

WRITING ESSAYS - an adapted university guide*

* adapted and abridged from The University Of Melbourne School Of Social And Political Sciences' *Guide To The Writing And Presentation Of Essays* available at:
http://ssps.unimelb.edu.au/sites/ssps.unimelb.edu.au/files/2012_SSps_Essay_Writing_Guide.pdf

Essays give you a chance to **show what you can do**: that you **understand the question** asked; that you **understand the issues** involved; that you have done the **appropriate amount of reading**. Having got that far, you must then show you can **communicate your understanding** to others.

Make sure that you **actually answer** the question. If you are asked to **assess**, or to **choose**, or to **discuss** - do it! Do not just write down everything you know about the subject: it may not all be relevant.

Your teachers are not necessarily looking for 'correct answers'. There is generally no 'line' for you to follow. They are concerned with **how well you make your case**. Whether they agree or disagree with your judgment is not essential to your mark. Disagreement does not lead to bad marks; bad essays do.

If there are important arguments against your position, do not ignore them; deal with them honestly. Give those who disagree with you a fair go. Try to meet their arguments with better ones. Scholarship is not a matter of political point-scoring: **you must respect evidence and superior arguments**.

Your argument should be **consistent**, and the language used should be clear, grammatical and precise. Furthermore, **an essay is a finished piece of work**, not a draft or series of notes (although you are encouraged to produce **drafts** of your essays).

PLANNING AND WRITING

Choosing your topic

You are usually offered several topics for essays. Choose one carefully and begin working on it early. Fit your preparation and writing into the framework provided by deadlines in other subjects. This will avoid a frantic, last minute rush. Essays are often best done when the topic interests you, but beware of becoming consumed by it: your capacity for analysis may be impaired, or you may neglect your other school work.

Analysing

It is vitally important to **address directly the essay question** or topic at hand. Begin by carefully examining the **key words and concepts** in the questions. Pay particular attention to the difference between commonly used words:

- **compare**: examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their similarities and differences;
- **contrast**: examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their differences;
- **analyse**: consider the various components of the whole and explain the relationships among them;
- **discuss**: present the different aspects of a question and problem;
- **evaluate**: examine the various sides of a question to reach a cogent and plausible conclusion.

Once the topic has been clarified, you should break it down into its component parts. This enables you to decide what material is relevant to the topic.

Outline

After analysing the question, the components should be organised to form an essay outline (or plan). The outline helps to ensure that your essay has a coherent, logical structure. It also facilitates the preparation of your essay by guiding your reading, note-taking and writing. Outlines also enable you to assign relative weighting to the different components of your answer by differentiating which points are central, and which peripheral. They will thus assist your research effort.

Researching

Wide reading is essential if you wish to submit a good essay. Effective research depends on knowing what to look for, so always keep your essay outline in mind. **Ensure that you read to answer the specific sections of your outline.**

The reading requirements are related to the nature of the subject and topic. Some topics may require a detailed analysis of a small number of texts; yet it is rarely sufficient to read only one or two books/websites/sources on a particular topic.

Note-taking

Use your essay outline as the basis of taking notes from your readings. Try not to photocopy large slabs of reading: it often delays the hard work of reading and thinking; unhappily, it sometimes substitutes for them.

Be organised in your note-taking. Maintain an order that you can follow and that will be of assistance in writing the essay. Such an order might be provided by your essay outline. How you choose to make notes is up to you. Keep an accurate record of the full reference and write down the page from which you obtain each piece of information, even though it may not be a direct quotation. The use of 'endnote' software can assist in this process; see your library or teacher for further help with this.

Writing and revising

The essay should be a **coherent** and **logical** piece of analytical prose that, in the first place, **answers the question set**, and, in the second place, **cogently argues, carefully documents, and clearly expresses your case**. Writing an essay is almost always a process of writing and revising. The structure and coherence of your argument **often become clearer upon revision**.

Structure

The core structure of the essay has three parts: **an introduction, the body of the essay, and a conclusion**. The **introduction** should introduce the topic to be discussed and prepare the reader for what is to follow; be concise. It may be useful to **summarise briefly** the overall theme or argument of the essay, indicating the main points to be made. The **body** of the essay is the **place to present your argument**. Attend to the logical sequence of your presentation, and to the considerations about evidence discussed above. The **conclusion** should **restate briefly** the key **arguments** and their **implications**.