An Introduction to Essay Writing

**Chapter objectives**

Having read this chapter you will:

- know what the book is about
- know how to use the book to your best advantage
- understand how to read books at university
- have planned which chapters to read in what depth
- understand what an essay is, why essays are set and how to structure one
- know how to structure an argument using the SED format
- know what to look for in an essay question.

**Key to getting the most out of this book**

It is essential to get used to preparing for essays by being organised. This may be something that comes naturally to you in which case skim read the first part of Chapter 2. For everyone else, read Chapter 2 thoroughly first! The second part of Chapter 2 shows you how to plan your essay – we think practically everyone could benefit from reading this even if you are reasonably confident about writing essays.

Lectures are very different from the classes at school and you are supposed to work in a very different way. If you already have experience of university or college, perhaps you could skim read Chapter 3. Those of you coming from school – perhaps even more especially good schools – will find
that university lecturers do not give you the clear direction you are used to. If you are at all uncertain of the rules of the game, spend some time on Chapters 3 and 4.

Essays are written in a particular style, so if you are at all uncertain what this style is, pay attention to Chapter 5.

If you have trouble working out how to use references – and especially if you have never heard the term – spend some time getting to grips with the referencing style described in Chapter 6. Students ask most questions about this and it is actually very simple once you get to grips with it. Even if you think you understand referencing, you should go over this chapter to refresh your memory and check to see whether you have been using references correctly in the past.

Students are often found to have plagiarised by accident but reading Chapter 7 will make sure you are never accused of this.

Essays are very commonly set in exams and while the main idea is the same as for coursework essays, Chapter 8 gives specific advice for preparing and writing under exam conditions.

Finally, the Appendices contain examples you can refer to and check back later.

**How to read books at university**

As with just about all books you read at university, you shouldn’t think of starting at the beginning and reading through to the end. You should use this book rather than read it. By this we mean that you will probably have at least some idea about the advice contained in parts of the book and you can skim read these sections quickly. Other parts you might need to start from scratch so these parts you should read differently. We recommend that you first skim read, then read through taking notes, then read your notes and dip in to particular sections again. (Quick tip – we have given more information about how to use books in Chapter 3 – unbelievable that we should be telling how to read but Pat didn’t realise how to do this until half-way through his university career by which time he’d wasted hours and hours of time and got himself needlessly stressed.) But don’t think this sounds too daunting a task nor is it time consuming. We have deliberately pared the information down to what you really need and the skills you are developing will save you time in the future and of course help you get the most out of your university degree – surely the aim of going in the first place!

So, start by looking at the contents and see if there are any areas you recognise as being ones you are comfortable with and ones you might need to concentrate more on. Use Table 1.1 to plan how you are going to use the book.
What is an essay?

At its simplest, an essay is a written answer to a set question. However, there are particular styles for the setting of essay questions and also styles to the way you have to answer them. In some ways it’s a bit like crossword puzzles – having subject knowledge isn’t enough – you need to know the code used by the person writing the puzzle. In essays, the rules are simpler but without the simple knowledge, you probably won’t be able to produce a good answer. So, here are the basics:

- You need to assume the reader has basic common sense knowledge but not subject specific knowledge.
- You must justify everything you write. Ideally by referring to scientifically accepted work but occasionally by use of examples.
- You are expected to demonstrate that you understand the theories you present by summarising them. Make sure you don’t reproduce exactly what you read in a textbook though or else this will be plagiarism (see Chapter 7).
- You must always acknowledge where you get your justifications from – see Chapter 6 on references and Chapter 7 on plagiarism.

Structure – the basics

There is a lot more about essay structure in Chapter 5 but we introduce the overall idea here so you understand how the essay is going to look when you
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>• a general short opening statement (one or two sentences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• an overview of what is going to be in the essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• how the question will be answered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• link to the first section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• one (short) paragraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make sure it isn’t too long or you spend too much time thinking about it and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>re-writing it.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The introduction only needs to describe how you have decided to answer the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>question set and you could almost write it last. Many times students get</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hung up on trying to get this right. If you are struggling to write the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>introduction, you probably haven’t planned the essay properly.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Make sure that you tell the reader what to expect in the main body of the</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>essay. Check that what you say you are going to do will answer the question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main body</td>
<td>• several paragraphs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• each with self-contained arguments (see below for what an argument is and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>therefore this section should be done)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• each will answer part of the question</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>• short summary bringing together the arguments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• possibly assessing the limitations of the arguments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• showing how the question has been answered in parts and as a whole</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• one or two paragraphs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summarise the points made in the order you have made them.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your conclusion must answer the question set – no more and no less.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make sure it matches what you set out in the introduction.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

have finished it. It is difficult to be precise about the exact length of each section since of course it depends on the number of words you have been set to use but also on the essay and how you approach it. However, the basic structure is not at all complicated and can be summarised as shown in Table 1.2.

Why are essays set (is it because our lecturers want us to suffer)?

The idea of an essay is that it both develops and tests. That is to say, the act of preparing an essay in itself develops subject knowledge in the student but the finished piece of work is a way for the lecturer to assess how much the student knows. In fact there is another layer to this in that essays make you
think logically (building logical arguments like in a debate) and critically (not just believing the statements made by people but finding out how they could justify what they are claiming). So, by writing essays you develop knowledge while becoming more logical and critical. These are key skills you learn at university. We often reconsider what coursework to set for our students but we keep on returning to setting essays because of these benefits.

### What an argument is and how to make one

One of the most frequent comments made by lecturers is to question ‘what is your argument here?’. An argument in this sense does not involve shouting or throwing crockery but is the basis of logic. The best way to understand this is to use this simple SED format in your writing:

- **Statement of claim** – you write what you are going to prove. On its own, a Statement of claim has no value (i.e. will not provide you with marks). If you provide evidence for it and then discuss and evaluate what it means, you are earning marks.
- **Evidence** – relevant evidence would be scientific papers from peer reviewed journals or textbooks (see Chapter 4)
- **Discussion/evaluation** – the evidence for and against your claim is weighed up and you show that your claim is justified.

Each paragraph should have this structure to it so each element is worthy of a little more description.

An example of this structure:

We can see from the collapse of Enron how dangerous pure intelligence can be as a predictor of achievement.¹ Enron started selecting employees solely on their intelligence test results so those who scored high on the tests were selected over individuals with knowledge and experience (Fincham & Rhodes, 2005). Senior managers encouraged these new inexperienced employees to explore new ideas and exploit new markets believing that intelligence was more important than experience. One psychologist claims that Enron’s major mistake was believing and telling the young professionals that they were ‘gifted’ simply because of their high test results (Fincham & Rhodes, 2000, p. 145).² This led to the arrogance of the firm and they had thought they could ‘do anything’ and ‘jump into any market’ (Fox, 2003, p. 145). This led to reckless decisions being made and was a major factor in the downfall of the company.³

Key:
1. Statement of claim
2. Evidence
3. Discussion/evaluation
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**Types of question**

Essay questions vary considerably between topics and between lecturers but in broad terms there are about four types of essay questions. Each of these are actually asking you to produce different answers.

‘**Discuss’**

In this type of essay, you are frequently given a statement (often contentious) followed by the word ‘discuss’. For example:

‘Taylorism is still a relevant model to leverage performance gains in the workplace. Discuss.’

To answer this question, you would start out by describing what Taylorism is then perhaps evaluating the features against literature or studies which contradict the idea that it does lead to gains. You then might return to the theory and extract any points which still have relevance.

‘**Describe**’

The question asks you provide information about a particular topic but does not ask you to evaluate this. It is very unlikely you will be asked only to describe something although this might be just part of a question – many essay questions have multiple parts and it is vital you make sure you note how many parts there are to a question and ensure you answer all of the parts. So a question might be:

‘Describe the Taylorist approach to productivity.’

In answering any of these question types, you should always use the SED format.

‘**Compare and contrast**’

This format is very popular and you need to find the similarities and differences between two things. You should look to find equal numbers of similarity and difference and come to some sort of conclusion. If no conclusion is specifically asked for, just bring the essay to a close with a summary of the similarities and differences.
‘Evaluate’

This is rather like the ‘compare and contrast’ question but the examiner has given you some more latitude in how you go about answering the question. You don’t particularly need to give equal numbers of points for and against but the custom is that you give both sides of the argument regardless of what you feel the evidence shows. So, you need to find at least something to say on each side. You are usually asked to come to some sort of conclusion and justify this through an evaluation of the evidence. Another favourite version of this question type is critically evaluate which essentially means the same thing.

Note: Some essays require you to do more than one thing. For example:

‘Outline the main organisational theories underpinning modern management and discuss their relevance to your professional area.’

Clearly you need to describe the theories and then evaluate their relevance to your profession. If you only describe the theories, you are unlikely to pass. If you do not describe the theories sufficiently (perhaps you just name them), similarly you are very unlikely to pass.

The most frequently written comment on essays by markers is something to the effect of ‘you have not answered the question set’. Probably the most important advice in this whole book is:

(read this next bit, it’s really important)

READ THE QUESTION
ANSWER THE QUESTION SET

Follow this advice and you are on the road to success! (There are more sample questions in Appendix 2, which are shown with explanations of how to go about answering them. You might like to use these for reference when you are first deciding how to answer the question you have been set.)

So, having looked at the basics, the next chapter moves on to how you go about the first stage of essay writing

Planning!