



Focus on Essay Writing

Essay writing is a process and a product. You need to focus on the process in order to achieve a high quality product.

What is an essay?

The word 'essay' originally meant 'to test' or 'try out'. The academic essay, however, now has the more usual meaning of a short piece of analytical writing on a given subject.

Why write essays?

Essay writing is an essential part of the learning process. It involves:

- time management – meeting the deadline for the essay
- gathering information – appropriate resources and references
- interpreting and analysing the information
- organising and structuring your thoughts and ideas
- planning what you are going to write
- following a set of writing conventions
- communicating those thoughts and ideas clearly on paper
- reviewing the marked essay for future improvement

It's a learning curve. Your essay writing style will develop through practice and you will begin to write more clearly, objectively and persuasively. As your writing improves, your assessment grades should reflect that improvement. Finally, being skilled in writing clearly, objectively and persuasively must be an advantage to you for the rest of your life.

Preparation

Start your preparation early. Read the assignment as soon as you can. Devote about 20 minutes to reading it in detail. Write out the full title, don't be tempted to shorten it as this can be misleading. Highlight or underline key words. Display the title so that you can always see it. It acts as a reminder and it will keep you focused on the question. Keep everything you need together. Before writing, make sure you know the word limit, use A4 paper and re-read the question.

Analysing the question

This will help you to find out what is required of you. It sounds obvious but failing to answer the question is a common mistake. Your analysis of the question will also help you to identify the information you need. It will raise questions that you can try and answer in your essay.

Style and Content

Style and content complement each other. Together they make up the essay.

Style

An essay should demonstrate that you possess a high level of understanding about a given subject. A good writing style will enhance this understanding making it a most important part of your learning experience. You need to adopt the appropriate style of writing for the intellectual demands of an academic essay.

Keep your writing style objective. Academic writing demands that you remain emotionally neutral. Try to express everything as simply as you can. Don't forget your reader!

Content

A good essay:

- answers the question
- shows evidence of wide reading
- uses source material (notes, texts, journals etc.)
- gives examples, evidence, reasons, case studies
- is analytical in structure
- compares and contrasts different opinions
- distinguishes facts from ideas and opinions
- deals with a range of arguments
- demonstrates an awareness of the complexity of the subject
- is written in your own words
- follows an argument with logical development from one point to another
- groups similar points together
- uses well-constructed sentences and paragraphs
- uses references and quotations
- concludes by making a decision – which argument is the best?
- has good spelling, grammar and punctuation
- is within the word limit
- is on single sides of A4
- has a reference section or bibliography
- follows the agreed system of referencing

Don't be put off by the above. Use it as a check list as you write your essay.

Stylistic Conventions

What is a convention? Broadly speaking, it is the most generally established view of what is accepted usage.

In the context of academic essays, this means a set of stylistic conventions you need to acknowledge in your writing as a matter of course. Below is a brief guide to some of these conventions to help you improve your essay writing style.

Colloquialisms and slang

Examples:

Colloquialism:	being led up the garden path	fooling someone
Slang:	gob-smacked	astounded

Avoid using colloquialisms and slang because their meaning is not always clear. They are used in everyday informal conversation. This is where they belong because you can ask immediately for clarification. In an essay, your audience is a distance reader who cannot ask: that clarification needs to be in your writing.

Lists and headings

These are not appropriate in essays where you should be writing in continuous prose. Avoid them and incorporate them into sentences.

Abbreviations and contractions

Examples:

Abbreviations:	dept. quote.
Contractions:	wouldn't isn't can't

Make sure you avoid these and write everything out in full. It allows for a more formal writing style to emerge.

Personal pronouns

Academic essay writing is impersonal so avoid using I, we, you.

Numbers

Numbers should be written in full, for example: three perspectives.

Using quotations

Everything between the quotation marks, even the punctuation, should be exactly the same as the original text. If you want to leave something out or add something use dots or square brackets respectively.

Beginning sentences

Avoid using and, but, or, yet at the beginning of sentences.

Every time you write an essay, you are practising these conventions. Your marked essay will identify inappropriate usage. Learn from your mistakes and improve your writing style.

Gathering information

Analyse the essay question and course notes very carefully before you begin to gather your information. Note briefly in writing any key words, concepts and texts/authors recommended by lecturers etc. These notes will help you select what you want.

Your information will come from a wide variety of sources, for example:

- lecture and course notes
- books (tutors' reading lists etc.)
- academic journals
- periodicals
- newspapers
- articles
- the internet – electronic databases etc.
- TV, radio, films
- discussions with friends etc.

Once you have gathered all the information you want, start to read round the topic. Your tutor will be looking for evidence of wide as well as deep reading. As you read, start to select information relevant to your essay question. You need to be selective because you can't use everything. Use contents and indexes to find subject matter quickly. Make sure that the publication is up to date. Concentrate on chapters/passages related to your topic. Read articles/journals referred to in recommended texts. Remember the word limit.

Primary sources

Highlight, underline or circle any source of information (the set book, a film etc.) without which you could not write your essay. This vital information is a primary source and is the essence of your essay.

Secondary sources

Secondary sources are used to supplement primary sources. They can also be used in the absence of primary information. They provide useful background information and supporting evidence for your argument.

Note references

Identify useful quotations/references as you read and note them carefully. It is time wasting to have to go back through material attributing them. Make notes in your own words. Avoid using copied chunks in your essay.

Planning and Reviewing

Make a plan before you write; it helps you to get started. Review your essay when you get it back, it has key information for you.

How to get started

Starting to write is very hard. Everyone finds it hard. You can write the essay but you can't work out how to get started. Here are some strategies to help you overcome this. To begin with, give yourself plenty of time and don't keep putting the moment off! Read and absorb the essay title, allowing time for subconscious-thought processes to suggest ideas to you. Before you do any research, write an outline of approximately 100 words on the given topic. You often know more than you think. This outline keeps you focused and shapes your ideas for reading. You have also begun to write.

Planning your essay

Planning your essay is essential in order to produce a well-structured, balanced piece of writing. The plan itself can be a list of topic headings with summaries. These headings can be written on separate sheets of paper enabling you to move ideas around without re-writing. Planning enables you to work out of sequence (e.g. writing the introduction last) making sure, however, that you work to the title all the time.

You also need to get a feel for the length of each of the main sections or topics you want to cover. You can work out a target number of words for each section. Make sure you know how many words of yours fill a side of A4. Consider how long your introduction and conclusion are going to be and work out how many words you have left to address the main topics of the essay. Planning helps you break down the essay into 'bite-sized' chunks of writing that are easier to deal with.

Reviewing your essay

Review your essay when you get it back. It's tempting to put it away and forget about it, especially if it's covered in hand writing. Don't be discouraged. Sometimes it helps to leave it for a day or two. Remember, marks indicate your current performance but comments may lead to better results in the future. Don't take it personally; try to focus on the issues addressed by the tutor. Check you understand the comments made and highlight any that are useful. Make sure you distinguish between major issues (obvious omissions etc.) that can lose you a lot of marks and minor issues (grammar etc.) where you lose a few. See your tutor if there is anything you don't understand and amend your essay while it is still fresh in your mind.

Organising and structuring

This is a very important part of essay writing, as important as the content.

Organisation

Once you have gathered all the information for your essay, organising it starts to shape the argument you intend to use. This argument, if it is well thought through, provides the structure for your essay. It helps you to order your paragraphs. It makes you think through your essay, from beginning to end, before you start writing. This organisation also ensures that your information is distributed throughout the essay.

The importance of paragraphs

Paragraphs have a two-fold importance for you as a writer. They structure your thoughts and aid the understanding of your reader. The key sentence within the paragraph also performs a dual purpose. It sums up an idea for you and informs the reader what the paragraph is about. Clear paragraphing helps you to move logically from one idea to the next. Link words like 'however' or 'to summarise' enable you to do this. They also help the reader by indicating that you are moving on to a new point. Paragraphing is a form of 'sign posting', your reader will get lost if you don't provide the signs. Finally, paragraphs break up the text making it much easier to read!

Structure

The Introduction

This is the paragraph where you address the question, actual or implied, in your assignment and indicate the arguments and evidence you are going to use to answer it. This should be about 10% of your essay (200 words of 2000 word essay). Try to make a positive impact in your opening sentences.

Main Body

Here you develop your argument and line of reasoning. State facts and give your evidence. Use examples and illustrations making sure that everything is in an easy to follow, logical sequence of paragraphs.

Conclusion

This paragraph should sum up the main ideas and state any conclusions you have come to. Consider whether there are any further implications which could provide scope for future investigation. Make sure your conclusion does not include any new material. Your last sentence should sum up your argument and refer back briefly to the essay question. This paragraph should be about 10% of your essay.

Drafting and Presentation

Drafting your essay is part of that process so you need to set aside plenty of time. It makes a very important contribution to the overall quality of your essay. It allows you to make mistakes and eliminate them. If you word process, you can 'cut and paste' to continually revise and review your writing. It also gives you time to reflect on the following:

- have you answered the question
- have you read your essay critically
- is it written in an objective style
- have you used appropriate evidence
- is your argument coherent (logical and consistent)
- do you show a good grasp of the relevant parts of your course
- is it referenced correctly (consult your Module Handbook etc.)

Proof reading

Set aside time between draft and deadline to proof read your essay before you hand it in. Get someone else to read it. Read it 'aloud' to yourself. Keep the drafts and/or print outs of your work. They provide proof of your work should the final essay get 'lost'. If you are using a word processor, read the print out to find errors. A computer screen is very hard to read for mistakes. Revising your essay carefully can affect grades. Re-read after a break and ask yourself if the essay is clear and convincing. Is it easy for the reader to understand your point of view?

Presentation

All essays should be well presented whether hand written or word processed. If it is hand-written, the handwriting should be neat and legible. Word processed essays should, automatically, be easy to read. You can also take a second copy for yourself in seconds and save the essay. In both cases, allow space for written remarks from your tutor. Use A4 paper and check your Module Handbook carefully for instructions about handwriting and word processing. Number the pages, make sure your name and the correct date are clearly visible together with the title, preferably on a separate page. Clearly indicate the word count at the end of the essay. Submit the essay in a presentation file, not loose leaf or in a clear plastic wallet. Some assignments fail if the above is ignored. It should look attractive and be easy to read and understand. Consult your Module Handbook for specific instructions. Finally, obtain a receipt as evidence that you have handed your essay in.

Using references and quotations

References and quotations must be used as evidence of deep and wide reading. They add intellectual weight to your essay and must be used appropriately.

Crediting sources

This is very important when using written sources. As you read, remember to note:

- the page number
 - author
 - title
 - date
 - place of publication
 - name of publisher
- Note the above carefully just in case books, journals etc. are not available later on. Once you know what you want to say, you can start to incorporate into your essay the various sources available to you. Credit all the sources you use either in the text or in the footnotes of your essay.

References

References are vital since they indicate your source for a particular argument etc. Having found what you want, decide what you are going to use and where. Continue writing in your own words when referring to someone else's point of view, argument, concept etc. Show clearly where the evidence came from:

e.g. 'Lashley (1995) demonstrates how to use references and quotations.'

Quotations

When you quote from a text, it must be word for word and separated from your writing by quotation marks. If you quote more than one line of words, you must indent the whole quotation. There should be a double space before and after the quotation (see your Module Handbook for specific instructions).

At the end of your essay:

- **References** list all the books, journals etc. to which you have referred.
- **Bibliography** (if one is required) list all the relevant texts that you read even if you did not refer to them in your essay.
- The Harvard System is the most convenient system to use but make sure you check your Module Handbook for the referencing system used on your course.

Citing Bibliographic references

- **What does it mean?**
- **Citing:** acknowledging within your text the document from which you have obtained information or ideas

Bibliography: the list of publications you have consulted

Reference: the detailed description of the document from which you have obtained your information

Why is it important?

You must acknowledge the sources you have used to establish your arguments and criticism, otherwise you could be accused of plagiarism.

To enable other people to identify and trace the sources you have used for your ideas.

How is it done?

There are two methods which can be used:

- Harvard System
- Numeric System

You can use either of these methods but you must be consistent in your use. The Harvard Method is illustrated below. Do not try to use both at the same time!

The Harvard system

Using this method consists of two stages:

Citing in text:

'There is some evidence (Sax, 1996) that these figures are incorrect'

Or:

'Turner (1996) indicated that these figures are incorrect'
(Use surname and publication year only in text)

Citing in a bibliography at the end of the text:

If the item is a book:

SAX, N.I. (1996) *Industrial pollution*. London, Van Nostrand.

If the item is a journal article:

TURNER, A.C. (1996) Airborne mercury concentration. *Air Pollution*, Vol 12 (4), pp. 13-17