

Essay Writing

Writing an essay is a vital skill for being successful at university. Good essay writing takes practice, and preparation is the first step. Try the tips below for help with planning, structuring and writing your essay. You may also like to try an [essay writing workshop](#).

Plan your writing

Begin by thinking about the topic and generating as many ideas as you can. Use your general knowledge and the information from lectures, tutorials and subject readings.

Have the question in mind and write down all the related issues, theories, arguments and evidence that you are aware of.

This process gives you the start of a writing plan – you should notice a central theme or argument emerging. It further helps by providing ideas about what you might want to write about.

Include:

- any ideas triggered by the question
- questions you need to answer
- lines of thought, research or argument
- any evidence that might support possible arguments
- words you need to define

Develop a draft plan

Develop a draft plan to help with your research. The level of detail of this plan will depend on the question and the knowledge you already have. Include background information, definitions and any questions you need to answer.

This plan will help you determine the central argument of your essay, organise the information you need to find, and arrange your ideas in a logical order.

You might break a 2,000 word essay into the following parts:

- Introduction (200 words)
- Discussion (400 words) 2-3 paragraphs
- Evaluation of current practice (500 words) 3-4 paragraphs
- Critical analysis of future directions (700 words) 5-6 paragraphs
- Conclusion (200 words)

Breaking the essay into smaller sections makes it more manageable. If you estimate how many words you might spend on each part, you will get an idea of how much information you need for each section.

Structure your essay

THE INTRODUCTION

Your introduction sets the focus of the essay and provides a map for your reader. Whether you write it first or last, you should review it and make any changes that are required. The introduction should focus a reader's attention on the central theme of an essay. Clarify how you intend to interpret or limit the question and give a clear, but brief overview of your argument and the main points supporting it. You may also need to define key terms in the question.

THE BODY

As you write the body of your essay, you will probably have several open books, photocopied articles, pages of notes (or their electronic equivalent, in EndNote for example), and your essay question and plan in front of you. As you develop each point, refer back to the essay question and think about how the point you are making both relates to the question and develops your argument. If its relation is not clear, explain the relevance of your point.

THE CONCLUSION

Your conclusion brings together all the different strands of your argument. The claims you made in your introductory paragraph have now been fully developed and substantiated, so you can reiterate them more assertively.

A conclusion can also explore:

- the significance of your findings
- the implications of your conclusion
- any limitations of the approach you've taken

The conclusion should refer back to the topic and end on a well-reasoned note.

Build an argument

The essay argument emerges from and demonstrates your critical reading of relevant texts. The points you make to support your argument need to be supported with evidence from your reading, and your sources must be properly referenced.

In academic writing, it is not enough to make a valid point; you need to back it up with evidence. Supporting evidence can come from the ideas of other authors, factual information, statistics, or logical argumentation. The kind of evidence you use depends on the discipline in which you are writing.

Use quotations that directly support your argument and have something critical to say. It is best to avoid long quotations (more than four lines of text). It is better to demonstrate that you understand what the author is saying through paraphrasing and summarising. The reader is interested in reading your argument, your interpretation and your analysis.

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are an important structural element of good writing. Each paragraph should develop a point or topic. A paragraph should include a topic sentence, which states the main idea of that paragraph. It is often the first sentence in the paragraph.

A topic sentence introduces the paragraph's main idea. In the rest of the paragraph you elaborate and provide supporting evidence for the idea. If you have only indicated the issue that is to be addressed and can only draw the main point out after your discussion and examples, the topic sentence will be the last sentence of a paragraph.

Whether it comes first or last, a good topic sentence contains only one idea and sums up what the paragraph is about. Other sentences expand the topic by giving supporting details, facts, examples and quotations. Every sentence in a paragraph must be clearly related to the main idea. The sentences in a paragraph should also be ordered logically.

The length of a paragraph is determined by its complexity and significance to the overall argument. The main function of the concluding sentence of a paragraph is to draw the information to a logical conclusion and link it to the next paragraph. Each paragraph should be the next logical step in the development of your argument. To make sure this occurs, you need to have thought about the best order for your ideas, and how you will develop your argument.

Link your ideas

Your ideas can be enhanced through the careful use of transitions. Transitions are words or phrases that show the connections between ideas or between sentences.

Try these:

Addition: additionally, and, also, as well as, furthermore, in addition, moreover

Comparison: correspondingly, equally, identically, in comparison, in the same way, likewise, similarly

Exemplifying and illustrating: for example, for instance, including, markedly, specifically, such as, to illustrate

Contrast: alternatively, but, contrarily, conversely, however, in contrast, instead, on the one hand ... on the other hand, yet

Emphasis: above all, again, certainly, especially, in fact, indeed, most importantly, of course, particularly

Concession: although, even though, despite, nevertheless, notwithstanding, whereas, while

Cause or effect: as a result, consequently, due to, subsequently, therefore, thus, because, hence, since

Concluding or summarising: all in all, in conclusion, in short, finally, in summary, to review, to sum up, on the whole

Clarification or restatement: in essence, in other words, namely, that is

Use evidence to support your argument

Working out where to find information and who to contact for advice is one of the most important skills to learn. Take the time to become familiar with the University's information services.

Our university libraries have extensive reference collections. Library resources will provide you with a grasp on research and concepts used in your field.

Increasingly, journals are available in digital format, and the library has access to an extensive range of these valuable resources. Use the expertise of the library staff for help with:

- search strategies
- getting the most out of databases
- tracking down information held in other libraries
- accessing rare and archived material
- organising information
- advice on citing sources

The [library](#) offers workshops on searching databases effectively, and managing your reference information.

Sentences

A sentence is a unit of language which expresses a complete idea. This means that it can stand alone and makes sense without reference to another sentence.

Sentence Structures

A **simple** sentence. For example: The empire was at its strongest.

A **compound** sentence is two sentences made in to one sentence. For example: The empire was at its strongest, and colonies thrived to the benefit of the mother country.

A **complex** sentence is a sentence with one or more dependent clauses. It cannot stand-alone and make sense. For example: Because his paintings were ignored at home, he moved to Europe for two decades.

Sentences can be both compound and complex. For example: When ship workers went on strike, several of their leaders were imprisoned; however, domestic and international pressure forced the government to relent, although the unions remain weak by Western standards.

Common Sentence Errors

Run-on sentences. For example: Buddha was uninterested in physical laws, he strove to withdraw from the world, the spiritual realm was more real to him.

Sentence fragments. For example: In time, the cities became more crowded. Though many people remained on the farms.

Subject-verb agreement occurs when the verb does not agree in number (singular or plural) with the subject of a sentence. For example: His arguments, which do not follow from any clearly stated thesis and rarely lead to a logical conclusion, is unconvincing.

Pronouns and antecedents, when a pronoun is a word used instead of a noun. For example: The crowd was ashamed of their behaviour (its).

Tense inconsistency. For example: Menzies regards the judgement of whether life is worth living as the fundamental question of philosophy. He considered this question the starting point for the meaning of life.

Subject - verb separation. For example: Menzies, who appealed to the electorate's distrust of communism, post-war patriotism and fears of too much centralisation of power, led the Liberals to victory in the 1949 election.

Verb separation. For example: The general announced with great reluctance and a sense of futility the orders.

Compound verb separation. For example: Loman was, however much his sons failed to recognise it, trying to help them.

Edit your work

Once you've written a first draft, it's a good idea to have a break so that you can distance yourself from what you have written. If you can, leave it for a day or two before returning to it. After a break you will be able to re-read what you have written with a fresh and more objective perspective. This way you will be better able to discover any inconsistencies in logic or argument, weak vocabulary or grammatical mistakes. You may even find that you have thought of some new ideas to incorporate.

It is important to allow time for editing. You need to edit for structure and argument; expression, grammar and spelling; and correct referencing.

When reading through your first draft consider the following:

Introduction

- Does your introduction tell the reader how you understand the topic, e.g., does it give background or contextual information?
- Are key terms defined if necessary?
- Does it clearly preview your argument?
- Does it provide the reader with a map of your essay?

Body

- Does each paragraph have one and only one main idea?
- Do all the sentences in each paragraph contribute to that main idea?
- Do the points you are making follow logically?
- Is the connection between one paragraph and another clear?
- Is your argument consistent?
- Is any one section too long or repetitious?

Conclusion

- Does the conclusion bring the strands of the argument together?
- Does it leave the reader in no doubt about your position in relation to the question?

As you edit, imagine someone else reading your essay. At every step, you need to tell the reader exactly what you are doing. If they have to stop and think, 'How does this point relate to the question?' or 'What is the point being made here?' then you have not done your job of communicating clearly to the reader.

After editing for structure, you should be happy with your argument and the way you have developed and supported it in the essay.

Punctuation

The following are three punctuation marks that often cause problems.

Comma ,

The comma has several uses, but is ultimately about separating parts of the sentence to avoid confusing the reader. This most often means separating the basic sentence from a description or qualification (1), separating two sentences with a conjunction (2), separating a sentence from additional information (3), or separating items in a simple list (4).

- Originally popular, CDs have largely been replaced with other technologies.
- The book has been out of print for many years, but continues to be of interest.
- The university logo, which represents a seahorse, is distinctive.
- It is divided into the cervical, thoracic, lumbar, sacral and coccygeal sections.

Semi Colon ;

The semi colon joins two independent sentences that are so closely related that the writer wants to run them together. In this situation, a comma is not enough.

- Before 1989, Newcastle was mining-based; these days its economic basis is more diverse.

Colon :

A colon is used when you want to add a more detailed explanation of a noun. The noun, and its explanation, must be at the end of the sentence.

- The course covers three areas: reading, writing and listening.