



# Essay Writing

By the end of this section you should be able to;

- Interpret essay questions successfully
- Plan personal objectives
- Actively search for information
- Construct a logical essay plan
- Prioritise information
- Write clearly for others

## **O**BJECTIVES

- Essay writing
- Stages in essay writing
- Preparing your essay
- Gathering your information
- Structuring your essay
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## **C**ONTENTS

# Essay writing

The following section explores the process of writing an essay from establishing the assessment criteria to utilising tutor feedback on the final product.

Very few university level essays will ask you to simply describe an outcome or narrate a history. Commonly, essays are written in response to a preprepared question that demands a critical appraisal of the topic at hand.

The benefits of writing essays are as follows:

Writing essays :

- consolidates your understanding
- allows you to delve more deeply into a particular subject area
- stimulates your mind by assembling an argument
- gives you practice in using technical or specialist terminology
- enables you to express your thoughts clearly and logically
- encourages you to think and read widely and deeply.

## Stages in essay writing

There are several stages in the production of a high quality essay. These are as follows:

- Preparing
- Gathering
- Structuring
- Writing
- Checking & Revising

## Preparing your essay

The following advice will help you establish **what** and **how** you are being asked to write. In preparing your essay you will need to identify the precise subject area that 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 or title indicates the required approach or treatment. For example, the following question:

*Consider the advantages and disadvantages of introducing peer appraisal into an organisation and justify its use to employees*

... is asking for two different elements, the **consideration** of the advantages and disadvantages and then the **justification** of these to employees.

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



Another section of the Study Guide, **What does the question mean?** lists some of the most common key words and offers definitions for each.

#### 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.

Discuss this with other students or your tutor. 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 that subject matter, you will 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. Don't make any judgements about relevance at this stage. The aim is to find out how much you already know.



It may help you to structure your ideas in the form of a spider diagram or other flow chart as discussed in another section, **Taking Notes**.

### Ask Questions - What don't I know?

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?
- 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.

## Information sources

Remember that there are many different sources of information, including:

- Journals
- Periodicals
- Theses
- Published texts
- CD ROM
- On-line information
- Audio/video
- Your own lecture notes
- The minds of friends and tutors

Don't be afraid to look as broadly as possible.



The use of many of these information sources is explored in the **Information Technology Skills Guide** available from the University's Flexible Learning Initiative.

**When gathering information you should remember the following:**

- Always search actively
- Don't take too many notes
- Take structured notes
- Keep a record of your sources (Author, publisher, date, page number)



The **Information gathering** section elsewhere in the Study Guide will help you do this. Also look at the sections on **Reading efficiently** and **Taking notes** if you have not already done so.

## 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
- The information you have gathered

Put together a logical structure for your essay as follows:

### **Introduction**

Comment upon:

- The subject you will be discussing
- The main points you will be raising
- The treatment you propose to apply

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

### **Main Body**

Present your argument in three or four main points.

- Write a paragraph for each main point
- Support your ideas with examples and references
- Develop your argument coherently
- Ensure that your emphasis is balanced
- Avoid stressing your opinion at the cost of more considered reasoning

### **Conclusion**

Summarise your main points in the conclusion. Additionally:

- Offer a firm answer to the question
- Relate to your introduction
- Identify wider implications or further lines of investigation

## Sorting your information

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

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

Relate the material to your outline structure. Remember that such information should enhance your argument not dominate the essay. Your tutor is after your opinion and your ability to use theories and sources.

## Writing a draft

It is time now to write a draft of your essay.

Whilst some people feel content with writing a completed version straight off, this is probably inadvisable to 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.

## Setting aside enough time

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 throughout the length of the essay. Any significant breaks in concentration might break your stream of thought and ruin this effect.

## Writing for others

When writing for others always remember that someone else has to understand what you say. To do this:

- Write simply and directly
- Limit your sentence length (avoid rambling)
- 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 acknowledge clearly the work of others
- List the sources you have referred to for other information
- Leave plenty of space for your tutor's comments (margins - left / right and top / bottom).

## 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 and/or other students.



Use the **Essay evaluation checklist** at the end of this section as a prompt to help you evaluate your own essays.



The **Self assessment** section of this Study Guide contains further details of how you can monitor and evaluate your own work.

## Problem solving

When you have established any problems ask yourself how these could be most easily resolved. Be realistic. It may not always be possible to start again from scratch.

If you are having real problems with your writing consult your tutor.

## Presentation

Always consider that your essay has to be read and assessed by somebody else. The presentation of your completed essay should be geared towards this.

The best presentation is that which is easy to follow, such as clearly used sub-headings or page numbering. Avoid spending too much time on extravagant presentation. Clarity will be more important than impressive graphics.

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 illegibility, should be avoided. If people regularly have problems with your handwriting, for example, you may need to consider word processing all of your significant written projects.

## Referencing

Each time you refer to somebody else's thoughts and arguments you need to both identify clearly **who** you are referring to and **where** you found this material. You need to do this whenever you:

- quote somebody else's work directly
- closely summarise a passage from another writer
- draw directly upon somebody else's writing and ideas.

To identify a quoted phrase or idea you need to state the author's name in the main text and include this and other details within a list of references elsewhere in the essay.

The most common way of identifying a name within the text is to write in brackets the author's name, the year in which the work was produced and the page number of the source text.

For example: (Clark, 1994, pp231)

Then there are three basic ways of fully acknowledging these ideas outside of the main text:

- **Footnotes**  
Numbers after each textual reference (as above) matched with numbered acknowledgements at the foot of each page.
- **Endnotes**  
Consecutive numbering of references throughout the text matched with consecutively numbered acknowledgements at the end of the essay itself.
- **Included references**  
More detail for each reference within the main text which can be picked up through a bibliography at the end.

All acknowledgements should include the author's name, the year or date of publication, the title of the book, article, report etc., the publisher and the place of publication.

For example: Clark, R. P. (1996) Study Guide, Loughborough University, Loughborough.

## Bibliography

You will also need to list all the publications that you have used to help you write your essay whether you have closely referred to them or not. This will give your tutors an idea of how you have set about writing and indicate to other students possible sources of

further information.

A bibliography should come at the end of your essay, listing each text alphabetically stating the author, date of publication and publisher.

## Using feedback

Your final task when writing an essay is to reflect upon the feedback received from your tutor and/or other students. This may be invaluable in helping you improve your essay writing skills for future work.



Use the section in this guide on **Using feedback** to help you get the most out of the feedback comments.

## Essay writing summary

Essay writing is an invaluable tool in the development of your understanding of your individual discipline area. 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 page in a structured format.



The **Essay assessment checklist** at the end of this section can help you evaluate your own essays, improving your essay writing skills and helping you check for simple mistakes.

## Essay assessment checklist



### **Introduction/Conclusion**

- Does my introduction detail what I will be doing and how?
- Does my conclusion summarise my main points and offer some outcome?

### **Content**

- Have I met the demands of the question?
- Have I met the fixed criteria (length etc.)?
- 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?

### **Use of supporting material**

- Is the material centrally relevant?
- Does the material endorse or detract from my argument?
- Does the information flow with or disrupt my central argument?

### **Plagiarism**

- What is the ratio of my ideas to the ideas of others?
- Have I distinguished between my ideas and the ideas of others?

### **Referencing and bibliography**

- Have I acknowledged quotations?
- How have I identified the ideas of others within the text?
- Have I fully referenced each quoted phrase or idea?
- Have I included a bibliography listing all of my background reading?

### **Presentation**

- Is there enough space for tutor comments?
- Is my handwriting clear enough?
- Are my sentences short and focused?
- Are each of my paragraphs clearly focused?