

Writing Essays

Writing Centre Learning Guide

A common form of university assessment is the essay. The purpose of essays is for you to demonstrate your understanding of certain key concepts associated with your course and communicate this understanding in a formal, structured way. Essays involve more than simply repeating information from your readings and lectures. They require analysis rather than description, as well as an evaluation of the material and the formation of an argument or interpretation of the set topic.

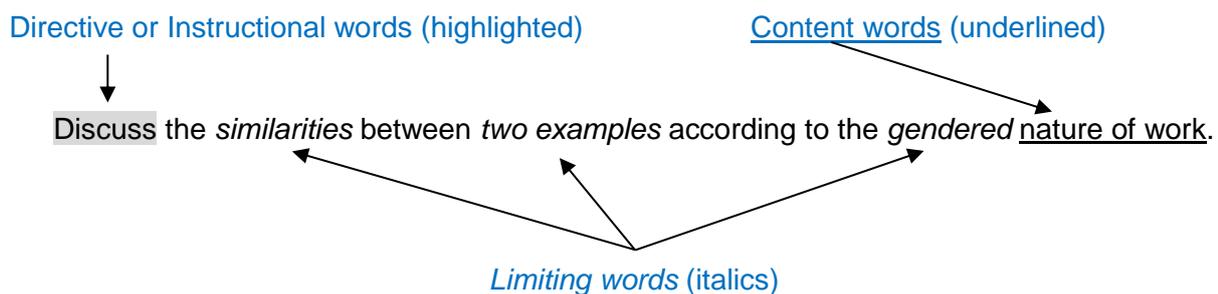
Analysing the essay question

Once you have chosen (or been given) an essay topic, your first task is to analyse the question you have been set. Failure to do this is a common reason why students do poorly in or fail essay assessments. This analysis of the question then shapes your research, your note-taking and the structure of the essay paper.

Analysing the question involves identifying three kinds of words that you would find in most essay questions:

- **Directive or Instructive words:** tell you what to do with the content words
e.g. discuss, compare, contrast, evaluate or analyse
- **Content words:** tell you what the question is about
- **Limiting words:** limit the focus of the question
e.g. a particular time period, theory, place or number.

These words have been identified in the following example of an essay question:



You must adhere to any word/page limit. In most courses, approximately 10% more or less than the required word length may be considered reasonable, while in others nothing over the word limit will be accepted. Beyond 10% of a word limit either way will almost always cause a deduction in your grades. It is important to check the details with your lecturer/tutor.

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Analysing more complex questions

Many essay questions are more complex than the above example. Sometimes a clear directive word is not included. If this is the case, you need to infer the directive word from the rest of the question. Often the question will include a direct quote, followed by a directive word such as 'discuss' or 'explain the significance of' a given statement.

Sometimes there may be several parts to the question, including a number of directive words. In this case, your task is to recognise the relationship and links between the different parts of the essay question. In the following example, there are both questions and issues to focus on:

It is claimed that Australian children spend more time in front of the television than they spend in school. Should this be a cause for concern? Should parents be more proactive in controlling their children's exposure to television? From your readings, discuss the effects of television on children with respect to either:

- a) the development of aggression; or
- b) the development of gender-role stereotypes.

Rather than answer the questions first, then focus on either a or b, it would be more effective to respond to the questions 'within' the discussion of a or b. This will demonstrate that you have recognised the relationship between all parts of the assignment and integrated your understanding of the overall topic.

Rough plan

Once you have thoroughly analysed the question, you are ready to write a rough plan for your essay. You will need to be flexible about your plan as you may need to change it when you begin to research your topic in more detail.

Before starting on your research, write down what you already know about your topic, maybe from pre-reading from your lectures and tutorials, or from the wording of the question itself. Consider this rough plan to be the skeleton of your essay. The shape of your final essay will be something like this:

Introduction	Approximately 10% of the word length	
Body	Approximately 80% of the word length	Issue 1 Issue 2 Issue 3 Issues 4 etc.
Conclusion	Approximately 10% of the word length	

Directing your reading/noting/research

Once you are clear on the essay question and have a rough plan, you can begin to research your essay topic. This will involve relevant reading and noting material from textbooks, journals and other sources. Often your lecturer/tutor will suggest readings to begin with and you will be expected to find more on your own.

Check your question often to ensure what you are reading and noting is relevant to your set topic. If the reading is not relevant, stop and find something which will directly address the essay question.

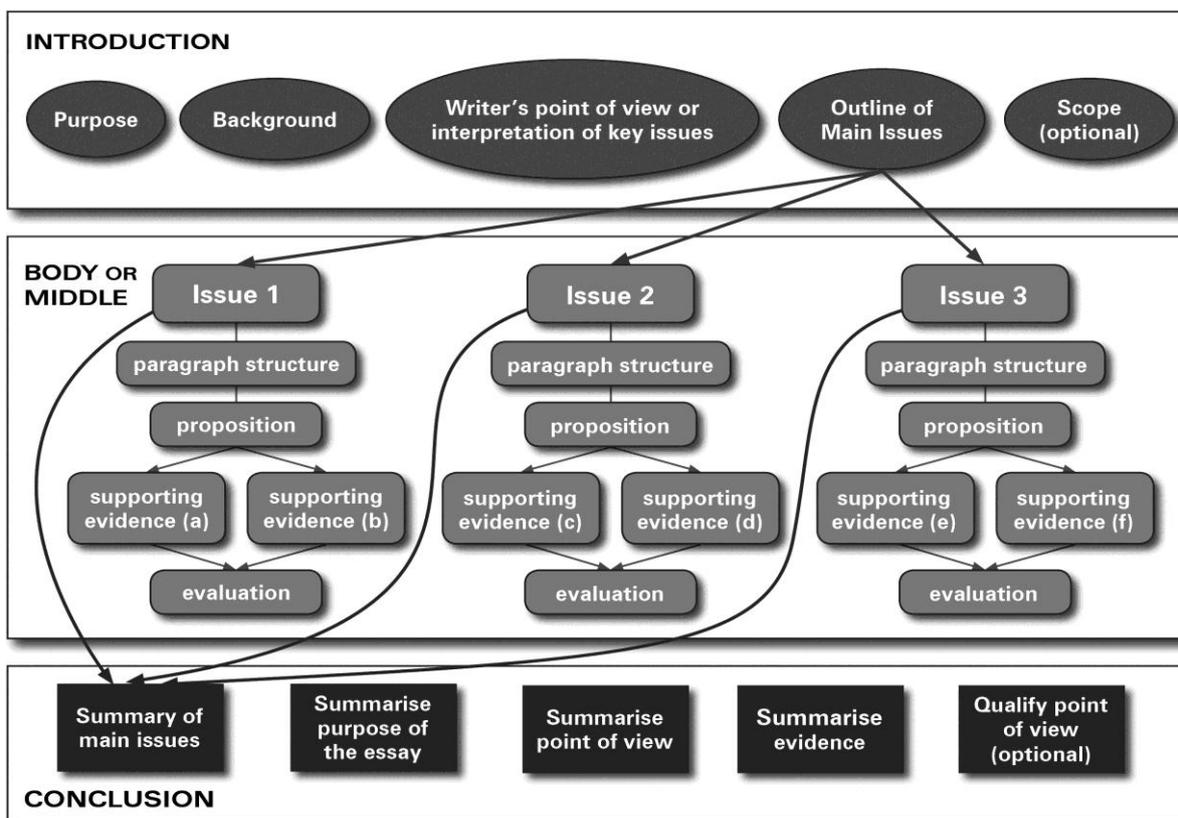
Forming a point of view

As a result of your reading and thinking, decide what your position is in relation to the essay topic. It is important to be clear on your point of view, as the whole of your essay should support this view.

Structure of the essay

The figure below provides you with a visual representation of the overall structure of an essay showing:

- the key aspects to be included in the introduction
- the relationship between the introduction of the essay and each of the issues discussed in the body or middle of the paper
- the aspects contained in the conclusion.



Writing the introduction and conclusion

For more information on these two important parts of an essay, refer to the Writing Centre learning guide [Introductions and Conclusions](#).

Writing the body

For each of the issues you identified, consider the evidence you collected from your reading and noting. What is your view on each issue? Your statement of this view forms the proposition statement for each section of the body as shown in the figure above. Explain, illustrate or elaborate on each proposition with evidence from your reading.

Language

It is expected that you use formal, academic English when writing at university.

- Academic writing does not usually include personal pronouns e.g. 'I' or 'my'
- It is more acceptable to write in third person e.g. 'It seems that...' rather than 'I believe that...'
- Avoid using colloquial terms, slang and contractions e.g. use 'they are' instead of 'they're'
- Ensure that your language is 'inclusive'. Avoid using sexist or racist language e.g. instead of using 'mankind' use 'humanity' which is inclusive of both sexes

Rough draft

Once you have analysed the question and completed your research, you will be ready to write the first draft of your essay. This will, of course, not be a polished final product but should be considered a 'work-in-progress'. While writing, make sure you refer to your question and check that your essay is still on track.

Polishing

Once you have drafted and redrafted your essay you must polish it so that you are presenting the best possible essay to ensure the best possible grade. Use the following checklist as a guide:

- Have I answered the question, including all parts of the question?
- Have I avoided the use of personal pronouns (first person)?
- Have I included a reference list or bibliography?
- Have I kept within the word length?
- Have I proofread my work to ensure correct spelling/grammar?
- Have I put the correct cover sheet information on the front of my essay?
- Have I referenced correctly?
- Is there a clear structure, including an introduction, logical body and conclusion?

Referencing

In all academic work you are expected to reference correctly. This means referencing throughout your essay (also called in-text referencing) and including a reference list at the end of all assignments. The actual method of referencing is likely to vary from course to course. Check your course guides or with your lecturers/tutors for preferred styles.

Other useful resources

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/pdf/essay.pdf>

<http://www.lib.uoquelpk.ca/get-assistance/writing/specific-types-papers/writing-university-essays>

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/writing/general/essay/sample-essay/index.xml>

http://www.usyd.edu.au/stuserv/documents/learning_centre/essay.pdf