

Writing successful essays

Expectations of essays at university level

Academic essays are a major form of assessment in university. Writing a good essay can be challenging, but it is also a rewarding experience. It allows you to present your own thinking and your own position on a particular topic. An essay assignment is generally not used to test your mastery of factual information, but rather to assess the strength of your critical thinking and your ability to put that thinking into a persuasive written form. Writing a successful essay requires fusing critical thinking with clear written expression.

Lecturers often ask the following questions when they mark an essay:

- Does it address the topic and/or answer the question?
- Does it present a strong argument or position on the topic?
- Does it use evidence and refer to other scholarship to make the argument?
- Is it organized in a coherent way with an introduction, body and conclusion?
- Is the writing clear and appropriate for an academic essay?

Analysing the topic

Student essays are commonly responses to specific topics or questions. Therefore, it is important that your essay address the topic. The first step is analysing the topic to make sure you know what is being asked of you. Generally, topics have three components: content terms, limiting terms and directives.

Can you locate these components in the following essay topic?

"Discuss the importance of light in Gothic architecture?"



- The general content is "Gothic Architecture."
- The limiting terms are "light" or "the importance of light." If you discussed some other feature of Gothic Architecture, for example, spires or arches, you would be deviating from what is required. This essay topic is *limited* to a discussion of light. Likewise, it asks you to write about the *importance* of light, not, for example, to describe how light enters Gothic structures.
- The directive is "discuss." This term suggests that you should take a broad approach to a variety of ways that light may be important for Gothic Architecture. (Other common directives include "analyse", "compare", and "define" - these are the terms that tell you *what to do* in relation to the content.)

Defining an argument

Essay topics are often broad formulations. This does not mean that your essay should be broad and general. The topics are purposefully general so that you can define a specific argument that addresses your topic. Many different arguments will be possible for a given topic. It is up to you to take a position or point of view and to develop an argument to support that position. This is where you can demonstrate your critical thinking and originality. As you plan and prepare to write the essay be thinking about what your argument is going to be.

Consider the following argument statements:

"The architectural use of light in Gothic cathedrals physically embodied the significance of light in medieval theology."

Or

"In the Gothic cathedral of Cologne, light served to accentuate the authority and ritual centrality of the priest."

These are the kinds of statements that define an argument for an essay. Such statements give coherence to the essay by providing an overarching theme and position toward which the entire essay is directed.

Using evidence and scholarship

A successful essay is an extended argument that supports a position or a point of view. To make your argument persuasive, you must use evidence and refer to scholarship related to your topic. Imagine that you are writing for someone who will be critical of your position. How can you convince such a reader? You must make a persuasive argument by including evidence and reasoning and by evaluating relevant scholarship.

Evidence comes in many forms, but typically consists of specific examples, facts, quotations, statistics and illustrations. The evidence should provide concrete information to support your claim.

Reasoning connects the evidence to your position. It is not enough simply to cite evidence like a shopping list. You need to show the meaning of the evidence and how it supports your position.

Scholarship is cited to show how your argument relates to what has already been written on the topic. You can use scholarship to support your position by citing specific works with which you agree, or to define your position by contrasting it with works that offer a different position.

Organising a coherent essay

The organisation and writing of the essay allows you to communicate your ideas to the reader. All essays have three basic components: introduction, body, and conclusion. Each of these components serves a distinct function. When you are writing and editing your essay, think about what you are trying to accomplish with each of these components.

Introduction	The most important feature of an introduction is that it tells the reader what you are going to say in the essay. A good model for an introduction is: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A general statement about the topic to orient the reader and provide context for your argument2. A statement of your argument - you can use explicit lead-ins, such as "this essay will argue that..."3. An overview of the essay to tell the reader how you are going to make the argument
Body	The body of the essay substantiates your position through evidence, reasoning and references to scholarship. The essay body should correspond with the overview provided in the introduction. The organisation of the essay body flows from the kind of argument you are making. You can organise your essay according to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The main points your essay is making2. The different kinds of evidence you are using3. The different material you are discussing
Conclusion	The conclusion ties together the various ideas you have developed in the body of the essay. All of the evidence and argumentation should be finished <i>before</i> the conclusion. Don't save any surprises for the end. You can use the conclusion to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Restate the main argumentative position of the essay2. Provide a brief summary of the themes discussed3. Emphasise what is significant, interesting and important about the topic and your position

Writing clearly

Even an essay with a strong argument supported by evidence won't receive top marks if the writing is not clear. Revising and editing is the process that produces clear writing. If you develop skills in editing and revising effectively, you can turn a good essay into an excellent essay. Be sure to leave enough time to edit thoroughly. When you edit your essay for clarity, try to view it with fresh eyes, as if someone else had written it. Consider editing on three different levels:

Essay Structure: Is your thesis clearly stated in the introduction?

Does the structure of the essay correspond to the overview?

Are you showing how the main points support your thesis?

Are you indicating the transitions between the main points?

Paragraphs: Does each paragraph introduce one main idea?

Is every sentence in the paragraph related to the main idea?

Does each paragraph use evidence and reasoning?

Are the transitions between paragraphs smooth?

Sentences: Is each sentence grammatically complete?

Is the spelling correct?

Is the main idea of each sentence stated clearly?

Can you state the idea more economically?

Finally, you should check your references to make sure that they are accurate and they follow a consistent format. Some departments require you to use a specific system of referencing. Whatever system you do use, you should follow the style guidelines correctly and consistently.

Some useful references

Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. (1996). *Writer's handbook: how to write better essays*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

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