

# WRITING AN ESSAY

Writing an essay is an opportunity for you to develop new ideas and apply concepts and theories from your course. You'll develop a thesis (or position) and use reasoning and evidence to support your point of view.

This resource has some useful hints on how to analyse your essay topic, and how to plan and write your essay. Essays are generally written to:

- inform your reader about your position in relation to a particular issue
- argue for change or recommend action
- analyse problems and present solutions
- present and evaluate research findings

A tertiary essay is similar to essays you may have written in the last couple of years at secondary school. However, there are some differences you need to be aware of.

- Citing all the sources you use is extremely important. If you don't, you'll be guilty of plagiarism, which is taken very seriously by the university. You can find out how to cite your sources and write reference lists in the Learning Lab and in RMIT Library referencing guides.
- Most essays are longer than you wrote at secondary school (between 1500 and 3000 words) and are a large percentage of your semester's assessment.
- You are usually expected to analyse issues at a deeper level than at secondary school.

## Steps in the essay writing process

Although no two writers work in the same way, there is a general system that many good writers follow. This involves following a step-by-step process.

### 1. Analyse the question

- Underline key words
- Put question into own words
- Look for hints on structure

### 2. Brainstorm the question

- Take stock of what you already know
- To give you a focus for your reading
- To give you the beginnings of a plan

### 3. Start your research

- Begin with general reading
- Look for potential ways to structure your essay
- Record bibliographic details and page numbers of references as you go

### 4. Plan the essay

- Write down the main points/arguments, preferably using a mind map
- Write any secondary points and their relationship to the main points

### 5. Continue your research

- This is focused research, where you seek further information about each of the main points/arguments

### 6. Write!

- Most people find it easier to concentrate on the body first, then the conclusion, followed by the introduction
- Decide on a logical order for your points/arguments
- Remember that each paragraph should contain **one** idea, which is stated in the topic sentence. Other sentences in the paragraph should explain, give evidence for and possibly give examples.
- Concentrate on one point at a time, but in your final editing, make sure it flows and each paragraph is linked to the thesis statement
- Expect to write several drafts
- Don't worry about spelling, grammar, sentence structure or finding the 'right' word until you've decided on the content of the essay.

## Analysing the question

Once you've selected your topic, you need to be sure you understand what is required before you begin any research or reading. A common problem is to make an assumption that you know what it means and what's expected of you. However, if you're wrong, even if you write a great essay, you won't get very high marks if it doesn't do what the topic asks you to do.

Here are some strategies:

- Underline or highlight the key content words or phrases and direction words (such as discuss, evaluate, analyse, etc.) and make sure you understand them. It's easy to overlook the direction words, but if you just describe something when you've been asked to analyse it, your essay is likely to get few marks. Check here to make sure you know the meaning of each.

### Example essay task:

'Explain the double-binds that managers are faced with in hierarchical organisations.'

The key content words are: 'double-bind', 'manager' and 'hierarchical organisations'.

The direction word is 'explain'. You probably think you already know what these words mean, but it pays to make sure you're not overlooking some part of the meaning. For instance, if you really think about these words, you might come up with these definitions:

**explain:** to analyse, focusing on the 'how' and 'why' of a particular issue; to identify reasons, causes and effects; to go beyond describing and summarising.

**double-bind:** a dilemma; an argument forcing an opponent to choose one of two equally bad alternatives

**manager:** a person conducting a business or institution; a person controlling activities of a person/team

**hierarchical organisation:** an organised system, or set of connected things or parts in some type of order such as order of importance.

- Re-write the task in your own words. This is a useful way of checking whether you've really understood the question. For example, for the topic mentioned above, two possible ways of re-writing could be:

'Analyse why and how the dilemmas come about that are faced by people who lead, guide and direct systems (organised with levels and ranks). Identify the causes and effects of these dilemmas.'

or:

'Analyse the causes and effects of dilemmas faced by persons leading, guiding and directing ranked systems.'

- Identify what concepts or ideas from your course apply to this topic (refer to your lecture or class notes and any other readings).
- Think about any controversies or arguments in relation to this topic (your lecturers or teachers will probably have referred to these).
- Write out a short statement giving your position on the topic. This may change after you've done some research and thought more about the topic, but if you do it at this stage it's easier to keep focused.
- Write down relevant information about the topic.
- Make notes about the areas of the topic you need to research.
- Write a possible outline of the essay. This is likely to change as you research the topic but it's useful to think of the organisation of your essay even at this stage.

## Brainstorming the task

Brainstorming is a useful process to find out what you already know about the essay topic (and what you don't yet know). Get a large piece of paper and let your mind go – write down anything that comes to mind when you think of the essay topic. It's important that you don't stop to think about whether what you're writing is relevant or not.

The next step is to look at what you've written for the beginnings of a plan for your essay. At this stage you can cross out anything you don't think is relevant and, of course, add other things you think of.

## Beginning your research

Now you need to locate appropriate references. You need to first read widely to get an overview of the topic, problem, issue or debate, then narrow your reading down to a few specific authors or key issues.

You should find reference material in the library, in resources or bibliographies from your teacher or lecturer, and on the Internet. A word of warning when using the Internet, however – check that the information comes from a reliable and reputable source. Remember, also, that the RMIT librarians can help you.

Remember to make notes as you go, and to record all bibliographic information as soon as you make a note or photocopy. It can take a lot of backtracking to find out where you got that wonderful reference you need to use!

When you feel confident that you've located enough relevant material, you need to develop a **thesis statement**. This is your position in relation to the topic (the 'answer'). It's the driving force throughout your essay.

## Planning your essay

An essay outline is like the skeleton of your argument. You can do this as a linear outline (list of main points with secondary points indented) or visually (drawing a mind map or other diagram).

Whichever format you use, you'll need to identify:

- the main point
- your supporting points or elaborations
- the evidence you'll use to support each point.

For an example of a mind map, check out the RMIT Learning Lab .

## Continuing your research

This is the easy part of your research because you know what information you're looking for. You've done your preliminary research and organised this information into an outline, and now your task is to find more information about each of the points on your outline. At this stage, you may find other points you need to add. This is OK – just reorganise your essay outline.

## Writing your essay

Finally, you can begin writing.

You don't have to write your essay in the same order that people read it. Sometimes you might find that writing the introduction first helps you to be clear about the content and intention of the essay. However, at other times you might find that it's better to write in this order:

- Write the body first (because this is the most important part)
- Then write the conclusion (so you can sum up while your main arguments are fresh in your mind)
- Finally, write the introduction (because sometimes it's difficult to write it until you're clear about what it is you're introducing).

This is the stage when you need to think of the writing style. You need to write in an academic style (check out the Learning Lab – Writing in an Appropriate Style) and you need to write clear paragraphs and sentences.

## Writing the 'body'

In the body of the essay, all the preparation you've done so far comes together. Follow the outline you've made already and write paragraphs with:

- Main points
- Supporting points
- Elaboration

### Main point

Write down one of your main ideas, in sentence form. If your main idea is 'private enterprise should not run public utilities', you might say this:

The Longford Gas Inquiry revealed to the community the damaging consequences of private ownership of public enterprises.

### Supporting points

Next, write down each of your supporting points for the main idea, but leave four or five lines in between each point. One of your supporting points may be:

Private companies are required to run their operations in an entirely different way to government.

## Elaboration

You may find the visual outline useful here. In the space under each supporting point, write down some elaboration for that point. Elaboration can be further description, explanation, examples, and/or support from research or discussion:

When the main point of an operation is to make a profit, efficiency and safety can suffer. A private company is not answerable to the community in the same way that the government is. Public utilities remain a matter of political importance even when they are privatised.

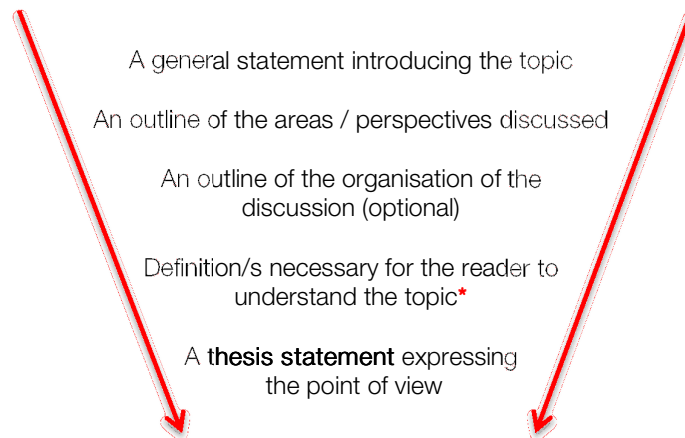
You 'flesh out' your body paragraphs in this way, and use joining sentences and refer to research. Once you have fleshed out each of your body paragraphs, one for each main point, you are ready to continue. For example:

The 1998 Longford gas crisis provides an example of risks of privatisation. When the Kennett Liberal government was elected in 1992, it considered that part of its mandate was the privatisation of a number of public enterprises. The first utilities to be sold off were gas and electricity. Although Esso had always operated a gas plant at Longford, (near Sale in eastern Victoria) it had previously done so in partnership the government through the Victorian Gas and Fuel Corporation. Esso now runs the plant and supplied the gas through VENCORP, the Victorian Energy Networks Corporation, which was responsible for the efficient operation of gas and electricity industries in Victoria until 2009, replacing one of the delivery functions of the Gas and Fuel Corporation. In September 1998 a series of explosions at the Esso Longford plant left two people dead and eight injured. The explosion left gas supplies at dangerously low levels, with the only gas available for consumers being what was left in the pipes. Victorians faced a crisis in terms of dwindling gas supplies and naturally enough turned to their government for leadership. Whilst the government was able to invoke special powers to protect gas supplies, it was not in fact able to provide for delivery of gas to consumers.

In this paragraph, which would probably be the first body paragraph, the main point about privatisation is introduced, and sub-points provide illustration of how a particular example worked. We have fleshed it out with factual information surrounding the situation, and closed the paragraph with reference to the implication for government.

## Writing the introduction

The introduction should set out clearly, concisely and forcefully your approach to the question as well as your point of view. You might wish to agree with part of the question and disagree with other parts. If so, make sure this is clear in your introduction. The introduction should also include a broad outline of arguments you write in the body of your essay. Introductions usually have information organised from general (broad) to the specific (narrow). Introductions usually include:



\* If there are many definitions, or if they need explaining at length, it may be better to do this in the next paragraph

## Writing the conclusion

A good conclusion should draw the arguments together and reinforce points made in the body of the essay. There is more variation in the content and organisation of a conclusion than there is in an introduction. However, there are some features many have in common.

A conclusion should:

- remind the reader of the thesis of the essay
- provide a summary of the main points and arguments
- point to the significance of your findings
- point out the implications of the issues
- not simply restate the introduction
- contain no new material (i.e. it should not introduce any new points)

## Formatting and style

Check the assessment guidelines for instructions on formatting and style. When you prepare your final draft, it's important to follow all of the instructions you've been given. Some schools have a style guide for student writing, or sometimes you're given a style sheet at the beginning of the year with formatting and style instructions. If you haven't been given any information, ask your lecturer or teacher if they or the school have any style preferences.

Some style and formatting questions you should find out:

- How big should the margins be?
- Does it require a cover sheet?
- What information must be included (e.g. date, lecturer/ teacher, course code, etc.)?
- Should it be double spaced?
- Should it be submitted in a folder? online? bound?
- What referencing style be used?

## Checking your writing

This is the stage when you need to review, edit and proofread so you can improve the way you present your ideas.

A good way to do it is to read your paper when it's finished and then put it away for a couple of days. Read it again and answer these questions:

- Does it make sense?
- Is there a logical development of ideas?
- Do the sentences flow smoothly from one to another? If not, add some words to help connect them. Look at transition words you've used, such as therefore and however. If you've used the same transition words throughout your essay, check out some others you could use.
- Is your spelling, punctuation and grammar OK?
- Have you used the formatting requested by your lecturer or teacher?
- Have you used the referencing style expected by your lecturer or teacher?
- Have you checked your references list to see that it is correctly formatted?

Once you've checked your work, give it to someone else to read (preferably someone who isn't familiar with your topic). Other people often pick up the simple mistakes or 'typos' such as writing and for an. When we read our own work, we often read what we think is there, rather than what is actually there.

Finally, make sure you have another electronic copy as well as another printed copy — just in case your essay goes astray.

See also: 'Differences between Essays, Reports and Journals' and 'Writing in an Appropriate Style'.

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