

# The Little Book of Essay Writing



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

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# Introduction

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All students at university will have to write essays. Those of you in the arts or social sciences, we think it is fair to say, will write more essays than those of you in pure science-based subjects, but even you budding scientists will have to write some essays.

Most of you will have written essays at secondary school. For those of you who are mature students, this may have been a long time ago. Academic expectations of you at university are higher than at school or college, and an essay that may have been more than acceptable in sixth form may lack the critical edge required at university.

One irony, however, is that although expectations may be high, essay writing is not often taught within university disciplines. In order to learn and develop the skill – and it is a skill that can be acquired, perfected, and mastered – you may have to go to your university’s writing or tutorial centre or take a workshop from support staff trained to teach academic skills.

*The Little Book of Essay Writing* attempts to fill a gap in essay writing self-instruction. Yes, there are many excellent books out there on the subject, but they tend to be textbooks as opposed to user-friendly manuals.

*The Little Book*, as its name suggests, is a condensed, readable, and accessible guide to essay writing, which can be read from cover to cover, but also dipped into more casually, or used to scan for specific information. The book contains such essential topics as answering the question, making notes in preparation for writing, and essay structure. It also confronts some of the trickier areas of essay writing such as purpose and audience. Throughout the book, we, the authors, try to demystify essay writing and to present it as a skill made up of a set of skills that all university students can learn and become proficient at.

## Approaches to writing

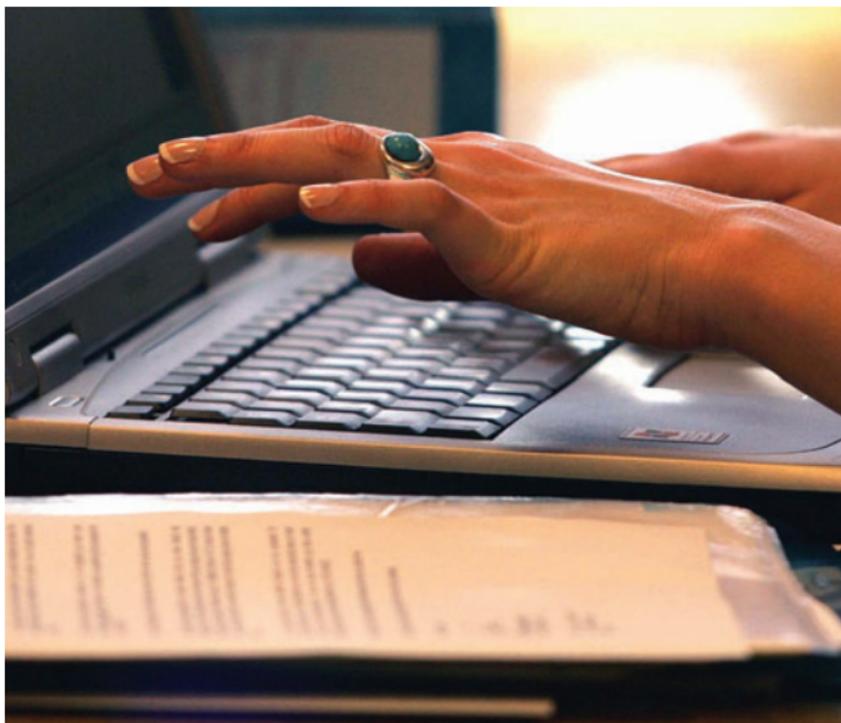
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Writing is a complex human activity, but most of us manage to do it to a greater or lesser degree. Like all complex activities, there are various views on what it is and how best to do it. A fairly conventional view expressed by Flower and Hayes (1981) is that cognitive processes – how you think – affect how you write. This, on the face of it, may seem glaringly obvious. What they are saying, in a nutshell, is that thinking must precede writing.

Peter Elbow (1973), the American writing guru, however, challenges this traditional view that we must first decide what we want to write before we write about it. He believes that we can use writing as a means of generating ideas and that it is by writing that we discover our thoughts.

Even further along the spectrum is the school of life writing (Goldberg, 1997), which advocates that the best writing comes from getting in touch with your unconscious. A typical writing exercise in a life writing class might involve continuous writing for ten minutes (never lifting the pen off the page) where, for example, you might begin by describing your hands and then writing down any associations that come to your mind about hands. In *The Little Book*, we suggest a similar five minute exercise to demonstrate how much writing you can actually do in a short time.

What does all of the above mean? Simply this: in writing, different approaches will work best for different people. One of the biggest challenges you will face at university is the Socratic maxim of knowing yourself, particularly how you learn and work best. In learning to write essays, you will need to figure out what type of writer you are and to adopt planning and writing strategies that suit you.



## The essay as discourse

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All university disciplines have discourses, that is, a set of terms, a jargon if you will, and methodologies, or ways of looking at things, which have developed over time. The modern essay could be seen as a university discourse. It, too, has developed over time and has conventions of structure, language, and ways of presenting evidence. Furthermore, it is a university discourse because it is relevant to university. After you graduate, you may never again write the type of essay that was so much a part of your life at university, although many of the skills you learn in doing essays will be transferable to other forms of non-university writing. It should be some solace to realise, however, that many before you have learned this discourse. If you have older brothers or sisters who have been to university, they will have written essays. If your parents are university graduates, they, too, will have written essays. With hard work and persistence, you can become part of this discourse community of essay writers.

# What is an essay?

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An essay is a short written piece of prose that attempts to answer a question or to respond to a statement. It is written in formal English and needs to be grammatically sound.

Essays are one of the most common forms of assessment used in universities because in tackling an essay question, you are working with the knowledge acquired in your course or module. Not all courses employ this mode of assessment, but those that do will be stimulating you to develop your writing skills.

Some of the conventions relating to the essay format are as follows:

- Writing should be in continuous text, although sometimes an essay might have sections with sub-headings. Paragraphs should be effectively used to break the text up into readable chunks. The onus is always on the essay writer to organise his or her writing in such a way that it is easy for the reader to follow.
- The essay is formal in both structure and language. It should have a well defined introduction, body, and conclusion. Standard English should be used as opposed to colloquial English.

- Essays can vary in length anywhere from 500 to 5,000 words. Such a range is not set in stone, but shorter pieces might constitute some form of brief reflection, whereas longer pieces of writing would probably be called projects, theses, or dissertations.
- The English word 'essay' is derived from the French 'essai', meaning 'a try'. It is worth bearing the original meaning in mind. Historically, the essay has been a means of expressing everyday concerns or reflections and not a format used to express ultimate answers to things. The modern university essay differs considerably from its historical cousin, yet something of its older ethos remains. As a student writer, you will not be expected to produce an ultimate answer, but rather to 'try' your best to produce a plausible answer to a topic that probably has no set or singular answer.

## Where do my ideas belong?

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Students often wonder where their own ideas fit into essays they are writing, if at all. Many essay topics (although not all) focus students on issues or debates within a discipline – some of these debates may have been going on for hundreds of years! Lecturers will want you to situate yourself in that debate, and they may want you to do secondary reading, that is to read the critics, so that you can understand the main issues involved or the pertinent schools of thought. At the end of the day, however, your lecturers will want to know what your position is and why. In that sense, your essay is your own even if you are summarising the views or findings of others in the process of arriving at your own view.

Sometimes students wonder whether they should strive to be original in their essays. Given that you will probably be entering an on-going discourse, the chances of your being original are probably slim. Anyway, this is not what is being asked of you. A thorough, plausible answer to the topic is what's expected. If an essay were a shoe, it would be best characterised as a comfortable and sturdy walking shoe, capable of standing up to a few scuffs and scrapes, as opposed to the latest high tech trainer, which makes you feel like you could fly. Flights of fancy aren't needed in essay writing; a thoughtful, methodical approach will be rewarded amply.

# Pre-writing:

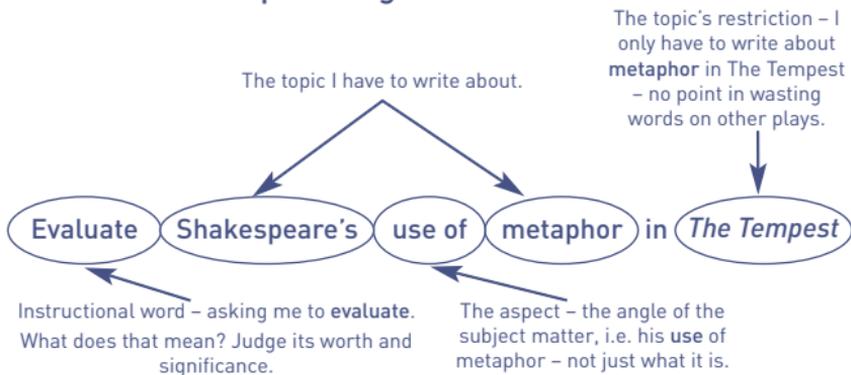
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## Answering the question

One of the biggest problems students face in essay writing is squarely addressing the essay topic.

There can be several reasons for this. One common mistake is a rush of blood at the sight of a topic and a subsequent splurge of writing resulting in what can best be described as an unfocussed essay of the 'all I know about the subject' school. This can particularly be the case in examinations requiring short essay-style answers. However, the problem can also arise when students have had weeks to contemplate a topic. Often the failure here is to analyse the topic question or statement in its entirety, not just part of it. Each word of the topic needs to be analysed as is demonstrated in the following example:

Here is an example assignment title:



Essay topics will contain certain key terms (sometimes called instructional words) such as 'describe', 'analyse', 'discuss', 'compare', 'critically evaluate', etc. It is important to have a grasp of these terms as they will guide you as to what is expected. There is a difference, for example, between 'Describe Jung's Theory of Personality' and 'Critically Evaluate Jung's Theory of Personality'. The former topic is simply asking you to describe the main aspects of Jung's theory of personality; of course, you will need to decide what those main aspects are and possibly even compare Jung's theory with other theories of personality, even though that is not explicitly asked of you. The latter topic is asking you to go beyond mere description and to place a value on Jung's theory. It is asking you to raise questions like the following about Jung's theory: how scientifically based is it; how thorough is it; does it help us understand who we really are; is something missing in it; is it superseded by other theories?

Although it is crucially important to try to understand the language of essay topics, this is not necessarily a straightforward task because a lot of language we use is not transparent. In the context of an essay topic, 'discuss' could mean 'describe', but it could also mean 'analyse' or even 'critically analyse', and it might implicitly mean 'compare'.

If you don't understand an essay topic after carefully analysing it, your classmates might be able to help. Your best source is the author of the essay topic itself, your lecturer. Don't feel shy about contacting your lecturer and explaining your difficulty; worse yet, don't feel that you are stupid because you need guidance. As can be seen with the word 'discuss', words can signify many different things, and they do not implicitly carry the meaning that the writer of the words necessarily intended. Asking for clarification is the smart thing to do: it shows that you are taking charge of your learning and coming to grips with ambiguity.

## **Developing your own topic**

Sometimes students in upper years of undergraduate courses and usually postgraduate students will be asked to design their own essay topics. The most common error here is to take on too broad a subject – 'history of the world' approach – which inevitably ends badly. The key here is to narrow one's topic, not so narrow that you have little to say but sufficiently narrow that you can cover the topic in some depth.

Let's revisit our friend Carl Jung. To attempt to write an essay on the psychology of Carl Jung would most likely lead to a superficial descriptive consideration of his theories – the topic is too broad. On the other hand, simply focussing on his notions of extraversion and introversion might be too narrow. However, considering his notions of extraversion and introversion and their implications for teaching and learning might strike the right balance. The topic is narrow, but not so narrow that a lot couldn't be said about it. The topic could be covered both extensively and in depth. Furthermore, this type of topic is extremely common – the analysis of a theory and the application of the theory to practice.

When devising your own topic, don't try to encompass more than you can reasonably manage. You want to demonstrate that you can analyse a topic comprehensively, and you will only be able to do that if you limit your scope.

Having understood your essay topic or devised a manageable one of your own, your next step may well be making notes.

## **Making notes**

You will need to make notes on your information sources. Remember to take down the details of your references since you will need to include this information in your citations and bibliographic references.

Note making differs from note taking in that it involves reading, evaluating, summarising and paraphrasing. In other words, it involves your being active, interpreting as opposed to copying passively. You should approach everything you read with questions in mind: what is it that you want to learn from your sources?

By actively engaging in the process and relating what you are making notes of to what you already know, you will find that note making is not a painful or boring process, but is one of the steps on the road to understanding and extending your knowledge.

## How do I make notes?

- There are several methods for making notes, and quite often, how much or how little detail you need depends on why you are making notes. For example, if you are just beginning to investigate a topic, you will need to get an overview of the subject. A quick mind map diagram with the main themes and the issues or problems could be sufficient.
- You can also combine styles: for example, a tree diagram to put all the ideas together without any prioritisation, a mind map to show relationships, and finally notes in sequence for details. These techniques will be explained in more detail in the next section.
- Sometimes you will need to make quite extensive notes, but you should resist the temptation to copy, which is really taking notes as opposed to making them. A good technique is to put the source aside after you've read for a while, then sum up the important points.
- Don't spend hours on end making notes. You need to decide which sources are absolutely crucial to your topic and make notes on those sources. Don't overdo it! It is possible to be awash in too much detail. It is more important to present the reader of your essay with well analysed information than with reams of undigested facts.



## Planning techniques:

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Once you've made notes, you will need to organise these and develop a plan of attack. Some students benefit from making a very visual plan, other students like to make detailed linear plans, and yet others prefer to write and to plan and organise later. The key here is to find a technique that suits the way you work best.

Visual techniques work for some students in helping them generate and organise ideas and plan essays, but they don't work for everyone, and they may not work for you. Each of us learns differently, and your job as a pro-active student is to search out those approaches that best suit your learning style and mode of working.

There are no hard and fast rules about how to plan and organise an essay. Some of you may find the following structured approach useful:

1. What do you want to say?  
Begin by writing down the gist of your argument.
2. Get your points in order.  
Work out the best order for presenting your ideas. Sometimes strongest point to least convincing is a feasible approach, or you might like to do it the other way around, working up to your strongest point.

3. Check your ideas.  
Do the ideas you want to present follow coherently one from another? If not, do they need re-ordering or bridging/linking ideas?
4. Check your examples.  
Could you add examples to illustrate the points you are trying to make?
5. Write an introduction.
6. Write a draft of the body of the essay.  
Using the order of ideas you have decided upon and the examples you have chosen, write an initial draft.
7. Write the conclusion.  
Paradoxically, this could also be the first section you write, especially if you have a very clear idea of where you are going.

Adapted from Fairbairn and Winch (1996)

A structured approach to planning and organising an essay may suit many of you, but like any learning skill, one size may not fit all. Some of you would benefit from a more spontaneous approach: that is, sitting down at your word processor or with a pad of paper and getting ideas down as they come to you.

If you follow such a process, then undoubtedly you will find yourself making a considerable number of revisions, but using a computer makes additions, deletions, and the moving around of sentences and paragraphs easy. Some people simply work best by getting their ideas down first and ordering and organising later.

Whatever your method of planning and organising an essay, it is important that you have a method that works for you. Sometimes combining spontaneous and less spontaneous approaches can work: doing some free writing before making a plan, or making a brief plan before writing at some length.

As mentioned earlier, some students profit from five to ten minutes of free writing, where they force themselves never to let the pen leave the page. When they get stuck, they repeat the last word they've written until a flow of thought is regained. Students who have tried this method are amazed at how much can be written in such a short time. Equally surprising is the natural structure which emerges without seemingly thinking of structure.

Here are some techniques you might like to try for organising your ideas and notes and planning an essay:

## Linear plans

These are the most common way of organising ideas. Look at this example:

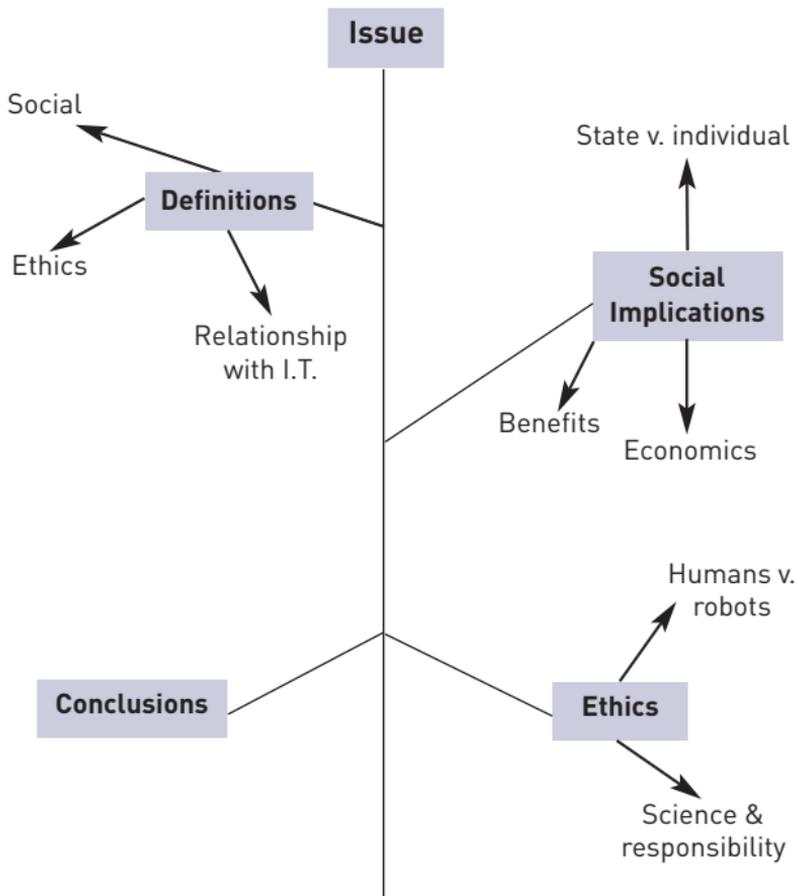
Topic: Examine the role of I.T. in the workplace.

1.1 Interpret the question, e.g. 'I am taking I.T. to mean...'	Introduction
1.2 Set the objective	
1.3 Outline the structure	
2.1 Define terms	Body
2.2 Main areas, e.g. computers, the modern office, the relationship. Cite and discuss examples	
2.3 Evidence and argument, e.g. 'for and against' case relating to efficiency, working conditions for staff, etc.	
3.1 Summarise the discussion	Conclusion
3.2 Identify areas for further research	

There are also other ways of getting ideas on paper or organising notes.

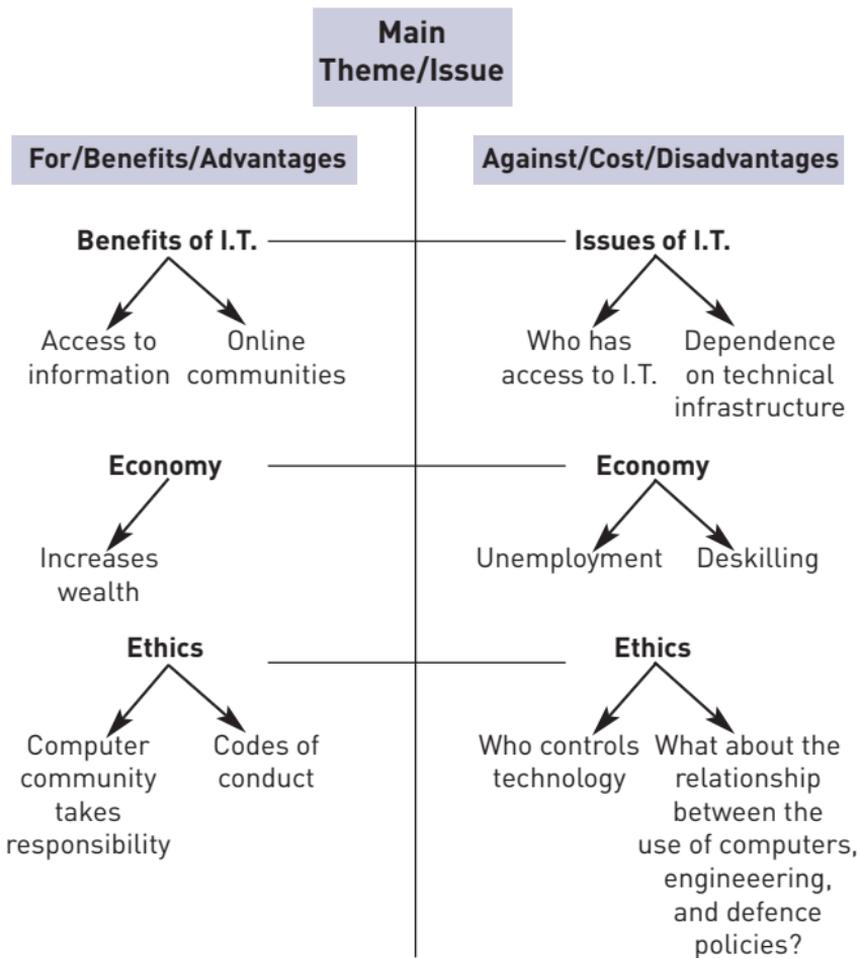
## Keyword trees

These allow you to specify the key and subsidiary points without organising them in any particular order at this point.



## Networks

These are useful if you have been asked to outline the main arguments in a controversial topic or to contrast two topics.



## Mind maps

Mind maps are a way of making notes or generating ideas using only key words and images.

This is an extremely useful technique that enables you to quickly get key concepts and ideas down on the page in an easy and fun way.

Mind maps also make it easier to remember and review information because of their visual impact.

Mind maps can be adapted for many different uses: making notes from the printed word, making notes from a lecture or video, planning essays or presentations, as a technique for exam revision, or for problem solving.

### Top tips for creating mind maps:

- Use colour to depict themes and associations and to make things stand out
- Wherever possible use images or symbols
- Remember, anything that stands out on the page will stand out in your mind
- Put ideas down as they occur – be spontaneous
- Be creative – creativity aids memory
- Have fun!

Here is an example of a mind map on Victorian achievers created by a student as a result of brainstorming:



Now that you are ready to write or are actually writing, you would think that what follows should be quite straightforward. After all, you've done a lot of your thinking and planning, and now it's just a case of putting it all together. Well, yes, this is partially true, but there will also be some tricky choices ahead.

# Writing the essay:

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## Essay structure

Essay structure is not an area where you will have to make difficult choices. An essay must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is a functional form that serves a purpose – the linear exposition of an argument. To put this in other words, the form of an essay allows you to present the following to your reader: ‘Here is what I am going to argue, here is my argument and my support for it, and here is what I have argued and its implications.’

### Introduction

This can help you with a number of tasks. It can hit the reader hard with the current issue and relevance of the topic. It sets the scene for the essay. It spells out the main debates/issues which you are going to address and explains and prepares the reader for the order in which you are going to address them. It gives you the chance to show the reader, early on, that you have understood the relevance of the topic and formulated a logical way of approaching it.

Most university essays **should have a thesis statement**, which you would place towards the end of your introductory paragraph. Simply put, a thesis statement is an explicit statement of your argument.

Let's say your topic is one we saw earlier: Evaluate Shakespeare's Use of Metaphor in *The Tempest*. The instructional word here is 'evaluate': meaning judge the value of, the worth of, the effectiveness of, etc. One of the principal key words is 'use'. In this question, you are being asked to place a value on Shakespeare's different uses of metaphor in the play.

Given what is being asked, what follows would be an example of a possible thesis statement: In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses metaphor effectively to set the atmosphere of the play, to develop character, and to further the plot.

This statement is telling your reader what it is you are going to argue, and it may further be telling your reader the order in which you will present your case. It is a guide for both reader and writer; in addition, it is a type of contract, where you the writer are setting the limits and the extent of what you intend to do. So, honour your contract and make sure you do it!

## Body

Relevant content is one thing, order and coherent argument is another. Once you have collected your information from all the useful sources, in what order are you going to put the material? Some helpful principles are as follows:

- Always prepare the reader for what comes next... no surprises. You should not be explaining theory, concepts, principles, etc. at the same time as you apply them. You should have done this clearly in laying your theoretical foundations earlier in the essay. If you want to apply theory to subject specific contexts, you must clearly articulate the theory first.
- Think about the most effective order for the presentation of your ideas. One common order is strongest support for your thesis to weakest support. You could equally reverse this process, and lead with your weakest argument building up to your strongest. It helps to have some rationale for the order of your ideas.

## Conclusion

You should be 'flagging' or sub-concluding at regular points in the essay so that the conclusion is more along the lines of 'So... it would appear that...' or 'Based on the evidence presented, it can be concluded that...'

### Do not...

- Introduce new evidence or arguments at the conclusion stage
- Comment upon something which you have not argued for in the essay
- Tack on your personal opinion without it arising out of your discussion in the body of the essay itself

### Do...

- Revisit the introduction and check each well structured paragraph of the essay. Did you do the things you said you would do in the introduction? Have you fulfilled your contract?
- What did you find? This is the place to discuss your findings, although by the time the reader gets here, they should be fairly clear.

- Your topic will fit into some larger context of which it is a part. What is this larger context, and how does your particular angle of vision in your essay impact on the whole? What are the future implications of your findings?
- Remember, you may think you have to solve all the problems and find the practical solutions to them by the time the conclusion arrives, but half the battle is thinking things through and realising that there is a problem or issue to be addressed.



## Academic writing style

We see the word 'style' in many compound words such as 'hairstyle' and 'lifestyle'. We might say that someone has style in the way that they dress or behave. What we mean in these instances is the manner in which someone does something.

Essays need to have a style, an academic writing style, and not understanding what this style is can lead to some very poor student essays.

There are many components of an academic writing style, but the two that best allow us to understand what style to adopt in writing essays are purpose and audience.

### Purpose

Purpose, simply put, is the reason you are writing the essay. You might answer that you are writing the essay because your lecturer has demanded that you do so as part of the formative assessment for your course. You would have a point, but this would not be the most helpful way of looking at purpose.

Most essay topics are set on complex issues. Your lecturer wants you to recognise the complexity involved but also to take a stand – that is, to argue for a particular thesis. Your purpose, therefore, is to argue your case as clearly as you can.

When you think of purpose in this way, certain other aspects of an academic writing style become more apparent. These could be summed up as follows:

- The organisation of your essay should have a rationale that is easy to follow because your purpose is to make your argument as clear as possible.
- Similarly, your language should be straightforward. Yours is not a quest to confuse, show off your superior vocabulary, be pompous, or fill your writing with gobbledygook and words you don't understand. Again, your purpose is to make your argument as transparent as possible.
- Your lecturer will not be impressed if you digress to the point of muddying your argument. All writers must make difficult choices of what to include and what to leave out, and so must you. Your guiding principles should be the clarity and flow of your argument.

## Audience

A related topic to 'purpose' is that of 'audience'. This is quite a complex issue. In most other instances of communication – for example, an e-mail or a text message – your audience is perfectly clear. This is not the case in essay writing.

If you were asked who you were writing your essay for, you would probably reply that you were writing it for your lecturer. And, yes, this would be true, up to a point. Yet you are not writing it for your lecturer in the sense of extending your lecturer's knowledge (although that could happen) but rather as an exercise in which you are showing your lecturer that you have a grasp of a topic. You are also engaged in an exercise which demonstrates your ability to articulate that grasp in writing.

In some ways, though, you are writing for yourself. It is in the act of putting your ideas down that you may be discovering for yourself what you think. If you already know what you think, then you are working out ways of supporting your thesis.

One useful way out of this dilemma of audience is to think that you are writing for an intelligent classmate. This classmate is a friend to whom you are trying to communicate your thesis as clearly as possible.

You are not trying to impress this friend or overwhelm him/her with the great breadth of your knowledge; rather you are providing this friend with the necessary information to follow your argument without being frustrated. You are treating this friend, in writing, as you would treat any good friend – with consideration and respect. You are keeping this friend in mind as you write – what terms would this friend need defined, what theory needs to be explained, and what links need to be provided so that the train of your argument can be followed and the relevance of your examples understood?

Just as you would probably clean up your home if this friend were visiting, so should you 'clean up' your grammar and spelling before submitting your essay. You want your friend to think of you as a careful, thoughtful communicator.



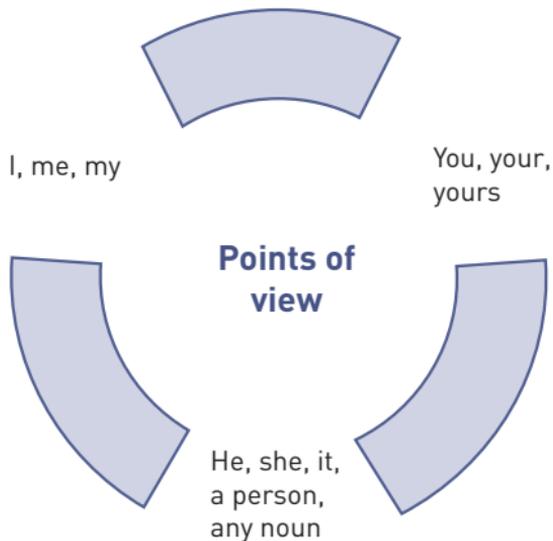
## Choice of person

This is an area of essay writing where you will have to make a definite choice. Your choices are essentially threefold, with a possible fourth option.

'Person' refers to the voice in which you write. If you are writing a personal or reflective essay, you will use the first person – 'I', 'me', 'my' because you are writing primarily about yourself. If you were writing an essay in which you were giving instructions for example (not a type of essay frequently required at university), you would probably use the second person pronoun 'you'. In this book, we frequently use the second person – 'you', 'your', and 'yours' because this book is an instructional manual to a large degree, and we are addressing you, the reader, directly.

Much of the writing you do at university will require that you use third person rather than first or second person. This means that you may be asked to leave the 'I' out of your writing. 'It' or any noun is third person. For reasons of establishing an objective voice, some lecturers may prefer, for example, that you write, 'It could be argued that...' as opposed to 'I believe that...'

A fourth sensible option would be a combination of third and first person – that is, an essay largely written in third person with appropriate use of the first person 'I' when the occasion allows you to speak personally, or when not to do so would lead to very awkward use of language. You want to avoid pompous sounding constructions like, 'The writer of this paper thinks...' and simply write, 'I think...' Clarity and ease of expression should take precedence over slavish adherence to person.



# Presentation

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What your essay looks like is important. Here are some tips and conventions that may help:

- Most essays these days will probably be submitted electronically, but if you must hand in a hard copy as well, A4 paper of good quality is required.
- Line spacing should be one and a half, except for long quotations, which should be single spaced and indented.
- Margins: left approx. 4cm and all others 2cm.
- Page numbers should be bottom centred and numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals. Pages that come before the actual body of the essay – a contents page, for example – should be numbered with lower case Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv...).
- Your essay should have a cover page, although most university departments will have a template which will perform this function. For reasons of marking objectivity, you probably will not be asked for your name on this template but rather for your student ID.

## Re-reading the essay

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No matter how well you write, it is very important that you leave enough time to proofread your essay. Try to leave at least 24 hours between finishing your essay and re-reading it. This is especially true if you don't really like writing, because this gives enough time for your feelings of frustration to subside.

Read the essay critically, objectively and actively. Is it answering the question? Have you provided enough examples to support your thesis? Does it flow? Is it grammatically correct? Have you cited and referenced carefully?



## Final words

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Competent essay writers are made, not born. It takes persistence to learn the numerous skills involved, but all university students can master these skills over time and with some guidance. Don't become too discouraged when essays come flying back at you covered in red. We often learn more from our failures than from our successes. Pay close attention to the feedback you receive, make sure you understand clearly where you've gone astray, and strive to improve next time. Try to enjoy the process of learning to write essays and take pride in your achievements. Good luck and happy essay writing.

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