

Writing successful essays

Expectations of essays at university level

Essays are a major form of assessment at university. Writing a good one can be a challenging, but rewarding, experience.

An essay is used to assess the strength of your critical thinking and your ability to put that thinking into a persuasive written form.

While reading a student's essay, markers will ask themselves questions such as:

- Does this directly address the set task?
- Does this present a strong, supported position?
- Does this use relevant sources appropriately?
- Is the expression clear, and the style appropriate?
- Is this organised coherently? Is there a clear introduction, body and conclusion?

Analysing the question

Student essays are responses to specific questions. As an essay must address the question directly, your first step should be to analyse that question. Make sure you know exactly what is being asked of you.

Generally, essay questions contain three component parts: **content terms**; **limiting terms**; and **directive terms**.

Look at the following essay question:

'Discuss the importance of light in Gothic architecture.'

- **Content terms:** *Gothic architecture.*
- **Limiting terms:** *the importance of light.* If you discussed some other feature of Gothic architecture, for example spires or arches, you would be deviating from what is required. This essay question is *limited* to a discussion of light. Likewise, it asks you to write about the *importance* of light – not, for example, to discuss how light enters Gothic churches.
- **Directive term:** *discuss.* This term asks you to take a broad approach to the variety of ways in which light may be important for Gothic architecture. You should introduce and consider different ideas and opinions that you have met in academic literature on this topic, citing them appropriately. (See the Academic Skills flyer 'Incorporating Sources').

Directive terms tell you *what to do* in relation to certain content; other common ones include *analyse*, *define*, *compare* and *evaluate*.

Defining an argument

Essay questions are often broad formulations, but this does not mean that your essay also needs to be broad and general. Questions are purposely written at a certain level of generality in order to give you space to define and present a specific argument. It is up to you to take a position or point of view and to develop an argument in support of it. As you plan and prepare to write the essay, you must consider what your argument is going to be. Consider these two argument statements:

'The architectural use of light in Gothic cathedrals physically embodied the significance of light in medieval theology.'

Or:

'In the Gothic cathedral of Cologne, light served to accentuate the authority and ritual centrality of the priest.'

Statements like these define an essay's argument. They give coherence by providing an overarching theme and position towards which the entire essay is directed.

Using evidence and scholarship

To make your argument persuasive, you must use evidence and refer to scholarship related to your topic. Imagine that you are writing for someone who will be critical of your position. How can you convince such a reader? You must make a persuasive argument by including evidence and reasoning and by evaluating relevant scholarship.

Evidence comes in many forms, but typically consists of specific examples, facts, quotations, statistics and illustrations. It should provide concrete information to support your claim.

Reasoning connects the evidence to your position. It is not enough simply to cite evidence like a shopping list. You need to show the meaning of the evidence and how it supports your position.

Scholarship is used to show how your argument relates to what has already been written on the topic – either in agreement (citing specific works) or in disagreement (citing other works in opposition).

Organising a coherent essay

You can only communicate your ideas to your reader by carefully organising what you write. An essay has three basic components – **introduction**, **body** and **conclusion** – each of which serves a distinct function.

While drafting and revising your essay, think about what you are trying to accomplish with each one of these.

Introduction

An introduction has to *introduce* your essay – not just begin it. Here is a schema to consider:

1. Open with a general statement about the topic that provides a context for your argument;
2. A thesis statement showing your contention - you can use explicit lead-ins, such as '*This essay will argue that...*'
3. A 'road map' of the essay, telling the reader how it is going to present and develop your argument.

Body

The body of the essay gives substance to your position.

It does this by presenting a reasoned case grounded in evidence from relevant scholarship.

Its shape corresponds to the overview that you provided in your introduction.

Conclusion

Don't save any surprises for the end! Your evidence and argumentation should have been laid out in full in the body of the essay.

Use the conclusion to restate, briefly, the main argumentative position; provide a brief summary of the themes discussed; and emphasise what is significant and interesting about the topic itself and about your own position.

Writing clearly

An essay that makes good, evidence-supported points will only receive a high grade if it is written clearly. Clarity is produced through careful revision and editing. If you can develop these skills you will have an opportunity to turn a good essay into an excellent one.

When you edit your essay for clarity, try to view it with fresh eyes – almost as if someone else had written it. Consider the following:

Overall structure:

- Is the contention clearly stated in your introduction?
- Does the actual structure correspond to the preview set out in your introduction?
- Have you clearly indicated how your main points support your contention?
- Are the transitions between each of your main points clearly signposted for your reader?

Paragraphs:

- Does each paragraph introduce one main idea?
- Does every sentence in the paragraph help to develop that main idea?
- Does each paragraph display evidence and reasoning?
- Have you included relevant examples and support?
- Does each paragraph logically follow on from the one before it?

Sentences:

- Is each sentence grammatically complete?
- Is the spelling correct?
- Is the main idea of each sentence clearly stated?
- Have you avoided redundancy and repetition?

See more about editing in the Academic Skills flyer '**Editing your writing**'.

Finally, check your citations to make sure that they are accurate, complete and follow a consistent format. Some departments require you to use one particular citation style; others may allow you to choose a preferred one. Whatever style you do use, you must follow its guidelines correctly and consistently.

Further resources

Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. (1996). *Writer's handbook: how to write better essays*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. (1986) *Essay writing for students: a practical guide*. Melbourne: Longman.

Davis, L. & McKay, S. (1996) *Structures and strategies: an introduction to academic writing*. South Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia.

Williams, J.M. & Colomb, G. G. (2010) *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 10th ed. New York: Longman.

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