

1.01 How to write an essay

Start early

As soon as you are given an essay question, begin your thinking. If you don't, you might miss useful information whilst doing other research. The television and radio often have programmes on topical issues which could be of use - if you don't already have some ideas for your essay you could miss their usefulness. It is similar to the process when you learn a new word: because you have actually looked it up, it then seems to appear more often. This is because you become more sensitive to it - the same will happen with your essay subject. Starting early also gives you the opportunity to draft and redraft your essay, talk to someone else about it and get it typed up and ready to hand in on time. If you do your essay the night before it is due in, it shows!

Collecting the material

It is important to collect information that is relevant. How? It is all too easy to dash to the library, collect a huge pile of books and then browse aimlessly. You might learn something, but you won't get your essay done. The best place to start is by quickly jotting down what you already know about the question: you will probably know more than you realise. It helps to get you thinking about the topic and may also give you some ideas to follow up.

Purposeful reading

You need to adopt a strategic method: in order to read purposefully, formulate a set of questions before you begin reading. As you read, more specific questions will arise and you can look for the answers to these too. It is easy to do too much research and end up getting confused by the facts and figures. Looking for the answers to predetermined questions helps to avoid this.

Use varied sources of information

You will usually have a book list which will list the major sources of information for your subject. Use the bibliographies in these books to extend your reading. You can refer to your lecture notes, but don't rely solely on these, as they are often a general overview or could contain incorrect information if you have misunderstood something. The most productive sources of information are often subject specific journals, the "broadsheet" newspapers (e.g. The Guardian, The Independent, The Observer) and ever increasing on-line resources, such as the Internet. These publications often have specific days in the week when they focus on issues such as business, society, law and so on. They will not only give you solid up to date information on your subject, but they will give you an indication of the style of writing which is required at this level.

Keep a notebook, record cards or data base

Jot down ideas, discussions, quotations or examples as you come across them. If you don't write them down, you will inevitably forget them when it comes to writing up time. This tactic also frees your mind, because you are not trying to remember small points which can block creative thinking. As an alternative, try using small record cards which can be shuffled and sorted out as you plan and write up your essay. This can also be easily done on a computer - but a computer is harder to carry around!

Record your sources

Your notebook should also be used to write down exact details of the sources of information which you use. Failure to do this will result in wasted time relooking for information, frustration and even information being wasted because you can't use it, due to not being able to state the source.

Understanding the question (See Guide 1.11 Understanding Questions)

When tutors set an essay question, they are trying to get you to show them how much you know about a particular aspect of a subject, and if appropriate develop a convincing argument. You must always answer the specific question set. Many students go wrong because they don't answer the question; they get side-tracked and focus on the wrong aspect of the subject, or just write "all they know" about the subject. Some essay briefs are more helpful than others. Some will just give a statement followed by the word "discuss". Others give structured details which guide you step by step through what is really required. Whichever type you find yourself tackling, checking the assessment criteria can help you to see in what sort of depth you are required to write. Think of your tutor as your audience, be strategic, and find out what your tutor wants to know.

Getting down to writing

Even the most experienced writer can find a blank page daunting. The trick is to just start writing. It doesn't matter where you begin as long as what you write ends up in the right place in the end. Just write, don't worry about spelling and style. Get your first thoughts down on paper. Once you have done this you can sort out your ideas using your initial plan.

If you compose on a computer you can "cut and paste", moving paragraphs around to their final place in the essay. If you prefer pen and paper, leave a line or two between ideas so you can physically "cut and paste". Get the scissors and sticky tape out and cut your essay up. Sitting on the floor with your work spread out around you can be useful at this stage. As long as you end up with a beginning (the introduction), a middle (the body of the essay), and an end (the conclusion), you won't go far wrong.

Your essay should follow this pattern:

An **introduction** should contain some comment on the topic of the essay - perhaps definitions are needed, or some explanation of what you understand by the title. This section should also state which aspects of the topic you intend to deal with and why. Remember you are not writing a book, so you need to select a few main arguments to support your answer to the question. Your introduction should consist of a guide to the essay giving the reader a clear idea of what will follow and making it clear to your tutor that you are going to answer the question set. (See Guide 1.22 Writing Introductions)

The **body of the essay** will take each of these main points and develop them with examples and illustrations, using clearly defined paragraphs. This is where you will need to think about the structure of your essay and make sure you follow a clear path through to your conclusion. This section is where most writers go wrong, but if you plan carefully you should have a direction for your essay before you start writing.

Your **conclusion** will summarise your main ideas. It might also be appropriate to give a firm or tentative answer to the question. Or you may have chosen a question where you need to suggest wider implications, or future trends. You could also suggest areas worthy of further consideration. It is in this section that you can introduce your own views - as long as they are based on the arguments you have developed earlier. (See Guide 1.23 Writing Conclusions)

It can help to have some idea of the length of each section; the following is a very rough guide, NOT A REGULATION.

Introduction 7 - 8% of total length

Conclusion 12 - 15% of total length

Style

(See Guide 1.20 Academic writing style)

Many students worry about their writing style but remember, your words express your thoughts and if you've got a clear plan and a real grasp of the material, then you will have very little trouble writing with clarity and coherence. It's much better to use clear straightforward language, although there is a difference between written and spoken language. Don't use obscure or complex words or phrases for the sake of it, but avoid slang and abbreviations. Generally, stick to shorter sentences, but remember to vary these with some longer ones occasionally. The main objective is to be clear and concise so that your reader can follow your argument, and is not distracted or irritated by irrelevant padding.

Paragraphs

(See Guide 1.30 Writing paragraphs)

A paragraph normally deals with one topic or aspect of a central issue. Two paragraphs may be on different topics but linked by that difference - you may have two paragraphs dealing with cause and effect, or positive and negative aspects of one argument, or a before and after situation. Sometimes, the first sentence of a paragraph is the "topic sentence" - that is, it explains what the paragraph is about and gives the main theme.

Cohesion

(See Guide 1.33 Cohesion: linking words and phrases)

The transition from one paragraph to another often presents some difficulty - but it is essential to maintain continuity and give verbal signposts to your reader. Some common linking words and phrases which can help you to do this are:

<i>but, however, on the other hand, yet</i>	indicate	CONTRAST
<i>for example, that is</i>	indicate	ILLUSTRATION
<i>similarly, moreover, furthermore, in addition</i>	indicate	EXTENSION
<i>therefore, consequently, as a result, thus</i>	indicate	CONCLUSION
<i>then, after that, ultimately</i>	indicate	THE NEXT STEP

Editing and proofreading

(See Guide 1.36 Proofreading and editing)

A review is essential even if it may not result in much rewriting. You might even get a friend to listen while you read aloud - this can help a lot if you're worried about clumsy sentence structure, punctuation or illogical ordering of your ideas. If you have no willing friend, read to a tape recorder and play it back to yourself. Try to be objective and as critical as possible. Make sure you spellcheck your work and refer to a dictionary for words that your computer doesn't recognize as mistakes. Don't use the grammar checker!

What have you learned from your essay?

Researching and writing your essay will have consolidated your learning of the subject at hand. However, the feedback you get from your lecturers can be used as further learning.

They might, for example, suggest new ideas, fresh examples or different opinions. These are really worth considering while the ideas and arguments are still fresh in your mind. There may be simple corrections of facts or mistakes. Note these! There may be ideas on how you could express yourself more clearly or remarks about the detailed aspect of the structure of your essay. Study them all carefully.

The overall comment you receive will evaluate your essay as a whole, and probably involve some justification of the mark you receive. These comments have been thought through carefully and are designed to help you to improve your work - use them, don't waste them. You may get the opportunity to discuss your work with the marker: use this as a positive opportunity, especially if you haven't done as well as you expected, and build on what you learn. It should be clear to you by now that essays are about a lot more than just covering a few sides of A4 paper. They are a vital part of your learning and it is up to you to maximise their usefulness to you.