

Essay Writing Guide

What is an Essay?

An essay is a short piece of writing on a particular subject (usually between 1000 and 6000 words).

It may be a piece of writing describing a certain process or idea, such as: *Describe how the central nervous system works.*

More frequently, you will be asked to answer a question (or questions) posed either directly or indirectly. This guide focusses on these types of essays.

You might, for example, be set an essay on a direct question such as: *Why did the First World War break out?* Alternatively, you might be set an essay inviting you to discuss a statement, such as: *'The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was the cause of the First World War'. Discuss.*

It is important when writing essays of this last type that you uncover the indirect question in the title. In the above example, you are really being asked to write about whether you think the assassination was the cause (perhaps the only cause, or the main cause) of the First World War.

Essays usually consist of three parts:

1. Introduction.
2. Argument (main body), where you make your detailed analysis and argument.
3. Conclusion.

What Makes a Good Essay?

A good essay should demonstrate a firm understanding of the subject and ANSWER THE QUESTION which is asked (either directly or indirectly).

A good essay also demonstrates an awareness of the scholarship surrounding the topic. What are other historians, or sociologists, or philosophers (etc.) saying on the matter? Show the reader that you have read the relevant literature and engaged with it. Rather than simply listing the views of other scholars, your analysis of their work should be incorporated into your own argument. Do you agree with certain views? If so, why? If not, why?

It is also important to structure your answer logically, so that you construct a piece of work which flows naturally to its conclusion. Likewise, the essay should be well-written. Sentences should be grammatically correct and typographic errors ('typos') and spelling mistakes should be eliminated.

Most departments have a section on their webpage giving further subject-specific guidance on what they are looking for in an essay. You might also be able to find a copy of the 20-point mark-scheme used by your department, which outlines the qualities which will be found in

essays at various points along this scale. If you cannot find these mark-schemes, ask the department secretarial staff or your tutor to point you in the right direction.

When Should I Begin?

You should start thinking about your essay at the earliest opportunity. Although you do not have to start researching or writing straight away, it is useful to be able to turn your mind over the question you have decided to attempt and think about how you might approach it.

How long it takes to complete an essay depends very much on how you work. You may prefer to free up your time so that you can spend a week working solidly on it, or you may spend a number of weeks working on your essay alongside other work which needs to be done. Regardless of how you work best, it is important to plan your time effectively. You should make a note of the deadline and leave yourself enough time for any contingencies.

How Should I Begin?

Breaking Down the Question

Before you begin to research your essay, you should read the question carefully and pay attention to any instructional verbs. These verbs (such as 'explain', 'compare', etc.) will give you an indication of what you need to do. You should also identify the topic of the essay and note whether any limitations have been imposed on your answer.

Take, for example, the essay title: *Discuss how the nature of English kingship changed during the thirteenth century*. The instructional verb is 'discuss', the topic is 'English kingship' and the limitation placed on this topic is that you should only discuss the changing nature of English kingship in the thirteenth century.

Once you are confident that you know what is required, you can get to work. There are four stages to preparing an essay for submission: researching, planning, writing, editing.

Research

During the research stage you will gather the required information for your essay. You should be prepared to use the books and journals on the shelves in the library in conjunction with the library's electronic resources [www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/resources/electronic/].

A good starting point is to find a few books or articles which provide a broad overview of the essay topic. You might find examples of these on your module reading lists. If not, search the library catalogue [<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/>]. Remember that books are shelved thematically, so it is also worth browsing the other books nearby.

While reading a general overview of your topic, make a note of any points relevant to your essay. You should pay attention to the author's footnotes and bibliography to pinpoint further literature which may deal more closely with the exact question of your essay. You will therefore be able to gradually sharpen the focus of your research. As you track down and read this

literature, continue to pay attention to the work cited in each text as, again, it may be useful to you.

As you keep researching and making notes, you should be getting an idea of how you want to approach your essay (for example. what your key arguments will be, who the key scholars in the area are.)

Planning

Once you feel that you have sufficient material from your research you can draw up a plan for your essay.

As with the research stage, it is best to start broadly and gradually add more detail to your plan. Think over what you want to say and consider whether your essay can be divided into several sections, each analysing a certain aspect of the topic.

When you have an idea of the broad structure of the essay, you can then plan-out the points you wish to make in each section. You may find it useful to jot these down as bullet-points.

You should now have the skeleton of your essay in front of you. Read it through to make sure that your argument makes sense and flows logically from one point to another, and that it answers the question that has been set.

Make a note in your plan of how many words you wish to devote to each section of your essay. Remember that you must also write an introduction and conclusion, each of which should account for about ten percent of your word count (usually between 100 and 300 words).

Writing

Once you are happy with your plan, you can start writing.

Everyone approaches writing in different ways. Some people like to write a very rough draft and then edit this (sometimes multiple times) until they have created their best copy. Others prefer to spend more time on their first draft and produce something which needs less editing to get into its final shape.

As you write, make sure that sentences are clear and the tone of your prose is professional (avoid colloquialisms and contractions such as 'don't' rather than 'do not'). You should also ensure that your paragraphs flow from one to the next.

Your introduction should give the necessary amount of background information for the reader to be able to understand your essay. You should also define any key terms and let the reader know the direction your argument will take by outlining the structure of your essay.

The conclusion is where you wrap up the essay by drawing the threads of your argument together and emphasise your findings and/or opinion. You may also be able to explain why your argument is significant and what effect it will have on our understanding of the topic in the future.

Editing

All essays will need some degree of editing. Do not underestimate how long this process takes. You should check not only for typographical errors and spelling mistakes, but also for grammatical errors and problems with clarity and style.

It is important that you also edit your footnotes or in-text references. Make sure that they are formatted correctly and follow the style required by your department. Finally, double check that the page numbers in your references are accurate.

It is helpful to leave it for a day or so and then come back and proof-read it once more. This will allow you to see errors that you may not have noticed before.

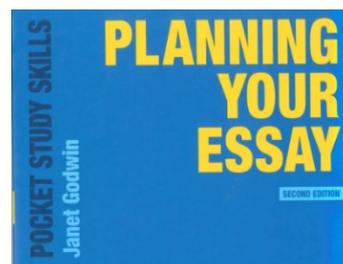
When you are happy with your essay you can submit it! Make sure you check the submission requirements. It is a common requirement for essays to be submitted in hard-copy form *and* uploaded electronically onto MMS, but some departments may have different rules.

Feedback

The final part of the essay writing process, and one that many people seem to forget, takes place when you get the essay back. Take on board feedback and learn from your mistakes. Essay-writing is a skill which you will develop throughout your time at university. Pay careful attention to any advice provided by your tutor and act on it!

Further Resources

You can also pick up a free Palgrave Pocket Study Skills Guide from the CAPOD offices.



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