WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC ESSAY?
You will probably write many academic essays while you are doing a course here - particularly if you are working in the Humanities or Social Sciences. However, many students do not do as well as they might in writing essays, simply because they don’t do what they are asked to. This is a shame. After extensive hours of research, many students end up writing reams of material that simply regurgitates what they’ve read. When they get low marks, they are obviously disappointed. However, if they’d just listened to the advice given, they might have done far better...

STOP!

How do you feel after reading that last paragraph? Hopefully you feel frustrated with the writer, who promises to tell you what an academic essay is, and then does no such thing. All you get is some vague notion of how students frequently do it wrongly. This is exactly how many tutors feel about some of the essays they receive: the essays do not provide the information asked for.

So, let’s start again: an academic essay is a continuous piece of writing focusing on a particular issue, which is carefully framed by the title. The writer should define what the question is asking, then respond to it, supporting all statements with evidence, example, and logical argument. Sources of material – i.e. texts consulted – should then be listed at the end, according to a standard format.
WHY WRITE ESSAYS?
Students often think it strange to answer questions to which their tutors already know the answers. But there are sound reasons for setting essays, however gruelling the process. The following are likely benefits:

- they make you think about an issue in depth;
- they help you develop the ability to think logically, to argue a case;
- they make you relate theoretical knowledge to particular issues;
- they help you to write cogently and fluently;
- they help you to write according to the demands of a particular discipline;
- they help you cope with less sleep!

HOW TO WRITE ESSAYS
The rest of this booklet discusses ways of maximising your chances of writing a reasonable essay. It is divided into three main sections:

a) Answering the question.
b) Structuring your answer.
c) Presenting your work.

a) Answering the Question
This is the key issue, as already mentioned. Most students go wrong from the start, by not doing what the question demands of them. Answering the question is by no means an easy task, as titles can be subtly phrased, intricate, or allusive. What you need to do is tease out
the key elements. Pattern Notes (discussed in the Note-Taking booklet) are a good way of doing this. Try to represent the question diagrammatically, putting the key issue in the centre of a blank sheet of paper, with other elements radiating out from this. Make sure that each word or phrase in the question is represented on your plan. Then ‘brainstorm’ each, by writing down anything that seems pertinent. You will probably end up with what looks an untidy mess! But, out of this, you should be able to pull some key points, while rejecting others as less relevant. These points will form the basis of your essay, so it is a good idea to re-write these on a separate sheet of paper.

When you have identified the key elements, you need to locate information to support each aspect. This will involve reading your lecture notes and following up references, besides undertaking some independent research in the library. Try to make sure that your reading is guided by your plan and avoid unfocused ‘background’ reading.

Amongst the key words of your title, look out for the ‘instructional’ words. These inform you what is to be done with the material: whether you are meant to describe a theory, analyse it, evaluate it, or compare it with another. The following is a list of the words that commonly occur in higher education essays, together with an indication of their meaning, plus, where relevant, in parenthesis, the derivation of the word.
### INSTRUCTIONAL WORDS

| ACCOUNT FOR | Give the reasons for something; unpack the causes of something in a logical way. |
| ANALYSE     | Examine in detail the constituent parts of something, and their inter-relationship (*to loosen up*). |
| APPRAISE    | Estimate the worth, value or importance of (*to price*). |
| ASSESS      | Estimate the worth, value or importance of (*to judge*). |
| CLARIFY     | Present clearly, unpack the complications of (*to make clear*). |
| COMMENT     | Make remarks about, expound (*to contrive*). |
| COMPARE     | Set together so as to reveal the similarities and differences; the agreements and disagreements between (*to match*). |
| CONSIDER    | Deliberate on; give careful thought to. |
| CONTRAST    | Put in opposition to bring out the differences (*to stand opposite*). |
| CRITICISE   | Give judgement on something, backed by a discussion of the evidence (*to judge*). |
| DEFINE      | Give the precise meaning of something; often to show that the distinctions are necessary (*to set limits to*). |
| DESCRIBE    | Give detailed account of, show characteristics of (*to write down*). |
| DISCUSS     | Investigate or examine by argument, to sift and debate, give the pros and cons of (*to shake apart*). |
| EVALUATE    | Determine the value or worth of something in the light of particular criteria - truth, utility, logic, morality etc. (*to value*). |
| EXAMINE     | Investigate in detail, to question, to inspect (*to weigh*). |
| EXPLAIN     | Make plain, interpret; unfold the meaning of (*to level out*). |
| ILLUSTRATE  | Make clear using concrete examples, or by using diagrams, figures etc. (*to light up*). |
| INTERPRET   | Explain the meaning of, translate into familiar terms, make explicit (*to serve as an agent, a translator*). |
| JUSTIFY     | Show adequate grounds for conclusions, decisions, dealing with possible objections to these (*to make just*). |
| OUTLINE     | Give the main features, general principles of something. Leave out detail in preference for structure and relationships. |
| PROVE       | To establish as truth by argument, test genuineness of. |
| RELATE      | Show how things are connected, and the extent that they are alike or affect each other; also: to narrate (*to bring back*). |
| REVIEW      | Make a survey of something, giving it a critical analysis (*to see again*). |
| STATE       | Express briefly and clearly. |
| SUMMARISE   | Give a concise account of the main points, omitting details, examples. |
| TRACE       | Follow the development of something from its origin (*to draw*). |
b) Structuring your answer
‘Answering the question’ is certainly the key issue in essay writing. But some essays, though they appear to have done this, fall short because the information is so badly organised. Making sure your answer is properly structured will avoid this, and help maximise your chances of good marks.

Essays comprise three sections, though they are usually written in continuous prose (i.e. without subheadings - but consult your tutor; he or she may have a view on this). These are i) ‘introduction’; ii) ‘development’ or ‘main section’; and iii) ‘conclusion’.

i) The Introduction - a key part of your essay, and one that can set the whole tone for your reader. Introductions should unpack the question - defining key terms, outlining what the wording implies - and give an indication of how you intend to answer the question - e.g. signposting the various stages in your argument. An introduction is read first but should be written last, when you know the direction your answer has taken.

ii) Development - this is the main section of your essay, where you lay out your response, mixing argument with supporting evidence (facts, illustrations, experiments, quotations, references to the literature). Try to see it as a series of points, each to be developed in a separate paragraph, though there should be an overall thread linking the points in a thematic way (e.g. points for/points against; historical progression). Sometimes you will find a natural theme; at other times, you may need to put a more artificial framework on your work (e.g. there are five points
of note here: first..., secondly..., etc.).

iii) **Conclusion** - another key part, where you pull together and restate the main points of your essay in order to make some overall statement in response to the question.

Unless you are particularly gifted, you will not be able to write your finished essay straight off. All that you will write is a ‘first draft’. Too many students, however, submit first drafts as though they were finished essays. Consequently, their marks suffer. Try, if you can, to complete your first draft some time in advance of the essay deadline, in order that you can leave it for a while, and return to it with a less involved, more critical eye. You should then spot not only grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, but more significant errors in your reasoning, contradictions, repetitions, factual errors, poor phrasing, and probably, a lack of clear structure. Try to rework the whole essay rather than individual phrases. This is what experienced writers do. In particular, try to work out exactly what your essay is doing, and then try to indicate this in your introduction, and summarise it in your conclusion.

Word-Processors are particularly useful in letting you revise your work with ease, and to save different versions of documents. However, it is always wise to ensure you have a back-up copy of your material. Though you might think the excuse, "The computer ate my essay" is original, your tutor is less likely to.

When revising your work, research shows that it is done more
effectively from a hard-copy than on screen. Try printing it with wide margins, in order that you can make your revisions clearly.

c) Presenting Your Work
Excellent presentation will not save a poor essay, but it will certainly help the marker’s perception of it. On the other hand, it is unlikely that any essay will be ‘first-class’ without some attention to presentation. This aspect involves writing reasonable English in grammatical sentences, tied together in coherent paragraphs. It also involves spelling correctly, and such minor issues as leaving sufficient margins and numbering your pages. Some of these topics are dealt with separately in the Writing: the Basics booklet.

Finally, you need to give some attention to how you have quoted the work of others in your essay, so that there is a clear demarcation between your own thoughts and words, and those of others. It is essential that you do this to avoid accusations of ‘plagiarism’. Quoting and referencing other people’s work is dealt with separately, in the Cite Me, I’m Yours booklets.

Below you will find a check-list of considerations, summarising what has been said above, followed by a reading list of material available in the University library. More discipline-specific works can be found by consulting the catalogue.
INTRODUCTION

• Have you got one?
• Does it take your reader straight from the question into your answer?
• Does it unpack/interpret/frame the question as necessary?
• Does it broadly signpost your essay? Tell the reader where s/he’s going?

MAIN SECTION

• Is your essay in paragraphs?
• Does each paragraph express and develop a single idea?
• Does each follow logically from the last, with no sudden breaks or shifts of topic?
• Have you dealt with all the issues posed by the question?
• Have you explicated important concepts/ideas, using examples where appropriate?
• Have you substantiated all your arguments with facts/evidence/quotations?

• Have you been sidetracked anywhere, gone off at a tangent on a favourite hobby-horse?

CONCLUSION

• Do you have one?
• Have you drawn together the main threads of your essay? Can you restate them in broader terms (i.e. summarise)?
• What general inferences can you draw from your argument?
relevant to the question? (i.e. conclude, don’t just summarise.)
Where do you stand in relation to your case? Are you sure you only refer to material discussed in the main section, rather than introduced new material?

- To round off - can you, very briefly place your answer in a wider context?

GENERAL POINTS

- **Vocabulary** - should be varied, precise and apt; not vague and cliché-ridden (e.g. ‘got’, ‘sort of’, ‘kind of’, ‘like’); nor too overblown, pedantic and repetitious.

- **Spelling** - check technical, specialist terms and proper names in particular.

- **Grammar** - Sentence structure should be varied; not too simple, nor too convoluted (complex sentences do not signify complex thought).

- Have you used signpost words (‘but’, ‘however’, ‘although’ etc.) appropriately, to give your essay cohesion?

- Have you generally signposted where you are taking your reader (‘There are two points here...’, ‘Now to move on to... ‘, ‘Having covered...’ etc.)?

- Have you used pronouns instead of nouns where apt? Are any of your pronouns ambiguous?

- **Punctuation** - Make sure it is used correctly. Beware of overworking commas and dashes.

- **Bibliography/References** - Do you have a list of sources used?
Have you cited each and every work that informed your writing?

And:

- Print out your work in hard-copy before the final version – with wide margins and double spacing – and, imagining you are the tutor, mark it thoroughly!
- Reading through your own work is helpful; even better, let someone else read it. Better still, get them to read it to you!
- Try reading just the first sentence of each paragraph. Does this convey the general direction that your essay takes?
FURTHER READING


Creme, Phyllis (2003) Writing at University. Maidenhead: Open University Press 808.06 CRE [Chadwick/Eagle]


Taylor, Gordon (1989) The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and