Essential Study Skills
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How to Write Great Essays

Aims

To prepare you for successful academic writing focusing on how to write great essays.

Learning outcomes

After reading through this chapter and engaging with the activities, you will:

• understand the what, why and how of the academic essay
• have explored your own approaches to essay writing and considered how to use your successful strategies in future writing
• have reviewed advice on successful approaches to essay writing
• have explored the essay as dialogue – and essay instruction words
• have thought about how to prepare your first academic essay.

How to plan, prepare and draft great essays

The essay is the great analytical and critical thinking form. It is where we write about our research in a way that is designed to answer a set question. It is also about learning to communicate effectively in concise, targeted writing: if we can communicate our ideas effectively we will get better marks. The trouble is that people are often so stressed about being assessed when they
write their essays, they forget that a real human being will have to read, understand – and enjoy it: that we will have to communicate with real people. What helps good communication can help you to produce better assignments. In this chapter we are going to look at the what, why and how of the academic essay.

Communication tips:

- on essay writing – look out for ‘the paragraph questions’
- on report writing – look for the sections on ‘the reader’
- on presentations – look for information on the audience, body language and the use of prompts rather than scripts.

What is an essay?

The word ‘essay’ comes from the Latin word exagium, which means the presentation of a case. When building an essay, think like a lawyer prosecuting or defending a client. When defending a client, it is not enough for the defence to say, ‘He didn’t do it, your honour!’ The defence has to look for evidence to prove their client’s innocence. They have to predict what the other side will say – and look for evidence to counter it. They have to make a case. That is what the academic essay is all about.

The essay – legal precedent model

The defence might open thus:

The defence will prove that the case against our client is utterly mistaken. In particular we will prove that he could not have been identified as being at the scene of the crime for it was too dark to make a definite identification. We will tell you that the so-called witness suffers from poor vision and therefore could not identify our client. Finally, we will conclusively prove that our client was somewhere else at the time.

Do you see how all the points have been separated out? And how they are all flagged up here in the introduction? The listeners are not left wondering, ‘Where is all this going?’ This is the same in an essay – and with an essay introduction.
The defence then elaborates upon those three key points:

1. The alley was too dark blah blah
2. The witness was not wearing his glasses blah blah
3. My client has an alibi for the time blah blah

The defence might conclude:

In conclusion, we argue that despite everything that the prosecution has said, you must find our client innocent because we have conclusively proven his innocence. He definitely could not have been identified as being at the scene of the crime. Firstly, it was too dark to positively identify anyone, further the witness was too shortsighted to have any value placed upon his testimony and finally we proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that our client was somewhere else at the time of the incident.

Here in the conclusion all the main arguments are re-visited; all the main points are re-stated.

**tips**

When it comes to searching for the answer to academic essay questions, use the legal model and:

- break the whole question down into mini-points that can be covered one at a time
- think of a case that you want to make
- think of the separate arguments that would go to making your case
- search for evidence for and against your arguments
- make sure you have evidence for each argument.

And you would have to do this within the academic ‘rules’ of your subject – that is the arguments you construct must build upon and use the arguments and evidence that already exist in your subject. So you will have to:

- re-read your lecture or class notes to get a starting point for your research
- read further – read around the topics looking for ‘evidence’
- present your arguments in the correct way for your subject.

See the essay structures shown in Figures 17A and 17B.
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**Body/Main argument = 80% length**

**Answer the question** in a chain of paragraphs that build and present a CASE.

Each paragraph should contain:
1. **1 big idea**
2. **Introduce**
3. **Define**
4. **Offer argument**
5. **Offer evidence and discuss**
6. **Make final point**

The Reader is asking you – and your writing should answer – the following questions:
- What is this paragraph about?
- What exactly is that?
- What is your argument on this (in relation to the question)?
- What is your evidence? What does it mean?
- What is the final point (in relation to the question)?

**Conclusion = 15% length**

- **Re-state your arguments**
- **Re-state the main points**
- **Do not introduce** new evidence
- **You could make recommendations**
- **Proves that you have answered the whole question**

**Introduction = 5% length**

Tells the reader how you will answer the Question. Your introduction should:
- Comment on the title or topic of the essay
- Define or explain any difficult or ambiguous terms in the title
- Direct the reader by stating which aspects of the topic you intend to cover and why

**Bibliography**

Author (date) Title Town; Publisher. Page numbers. In alphabetical order by author’s surname

**Plan, Draft, Review, Revise & Edit**

Write last, once you know where the essay is going

**FIGURE 17A** Developing a plan or structure for your essay

Remember to include a title and any other information asked for in your module booklet
Title
‘Explain how the application of motivation theories helps managers in dealing with employees in the workplace?’

Introduction
The main points you are going to make:
• Can motivation theories help managers or not?

Body/Main argument
Examination of the motivation theories to see:
• If they help managers
• If they can motivate employees

Theory 1
1 Example of application
2 Evidence for and against
3 Evaluation of evidence

Alternative Theory 2
1 Example of application
2 Evidence for and against
3 Evaluation of evidence

Alternative Theory 3
1 Example of application
2 Evidence for and against
3 Evaluation of evidence

Conclusions
a. Main points made
b. Suitability of motivation theories over others for managers
c. Successes and failure of motivating employees

Bibliography
Author (date) Title Town; Publisher. Page numbers
In alphabetical order by author’s surname.

Any underlying issues

FIGURE 17B An example of an essay structure/plan
The essay explained

An essay has a formal convention – a set style to which it must conform or it is not an essay. The convention is as follows:

The body

This is the section of the essay where you answer the question that you have been set. It can be 80% of the total length. You answer the question in a chain of paragraphs that you have organised to build a well-argued case. Note: Typically written in the third person, past tense. That is: It can be argued that… NOT I think this…

Paragraph structure

Each paragraph also has a set convention: introduction; definition; argument; evidence plus discussion; final point. This is where it is useful to remember that you are communicating with a reader. When writing, imagine your reader asking you questions and make sure that your writing answers them.

Paragraph as dialogue

- What is this paragraph about?
  - Introduce your topic
- What exactly is that?
  - Define, explain or clarify
- What is the argument – in relation to the question?
  - Say something about your topic
- What is the evidence? What does it mean?
  - Say who or what supports your argument. Give evidence. Say what the evidence means
- What is your final point? (How does this paragraph relate to the question as a whole?)
  - Take the paragraph back to the question.

Write these questions out on an index card and stick them on your computer screen. Look at them when you write.
The introduction

This is the first part of the essay. It can be between 5% and 15% of the total length. In the introduction you tell the reader how you are going to answer the question. You write some remarks that acknowledge the importance of the topic and then give the agenda of the essay.

**tip**

Write the introduction last, when you know where the essay is going. Writing it too soon will give you a writing block.

The conclusion

This is the last, often long, paragraph of the essay. It can be 10–15% of the length. In the conclusion you restate your main arguments and points in a way that proves that you have answered the whole question. You do not include new information or evidence, but you may make recommendations if appropriate.

**tip**

Use the words from the question in your conclusion to prove that you have answered the whole question. Write a rough conclusion first to see where you want the essay to go.

Bibliography

Literally a book list, it is now a record of all the sources you have used to construct your essay.

**tips**

- Harvard System: author (date) Title, town; publisher
- British Standard System: author, Title, publisher, date
- Alphabetical order by author’s surname.
Why write essays?

The essay is perhaps the most theoretical of the assessment forms. It is the assessment mode that invites you to read, understand and then use for yourself the major theories, knowledge-claims, arguments and evidence of your subject. If all assignment production is designed to be heuristic, to bring about active learning, then the essay is the form that is designed to get you to undertake deep learning of your subject. Indeed, there are many who say that students cannot be said to really understand their discipline until they can write subject essays.

**tip**

Make the most of your essay writing opportunities. Read the key books and journal articles. Make notes that you can use again and again as you study your subject. Summarise your essays to prepare for your exams.

How to prepare and write an essay

1. Activity: Thinking about your approach to writing essays

On the website ‘An Essay Evolves’ (http://evolvingessay.pbworks.com/w/page/19387227/FrontPage), a student volunteer undertook to read for, plan, draft and revise an essay on the topic of Freud’s theory of the personality. Visit that site to see how the whole essay evolved through to the final draft of the essay and the mark and feedback that the essay received. The site gives fascinating insights into how a real person has approached an assignment task.

This activity is designed to help you understand and develop your own writing strategies and approaches. For this activity, we want you to read the student’s response to the essay question, below, and then to answer the questions we have set at the end.

Question: Evaluate Freud’s theory of personality.
I only have 1500 words in which to do this, so I will not be able to go into a long explanation of the ins and outs of the theory. How to reduce a life's work to 1500 words, though? Plus, I do not want to do the obvious thing where I explain all the theory and then evaluate it. Boring, Boring. I want to give a flavour of evaluation, of opinion, right from the off, as in take a critical view of the concept of personality. I also do not want to stick to purely scientific evaluation. There is not really enough of it.

Evaluate to me suggests be even handed in my assessment. Look at pros and cons, with evidence for both, and come to an opinion. OK, I already feel that Freud's ideas are unfairly and unreasonably dismissed. I need to limit myself to areas of theory that have something to say for and against. Also the essentials: dynamic unconscious, psychological defences, id and ego, we develop through psychosexual stages. Personality quirks can arise from fixation. So also a discussion of libido. I notice in my argument list I mention libido late, and do not explain it. I need to get it in early, with the id. Then I need to finish by saying that contemporary scientists have seen fit to take Freudian theory and subject it to systematic appraisal. What is more, it has not been found as wanting as the hype would have us believe.

Now think about and answer the following questions. Take your time – this is not a race. Give yourself space to reflect on your own writing practices.

1. How has this student approached the question? What has she done? What initial thinking can you see?
3. Discuss your successful strategies with a partner. List five things to do before you start reading up on any assignment question.
4. Take a real assignment question. Analyse the question. Make a list of – and then DO – the five essential things that you need to do before you start to read.

Discussion: When we have undertaken this activity with students in class they all noticed that this student was having fun with her assignment. For most of them this was a revelation; they understood that assignments were hard work, they had not realised that you could enjoy that work.

As always – make sure that you have identified things for you to do right now to put what you have learned from doing this exercise into practice.

(Our thanks go to ‘An Essay Evolves’ for the content – and to Lisa Clughen from Nottingham Trent University for sharing this activity.)
How to write an essay: Big essay writing tips

In this section we have collected some of the most popular questions about essay writing and some of the best advice on tackling essays. Read through and make notes of the advice that will be of the most use to you.

**SOCCE**

First remember the full range of SOCCER activities:

- **Study techniques:** plan and use your time well
- **Overview** – remember you course aims and learning outcomes
- **Be Creative** – brainstorm and question matrix
- **Communicate effectively** – in the right form
- **Emotionally** – want to do well
- **Reflect on your practice and your progress** – also follow the 10 stages to success.

**How much should I read?**

Dip into between three to five textbooks, five to ten journal articles and a couple of peer-reviewed websites when reading for an assignment.

**Read for one word from the question at a time**

Use the reading from one assignment in another: often reading is transferable across several modules so a canny student chooses to read texts that can be re-used in this way.

When planning:

- Write the whole question out in the middle of a large sheet of paper.
- Circle key words or phrases in the question – and draw a line from each word. Note key points from your reading against the key words or phrases in the question.
- Number the different sections of your rough plan in the order in which you think you will mention them in your essay.
- Write all the ideas you have generated onto separate pieces of paper. Move the pieces of paper around to discover the best structure for the essay. Now number the points on your plan.
- Use your notes.
- Write on the walls!
- Make paragraph patterns.
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- Spread your notes on the floor (only write on one side of the paper!).
- Go with the flow – how to write the first draft.

Once you have your plan ready, sit down at your computer with your plan in front of you. Write straight from the plan as quickly as possible.

Do not try to be perfect – just write. If you cannot think of a word or phrase, if you get stuck in any way – do not search for the right word/spelling/tense. Put an ellipsis (three dots) or write something like BLAH BLAH then move on.

Continue like this until you have a first draft of your essay written. Once you have something written – no matter how bad – you have something to work upon and change.

Worried about your grammar?

Just 20 typical errors account for 91.5% of all grammar mistakes. See http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/methods/grammar.shtml to find out what these errors are, or buy a really simple grammar book to help you get better – Lynne Truss’s book, *Eats Shoots and Leaves* is still really popular.

What should it look like?

One way to know what your final essay should look like is to read journal articles to see how they are written:

“...So I learned how to write and I learned how to structure from my reading. Sometimes I used to copy from the book to see the way they just write it down ... then through that experience I started knowing how to structure my phrases and my writing. It just ... I don’t know, it just got better through practising. That’s the main thing.”

Practise, practise, practise

Don’t just write for an assignment, write little and often and you will see that your writing really does improve with practice. It is very similar to learning to play a musical instrument; you only get better if you practise.

Free write! When you get your module handbook go straight to the assignments. Give yourself 10 minutes to start writing an answer to any of the questions that look interesting. Do not worry about getting the answer ‘right’, just write and see what comes out. When you have finished you should be able to see what you already know about the subject – and what you
need to find out. This will help you make more sense of the course – and it will help you to make more sense of the reading you have to do.

One worry at a time

Learn how to concentrate on one thing at a time. Typically, you will be studying several courses or modules at the same time. Each course will have several assignments and often hand-in dates will be the same or very nearly so. In any one assessment week you may have to hand in two or more different assignments. So, if you are writing essay A, you need to be able to not worry about essays B, C and D; you need to be able to put the other essays on a mental shelf and only take them down one at a time when you are going to concentrate on them. This is a trick that gets easier with practice.

Get a receipt

When handing your work in always get and keep a receipt so that you have proof that you handed work in on or before a deadline. Never miss a deadline, even to improve your work, because a missed deadline tends to mean the work will be awarded a fail grade.

Use proof reading symbols

Proof reading can be easier if you use the proof reading symbols that publishers use when you go through various drafts of your work. So try using the following:

- TRS transpose words
- UC upper case
- LC lower case
- Insert word or letter
- Delete word/section
- Close gap
- Insert gap
- Stet leave as it is
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How to write: Use the paragraph questions

One way of writing a paragraph is to imagine a conversation between you and your reader. Imagine your reader’s questions and write to answer them.

FIGURE 17C  Stages to writing your essay
# How to Write Great Essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reader</th>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Your answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>What is this paragraph about?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Introduce the paragraph topic</strong></td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>This is my idea</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>And what exactly is that?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Explain (and clarify)</strong></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Let me explain</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Tell me more</strong></td>
<td><strong>Give your argument</strong></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Here’s my argument… these studies show…</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>And who supports this view? Is there any evidence?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Give and comment on the evidence</strong></td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Which means…</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>And what is your final point? Does this relate directly to the question?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conclude and link to question</strong></td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>I’ve shown the point I started with is … and the next thing we should consider is …</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 17D**  The paragraph conversation

:\textbf{Photocopiable:}

\textit{Essential Study Skills, Third Edition} © Tom Burns and Sandra Sinfield, 2012 [SAGE]
tip

Photocopy the paragraph diagram shown in Figure 17D and use it when writing your real essays. This works if you put it into practice.

2. Activity: The paragraph as dialogue in action

Explore the paragraph below and see how it has been written in answer to the paragraph questions.

This simple paragraph could be from an essay entitled ‘Evaluate the usefulness of pattern notes to you as a student’.

Pattern notes, which have been an important part of our Study Skills course, are designed to help students both select and learn key information. Pattern notes are actively generated by the notemaker and are non-linear in form, often having a key idea placed centrally, with subsidiary ideas branching out and connecting as the notemaker sees fit. It is argued that it is the very selection/reduction/connection processes involved that make this notemaking system an effective part of active learning. Buzan (1989) calls this process ‘mindmapping’, positing that it mirrors the lateral way that the brain actually works, engaging both halves of the brain, creative right and logical left, in the creation of successful notes. Whilst traditional linear notes are said to be literally monotonous, monotone, only involving half the brain in one’s learning, the pattern notemaking process engages the learner in more productive and more successful whole brain learning. Buzan recommends an active revision system in conjunction with the notemaking to firmly fix the information gathered in the long-term memory. In effect, pattern notes engage the student in the production of very structured and condensed information, with less in quantity to learn, but more in quality. Thus, if it is true that the more active we are in our learning (Burns and Sinfield, 2004), the more we learn, it seems logical to use an active notemaking system, coupled with an active revision process, to record and learn material, and to become more effective and successful students.

Now:

1. Mark the different parts of the paragraph in different coloured highlighters.
2. Find another source, apart from Buzan, who would support the arguments in this paragraph.
3 Find one or more sources that might counter or disagree with the arguments in this paragraph.

4 Re-write the paragraph to build in the additional supporting sources and/or to take account of the counter evidence. 

Re-write the paragraph here:

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**Query:** What do you now understand about academic writing?

**Discussion:** When using the paragraph questions ourselves, we have found that they remind us to search for evidence and to discuss that evidence in our writing. We also really like being reminded that we need to make a point at the end of the paragraph. It is all too easy to leave a paragraph dangling, to not tie it back to the essay question… and thus to throw away marks. Use the paragraph questions in your own essay writing and see how they help you.

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**Using the question**

Essay questions never ask you to write all you know on a topic – they always tell you how you are supposed to go about answering the question. It just takes a little practice to understand what the question is asking us to do.

All assignment questions can be broken up into the following components:

- **Instruction words:** Tell you what to do – assess, discuss, evaluate – it is important to interpret these words properly
- **Topic words:** Tell you what the essay is about
- **Aspect words – reveal topic focus:** Once you know the topic you need to know which aspect of it to focus on
- **Restriction words – reveal topic boundaries:** A question is never: ‘Write all you know about…’. The restrictions will limit your discussion and help you shape your essay.

Here is an example to demonstrate what we mean:

- **Essay question:** ‘Assess the importance of free writing for student academic success’
- **Instruction:** Assess
In this example you are not asked to write all you know about free writing, but you are expected to assess its usefulness in promoting academic success for students.

You would have to define free writing – and say what it can do – but you have to show how a student might benefit from using that to enhance their academic success.

Knowing what the essay is asking you to do prevents you from describing – and moves you on to finding and evaluating information – and then to using that information analytically and critically to answer the question. It diverts you from seeing one key word in a question and writing about that, to seeing the whole question. There are several instruction words used in essay questions. The list below gives advice on how to approach them in your thinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common instruction words</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account for</td>
<td>Give reasons for; explain why something happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>Break up into parts; investigate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess</td>
<td>Decide the importance of and give reasons for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on</td>
<td>Identify and write about the main issues; give your reactions based on what you’ve read/heard in lectures. Avoid just personal opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Look for the similarities between two things. Show the relevance or consequences of these similarities. Perhaps conclude which is preferable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>Bring out the differences between two items or arguments. Show whether the differences are significant. Perhaps give reasons why one is preferable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically evaluate</td>
<td>Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticise</td>
<td>Requires an answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses, and which also indicates any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. It requires a balanced answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define</td>
<td>Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show you understand how the definition may be problematic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show you understand how the definition may be problematic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate; give reasons for and against; examine the implications of.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinguish between</td>
<td>Bring out the differences between.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Assess and give your judgement about the merit, importance or usefulness of something. Back your judgement with evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>Look closely into something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Make clear why something happens, or is the way it is; interpret and account for; give reasons for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Examine thoroughly; consider from a variety of viewpoints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate</td>
<td>Make something clear and explicit, giving examples of evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td>Show the meaning and relevance of data or other material presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Give evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made; answer the main objections which might be made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrate</td>
<td>Outline what happened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>Give the main points/features/general principles; show the main structure and interrelations; omit details and examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prove/disprove</td>
<td>Both of these require answers which demonstrate the logical arguments and/or evidence connected with a proposition: prove requires the ‘pro’ points, and disprove requires the ‘contra’ points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate</td>
<td>(a) Narrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Show similarities and connections between.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Give the main features briefly and clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarise/outline</td>
<td>Draw out the main points only; omit details and examples.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To what extent… Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which it is not true.
Trace Follow the development or history of an event or process.
Query: Were these already familiar to you or did you learn some new ones?
Discussion: Now that you have read these ask yourself:
• What do I know now that I didn’t know before?
• How does this help me?
• What will I do differently now that I know what these instruction words mean?

How to write an essay: Putting it into practice

If you are writing an essay right now, use the simple questionnaire in Activity 3 to help you use the above information in approaching your question.

3. Activity: How to write an essay: prepare to research

Once you have used the task words to think about the assignment that you are currently working on consider the following:

1. Write down in your own words what you think the assignment is asking you to do.

2. What do you already know about the subject matter of the essay?
3 What background information do you need to help you to complete this essay?

4 How do you think this essay differs from or is similar to other assignments that you are working on at the moment?

5 What are you going to read – and why?

6 As you begin to read for your assignment, read and make notes with the essay in mind.

**Query:** How do you feel now? What are you going to do next?

**Discussion:** Once you have done that… don’t forget the 10 stages to essay success, below.

**tip**

Use our online Sage assignment packs to help you with future essays. Check out our LearnHigher pages on Reading and Notemaking – including the links to our essay writing resources. Also look at other LearnHigher information on Academic writing and Assignments.
10 stages...

- **Prepare**: Analyse the question (as above) and devise an action plan: note what you are going to do and read to get the essay ready. When will you do these things?
- **Follow the action plan**: Photocopy chapters from books and print journal articles. Read actively and interactively, marking the texts as you go and always keeping the question in mind. Make active notes focusing on one Q word or phrase at a time.
- **Review your findings**: Review your notes – analyse your information. If you have not already done so, make paragraph patterns. Collect together all the information for each potential paragraph.
- **Plan the essay**: The structure to the essay may be obvious; sometimes it is not clear at all. Move the paragraph patterns around until you have a structure that makes the best case or the most sense.
- **Write a rough draft**: Follow the rough structure you have found. Write quickly and without correcting yourself. Go with the flow. Use the paragraph questions. Make sure you leave gaps – and write BLAH BLAH rather than struggling for a perfect draft first go. Highlight gaps and prompts in a bright colour so your brain knows your writing is incomplete.
- **Leave a time lag**: Put the work to one side, think about something else. Let your unconscious continue working on the essay.
- **Review, revise and edit**: Struggle to draft and re-draft your essay. Make sure each paragraph does answer all the paragraph questions. Make sure the essay is in the best ‘shape’.
- **Proof read**: At some point you have to stop writing and decide that the essay is finished. Proof read the final draft. Correct your mistakes. Keep copies on different devices.
- **Submit**: Hand in on or before the deadline – and get and keep your receipt. Go and celebrate – be happy – be proud.
- **SWOT your progress**: Get your essay back and do not just look at the grade – look at the feedback you received and work out how to build on your strengths, correct your weaknesses and write a better essay next time.

**WiiFM: Getting work back**

Always make the effort to go and get your work back – yes, you only care about your grade, but there is so much to learn from the thing itself, especially if you have a tutor who likes to scribble all over your assignments: SWOT your essay.
• **Strengths**: Go through the essay very carefully; look at all the ticks and positive comments. These indicate that you have done something well. Check out the good things you have done – make a note to do them again.

• **Weaknesses**: Look at all the passages without ticks or with comments suggesting that something is missing or incorrect. Note these: make a note to do something about them. Go and find the missing information – correct errors.

• **Opportunities**: Think what you can do now to learn the subject better or improve your grades. Think how to write a better essay in your next module.

• **Threats**: Ask yourself if anything is stopping you from doing better work. Find out what it is and do something about it. Sometimes we can be frightened of success just as much as of failure – is this you? What are you going to do about it?

**tips**

- If you can answer an exam question on a topic previously covered in an assignment, put the assignment in your revision folder.
- If you improve the essay then the exam answer will be even better. This is a good thing.
- Share it. Read each other’s work, discover different writing styles and other ways to answer a question – this stretches our thinking.

**Conclusion**

We have considered the what, why and how of the essay. What: we looked at the structure of the essay and at building a logical case using argument and evidence. Why: we emphasised the ‘struggle to write’ as a learning process – we write to learn rather than learn to write. How: we gave tips and tricks and activities to do to take you through the planning and drafting of a real essay. We referred you to useful websites such as ‘An Essay Evolves’ so that you can see how other students have gone through the process from beginning to end. We also directed you to our assignment packs on the Sage website which are designed to help you to prepare real assignments in the future. We hope that you now feel in a better position to approach your assignment essays.
Review points

When reviewing your notes on this chapter, you might realise that:

- You are prepared to engage in ‘writing to learn’ as opposed to writing up what you know
- You are ready for the ‘struggle to write’: you know that you should draft and re-draft your work
- You now think of communicating successfully in your essays, using the paragraph questions (in reports you will think of reaching real readers and in presentations you will consider the audience)
- You now feel ready to tackle the most theoretical assessment form – the essay
- You realise the importance of the 10-stage plan, prepare and review strategy
- You have realised that preparing for an essay can be ‘fun’ and stimulating as well as an assessment activity.

Essay checklist

For every essay check:

- Have you answered the whole question?
- Have you addressed the aims and learning outcomes?
- Is there an introduction that acknowledges the significance of the question and gives the agenda of the essay?
- Would that agenda actually answer the question set?
- Are the paragraphs in the best possible order?
- Does each paragraph have its own introduction, definition, argument, evidence and final point?
- Have you referenced your evidence?
- Have you discussed your evidence?
- Is there a conclusion re-stating the main arguments and points?
- Do you use all the words from the question to prove that you have answered the whole question?
- Is there a comprehensive bibliography (referring to every source you have mentioned in the essay)?
- Is it in alphabetical order by author’s surname?
- Have you proof read and made corrections?
tips

• Print your essay. Cut up the paragraphs. Mix them up. Put them in the best order.
• Allow time between writing and reviewing your essay.
• Use a computer – even for your first draft – it is easier to cut and paste and rewrite an essay that has been drafted on a computer.