the reader will be looking for something else).

If you're given a title, a good starting point is to look at any verbs in it.

Verb	What you need to do in the essay	What would get a poor grade/fail?
Explain.	Give reasons for.	Not giving reasons or giving invalid ones.
Explore.	Look at all the aspects of something.	Only limited aspects considered.
Discuss.	Give the pros and cons, comparing and contrasting.	Gives one viewpoint only.
Describe.	Say what something is like.	Being inaccurate or incomplete.
Justify.	Give evidence for a claim.	Making statements with no evidence or invalid or irrelevant evidence.

What adverbs or pronouns are in your title?

Adverb or Pronoun	What you need to do in the essay	What would get a poor grade/fail?
How?	Describe any methods/processes/procedures.	Missing out stages or steps, being inaccurate.
When?	It could mean 'under what circumstances' or the timescale in which something happened.	Being vague or inaccurate.
Where?	It could mean 'in what circumstances' or it could mean a physical location.	Being vague or inaccurate.

Adverb or Pronoun	What you need to do in the essay	What would get a poor grade/fail?
Why?	Give reasons.	Not giving reasons or giving irrelevant or invalid reasons.
Which?	Focus on a thing or set of things.	Not referring specifically to a thing/ things.
Who?	Focus on a person or group of people.	Not referring specifically to a person/ persons.

Now look at the other words in the title. It helps to paraphrase (put in your own words) exactly what you think they mean and then note what you need to do to write a relevant essay. If you're unsure what the title means: check on words in a dictionary; ask what others students think it means; ask your tutor.

Your essay title

What's your title?
The title in your own words
What must you include in the essay to make it relevant to the title?

See Skill Topics 7 'Finding, using and analysing information and evidence' and 9 'Making notes'. Your next step is to note information needed for your essay and to ensure you have all the details needed to reference items you mention (see Skill Topic 8 'Plagiarism and referencing').

C6 The language you use in your essay

There are two key principles here:

1. your language must be 'correct';
2. your language must be 'appropriate'.

If it isn't, the reader may either not be able to fully understand it or could be irritated by it.

C6.1 'Correct' language

We are using 'correct' here to mean:

- words are spelt correctly;
- words are used correctly;
- grammatical rules are followed.

Spelling. If you write your essay on a computer, spellcheckers can be really helpful but only if you check what they say. A spellchecker may give you an incorrect spelling because it thinks you mean something else (e.g. it might give you 'their' when you mean 'there'). If in doubt, use a dictionary (paper or on-line).

Using words correctly. If you have any doubt about using a word correctly, check it out. Wrongly used words can cause either misunderstanding or great amusement. People may get it wrong when they use words they don't normally use, either technical terms that are new to them or when they're trying to use 'clever' academic language.

In this series of Skill Topics we use some casual language, like 'don't'. This is **not** generally acceptable in a formal essay.

Grammar. Grammatical rules exist because without them meaning would be unclear. If you write using a computer, the grammar-checker is not very helpful, as it may think you are trying to say something you don't intend.

What often makes work unclear is punctuation. Here's an example from a (very entertaining) book on grammar on how punctuation can change meaning.

'A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman: without her, man is nothing.'

(Truss, 2003, p. 9)

There are some simple rules that many people get wrong and that often irritate assessors. The use of the apostrophe is one of these.

Examples

Its – always means 'of it'.

It's – always means 'it is'.

Dog's – always means 'of a/the dog'.

Dogs' – always means 'of more than one dog'.

Punctuation isn't the only thing that needs to be used correctly. A sentence must always have a main verb.

Example

'On my way to the library.' This is not a sentence.

'I was on my way to the library.' This is a sentence.

The tense of the verbs you use needs to be consistent or it'll confuse the reader.

Example

'The dogs were barking and the noise is distracting me.' This has inconsistent tenses.

'The dogs were barking and the noise was distracting me.' This has consistent tenses.

There's not enough space here to do more than suggest general things you need to give attention to. There are many books on grammar, dictionaries (including on-line ones) and thesauruses (which give you alternatives for a word e.g. Roget, 1988).

When you proof-read work, check your spelling, use of words, punctuation and grammar.

C6.2 'Appropriate' language

Formality. An essay needs formal language. This means avoiding writing as people speak. It also means **not** using texting abbreviations, slang (*'I can't get my head around'*; *'This is just, so, totally uncool'*), sports commentator verbs (*'She's going across the road and she's falling over'*) and, of course, swearing. It also means not using regional dialect that might not mean something to others outside the region (*'The child was mardy'* means something to one author of this series of Skill Topics but not to the other).

First or third person. Check with your tutor if you have to write in the first (*'I think'*) or third (*'It is thought'*) person.

Inclusivity. All written work must be non-discriminatory. This means not using 'he' or 'man' when referring to a generalised individual and **not** assuming that people in specific groupings have the same characteristics (e.g. gender; race; culture; age; disabilities).

Example

'A nurse wears her uniform with pride' is discriminatory.

'A nurse wears her/his uniform with pride' or *'Nurses wear their uniforms with pride'* are not discriminatory.

This principle applies to using examples. Do your examples include a variety of people (e.g. different cultures; ethnicities)?

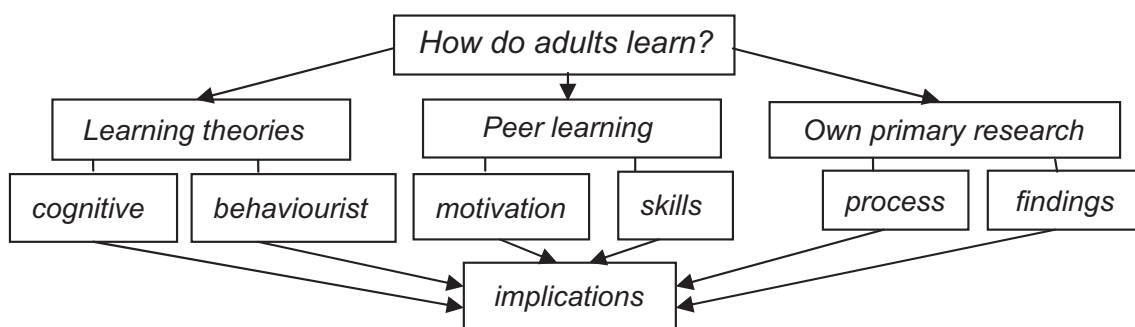
The vocabulary you use must be appropriate for the subject area, using words that are normally used in it (e.g. technical or specialist). However, your assessor may want to know that you understand a term, so you may need to explain it. You'll need to use your knowledge of the subject area to judge which words need explanation and which don't.

C7 Planning your essay

You need to find a way of planning your essay that works for you. There's no one best way to do it (tutors may advise one, possibly one that works for them, but you need one that's OK for you).

Here are some suggestions:

- you could start by identifying the outcomes for your essay or the key ideas you want to get across (we planned this Skill Topic by first identifying the learning outcomes for it and then having a section on each outcome);
- you could brainstorm ideas on the topic and then sort them into a logical order;
- you could do a first draft off the top of your head, then revise it and add in information or evidence (one of the authors of this series of Skill Topics likes to work in that way);
- you could identify some key texts (e.g. books; journals; websites) and make notes on crucial information, then structure your thinking around your notes;
- if you like to think in a visual way, you could draw a diagram, a picture or a flow chart to help sort out your ideas, see example below.



What do you usually do?	What's helpful/unhelpful about this?	What could you try instead?

C8 Structuring your essay

In this context, 'structure' means that each paragraph in an essay is about one main idea or piece of information and that the paragraphs are in an order that helps the reader understand the line of reasoning (the 'argument').

If you use several different ideas in one paragraph and then repeat some of the ideas in later paragraphs without saying why you're referring to them again, you'll confuse the reader.

If you create a line of reasoning but miss out a crucial bit of information, then the reader will be confused. They'll be confused if you mention something in one paragraph but don't explain it until several paragraphs later.

A rough guide to structure is:

- the introductory paragraph says what you'll cover in the rest of the essay;
- the last paragraph (or last few paragraphs) gives what you conclude from what you've written. Rather than thinking of the word 'conclusion', if you see it as 'what do I conclude' you may end up with a better final paragraph;
- the paragraphs in the middle take the reader from the introduction to what you conclude.

The following checklist will help you think about your structure.

Question	✓
Does your introduction clearly say what you'll cover in the essay and clearly relate to the essay title?	
Is each sentence about one thing i.e. one main idea or piece of information, closely connected?	
Are all the sentences in a paragraph about the same thing i.e. a main idea/piece of information? Are the connections between the sentences (ideas and information) clear?	
Have you put your paragraphs in a helpful order and have you been consistent? Possibilities are: • in date order or the order in which something happened • by stages or steps • by causality (i.e. one thing led to another) • by theme (e.g. paintings; drawings; sculptures) • by importance to your subject • what else?	

Question	✓
Have you made the connections between the paragraphs clear?	
Have you given essential information needed to understand something at the point it is first mentioned?	
Have you avoided having paragraphs about the same thing dotted around with no logical order?	

Because you know what you mean, it's hard to see it as somebody who's reading your essay for the first time does. Ways of checking if your structure makes sense include:

- identify a key word or phrase that indicates what a paragraph is about. Now check if everything in the paragraph is about that; if not you may need to move something from it. List your key words/phrases in the order in which your paragraphs appear and ask if that's a logical order; if not, move paragraphs;
- jot down (briefly) the main points that somebody who knows nothing about the topic would need to know in order to understand what you've written; look at your draft essay to see if you've included them;
- ask somebody else to read it to see if they can follow it;
- if the tutor offers to look at a draft, take full advantage of this and act on the feedback;
- draft it, leave it for a few days, then re-read it;
- if you have written it on the computer, print it off and read it;
- read it aloud.

Using a computer makes structuring your work much easier than handwriting it, as it allows you to move things around (don't forget to back it up when you save it and give successive drafts a number, so you don't forget which version is the latest one).

The layout of your essay helps make the structure clear (e.g. making clear where your paragraphs start and end). This means (if you use a computer) a line space between paragraphs and it means 'running lines on', i.e. not starting each new sentence on a new line (see Skill Topic 10 'Presenting your work; making it look good').

Look at the last two paragraphs. Now look at them below without line spaces and without 'running on'. Which is clearer?

Example of poor layout

*Using a computer makes structuring your work much easier than handwriting it, as it allows you to move things around (don't forget to back it up when you save it and give successive drafts a number, so you don't forget which version is your latest one).
The layout of your essay helps make the structure clear (e.g. making clear where your paragraphs start and end).
This means (if you use a computer) a line space between paragraphs and it means 'running lines on', i.e. not starting each new sentence on a new line (see Skill Topic 10 'Presenting your work; making it look good').*

C9 Developing an argument: putting the 'soul' into the essay

Writing an essay is a bit like telling a story: you work out an 'angle' that gets across the main point and appeals to the reader. You're creating a line of thinking and your reader is following a thread leading them somewhere. You need enough detail for your 'story' to make sense but not so much that your reader gets bogged down, so you need to include details that add to the 'story' and to exclude anything detracting from it.

There are different approaches to creating your essay. There's no 'right' way, no one correct line of argument. It's up to you to choose one that suits you and the topic. Readers want to see what your argument is (and that you've got one that you've worked out for yourself), how you construct it and what connections you make along the way.

For example, to answer the essay question 'Should airport provision in the UK be expanded', here are two possibilities.

Possibility 1

Line of argument	Examples
1. Provide an overview of the current provision.	<i>Number of airports/passengers/flights (perhaps compared with other countries).</i>
2. Identify all the factors to consider in expanding them, and provide information/evidence about each.	<i>Projected passenger needs; airport capacity needed for this; expand current/build new; costs; impacts on residents; impact on environment.</i>
3. Discuss the different factors.	<i>Which factors will most affect the economy and the environment.</i>
4. Finally, make a judgement.	<i>Decide if impact on environment is outweighed by the economic benefits.</i>

Possibility 2

Line of argument	Examples
1. Explore why it's an issue.	<i>Tension between environmental concerns and need to increase capacity. Short term as opposed to long term interests.</i>
2. Look at the different viewpoints about this issue.	<i>Government; employers; passenger airlines; freight airlines; local residents; pressure groups ; the planet.</i>
3. Provide and weigh up the evidence in relation to the viewpoints and issue.	<i>Current capacity; projected demand; impact on economy/local residents/environment; costs/benefits of alternative transport.</i>
4. Finally, make a judgement.	<i>Decide if better to invest in alternative transport.</i>

Which of the following alternative approaches would suit your 'story'?

Possible approaches	✓
Start by making a claim/statement, then justify it.	
Start by identifying the evidence, then say what it proves at the end.	
Start by stating key themes, then explore them one by one, then show how they're connected.	
Use a chronological order (e.g. start with the final conclusion then say what led to it; or start at the beginning and go through the stages to reach the conclusion).	
Start with a statement of existing knowledge.	
Start with a statement of new knowledge and tell the 'story' of how it was created (e.g. 'here's something wonderful we now know; how did we get here?')	
What else?	

C10 Drafting, editing and proof reading**C10.1 Drafting**

It's highly unlikely that your first draft will be good enough to hand in. Most writers do several drafts of a piece of work and computers really help here. If you're not using a computer but are handwriting, it's helpful to write your first draft on every other line. This will help you do amendments before your final version. If you use a computer, you can cut, paste and move things around easily.

An essay is often seen as a final product but it's the drafting of it that's the learning experience. Through thinking about the structure, you'll be sorting out and forming your ideas about the topic: you learn as you write. Putting an idea in writing can make you see it in a new way and question it. If you leave writing your essay till the last minute, you'll miss out on this and your work won't be as good or get as good a mark.

C10.2 Editing

Editing means amending a draft to make it better. This checklist can help.

Item	✓
Can you say the same thing in fewer words (you get marks for quality, not bulk)?	
Can you use more appropriate words or better examples?	
Have you got the best order for the paragraphs?	
Have you got the best order for the sentences in each paragraph?	
Are the connections/links between your sentences/paragraphs/ideas clear?	
Is everything relevant to the title (if not, take it out)?	
Have you checked the assessment criteria for the work? Are you meeting them?	
<i>What else would make the work better?</i>	

Example: saying the same thing in fewer words

FIRST VERSION

It is very unlikely that your first draft will be good enough to hand in. Most writers do several drafts of a piece of work and computers really help you do this. If you're not using a computer but are handwriting your work, then it's helpful to write your first draft on every other line. This will help you do amendments before your final version. If you use a computer you can cut and paste and move things around at will.

SHORTER VERSION

Your first draft is unlikely to be good enough to hand in. Most writers do several drafts of a piece and computers help here: you can cut, paste and move things. For handwritten work, write a draft on alternate lines so you can insert amendments before making a final version.

Linking words and phrases

How can you link sentences and paragraphs? Here are some linking words and phrases.

however	in addition	as a consequence	a different perspective is
on the other hand	bearing in mind the former	following on from	another example is
in spite of	turning to	as a result of	an alternative way of seeing this is
whereas	after considering	a further idea/concept is	instead of
having looked at the positives, the negatives might be addressed	<i>What else?</i>		

Such linking words act as 'signposts' i.e. they tell the reader where they are in the work. Other ways of signposting include:

- telling the reader what you will cover;
- providing summaries at various points in the essay of key things covered so far;
- making explicit the relationship between information or ideas.

In some sorts of essays you can't use subheadings, which are a way of signposting used in reports, so it's even more important to use your wording to signpost.

C10.3 Proof-reading

Proof-reading is checking your draft for accuracy. It helps to:

- leave it for a few days then look at it again;
- print it out to look at it if you've produced it on a computer;
- ask somebody to do a final check (but ensure the final version is still your own work).

Here's a checklist to help.

Have you checked...	✓
spelling?	
the meaning of the words you've used?	
punctuation?	
that all your sentences have a main verb?	
any details are correct?	
all other work referred to is cited (see Skill Topic 8)?	
your list of references follows the correct conventions (see Skill Topic 8)?	
your paragraphs are clearly separated?	

C11 Reviewing and improving what you do

How can you improve your essay writing next time round?

Activity	This is what I'll repeat/do the same in future	This is what I'll do differently
Being clear about the essay's purpose, audience, requirements.		
Clarifying the title.		
Using 'correct' language.		
Using 'appropriate' language.		
Planning the essay.		
Structuring and developing an argument.		

Activity	This is what I'll repeat/do the same in future	This is what I'll do differently
Drafting work.		
Editing work.		
Proof-reading work.		

ENHANCED SKILLS

E1 What do you want to achieve?

Working this out in advance can be helpful.

Your aims	✓	You need to ...
To get the essay done quickly.		find efficient ways of doing things.
To get a good a mark/grade.		ensure you meet the assessment criteria.
To impress the assessor.		ask what they are looking for (explicit and implicit; different tutors may have different emphases).
To improve my use of language.		read more in your subject, practice writing and use feedback on it.
To improve my structuring.		read published work in your subject and explicitly look at how they structure it.
To construct better arguments.		read published work in your subject and explicitly look at how they structure it.
To show how widely read I am.		see Skill Topic 7 'Finding, using and analysing information and evidence'.
To show how critical I am.		look at Skill Topic 7.
What else?		

Some more ideas

For more efficient ways of doing things, see Skill Topics 15 'Handling time and pressure', 9 'Making notes' and 7 'Finding, using and analysing information and evidence'.

Keep all the feedback you get on your essays and look at what it says you did well and what you need to improve.

E2 Doing an extended piece of work

You may need to do a long essay or dissertation taking a whole semester, a year or longer (for postgraduate work). You need to plan carefully. Skill Topic 7 'Finding, using and analysing information and evidence' gives ideas about this for information gathering and Skill Topic 9 'Making notes' considers keeping notes for an extended piece of work.

The actual writing also needs planning. You need to allow enough time and most of us underestimate this: do an estimate and double it! You also need to add time for things you can't anticipate, like computer systems going down. See Skill Topic 15 'Handling time and pressure'.

Here's an example for a 5,000 word essay/dissertation.

Action	Time
<i>First draft after pulling together most of your information.</i>	<i>4 days</i>
<i>Search for further information this reveals you need.</i>	<i>Depends what's needed. 2/3 days?</i>
<i>Second draft.</i>	<i>3 days</i>
<i>Editing.</i>	<i>2 days</i>
<i>Making list of references or bibliography.</i>	<i>1 day</i>
<i>Proof-reading.</i>	<i>1 day</i>
<i>Total.</i>	<i>14/15 days</i>

You'll also need to add in time for other things such as:

- other course work;
- domestic or family tasks;
- socialising/leisure.

So, you need to start writing several weeks before the deadline.

It may feel less daunting if you write sections as you go along. If you do this, allow enough time at the end to put it all together and re-order it, if need be.

E3 Creating effects with your language

The style you write in will create an impression. What impression do you want to create?

Look at different styles of writing to see what the differences are. They include:

- the length of sentences (e.g. longer, complex sentences create a 'weightier' effect);
- the types of words used (e.g. short; common; longer; specialist);
- formality (e.g. first or third person; use of slang);
- the format (bulleted lists highlight points but are often frowned on for essays).

Have a look at the work of others in your subject area (e.g. journal articles; books) and make notes on the language features they use.

There's a danger here. Students may think that flowery, academic language is needed and try to write in a way that's alien to them. If you do this you may end up using words wrongly. It's better to write simply than to write wrongly.

What sort of impression do you think the following make?

Feature	Your notes on this
Using only very long paragraphs.	
Using only very short paragraphs.	
Having pages full of quotes.	
Having pages with no quotes.	
Using mainly short sentences.	
Using mainly long sentences.	

E4 Sustaining an argument

Your essay needs to flow logically from one point to another, to show you can use and connect ideas and information. You need to show how well you've made your discussion/argument and how well you develop it.

To help your reader follow your thinking/'storyline', you could:

- have one strong thread running throughout your work, with everything linking and referring to it;
- have several threads that you bring together, cross-referring to each other, with your essay built around connections between them. To avoid the reader getting lost, you need a strong focus on the connections and may need to limit the number of threads.

Example ‘Should airport provision in the UK be expanded?’

- One approach might be to have a main thread (e.g. about increased demand).
- Another approach might be to identify a number of threads, all pulled together by a deciding factor (e.g. environmental considerations).

Whichever approach you adopt, the key aspects are:

- signposting;
- making connections between sections;
- maintaining the thread of the discussion/argument.

Signposting is essential to help the reader see how you’ve connected ideas and information, and showing a logical progression (e.g. ‘Skill Topic 3 has already considered... and in Skill Topic 7, the issues raised in relation to... will be explored’).

Making connections between sections in a long piece of work involves linking ideas and information throughout the work (e.g. in an essay on how students adjust to HE, you might have an initial section on the importance of students making friends in the first week, a later section might refer to the importance of peer support throughout the first year, and here you might refer back to your initial section).

Maintaining a thread involves relating ideas and information back to the main thread to help the reader follow your line of thought (for the ‘airport’ example, the main thread might be the environment e.g. for a section on the importance of freight traffic... ‘there are also environmental implications here, as freight has to be moved from the airport to its destination and that may mean roads and the use of fossil fuels’).

E5 Getting your point across

You’ll need to make complex points and there are different ways of doing so, showing your own understanding/analysis/critique of information and ideas.

Ways of trying to help the reader see what you mean include:

- using an analogy (‘it is rather like...’);
- showing what the opposite would be;
- using a quote that supports what you are saying;
- using examples that are relevant to the topic and that the reader can understand and relate to (this is one reason why it’s important to be aware of who your reader is);
- expressing it in more than one way;
- returning to an idea (‘earlier, we considered...’);

- using a visual image (if that's acceptable in your subject area).

If you're trying to explain something complex, it might help to:

- break the idea/information down into its parts and explain each one;
- identify the essential feature and explain it first before going on to say more;
- avoid getting bogged down in detail;
- see if there are stages or steps that have to be explained in a logical order.

If you're trying to critique something you might (see Skill Topic 7 'Finding, using and analysing information and evidence'):

- look at what different authors have said about it;
- refer to both positives and negatives about it;
- discuss research that gives an alternative picture;
- identify possible vested interests;
- consider how good the evidence is;
- look at the context in which it was written/developed.

E6 Review: improving things for next time

What could make your future essay/dissertation writing even better?

Activity	This is what I'll repeat/do the same in future	This is what I'll do differently
Identifying what I want from the essay and a strategy for getting it.		
Planning for an extended piece of work.		
Creating effects with language.		

Activity	This is what I'll repeat/do the same in future	This is what I'll do differently
Sustaining an argument.		
Getting points across.		
<i>What else?</i>		

REFERENCES

- Roget, P. M. (1988) *Roget's Thesaurus of synonyms and antonyms*, London: Ramboro
- Truss, L. (2003) *Eats, shoots and leaves: the zero tolerance approach to punctuation*, London: Profile Books

