

Writing essays

This Study Guide addresses the topic of essay writing. The essay is used as a form of assessment in many academic disciplines, and is used in both coursework and exams. It is the most common focus for study consultations among students using the Student Learning Development service.

Other useful guides: *What is critical reading? What is critical writing? Thought mapping; Referencing and bibliographies; Avoiding plagiarism; The art of editing.*

A collection of Question Lists is available via the Student Learning Development website: www.le.ac/succeedinyourstudies. These lists suggest questions to ask of your writing when you are reviewing it.

Why essays?

To produce a high quality essay you need to demonstrate your ability:

- to understand the precise task set by the title;
- to identify, appropriate material to read;
- to understand and evaluate that material;
- to select the most relevant material to refer to in your essay;
- to construct an effective argument; and
- to arrive at a well-supported conclusion.

The need to use such a wide range of academic skills is probably the main reason why the essay format is so popular with tutors as an assignment.

The word limit adds to the challenge by requiring that all of these skills be demonstrated within a relatively small number of words. Producing incisive and clear written work within a word limit is an important skill in itself, which will be useful in many aspects of life beyond university.

Feedback

Good, constructively critical feedback can give you excellent guidance on how to improve your essay writing. It is worth attending to all of the suggestions and comments you receive, and trying to act on them.

Common criticism given to students is that their essay:

- does not keep to the title that was set;
- has a poor structure;
- is too descriptive;

- does not have enough critical writing.

These criticisms highlight the three basic elements of good essay writing:

- attending closely to the title;
- establishing a relevant structure that will help you show the development of your argument; and
- using critical writing as much as possible; with descriptive writing being used where necessary, but kept to a minimum.

These elements will be used to give a broad overall structure to this Study Guide.

Attending closely to the title

The most important starting point is to *listen carefully* to what the essay title is telling you.

You need to read every single word of it, and to squeeze out as much guidance you can from the title. Then you need to plan how you will respond to every single element of the title. The guidance given to you by the title is freely available, and is your best clue to what is required in your essay.

As a tutor has said (Creme and Lea, 1997 p41):

‘When my students ask me about essay writing, there are three main pieces of advice that I give them. One, answer the question. Two, answer the question. Three, answer the question.’

This is important at the start, but also throughout your writing, as it can be easy to drift away and waste valuable words from your word limit by writing material that may be interesting, but which is not relevant to the title set.

The *Mini Guides: Essay terms explained*, and *Questions to ask about interpreting essay titles* (available on our website) may be useful.

Brainstorming

To start you off, and to minimise the likelihood of writer’s block, a useful exercise is to do a ‘brainstorm’ of all your ideas in connection with the essay title. It can be a way of making a lot of progress quite quickly.

It can be stressful and very difficult trying to work out solely in your mind how to tackle an essay title; asking yourself questions such as: What structure should I use? What are my main points? What reading do I need to do? Have I got enough evidence? It can be much less stressful to throw all your thoughts down on paper, before you start trying to find answers to these questions.

In these early stages of your thinking you may not be sure which of your ideas you want to follow up and which you will be discarding. So, don’t feel you have to make that decision in your head before you write anything. Instead, you can catch all of your ideas, in no particular order, on a sheet or two of A4. Once they are down there it will be easier for you to start to review them critically and to see where you need to focus your reading and note taking.

Breaking it down then building it up

Essentially, this is what you are doing within the essay process: breaking ideas down, then building them up again. You need to:

- break down the essay title into its component parts, and consider possible ways of addressing them;
- work with these component parts, as you select your reading and make relevant notes;

- build up the essay using the material you have collected; ordering it; presenting and discussing it; and forming it into a coherent argument.

Throughout this process, the essay title is the single immovable feature. You begin there; you end there; and everything in between needs to be placed in relation to that title.

Efficient reading

All three of the processes described above will inform your decisions about what you need to read for a particular essay. If left unplanned, the reading stage can swallow up huge amounts of time. Fortunately, there is scope for developing efficiency in several ways:

- making intelligent decisions, based on your initial planning, about which sources to target, so you don't spend time reading less relevant, or even completely irrelevant material;
- reading with a purpose, so that you are looking out for particularly relevant material, rather than paying equal attention to material that is less relevant;
- systematic note taking, so that you record the most relevant material, and that you have full reference details (including page numbers of direct quotes) of all material you may end up using.

While a certain level of efficiency is desirable, it is also important to remain flexible enough to identify relevant and interesting ideas that you had not anticipated.

Writing as thinking

You can use the writing process to help you think through, clarify and develop your early ideas about how you might respond to the title that has been set:

'you may not know what you think until you have written it down' (Creme & Lea, 1997 p115).

As with teaching, it is often not until you try to communicate an argument and its evidence that you find where the gaps are in your knowledge or argument. So don't be afraid of writing down your ideas before they are fully formed, or in the 'right' order.

Writing is an active and constructive process; it is not merely a neutral recording of your thoughts. It is therefore useful to go into the writing process *expecting* to make revisions. The first words you write do not have to be part of the final version. Editing your writing as you develop your ideas is a positive not a negative process: the more you cross out, re-write, and re-order, the better your essay should become.

Establishing a relevant structure to support your argument

All essays need **structure**. The structure may be strong and clear, or it may be unobtrusive and minimal but, in a good essay, it *will* be there.

Underpinning the structure will be the '**argument**' your essay is making. Again this may be strong and obvious, or it may be almost invisible, but it needs to be there. In different subject areas, and with different styles of writing, the term 'argument' may seem more or less relevant. However, even in those essays that appear to be highly creative, unscientific, or personal, an argument of some kind *is* being made.

It is the argument, and how you decide to present and back up your argument, that will influence your decision on how to structure your essay.

The essay structure is not an end in itself, but a means to an end: the end is the quality of the argument.

By creating a relevant structure, you make it much easier for yourself to present an effective argument. There are several generic structures that can help you start to think about your essay structure e.g.:

- chronological;
- thematic;
- by context;
- comparative.

These can be useful starting points, but you will probably decide to work with a more complicated structure e.g.:

- overall chronological structure; broken down by comparisons according to the elements of the title;
- overall thematic structure; broken down by sub-themes;
- overall comparative structure; broken down by context.

In addition to these macro-structures you will probably need to establish a micro-structure relating to the particular elements you need to focus on e.g.: evidence / policy / theory / practice / case studies / examples / debates.

Fluid structures

You may feel that, for your particular essay, structures like these feel too rigid. You may wish to create a more flexible or fluid structure. Perhaps a more suitable word than 'structure' in those cases may be 'pattern', or 'impression', or 'atmosphere'; although these merge into the field of creative writing rather than essay writing.

An analogy could be that of symphony writing. The composers Haydon and Mozart, working in the 18th century, tended to write symphonies to fit reliably and closely within what was called 'symphonic form'. This set out a pattern for the numbers of movements within the symphony, and for the general structure of writing within each movement. The continued popularity of their work today shows that they clearly managed to achieve plenty of interest and variety within that basic structure.

Later composers moved away from strict symphonic form. Some retained a loose link to it while others abandoned it completely, in favour of more fluid patterns. It would be rare, however, to find a symphony that was without structure or pattern of any kind; it would probably not be satisfactory either to play or to listen to. Similarly, a structure of *some kind* is probably essential for every essay, however revolutionary.

Your decisions on structure will be based on a combination of:

- the requirements of your department;
- the potential of the essay title; and
- your own preferences and skill.

An iterative, not necessarily a linear process

The process of essay planning and writing does not need to be a linear process, where each stage is done only once. It is often an iterative process i.e.: a process where earlier stages are repeated when they can be revised in the light of subsequent work. A possible iterative process is:

analyse the title

brainstorm relevant ideas

read around the title, making relevant notes

prepare a first draft

analyse the title again

critically review your first draft in the light of this further analysis

read further to fill in gaps

prepare final draft

critically edit the final draft

submit the finished essay.

‘Helping your readers’

This section heading is in quotes as it is also the heading of chapter 8, pages 80-92, in Barass (1982). Barass (1982 p80) makes the simple but valid statement, that:

‘By making things easy for your readers, you help yourself to convey information and ideas.’

The tutors reading and marking your essays deserves your consideration. They will be reading and marking many, many student essays. If you make your argument hard to follow, so that they need to re-read a paragraph (or more) to try to make sense of what you have written, you will cause irritation, and make their job slower. Realistically, it is possible that they may even decide not to make that effort. It is *your* task to present your argument in a way that your audience can follow; it is not your audience’s job to launch an investigation to detect the points you are trying to make.

Your tutors will not necessarily be looking for the perfect, revolutionary, unique, special essay; they would be very happy to read a reasonably well-planned, well-argued and well-written essay. They will not *want* to pull your essay to pieces. They would much rather enjoy reading it, and be satisfied by the thread of your argument. In the words of a tutor:

‘I’m looking for focus, for a voice that I feel confident with and not bored by – someone who knows the area and is going to take me round the issues in an objective, informed and interesting way.’ Stott (2001 p 37)

The introduction

A powerful introduction is invaluable. It can engage your readers, and can give them confidence that you have thought carefully about the title, and about how you are going to address it. A useful generic structure is to:

- begin with a general point about the central issue;
- show your understanding of the task that has been set;
- show how you plan to address the title in your essay structure;
- make a link to the first point.

It may be possible to use only one paragraph for your introduction, but it may fall more easily into two or more. You will need to adapt and extend this basic structure to fit with your own discipline and the precise task set. Here is an example of an introduction for an essay entitled:

Examine and compare the nature and development of the tragic figures of Macbeth and Dr Faustus in their respective plays.

- **Begin with a general point**

Dr Faustus and Macbeth are both plays that show their respective playwrights at the pinnacle of their careers.

- **Show your understanding of the task set**

When comparing the nature of the two plays' respective heroes, both parallels and contrasts can be found.

- **Show how you plan to address the title**

In the first section of this essay, the role of the tragic hero will be considered ... The second section of the essay will examine the nature ... Finally, a comparison will be made of the development of the two ...

- **Make a link to the first point**

In examining the characters' tragic qualities, a useful starting point is Aristotle's definition of tragedy...

Although the introduction appears at the beginning of your essay, you may prefer to write it towards the end of the drafting process:

'It is only when you have completed a piece of writing that you can introduce it to the reader.' (Crème & Lea, 1997 p115)

Questions to ask of your introduction and conclusion (available on our website) may be useful.

The heart of the essay

The middle part of the essay **must fulfil the promises made in your introduction**, and **must support your final conclusions**. Failure to meet either or both of these requirements will irritate your reader, and will demonstrate a lack of self-critique and of editing.

The central part of your essay is where the structure needs to do its work, however explicit or implicit your chosen structure may be. The structure you choose needs to be one that will be most helpful to you in addressing the essay title.

The content of this central part will probably contain: ideas; explanations; evidence; relevant referencing; and relevant examples. It will be characterised by:

- appropriate academic style;
- interesting and engaging writing;
- clarity of thought and expression,
- sensible ordering of material, to support and the development of ideas and the development of argument.

Questions to ask of your essay content (available on our website) may be useful.

Conclusion

A powerful conclusion is a valuable tool. The aim is to leave your reader feeling that you have done a good job. A generic structure that you may find useful is:

- brief recap of what you have covered in relation to the essay title;
- reference to the larger issue
- evaluation of the main arguments

- highlighting the most important aspects

The example below relates to the essay title used on the previous page.

- **Brief recap**
The characters of Macbeth and Faustus are very similar in many respects; for example they both willingly follow a path that leads to their damnation.
- **Reference to the larger issue**
The differences lie in the development of the characters in what are essentially two different types of plays.
- **Evaluation of the main arguments**
As has been shown, the character of Macbeth has a nadir from which he ascends at the conclusion of the play. This is in keeping with Aristotle's definition of tragedy. For Faustus however, there is no such ascension. This fits with the style of the morality play: the erring Faustus must be seen to be humbled at his end for the morality to be effective...
- **Highlighting the most important aspects**
It is this strong element of morality in Dr Faustus that ultimately divides the two leading characters.

Questions to ask of your introduction and conclusion (available on our website) may be useful.

Being a critical writer

After attending closely to the title; and establishing a useful structure; a third main element in the essay-writing process is the confident use of 'critical writing'. The Study Guide **What is critical writing?** provides more extensive guidance in this area, but it is useful to present one section from that guide below:

The most characteristic features of critical writing are:

- a clear and confident refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence that they provide;
- a balanced presentation of reasons why the conclusions of other writers may be accepted or may need to be treated with caution;
- a clear presentation of your own evidence and argument, leading to your conclusion; and
- a recognition of the limitations in your own evidence, argument, and conclusion.

With critical writing, you are *doing work* with the evidence you are using, by adding a level of examination and evaluation. Stott (2001 p37) proposes that, 'Knowledge-telling is the regurgitation of knowledge in an essay. But knowledge-transfer is what's crucial: the ability to manipulate that basic, raw material in order to make a convincing argument'. **Questions to ask about your level of critical writing** (available on our website) may be useful.

One way to **practise critical writing** is to make sure that you don't leave any description to speak for itself, if it is part of your evidence and argument. If a quote or piece of data is worth including, then it's also worth explaining *why* you've included it: 'Do not leave your reader to work out the implications of any statement.' (Barass 1982 p80).

Another useful tool to support critical writing is **the paragraph!** Aim to present one idea per paragraph. Within the paragraph you could:

- introduce the idea/piece of evidence/quote/stage of argument;

- present the idea/piece of evidence/quote/stage of argument;
- comment on it – this is where you demonstrate your critical thinking and writing.

A different pattern would be to use a paragraph to present and describe an idea/piece of evidence/quote/stage of argument, then to use the subsequent paragraph to explain its relevance.

Editing

Finally, you need to **take a break from your essay** so that you can return to it with fresh eyes for the final editing.

‘Editing and proof reading are not the icing on the cake, as some people think. They are absolutely crucial because it is only at this stage that the student can see that the argument hangs together, has a sequence and is well-expressed. Editing is both difficult and important.’ (Stott, 2001 p39)

Yes, editing is important, but no it does not need to be difficult. You’ve done most of the hard work already in the reading, evaluating, and writing. Also, criticising your writing tends to be easier than creating it in the first place. The Study Guide: *The Art of Editing* and the sheet: *Questions to ask when editing* may be useful.

Presentation

A tutor can learn a worrying amount about the quality of your essay simply from how it looks on the page. The lengths of paragraphs; the lengths of sentences; the neatness of the reference list; the balance of length between different sections; all offer insight into the kind of essay they are about to read.

In general, think ‘**short and straightforward**’. Shorter words are often preferable to longer words, unless there is some specific vocabulary that you need to include to demonstrate your skill. Short to middle length sentences are almost always preferable to longer ones. And over-long paragraphs tend to demonstrate that you are not clear about the specific points you are making. Of course, these are general points, and there may be some occasions, or some subject areas, where long paragraphs are appropriate.

Accurate grammar and spelling are important. Consistently poor grammar or spelling can give the impression of lack of care, and lack of clarity of thought. Careless use of commas can actually change the meaning of a sentence. And inaccurate spelling and poor grammar can make for very irritating reading for the person marking it. The previous sentence began with ‘And’. This practice is now widely accepted where it makes good sense. It is however possible that some tutors may still prefer not to see it.

Summary of key points

The title is the most important guidance you have. The task ahead is nothing more and nothing less than is stated in the title. When in doubt about any aspect of your reading for the essay, or about your writing, the first step is to go back and consult the essay title. This can be surprisingly helpful. It informs directly: the choice of reading; the structure you choose for the essay; which material to include and exclude; what to do with the material you use; and how to introduce and conclude.

A relevant and useful structure to support the presentation of your response to the title is vital.

Expect to undertake an iterative process of planning, reading, drafting, reviewing, planning, reading, re-drafting, and editing.

Editing is a crucial part of the process not an optional extra.

References

Barass R, (1982) *Students must write: a guide to better writing in coursework and examinations*. London: Methuen.

Crete P & Lea MR (1997) *Writing at university: a guide for students*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Stott R, (2001) *The essay writing process*. Chapter 3 pp 36-58. In *Making your case: a practical guide to essay writing*. Eds. Stott R, Snaith A, & Rylance R. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Questions to ask of your reference list (available on our website) may be useful when reviewing your own reference list.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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