

Answering Assignment Questions



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In order to decide how to answer an essay question, you need to identify what the question requires in terms of content and genre. This guide outlines some methods to help you analyse essay questions.

Analysing a Question

Assignment questions can be broken down into parts so that you can better understand what you are being asked to do. It is important to identify key words and phrases in the topic.

Key Words

Key words tell you the approach you should take when answering an essay question. There are three types of key words:

- **Task Words** These tell you what you have to do; the action you need to perform.
- **Content Words** These tell you what the topic area is and what you should write about.
- **Limiting Words** These limit and focus the essay, making it workable.

Understanding the meaning of words, especially task words, helps you to know exactly what is being asked of you. It takes you half way towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer. Task words direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question.

Using Key Words

Look for the keywords in your essay question and underline them. Spend time working out what they mean. Use the glossary of task words included in this guide to help you.

An example essay question (from the school of education)

Computers have had a significant impact on education in the 20th century. Discuss the changes they have made.

Task word: *Discuss*

Task words indicate what you are being asked to do. Task words are usually verbs (action words or processes). In this question, the task word is *discuss*. If you look up the definition in the glossary of task words used in essay questions below, you will see that to *discuss* (in an essay) means to 'examine and assess by means of an argument'.

Content word(s): *education, computers*

Content words set and define the essay topic area. Content words help you to focus your research and reading on the correct area, in this case on computers in education.

Limiting words: *changes, significant impact, 20th century*

Limiting words define the topic area further, indicating aspects of the topic you should focus on. For example, in this question, you should not write broadly about computers in education, but focus on analysing the *changes* computers have made to education.

Implied or Complex Questions

Some assignment questions are more complex than the example above. They might have a number of parts or may not include a clear task word, which can make them appear confusing. Some tasks are implied rather than explicitly stated.

In order to understand what you must do, you need to work out your task by looking at the entire question. Look for clues in the limiting and content words and in the relationships between words, phrases and parts of the question.

Elements

Some questions consist of a statement or a proposition that requires **a discussion**. Such questions often provide a quotation or statement, followed by a task word such as 'discuss'.

Other questions include **a direction** such as 'explain the significance' of a given statement.

Some questions require an **evaluation**. They may use task words like 'to what extent'.

Some questions include **specific instructions**. They might require you to include certain material, use specific sources or to take a particular approach. Make sure you follow these instructions.

Other questions include **guidelines as to the scope** of the essay. They will specify a time period or location, or specify a framework for the discussion.

Sometimes an assignment task consists of **a number of related questions**. There may be several parts to the question, including a number of task words or specific questions.

In this case, it may be necessary to break the question into small chunks to find all the different sections that you will need to cover in order to answer a question fully. You should make sure you address each part of the task, and also recognise the relationship and links between the different parts of the assignment when forming your conclusion.

What if I don't have a question?

Some assignments let you choose a topic to explore within a particular framework or context. For example:

'Write a report on the significance of your chosen topic for the Engineering program.'

If you are given a general topic to research for an assignment, you need to form your own focus. First consider the current trends, issues or debates on the topic (this may require some preliminary research). Then form a focus question that indicates how you will approach the topic. You should also discuss your question with your tutor.

Sample Questions

The sample assignment questions below which are examples of implied tasks.

Questions which require a discussion or explanation:

'The ideal of human rights is not universal. Discuss.'

'Account for the economic success of the 'tiger' economies of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea during the 1960s.'

Questions which imply a comparison and /or contrast:

'The development of ethics is as important to medicine as the development and use of antibiotics.'

Questions which ask for the cause and/or effect relationships to be exposed:

'Indigenous Australians experience lower levels of access to health services than the general population. Discuss the factors determining access.'

Questions which imply an opinion needs to be given:

'Why did the ideas of Martin Luther cause such an upheaval in 16th century Europe? Would there have been a Reformation without him? How would you measure the success of the Lutheran Reformation? Give reasons for your view.'

Questions which imply evaluation:

'To what extent did the subcultural research project demonstrate that youth cultures were "counter-hegemonic"?''

'What traits distinguish Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism from each another? Has society influenced these religions or have these religions influenced society?'

Glossary of Task Words

Understanding the meaning of words, especially task words, helps you to know exactly what is being asked of you. It takes you half way towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer. Task words direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question. Here is a list of such words and others that you are most likely to come across frequently in your course.

Words	What they (might) mean
Account for	Explain, clarify, give reasons for. (Quite different from 'Give an account of' which is more like 'describe in detail').
Analyse	Break an issue down into its component parts, discuss them and show how they interrelate.
Assess	Consider the value or importance of something, paying due attention to positive, negative and disputable aspects, and citing the judgements of any known authorities as well as your own.
Argue	Make a case, based on appropriate evidence for and/or against some given point of view.
Comment on	Too vague to be sure, but safe to assume it means something more than 'describe' or 'summarise' and more likely implies 'analyse' or 'assess'.
Compare	Identify the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (but probably pointing out their differences as well).
Contrast	Point out the differences between two things (but probably point out their similarities as well).
Criticise	Spell out your judgement as to the value or truth of something, indicating the criteria on which you base your judgement and citing specific instances of how the criteria apply in this case.
Define	Make a statement as to the meaning or interpretation of something, giving sufficient detail so as to allow it to be distinguished from similar things.
Describe	Spell out the main aspects of an idea or topic or the sequence in which a series of things happened.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument. Examine key points and possible interpretations, sift and debate, giving reasons for and against. Draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal or the worth of something, in the light of its apparent truth; include your personal opinion. Like 'assess'.
Enumerate	List some relevant items, possibly in continuous prose (rather than note form) - and perhaps 'describe' them (see above) as well.
Examine	Present in depth and investigate the implications.
Explain	Tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are, including perhaps some need to 'describe' and to 'analyse' (see above).
To what extent	Explore the case for a stated proposition or explanation, much in the manner of 'assess' and 'criticise' (see above), probably arguing for a less than total acceptance of the proposition.
How Far	Similar to 'to what extent . . .?' (see above)

Words	What they (might) mean
Identify	Pick out what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use.
Illustrate	Similar to 'explain' (see above), but probably asking for the quoting of specific examples or statistics or possibly the drawing of maps, graphs, sketches, etc.
Interpret	Clarify something or 'explain' (see above), perhaps indicating how the thing relates to some other thing or perspective.
Justify	Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, probably including the need to 'argue' (see above) a case.
Outline	Indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events, possibly setting them within a clear structure or framework to show how they interrelate.
Prove	Demonstrate the truth of something by offering irrefutable evidence and/or logical sequence of statements leading from evidence to conclusion.
Reconcile	Show how two apparently opposed or mutually exclusive ideas or propositions can be seen to be similar in important respects, if not identical. Involves need to 'analyse' and 'justify' (see above).
Relate	Either 'explain' (see above) how things happened or are connected in a cause-and-effect sense, or may imply 'compare' and 'contrast' (see above).
Review	Survey a topic, with the emphasis on 'assess' rather than 'describe' (see above).
State	Express the main points of an idea or topic, perhaps in the manner of 'describe' or 'enumerate' (see above).
Summarise	'State' (see above) the main features of an argument, omitting all superfluous detail and side-issues.
Trace	Identify the connection between one thing and another either in a developmental sense over a period of time, or else in a cause-and-effect sense. May imply both 'describe' and 'explain' (see above).

Other Useful Definitions

Words	What they (might) mean
Assumption	Something which is accepted as being true for the purpose of an argument.
Issue	An important topic for discussion; something worth thinking and raising questions about.
Methodology	A system of methods and principles for doing something. Often used to explain methods for carrying out research.
Objective	It is the point or the thing aimed at. It is what you want to achieve by a particular activity.

Essay and Assignment Planning

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Is planning really necessary? Shouldn't I just be able to sit down and write?

Writing is an iterative process and planning is an essential part of that process. A great essay doesn't flow out fully formed from the mind of the 'perfect student'; nor do coherent, well-developed arguments. Good essays are produced through hard work, thinking and (usually) writing and rewriting. Although it can feel chaotic, planning will ultimately save you time and unnecessary confusion.

Constructing an essay plan is a way to provide yourself with an outline or 'road map' to help work out which direction to take. A plan can focus and define your ideas, provide a starting point and help break the assignment into manageable parts. Drafting a quick initial plan is a great way to avoid procrastination and to get started.

When should I make an essay plan? Will I need to write more than one?

Before you start any journey, it's best to plan your trip. Sketch out a brief initial plan BEFORE you head for the library to spend days or weeks reading. A second plan, one you write AFTER research and reading, will strengthen and clarify your ideas and give you a solid framework from which to begin writing. So, assume that you'll draft a couple of plans over the course of writing your essay or, at the very least, revising your initial one.

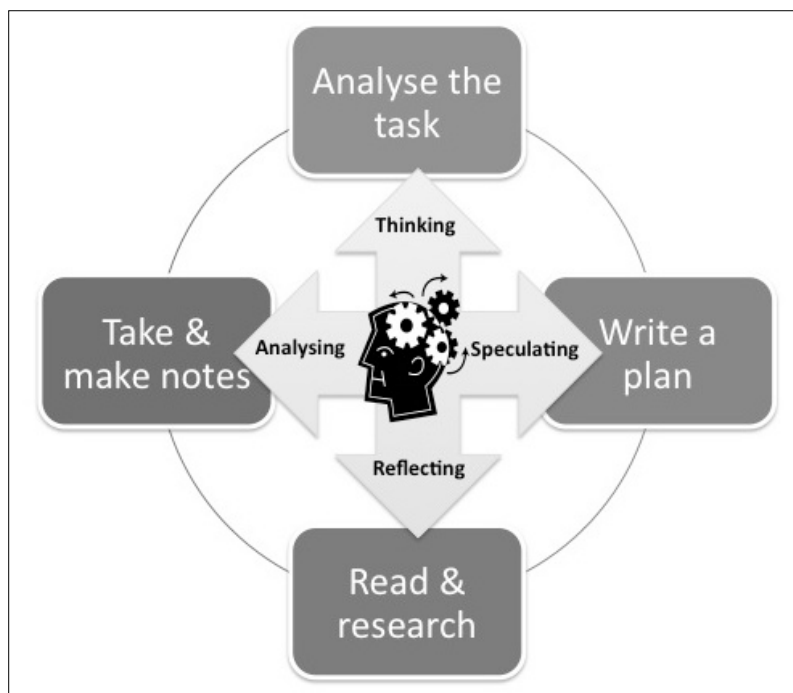


Figure 1: The Essay Planning Process

What should a plan look like?

An essay plan should allow you to see the shape the essay might take. It can range from a brief sketch of main ideas to a detailed point-by-point outline, complete with draft paragraphs and topic sentences (the sentence that conveys the main idea of a paragraph). How much detail you include will depend on how developed your ideas and your knowledge are.

In terms of how it should look, an essay plan can take a number of forms: a list of bullet points, a mind map, a diagram or a few rough paragraphs. Like notes, plans can take whichever shape you find most helpful and meaningful.

Getting Started

Step 1: Analyse the Task

Confirm what you have to do by establishing some basic information. Check your course outline for assignment guidelines and be certain about the following:

- **The format your assignment should follow.** Find out whether it is an essay, report, annotated bibliography, critical review etc. Each assignment has a specific purpose, distinctive components and conventions that you will be required to follow.
- **The length.** This will affect the amount of research and how much depth you should go into.

Analyse the assignment question: read it carefully and make sure you are clear about what you are supposed to do and the key words, terms and concepts

See *The Learning Centre's guide to 'Answering Assignment Questions'* for further details

Step 2: Work out your initial thoughts and ideas about the topic(s)

- Do you have any initial responses to the question? What could a possible answer (or answers) be?
- Do you have any opinions at all about the topic(s)? Write them down, no matter how 'creative' or non-academic they may be.
- What do you already know about the topic(s)? Do you have knowledge that can be built on, such as familiarity with related areas, sources or frameworks for thinking about similar topics? Write everything down—you may know more than you think.

Further your thinking by 'questioning the question'. This helps you focus by drawing out sub-questions about the question and topic.

- Question the terms – Is there a generally agreed-upon response to the question or approach to take?
- If not, how do different approaches/ theories/ arguments differ? Which ones could/ should you use?
- What are the key concepts? How do they relate to each other?

Generate ideas through brainstorming. Come up with as many ideas as you can as quickly as you can. Don't evaluate or discard anything – you can do that later – just jot them down. Use mindmaps, drawings and lists; whatever comes to mind and stimulates your thinking. Look at what you've noted down. Pull out the points that are relevant to the question and discard the rest.

Step 3: Construct an initial essay plan

After you have generated some ideas, it's important to write an initial plan before you head for the library. This can feel strange—after all, how can you answer a question when you haven't done any research?—but starting with an initial plan helps you order your ideas and focus your reading. Without a sense of which direction to head in, it's easy to get lost in the research process. This initial plan will be provisional and might consist of:

- a provisional answer to the question (or *thesis statement*)
- a brief outline of possible main points.

As you research and develop your understanding of the topic, your ideas will likely change, and your answers may change with them. Try to see your essay plan as something that evolves as you engage further with your topic.

While it's a good idea to write an initial plan before you start researching, if you really know nothing at all about the topic, some initial skimming and browsing through recommended or assigned readings can provide a few ideas. However, the initial planning stage is not the time for a lot of intensive or detailed reading.

Step 4: Research and gather information

Your initial plan should raise a series of questions and identify key words and topic areas which you can use to orientate your research for the essay. While reading informs your thinking, knowing what you need to find out will give your reading a purpose.

See 'Starting your research' from *ELISE (UNSW Library)*: <http://elise.library.unsw.edu.au/mod3/study2.html>

- Be sure to examine any assigned course readings that are relevant to your essay topic.
- If there was a lecture on the essay topic, did the lecturer recommend or refer to any particular author?
- Is there a list of recommended readings for the course? Refer to it for sources of information. Who has written what on the topic(s)? What is essential to read?
- Use the key words and topics gleaned from your initial plan for library keyword searches.
- Notemaking as you read helps you record how you know something and helps you avoid plagiarism.

I'm supposed to write an essay plan for my course—what should it consist of?

Students are sometimes asked to submit a preliminary essay plan or outline as part of their course. This might be done as a prelude to completing a major essay, or it might be an individual form of assessment.

The purpose of setting this kind of assignment is to encourage students to start engaging with the essay topic early in the semester and to provide feedback to help them proceed.

If you have been asked to submit an essay plan or outline as a course assignment, there will usually be guidelines to follow. A plan usually requires a thesis statement and an indication of main points. Other than that, clarify what your tutor/ lecturer has in mind. You need to know:

- What form the plan should take. Should it be a list of points, a diagram etc?
- The amount of detail required. Should you indicate sources for research, should you provide references, etc?

What elements should an essay plan consist of?

A thesis statement

A plan should indicate the answer to the question: write a 1-2 sentence thesis statement.

A *thesis statement* is a sentence (or two) that answers the essay question. A clear and well-written thesis statement will help you to determine the direction and structure of your argument.

In the initial plan, the thesis statement is usually provisional. However, after you've done some research, you will need to work on your thesis statement until it is clear, concise and effective.

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is:

- a clear and direct answer to the essay question
- a claim that can be discussed and expanded further in the body of the essay
- one or two complete sentences
- part of the introduction

Tips: Try introducing your thesis statement with the phrase 'this essay will argue' or 'this essay argues'. Paraphrasing the assignment question can help ensure that you are answering it.

Main Points

A plan should indicate possible main points.

Once you have a thesis statement, follow it with a paragraph or a set of points that indicate the 'reasons why' for your answer. The 'reasons why' can be developed into the main points of your essay.

In the initial plan, try to express the main idea of each point in a single, clear sentence. These can become *topic sentences* (the first sentence of each paragraph) when, in your second plan, you develop these points further.

Arrange your main points in a logical order and number them (is there one that would seem to go first or one that would seem to go last? Are there any two that are closely linked? How are the ideas connected to each other? Do the main points, when considered as a whole, present a unified discussion?).

What are main points?

- Main points make up the body of an essay.
- Each point should be developed in a paragraph. These paragraphs are the building blocks used to construct the argument.
- In a 1000-1500 word essay, aim for three to four main points.

What is a topic sentence?

The topic sentence is the main sentence of a paragraph, which establishes its central idea and indicates the direction the supporting sentences will take. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence in a paragraph.

Structure

A plan should follow the structure of an essay (eg. Introduction, body and conclusion).

While you may not be ready to construct an introduction or conclusion, this three-part structure should be at least suggested in your plan.

The introduction is where you answer the question and provide an outline of the essay's main ideas.

The body is where you answer the question by developing a discussion through offering explanation and evidence.

The conclusion is where you restate the thesis and re-summarise the main points.

Research

A plan should include some indication of the evidence you might use.

Make a few notes about how each main point might be developed. Consider and if possible, specify the evidence you might draw on and which texts you might refer to. Jot down titles, authors, page numbers etc.

Step 5: Write a second essay plan

After you've researched and your ideas are more developed, it's time to write a second plan. This one might be a detailed point-by-point outline complete with paragraphs and topic sentences. How much detail you can include will depend on how developed your knowledge and ideas are. You can also return to your initial plan and revise it.

Questions to ask yourself:

- **In light of your research, has your answer changed?**
If yes, write a new thesis statement. Now is the time to ensure it is clear, concise and fully answers the essay question.
- **Are the main points still relevant?**
Are they still in line with your thesis statement? What should you add or change?
- **Is each main point expressed as a topic sentence?**
Specify each point the essay will make by writing the main idea in a single sentence.
- **How does each point relate to the question?**
Include a brief sentence explaining how each point relates to the question – doing this can make sure your discussion stays on course. If you can't see how a particular point relates to the question, delete it.
- **How will you develop each main point?**
How will you explain and illustrate each one? What evidence or examples might you use?
- **Do you have specific evidence to draw on?**
Specify the texts you will refer to. Jot down titles, authors, page numbers.
- **How does each main point link together?**
How is each one connected? Are they in logical order?

When you have an outline, make a few rough notes to get the **introduction and conclusion** started. Start thinking about:

- how you will introduce and 'lead the reader in' to the topic
- how to conclude and 'close the door' on the topic

Do this last, as you can't know how you're going to introduce or conclude something until you're clear about what you're going to say.

Should I write while I'm researching?

YES. Writing is a means of thinking and working out ideas. A 'writing-as-you-go' approach helps you to avoid a 'split' process, where you do lots of reading, defer writing until the last minute, and so experience a lot of confusion.

Try the following strategies:

- During each study session, set yourself a goal and **spend 5-10 minutes writing**. As you think through ideas, try expressing them in short paragraphs. You might produce some that are well-developed and require little revision. Other fragments might require a lot of rewriting. That's fine—the point is, you're not starting with a blank page.
- Use the **split-page notemaking method** to make notes and write as you read. In addition to noting specific information, write your comments and ideas. You don't have to write perfect sentences, but writing-as-you-go can mean that by the time you're ready to write a first draft, you'll already have a framework of notes and comments to build on.
- As you read, **write in response to these questions**:
 - ◇ in what ways is what I've been reading relevant to my essay?
 - ◇ What more do I need to find out and why?
 - ◇ How does what I'm reading link in to what I already know?
- Try **freewriting** (or 'stream-of-consciousness' writing) – a technique in which you write continuously for a set period of time. Write in full sentences and don't worry about spelling or grammar. If you can't think of what to write, don't slow down, just repeat the last phrase you wrote. Freewriting is often used to collect initial thoughts and ideas on a topic, often as a preliminary to formal writing. It is also a great way to overcome writer's block.

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Essay Writing

The Basics



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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.

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Editing Checklist



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

When revising and editing your assignment, ask yourself...

Have I answered the question or task as fully as possible?

- ☐ What is my thesis/ central proposition/ main assertion?
- ☐ Do I make a clear argument or take a position about the topic? Do I state that position in my introduction?
- ☐ Does my introduction or opening paragraph prepare the reader for what follows?

Is my essay clearly structured?

- ☐ Does my assignment have a clear introduction, a body and a definite conclusion?
- ☐ Does the assignment advance in logical stages?
- ☐ Are the major points connected? Are the relationships between them expressed clearly?
- ☐ Do the major points all relate to the topic and contribute to answering the task or question?

Are my paragraphs clearly connected and coherent?

- ☐ Does each paragraph begin with a topic sentence?
- ☐ Do the sentences flow smoothly and logically from point to point? Does each sentence clearly follow on from the one before?
- ☐ Does each paragraph state its case clearly and completely, or should there be more evidence/ detail?
- ☐ Are there adequate transitions between sentences and paragraphs? Are transitions varied or are they all the same kind?
- ☐ Are all examples and quotes relevant to and supportive of my answer?
- ☐ Are facts and opinions supported with examples or explanations where necessary?

Is my written expression appropriate?

- ☐ Have I used direct and clear language?
- ☐ Have I explained my ideas clearly and explicitly?
- ☐ Have I kept my audience in mind? Have I said all I need to say so that my reader can understand, or am I assuming they will 'know what I mean'?
- ☐ Have I written complete, grammatically correct sentences?
- ☐ In long sentences, have I separated related ideas with commas or semicolons for easier understanding?
- ☐ Is my use of tenses correct?
- ☐ Have I used non-discriminatory language?

Have I fully referenced my sources of information?

- ☐ Have I referenced all the words, ideas and information sources I have used in my assignment?
- ☐ Have I used a consistent referencing style?

- ☐ Is there a clear distinction between my thoughts and words and those of the author(s) I've read and cited?
- ☐ Are quotations properly introduced? Are they accurate? Are they formatted correctly?
- ☐ Do the quotations add evidence or provide an authoritative voice, or am I letting the author(s) speak for me? Would writing it in my own words be more effective?

Have I remained within or exceeded the set word limit?

- ☐ I don't have enough words:
 - Have I fully answered the question or task?
 - Do I need to read more? Should I include more information or discussion?
 - Have I provided enough evidence to support my argument/s?
- ☐ I have too many words:
 - Have I included only relevant information?
 - Is there any unnecessary repetition in my assignment?
 - Is my written expression as clear and concise as possible, or is it too 'wordy'?

Have I proof read and revised my assignment for errors?

- ☐ Have I checked my spelling? Have I read through my assignment and not just relied on a computer spellchecker?
- ☐ Is all my bibliographical information correct?
- ☐ Have I used correct punctuation? Have I ended every sentence with a full stop?

Is my assignment well presented?

- ☐ Does the presentation follow any guidelines set by my lecturer or school?
- ☐ Have I included a cover sheet? (assignment cover sheets are available from your school office)
- ☐ Have I made sure my assignment is legible? Is it typed or written neatly?
- ☐ Have I used double-line spacing?
- ☐ Have I numbered pages and used wide margins?
- ☐ Have I kept an extra copy?

Further Reading

Bemidji State University Writing Resource Center 1997, *How to Proofread and Edit Your Writing: A Guide for Student Writers*, Internet, <http://cal.bemidji.msus.edu/wrc/handouts/ProofAndEdit.html>. (27 August 2001)

Barnett, S. and Cain, A. 1997, *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature*, Harper Collins.

Cuba, I. 1988, *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science*. Harper Collins.

Prepared by Tracey-Lee Downey, Pam Mort and Ian Collinson for The Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales. This guide may be distributed for educational purposes with proper acknowledgement.