

ESSAY WRITING

CLEARING THE GROUND

There is no single set of skills which will guarantee that you write a good essay, but there are specific qualities that your lecturers will be looking for.

- Your essay should be relevant to the set topic in both content and focus.
- You should read widely and critically in order to accumulate and select your material.
- You should present a reasoned argument, based on valid evidence and leading to a clear conclusion.
- Your lecturer will be looking not only at the material you have selected but, more importantly, at the use you have made of it.
- You should aim at precision, accuracy, and appropriateness in language, style and format.

CHOOSING YOUR ESSAY TOPIC

- You need to *give time and thought* to the interpretation and selection of the topic on which you will write.
- Your topic will almost invariably involve analysis as well as explanation or description and will require you to relate general concepts to particular materials or events.
- You will be confronted with problems or controversies for which there is no single 'solution' or explanation and asked to make critical judgments amongst competing solutions or explanations.
- When you are considering what an essay is 'about', you should take into account the area of content defined by your topic, the specific concepts involved, the suggested relationships amongst those concepts and the discipline within which you are working.
- Your choice of topic will also be partly conditioned by practical considerations of time, availability of sources, and other commitments.
- If you are creating *your own topic*, you must consult closely with your tutor or supervisor to ensure that the topic is manageable.

READING FOR YOUR ESSAY

You should develop a variety of strategies for handling the reading that you must cover for an essay. *Skimming* and *scanning* are the most efficient skills you can develop for reading academic texts because the former makes use of the paragraph as the basic unit underlying the structure of argument, whereas the latter makes you focus and work on the specific issues of your paper.

- Your lecture and tutorial notes and a reading list provide three useful starting points for your reading.
- Careful analysis of the reading list will suggest sensible strategies for where and how to begin reading.
- Skimming and scanning are the most effective initial techniques for reading for academic purposes.
- Efficient reading of academic texts depends on your ability to perceive the basic structure of argument that in turn is related to the use of the paragraph as an idea unit.

NOTE-TAKING FOR ESSAY WRITING

It will help you develop your own note-taking methods, should you remember the following main points:

- The guiding principle of your note-taking should be that the content, style, intensity and format of the notes suit the purpose for which you are taking them.
- Your notes, whether stored in print or electronic form, should be accurately identified, flexibly recorded and allow space for cross-referencing and comment.

SEARCHING THE WEB

While searching the Web for research material, you may consider that whereas some documents on the Web are very carefully screened and evaluated, many others are not given any prior critical appraisal at all. The Web is thus both a goldmine and a junkyard.

- The bulk of material on the Web is poorly organised and is not selected or validated by any authority to priority. You will need, therefore, to maintain a clear sense of your purpose in assessing Web material in the first place and a highly critical attitude to its interpretation and use.
- Some of the criteria by which you evaluate Web documents are very similar to those you bring to print sources to print sources, in particular: relevance, comprehensiveness and balance, persuasiveness, and competence.
- In addition, for Web documents issues of authorship (and publication) and currency assume particular importance.

ANALYSING AND PLANNING

Planning is a process that takes place continuously throughout the preparation for and drafting of an essay. Nevertheless, there is no one style of developing a plan that is 'the best'.

The important points to remember are:

- You need to analyse your topic carefully.
- Most essays involve both description and analysis.
- Other common tasks in essays are evaluation of controversy, definition and clarification, and interpretation.
- Planning is a process by which your ideas, your materials and the demands of the set topic are transformed into an original piece of writing.
- At some stage in the production of your essay you must develop a conscious plan, but how and when you do this depends on your individual style of working.
- There are some steps which are useful in developing an essay plan, including close reference to the topic, reading over all your notes, and developing a tentative sequence of content.

DRAFTING

1. Remember general strategies for drafting papers.

Keep these overall writing strategies in mind:

- *Gather all material together.* You can proceed with relatively few interruptions if your planning materials and writing supplies are nearby.
- *Work from the outline.* Write one paragraph or section at a time, in any order, postponing work on troublesome sections until you have gained momentum.
- *Remember the purpose of the paper.* Arrange and develop only the ideas presented in the outline – and closely related ideas that emerge while you are writing.

- *Use only ideas and details that support the thesis statement.* Resist tendencies to drift from your point or to provide interesting but extraneous details.
- *Remember your reader's needs.* Include information and explanations that reader needs in order to understand your discussion.
- *Do not worry yet about technical matters.* Concentrate on getting ideas down on paper; you pay attention to punctuation, mechanics, and spelling later.
- *Rethink and modify troublesome sections.* If the outline creates problems, if an example seems weak, or if the order of the paragraphs no longer seems logical, change it.
- *Reread sections while writing.* Rereading earlier sections while writing helps you maintain a reasonably consistent tone.
- *Write alternatively versions of troublesome sections.* Write multiple versions of troublesome versions; then choose the best one.
- *Periodically take a break from your writing.* Interrupting your writing too often can cause inconsistencies in style and tone, but getting away from the work occasionally can help you maintain a fresh perspective and attain objectivity.

2. Incorporate notes into the paper

- *Smoothly incorporate information* from note making into the research paper, providing clarifications, explanations, and illustrations of important ideas.
- *Use information selectively to substantiate key points*, not simply to show that you have gathered materials, and comment on the central ideas.
- *Your reader should know why* you have included the source material.

3. Plan your title and your introductory and concluding paragraphs

The title and the beginning and ending paragraphs of an academic paper create an important impression. You can develop, write and rewrite these special sections of your paper at any time during the planning, drafting and redrafting of your paper.

Titles

A good title is descriptive, letting your reader know what the paper is about. To create an effective title, consider the following:

- *Use words or phrases that explicitly identify the topic.* Search your draft for expressions that are clear and brief.
- *Play with language.* Consider variations of well-known expressions.
- *Match the tone of the title to the tone of the paper.* Use serious titles for academic papers, less formal titles for informal papers.

Keep an open mind as you write titles. You can create several and, at the end, you select the one that best clarifies your paper's topic and attract interest of your reader.

Introduction

The introduction to your paper establishes a context for the discussion, clarifying the subject and your opinion. In addition, the introduction creates interest, drawing your reader into the discussion. While drafting alternative introductions, keep these general principles in mind:

- *Adjust the length of the introduction to the length of the paper.* A long paper needs a proportionately comprehensive introduction.
- *Match the tone of the introduction to the tone of the paper.* An informal essay needs an informal introduction, whereas a serious academic paper requires a formal tone.

- Your introduction should suggest the direction your paper will take, create interest, and indicate how you will develop the paper.

Begin the introduction with one or more of the following general strategies and end it by presenting the *thesis statement*. The following strategies are well suited to researched papers:

- Allusion.
- Analogy.
- Anecdote.
- Definition.
- Description.
- Facts and figures.
- New discussion of an old subject.
- Question.
- Quotation.
- Startling statement. Use an arresting statement to get your reader's attention and arouse his/her interest.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should re-emphasise the point of your paper and create a good final impression upon your reader's mind. You may begin your conclusion with a brief but specific summary, then use a concluding strategy to present a general observation.

You can use some introductory strategies – such as allusion, analogy, anecdote, description and quotation – as concluding strategies in your paper. You may also consider the following additional strategies that are particularly appropriate for conclusions.

- *Challenge*. You may ask your reader to reconsider his/her current ideas or to consider new ideas.
- *Framing pattern*. You can frame your paper by modifying some central words, phrases, or images you used in your introduction, thus reflecting the progress in thought demonstrated in your paper. If a good stylist, you may repeat the introductory strategy as the concluding strategy, intensifying the framing effect.
- *Summary*. You can summarise, restate, or evaluate the major points of the paper. However, you should use this strategy carefully and thoughtfully to avoid being repetitive and redundant.
- *Visualisation of the future*. You may go so far that you can predict what the nature or condition of your topic will be in near or distant future. Be realistic, though!

ATTENTION: You *should not* introduce new information or ideas your conclusion; otherwise, you must start writing another paper!!!

REDRAFTING/REVISING YOUR PAPER

After writing the draft of the paper, set it aside *for at least two or three days*. Then reread it carefully. Consider your paper's organisation, content, and style. Ideas should be logically organised and connected, clearly expressed, and effectively supported with appropriate and illuminating facts, summaries, paraphrases, and quotations – all smoothly and accurately incorporated. *Allow time* for reworking your paper: strengthening underdeveloped sections by expanding them, clarifying them, and tightening overly long sections by cutting unnecessary material.

To achieve some distance from your work, however, wait at least *two or three days* and then revise the paper, keeping the following in mind.

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- *Reconsider troublesome elements as you read.* You can stop whenever you feel something is not working well. Though somewhat slow, this process allows you to improve the paper in small stages.
- *Make clear notations.* Make corrections and changes on the copy you read from. If your revision strategy is too complex to complete during the reading, you may consider making notes in the margin so that you can give the matter fuller attention later.

1. Reconsider content

Examining your paper's content for *clarity, coherence, and completeness*, consider whether you have achieved the following:

- *Effective title, introduction and thesis statement, and conclusion.* Is your title both interesting and clear? Do your introduction and the conclusion effectively lead into and out of the discussion? Are introductory and concluding strategies well matched to the paper's tone and purpose? *Revise any of these elements that you find are not effective.*
- *Thesis statement matched to development.* Does the thesis accurately represent your opinion of the topic? Does the development of the paper support it? *Revise the thesis statement to reflect the final version of your paper.*
- *Provide sufficient support for your thesis.* Have you included enough ideas and information to support the thesis? *If you discover underdeveloped areas, work on them.*
- *Balance in cited materials.* Have you incorporated a variety of facts, summaries, paraphrases, and quotations to develop your ideas in a varied and interesting way? *If you discover an over-reliance on one kind of material, consider using alternative materials.*
- *Appropriateness of organisation pattern.* Is the organisation logical? Would another pattern work better? *If you discover a flaw in your organisation, correct it now, by rearranging paragraphs or more sections. Coherence is crucial, so make necessary adjustments.*
- *Linking words and transitions between sections.* Have you led readers clearly from one part of the discussion to the next? *If your conjunctions and connections are unclear, revise them.*
- *Balance among sections.* Are sections of your paper appropriately balanced in length and emphasis? *If you discover inconsistencies, add or delete information as necessary.*
- *Balance in the use of sources.* Have you used all sources well? You will, no doubt, find some sources more useful than others, but *you must not depend too much on any one view. Adjust the paper if it needs a more balanced use of sources.*
- *Balance in kinds of sources.* Have you used all books or all magazine articles or all journal articles? This suggests a limited perspective on the topic. *If you have not achieved this type of balance, rework the paper.*

Consider your earlier written work (your previous essays) in order to focus on troublesome areas. For example, if you frequently have trouble with conclusions, ask a fellow-student or your instructor to review only that element of your paper. Give attention to recurring writing problems so that they will not interfere with your otherwise effective essay writing.

Redrafting is the time for reflecting on the overall effectiveness of your paper's content. Assess all elements carefully and critically.

2. Rework style

Achieving coherent, balanced, well-developed content is one aspect of redrafting. Another is achieving a clear, cohesive and compelling presentation of that content. Refine your paper's style, keeping these issues in mind:

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- *Tone appropriate for subject and purpose.* Is your paper's tone suited to the topic and presentation? You must write an essay rather formal but not pretentious or artificial. *It is important for you to maintain a uniform tone throughout your writing.*
- *Effective sentences.* Have you used a variety of sentence lengths and types? Have you used active, not passive, voice in most sentences?
- *Appropriate diction.* Are your word choices vivid, accurate, and suitable? Have you explained technical terms adequately?
- *Effective introduction of researched materials.* Have you introduced your researched materials with variety and clarity?
- *Effective transitions between paragraphs and sections.* Have your transitions effectively ushered your reader from main point to main point and from sub point to sub point?

From comments you received on other papers in the past, you know both the strengths and the weaknesses of your writing style. Your essay or research paper provides you with the opportunity to refine your style. *Take the time to do so.*

3. Eliminate technical errors – The mechanics of an essay

Technical revision focuses on grammar, punctuation, mechanics, spelling, and manuscript form. After revising content and style, consider technical revisions to make the presentation correct and precise. Give particular attention to issues related to documentation, remembering that different styles (MLA, APA, Chicago and others) require different formats. Keep focused on the following issues:

- *Correct grammar used throughout.* Are your sentences complete? Do nouns agree with pronouns, and subjects with verbs, in number and gender as appropriate?
- *Punctuation and mechanics handled suitably.* Is all punctuation accurate? Are spelling, quotation marks, and the use of italics or underlining accurate?
- *Parenthetical notes correctly placed and punctuated.* Are parenthetical notes placed appropriately and punctuated accurately, according to the kind of information being cited and the required documentary style?
- *Works Cited (or References or Bibliography) prepared accurately.* Have you listed only those materials cited in the paper? Is your list appropriately arranged, according to the required documentary style? Is each citation complete and correct, depending on the required kind of information? Have you included all necessary citations?
- *Manuscript guidelines used correctly.* Have you followed manuscript guidelines for the required documentary style? Are margins, line spacing, and paging accurate? Does your paper include all required elements? *Review and follow manuscript guidelines carefully.*

Make technical revisions slowly and attentively. Never ignore potential problems, hoping they will be unnoticed.

4. Solicit responses from other readers

After working on an essay, you lose your objectivity. That is normal. To get an unbiased response to the paper, consider working with **a peer editor**, who can be a fellow-student of yours. Because a peer editor does not know the topic as well as you do, s/he can read or respond objectively and point out matters that require attention. Before asking someone to serve as your peer editor, however, consider the qualities of an effective peer editor and the strategies that make peer editing successful.

Peer Editor must be:

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- Knowledgeable.
- Thoughtful.
- Curious.
- Honest.
- Flexible.
- Collegial.
- Thorough.

What things YOU should Remember for Peer Editing:

- Have a readable copy.
- Allow enough time.
- Ask specific questions.
- Consider every comment.
- Remember that your paper is yours.
- Wait before making changes. Just as waiting between drafting and redrafting helps achieve some critical distance, waiting between peer editing and another revision also makes sense. *Take time to review the comments and suggestions thoughtfully.*

EDITING

The peer-review process allows a representative reader to respond to your work, to discover where your paper succeeds and where it does not. After peer review, you can make all the necessary changes before handing in the final version of your essay.

As a final note, remember:

Writing is 20% inspiration and 80% perspiration.