Study Advice Services

Part of the IfL Centre for Learning Development

Essays

A detailed look at planning and writing them

The following is a relatively comprehensive explanation of what you will need to do in order to write a good essay. Reference is also made to additional leaflets produced by the Study Advice Services, all of which are available from our website at **www.hull.ac.uk/studyadvice.**

First, what are essays and why are students required to write them?

An essay usually has all the following characteristics; it

- is a piece of continuous, extended writing (in other words, it does not usually contain sub-headings),
- varies in length from one to five thousand words,
- explores a given topic, often analytically,
- is based on information from multiple sources,
- is based on your thinking, that of others or both.

Why is essay writing important? Because it:

- illustrates to you and to your tutor how well you have understood a given topic,
- helps you to clarify your ideas,
- develops critical thinking,
- is one of the key skills in your education (written communication),
- develops generic skills (time management, information gathering, logical thinking & planning),
- provides the opportunity for feedback on your progress,
- may count towards your degree classification.

Knowing what is expected

1. Understand the task

Be clear about what you have to do before you begin, regarding the length, the content and the format of the essay. Check with your tutor or department if you are unsure. They may also produce guidance of their own or even the criteria used for assessment, either of which may be valuable to you.

2. Understand the question

It is vital that you spend some time looking carefully at the question in order to understand its implications. Often, a clue to how it could or should be answered is in the question itself. This process should help you to decide what is **relevant**. This is important because otherwise you will waste your time along with that of the tutor who marks it and you will fail to gain credit for anything you write which is irrelevant. You might like to adopt the "TFI" principle:

Topic – what the question is generally about.
Focus – what specific aspect, if any, you have to concentrate on.
Instruction – what you are required to do.

Here are some examples

Question	Topic	Focus	Instruction - implicit or explicit
"Discuss the causes of war in [play] by [author]"	The play	The causes of war	Discuss
"How important was the rôle of Bismarck in the formation of the German state?"	Formation of the German state	The rôle of Bismarck	Analyse
"What are the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative methods of evaluation in [subject]?"	Methods of evaluation	Qualitative and quantitative types	Compare and contrast

Unless you are specifically instructed to do so, do not concentrate on one particular aspect at the expense of others which should also be described, discussed or explained. In other words, get the **proportions** right so as to **avoid imbalance** and **bias**. Don't concentrate on one aspect of the question to the neglect of another – give each the amount of consideration it deserves. You will gain no credit (and waste time) if you write about something not relevant to the question.

3. Understand the preparation

- Lecture notes and hand-outs in themselves are not usually enough.
- You need to show evidence of further reading.
- Ask yourself if there are any specific 'musts', for example, must you include/describe/discuss certain ideas or a minimum number of them? What is to be the number of words and how close should it be to the number stipulated? Must something be done or read beforehand?
- Is your personal experience relevant?
- How much is each skill weighted: understanding of content, use of language, organisation of material, presentation of argument, depth of analysis …? This will be indicated in the criteria for assessment given by your department.

4. Understand the instruction

Important: It may be blindingly obvious, but **ANSWER THE QUESTION.**
It is amazing how many people do not read the question carefully and understand all its implications. Very often a clue to how it should be answered can be found by reading it very carefully.

On page 3 is a list of key words and phrases which will tell you what kind of essay is required or, in other words, what you need to do:

Key word	Common implication
Analyse	Break into component parts and show how they relate to one another
Assess	Estimate the value or importance of
Compare	Examine similarities and differences
Contrast	Concentrate on differences
Define	Explain the precise meaning of
Describe	Give a description of (relatively easy)
Discuss	Explain the meaning or significance of something and explore all its implications
Evaluate/To what extent?/ How far?	Judge the importance, success, value, merits or otherwise of, using evidence or argument to support your view
Examine	Give a detailed account of something, questioning and exploring issues
Explain	Give a precise account of something with **reasons** for why or how it is as it is
Illustrate	Use examples from a range of sources to demonstrate something
State	Write the main points relating to something
Summarise	Give the main points of something, preserving the overall coherence of the original

Getting started

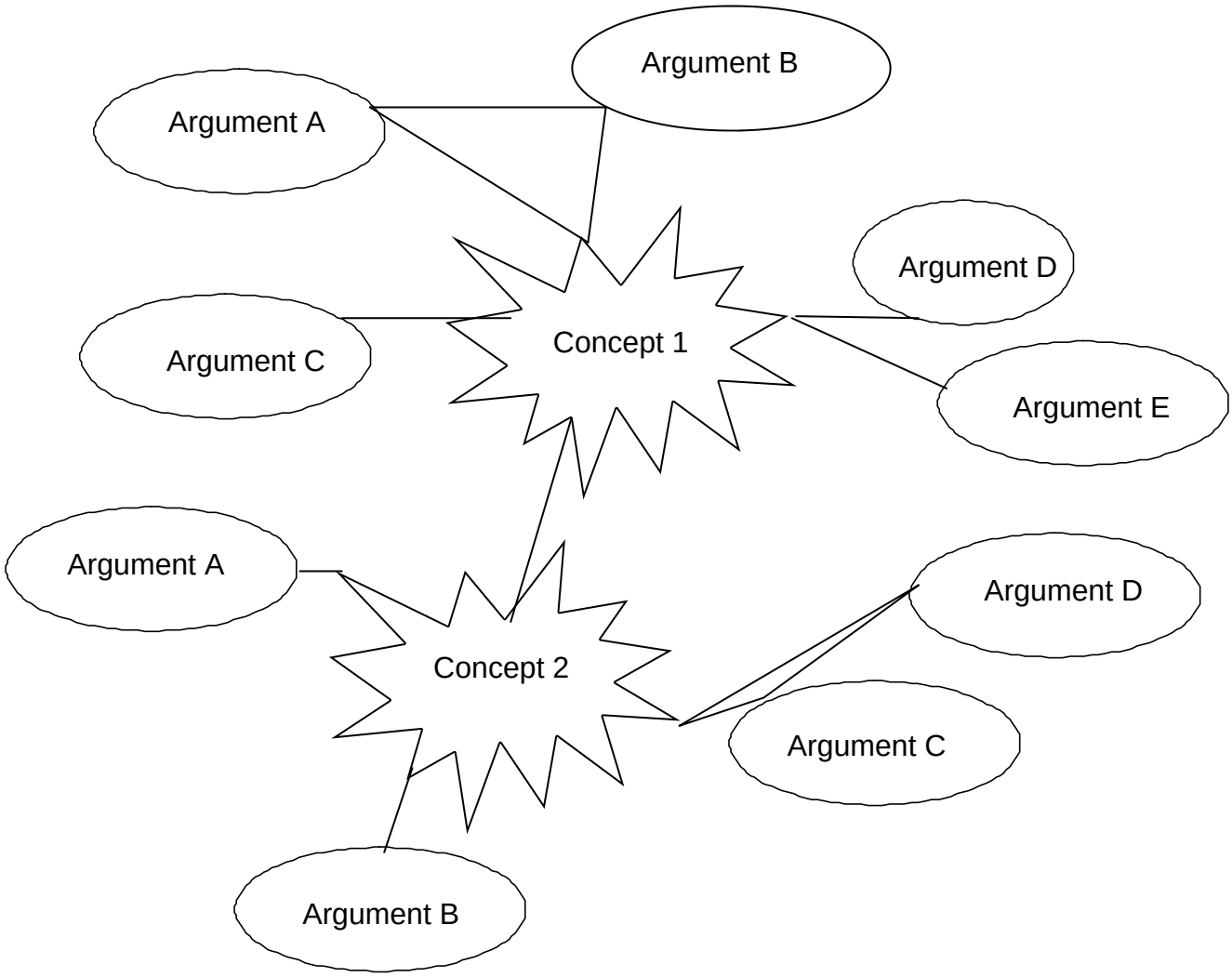
There is a range of approaches: these are the most common:

A) **Make a plan**, which will also guide your choice of reading and the gathering of information. This can alter as you progress. Ask yourself:

- What are the main ideas or issues to be covered?
- How will I cover them? Draw on primary texts and/or authorities in the field, personal experience …
- What examples/illustrations/references/quotations will be useful?
- What conclusions may or will be reached?

B) **Make a list or brainstorm**, by writing down ideas as they occur to you. This will reveal how many ideas you have and therefore what further reading, discussion or thinking you will have to do. Even if you think you have enough ideas to answer the question without further research, you may well be wrong. Few people, if any, know everything! You can then complete this, if necessary, by further reading and number the ideas in the order in which they will be presented in the essay. Sequence the essay based on the notes you have made and assign approximate word counts to each planned section so that they all add up to the required word length and give the whole answer **proportion** and **balance**.

C) **Write a mind map**. After writing down your ideas, try linking them in terms of logic or relationships. Here is one example of many which could be made:



D) **Use the start of a mind** map to tease out your ideas.

E) **Talk** to tutors or other students. This can be a useful way of generating or clarifying ideas, of testing your ideas on others and of discovering other sources of information. Ensure, however, that you consider the question adequately yourself before you do this; you would not want your tutor, for example, to think he or she was being asked to do your thinking for you!

F) **Write a rough draft immediately** and then read for more ideas. This method can be adopted for a word-processed work since it is very easy to cut, paste and move things around, but it may be more time-consuming.

G) **Read first, then make a list or plan.** Care is needed here to ensure that the reading you do is relevant and targeted. As you read and make notes, ideas and strategies will often occur to you and a plan may fall into place almost spontaneously.

Preparatory Reading

It is good if you already know a lot about what you are going to write, but in most cases you will at least need to find out more – either more facts or more ideas and arguments. Your first task must therefore be to read as much as you can about the topic. Ideas, arguments and concepts are born from an understanding and a consideration of the facts. Do not begin an essay until you have enough knowledge at your disposal to support what you will say. This will also help to avoid any bias in your argument. Reading is probably the most important academic task you can do at

university. One word of warning, however: it is possible to read about a topic in too much detail or to attempt to read from too many works. You will need to develop the skill of looking at the contents and/or index pages of a book and of skimming a selection of pages to see whether or not it will be of use to you. You want the right **amount** of information before you start so you need to achieve a **balance** between reading too much, which carries the risk of overload and confusion, and reading too little, which leaves you with a lack of material and ideas about which to write.

Make notes as you read and **record works and page numbers** so you can refer back to them later. You will also need this information to reference and acknowledge authors you have cited. Try to make these notes in your own words so as to avoid **unintentional plagiarism** by noting something verbatim and then copying it later when writing the essay as if they were your own words.

Gathering information

It may help you to list:

- what information you need and
- where you are likely to find it.

The kinds of information sources available to you, depending on the subject matter and what you have been asked to do, are likely to be:

- lecture notes and/or handouts
- books
- journals (these are often under-used)
- reference works
- the internet (but beware here; good search and selection techniques are required or much time and energy can be wasted)
- other printed media (newspapers, magazines …)
- videos
- experiments (in Sciences)
- fieldwork (in Sciences or Social Sciences)
- other people.

Structuring the essay

Most essays need an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction presents to the reader a situation to be considered. It needs to be fairly short in relation to the rest of the essay – don't bore your reader from the start! It may include an explanation of terms, of how you are going to treat the topic and perhaps the line of argument you will follow. The main body of the essay should provide a clearly structured, coherent argument and/or exposition. The conclusion also needs to be short but remember not to repeat at length what you have already said but to **summarise** and **draw conclusions.** Here are some examples: the list is by no means exhaustive and you should feel free to devise your own plan, **as long as it is logical and coherent.**

Simple

Introduction	Main body	Conclusion

Serial
(where aspects or arguments for and against can be considered, the most important first):

Intro.	Aspect / argument 1	Aspect / argument 2	Aspect / argument 3	Conclusion

Chronological
(where a historical - and present and future - consideration of the topic might be appropriate):

Introduction	Date 1	Date 2	Date 3	Conclusion

Parallel
(where you are considering how well a theory would map onto various real or possible situations):

Introduction		
Situation 1	Theory 1 Situation 2	Situation 3
Situation 1	Theory 2 Situation 2	Situation 3
Situation 1	Theory 3 Situation 2	Situation 3
Conclusion		

Or, conversely …
Parallel

Introduction		
Theory 1	Situation 1 Theory 2	Theory 3
Theory 1	Situation 2 Theory 2	Theory 3
Theory 1	Situation 3 Theory 2	Theory 3
Conclusion		

(where you are considering how well various situations illustrate different theories):

Writing the essay and expressing your ideas clearly

Writing is not easy, even for those with experience, but it is only by practising a given skill that we become better at it. Motivation is the key. In theory, if the preparation has been done properly, the writing is relatively easy providing you have a good command of the (English) language. If you find this stage difficult you may need to:

- read more (go out less!)
- think more (switch off the music, television, mobile phone)
- motivate yourself (starting is often the most difficult part).

In today's word-processed world, things can be changed, added, deleted etc, very easily, but do remember to save frequently and **make a back up** – work can sometimes go astray.

So, you might adopt one of these procedures:

- write the introduction and conclusion, so you know where you are heading, then the main body of the essay; the introduction and/or conclusion can always be altered later, if necessary;
- start with the introduction and go on to the finish, editing and proofing as you go;
- as above but edit and proof afterwards;
- as above with breaks of from ¼ hour to one day between writing sessions;
- write the main body, then add the introduction and conclusion;
- divide your essay into 'chunks' of ideas or topics, according to a mind map, if you have made one, before or after writing the introduction and conclusion.

In all cases, try to write in an academic style, avoiding the use of 'I' or 'we' (academic works and the editorials of quality newspapers are good examples of this technique) and ensure that both the argument and the expression are **clear**. If you are not confident about this, **use short sentences**. (See the Study Advice Services leaflet *Academic Writing*)

In most essays, except for the simple expository (descriptive) ones, you will gain credit for **showing an ability to discuss and analyse** the facts and argument you have presented. This involves a personal evaluation, arguing the pros and cons, illustrating advantages and disadvantages, taking an argument apart and looking at each point, or following it through and extrapolating i.e. continuing the same line of argument (perhaps into other areas) to see where it would lead, or giving counter arguments.

After answering the low-level questions (Who? What? When? Where?) which invoke only factual and descriptive responses, try to pose the higher-level ones (Why? How? To what extent…?) since an attempt to answer these provokes the kind of discussion which puts you in line for the higher grades.

You might prefer to write for 15 – 20 minutes before having a break, then to continue, or you may prefer to finish once you have started. This will depend on:

- the length of essay required,
- your concentration span and
- your preferred style of work.

Stop every 2 or 3 pages. Look at the question again and consider what you have just written. Is it still relevant? Is it still answering the question? Am I wandering off the point? Remember, your first draft is exactly that, so be prepared to amend, add, expand or adjust parts of it once or even twice more until you are satisfied with the presentation and/or the argument used.

Sequencing the argument

This means developing **a clear line of thought**. Your ideas need to be organised into a sequence **meaningful to the reader** which can be signposted in the introduction.

Supporting your argument

You may do this by:

- **logical reasoning**. You might, for example, highlight the consistencies in your view and the inconsistencies in opposing viewpoints, perhaps by **extrapolating** i.e. continuing a line of thought to a logical conclusion to see where it leads;
- **weighing** two or more convincing viewpoints and deciding what tips the balance in favour of one;
- **providing evidence** based on your own experience;
- **citing authoritative sources.**

Be careful of statements such as: "Experiments have shown that …" What experiments? Or: "There is evidence that …" What evidence? You must be able to back up what you say and to refer the reader to the sources which you say exist.

Acknowledging or referencing the sources

This needs to be carefully done in order to **avoid plagiarism**. The general rule is that ALL quotations MUST be referenced with the page number of the works from which they are taken. Keep a careful note as you go along, including page numbers. Check with your department on which convention is to be used; this should be in the departmental handbook. See also the leaflet "Referencing" obtainable from the Study Advice Services website www.hull.ac.uk/studyadvice or, for a full explanation of the Harvard system, with examples, consult the University Library's factsheet "References: how to collect and present them" on their web page at www.hull.ac.uk/lib/infoskills/collect.html

When do you need to give a source?

The following table is a guide to the procedure. For full details, refer to the leaflet and web page above or to your departmental guidelines.

The examples given would need to be included in a **reference list** at the end of the essay or as footnotes on the same page giving full details of the work. Your **bibliography** (if you need one) is simply a list of all the works you have read or partially read to help you construct the essay, **whether or not you have referred to them in the essay**. If not numbered, the reference list must be set out in alphabetical order by author surname. Again, please refer to the Study Advice Services leaflet on referencing or your departmental policy on referencing. The important point, whatever system you use, is that it should be both **clear** and **consistent**.

Context	**Example**
A direct quotation i.e. a verbatim (or virtually word-for-word) copy from a published work	"*words…words…words*" (Thompson 1999 p. 26) or "*words…words…words*" (Thompson 1999 : 26)
Summarising or explaining an author's ideas or argument which may have been expressed over many pages or a whole work	There is the opposing view which holds that idea(s)… idea(s)…/ argument… argument (Thompson 1999) or Thompson (1999) has argued that words… words… words.

Checking, editing and proofing

When you have finished writing/typing, you have not finished the essay. It is not complete until it has been checked. Reading it through yourself, slowly, will also reveal other points or qualifications you may like to include which will add to the quality of the essay. Checking is an important process which you must not fail to do.

Treat it as if you are submitting it for publication. Ask yourself whether or not an editor would accept it as it is for printing. If not, why not?

- **Introduction**.

Have you defined your focus, stated the main issues to be covered and how you are going to deal with them?

- **Main body of the essay**.

Have you developed an argument, using evidence and analysis to support your statements? Have you presented the main ideas one at a time in a logical sequence? Have you missed anything important? Is the line of thought clear? Is the balance of the essay right? Is it all relevant?

- **Conclusion**.

Does it indeed conclude or simply repeat or summarise what has already been said? It should not introduce any new material but should re-iterate very briefly what has already been said (a summary) or draw conclusions from that, if you have not already done so in the body of the essay.

Check for **meaning.**

- Does it make sense?
- How would another reader, perhaps one who is not familiar with the subject, react to it?
- Is it for the layman or for someone with knowledge of the subject?

Next, check that ALL works mentioned have been **acknowledged and correctly referenced**. (See above)

Then check:
- that the vocabulary you have chosen is in the **appropriate register** (e.g. that you have not used an informal word or expression in an academic piece of work);
- that your paragraphs ideally each contain a single idea.

Then, check for **spelling**. A computer spell-check is a start but is not complete – you must also check it yourself since **spell-checkers do not see everything**. Check for the usual mistakes: principle/principal; affect/effect; practice/practise; too/to; its/it's; where/were; there/their; who's/whose; of/off; compliment/complement; ensure/insure; advise/advice; discreet/discrete (+ many, many more!)

Next, check the **grammar**, especially:

- for incomplete sentences.
- for 'telescoped' sentences, where there is a lack of division.
- that your sentences are not too complex or compound. It is often better to break down a long sentence into a series of shorter ones – your expression will then be easier to understand and much less susceptible to syntactical errors.

Next, check the **punctuation**. Are there full stops where there should be? Are there question marks after questions? (See the Study Advice Services leaflet "Punctuation").

Check also the **apostrophes** (or lack of them!). Even a casual glance at the local newspaper, shop signs and markets will reveal that these are widely misused, mainly due to a lack of understanding. They are used **only** to indicate:

- possession (e.g. the country's parliament), or
- that a letter or letters has/have been omitted (e.g. it's = it is).

In any case, the use of colloquial contractions (can't, I'm etc) should be **avoided** in an academic piece of work. A basic rule is:

There is NEVER an apostrophe in simple plurals!

Finally, check for **style**. Unless you have been instructed otherwise, this should be formal and impersonal. It should not be colloquial, chatty or use the first person (I/we) too much, if at all. The most important principle is that of **clarity**. **If it is not clear, it is not good English**. Avoid superfluous vocabulary, particularly prepositions, which add nothing to the meaning, for example:

- meet (up with) the president
- (up) until the last moment
- he missed (out on) the opportunity to …
- they continued (on with) the project
- … outside (of) the building

All the words in brackets add nothing to the meaning, so are **unnecessary**.

All foreign words should be in *italics*. Thus, you should also avoid making *ad hominem* comments and reserve any disparaging remarks for the idea, not the person.

Presentation

- Have you followed the conventions laid down by the department?
- Should it be word-processed? If so, is the format (margins, line spacing etc) correct?
- Have you made a copy?
- If it is hand-written, is it legible?
- Is the full title clearly set out at the beginning or on a separate title page?
- Is the reference list and/or bibliography set out on a separate page at the end, if not using a footnote system?

Using feedback

Feedback from tutors, written or oral, is extremely valuable when considering your next essay. Always follow the advice you are given. You can perhaps analyse the essay yourself after it is marked by looking carefully at any errors or omissions.

- Do I need to think about the style, punctuation, grammar, spelling …?
- Does my ability to construct an argument need improving?
- Did I link the paragraphs and ideas well enough?
- Was it all relevant?

If you are still not sure how you can improve your next essay, **ask your tutor**. The Study Advice Services may also be able to help and the Brynmor Jones Library has a very useful list of books on writing essays for various disciplines:

www.hull.ac.uk/lib/infoskills/essays.html

Finally, good luck with your next essay.

The assistance of D. and A. Jamieson in compiling this leaflet is gratefully acknowledged.

All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication.

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request from Sue Hodgson, telephone 01482 466199.