

Geography Essay Writing Guidelines

Essay Structure

Each essay has the general structure of introduction, body and conclusion.

Introduction

There needs to be a clear **introduction** where you:

- state what the essay is about
- provide some background to the topic e.g. why it is important
- set the parameters of your essays e.g. a case study of Brazil is examined (stating why you are using this case study)
- an outline of the structure, and argument, of your essay e.g. the main ideas/issues/themes you will address and the order in which you will discuss them

Note: Explicit statements such as “This essay will...” should be avoided.

Body: In the **body** of the paper, you write about the ideas (issues or themes) you have identified through your research and explain your point of view on these ideas (issues or themes). Your argument is developed as you present your views and forms the body of the paper. You need to address the ideas (issues or themes) in a systematic and logical way and back them up with evidence from your reading, discussing the various sides, issues, debates and so on.

Conclusion: There needs to be a strong **conclusion** in which you pull the various strings of your argument together and relate it back to your introduction whilst covering what has been discussed in the essay. If you were asked as an essay task to ‘evaluate’ or to ‘discuss’, you present your evaluation and the findings of your discussion in this section. A conclusion is not a summary – you do not need to list each point you made in your argument but it should summarise the main issues and your point of view.

Note: New issues and points are not to be raised in the conclusion.

Paragraphs: A paragraph contains one idea. The idea is generally introduced in the first sentence, discussed throughout the paragraph and resolved in the final sentence. A sentence is not a paragraph – although there are occasional exceptions to this rule. There needs to be a logical, well-structured flow of your paragraphs and argument as a whole, where the final sentence of the paragraph leads the reader logically into the next paragraph. You need to avoid jumping from one issue to another, and back. Each paragraph should link back to the main topic and support the argument being made.

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Example Essay Paragraphs

The paragraphs below are provided as examples of relatively high standard of writing that takes into account the advice contained herein. They are written in response to the following question:

“The issue of greenhouse gas emissions has recently been placed at the top of the global environmental agenda. Discuss the reasons for this and assess the possible consequences of particular human reactions or inaction.”

An example introduction

Projected increased global air temperature resulting from human-induced build up of “greenhouse gases” has, in the past decade, become the most important planetary environmental issue (IPCC 2013). Global warming is highly likely to detrimentally affect many important facets of the both biophysical and human environment and raises the possibility of significant loss of human lives and reductions in biodiversity (Sander 2015). The widespread predicted impacts of global warming, combined with a general consensus that warming has commenced, have led to an increasing acknowledgement of the problem at all levels of government (Hughes 2013). Nevertheless, variation in assessments and the spatial variability of predicted effects combine to hamper substantive action to reduce emissions (Bolt 2011).

An example paragraph (perhaps 3 or 4)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007) suggests that global temperatures will increase by an average of at least 0.5°C by 2050. This estimate, although useful for comparison with other predictions, hides the forecast variability in temperatures across the globe (Pittock 1993; IPCC 2003). In the Scandinavian Arctic mean summer temperatures are likely to be 5°C higher by 2050 (Jorgsen 1995), with slightly higher values predicted for the Canadian Arctic north of 60°N latitude (Smith 1998). Such increases will have dramatic effects on a wide variety of plants and animals.

Note: In the last sentence it is clear what the author thinks without having to say “I think...”

Another example paragraph (following from previous)

In Australia, significant increases in temperature are predicted. For example, South Australian summer temperatures will increase 2°C in the next thirty years (Jones 2002) and winter temperatures will rise by 1°C in the tropical north (Adamson 1999). However, these relatively minor changes in temperature regime contrast with the marked effect of changes in moisture balance (Pittock 1997; Whetton 2003). For example, in the West Australia wheat belt, lowered effective moisture may reduce production by 35% (Ogilvie 1999). It appears the South Australian wine industry will fare better since profit growth of \$100 million per year is still expected for the next three decades (Anon. 1999). All of these consequences are predicted to occur, and may or may not be reduced through human reaction.

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Supporting your argument – references and referencing

You need to support your argument with data, information and analyses produced by researchers and theorists working in your field of inquiry. For example:

Land and water salinisation is the most important land management issue in Australia, costing a conservatively estimated \$3.5 billion in lost production each year (Otter 2001, p. 433; James and Lowan 2003, p. 43), with substantial flow on effects to the viability of rural towns (Taylor *et al.* 2002).

When you refer to data, information or analyses produced by others, these are your **references** (also called **sources**). The more relevant references you read and utilise for your argument the better your argument will become. Research as widely as possible, this will give you (i) more ideas for your argument, (ii) a better understanding of the issues and debates, and (iii) more sources to use for your argument.

Most importantly you must demonstrate that you have accessed, and understood, the **academic** literature related to your topic. In general, academics will only accept peer reviewed books, book chapters and journal articles (this is the academic literature). Academics may vary on the sources they accept as authoritative – check this with the course coordinator before you start your research. It is best to avoid:

- Popular WWW pages (such as Wikipedia or those produced by partisan organisations such as political parties and non-government organisations)
- Newspapers, popular magazines (*Habitat, National Geographic*)

In-Text Referencing (Citations), the Harvard System and Quotes: Proper referencing is essential in a good piece of scholarly writing. You must use sufficient referencing (citations) to support the claims you make throughout the text (an absolute minimum is three per paragraph and 8 different sources used per 1000 word essay). As a general guide, remember that the stronger the point you make, the more referencing needed. Referencing is not needed in the conclusion. Refer to your course guide for which referencing style is expected.

Where you **quote** (i.e. use the exact words of) other authors or paraphrase their words you must indicate this by using quotation marks. Long quotes which have more than 30 words (or generally go over 2 lines) need to be indented in your text and should be a smaller font.

Conventions

- Do not use single line spacing. Use at least one and a half (1.5) or double spacing.

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- Use the term **anonymous** where it is unclear who has written a particular document. This can be contracted to “Anon.” in the in text referencing e.g.: (Anon., 1999)
- The first time the name of an organisation is used in the text it should be written in full followed by the **acronym** in brackets for example, United Nations (UN). In subsequent references to the United Nations, the acronym UN can be used.
- The name of organisations should be written in full in the reference list, but can be abbreviated in the in-text referencing. Provide the abbreviation in the reference list to remove any ambiguity, e.g.: Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resource Management Board (AMLRNRMB). 2008 *Creating a sustainable future: An integrated natural resources management plan for The Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges region*. AMLRNRMB, Adelaide.
- Spaces are needed between **units of measurement** and the measurement itself: 100 km, 3 mm. Exceptions are for percentages and degrees: 5%, 7°C
- Academics vary on whether they will accept **headings and sub-headings** in essays, so it is best to check with your course coordinator or course guide.

Figures and tables

Figures and tables can summarise a large amount of key information. The best essays provide modified or composite figures and tables, indicating the author has synthesised the information.

- Always refer to the figure in your essay, e.g. “Rates of extinction have increased in the past two decades (Figure 1)”
- Table headings are placed above the table, but figure headings go below the figure.
- Figures should not be provided just for the sake of it, but should instead help in illustrating a point.

Things to avoid

- Don’t repeat or rewrite the question
- Don’t say: “This essay will...”
- Don’t overuse quotes. Information should be synthesised in your own words.
- Academics and academic disciplines vary on the use of the first person (“I”, “we”). Academics working in humanities and social sciences generally accept the use of the term where it is appropriate. Academics working in the physical sciences (e.g. physical geography) generally do not accept the use of the first person. e.g. Statements such as “We need to solve the problem of global warming” or “I think that...” are generally superfluous and should be clear from your discussion.
- Don’t assume or impose gender: e.g. “Man has had the biggest impact on the planet of all species.” Use “people” or “humans” in place.
- Don’t conclude with a grand statement that has not been supported in the essay

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e.g. "If people all learn to live together, then the problem of biodiversity loss can be halted.

Tips from a student perspective

- Ensure that everything being said relates back to the main question/argument, if it does not, it should not be included - quality over quantity.
- Make sure you are forming and presenting your own opinion through academic research, rather than just relaying the information.
- Ensure paragraphs stick to one idea/point and do not make them too long. There is no set limit. However, quality over quantity is important here as well.
- Check with your tutor or course guide as to whether the in-text references/reference list are included in the word count as this can differ between courses.