

ESSAY WRITING AND REFERENCING

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A. WRITING AN ESSAY

What is an Essay?

It is often assumed that everyone, by instinct or instruction, knows what an essay is. The surprising thing, however, is that many books and commentators on essay writing offer very little guidance on the subject. Often they pose the question but only talk around it without offering a definite answer. Or, if they do offer an answer, it is usually one that falls short of general approval. This suggests, firstly, that constructing a satisfactory general definition of an essay is a difficult task, and secondly, that it is probable that individual ideas about what constitutes an essay are mostly implicit and variable.

Fortunately, it is not our job to resolve this problem here. But we do need to make some decisions which will help us get on with the specific job of writing a good essay in commerce or social science subjects. For our purposes, we will operate with the following simple, broad definition:

AN ESSAY IS AN ARGUMENT LEADING TO A CONCLUSION.

Let us now examine the implications of this statement.

Firstly, it means that, because the essay is an argument, it will consist of groups of statements linked together by steps of *logical reasoning*. Statements can be of various kinds – they may be *factual* or *descriptive* (e.g. how the unemployment statistics have varied over time); they may be *evaluative* or *normative* (e.g. expressing the view that unemployment is undesirable); or they may be *practical* or *policy-oriented* (e.g. saying what should be done to reduce unemployment). What then binds all these statements together are additional sentences expressing the *logical relationships* between them. These transitional sentences are needed to show how all the individual facts, ideas, value judgments and thoughts relate to each other, and how they can be connected together in an ordered pattern of thought.

Secondly, the argument should lead up to a clearly stated *conclusion of some kind*. There are, however, a considerable variety of conclusions. There need not be a single correct solution to the problem posed, although this may be one possibility. Some of the possible conclusions at which you might arrive are as follows.

You may decide that one out of all the alternative viewpoints you have researched is essentially true (e.g. that inflation only has monetary causes). Or you may decide that the weight of theoretical argument and statistical evidence tends to make one viewpoint more probably correct than another, although the argument is far from settled (e.g. that in most markets, prices are administered and not flexible). Or your conclusion might be that a controversy between two viewpoints is a false controversy because it is possible to make them compatible in some way (e.g. one theory applies to the short run, the other to the long run). Or you might conclude that you find it impossible to choose between alternative explanations because all of them seem to make equally valid points, or because insufficient empirical work exists to test them. The conclusion, that no conclusion to the argument is possible at present, is still a conclusion for purposes of the essay.

To reinforce the concept of an essay as an argument leading to a conclusion, it is worth noting what the definition *excludes*. An essay is *not*:

- (i) a piece of pure description, e.g. of empirical evidence, theory or institutions,
- (ii) a series of relevant pieces of information unconnected by logical steps, or
- (iii) a collection of informative comments which leads nowhere.

Getting Started

First you need to select a question out of the alternatives offered. This naturally depends on (a) what you find most interesting, and (b) what you feel able to handle.

The second step is to *reflect carefully on the question*. Think about each sentence in the question. What is it asking you to do, and what do you have to do to answer it? The verbs in these sentences are critical – verbs such as ‘analyse’, ‘explain’, ‘critically discuss’, ‘compare and contrast’ or ‘evaluate’ indicate the activity that is required. Then think about the sentences in terms of how they relate to each other. Very often this will help you determine the *structure* of your essay. Concentrating carefully on the question also helps you avoid one of the commonest faults of student essays – *not answering the set question, but some other related question*.

Next you need to do some initial reading and research. Your previous thoughts on the essay question will enable you to tackle your reading with some *purpose and direction*. As well as informing yourself generally, you will be looking for ideas relevant to *specific* issues. It is generally not helpful to do all your research and note-taking in one big effort. It is better to do some preliminary reading and then work out a structure for your essay *before* you continue further with your research.

Organising a Structure

This is *most important* and needs to be attended to *fairly early* in your preparation. Lack of structure (or organisation, or plan) is another extremely common fault in student essays. Organising a structure is closely related to our definition of an essay as an argument, for arguments require some sort of orderly progression. In general, structure is mainly about two things:

- (i) **Ordering your thoughts systematically.**
- (ii) **Giving prominence to the main points.**

Sometimes a gross structure may be *implicit in the question itself*, in the way the sentences are arranged. All you then have to do is organise your material at a more detailed level. At other times, you will have to create a structure for yourself.

In working out a plan, the use of *headings and sub-headings* is very helpful. It is often a good idea to retain these in the final draft of your essay for they frequently make for clearer exposition and easier reading. It may also help your preparation if you draw diagrams with lines and arrows connecting various ideas. Naturally, the first organisational scheme you work out will be a rough one but it will be sufficient to get you started. Later, as you read further, it will probably be necessary to modify it.

The reason why it is important to focus on structure early in the piece, rather than at the end of your research, is because it prevents you from being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information collected. This can easily induce paralysis, a feeling of not knowing where to start in pushing the haphazard pile of notes, ideas and facts you have collected into shape. Whereas if you start with an organised framework, it is much easier to slot the material into an appropriate space as you collect it.

Once you have decided on a structure, it is time to resume your wider reading and research. One useful strategy is to chase up references mentioned in what you have already read.

Writing Up

Don't approach your essay with the idea that the first version or draft will be the last version or draft. You should expect to write at least two drafts – a first draft and a final draft. In practice, many people write more than two drafts.

The first draft, since it is your first attempt at the question, will typically be fairly rough and uneven. Your next tasks are then to improve, polish and edit this so as to produce the final draft which is the one you submit.

Helpful Hints

University essays are typically about *analysis, not description*. Analysis is concerned with uncovering the underlying causal factors, and making use of theory. The word 'explain' in an essay question is an indication that the emphasis lies on theoretical discussion and causal analysis. You may, of course, need to include some descriptive material, but the essential ingredient will be relating the essay topic to some relevant theory or theories. An essay that simply stays on the surface, describing statistics, institutions and procedures, no matter how accurately, will fare badly.

Secondly, if you are having trouble with the essay, *seek help*. Approach your tutor with your problem – maybe you aren't sure what the question requires, or how to tackle it, or how much to include, or how to arrange the contents of your essay.

Thirdly, the references you use must be *primarily at University level and not at secondary school level*. Essays which rely heavily on secondary school textbooks, newspapers and other mass media material will generally not attract good marks and will probably fail. You have to upgrade to more advanced material and use the University Library to locate it. Of course, non-university references are permitted, but they should occupy only a *minor* position in your bibliography.

The final hint, to repeat an earlier but never to be forgotten point (which applies just as forcefully to exam questions as it does to essays) is to *answer the question asked*, and not some other question about which you would prefer to write.

B. FORMAL REQUIREMENTS OF AN ESSAY

Your essay should conform to certain requirements. These concern layout, avoidance of plagiarism, satisfactory English expression, and referencing methods.

1. Layout

The format required for essays is usually as follows:

- **TITLE SHEET**
- **ABSTRACT OR SYNOPSIS**
- **TEXT OF THE ESSAY**
- **BIBLIOGRAPHY**
- **APPENDICES (OPTIONAL)**

The Abstract or Synopsis

The abstract is a *brief summary* or *overview* of the argument of the essay. It should not contain any ideas that are not in the essay itself. After reading the abstract, the reader should immediately know what the essay deals with and what conclusions are reached. It is *not* an introduction to the essay, nor a rewording of the question, nor a table of contents; it is simply a summary or overview. Some of the kinds of information that are encountered in synopses are: the problem(s) addressed in the essay, the type(s) of analysis used, any unique feature(s) of the study, and the principal conclusion(s) reached. The synopsis is not optional. Marks may be deducted if it is not included.

Since students often have difficulty writing abstracts, an example is given below for an essay on the question: 'Explain and evaluate the measures proposed by the Australian government in its latest report on superannuation and retirement standards of living'.

ABSTRACT

The ageing of the Australian population has generated considerable discussion of current retirement income provisions and whether these need to be reformed. This essay outlines and evaluates the latest Australian government report on superannuation and standards of living in retirement. Two main questions are addressed. Firstly, are the issues presented in the report sufficiently comprehensive in scope? Secondly, are the proposed measures supported by sound economic analysis, including those relating to taxation, or are they driven more by political considerations? The main conclusions reached are that the report is too narrowly conceived in that it does not consider several crucial issues, and also that its recommendations, particularly those dealing with taxation, only partially address the inadequacies in Australia's current retirement system.

The Text of the Essay

This contains all the sentences of the essay. These set out the argument of the essay and the conclusion to which it leads. It often helps, stylistically, to have a mixture of long and short sentences. Do not be afraid of using short sentences. As the Keynes quotation towards the end of this document shows, they can be used to very good effect. Also remember to break your discussion up into paragraphs, but do not make these paragraphs too long. As a rough guide, think of each paragraph as dealing with a different issue or link in your argument.

Do not hesitate to use headings, diagrams, tables or graphs within your essay. They are very helpful in organising, clarifying, illustrating or condensing material. All diagrams and tables should be discussed in the text and, if taken from another source, should also be acknowledged (see section D below on how to acknowledge, or refer to, other people's material).

Bibliography

The bibliography, or list of references, comprises a list of all sources consulted during research *and used* in the essay. It is presented after the main text of the essay. Items are listed *alphabetically by the author's last name* using a standard system of referencing (one of the most useful of which is outlined below). Do not include references which are not cited anywhere in the essay; every work in the bibliography should be referred to in the text of the essay (or the appendices).

Appendices

Appendices are *optional* additions. Generally they should contain discussion which is relevant in that it supports the argument in the main body of the essay, but which is too voluminous or detailed to warrant inclusion in the body or in footnotes. Usually, appendices are *not* included in calculating essay length.

2. Literacy

The essay should be written clearly, in good English, with correct spelling and grammar. If your essay has been word-processed, you should use the Spellchecker – in the English version, not the American. If you have trouble in the areas of expression, grammar or English usage, there are a number of good books available, such as:

Fowler, H.W. (1965) *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press.

Gowers, E. (1987) *The Complete Plain Words*, 3rd ed., Penguin.

Partridge, E. (1965) *Usage and Abusage, A Guide to Good English*, 6th ed., H. Hamilton, London.

Murray-Smith, S. (1989) *Right Words: A Guide to English Usage in Australia*, 2nd ed., Viking.

3. Acknowledgments and Plagiarism

The sources of quotations and important ideas must be acknowledged. Failure to do so is tantamount to claiming the words or major ideas of others to be your own and may be regarded as plagiarism.

Plagiarism is stealing the words of other writers and presenting them as original to yourself. It is a very serious academic offence for which disciplinary action will be taken. The penalties can be severe. In extreme cases, suspension from a course or from the University is possible; in milder cases it can result in zero marks for the essay.

The only situation in which you are permitted to copy sentences or sections from another person's work is when you present the copied items as *quotations accompanied by (proper) acknowledgements or references.*

The simplest way to avoid plagiarism is to *acknowledge, or refer to, your sources.* This is perfectly normal in academic work. Many of the ideas used in books, articles and essays inevitably use or build on the work of others, and it is only fair, honest and courteous to acknowledge those to whom you are indebted.

C. FINAL TASKS

- (i) On completion of your essay, you should *read it through aloud, or to yourself,* as though you were a listening audience. This is a most effective way to test for various faults. Any parts which are muddled, any lack of direction in the flow of the argument, and any poorly expressed passages will stand out for correction.
- (ii) You should *proof-read* the essay for errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- (iii) Don't forget to write a *synopsis.*
- (iv) Don't forget to include your *bibliography.*
- (v) Don't forget to make a *copy* of your essay.
- (vi) Don't forget to follow all *instructions* supplied with the essay handout.
- (vii) Don't forget to *number* all pages.

D. HOW TO REFER TO BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Many students have difficulties in this area, some because they have never been shown, and some because they think it trivial and boring. However, it is an important means of communicating information to your reader and one in which all tertiary students must become fluent.

Several standard systems of referencing are available. One of these – *the Harvard or author-date system* – is described below and is recommended for your adoption. However, if you have already adopted some other standard method and do not wish to switch, there is no obligation to do so. But you must use one standard system *consistently throughout* your work. Methods of referring are purely conventional – the important thing is to *stick to one of the standard conventions*.

The Harvard system is an author-date system, the essence of which is the use of *the author's last name and the year of publication*. We will first look at how it is used in presenting a bibliography, and then at how it is used to refer to works in the text. The only way to learn the system is through practice – you will find it very concise and straightforward.

1. Presenting the Bibliography (or List of References)

Regardless of the type of reference (book, chapter, article etc), items in the bibliography are listed *alphabetically* by the author's last name, and then *chronologically* by year if the same author has written more than one work. Single-authored works appear first in the list. Where the same author is also the first author of two-authored items, these items appear next in alphabetical order according to the last name of the second author. For example:

Brennan D. (1995)
Brennan D. and Cass B. (1991)
Brennan D. and Cass B. (2002)
Brennan D. and Goot M. (1987)
Brennan D., Smith J. and Walker R. (1984)

(i) Books

The method will be illustrated using the following two examples:

Hicks, J.R. (1946) *Value and Capital*, 2nd ed, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Patinkin, D, and Leith, J.C. (eds) (1977) *Keynes, Cambridge and the General Theory*, Macmillan, London.

The order of presentation is what matters. First comes the *last name and then the initials* of the authors or editors as they appear in the book.

Second comes the *year of publication* placed within brackets. (Note that, in the first example, this is the date of the second edition).

If the book has been edited by one or more persons, their names are respectively followed by either (ed.) or (eds), as shown in the second example.

The next item is the title of the book which is italicised or underlined.

The number of the edition now follows, *except* if the book is a first edition in which case nothing is written.

The next entry is the name of the publishing company.

Finally, there is the location of the publisher; sometimes this information is omitted but only when the publisher is well known.

A minor modification is necessary when the same author has written two or more books (or articles) in the same year. The problem is overcome by placing the letters a, b, c... after the year. For example:

Popper K.R. (1972a) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Hutchinson, London.

Popper K.R. (1972b) *Conjectures and Refutations*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

Popper K.R. (1972c) *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford University Press.

Occasionally, a book is produced by an organisation, institution or company without any named authors. In this case, the organisation, institution or company is regarded as the author, as in:

Indecs Economics (1988) *State of Play 5*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Reserve Bank of Australia (2000) *Bulletin*, July, Sydney.

Where organisations are also known by their abbreviations, either the full name is used, or the abbreviation (followed by the full name in brackets). For example:

World Trade Organisation (2002) Or

WTO (World Trade Organisation) (2002)

(ii) Journal Articles

The method here is very similar, and is illustrated in the following examples:

Phillips, A.W. (1958). 'The Relation Between Unemployment and the Rate of Change of Money Wage Rates in the United Kingdom, 1862-1957', *Economica*, 25, Nov., pp. 283-299.

Feldstein, M. (1973) 'The Economics of the New Unemployment', *The Public Interest*, Fall, pp.3-42.

The author's last name(s), initial(s) and year of publication again appear first. Then comes the *title of the article in quotation marks, followed by the name of the journal which is in italics or underlined*. After this you enter the volume of the journal, its number, or month if appropriate, and finally the starting and finishing page numbers of the article (with or without the abbreviation pp.).

(iii) Chapters in Edited Books

Chapters are treated in either of two ways. The first way creates only one entry in the bibliography as shown:

Robinson, J.V. (1975) 'What has become of the Keynesian Revolution?', in Keynes M. (ed.) (1975), *Essays on John Maynard Keynes*, Cambridge University Press.

The second way creates two separate entries in the bibliography as follows:

Bronfenbrenner, M. (1977) 'Ten Issues in Distribution Theory', in Weintraub (1977).

Weintraub, S. (ed.) (1977) *Modern Economic Thought*, University of Pennsylvania Press.

(iv) The Internet

Items read on, or printed from, the internet are handled in the same way as other references except for the addition of information about the full web address and the date of access. For example:

Krugman P. (1999) 'Thinking about the Liquidity Trap',
www.wws.princeton.edu/~pkrugman/ [Accessed 15 February 2002].

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) Australian National Accounts/: 'Concepts, Sources and Methods', ABS Publications, www.abs.gov.au [Accessed 14 February 2002].

Gordon M.J. and Rosenthal J.S. (2003) 'Capitalism's Growth Imperative', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (online), vol. 27, no.1, 25-48.
Retrieved via <http://cje.oupjournals.org/> [Accessed 9 May 2004].

2. Referring to Works in the Bibliography Within the Text

With the bibliography set out as above, it is a very simple matter to refer to its items within the text of the essay or within footnotes and endnotes. When using sentences, simply use the author's last name and the year of publication followed by relevant page numbers (where appropriate). For example:

This type of analysis had been examined by Challen and Hagger (1974) who found that...

Keynes (1937a) presents a summary of some of the main ideas in the *General Theory*.

An earlier study (Friedman 1956) concluded that....

When you want to refer to two or more items in a sentence, the items are separated by semi-colons as in:

Recent investigations (Anderson 2003; Higgins 2001a; Kozel 1999) have shown that..

When page numbers need to be included, they go *inside* the brackets and after the year. Two methods are available. One is to use p. or pp. for single or multiple pages respectively. The other is to omit p. or pp. and use a colon between the year and the page number(s). For example:

Estimates of the government expenditure multiplier may be found in Nevile (1975, pp.87-92). Or ... in Nevile (1975:87-92).

According to Friedman (1953, p.16), the validity of a theory is not to be tested by the realism of its assumptions. Or According to Friedman (1953:16), the....

3. Footnotes and Endnotes

A footnote is placed at the bottom or foot of the page on which its number appears. Endnotes are collected together and put in numerical order at the end of the essay under the heading ENDNOTES, just before the bibliography.

Footnote and endnote referencing is especially easy with this system. For very brief footnotes or endnotes that refer only to page numbers in a given work, either of the following may be used:

- 1. See Smith (1994) p.126. or
- 1. See Smith (1994, p.126). or
- 1. See Smith (1994:126).

For longer sentences that contain additional information, only one of the last two forms is used, as in:

- 1. See Smith (1994, p.126) for clarification of this argument.
- 1. Smith (1994:126) suggests that this theory is flawed because it confuses...

Footnote or endnote numbers in the text are superscripts, placed (a) after any punctuation mark, and (b) at the *end of* the sentence in the text, except where ambiguity might arise, in which case they are placed *within* the sentence just *after* the relevant word or phrase. They do *not* go at the beginning of sentences.

Quotations

Quotations are handled in either of two ways depending on their length. A short quotation, say up to about 25 words, should be placed within quotation marks and included within the sentences in the text, along with the source which is placed at an appropriate point in the sentence. For example:

Lydall (1998 pp.xi, 10) has presented ‘a critique of the foundations of modern neoclassical economic theory’ by focusing on the issue of entrepreneurship. ‘Why’, he

asks, ‘do modern economists say so little about entrepreneurship?’. The answer he finds in the assumptions of orthodox economic theory.

Longer quotations are set out separately, in an indented passage without quotation marks, with the source noted at the end. Any omitted sentences are indicated by three dots (known as an ellipsis). For example:

..... That Keynes firmly rejected Conservative Party politics is demonstrated by his remarks in 1925.

How could I bring myself to be a Conservative? They offer me neither food nor drink – neither intellectual nor spiritual consolation. I should not be amused or excited or edified. ... It leads nowhere; it satisfies no ideal; it conforms to no intellectual standard; it is not even safe, or calculated to preserve from spoilers that degree of civilisation which we have already attained. (Keynes 1925 pp.296-7)

His comments in later years indicate that his views had not changed over time.

Conventional Abbreviations

A number of conventional abbreviations are sometimes used to shorten the process of footnoting and referencing. These are not compulsory but, if they are used, they should be underlined or italicised as they are derived from Latin.

Abbreviation Meaning

et al. ‘and others’ - e.g. Green *et al.*, indicating a work by Green and one or more other authors, e.g. Green A.C., Leung K.Y. and Jones B.M.

sic ‘so’, ‘thus’. This word is used in quotations to note a peculiarity or error which exists in the original version of a sentence, but which might be interpreted as a mistake made by the person quoting the sentence.

passim ‘throughout’, ‘in every part’. This may be used where you cannot attribute the argument to any specific page or part of the work.

op. cit. ‘in the work cited’. This is used to avoid repetition of titles in footnotes or endnotes. Once you have given the reference to, say, Galbraith, *American Capitalism*, all subsequent references to this work (provided there are no intervening references to other works by Galbraith) may be made as ‘Galbraith, *op. cit.*’, (and a page reference if this is appropriate).

loc. cit. ‘in the place cited’. This is used instead of *op. cit.* if the page reference is the same.

ibid ‘in the same place or work’. This is used if you refer to the same work several times in succession (having initially given the proper reference) with no other, intervening references.