

→ SAGE Study Skills

How to Write Successful Business & Management Essays

2nd Edition

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Cover design: Stephanie Guyaz
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

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First published 2009
Reprinted in 2009 (twice), 2010 and 2012
This edition published 2017

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944266

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-47396-050-3
ISBN 978-1-47396-051-0 (pbk)

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How Essay Writing Will Help with Your Career Success



Chapter objectives

By the end of this chapter you will:

- understand how the skills acquired in this book can help your career
- know how to recognise the different times when these skills will apply
- understand how essay skills will help with report writing in different industries.

‘Is writing essays of any use for my professional career?’ you might wonder. ‘Isn’t this just like school where I am plugging together lines and paragraphs to be rewarded with a good grade?’

Have you ever read a newspaper article that kept your attention until the end? Or a company report that felt less like fighting your way through a jungle of jargon and more like an actual memorable, pleasurable lecture? How about a presentation you tried to follow and felt puzzled half-way into it, because the speaker failed to keep you interested as there was no real thread guiding you?

Mastering university essays sets you up with the skills set to do these things at: professionally convey a message while keeping the reader or listener engaged. But writing university level essays gives you the opportunity to learn these exact skills, which are crucial in your professional life. From analytic thinking to researching a topic, from drawing up an essay plan to structuring



your arguments and conclusions, writing is about learning to capture the world, and relevant information, and conveying it to your readership in a manner that is powerful and effective. Regardless of whether you are planning to work in banking, consulting, marketing, advertising, the pharmaceutical, health or the automobile industry, successfully managing the art of essay writing will give you a major advantage over your peers. It is not your literary skills that put you at an advantage – although that might come in handy if you ever want to write a successful novel – it is mastering written communication.

Writing essays will even help you to land your next job. Conveying in a few sentences who you are and why you are the right person for the job is, while for many a challenge, an indispensable skill to succeed in your professional life. Post-candidacy you are required to write reports, analyses, give presentations, win deals and communicate with clients, colleagues, partners, superiors and employees. The better your understanding of a subject and the communication thereof, the more influence you will have over those who read your article, business report, stock analysis or advertising campaign.

Researching a topic

The ability to research a topic, filter out the relevant information and separate the useless or negligible is an essential part of business. Before you can select information you render important for conveying your message, knowing where to find and tap into the right sources and differentiate between noise and valid and valuable resources is crucial. Take for instance market research: imagine you are approached by a company that wants to bring a new product to market and are asked to determine whether this product has potential success. You will need to know where to get the information; be able to structure your report on the product's potential, the exact pricing, the desirability of its look and features, and the best target market; and be able to convey your message clearly and effectively to the client company, skills that are of utmost importance for both you as an advising body and the company's subsequent decisions.

Before we look at some industries in more depth and the transferability of your essay writing skills to the respective sector, let's have a quick recap of what researching a topic entails (for more information refer to Chapters 3, 4 and 5):

1. Knowing where to look. Depending on your industry, project, task and goal, there are infinite numbers of sources available to you: from newspaper articles to professional journals, studies, research reports by other companies, think tanks, and governmental organisations, and experts in your field that may add important information for you to draw the right conclusions. Every single day thousands of new pieces of information are made available, so being able to critically evaluate which sources are of most use to you,

providing the best information and data for your specific project, is pivotal. You will quickly come to realise that the more often you conduct research and use information outlets, the more skilled you become at dissecting good from bad.

2. Selecting the right material might appear a rather simple endeavour, but, in fact, requires solid experience and adeptness. You just need to open four different newspapers and look for articles on the same subject. Depending on the leanings of the media outlet, story and facts will tell significantly different stories. Knowing how to select information and decipher the facts and truth between the lines is vital in drawing your own conclusions.
3. After having selected sources that best suit your project, picking the relevant information from hundreds of pages of text, charts, figures and statistics can be a time-consuming challenge. With practice comes skill. The more often you read through source material, the better you become at scanning through numbers and text and in pinpointing relevant information. In fact, there will be a moment when you have developed such an eye for locating valuable lines and statistics that you find it has become second nature.

Locating sources across different industries?

So where do you look for information sources in different industries? Granted, if you are planning on going into *finance*, there are only a few really important newspapers to scan through in the morning including the *Financial Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. However, as these will not be your go-to sources for obtaining information to stay ahead of the game, you are confronted with hundreds of financial, political, economic and other relevant pieces published every single day. While this might initially seem overwhelming, you will soon discover the most important sources such as Bloomberg, Reuters or Thomson.

But beyond these commonly used research facilities, you will quickly have to establish your own information source pool. You might scan through company reports and analyse the statements and figures, predictions, as well as economic reports or news on legal changes important for your work. Mastering your research skills at university and learning how to critically evaluate what information is worth a second glimpse and what to dismiss will set you up for a successful and smoother transition in your professional career.

It is similar if your professional journey takes you into the world of *consultancy*. Digging through company reports and history, researching and analysing company and industry reports to provide sound advice to your client will be your bread and butter. Before being able to make any recommendation to improve your client's business, the skills you have acquired during your university time researching for your essays will come in handy as they enable you to process data and information quicker than someone who missed out on this valuable training.

But not only will you be reading through numerous reports and studies, you will also be talking to employees and management to determine what

drives or lacks in their business. Just as your adeptness in researching for essays led to good results, so knowing where to look and who to talk to will be the key to your success. Elsewhere during your business studies you will have come across tools such as SWOT analysis and have learned that in order to conduct such an analysis you need to know your business inside out through experience and research.

If your goal is to work in *marketing* or other business areas demanding market research, researching and understanding how to collect the necessary information and gather the relevant data is, as it says in the job description, your daily task. You will need to be highly adept at differentiating between what is relevant, what market you need to focus on and what area to research. Part of your work will be to create surveys and run focus groups. Whether you are asking questions in a survey or a focus group, the information you will obtain depends on the quality of the questions. For you to draw up questions that accurately capture the insight you seek, you need to do research. From determining your target group and the type of questions to develop, a survey can only return useful data if you understand the market, product, potential and audience. In-depth research is your foundation to conducting successful market research. The stronger your skills set, the better your performance. Wouldn't it be great to hit the ground running on your first day in your new job?

The *pharmaceutical industry* is another example that has research at its core. Even if you are no scientist, research will be essential to many of the jobs in the industry. For laboratory trials to commence and scientists to get their research and development started, others will have to analyse the market potential for new drugs. Once drugs are developed new market opportunities need to be explored and communicated to other stakeholders in the organisation.

You have decided to study business or management because you see yourself in some form working in the field. In fact, as early as applying for your first job, the research skills and the critical evaluation of what is important and relevant to include in your cover letter and your CV will help you a great deal. Recruiters know their company and the industry and they want to see that you as well have done serious research into what the job, the company and your future will entail. Thus, good research for a potential job will enable you to stand out from the masses, tailor your application and know your market value when it comes to negotiating your salary.

Planning and writing techniques

While research is essential, it is the writing that allows you to communicate with an audience. It may seem arduous at first, but mastering the essential

planning, structuring and writing techniques are skills that you will carry with you for the rest of your life and that will be similarly essential to success throughout your career. With all the hard work and many hours that have gone into researching a topic, your ultimate success depends on how well you communicate your message. If your writing is too complex, it becomes inaccessible to most. Business reports in various forms, however, should not be high-brow papers forcing your reader to think every few minutes about what you are trying to convey. Written communication in business is time sensitive in that your audience requires you to communicate your message in a way that is easily understandable and enables them to grasp instantly the major points of your verbal or written presentation, analysis or report.

When researching for essays at university you will ultimately find yourself with pages and pages of useful material. The secret to effective communication, however, is the ability to be precise and concise. Albert Einstein (1879–1955) once said, ‘You do not really understand something unless you can explain it to your grandmother’. You might never explain your essay topics and even less so your business reports to your grandmother, but always keep in mind that simplicity not complexity in writing is a useful guideline to go by. At university you learn to narrow down and condense the wide range of material you accumulate during your research for your essay; an ability that will prove vital in your professional career.

Throughout the book, you will find strategies on the various elements of the writing process including planning, structuring and writing. All of these aid in reaching the above key element of successful writing: precision and concision.

Similarities between essays and professional reports

Let us return to our previous examples. If you enter *investment banking* as an analyst, your days will comprise primarily of research and writing. The writing skills you have acquired at university will accelerate and strengthen you planning, structuring and writing of, for instance, a research report on a company’s future growth potential. Imagine the following: you are in charge of analysing Total SA, one of the six biggest oil companies in the world. Your readers, potential investors, expect your recommendation on how the company will perform over the next year. After doing research into the macroeconomic environment and outlook, such as the global demand for oil, management composition, strategic changes, and peer evaluations such as BP, ENI or Royal Dutch Shell, you have to write up your research report.

It is here where your university training comes in handy: structuring your report for clarity to achieve the greatest impact on your readers.

Although an essay and a research report are obviously not identical in nature, there are a number of similarities in both the way they are written and how they are structured. Your university essay outlines the background and sets the stage for your analysis of the topic in the main body and your conclusions. In a research report on Total SA, for instance, you start by including basic items such as shareholder structure and share price and give an overview of the company and industry, moving on to the investment summary, business and management description and industry and competition review. Your essay's main body would be similar to valuation, financial analysis and investment risks sections to conclude with your expectations for the company's performance in the next few months or year.

In a *consultancy*, the similarities between the structure of an essay and of a report are even bigger. Your introduction would outline the company and industry, and tell the reader what to expect on the following pages. Your main body would contain your analysis and your conclusion section would be the summary recommendation for the company you are consulting for.

The writing skills you have acquired during university and the understanding of how to structure your essay are tremendously useful transferable skills that will strengthen your critical perception of what to include and how to present your analysis and conclusion.

Reflecting on intermediate feedback

A recurrent aspect of writing essays at university is the feedback you receive on your work. While it may seem harsh at times, feedback will aid you in becoming a better writer and in developing more structured ideas. The feedback you receive enables you to reflect upon how to improve your communication, persuasion and presentation skills. In the professional world you would be hard-pressed to receive detailed feedback on your writing skills. Your boss or colleagues might comment on specific aspects, but will generally not take the time to mentor you. Practising writing reports and essays at university enables you to improve your skills in a safe environment so you can hit the ground running the moment you join the professional world.

Mastering the skills of persuading the reader that your idea, product or service is of use is a vital part of succeeding in business. At university you might receive a grade that fails to meet your expectations; during your career this translates into lost revenue and lesser influence over other professionals. Thus, improving your skills through the frequent feedback on your essays will not only translate into better grades at university, but eventually a bigger pay cheque and greater influence over your business partners.

Reaching different audiences

You probably already know that it is crucial to always develop and alter your speeches and presentations depending on the audience and your goal. Whether this goal is to sell your product or service, write a research report, write a newspaper article or write an internal presentation, learning to communicate with different audiences is crucial for your professional life. In fact, you may have already noticed that your lecturers place different emphases on what they included in essays for their class. While this might at first feel rather annoying with you thinking, 'Why can't they have one standard', it actually does you a great service: it trains you to adapt your writing to whatever audience you are communicating with so you have a better chance of meeting the goal you are trying to achieve with your written work.

This is tremendously important in that one speech might be perfectly suited for one audience but fail to have any impact on another group of people. Take, for instance, a written report for a marketing team. While including marketing aspects, findings and jargon might be well understood by marketing geniuses, a group of engineers is likely to feel puzzled by talking about *lead generation* or *OTH*. Engineers will need explanations and might be less interested in the marketing side of things. You would need to find a different approach to get your message across. Just as you would ask your lecturer for what he or she expects, find out about your audience and tailor your message to them. In case you are wondering, *lead generation* refers to marketing devices that encourages the client or customer to inquire more about a product or service. *OTH* refers to the number of times a radio marketing message is heard by potential customers.

Not only is it the jargon that differs between audiences, but also the structure in which you present your message. Take, for instance, an essay for your finance class. The data and information you choose will differ greatly from the material you include in your essay for your organisational behaviour class. While in the former you tend to put a greater emphasis on numbers and an argument driven by quantitative data, the latter is oftentimes more qualitative in nature. Your organisational behaviour essay will not be number driven, but statement driven and sometimes more abstract in nature. Another example is an essay on corporate finance versus one on leadership changes. The finance essay will include tables of data, the leadership essay, although citing studies, will be more text based.

Knowing and understanding the difference is a pivotal skill when preparing your written communication with different stakeholders in your business. The finance team will be more interested in the cost and revenue aspects, the design department in the perception of a product among potential consumers.

Consequentially, your communication with finance will tend to be figure based while communication with the design team will be more qualitative, such as feedback on their designs.

Transferability of essay writing skills

Next time you are sitting in front of that blank paper contemplating why you should write on the impact of management on employee motivation, remember this: your skills are highly transferable and you are strengthening your research, evaluation, writing, communication and evaluation skills. Mastering these will give you a significant advantage over peers that have not gone through this learning process.

Here again is a list of transferable skills you acquire when writing essays:

1. research skills
2. deciphering statements and messages
3. critical evaluation of the quality of sources
4. ability to differentiate between what to include in your communication and not
5. better planning of reports
6. ability to structure arguments
7. clarity and precision of arguments
8. knowing and adapting your message to respective audiences
9. awareness of the structure of written communication.

All these skills are in fact also relevant for verbal presentations.