

# Introduction



## Overview

- Who Is the Book For?
- How Will This Book Help You to Produce Good Work?
- Assignment Anxiety. Getting Started: Writer's Block
- Seven Steps to Completion
- A Good Assignment: Gaining Good Grades
- What Went Wrong: The Corresponding Seven Common Essay Errors
- Take Seven Steps to a Better Grade
- Conclusion
- Summary of Key Points
- A Preliminary Note: 'Voice'

## Who Is the Book For?

This book was written for a wide intended readership because all Higher Education (HE) students, undergraduate and postgraduate, and even students doing A-levels want to know how to write a good essay and wish to achieve a high grade. Whether you are a student of education, the arts, of one of the humanities or one of the social sciences you will need to write essays, reports and reviews.

Each chapter contains good advice, explanations and examples, and you will be a much more competent and skilful student after reading it. However, if you are desperately short of time, but need to produce an acceptable essay or assignment, then **at least read the summary at the end of each chapter and at the end of this introduction.** These will give you the most helpful tips, and the most crucial advice to enable you to write a much better



essay than you might otherwise have submitted. Similarly, skip to Chapter 1 if you are impatient to read the main book, and return to the introduction at the end.

This book will help you:

- To write your first essay or assignment. This might be your first essay ever or your first essay in a new subject.
- To improve your grades on subsequent essays and assignments.
- If this is the first time you will be assessed for something other than an essay – such as a report, a review or a group presentation.
- If you do not understand what is going wrong. What does your tutor mean by *incorrect referencing*, *lacks structure*, *too descriptive*, etc.?
- If you are a student who experiences anxiety about your assignments, especially if there has been a gap in studying. You may worry about producing longer essays at a higher level. It is very common for returning students, who are highly motivated and conscientious, to feel anxious about striving for HE level work. This book will help you.
- If you are a mature student, or indeed a young student coming via an Access or some other less conventional route, you will also benefit from having your own copy. If you are a highly motivated and conscientious student, you will find this book reassuring.
- If you are a **staff member** who is new to marking at this level and who is anxious to grade work fairly and in tune with the assessments of your colleagues. Even some experienced members of staff are secretly puzzled when other colleagues give a lower grade than they have themselves, with comments such as: *insufficiently critical* or, *too assertive*.

## How Will This Book Help You to Produce Good Work?

- You will learn how to write a good essay or assignment – an essay which demonstrates the characteristics an assessor will be looking for.
- You will come to understand frequent sources of errors and learn how to avoid the most common pitfalls.
- You will develop the criticality appropriate to Higher Education.

If you are a university or college student, you need to understand what makes for good work in Higher Education. (In Chapter 3, we will explore what working at a *higher* level means.) This concise and practical book will help you to produce competent work at an appropriate level so that you complete your studies successfully.

Two basic requirements of good work are: firstly, to know your subject area, and, secondly, to know how to present what you know in well-written,

well-referenced and original work. In conjunction with your subject-specific guidebooks and materials, this book will provide all the support you need.

Every chapter gives examples of right and wrong approaches so that you will know how to work on the right lines. We will also show you how a barely passing level assignment can move, with relatively little additional work, to a good grade. Academic work has established rules and conventions that you are not born knowing. Tutors can sometimes assume that these requirements are obvious and do not need pointing out. On the contrary, you need to learn the rules of the academic game and the chapters in this book will explain, quite explicitly, what these are. An appendix will also show you how to evaluate what you have produced.

Chapters 1, 2 and 7 provide you with the tools to avoid the most basic pitfalls, and thus to produce an acceptable essay or assignment which will not fail. Chapters 3–5 will take you further, equipping you with the critical skills to achieve a higher grade.

The contents of the chapters cover:

- use of the literature and relevant research, planning and organisation
- correct use of reasons and evidence
- critical thinking (including criticality)
- meta-analysis
- developing a fresh point of view
- presentation and referencing.

The ‘presentation’ chapter looks at the good presentation of written work and also at the correct use of academic conventions such as referencing, acronyms and the avoidance of unintentional plagiarism.

The majority of assignments in HE still come in the form of an essay, but there are other common forms of assignments. These assignments (reports, reviews, presentations, etc.) need to pay attention to all the points made in the preceding chapters (Chapters 1–7), but additionally have a number of particular requirements that you need to understand and fulfil. These other forms of assignment are looked at in Chapters 8 and 9.

Before all these chapters, however, we provide a useful seven-step progress plan below. This will help you to meet your deadlines and word limits. Finally, this introduction explains the seven most common essay and assignment errors, linking these to the chapters.

In short, if you are anxious about your essays and assignments and about how to work at HE level, this book, with its concise explanations, useful checklists and crucial tips, is a must-have book for you. It will also be useful to you if you simply want to get a better grade.

## Assignment Anxiety. Getting Started: Writer's Block

Many students, when faced with their first essay, do not know how to get started. They are unsure of what is expected and feel that they may fail to work at the expected level. Other students, having been disappointed by their grade(s) for previous assignments, also lack confidence. They worry about what went wrong. If you have **assignment anxiety** you are not alone. Such anxiety is widespread. It undermines confidence, which may then be reflected in the tentative, unsure tone of your essays. It can even lead to a severe case of writer's block.

Sometimes writer's block causes students to continue their background reading rather indiscriminately. They feel they must read everything. They make copious notes and feel overwhelmed by the sheer mass and complexity of this material. Where should they begin? What should they include and what should they omit? This becomes a vicious circle. The more you put off beginning the writing process, the more overwhelmed and unable to begin you will feel.

There is much advice about overcoming writer's block. These are the five tips which we think are most useful.

1. **You are capable.** Remind yourself that you would not be on the course if your tutors thought that you were not capable of completing it successfully.
2. **Take bite-sized pieces.** Do not sit down intending to write the whole assignment. Following your plan (see Chapter 2), aim to write just one section (or even the first paragraph of the first section). You have begun.
3. **Allow a limited time to complete the section.** For example, do not sit down after breakfast and intend to write for the whole day. Decide you will write for, say, one hour in the morning and for one hour later in the day. (Obviously if you are on a roll, you can continue, but the trick is to aim for small steps, which feel less daunting.)
4. **First draft.** Remember that this is only your first draft. You will be able to improve it; to delete, prune, expand, take advice. It is always easier to work on and improve a first draft than it is to take that first step of putting pen to paper on the icy page.
5. **Seven steps.** Construct a timescale for the seven points of the plan (below) and keep to the time you have allotted for each step.

## Seven Steps to Completion

These seven steps will help you to meet your assignment deadline. Divide the time that you have available from now up to your deadline into three equal amounts. You should try to complete steps one and two by the end of the first block of time, steps three and four by the end of the second block and steps five, six and seven by your deadline (see Figure 2.1 on page 29 for a Gantt

chart on planning your Seven Steps. A Gantt chart is a tool that is commonly used to manage projects, tasks and events displayed against a timeline and showing the duration of each item or task). These timings are approximate, but should give you a rough guide to keeping you on target.

## The Seven Steps

### 1. Focus and Preparation

**The Title. Focus on the essay title.** What is it asking? It could be a question. For example: *Environmental Education should be included in the Primary Curriculum. Do you agree?*

You will consider arguments for and against and give your own view with reasons. Your introduction might explore what we mean by environmental education and why it is important. In the main body of the essay you will consider arguments for and against the inclusion of environmental education and give your own view with reasons. Finally your conclusion might touch briefly [because it is not strictly part of the question] on some pedagogical considerations, and summarise the most important arguments for your own point of you.

How many parts does the title have? Students often miss out a part of a two or three-parted title, e.g. *Explain and Evaluate the Arguments for Environmental Education*. You must remember to explain **and** to discuss/evaluate **and**, indeed, to give your own views with reasons.

You could record your initial thoughts about environmental education before you begin your reading, e.g. education must be worthwhile. Is conserving and protecting our environment worthwhile? How? How worthwhile is it relative to other worthwhile learning? i.e. there may not be enough time to include all subjects that could be regarded as worthwhile. You could make a strong argument about how crucial environmental education is for the survival of the planet. Could/should environmental education be taught as a separate curriculum subject or permeate all subjects?

The following essay question has two parts and incorporates two elements in the first part. All this must be taken into account.

**Example Title: Explain and discuss Brookfield's Notion of Critical Thinking. Do you consider this to be an influential idea?**

Clearly there are three parts to this essay. You must identify and explain each of the components of Brookfield's idea. You must discuss each of these components. And, finally, you must evaluate its influence. For example, it may have been influential in one sector of education or the social sciences and

not in others (an example of a poor, and an example of a good attempt at a similar essay are provided in Chapter 4).

Or

### **Example Title: Explain and discuss Darwin's Theory of Evolution.**

This title has two parts. In *explaining* Darwin's theory, you will articulate as clearly as possible the claims of the theory. In *discussing* the theory, you may be identifying its strengths, weaknesses, implications, historical context, influences and subsequent scientific evidential support, etc.

However excellently you write on one part of an essay question, you cannot get a good grade if you neglect another part. A surprisingly large number of students make this basic error, writing much on one part of an essay question and neglecting, completely or relatively, another part or parts. To ensure you answer all parts of a question, list a small number of key points relating to each of the parts of the question. Note a small number of key texts, which are directly relevant to each part.

## **2. The Literature Search**

Now do some directly relevant reading. Obviously include books from your reading list and any relevant books or papers written or recommended by your tutor. There will be more about how to research and record the relevant literature in Chapter 1. You will learn that there are useful tools to help you with this. For example, using digital resources such as Google and other search engines; making good use of your college or university online resources as well as the libraries' physical resources for researching; and taking advantage of the plethora of software packages and programs for capturing and recording the information you found. Using citation management tools and applications is a good starting point for keeping a track of the journals, books and other sources you may discover as you carry out your literature search. These will help you to store and manage the information. You can also use a simple Microsoft Excel spreadsheet or free tools such as Scrivener, Evernote ([www.evernote.com](http://www.evernote.com)) or Trello ([www.trello.com](http://www.trello.com)). These are also available as apps, making it easier to capture information easily when you are out and about.

## **3. Planning**

Plan your essay. To see the intended structure clearly, it is helpful if this is shown on one side of A4. Chapter 2 gives guidance on how to construct this

plan. A good plan will focus on the title and incorporate all its parts in a logical sequence. Planning is essential for good organisation of your material and will also help you to break your writer's block and get started. It will also help you to time plan your writing in order to meet the submission date. Do not launch into your essay without making a plan. Poor organisation of material, including illogical ordering, repetition, serious omissions and jumbled ideas result from lack of initial thinking and planning. A good written plan will help you to produce well-organised work.

#### ***4. First Draft***

Find somewhere comfortable to write, and, if you can, find somewhere where you do not have too many interruptions or distractions. Remind yourself that this is only your first draft. Nothing is set in stone. However, it is always easier to improve a first draft than to try and produce a perfect piece of work straight off.

Write your first draft following your plan. This will not necessarily mean that you must write in the sequence of the plan; you may want to write the main body before writing the introduction for example. The sequence may vary from essay to essay and from student to student. But you must finish up with an introduction, a main body and a conclusion as set out in your plan. Following your plan will also help you to stay relevant to your essay title. Superfluous material, however excellent, will nevertheless be marked down if it is not relevant to the question asked. Check that you have answered the question as given, e.g. 'give three reasons' means three. If you only give two reasons, you will lose marks and giving four will not mean you will gain additional marks.

#### ***5. Second Draft***

Now read your completed essay and, using the checklists provided at the end of the book, you can add, change, amend and delete. Add these notes to (a copy of) the text of your first draft. Some of the most common changes include: noticing and amending small errors; adjusting the word count (see below); dealing with repetition, and recognising the need for greater clarity in places.

Write your second draft incorporating all the improvements you have noted.

At this stage, it is useful to get a second opinion. You could ask a critical friend to read this second draft. Ideally, your tutor could read it to reassure you that you are on the right lines.

Amend your second draft in the light of any useful feedback you have been given.

## 6. Word Adjustment

Check the number of words you have produced. If your assignment is too short, think about which parts would benefit from further clarification or discussion. If your assignment is too long, delete any repetitions or wasted words. Pruning nearly always improves clarity and style. See page 106. Now write the final version.

## 7. The Final Check

Have a final check through including checking your citations and reference list (see the checklists in the appendix). Complete the submission sheet if your department uses these. Hand it in on time or by an agreed (negotiated) extension date.

## A Good Assignment: Gaining Good Grades

There are seven key characteristics which any good essay will exhibit. When an assessor marks your work they will tend to award marks on the basis of the presence or absence of these characteristics. You will be gaining or shedding marks toward your grade largely in relation to these salient aspects of good work. However, be aware that different assessors may have differing responses to an essay, partly because there is, inevitably, a subjective element in marking, but also partly because the relative importance of these characteristics of good work will vary for individual assessors. Assessors will be guided by the marking criteria, however, so take account of this. In addition, where possible, if your tutor is the assessor, notice his or her preferences or foibles.

### The Key Characteristics

1. Evidence of wide and relevant reading. Knowledge of the literature (see Chapter 1).
2. Good organisation of material (see Chapter 2).
3. Sound argument and use of relevant research (see Chapter 3).
4. Evidence of critical thinking (see Chapter 4).
5. Inclusion of analysis (see Chapter 5).
6. Originality (see Chapter 6).
7. Professional presentation and correct use of academic conventions (see Chapter 7).

Chapters 8 and 9 cover additional characteristics of other forms of assignment including oral presentations.

## What Went Wrong: The Corresponding Seven Common Essay Errors

Unsurprisingly, the most common errors students make in writing an essay occur because one or more of the key characteristics of a good essay are not met. Again, your assessor will mark you down for committing these mistakes. Let us revisit our key characteristics and see how things go wrong.

### 1. The Literature

- No reference is made to the work of other writers, thinkers, researchers.
- Your own ideas are swamped by too many references and overlong quotations.
- The works chosen are irrelevant.

For example, in an essay entitled: 'What is Tourette Syndrome?' the focus must be on this condition. We do not need a lengthy account, as distinct from a mention, of all the co-morbidities that can be associated with Tourette Syndrome.

- Wrong attributions of ideas/research.

For example, do not attribute Darwin's actual ideas to a commentator, or the commentator's own slant on evolution to Darwin.

- The references are not correctly placed in the text nor correctly set out in the reference list. See section on References on page 110.

### 2. Organisation of Material

- Failing to answer the question and all parts of the question
- Poor essay structure
- No use of headings
- Poor introduction and overview
- No logical development
- Poor conclusion
- Too many or too few words (i.e. not staying within specified word limit)

### 3. Reasons and Evidence

- Too assertive. No arguments advanced for the claims made or counter arguments to arguments that are made against your claims. (By claims, here, we mean the propositions you are putting forward as valid, and by arguments, we mean the reasons and evidence you cite in support of your claims.)
- No relevant research cited in support.

#### 4. Critical Thinking

All the material is descriptive with very little in the way of theories, critical questioning, distinctive critiques and critical reflection.

#### 5. Forms of Analysis

There is little or no critical analysis – no meta-analysis, analysis of key concepts, no exploration of relevant theoretical material. Meta-analysis means taking an overview of your material in order to be critically reflective about it (see Chapter 5).

#### 6. Point of View and Original Elements

- The student tells us what other writers think about the topic/question but does not give (or support) their own point of view.

We have tended to use ‘claim’ for any proposition you put forward as true. Your point of view is your perspective or stance on an issue. You add interest, too, by including your own examples or by drawing on your own experience.

#### 7. Presentation and Academic Conventions

- The presentation is poor – poorly typed and not in accordance with departmental guidelines. (If your department does not have guidelines, choose a clear, sensible font such as Times New Roman or Arial, set appropriate (wide enough) margins and set line spacing to 1.5 or double line spacing.)
- The English is poor – unclear sentences, poor punctuation, spelling and grammar. (Use your software’s inbuilt spellchecker to correct any spelling and grammar. If English is not your first language, there are lots of ESL (English as a Second Language) resources online with practical exercises and advice and tips that will help you to improve your writing.)
- Referencing and other academic conventions are applied incorrectly and inconsistently. See Chapter 7 for detailed information about academic conventions and referencing systems such as Harvard, which is often used in humanities subjects, the Vancouver system, which is used in medical and scientific papers and APA (the American Psychological Association style), often used in the social sciences.

### Take Seven Steps to a Better Grade

Earlier, we identified seven steps to completion. We have also seen that the characteristics of a good essay, and the corresponding common errors, can be

conveniently grouped into seven key areas. The first seven chapters of the book cover these key areas. Follow the advice in every chapter and you will achieve a good grade. What follows is a detailed explanation of the contents of each chapter. If you work your way through them, you will avoid the most common pitfalls.

If you fail to complete an assignment you will not obtain a grade – even a lowly one! This is why our introduction has discussed getting started, how to overcome writer’s block and how to complete your assignment on time. Always remember that if you must rush to finish, or you fear you have gone wrong in some way, you have options. You could ask your tutor for extra time. You could hand your work in anyway and be prepared to be asked to resubmit. Ask for advice. Discuss what went wrong and clarify what you need to improve for any resubmission.

### **Chapter 1: Using the Literature**

Students go wrong here in one of two ways. Either they make no use of the work of others (‘no evidence of wide and relevant reading’) or they cram in so many long quotations that there is no space for their own voice and their own ideas. That is why in this chapter you will learn how to identify the most relevant literature, and examples are given of too little, too much and a balanced use of the literature.

### **Chapter 2: Planning, Structure and Organisation**

Poor assignments often show a lack of structure. There may be much irrelevant material. The assignment reads as though the student is writing down a stream of academic consciousness or taking a scattergun approach to the topic, i.e. throwing material onto the page in a random manner. To make a good plan is important because it will give your assignment structure and coherence. Good organisation of relevant material is one of the keys to a higher grade. Good organisation will also ensure that you produce a good introduction and an appropriate conclusion with logical order of material in the body of the essay and the helpful use of subheadings.

### **Chapter 3: Rational Thinking**

Chapter 3 explains what we mean by rationality; it gives you the skills of reason giving, good argument and supporting your work with strong evidence.

A common error is to make sweeping claims that go beyond your evidence or to make unsupported statements and arguments. The name of the academic game is to have good reasons and/or evidence for your arguments and ideas. Don't earn a 'too assertive' comment, it will lead to some loss of marks.

### Chapter 4: Critical Thinking

Chapter 4 explains what we mean by critical thinking; it gives you the skills of asking critical questions and engaging in critical reflection. These skills will ensure that your assignment will contain sufficient critical content to avoid the common error of being 'too descriptive'. A degree of criticality is often what separates pass level work from a 'good' or 'excellent' assessment.

### Chapter 5: Analytic Thinking

Chapter 5 explains what we mean by analysis; including conceptual analysis, meta-analysis, philosophical reflection and metacognition. It will give you the skills to engage in these four forms of analysis.

### Chapter 6: Originality

A good assignment will be well presented, make good use of the literature, provide reasons and evidence for its assertions and contain some critical/analytic thinking. A very good or excellent assignment will have a distinct point of view or a fresh perspective. In other words, it will have a touch of originality, which lifts it out of the pile! This is not as difficult to achieve as it may sound. Advice and examples are covered in Chapter 6. Never be afraid to produce your own slant on the topic (perhaps by drawing on your own personal or professional experience), provided that you give reasons for what you are suggesting.

### Chapter 7: Presentation

Students are often marked down for poor presentation or for incorrect use of academic conventions or for many small errors. If you have comments like: *poor presentation, poor use of English, spoiled by small errors, incorrect referencing, poor use of quotations* and so on, take the advice in this chapter to heart. These kinds of errors do not necessarily lead you to fail, unless they are very bad or

very numerous, but they do give a bad impression and tend to lead to a lower grade. Therefore, you can raise your grade simply by getting these more mechanical requirements completely correct. Similarly, if you follow academic conventions on such things as referencing, acronyms, good layout of tables and figures, etc. you will ensure a more polished and professional presentation and gain credit for this.

## Chapter 8: Other Forms of Assignment

**Reviews** need to clearly convey the key information about the book (or presentation, etc.) under review, but will also need to critique this, using some of the techniques explored in Chapters 4 and 5. Students often fail to be sufficiently critical. (Remember, that to be critical includes highlighting positive as well as negative aspects of the item under review.) Both strengths and weaknesses need to be considered and evaluated.

**Reports** of various kinds are sometimes given to students as an alternative to an essay. Clarity and conciseness are important for constructing a report. Students often fail to include all the important information. Tips on how to identify the important issues and details and how to structure the material using helpful headings are included in this chapter.

This chapter also touches on group work, research projects, reflective journals, abstracts and summaries, and portfolios.

## Chapter 9: Oral Presentations

Understandably, you may be nervous about giving an oral presentation and this can mar your performance. We have known situations where better material, nervously presented, has received a lower grade than poor material presented with confidence and conviction. You can use humour or anecdote to keep audience attention. PowerPoint presentations can be very helpful. All this is further explored in Chapter 9.

## Conclusion

In this introduction we have explained that this book is for all students who wish to write good essays. Each chapter is devoted to helping you to develop useful HE skills and avoid the most common errors and pitfalls. The introduction also has advice on overcoming writer's block and has provided you with seven key steps to achieving a better grade.

### Summary of Key Points

1. This book will help you to write your first essay or to get better grades than you achieved for previous ones. You will learn how to write a good essay at a level appropriate for higher education.
2. You are capable of completing a good essay or other assignment, but you were not born knowing what is required. This book will show you.
3. To avoid writer's block, write in bite-size chunks. Do not sit down intending to write the whole essay. Follow your plan (see Chapter 2). Remember it is only a first draft. Once you have a first draft it is easier to improve it.
4. Begin with a focus on the essay title. What is it asking from you? How many parts does it have? Now do the relevant reading. Use your recommended reading list. (There are some suggested search tools in Chapter 1.)
5. Read your first draft and note where it could be improved, e.g. correct small errors, cut repetitions, clarify any unclear text.
6. To adjust the word count: if the essay is too short, which parts would benefit from further discussion? If the essay is too long, delete any unnecessary words (e.g. very) and any repetitions.
7. Ask a critical friend to read your second draft and take on board any useful advice they offer.
8. A good essay must show:
  - Evidence of wide and relevant reading. Knowledge of the literature (see Chapter 1)
    - Common error: No citation of other writers or too many quotes from others.
  - Good organisation of material (see Chapter 2)
    - Common error: Haphazard, unstructured material, perhaps missing an introduction or a conclusion.
  - Sound argument and use of relevant research (see Chapter 3)
    - Common error: Assertive essay with no justifications given.
  - Evidence of critical thinking (see Chapter 4)
    - Common error: No critical questioning or reflection.
  - Inclusion of analysis (see Chapter 5)
    - Common error: No use of any of the forms of analysis, e.g. no definition of key terms.
  - Originality (see Chapter 6)
    - Common error: No inclusion of your point of view.
  - Presentation and academic conventions (see Chapter 7)
    - Common errors: Poor English, incorrect use of academic conventions such as acronyms and references.

## A Preliminary Note: 'Voice'

Before we look at the skills covered in the following chapters, we are providing a preliminary note about deciding in which voice to write your essays. The voice you choose may vary according to the essay topic, and sometimes according to the preferences of your tutor/department.

You could write your essay in the first person (I would argue...) or in a less personal style, the third person, (the author would argue...) or in the passive voice (It could be argued that...).

Examples of first person:

In my view...

I suggest that...

Examples of the third person, less personal 'voice':

In the author's view...

The author would suggest that...

Examples of the passive 'voice':

One plausible view is...

It could be suggested that...

Which tone is to be preferred might, arguably, depend on the essay or assignment task. Some assignments would be too contrived if the direct 'I' were avoided. For example:

In addition to writing your five thousand word essay, write five hundred additional words reflecting on your own learning from writing your essay. (Such reflection is sometimes referred to as metacognition – an analytic task discussed in Chapter 5.)

We (the authors of this book) clearly use the direct, more informal first person, but we know that some university teachers prefer essays in the more formal, passive 'voice'. We would argue that the first person approach is more direct, less contrived, more involving for the reader and rather easier to write. Other academics would claim that this approach is less objective in tone and that students should be encouraged to be objective. Moreover, they believe that essays call for formality and that students should be able to write in the passive voice.

The important thing for you is to check with the tutor who has given you the essay. Do they have a view on this? Some university departments will have essay and assignment guidelines which include attention to this issue. Find out if your department provides such guidance. If so, follow the guidelines! In general, essays in the natural sciences are less likely to be acceptable in the first person than those in the social sciences.

**Top Tip**

Before you write your essay, check any department guidelines and ask your tutor about the acceptability (or otherwise) of using the first person in your work. Also check the word allowance, the hand-in deadline, marking criteria and any special requirements.