

Essay writing

This study advice sheet explores the process of writing an essay from interpreting the question which has been set to making use of feedback from a tutor on the final piece of work.

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Why write essays?

Understanding the value of essay writing will help you to be more confident and positive about tackling it. What reasons are there for writing essays?

- consolidates your understanding of the topic
- encourages you to think and read widely and deeply
- allows you to develop and organise your own ideas through writing
- illustrates that you are able to express your thoughts clearly and logically
- provides an opportunity for you to get feedback from a tutor

The essay writing process

The following stages are involved in writing an essay:

- understanding the task
- gathering information
- structuring and organising the content
- writing the first draft
- checking and redrafting

Understanding the task

Very few essays will ask you to simply describe a series of events or methodology. You will often need to apply your subject knowledge and understanding by analysing the topic you have been given.

One of the most common mistakes made by students in essay writing is misunderstanding the task which has been set and not answering the question which has been asked.

It is therefore vital to examine the essay title carefully to establish what you are required to do. Many clues are contained within the essay title, in particular look out for keywords or verbs.

What makes a good essay?

- answers the question asked
- deals with key points and a balanced range of arguments
- shows evidence of wide reading
- well structured – flows logically from introduction through to conclusion
- written in a clear, objective style and well presented
- uses references and quotations appropriately

Some keywords are clearer than others and further advice on the meaning of keywords used in essay titles can be found in the **What Does the Question Mean?** study advice sheet in this series.

Write a quick version of what you think you are being asked to do. Rewrite the title or question in your own words. If you are at all unclear about the question ask for clarification from your tutor **before** you try and write anything.

Other assignment instructions which you must take into account are:

- Length – are there any restrictions on the length of the essay?
- Marking scheme – how will the essay be marked?
- Deadline – make sure your essay is handed in on time

Gathering information

Once you have identified what you are being asked to do you will need to consider what information and ideas you are going to put in the essay.

Consider what you already know, what you need to know and how you can find this information quickly and efficiently. Based on this you will need to identify the sources of information you must use and how you can access them. Possible sources of information include the following:

Sources of information

- Your own lecture notes
- Reading lists
- Journals
- Electronic databases
- Internet
- Reports
- Statistics and surveys
- Theses

Once you have found a relevant source, concentrate on what is relevant to your essay title. Read with questions in mind and take structured notes on ideas you wish to include. Make notes in your own words and keep a record of all the sources you use. Further help on reading and note-taking can be found in the study advice sheets **Reading Efficiently** and **Taking Notes**.

Structuring and organising the content

Having collected the information you need to write your essay you should structure it in a clear and coherent way. It is a good idea to draw up an outline plan of your essay noting the main ideas you want to develop together with the sources of information you will be using to support them. The information you have gathered can be prioritised by identifying what is centrally relevant, what is partially relevant and what is simply irrelevant.

Your essay can then be structured as follows:

Introduction

This is a very important part of your essay. You may prefer to write this last, once you know what you've written in the main body. You should:

- Indicate the main issues you plan to develop within the essay

- Give your essay a context – consider the wider issues or areas for discussion
- Show that you have understood the question

Main body of the essay

- Write a paragraph for each main point.
- Use the first sentence of the paragraph to state the main point or pose a question.
- Support your ideas with examples and references from your wider reading.
- Develop arguments coherently and logically - your line of argument should be developed through several clear ideas.
- Relate one idea to another – don't simply produce a string of unconnected points.
- Make sure your essay is balanced – don't spend too long on one idea or too little on another. Also avoid stressing your own opinion at the cost of supportive evidence and a balanced argument.

Conclusion

- Summarise your main points in the conclusion.
- Offer an answer to the question you were set.
- Relate your conclusion to the introduction.
- It may be useful to identify lines of further investigation.

References and Bibliography

You should always list at the end of the essay the sources of quotations and other people's work that you have referred to throughout your essay. References should include all the information necessary to identify and locate the source of information which has been cited.

There are a number of styles of referencing and it is important to check whether your Department has a preferred style. Whichever method you choose apply it consistently.

Writing the first draft

You are now ready to write a draft of your essay. Remember to refer to the outline plan you developed, throughout the writing process.

Although some people may be content to write a completed version of their essay straight off, this is probably inadvisable for most of us. A draft version engages you with your material and allows you to take an overview once it has been completed. You can then evaluate your draft, making any amendments as you go along.

When approaching the first draft of your essay you will probably need to set aside enough time to write it completely without any interruptions. It is important that the thoughts and ideas flow freely through the length of the essay. Any significant breaks might shatter your concentration.

Writing style

- Write simply and directly
- Use short clear sentences (avoid rambling)
- Ensure that each paragraph has a focus
- Use clearly labelled images if they will save words
- Consider using sub-headings to define structure
- Acknowledge the work of others

Checking and redrafting

Don't just write your essay, make sure you read it through. If possible try to leave your essay for a day or two once you have completed the first draft. This will make appraisal of your written work easier as you will have had time to distance yourself from your first effort. It also gives you time to identify any other things which could be included.

Although most essays are word-processed you still need to check spelling and grammar. Spell-checkers will not identify inappropriate words if they are spelled correctly. For example, using **affect** instead of **effect** or **crate** instead of **create**.

Compare your essay with your interpretation of the original essay title, your outline plan and any assessment criteria or other instructions which your tutor has given you.

If you identify any problems try and work out how these could most easily be resolved. Be realistic. It may not always be possible to start your essay again. If you are having real problems with your writing talk to your tutor.

Using feedback

Your final task when writing an essay is to reflect upon the feedback you receive from the marker

This may be invaluable in helping you to improve your essay writing skills for future work.

All study advice sheets are also available to view and download on the following website:

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/skills/>



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