

# Essay Writing

## The Basics



### What Does a Good Essay Need?

*An academic essay aims to persuade readers of an idea based on evidence. Writing down everything you know about a topic is not enough to make a good academic essay.*

- An essay should answer a question or a few related questions.
- It should have an argument.
- It should try to present or discuss something—develop a 'thesis' or a set of closely related points—by reasoning and evidence.
- It should include:
  - ∞ relevant examples;
  - ∞ supporting evidence and information from academic texts or sources.

## 1. Starting Your 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.*

For example, you may go back to the reading and notetaking stage if you find another useful text, or perhaps to reread to locate specific information.

### Start Work Early

You can't write a good essay unless you give yourself enough time to read, research, think and write. Don't procrastinate! Start as early as possible.

### Define the Question and Analyse the Task

Above all it is important to *answer* the question.

- 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 expected to take.

*See The Learning Centre guide 'Answering Assignment Questions'*

### Basic Steps in Writing an Essay

*In no strict order . . .*

- ✓ Analyse the question and define key terms
- ✓ Establish your argument/point of view
- ✓ Research the topic
- ✓ Take notes from your readings
- ✓ Write your 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 your references and bibliography
- ✓ Final draft completed — hand it in

## 2. Research the Topic

*You must research your essay by reading and finding relevant information. Reading on the topic enables you to develop a thesis and answer the essay question.*

### Where to Start?

Your starting point for your essay is your personal response to the topic or question. Your response is based on what you already know. But this is only a starting point. You should then research, question your response, and find some answers.

## Reading for Your Essay

Begin reading for the essay as early as possible. This will give you plenty of time to familiarise yourself with the topic and develop your ideas. When you begin to 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. Look at 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?

### Taking Notes From the Readings

When you read in-depth and find information relevant to your essay, note it down. Your notes will be the basis of your essay.

*Don't take notes during your first reading.*

If you are using photocopies, underline or highlight relevant information. You can return to it when you reread 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 quotations from texts, useful examples, case studies or statistics.

*Make a note of any sources of information you use.*

Copy down all the bibliographic details of what you read. Include author, date, title, publisher and place of publication. For journal articles, include volume and issue numbers. This will help with your referencing.

*See The Learning Centre guide 'Notetaking: An Introduction'*

## 3 . O r g a n i s i n g   Y o u r   I d e a s

*Now begin organising your thoughts into an answer. Your notes should help you to do this.*

### Thinking It Through

Essay writing requires both *creative* thinking 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 include both points in favour of and against your argument. You need to evaluate these points—that is, explain why one argument is more important than the other.

### Essay Plans

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. After you have done some reading, draw up an initial essay 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 point of view.
- Decide which points you will discuss, and in which order (first, second, etc.).
- Write all this down in point form. This will be your essay plan.

Your essay will probably change as you draft and edit. Write a second essay plan after you write a draft.

### 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 some 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. You can then underline and make notes.

## 4 . W r i t i n g   t h e   E s s a y

### Drafting

Writing a draft essay will help you work out:

- what you need to say;
- how you will answer the question;
- which evidence and examples you will use;
- whether you have enough information.

Write a first draft to try out the structure and framework of your essay. Once you have a draft, you can work on writing well.

### Structure

Structure your essay in the most effective way to communicate your ideas and answer the question. ALL essays should include the following structure:

#### 1. Introduction

Answer the question and provide a summary or 'road map' of your essay. Tell the reader what you are going to talk about and what you believe the answer to be. Keep it brief, but mention all your main ideas.

#### 2. Body

The body of your essay is where you answer the question by developing a discussion. Here, you show your knowledge and grasp of the material you have read.

Offer exposition and evidence. Use relevant examples and quotes to support your argument. If your essay question has more than one part, structure the body into sections that deal with each part of the question.

#### 3. Conclusion

The conclusion rounds off the essay. Relate it back to your main ideas or points and restate your answer to the question. NEVER introduce new information in your conclusion. The conclusion moves from specific to general.

### Essay Paragraphs

Each paragraph in the body of the essay should contain a topic sentence (or main idea sentence of a paragraph) that states your point. It should be followed by an explanation of the point you're making, and (most of the time) it should be supported by some form of evidence from your reading, or by an example drawn from the subject area. Don't just leave the evidence hanging there—analyse it! Comment on the implication/ significance/ impact and finish off the paragraph with a critical conclusion you have drawn from the evidence.

*See The Learning Centre guides 'Quoting Summarising & Paraphrasing' and 'Introducing Quotations & Paraphrases'*

## 5 . R e f e r e n c i n g   Y o u r   E s s a y

**All academic essays MUST contain references. Referencing guards against plagiarism, a serious academic offence.**

Plagiarism is copying someone else's words or ideas and presenting them as your own. Make sure you are familiar with the referencing style your faculty or school requires. Most Schools/Faculties 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 referencing styles and avoiding plagiarism*

### Tips for Effective Writing

*Start writing early—the earlier the better.*

Starting cuts down on anxiety, beats procrastination, and helps you develop ideas.

*Don't try to write an essay from beginning to end*

Begin with what you are ready to write. 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 overall purpose in mind*

Don't lose track of the question or task. Keep it in mind as you draft, edit and work out your argument.

*Revise your first draft extensively*

Look at the whole essay, make sure it 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.

*Proofread your final draft*

Check spelling and punctuation.

## 6. Editing your Essay

*Most essays are dramatically improved by careful editing. Good essays are products of writing and rewriting. If you have time, put your essay aside for a day or so before you begin to edit. This gives you time to gain a perspective on what you have written and to think further about your answer and arguments.*

### Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Have I answered the question as fully as possible?
- Is my essay clearly structured?
- Does my argument make sense? Is it well balanced and researched?
- Are my paragraphs and arguments clearly connected and coherent?
- Are my examples and quotes relevant to and supportive of my answer?
- Have I referenced all my quotes and paraphrases and have I used a consistent referencing style?
- Have I remained within the set word limit?

Don't despair when you find faults in your essay—this is part of the editing process. If you find that you need more information, or your argument has holes in it, keep calm and methodically go about fixing it up. Once you have a fairly complete and well-organised draft:

- Revise sentences. Make sure the words you use mean what you think they mean.
- Check transitions—be sure that a reader can follow the sequences of ideas from sentence to sentence, and from paragraph to paragraph.

*See The Learning Centre guide 'Transition Signals in Writing'*

## 7. Handing Your Essay In

*READ assignment guidelines in your course outlines and find out how your lecturer/tutor would like assignments presented. Make sure you have complied with their requirements. Make sure you know where and when your essay should be handed in.*

### In General:

- Don't hand in your essay in a plastic folder or sleeve (unless you are asked to do so).
- Use double-line spacing.
- Make sure your essay is easy to read. If you can, type your essay. If not, write neatly on every second line.
- The text of your essay should be in black or dark blue ink. Colours like red or purple are hard to read.
- Use a cover sheet (available from your school office).
- Number pages and use wide margins.
- Use a readable font size (12 point at least).
- Print on one side of the page only.
- Make sure you have an extra copy.

### References

Cuba, I., 1998, *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science*, Harper Collins.  
Oshima, A. & Hogue, A., 1991, *Writing Academic English*, Addison-Wesley  
University of Toronto Writing Centre, *Some General Advice on Academic Essay Writing*  
<<http://utl1.library.utoronto.ca/www/writing/essay.html>>

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