

9 Writing for assignments

In this section:

- interpret questions successfully
- plan personal objectives
- actively search for information
- construct a logical essay plan
- prioritize information
- write clearly

Introduction

The following section explores the process of writing in essay form, from establishing the assessment criteria to using your tutor's feedback. Note that many of the distance learning assignments will not require formal essays. Also, length restrictions applied to the answer will mean that you cannot always follow the advice provided in this section.

Essays are usually written in response to a pre-prepared question that demands a critical appraisal of the subject at hand.

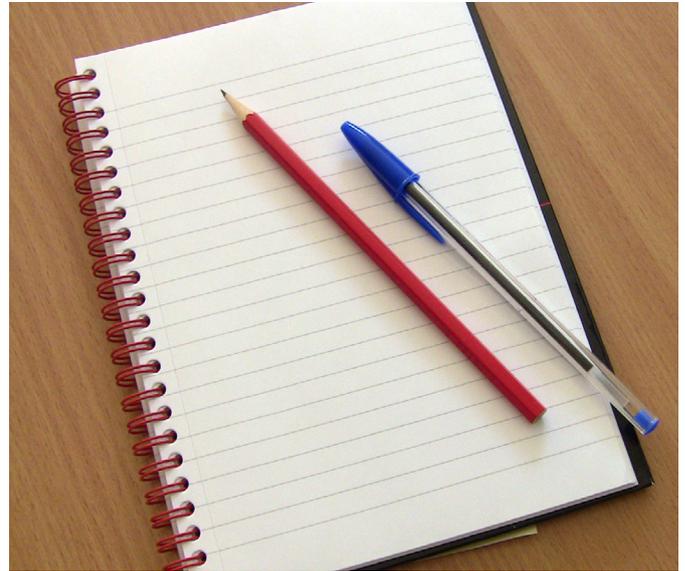
Stages in essay writing

There are several stages in the production of a high-quality essay:

- preparing;
- information gathering;
- structuring;
- writing; and
- checking and revising.

Essays

- help you to consolidate your understanding;
- allow you to delve more deeply into a particular subject area;
- stimulate your mind by assembling an argument;
- give you practice in using technical or specialist terminology;
- enable you to express your thoughts clearly and logically; and
- encourage you to think and read widely and deeply.



Preparing your essay

The following advice will help you establish what and how you are being asked to write. As you prepare your essay, you will need to identify the precise subject area you will be writing about as well as the treatment you will be applying to it.

The ground rules

Note any restrictions in length

Focusing your thoughts into a shorter essay may require more careful consideration than verbose, lengthy 'ramblings'.

Explore the criteria

Have you been given any indication of what will be assessed? What in particular is your tutor looking for in this essay? Can you ask for clarification?

Examine the question

The essay question usually indicates the required approach. For example, the following question:

Consider the advantages of introducing a programme of latrine upgrading into a remote rural community and describe how you would justify the need for such a programme to community leaders.

...is asking for two different elements — the consideration of the advantages, and then the justification of these to community leaders.

With every essay question you attempt, you will need to identify and decode the key words.

Section 5: Assignments, assessment and awards, lists some of the most common key words and offers definitions for each.





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Make it clear for yourself

Write a quick version of what you think you are being asked to do. Rewrite the title or question in your own words.

You may like to discuss this with your local guarantor or a friend. Have you understood the question? What areas, if any, need clarifying?

Preparing your response

Once you have clarified what you have been asked to write about and how you should treat the subject matter, you need to consider what material should be included in the essay.

Start with what you already know, focusing on your own interests and experiences.

Brainstorm your ideas

To brainstorm, focus your mind broadly on the topic at hand and let your ideas flow onto the page. Do not make any judgements about relevance at this stage; the aim is to find out how much you already know.

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It may help you to structure your ideas in the form of a 'mind map' or other method. See: Section 8: Making notes.

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Ask questions

Once you have established your existing knowledge you will need to identify the 'empty' areas in your brainstorm and pose these as questions.

- What don't I know?
- What do I need to know? and
- What detail would support my argument?

These questions can then form the basis for your information research in the next section.

Gathering your information

Based upon your brainstorm questions you will need to identify:

- what sort of information you are looking for; and
- where would be the most appropriate place to find it?

In most cases, your module notes and accompanying publications will provide much of the information you will require, but there are many different sources of information, including:

- serials/ periodicals /journals;
- theses;
- published texts;
- CD ROMs;

- the Internet;
- the radio;
- the television, videos, DVDs;
- your own notes; and
- the minds of friends and colleagues.

Don't be afraid to look as broadly as possible, but remember the following:

- always search actively;
- do not take too many notes;
- take structured notes; and
- keep a record of your sources (e.g. author/s, publisher, date, page number).

Structuring your essay

Now you can put together a plan for your essay based on:

- your interpretation of the question;
- your personal thoughts and opinions; and
- the information you have gathered.

Put together a logical structure for your essay as follows:



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Introduction

Comment upon:

- the subject you will be discussing;
- the main points you will be raising; and
- the treatment you propose to apply.

Your introduction should also relate your essay to a wider academic context/discussion.

Note that, as mentioned in the Introduction, often with the distance learning assignments there will not be a need for, nor space for, an introduction to your answer.

Main body

- Present your argument in a few main points.
- Write a paragraph for each main point.
- Support your ideas with examples and references (see Section 10).
- Develop your argument coherently.
- Ensure that your emphasis is balanced.
- Avoid stressing your opinion at the cost of more considered reasoning.

Length restrictions on the answers to many of the distance learning assignments may mean that you cannot follow all of the advice given above, particularly the second bullet point.

Conclusion

Summarize your main points in the conclusion:

- offer a firm answer to the question;
- relate to your introduction; and
- identify wider implications or further lines of investigation.

When you are asked to provide a short answers to an assignments it will not usually be necessary to provide a separate conclusion.

Sorting your information

Using your outline plan, sort through the material that you have collected and prioritize this by asking the following questions.

- What is centrally relevant?
- What is partially relevant?
- What is irrelevant?

Relate the material to your outline structure.





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Remember that such information should enhance your argument, not dominate the essay.

Your examiner is looking for your ability to select relevant material to support your answer.

Writing style

Here are a few recommendations that can make a difference to your work and will lend a professional feel to it.

- **Use short words:** 'after' instead of 'following', 'but' for 'however'; 'show' for 'demonstrate'.
- **Avoid unnecessary words:** e.g. strike action (strike); cutbacks (cuts); weather conditions (weather); the fact that (that); substantially finished (incomplete).
- **Jargon:** Don't use words that are unlikely to be known by the reader unless absolutely necessary; and then, on first use explain what they mean. If you are writing your research dissertation then include a 'Glossary' at the front in which such words are listed and defined.
- **Avoid slang:** e.g. 'Thumbs down'; 'gravy train'; 'the likes of'; 'flavour of the month'.

Abbreviations

Use of abbreviations can make your work easier to read (e.g. for Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council use WSSCC.) However, on first use explain what the abbreviation means.

Capital letters

Use capital letters in appropriate places:

- **People:** Prime Minister May, or 'the Prime Minister'; The Minister of Finance.
- **Organizations:** The African Development Bank; Students' Committee.
- **Places:** Kenya; southern Africa; western Europe; North America.
- **Trade names:** Sony; Peugeot; Nokia.
- **Electronic expressions:** email; cybercafé; Internet; World Wide Web.

Figures

Spell out figures from one to ten.

Use numerals for figures from 11 onwards, and for all figures that include a decimal point or fraction (e.g. 4.25, 5½).

Use all numerals when mixing numbers in one sentence (e.g. 'there have been 14, 6 and 2 cases of malaria in the past three years'.)

Italics

All foreign words should be shown in italics (e.g. *kamukunji*) apart from where they are in such common use that they have become anglicized (e.g. safari; apartheid).

Newspaper and periodicals e.g. *The Sun*; *The Daily Nation*.

Court cases e.g. *Odhiambo vs Blenkinsopp*.

Useful words to indicate transition

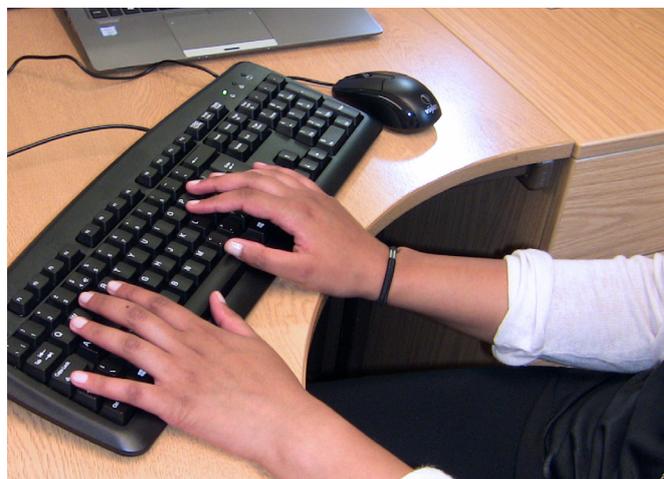
- Addition:** Moreover, furthermore, in addition, incidentally, again.
- Contrast:** However, in contrast, on the other hand, nevertheless.
- Comparison:** Likewise, similarly.
- Cause:** Therefore, thus, hence, consequently.
- Example:** For example, for instance.
- Time:** Afterwards, later on, soon, meanwhile.
- Place:** Here, there, nearby, beyond.

Writing a draft

It is time now to write a draft of your essay. A draft 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. Make sure you do not exceed any length restrictions mentioned in the question.

Setting aside enough time

It is important that the thoughts and ideas flow freely throughout the essay. When approaching the first draft of your essay you may need to set aside enough time to write it completely without any interruptions. Any significant breaks in concentration may break your line of thought.



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Writing for others

When you are writing an assignment, remember that your tutor must be able to understand what you say!

- Write simply and directly.
- Limit your sentence length.
- Ensure that each paragraph has a focus.
- Use clearly-labelled pictures (graphs, diagrams, etc.) if they will save words.
- Use sub-headings to define each section.
- Take care to properly acknowledge the work of others. Plagiarism will be penalized (see Section 10).
- List the sources you have referred to for other information;
- Follow the advice given on the width of page margins; this space may be used for your tutor's comments. Also follow the requirements for minimum font size and style. Show your student number on each page (e.g. in the 'header' margin) if you are asked to do so.

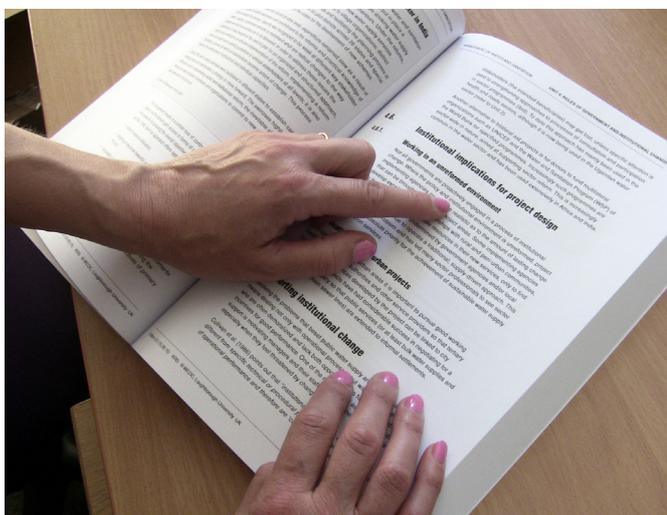
Checking and revising

To check your essay, compare it with your original question interpretation, draft outline, and any assessment criteria that have been prepared by your tutor. Use the checklist at the end of this section as a prompt to help you evaluate your own essays.

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Section 4: Self-assessment, contains further details of how you can monitor and evaluate your own work.

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Problem solving

When you have established any problems with your draft assignment, ask yourself how these could be most easily resolved. Be realistic. It may not always be possible to start again. If you are having real problems with your writing consult your tutor. Always consider that your essay has to be read and assessed by somebody else.

A clear presentation needs a good and clear structure, which can be indicated by making use of suitable titles, sub-titles, lists and bullet points etc.

Avoid spending too much time on extravagant presentation.

Tutors spend a lot of time marking many essays at once. Anything that distracts or discourages them from reading your essay in a favourable light, such as poor English, should be avoided. Use of a word processor not only makes your work legible, but also allows you to make frequent changes as you compose your answer. The spell check used by most word processors is also useful!

Referencing and plagiarism

Every time you refer to somebody else's thoughts and arguments you need to both identify clearly who you are referring to and from where you found this material. You do this by providing a 'citation' (e.g. 'Skinner (2013, p. 33)') in the text, just after the information that you obtained from it.

Correctly referring to each of your sources of information is a very important issue that is dealt with in Section 10 of this Guide.

Bibliography

It may be helpful to include a bibliography in addition to a list of references, although this is not essential and will not usually be appropriate for distance learning assignments. A bibliography is a list of sources of information that have not been used for direct references but that you have used and recommend for relevant background reading. Clearly distinguish it from your list of references

Checking

Please take time to check that every 'citation' in your text is found in the same format in the list of references. In addition to an author's name, check that dates and specific page numbers where the information is to be found are shown correctly.

Also check that there are no documents in your list of references that are not mentioned in the text. You can do this





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by putting a mark against each reference in your list as you read through the text, and then at the end checking for any unmarked ones.

You can use the 'Find' feature of a word processor to search in your document for any particular word (such as an author's surname), or groups of letters or dates. This is useful for double-checking for references that seem to be missing from the text of a long report such as a research dissertation.

If you search a file containing your complete document and do not find the author's name, then you know that you have not used it, or have misspelled the name.

Using feedback

Your final task is to reflect upon the feedback received from your tutor. This may be invaluable in helping you improve your essay writing skills for future assignments.

Summary

Essay writing is an invaluable tool in the development of understanding. Through the construction of detailed, reasoned and balanced arguments you consolidate what you have learned and apply key principles and theories in such a way that is both interesting to you and informative to the reader or assessor.

Essay writing also develops your communication skills as you distil large amounts of information onto the pages of your assignment in a structured format.

The following checklist can help you evaluate your own essays, improving your essay writing skills and helping you check for simple mistakes.

Checklist



Introduction/Conclusion

- Does my introduction (if used) detail what I will be doing and how?
- Does my conclusion (if used) summarize my main points and offer some outcome?

Content

- Have I met the demands of the question?
- Have I met the fixed criteria (e.g. length and style of answer)?
- Have I clearly identified my key points?
- Are they presented in a logical sequence?
- Are each of my points supported by sufficient information and examples, particularly in view of any weighting of marks indicated in the question?

Use of supporting material

- Is the material centrally relevant?
- Does the material endorse or detract from my argument? and
- Does the information flow with, or disrupt my central argument?
- **Originality, referencing and plagiarism**
- What is the ratio of my ideas to the ideas of others?
- Have I distinguished between my ideas and the ideas of others?
- Have I acknowledged quotations?
- How have I identified the ideas of others within the text?
- Have I fully referenced each quoted phrase or idea? and
- Have I included a list of references and, if appropriate, a bibliography listing all other background reading?

Presentation

- Is the format used (font size and margin widths etc.) as specified?
- Is the structure and layout clear enough?
- If I have handwritten anything, is it readable?
- If it is typed on a computer have I spell checked my work?
- Are my sentences short and focused?
- Are each of my paragraphs clearly focused?