

Student Disability Services

Essay Writing in 8 Steps

Step 1: Get to grips with the scale of the task

This is important because it's much harder to cut down to the required word count if you have written too much than to plan carefully and write the right amount in the first place. Scale is also important because it will dictate the amount of detail you can include.

Think about the word limit (2,000 words, 3,000 words?). How many typed pages will there be (about 500 words per page with single spacing)? Roughly how many sections do you think there will be (e.g. 6 including introduction and conclusion)? For example, each section for a 2,000 word essay would be in the range of 300 – 350 words. Think about the number of words per page (500, font 12, single spaced or 250 double spaced). A 2,000 word essay will fill about 4 (or 8) pages. If you visualise and work within a framework like this, you will be more likely to produce a piece of writing that is of about the right length. No time wasted chopping bits out.

Step 2: Consider the subject of the essay / the essay title

Read the essay title carefully, as every word will be important. It may be helpful to identify two different sorts of words: Content words and Instruction words.

Content words relate to the subject you will be writing about. The area about which you will be demonstrating your knowledge and understanding, be it cognition, anatomy, French history, Descartes or post-impressionism.

Instruction words are those that tell you how you are expected to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding, e.g. discuss, give an account of, describe, compare and contrast, justify, evaluate, analyse, critically examine, define, explain. The instruction words are easy to overlook, because it is the content words that tend to stand out. It's perhaps a good idea to highlight them as a reminder to bear them in mind as you plan, research and write.

Step 3: Draft a Plan

First; what do you already know about the subject? Perhaps not a great deal, as you may not have read very much yet. But you may have attended a lecture or course of lectures; you may already have ideas of your own. Before starting your research, get some ideas down on paper or use mind-mapping software. This could be in the form of a mind-map or simply a list of headings – areas that you think need to be covered in the essay.

Second; does the title offer you structure? For example: 1. Describe; 2. Explain; 3. Evaluate - Can the essay be logically divided into sections that have been suggested to you? Third; make a draft plan of the essay structure by putting your headings / topics in the order you think would be best in the essay. Assign numbers to the headings as these can be cross referenced in your notes (see below).

It's really important to spend some time focusing on the essay before starting your reading, as this preparatory work will give you a 'scaffolding' to support your research. It will make your research much more effective.

Step 4: Identify relevant literature

Now that you have some idea what you are going to be writing about you can start to identify the papers / chapters that will provide the information you require. As you make a list of reading material make a note of the section of your essay the text is likely to relate to.

Step 5: Research and take notes

It may seem strange that it is not until Step 5 that the reading for your essay begins. Actually, steps 1-4 need not take very long, but they are extremely important. This is because, if you dive in immediately and wade through a huge pile of journal articles, making copious notes, you are likely to end up wondering what the point of all the reading was, or even to feel a sense of panic that you can't remember anything from your reading.

Having completed Steps 1 – 4 you are starting your reading with an essay in mind. You will be able to adopt a selective approach to your reading (see Information Sheet on Effective Reading) focusing only on those texts that meet your need. Before reading a text, try making a note of a few points or questions that you expect to be addressed in it (all related to your draft plan); As you make notes, think about where you might use the information from the text in your essay and cross reference to the numbers you have given to the headings in the draft plan. This will make life easier when you come to write your essay; you will see the point of the reading once you have finished it.

Compile your references as you go, as this can be a time consuming exercise if you leave it to do just before submission. Using referencing software such as Endnote or Reference Manager can simplify this task.

Step 6: Finalise your essay plan

At this point the draft plan needs to become the actual plan. You will have new ideas from your reading so you will probably want to tweak the plan. Finalise your headings (in a Word document) as a framework for writing. If you have written your research notes in Word, transfer them to the appropriate section of the essay for easy reference as you write. At this point it's a good idea to write a short 'abstract' or summary of your planned essay (50 – 100 words) to keep you on track as you write.

Step 7: Writing

A few general points:

Audience: Bear in mind that the purpose of essays is to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding. The best way to do this is to imagine that you are writing, not for your course tutor who will be a specialist and published author to whose work you will no doubt be referring, but to a reasonable well-informed lay person or a specialist in a related field of study. Imagine this person reading what you have written. Will they be able to follow your arguments? What might need to be made clear?

Content: There is usually an expectation that essays will be more than simply descriptive; they will involve some level of critical analysis, evaluation or argument.

Flow: The ideas presented in an essay need to flow in a logical order; they need to ‘hang together’ so that the reader can be aware of the direction you are taking and can follow the argument without having to search for it. The conclusion needs to link in to the introduction to complete the ‘circle’.

The dreaded word-count: Keep an eye on this as you go; of course there is some flexibility within sections but there is little flexibility overall.

Don’t lead with the literature: There is a temptation to start every paragraph or section with a reference to literature. It’s important to remember that the essay is yours; it represents your argument and so the function of the literature is to support that or to throw more light on it. Of course some of your sentences will start with the name of a researcher – but overall, the essay is *your* ‘story’.

The Writing Process

This part of the process should not actually take too long, as you have done most of the work already. Try not to write in too many sittings – you may well be able to write up to 1,000 words in one go.

Where to start? This doesn’t matter too much as you have an overall plan as your structure. You may want to start with the section you feel most confident about. As the function of the introduction is to outline the scope of the essay, you may wish to leave this until last, referring instead to your brief summary mentioned in Step 6.

The **introduction** sets out, briefly, the structure of the essay. Problems may be posed but solutions are not offered at this point; outline (as relevant/appropriate to the discipline) your perspective on the subject and the reasons for the need to address the issues at hand. It may also be appropriate in some subject areas to define subject-specific terms.

The function of the **conclusion** is to draw together the various threads of your argument. It is not the place for new information, but it is the place to express your own evaluation of the arguments and ideas you have discussed. It is also the place (depending on the discipline) to allude to possible areas for further research.

Style

Reflect the style of the literature you have read in your research but do not plagiarise at any cost.

Make good use of paragraphs; it’s difficult to read huge blocks of undivided print and it’s irritating to read ‘sound-bite’ sized paragraphs of one or two lines.

Use connecting words and phrases to link your paragraphs, so that your argument ‘hangs together’.

Step 8: Finalise References, Edit and Proofread, Cover Sheet

Make sure you leave enough time for this 'housekeeping' aspect of the process.

Editing

- Try not to make any major changes at this point.
- If you have used headings to structure your essay they can be deleted now (depending on the type of essay and the expectations of your course tutor). You can also delete the 'abstract' you used in the preparation stage (Step 6).
- Run the spell check.
- Read through to check that there is a flow to your argument. Combine any 'sound-bite'-sized paragraphs and split any very large blocks of text.
- You may find it helpful to proof read using text to voice software. It's best not to proof read the whole essay in one go as it's hard to maintain the level of concentration required to spot mistakes – so do it in sections and take a break.
- You shouldn't need to cut out much material to finish with the right number of words. Check that you are within the set limit.

References

- Look through your reference section and make sure that all the items listed need to be there – have you referred to them in your essay? Now look through the references in the body of your essay and make sure that each is listed in the reference section.
- Check the formatting of the reference section, making sure it complies with the required conventions for your discipline.
- Run Turnitin to ensure there could be no indication of plagiarism.

Submission

If you have been issued with stickers to declare your dyslexia / dyspraxia, attach one to any hard copies you are submitting. For electronic submissions, you can either scan in the sticker or copy the wording onto the cover sheet issued by your course tutor.

Submit it!

Useful Assistive Software

Inspiration <http://www.inspiration.com/>

Mind View www.matchware.com/en/products/mindview/default.htm

XMind (free to download) www.xmind.net/

Natural Reader (free to download) <http://www.naturalreaders.com/>

TextHelp Read and Write Gold www.texthelp.com/

ClaroRead www.claroread.com/