



# STUDY GUIDE

## ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING

### HOW TO WRITE AN ACADEMIC ESSAY

No matter which degree you choose to study at university, you will have to write essays. Although each course will have its own conventions, students need to develop an understanding of academic essays in general. This study guide shows you how to write essays with a sound structure, coherent arguments, and clear presentation; features that are as important in a biology essay as they are in a performing arts essay.

Academic essay writing involves:

- collecting and ordering relevant information
- organising your ideas and arguments

- presenting your work so that others can understand your ideas and arguments, citing the sources you have drawn on

If you are able to produce a well-argued piece of writing, to the specified word count (usually somewhere between 1,000 and 3,000 words), you are already well on the way to producing good essays and passing your exams.

This guide provides practical suggestions to help you tackle the **pre-writing**, **planning**, and **drafting** stages of essay writing. The final stage of essay writing is covered in **Study Guide - Proofreading and Editing**.

#### When you reach the end of this guide, you will:

- have a better understanding of what writing an academic essay involves
- know how to analyse the essay title
- be able to brainstorm your ideas
- understand the importance of having a clear sequence of ideas in your essay
- have chosen an approach to taking notes that works for you
- know what information to collect for recording the sources used in your essay
- have practised drawing up a reading list
- know what to include in your essay and what to leave out

## ESSAY WRITING: PRE-WRITING

If you ask a friend the best way to travel to Ibiza, you do not want to be told the best way to get to Moscow. It is just as important to answer the question you have been asked when you are writing an academic essay. Often, students ignore the clues the essay title gives them and so lose marks.

Here are two activities that show you **how to focus on what you are being asked to write about**.

### ACTIVITY 1: IDENTIFYING KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Taken together, key verbs and key ideas give you direction in thinking about how to approach the essay title. Use the essay titles (right) to practice sorting out the key verbs and key ideas in the question. You will need two highlighting pens in different colours. Use one colour to mark the key verbs in the question, and the other to mark the key ideas.

Here's an example, with the key verb highlighted in green and the key ideas in blue: **Animal models of disease are of questionable scientific value. discuss.**  
(Biochemistry, University of Cambridge)

**Now mark up these four examples in the same way:**

- In what ways did Peter the Great's reforms transform the concept of the Russian Empire. (History, University of Loughborough)
- Explore the meaning of 'radical evil' and the 'banality of evil' using the cases of Idi Amin and Adolf Eichmann. (Anthropology, University of Sussex)
- Discuss the 'fallen woman' as a familiar feature of Victorian writing. (English, University of Teesside)
- Graphene the wonder material: does it live up to the hype. (Physics, Imperial College London)

For additional help  
contact the **HE Study  
Support team** on **01803  
540780** or email  
**hestudy@southdevon.ac.uk**

## ACTIVITY 2: BRAINSTORMING

Once you understand what the essay title is asking you to do, you will be ready to write down what you need to find out through reading and research. Brainstorming helps you explore the subject you are writing about by noting down what you already know, identifying gaps in your knowledge, and listing what you need to find out more about.

- Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen.
- Choose one of the essay titles from **activity 1**, perhaps the one closest to the subject you are studying at university.
- Look at the essay question, and set a timer for ten minutes.
- Write down as many points as you can; jot down whatever comes into your head. Do not worry at this stage if some of what you write seems irrelevant. You will be surprised at just how much you can get down on paper!



### KEY QUESTION WHEN YOU ARE BRAINSTORMING:

Which are my  
strongest ideas and  
which are the  
weakest.

### TIDYING UP YOUR BRAINSTORM

When the ten minutes are up, you may want to tidy up your brainstorming notes by creating a second version of them, either by hand or using a free mind mapping app.

## ESSAY WRITING: RESEARCH AND PLANNING

Now you are ready to start researching and planning your essay. At undergraduate level, you will be expected to read **primary sources** (also called **original sources** or **evidence**), and **secondary sources** (sources that offer different perspectives and analysis of primary sources).

### ACTIVITY 3: DRAWING UP A READING LIST

Although your lecturer may give you book lists, they are intended as a starting point for your reading. You will be expected to decide for yourself what to read in addition to increase your knowledge and understanding of the subject you are writing about. Make a start by putting together your own

reading list for the essay title you have been working with in activities 1 and 2. Establish good habits before you get to university by noting the shelf location for each book and journal article you find that may have relevance to your chosen subject. University library catalogues are publicly available online.

### ACTIVITY 4: TAKING NOTES

In the speech bubbles below are three ways of taking notes. Think about your own study habits. What do you think are the pros and cons of these note-taking approaches.

I put each of my brain-storming points at the top of a piece of paper and write notes from my reading underneath to provide material.

**Julian, second year student**

My notes are on all sorts of odd bits and pieces of paper, backs of envelopes, even receipts from shops. I've tried to be more organised but it's just the way I work.

**Gabriela, first year student**

When I find a good point, I write it on a small piece of paper. When I come to plan the essay, I shuffle the sheets around until I get them in what seems like the best order for the question.

**Valentina, first year student**

## NOTE-TAKING HINTS AND TIPS:

- Only take notes on material you might use.
- Use your own words rather than copying out what you read.
- Fill out the information you wrote down when you were brainstorming.
- Experiment with different ways of taking notes to find one that suits you.
- Jot down questions that occur to you as you go, so you can follow them up later.

## ACTIVITY 5: PLANNING

Essay planning means working out what to include, what to leave out, and how to order your material. When you write an essay, you are pulling together lots of pieces of information into a coherent argument. At the planning stage, you must decide which points to develop and which to discard.

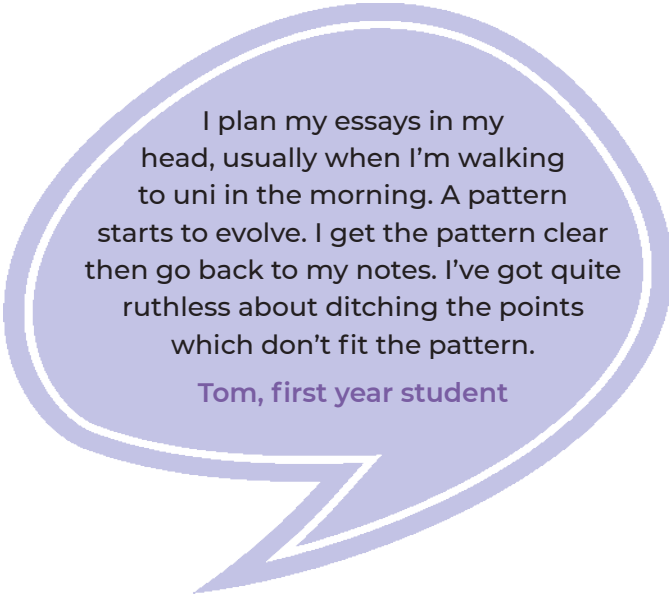
There are three main benefits to planning your essay carefully:

- You would not waste your time on points or ideas that are not essential.
- You will start writing your essay with a clear sense of what needs to be done.
- You will be sure you have dealt with all the important aspects of the question.

Now go back to the brainstorming notes you made for **activity 2**. Use them to write a **rough essay plan**; one side of A4 is about right. You should aim to make about four points in the main body of the essay. Discard material that does not support your arguments. Draw on the main points for the introduction and conclusion. Some students find it easier to plan the introduction and conclusion after they have thought through the main points. Some prefer to think through the conclusion before the introduction.

### PLANNING CHECKLIST:

- Selected suitable and relevant material from your notes.
- Rejected material that isn't relevant.
- Taken account of key verbs and key ideas in your plan.
- Thought through the main arguments, the introduction, and the conclusion.
- Made a note of the sources you have used next to each point in your plan.



I plan my essays in my head, usually when I'm walking to uni in the morning. A pattern starts to evolve. I get the pattern clear then go back to my notes. I've got quite ruthless about ditching the points which don't fit the pattern.

Tom, first year student

# ESSAY WRITING: DRAFTING

Now you are ready to put the essay together. At the drafting stage, you revise, reconsider, and rewrite what you have already produced, and write fresh sections as necessary. If your planning work has been thorough, you may not have very much to do. You will already have structured the essay and nailed down the sequence of points you want to make. Some parts of the essay may be relatively well structured by this point, and others less so.

Expect to have to draft and redraft parts of your essay, or even all of it. It is a good idea to leave yourself a day or so between finishing the essay and the deadline for submitting it. Most students find it far easier to spot sequence and structure problems after they have taken a break.

## INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Your introduction and conclusion are as important as the arguments you develop in the main part of the essay. Each of them should account for between five and ten per cent of the total word count.

**Your introduction** should clearly state the way in which you are going to discuss the subject. It should make the reader want to read on, with a clear understanding of what the essay will cover. The introduction is your chance to show how you are going to address the question.

**Your conclusion** pulls the essay together, without falling into the trap of repeating what you have already said. A good conclusion will add something new to the arguments you have made, e.g. a different perspective, or a good point you have saved until last.

I find essays actually crystallise my ideas. I read and read, and end up with lots of what are essentially jumbled together thoughts. The way these different thoughts and ideas relate to one another becomes clear when I start writing.

**Mustafa, first year student**

## DRAFTING CHECKLIST:

- Written about your ideas in a logical sequence?
- Provided your readers with a clear structure?
- Written an introduction?
- Written a conclusion?



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