

How to Write an Essay

Writing an essay can seem daunting at first. Here are some simple guidelines on how you might go about writing an essay.

Understand the Question or Instructions.

Begin by carefully considering the question or instructions. One of the main reasons that students don't do well in their essays, is that they have missed what was asked of them in the assignment. Every point in your essay must directly relate to the assessment instructions - and you must explain why each of these points relate to the answer, you cannot leave the reader to make the connection themselves.

Make sure that you understand the instructive words of the essay (such as: discuss, summarise, outline). These words will tell you the type of assessment you are writing. You will find a list of these below.

You will find it helpful to break the question down into sections – but remember these sections might develop further after your research.

Other questions you will ask are:

- What are the content words, what you are being asked to do. (e.g. the topic area, focus of the research). Make sure you understand these and ask your lecturer if you don't.
- What are the limiting words? (e.g. words that define the scope, increase focus on an area or limit the research)
- What are the Word Count requirements?
- How many References are required?
- When is it due

Instruction Words.

Analyse	Examine the main ideas and issues of a topic, look at arguments for or against, and show their relationships.
Compare	Look for and discuss the similarities or differences between two or more things.
Define	Give a clear, concise meaning. Give the limits of the definition
Describe	Explain and explore the meaning or main features of something.
Discuss	Examine and analyse the key point(s) and possible interpretations; give arguments for and against and draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Give an opinion, with evidence, on the advantages and disadvantages or strengths and weaknesses of something
Examine	Investigate or research a topic and discuss in detail.

Explain	Clarify or make clear the meaning or significance of something. Give the reasons, causes, and why or how something has developed or occurred.
Illustrate	Explain or clarify something using a diagram, figure or concrete example.
Outline	Briefly describe and give the main features of a subject. Omit minor details.
Summarise	Give the main points or facts in a condensed form. Don't include details, evidence or examples.

Research

The marker will be wanting to see that you have been learning from your research and are able to support what you have written. You need to argue your point from good evidence. Don't ignore evidence that supports people that disagree with your thinking, make sure that your argument does justice to all the information you have available.

As you are reading you will need to take detailed notes. This is a skill that you will develop as you write assignments. Some of you will use a note pad and others might be happier to type directly into a document that you can cut and paste from into your essay document. Make sure that you record the details of the resource for each idea you note so that you have these when you need to footnote – the author and page number is often enough at this stage (unless you have 2 sources from the same author).

Order your notes under headings so that you can find it when you write specific ideas in your essay.

You will not just be looking for the facts of your argument, but you must evaluate the evidence. When you read you will:

- **Read to understand** - What is the author saying? Write a summary of relevant themes or idea.
- **Read to analyse.** Consider the purpose of the argument, who it is written for and what it actually means. Consider how it relates to other information that you have and how it supports your argument.
- **Read to evaluate.** How reliable is this evidence? Consider if the reading is biased. What are your thoughts on the merit of the argument, do you agree/disagree?

Planning

Write an outline of the essay. There are various methods that you can use to begin this:

- **Brainstorm** a list of ideas in bullet point form, then organise them into a framework for your essay.
- **Table ideas** - creating a column for ideas and another column for supporting research and evidence.
- **Mind-map ideas** - creating a picture of the key points and their supporting evidence.

Once you have these ideas you need to write an outline of your essay. You can start by breaking down your word count. A 2000 word essay will look like this:

Introduction 200 Words – 1 paragraph

Main Body 1600 Words – 6 – 8 paragraphs

Conclusion 200 Words – 1 paragraph.

Then you will list what each of the 6-9 Paragraphs in the main body will be about. These will be the central ideas from your brainstorming, tabling or mind mapping. You will need to think about how you will organise these ideas. For example, you might begin with the background of your argument and how you support this and then break this into key themes. And then discuss a concept that disagrees with your argument before bringing it all together.

Your outline **might** look like this:

- Introduction
- Body
 - Background of argument
 - Key theme 1 (2 paragraphs)
 - Key theme 2
 - Key theme 3
 - A counter argument
 - A synthesis of your argument
- Conclusion

Writing the Draft

Begin your draft by writing the body of the essay in logically laid out paragraphs. It is often easier to write ideas for each paragraph as they flow and then come back and rewrite into more cohesive paragraphs with correct sentence structure and grammar later.

Provide headings and sub-headings as appropriate. Each paragraph should contain one main idea and will contain about 3 – 8 sentences. These sentences are to be logically connected and flow smoothly. A paragraph will often have these 4 main parts:

- A sentence which introduces the main idea.
- Supporting sentences in which you develop the main idea with explanations and examples.
- A sentence providing evidence from your research that supports your explanations.
- The concluding sentence that summarises the main idea or provides a final thought.

As you write **insert footnotes** that reference every time you use ideas from someone else. So as not to disturb the flow of your writing you may simply add the author and page number and come back and complete these at the editing stage.

Before you write your introduction and conclusion, it is a good idea to do a first edit. Asking if the question is adequately answered and if it is supported sufficiently. And if you have the correct wordcount so far. Don't be discouraged if you need to go back and rewrite sections of your essay at this stage. This is all part of the process.

You will then write your **introduction** - the introduction will:

- Orientate the reader to the general topic of essay and identify the focus or purpose of essay.
- Specifically address your assignment question and identify the argument of the essay.
- You may also need to define key terms.
- Outline the main points that are going to be covered in the essay and define the scope, what you are going to cover and what you are not going to cover.

You then complete your essay with your **conclusion**, in this you will:

- Briefly recap the main ideas.
- Restate the line of argument.
- Makes final evaluative comments and broad concluding thoughts on the importance, implications or consequences of what has been discussed.
- This should be one paragraph, so make it memorable and concise

Tips for Writing Conclusions:

- Don't introduce new ideas.
- Don't include new evidence or references.

- Do not start a new line of your argument not previously mentioned.
- Check that you have used clear transition signals such as 'In conclusion' or 'In summary'.
- Check that you have summarised all of the key arguments.
- Check that you have done everything that your 'Introduction' said it would.

Editing

Editing is the process of re-reading the draft essay to assess and amend the content and structure. When you do this, you need to:

- Reflect on the adequacy of research and response to the assignment task – whether you adequately answered the question.
- Check that you have achieved your wordcount.
- Check if there is anything unaddressed or underdeveloped.
- Check your grammar and sentence structure and that the essay flows well from one paragraph to another.
- Edit long wordy sentences and paragraphs to ensure that your essay is concise.

What is very helpful at this stage is if you have a friend or family member who will read it over for you. Ask them to point out where it doesn't make sense or doesn't answer the question.

You will then:

- Add any missing detail to your **footnotes**.
- Add your **Bibliography** – check that all references cited in your Essay appear correctly
- Check **Formatting**: 1.5 spaced, with a standard 11-12-point font (Arial, Calibri or similar)
- Add your **Cover Page**.