

***Essay success***

---

Language and Learning Advisers, Deakin University

© Deakin University 2011

*Essay success* is adapted from:

Farrugia, D, Lee, R, Gilchrist, R, Kumar, M & Broadstock, H 2004, *Essay writing: understanding the process* 3rd edn, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria.

## Contents

---

Analysing the question	6
Reading and making notes	8
Making essay plans	10
Writing the essay	11
Editing	13
Citing sources	15



An academic essay is essentially a piece of writing which answers a question, presents a point of view in a clear and logical way and is supported by evidence from academic sources. In writing an essay that is geared specifically to your discipline, you are coming to terms with new knowledge and demonstrating a wide range of skills.

Students approach essay writing in many different ways. This booklet suggests an approach which can be helpful for getting started and organising your time so that your essay is completed by the due date.

## Analysing the question

---

*'I have always preferred to reflect upon a problem before reading on it.'* (Jean Piaget)

### Things to note immediately

- When is the due date?
- How long is the essay?
- To which parts of the course does the essay relate?
- What is the essential subject matter of the essay?
- What do I already know about the topic?
- How much research do I need to do?
- What does the person who set the topic expect?

### Deconstructing the question

In order to answer an essay question properly, it is important to look carefully at what you are being asked to do.

- *Content* words are those that tell you the *subject areas* of the topic.
- *Limit* words are those that tell you the *scope* or *boundaries* of the essay.
- *Direction* words are those that tell you *what to do* with the topic.

An example:

**Discuss the effects of the 2000 Olympic Games on contemporary Australia.**  
(2500 words)

- The *content* words are 'the effects of the 2000 Olympic Games'; they tell you the subject matter of the essay question.
- The *limit* words are those that tell you the boundaries of the essay; 'contemporary Australia' and '2500 words'.
- The *direction* word is 'discuss'; it tells you what to do with the topic.

Some commonly used **direction** words and their definitions.

analyse	describe the main ideas and their relationships, assumptions and significance
argue	present the case for and/or against a particular proposition
compare	show the points for and against or the similarities and differences
contrast	compare by focusing upon the differences
criticise	present your considered opinion based upon the points for and against an argument. Criticising does not necessarily mean condemning an idea. It is best to present a balanced argument showing both the positive and the negative points.
define	state the meaning of a term, generally in a formal way. Including an example will enhance your definition.
describe	present a detailed and accurate picture of an event or phenomenon
discuss	describe an event or phenomenon, giving the positive and negative aspects. At university level, it would be fair to expect a critical discussion, citing the significance and assumptions, if relevant.
evaluate	weigh up or give your assessment of the relevant matter, citing positive and negative features, advantages and disadvantages
examine	analyse in depth and investigate the implications
illustrate	explain and make clear by the use of concrete examples, or by the use of a figure or diagram
interpret	present the meaning using examples and provide your opinion with evidence to back up your statements
justify	present the basis for a particular event or phenomenon and explain why you think it is so. You need to supply evidence to support your views and conclusions.
outline	give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting detail and emphasising structure and relationships

(Adapted from Marshall, L & Rowland, F 2006, *A guide to learning independently*, 4th edn, Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest, NSW, pp. 98-9.)

Brainstorming also helps deconstruct the question. It is a way of generating ideas for your writing and can add to your understanding and analysis of the question.

To do this, spend some time jotting down all of the thoughts and associations that come to mind when you think of the topic. Now, look critically at your ideas and thoughts and try to make links between them. It is also useful to ask questions of your topic, such as '*what, when, how, why, who, how significant and to what extent?*' to help come up with more ideas.

## Reading and making notes

---

*'I think best with a pencil in my hand.'* (Anne Morrow Lindbergh)

In the research phase, it is vital that you read and make notes with a purpose. The starting points for this stage are:

- the essay question
- the unit study guide and reader
- a reading list
- lecture and tutorial notes, and advice from tutors and lecturers.

### Reading

An initial strategy for coping with the volume of reading required for researching your essay is to gain an overview of the text. Gaining an overview allows you to locate the most useful material which you will then read in detail and make notes from for your essay.

For a **book**, look at:

- the title page and back cover
- the contents page
- chapter headings
- diagrams and tables
- the first paragraph and concluding paragraph of chapters which look useful
- the index.

For an **article** or **chapter**, look at:

- the abstract
- headings and subheadings
- anything printed in bold
- the first sentence of each paragraph
- diagrams and tables
- the conclusion.

Academic texts, such as books and journal articles, follow specific conventions; they usually have an introduction that outlines the argument to be presented, body paragraphs that develop the contention and a conclusion that sums up the author's point of view. Awareness of this structure can greatly facilitate your reading.

### *The introduction*

The introduction presents the topic in a general way. It provides a statement of the issue, outlines the author's intention and presents a framework for the article, chapter or book. This is a key element in understanding what the author is writing about.

### *Body paragraphs*

The main idea of each body paragraph is presented in the topic sentence which is usually located at the beginning of each paragraph. You need to look for the topic sentences in your reading because they help you to follow the points the author is using to support the contention.

### *The conclusion*

The conclusion is where the author summarises the ideas and arguments presented in the body of the article, chapter or book. The author may also comment on the significance of the work. It can be helpful to read the conclusion first.

## **Making notes**

Reading is an active task. Note making, similarly, keeps your attention focused and is a most effective way of ensuring you understand what you read. Make sure you read and take notes with the essay question firmly in mind. Making notes using your own words forces you to:

- summarise a range of ideas and arguments
- select points relevant to your purpose
- understand and interpret original sources
- remember what you have read
- clarify and adjust your perception of the essay topic in the light of your increasing understanding of the arguments presented by others.

Making notes is an important stage in the understanding of your topic. It is also the foundation of good writing. You will need to develop your own system of writing notes, whether this is done on paper or on a computer. However, the following is highly recommended:

- Note **all** the bibliographical details of the sources from which you make your notes.
- Use a flexible note-making system so that you can rearrange the notes for the purposes of the essay.
- Leave wide margins on your notepaper so that you can add comments or cross-references which are crucial to your essay.

## Making essay plans

---

*'As the mind works the hand moves.'* (Fay Weldon)

Creating an essay plan is essential in order to achieve a logical structure to your essay and ensure you are doing what the essay topic asks of you.

One method of drawing up an essay plan is to make a list of all of the points you wish to make, and then to group these points into common themes or categories. These groups will become the sections of your essay which will contain the paragraphs. This approach enables you to see the logical flow of the essay. It provides a road map for your writing.

Concept mapping is another way to create an essay plan. The idea is to represent your knowledge pictorially. This is done through drawing diagrams with connecting arrows to indicate the logical organisation of the material.

Essay plans function as your guide for the writing stages of the essay. A plan ensures that you keep to your task.

An example:

**Discuss the effects of the 2000 Olympic Games on contemporary Australia.** (2500 words)

*A possible plan*

Economic effects

- increased tourism
- increased employment
- business opportunities

Political effects

- international recognition
- government goodwill

Cultural effects

- greater appreciation of artistic and sporting achievements
- greater awareness of indigenous culture

Social effects

- impact of volunteering
- sense of goodwill and friendliness

*Your essay would then develop from this plan; each point from your plan might become the focus of a paragraph/s.*

## Writing the essay

---

*'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?'* (EM Forster)

Writing is a thinking process; that is, the process of writing actually facilitates our thinking. Because of this, you must allow time for your writing and thinking to evolve. So, instead of expecting the first draft to be perfect, be prepared to make several drafts of your plans as well as of your essays. Successful writers are those people who try out different versions of a sentence and then choose the one that best conveys their meaning. An effective strategy for those who have trouble formulating a sentence on paper is to say aloud what they mean.

Another key to successful writing is to use clear sentences. Expressing one point per sentence makes it easier to construct sentences which follow logically from one to another and can prevent you from becoming entangled in a 'web of words'.

Remember there is no place in an essay for irrelevant ideas. Keep the essay question and plan always at hand and pay careful attention to the points you are expressing and the order in which they are being made. You need always to be judging whether your points are relevant, or whether you may be making illogical leaps.

### **Crafting the introduction, body and conclusion**

The finished essay will have an introduction followed by a body and then a conclusion. However this does not always reflect the order in which the writing takes place.

The **introduction** is very important because it is the first impression that the reader gets. It should give the reader a clear understanding of what the essay is about.

The introduction must:

- set the context for the topic in a broad way so that after reading the first part of the introduction the reader can say, very generally, what the essay will be about.
- become specific so that after reading further into the introduction, the reader can identify the exact focus of the essay.

- provide your response to the question (your contention)
- give an outline of the key arguments and ideas to come.

In the **body** of the essay each idea or argument listed in the introduction is examined—in the same order as listed—and developed paragraph by paragraph.

A typical body paragraph has the following structure:

- a topic sentence which conveys the main idea of the paragraph and is commonly found at the beginning of a paragraph, although the position is variable
- supporting sentences which, using your research and citing your sources, provide discussion and examples which add to and expand upon the topic sentence.

A concluding sentence can help to tie the paragraph together.

In the **conclusion** the main points or arguments discussed in the essay are summarised, and the major point of view is restated. Depending on what the essay topic is asking you to do, your conclusion may:

- evaluate the material you have presented
- indicate that you understand the significance of what you have argued
- state your conclusions
- make recommendations.

## Editing

---

*'Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what one is saying.'* (John Updike)

### Editing for logic and coherence

*Logic* means that there is one clear line of argument relating to one topic and that all the paragraphs and sentences connect to the question. The essay should, therefore, present a logical, well-developed and well-supported argument. To check that the essay is well structured, go through your essay and identify the topic sentences. Each should indicate the main point of each paragraph. In your essay do all of the main points relate to the question? Is the argument well developed? Check the introduction, body and conclusion—does each part fulfil its role?

*Coherence* means that all parts of the essay are linked. A good way of ensuring a coherent argument is to use *signal words* to show the development of the essay. Don't be afraid to use them. They can appear at the beginning of a paragraph to signal a main idea and throughout a paragraph to link supporting information to that main idea. They are also used to signal the transition or change of ideas which occur between paragraphs, thus linking the whole essay together.

*Signal words* tell the reader where the argument is going and show the transition from one point to another. Here are some words you could use to indicate certain meanings.

#### **meanings**

#### **signal words**

addition	in addition, again, also, and, besides, further, furthermore, moreover, too, similarly
concession	otherwise, admittedly, however, nevertheless, of course, after all, nonetheless, indeed
cause and effect	accordingly, as a result, consequently, otherwise, therefore, thus, as a result, so, hence, as a consequence, thereupon
comparison	similarly, likewise, in the same manner, also, as well as
conclusion	in conclusion, to sum up, finally, lastly, to conclude, accordingly, overall
connections in time	after a short time, afterwards, as long as, as soon as, at last, at length, at that time, at the same time, before, earlier, of late, immediately, in the meantime, lately, later, meanwhile, presently, shortly, since, soon, temporarily, thereafter, until, when, while

<i>meanings</i>	<i>signal words</i>
contrast	in contrast, although, and yet, but, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, conversely, whereas, alternatively, in spite of
emphasis	undoubtedly, indeed, true, above all, most important, the main point here is
examples	for example, for instance, in other words, in illustration, in this case, in particular, specifically, an example of this
qualification	except for, admittedly, studies suggest that, perhaps, it would seem that, it tends to be the case that, may be, could be
sequencing	firstly, secondly, lastly, finally, then, too

## Editing for style and expression

*Style and expression* refers to choice of vocabulary, the way sentences are constructed, ideas are introduced and paragraphs are developed. Most of us can improve our style by improving our expression. Good expression is clear and direct. It facilitates rather than hinders meaning for the reader. It leaves the reader satisfied. How can you achieve this?

- Read your work aloud and listen to whether or not it makes sense.
- Check that you have used proper sentences.
- Check whether you have used unnecessary words.
- Avoid colloquialisms, slang and contractions (i.e. use *do not* rather than *don't*).
- Check your sentence length—a long and convoluted sentence can be difficult to understand. If the sentence reaches three lines in length, you probably need to break the ideas into separate sentences.

## Editing for spelling, grammar and punctuation

- ‘Near enough’ is not good enough; marks are deducted for errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- Use doubt as your guide—if something does not look or sound right, check it in a dictionary or with a friend.

## Proofreading

Proofreading is usually the final step in the editing process. The aim is to produce an error-free essay. Thus careful checking for mistakes in spelling, punctuation and typing is essential.

## Citing sources

---

*'If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.'* (Isaac Newton)

### Avoiding plagiarism

Academic work builds on what has gone before and you will be using academic research as the basis for your essays. It is necessary to acknowledge the work of others when you use it. Writing academic essays always involves the *citing of sources in text* and the *inclusion of reference lists or bibliographies*.

You must acknowledge the source when you quote directly, summarise or paraphrase from the work of others. The failure to acknowledge another's work is plagiarism. It is a serious offence at university. Strict penalties apply.

Sometimes plagiarism is unintentional. Students may read for an essay and take detailed notes which find their way into the essay without a reference. To avoid this you must take great care when making notes to ensure that the sources of all your information are clear and accurate. You should aim to write in your own words and keep quotations to a minimum.

### Referencing

As well as ensuring you avoid plagiarism, correct referencing:

- shows that you have read
- shows what you have read
- enables the reader to locate the sources mentioned in your paper.

At Deakin University a number of referencing styles are used:

- APA (American Psychological Association)
- author-date (Harvard)
- documentary-note (Oxford)
- law
- numbered citation
- Vancouver

Details on these referencing styles can be found at [www.deakin.edu.au/referencing](http://www.deakin.edu.au/referencing).

Check your unit guide or ask your lecturer or tutor which referencing style you should use for a particular unit.

This booklet and related resources titled *Essay writing, Assignment writing, Reading, Editing and Academic writing style* can be accessed online in the **A-Z index** at <[www.deakin.edu.au/study-skills](http://www.deakin.edu.au/study-skills)> and in printed form from the Division of Student Life.

Language and Learning Advisers can be contacted in the Division of Student Life on all Deakin campuses.

Geelong Campus at Waurn Ponds  
Telephone 03 52271221

Geelong Waterfront Campus  
Telephone 03 5227 8400

Melbourne Campus at Burwood  
Telephone 03 9244 6300

Warrnambool Campus  
Telephone 03 5563 3256