

UNIT 6: WRITING ACADEMIC ESSAYS

Presenting an Argument

The main purpose of writing an essay is usually to express an opinion or put forward an argument, which must then be substantiated by providing evidence. An essay is usually developed in three stages. It starts out with an introduction (which serves as a statement of intent), goes on to the middle section (which provides evidence to support the main argument), and ends with a conclusion (which usually draws the threads together and sums up the main ideas).

The Essay's Introduction

The introduction to the essay provides the reader with a clear statement of the aims of the essay. It tells the reader what it intends to argue, which sources it will call upon to support the argument and what it hopes to demonstrate. In other words, the introduction explains unambiguously the author's position on the chosen topic, and tells the reader what precisely to expect from the essay. Ideally introductions should not only provide a clear indication of the writer's central argument, but also show a firm grasp of the central issues or debates that lie behind the essay question or title.

It is of course important that the introduction is presented in such a way that it grabs the reader's attention. Some writers avoid the potential problem of dull and formulaic introductions by, for instance, starting their essay with an arresting quotation or a challenging statement. Others start with a short description of an example or theme central to the topic under discussion and use this to indicate the questions to be addressed in the work that follows. Even when using such devices, however, it is important to make sure that the introductory paragraphs have succeeded in providing the reader with a clear and unambiguous idea of what is to follow.

The Body of the Essay

In the body of the essay, the author develops the argument. In doing so, rather than presume that one is alone in reflecting on the topic, one must consider what other people have had to say about it. It is vital therefore to engage with the works of other scholars who have written about the topic at hand. By engaging with previous scholarship the writer is able to decide whether or not s/he is in agreement with particular scholars. The writer is also able to determine why it is that s/he agrees with some and not with others. The ability to demonstrate an understanding of competing positions or arguments, and to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of each, is an important skill in essay writing. This is the ability to be 'critical'. Being critical does not mean being negative about everything. It means standing outside the competing positions and looking for their limitations as well as their strengths.

The writer's own argument, however, is likely to derive from a particular perspective, such that s/he takes a side in an intellectual debate. To take sides does not mean of

course that the writer then refers only to that literature or scholarship that suits his/her preconceived standpoint. It means instead that the writer takes an informed position on the basis of reasoned academic judgement while acknowledging the potential weaknesses of his/her own arguments. Since choosing between competing arguments involves making a value judgement, it is good practice to make explicit the orientation that underpins one's work rather than pretend that it is entirely 'objective'. This will alert readers to possible bias in the argument and help them make up their own minds about the merits of the writer's position.

It is important to support the arguments in the essay with appropriate examples and evidence. These examples will usually be drawn from primary and/or secondary sources. Using evidence to support the arguments in the essay requires more than just reproducing or describing research findings. The writer also needs to explain exactly how these findings support his/her arguments. It is good practice to highlight evidence that has the most significant implications, to use more than one example, and to select evidence from a range of sources.

It must be clear from the preceding paragraphs that there are in fact three things we do in the course of writing an essay. Firstly, we present an argument. We take a position on the topic and argue for it, rather than engage in a purely descriptive exercise. Secondly, in putting forward the argument, we take into account the works of previous scholars who have commented on the subject, and engage with their scholarship. Thirdly, we present evidence in support of the argument. In providing evidence, we need to explain where the evidence came from, and why it is important for our argument. When we encounter convincing counterarguments to our claims, we do not simply ignore these but instead acknowledge them and explain why it is that we differ from them.

The Conclusion

The conclusion of the essay is usually retrospective in character. Here the writer gathers together the ideas developed in the course of the essay, weighs up the main arguments developed in the discussion, and provides the reader with a quick recap of what the essay was about, drawing the key points into focus one last time. This kind of conclusion is often referred to as a summary conclusion. This however is not the only type of conclusion that can be used in an essay. Another type of conclusion which can often be used to great effect is the discursive conclusion. Here the writer continues to develop the main ideas till the last line or word. This type of conclusion allows scope for inventiveness and originality, and it is often tempting to sign off with a grand flourish, usually with a bold statement which kindles the reader's imagination and forces him/her to think beyond the scope of the essay.

Tips on Good Essay Writing

Grammar, Visual Presentation, and Style

It is important, when writing essays, to re-read and revise drafts before making a final submission. The most obvious things to check for, while reading drafts, are spelling mistakes, typos and grammatical errors. However, it must be borne in mind that visual perspicuity in an essay is just as important as grammatical perspicuity. It is always a good idea to present your essay in a font and type size that is easy to read, with plenty of room along the margins, and adequate spacing between lines. It is also important to break overly long sentences into shorter sentences, and to break up large unwieldy blocks of text into neat paragraphs. In some cases, it might be useful to divide the entire essay into sections, and to head each section with a self-explanatory title so that the reader can understand, at a glance, your essay's contents and their arrangement.

It is also useful to pay attention to issues of style in academic writing. For example, non-English words should always appear in italics. The same is true for book titles. Long quotations should appear as a separate paragraph (as a rule of thumb anything 4 lines and over in length) and should be indented and without the addition of quotation marks. The previous section on 'Using and Referring to Sources' provides a detailed discussion about referencing style, a topic of extreme importance for the proper presentation of an academic essay.

Structuring the Essay

Just as important as grammatical clarity, visual appeal, and style, is the logical structuring of your arguments and ideas. Essays must ideally demonstrate a clear progression or sequential development of thoughts such that one sentence or section leads smoothly into the next without giving the impression of being disjointed or unconnected. Often it is helpful, prior to writing the essay, to draw up a scheme or map of the arguments and supporting evidence, in order to work out the best ordering or sequence for presenting these. Similarly, after writing a draft of the essay, it is helpful to go over it carefully, rearranging sentences and sections to improve the clarity of your argument and make the essay far more intelligible and coherent to the reader.

Using Quotations

When citing from the works of other authors, it is of utmost importance to be judicious in the use of quotations. Quotations should ideally be used only when the other author has expressed an idea in a particularly appealing way. It is important to be economical with quotations and not let the essay end up looking like a string of quotations with little by way of your own commentary. Where the idea in a quotation can readily be paraphrased and retold in one's own language, this would be the preferred option. While doing this, of course, it is important to indicate the source from where the idea was derived. Quotations should not be left to stand alone but should always be introduced to the reader, and their significance explained. All quotations should be supported by a reference. When quoting from the works of other authors, it is important

to make sure that these quotations work to support, not replace, your argument.

Establishing Links and Signposting

In most essays, the overall argument is comprised of a series of smaller arguments. While these may be self-contained, addressing different points or themes, they all work together to establish the overall argument. If the smaller arguments or sub-arguments are not linked up properly together, the result can be an ungainly whole, with awkward transitions between sections, leaving the reader to negotiate what is, at best, a bumpy ride through the essay. The problem is not the sub-arguments, but the gaps between these. What is required is for you to build bridges between sub-sections so that the argument will not appear disjointed. Often providing a recap of a section just completed and indicating where the essay is about to go next, serves as a useful bridging device.

Signposts are another helpful device for ensuring the smooth flow of the essay. Signposts are phrases or paragraphs which keep the reader informed about what is happening or about to happen, in terms of the overall argument and organisation of your essay. Signposts are particularly useful when we are about to change direction in the course of your essay. By means of signposts, you can tell the readers that you are about to change course. If you have not yet given them a chance to explore all the implications of what you have just been arguing, you can reassure them that you will return to this discussion in a while. Signposts can go a long way towards integrating the essay and polishing up the presentation.

Checking for Relevance and Avoiding Repetition

It is also always useful to check that every section of the essay is directly relevant to the essay topic or question. It is a mistake to treat the essay writing exercise as a means for demonstrating how much you know outside the essay topic when in fact none of this knowledge is of relevance to the main argument. Going over the essay with a fine toothcomb, and paring down to that which is directly relevant, is vital to developing good essay writing skills. Like the relevance test, the redundancy test too is an indispensable means for ensuring that an essay remains focused and to-the-point. An odd sentence or paragraph may contain ideas that have been expressed before, in which case it is entirely repetitive and does not add anything to the substance of the essay. It is always advisable to eliminate all such repetitive and redundant material and stay on course right till the end.

Understanding the Marking Criteria

It is particularly useful to spend some time going through the marking criteria provided in the programme handbook, in order to get a good sense of what it is that tutors look for in essays. You will notice that the bare minimum required of any essay of passable standard is that it presents an argument that addresses the essay question or title, engages with the works of other scholars, synthesises material, and shows an understanding of standard referencing conventions. As we move higher up the

gradations to the class of essays that merit a distinction, we find that these essays show much more sophistication in the way they present their argument. They are extremely clear, demonstrate breadth and depth of research and good comprehension of the subject matter, demonstrate the ability for insightful critical analysis, show considerable originality in the way they present and substantiate their arguments, provide a logical progression of ideas, and use the standard referencing system accurately. It is important to bear in mind that all these are skills that you can develop through application. There is no better way to develop these skills than to engage in the essay writing process and keep at it till you begin to gain mastery over it. Tutors are always at hand should you feel there are areas where you require help.

Some Common Worries

Getting Started

One of the most common worries expressed by students on TRIS post graduate programmes is about getting started on the essay writing process. Writing the first essay is usually the most daunting; once one essay is written, subsequent essays seem slightly less nerve-racking. Usually the best way to overcome the fear is to embark on the writing process with the expectation that the result will be fairly crude and unfinished. Mostly it takes several attempts at drafting and re-drafting before the final version of the essay begins to take shape. It is useful to start early in order to allow yourself plenty of time to make the necessary changes and adjustments. It is often also useful to give yourself a break between successive attempts. Returning to a draft after a complete break from it often helps you to see it from a relatively fresh perspective and notice its strengths and weaknesses more keenly than you would if you kept at it for long stretches without a break.

It is also often useful to run an outline of the essay past tutors for comments. Most tutors will be happy to give students feedback on essay outlines at least the first time round. The feedback given by tutors on essays that have been submitted for marking too can prove useful in terms of providing general guidance on how one's essay-writing skills can be improved for future submissions. It is generally expected that students will require feedback on drafts mainly in the early stages of their study programme, and it is useful to consult with individual programme directors about their expectations in this regard.

Keeping to the Word Length

Often students feel frustrated about the word limit on their essays, arguing that they could easily write far more on a given topic than the stipulated word length allows. However, keeping to the word limit is an important academic skill. It teaches the writer to condense material and select and communicate core arguments. It forces one to choose and prioritise material, and to communicate it in an economical and easily digestible manner. It is therefore important to stick to the word length as far as possible. Writing too much, as well as writing too little, may lead to a reduction of

marks.

Assessment for a 20 credit module in TRSIS is normally the equivalent of 5,000 words. Often the assessment is broken down into component units, for example 1,000 or 2,500 pieces of work.

As a rule of thumb, you should take the figure indicated as a word *limit* and you should not go beyond it. In order to assist you, we suggest that the following could be a rule of thumb:

Word limit of 5,000 words – no *less* than 4,500 and no *more* than 5,000 words

Word limit of 2,500 words – no *less* than 2,125 and no *more* than 2,500 words

Word limit of 1,250 words – no *less* than 1,000 and no *more* than 1,250 words

The word limit does not include footnotes and bibliography.

Referring to Personal Experience

Some essay questions will require you to draw on personal experience. Relevant personal experience may often add colour to an argument and catch the reader's attention. However, all such reference to personal experience must be related to the course and the essay questions, and all claims made on this basis must be substantiated using the usual methods. Unsubstantiated, it amounts to little more than personal opinion. However, if you are able to clearly demonstrate how the reference to personal experience is relevant to the question, and to substantiate any claims made on this basis, it can serve as a useful resource in the essay.