

Writing an essay

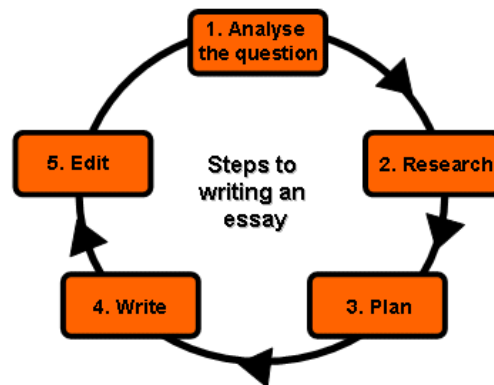


Introduction

Essays are not just exercises in research; they are also exercises in communication. Essays give you a chance to show what you can do: that you understand the question asked; that you understand the issues involved; and that you have done the appropriate amount of reading. Essays also allow you to demonstrate your analytical thinking and force a deep and powerful type of learning to take place. For these reasons, they are a common form of assessment at university. This form of assessment is frequently used for session assignments and exams. Most students, some more than others, will be required to demonstrate their learning through this genre during their degree.

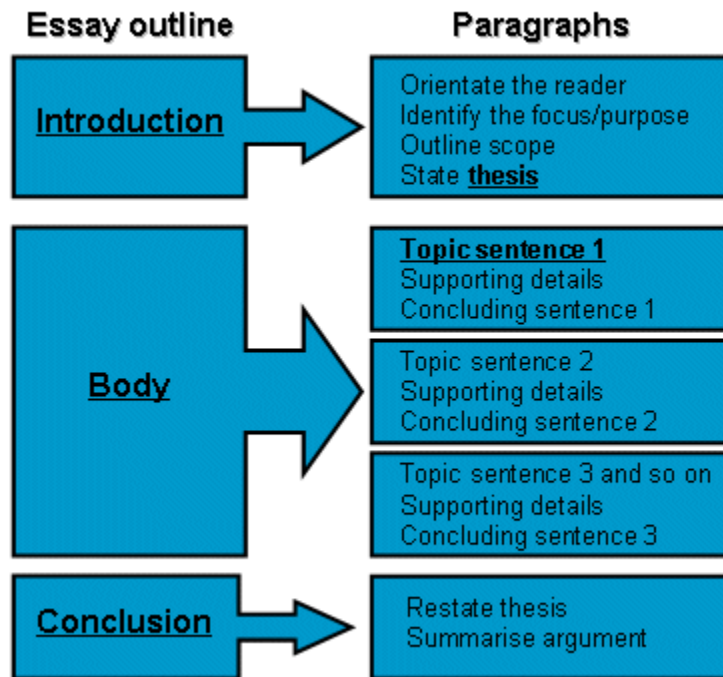
An essay writing process to follow

There are a number of steps students need to work through:



Each step is important. However some students do not pay sufficient attention to the steps of question analysis, planning and editing. Perhaps this reflects insufficient time being allocated to the assignment task as a whole. Poor question analysis may result in a well-written essay but one that doesn't address the question asked or goes off on tangents. A lack of planning often results in a poorly structured essay, which is hard for the reader to follow. Failure to edit an essay results in poorly presented work containing unnecessary errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.

The basic essay structure



Each section, the introduction, body and conclusion, has a specific purpose, which means the reader will be looking for expected features.

A traditional essay does not include headings. As such it will appear as a series of paragraphs, with each paragraph having a place and purpose which the writer needs to make clear in topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph.

However, lecturers are becoming more flexible in their expectations and in some cases are allowing students to use headings in their essays. This has sometimes been referred to as a 'report style essay'. Always confirm with your lecturer if headings are allowed if you are not sure.

Many students find using headings helps them structure their essay. This is true for many DE students as headings are commonly used in workplace writing. If this is true for you and headings are not allowed, use headings in your draft, then convert them to topic sentences, before you submit your essay.

Referencing in an essay

You will be required to reference both *within* your essay and *at the end* of your essay in a list of references. You are required to reference every time you use the work of someone else, whether you have changed their words (paraphrased) or used their exact words (direct quoted).

If you are not sure what this means refer to the referencing site for further explanation and examples or to the referencing section in the online essay writing tutorial.

How should I present my work?

Some students mistakenly think that presentation of an essay refers to fancy headings, clever shading and elaborate fonts. It isn't – and the extra time spent won't result in extra marks – in some cases quite the opposite. Professionally presented, clear, easy to read text is the key.

Always refer to your subject outline for specific instructions from your lecturer. If you are still unclear, post a message on your subject forum or ask your marker. It is likely that other students may have the same questions or perhaps the question has already been answered on your forum.

In the absence of any specific directions, the following points are a general guide for presenting assignments.

- Assignments should be typed
- Use 1 1/2 spacing. (Some lecturers may ask for double spacing.)
- Use 2.5 cm margins both sides or a 5 cm left margin. Markers need space to be able to include their comments.
- Use Times New Roman font 12pt
- Include a separate title page with your name, student number, subject code and assignment question
- Number your pages
- Use a header or footer with your name and student number on each page
- Always keep a copy of your assignments. Both, a hard copy and an electronic copy.
- Most importantly, always use your spelling and grammar checker, but remember that this does not pick up all errors. You must still manually and carefully edit your work.

Developing essay writing skills

- You might like to work through the essay writing tutorial on this site. At the end of this you will have a better idea of your needs.
- Enrol in Academic Skills Development, a 13 hour self paced subject designed to allow students to further develop their essay writing skills.
- Contact a Learning Skills Adviser if you have a question or concern.
- Complete English Skills for Academic Writing, a 13 hour self paced subject, if you are concerned about grammar and spelling.
- Take care if exchanging essays with other students before the essays have been marked. While some may consider this another form of learning, there is always the danger of work being copied. In this case both students may be failed on the assignment.
- It may however be beneficial to read a 'good' assignment after they have been marked to gain a better idea of what the marker was looking for.

The essay writing process

Step 1: Analyse question

Some questions are written in such a way that the content and structure of the essay is outlined in the essay question. This often occurs in a long question, so don't be put off by the length of the question. .

However, other questions require that you first analyse the question to determine the direction that is required and the level of analysis needed. When this occurs the following *key word analysis* will help ensure that you answer the question.

1. Look for the **content words** that determine what you will need to research: that is, what you are expected to write about. Pay attention to words that indicate the:
 - general *topic* (this often assists you with a good introductory sentence for your introduction) and the
 - *focus* of the question (this is, what the lecturer wants you to specifically address).
2. Note the **task**, or **directional words**, that will dictate how you are expected to approach the question. These are sometimes contained within the instructions leading up to the question.

Task words are important because they determine the depth of analysis or thinking required. At tertiary level tasks words such as compare, contrast, analyse, discuss and evaluate are more common and require that you demonstrate your thinking about your research, not just describe what you found. Words such as describe, explain, and outline often accompany short answer questions. More commonly at tertiary level, you will be asked to express your point of view. In other words, you have to argue your case supporting your statements with evidence, discussion and valid reasoning.

You might find the expanded list of task words and their meanings useful.

3. Finally note any limitations, that will guide your reading through time, place and of course word limit. For example, the question might ask that you restrict your answer to the '*Australian context*', '*crime in rural Australia*' or '*events after 1900*'.

Analysis of the following question might look like this:

Question:	<i>The UAI (university admissions index) is a reliable predictor of success at university. Discuss this statement.</i>
Content:	Topic: Success at university Focus: Whether the UAI is a reliable predictor of success; not, for example, 'what are the predictors of success?' although this may be part of your answer.
Task:	To discuss, that is, Investigate and examine by argument giving the reasons for and against. Present a point of view - this will require both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen authoritative evidence.
Limitations:	University study. Note you are not limited to time or place. You might assume the lecturer wants you to concentrate on the current Australian context. However, this would be a good question to ask on your subject forum. Word count (not supplied here) will of course impact on how wide you go. For example, 1500 words will significantly restrict you. 5000 words will give you much more room to discuss this question from a number of perspectives. The term UAI is also a guide as it is a relatively recent term replacing the term TER.

Common task words	Description
<i>Analyse</i>	Find the main ideas and show how they are related, what their function is and why they are important.
<i>Comment on</i>	Discuss, criticise, or explain the meaning.
<i>Compare</i>	Note the similarities and differences of what you are being asked to compare.
<i>Contrast</i>	Compare by showing the differences.
<i>Criticise</i>	Make a judgement about the merit of theories and opinions or about the truth of statements. Back this by discussing the evidence. It is not necessary to attack it. Discuss the strong and weak points and include your own analysis.
<i>Define</i>	Give the formal meaning of a word, term or phrase.
<i>Describe</i>	Give a written, detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence. Emphasise the important points. An explanation or interpretation is not required.
<i>Diagram</i>	Make a graph, chart, or drawing. Label it and include a brief explanation.
<i>Discuss</i>	Investigate and examine by argument giving the reasons for and against. Present a point of view - this will require both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen authoritative evidence.
<i>Enumerate</i>	List the main ideas in point form.
<i>Evaluate</i>	Make an appraisal of the worth of something. Give the opinion of leading practitioners in the field of the truth or importance of the concept. Include the advantages and disadvantages. You may also include your opinion.
<i>Explain</i>	Interpret the facts; your main focus should be on the 'why' or 'how' with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes and effects. Do not just describe or summarise.
<i>Illustrate</i>	Use a figure, diagram or example (comparisons or analogies) to explain or make clear.
<i>Interpret</i>	Explore and clarify the meaning using examples and personal comment.
<i>Justify</i>	Give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.
<i>List</i>	Give a concise numbered list of words, sentences, or comments. Same as enumerate.
<i>Outline</i>	Give a general summary/description containing the main ideas supported by secondary ideas. Omit minor details.
<i>Prove</i>	Show by argument or logic that it is true. Establish certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.
<i>Relate</i>	Show the connections and how one causes, or is like, another.
<i>Review</i>	Examine the subject critically. Analyse and comment briefly in an organised sequence on the major points.
<i>State</i>	Express the main points in brief and narrative form. Omit details or examples.
<i>Summarise</i>	Give a concise account of the main points. Omit details and examples.
<i>Trace</i>	Give the development, process or history of an event or idea.

Step 2: Research

After you have analysed and understood the assignment question you might be able to formulate an initial plan by brainstorming, that is, jotting down your ideas so far. Concept mapping works well when brainstorming. An initial plan will help guide your reading and note-taking. However, it is more likely that you will need to research the question in more detail before you can go much further.

You will be required to read widely. Some subject outlines will advise you on how much and what to read. Reading requirements will also vary between subjects and the topics. Some topics may require a detailed analysis of a small number of texts; yet it is rarely sufficient to read only one or two books on a particular topic. A rule of thumb for first year, first semester, subjects is to include at least five sources. Another rule of thumb is to choose sources published within the past 5-10 years. Some assignments call for a mix of sources, such as books, journals, newspapers, and/or websites. Journals provide more recent information, but it is often specific information. Another rule of thumb for first year students is to start with the textbook to gain an overview of the topic, then move to specifics.

New students might find researching using a large library and databases a little daunting. The library has provided an online tutorial called Webezy to help you. Otherwise, contact a librarian and seek help. Do not spend hours agonising and getting nowhere.

After having found the information you are looking for, your task is to take effective notes. Do not rewrite the text, but try to make notes in your own words, and always remember to take the full reference including any page numbers. You will need this information if you decide to use this research in your essay.

Some students seem to get caught on this step, research. They gather more and more research and ultimately find themselves with too many notes, confused and discouraged. If this is you, start your plan, then move to the next step. Once you get something onto paper you are likely to feel you are back in control, can see some progress for your efforts and any further research is likely to be more focused and hence productive.

Step 3: Plan

You are now ready to plan your essay, or if you had an initial plan, return to it and add any new points or delete any that you have now discovered are irrelevant.

Planning however does not simply mean randomly gathering information to support your argument. Planning involves grouping or categorizing information into a series of points and determining a logical order in which to present your points. Your aim is to develop a logical, coherent and transparent structure. The following steps will help you do this:

- Formulate your thesis: Did you start your research with a thesis? Has it changed now that you have researched the question further? Or have you developed a thesis now that you have researched your topic? What is your thesis or viewpoint? If you didn't have a viewpoint before you started your research you should have one now to help guide your response to the question. Remember, your thesis will help you structure your essay.
- Decide which points you wish to include in support of your viewpoint or thesis
- Check to see if there is a logical grouping of ideas or points
- Decide on an order of presentation. Order could be determined by, for example, level of importance, time in place, the question, geography or personal preference, but it should follow the order indicated in the introduction
- Note if there are any points that refute your viewpoint that you should address
- Delete any points that you now consider irrelevant.

This is when you can start making use of headings. Give each point you are going to include a heading. Now list these in the order in which you will present them in your essay. Does your order make sense? If not, change it.

Assuming research leads to the thesis below, an essay plan for the following question might look like this:

The UAI (university admissions index) is a reliable predictor of success at university. (Discuss)

Essay structure	Number of paragraphs	Content
Introduction	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Orientate the reader to the general topic ● Identify the focus or purpose of the essay ● Outline the scope, that is, the points to be covered, in the body ● Thesis: The UAI is a reliable predictor of success at university
Body	Maybe 6-8 in this simple essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is success? (Academic achievement) ● What is involved in order to achieve a good UAI? ● How does this relate to academic success? ● What does the research say about the correlation between the UAI and success? Studies? ● Are there any exceptions? Do they provide an effective counter argument?
Conclusion	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Summary of main points ● Reaffirm thesis

Step 4: Write

- Refer to the section on essay structure
- Follow your plan.
- Make use of headings if this helps you. Sometimes turning a heading into a question helps students keep to the point. Remove them from your final draft if traditional essay format is wanted.
- Take care if you change terms used in the question. For example, if the term used in your question is 'success' and you substitute this with the term 'achievement', the meaning may be quite different.
- Remember to pay attention to your topic sentences. Make it clear to the reader what point you are making in each paragraph and why. You know what you mean, but did you tell the reader?
- Relate the points you are making to the question/your thesis.
- Do not use first person, such as 'I think..', 'I believe..', 'In my opinion...', unless you are permitted or asked to do so,
- Do not use any colloquial phrases, informal language or cliches, such as:
The union representative was *a thorn in the side* of the manager.
Brown (2004) *stuck to* his ideals
Smith's (2000) analysis was *spot on*.
- Use full sentences to communicate your ideas.
- Always reference other people's ideas whether you paraphrased or directly quoted their work, and
- Remember this is a draft. Come back later and edit out minor errors.

Step 5: Edit

This is the final step in the essay writing process and an important one. Failing to edit your work will impact on your marks despite all your hard work. Remember, professionally presented, clear, easy to read text is the key. Give yourself time to complete this step. It may mean the difference between a pass and fail or a pass and distinction.

McLaren (1997) refers to two editing steps: micro and macro editing. Micro editing involves checking that your

- spelling, grammar and punctuation is correct. Always use your spelling and grammar checker, but be aware that this may not pick up all errors
 - referencing is correct and consistent. Inconsistent referencing suggests poor attention to presentation.
- Macro editing refers to examining the essay as a whole. Check for coherence and logic. In other words, does your essay make sense? Is it reader friendly?

Put your essay aside for a day or two before you edit, otherwise you will be inclined to read what you expect to see, not what you've written. Often the best way to edit your work is to read it aloud or read it to someone. Give your essay to someone else to read.

Finally, refer to the marking criteria in your Subject Outline for the presentation requirements for your subject and assessment item. Refer to the general guidelines in the topic 'presenting your work' in the learning skills website, if you are still unclear about how to present your work. At the very least you will know what questions to clarify with your lecturer.

Basic essay structure

1. Introduction

The introduction to your essay is an important paragraph. It is the first thing the reader sees. A good introduction should

1. Orientate the reader to the general topic
2. Identify the focus or purpose of the essay
3. Outline the scope, that is, the points to be covered, noting any limitations and
4. Finish by identifying the thesis.

An introduction is usually one paragraph, although this is not always the case, particularly with long essays. Some students define key terms in the introduction. Others signal within the 'scope' that key terms will be defined in the essay. If this is case, do this at the beginning of the body of the essay. The decision about where to define key terms is probably guided by the length of the definition discussion. A simple definition may sit well in the introduction. A protracted definition may be distracting and better dealt with in the body of the essay.

Points 1 and 2 above are determined by your essay question.

Point 3 will be guided by the question, your research and the thesis.

Point 4 is important. It identifies what you have learnt, your argument or viewpoint. The thesis will drive your essay. More information on thesis statements follows:

A **thesis** statement is your line of argument, your viewpoint. You might agree, disagree or perhaps qualify your argument in some way so that it agrees with part of the question.

For example, you might be asked to discuss this statement:

The UAI (university admissions index) is a reliable predictor of success at university.

Some students may argue that it is. Some may argue that it isn't. Others may argue that it is a useful but not reliable predictor. A critical thinker might challenge the concept of success and argue that the UAI has little to do with success in its broad sense.

In other words, there may be a number of thesis statements or viewpoints that relate to a question. What is important is that you support your viewpoint with evidence based on your research. Your thesis is an expression of your learning.

Thesis statements generally grow out of a consideration of many viewpoints within your research. Thesis statements can develop at any point in the research, planning and writing of your essay. If you decide on your thesis statement before you begin your research, take care that you remain open to the 'many points of view' you will read about. Most students probably develop their thesis statement at the end of their research.

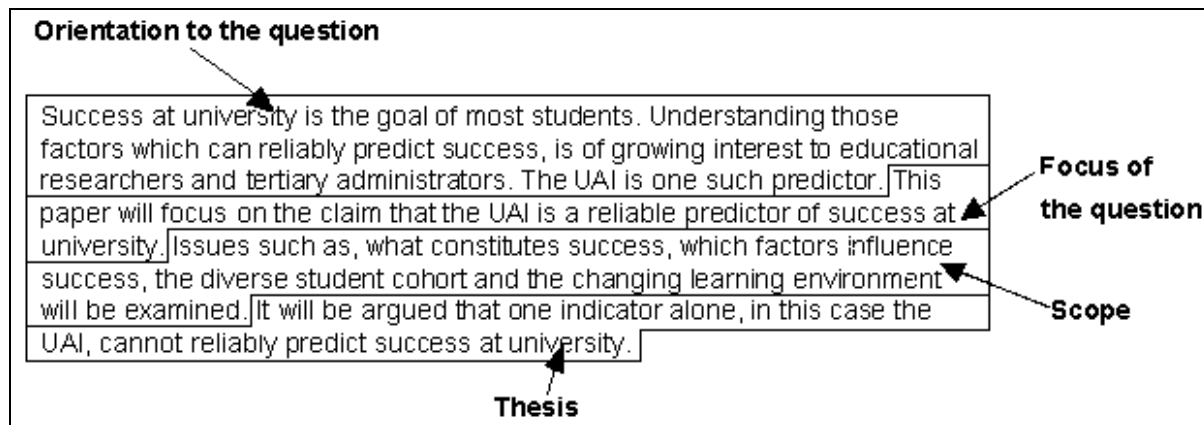
The thesis statement and the topic sentences (opening sentence for each paragraph) provide the *framework* for your essay. For the *writer*, the thesis statement:

- serves as a planning tool.
- helps the writer determine the paper's real focus and clarify the relationships between ideas.
- becomes a hook on which the writer can "hang" the sub-theses or the topic sentences that present evidence in support of the argument.
- anticipates questions about the topic and provides the unifying thread between pieces of information.

(Ref: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ThesisStatements.html>)

Your thesis is a statement, not another question and sits in the introduction.

An introduction containing these features might look like this:



2. Body

The body of an essay is where you develop your essay. This occurs in a series of paragraphs with each paragraph logically flowing to the next. Thus

- a good use of topic sentences and
- correct paragraph structure are important.

The first sentence of each paragraph, often referred to as a **topic sentence**, introduces the paragraph by stating and summarising the main point being made in the paragraph. Topic sentences often contain transition signals, which aid in the smooth transition from one paragraph to the next. This first sentence should inform the reader of the point you are making and how this paragraph relates to the question. In fact, if the reader were to scan your topic sentences, they should be able to obtain a sketch of the entire essay. This sketch should show the logical progression of the points you are making. Absence of topic sentences leaves the reader wondering what you are trying to say and why, ultimately confusing the reader.

Signposting is not limited to topic sentences. Signposting within your paragraph also aids the reader. The following example well illustrates the effective use of signposts (bolded).

Finally, as with all models of learning, information processing has limitations. **For example**, the model implies that thinking and learning occur in a serial (linear) processing form, **whereas** we know that thinking and learning are more complex than this (it is a recursive process). **Furthermore**, the model fails to take into account motivation, emotions and social interaction as elements affecting learning processes. **Nevertheless**, the model gives teachers many useful starters for considering how information can be structured to facilitate learning.

Ref: The University of New England <http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/alo/paragraph7.htm>

Effective paragraphs have three important qualities.

- Unity: where they focus on one main idea.
- Development: which occurs when the idea is elaborated on in the paragraph. This elaboration usually consists of the evidence you have gathered from your research to support the point you are making in the paragraph, and
- Coherence: where everything in the paragraph relates to and expands on the point you are making.

In addition to a topic sentence and supporting sentences, body paragraphs, often but not always, have a concluding sentence. The topic sentence introduces the paragraph, and the concluding sentence summarises it. However, this concluding sentence is not essential. What is important is that the transition from one paragraph to the next is logical and well signalled.

3. Conclusion

The conclusion is also an important paragraph in your essay. It is usually one paragraph in length and should reflect what you said you were going to do in your introduction. The conclusion

- summarises what you've said in your essay and
- reaffirms your thesis

Do not introduce new material. Most students begin their concluding paragraph with a transition signal, such as, 'In conclusion' or 'In summary'.

References

Cottrell, S. (2008). *The study skills handbook* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Crème, P. & Lea, M. R. (1997). *Writing at university: a guide for students*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Germov, J. (2000). *Get great marks for your essays* (2nd ed.). Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin

Levin, P. (2004). *Write great essays: Reading and essay writing for undergraduates and taught postgraduates*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

McLaren, S. (1997). *Easy writer*. Glebe, NSW: Pascal Press

Additional web resources

You can google for other sites by typing, for example, 'essay writing' as the search term, *but try to ensure the sites you use are reliable sites*.

The University of New England website <http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/alo/index.htm> is an excellent interactive site. It includes a number of examples, which further illustrate the points you have just read.

The University of New South Wales <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/olib.html> has another good site and also includes some useful alternative expressions when trying to integrate references into your work. How else might you say: Smith (2004) said ...? Look in Writing: Elements of style.

OWL at Purdue University http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_transition.html provides another good summary of transition signals. Stylistic variation will enhance your work.

The University of Toronto site <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/essay.html> includes some very interesting writing tips including *practices of good writers* and links to other universities for various topics including *overcoming writers block* at OWL, Purdue University

The University of South Australia

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/lrnsvcs/ass.asp#writ>

James Cook University <http://www.jcu.edu.au/studying/services/studyskills/essay/> are two more good sites.