



Essay Writing the Basics

What is an essay?

An essay is a continuous piece of writing which enables students to provide their answer to the question set by the logical presentation of academic arguments and evidence.

Why do you need to write essays?

Essays enable you to demonstrate your understanding of a topic

You can demonstrate your ability to critically analyse the information you have gathered to develop your own answer.

Essays allow you develop your own viewpoint based on evidence

Essay allow you to learn to persuade the reader of your viewpoint and why it is valid.

What do you need to write an essay?

Evidence - To answer an essay question you will need to gather information from books, journals and other sources (see the Finding Information section). Your opinion is only valid when supported with academic evidence

A critical approach - To be able to answer an essay you need to think, read and write critically. (See critical thinking section)

Academic writing – essays are written in a formal academic writing style (see the academic writing style)

The essay writing process

Answer the question set.

As essays is not a just a collection of facts on topic!

Do not just regurgitate the information you have gathered

You must include your academic argument or interpretation – focus on why and so what, not just what and how.

Examine the essay title – plan your essay:

- What is the essay about?
- What are you being asked to do?
- Look for two types of information in the title
- Subject words
- Directive words
- Subject words

Identify the keywords of the topic that is the subject of the essay - these will form the basis of the search terms used in your research. Make sure you define any key words if you are unsure of the meaning - use dictionaries or relevant text books. See the section on Finding Information for examples and help with searching.

Directive words

You need to look for the directive or instructional words in your essay title that define the kind of reasoning you should be using e.g. why, how, analyse, compare, evaluate, argue etc. View a list of directive words and their meanings.

Common examples

Explore: adopt a questioning approach and examine different points of view.

Evaluate: present your judgment about something by presenting the advantages and disadvantages relevant to that situation.

Discuss: give a complete or detailed examination of a topic by means of argument, debating the pros and cons of the subject.

Describe: convey the main details or characteristics of a subject in an objective way.

Illustrate: give examples that help clarify issues.

Define: give the exact meaning of something. If there is more than one explanation, give them all.

Mind-mapping or brainstorming

The directive and subject words should prompt ideas to form in your mind.

Make a note of the ideas as they happen

Don't worry about order or importance at this stage

Let your ideas flow!

Pattern notes are particularly useful – out your main topic in the middle and let ideas or factors radiate out (illustrate)

Once you have generated a mind-map you may wish to re-write into a logical order, rank the more important points first and group related points

If you don't know much about your topic, you may leave it at the mind-mapping stage and write your notes in a more logical flow once you have read around on the topic.

Gathering evidence

You need to read and collect as much academic information and evidence as you can based on the points you have identified. Your evidence should consist of specific examples or the opinions of others which support and illustrate your own view. You need enough evidence to make a strong statement.

Statements made without supported evidence may result in you losing marks.

You may need to consult both primary (original texts, such as a journal article giving an account of research carried out by the authors of the article. Another example would be an autobiography, photograph, film) and secondary (opinions or commentary on other people's work. Authors of books and journal articles often refer to previous related work, these accounts are secondary sources. These can include textbooks, journal articles and biographies) sources of information according to your assignment brief. Where possible you should consult the primary source.

You should use the widest variety of sources to form and support your own views, but make sure that you use reliable and appropriate sources such as academic books and journals rather than relying on websites. Remember to critically evaluate the material that you are consulting, do not simply collect the opinions of others and rearrange them.

As you examine the literature on your essay topic you may identify further points that you hadn't considered in your initial brainstorming activity, so you will have to factor these into your essay outline.

Add in the evidence you need for each point.

Referencing

Make sure that you make a note of every book, article and website you have consulted as you carry out your research, so that you can create a bibliography or list of references when you come to write the essay. You may wish to create a Refworks account to manage your references. See the referencing section for further guidance.

Basic essay structure

Introduction – say what you’re going to say!

Main body – say it!

Conclusion – say what you have said!

Summary

Identify subject/directive words

Brainstorm – identify your main points

Gather evidence

Amend your essay plan notes

Write your essay

Referencing

Access LEAP Online at: www.bolton.ac.uk/leaponline