



Essay writing

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Introduction

Writing an essay can seem the most terrifying thing you have to do as a student. It is particularly difficult if this is the first university essay you have had to work on or if you lack confidence in your own ability to understand the particular subject you are studying.

This study pack can't help you acquire knowledge about your subject, but it can help you to sort out your ideas about the knowledge you already have. And if you are experiencing a crisis of confidence about your ability, it may be helpful to remember that experienced admissions officers chose to accept you for your course. In addition, most people who leave De Montfort University do so with a degree.

Objectives

The main aim of this study pack is to explain some of the ways in which you can set about writing an essay, in the hope that it will become a less terrifying experience. This study pack will help you to:

- understand what the question is asking you to do
- find and select relevant information
- distinguish between evidence and ideas
- put your own point of view
- plan and structure your argument
- support your argument
- write clearly
- revise your essay

There is also an important, final section called "When your essay is returned". Learning how to use feedback from your lecturers is a vital part of improving your essay-writing skills.



How to use this pack

The best way to use this study pack is to work through it long before your essay is due. However, it may have been the panic provoked by an imminent essay that prompted you to pick up this study pack – **don't panic**. If this is the case, you should concentrate on Sections 1 – 5 (or, if you can't choose your own question, Sections 1.2 – 5). You may not have time to undertake all the practical exercises. However, a number of exercises have alternative instructions which will help you plan and write the essay that is due soon. These instructions are headed **Don't panic**. You may also find it helpful to read through the other exercises without spending much time on them.

1 The question

1.1 Choosing the right question

It is time to start work on your essay. You have before you a list of questions. Now you must choose one – the question that will best display your knowledge, grasp of ideas and ability to present a case. Unfortunately it's possible to go wrong at this stage by choosing a question that gives you too little space to develop your own ideas. (Remember your answer must be relevant.) Particularly dangerous are questions on which you have a strong point of view – but just one idea. Essays on such questions will let you write a good paragraph – perhaps two – but will run out of steam as the same argument is presented again and again, with a series of examples and illustrations which add little to what you have already said.



Activity 1

Look at these questions, on subjects of public interest, and see which would enable you to write a good 2,000 word essay. Think ahead. How would you develop an argument in response to each? How many points would you be able to make? Then choose the question which would be best for you.



Don't panic

If you have a list of essay questions in front of you, you can also try to do the exercises using your own list of questions.

There is no single correct answer to this exercise; it will depend heavily on your own point of view and how many arguments you have to put.

Essay questions

- a** Should abortion be available on demand?
- b** Is capitalism the best possible economic state for British society?
- c** Should the death penalty be re-introduced and, if so, in what circumstances?
- d** Discuss the effects of racism or homophobia in British society.
- e** “*Women’s known mental and physical weakness renders them unfit for academic work.*” Discuss.
- f** Which newspaper do you consider more influential – *The Times* or *The Sun*?

When you have chosen your question, write down the points you would make in answering it. Make sure that these are different points and not just the same point expressed in different ways. After each point write down, in brackets, any example, illustration, or opposing point of view that you could use in making your case.

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Now check whether the question you have chosen is suitable by seeing how many detailed points you can make in reply to it.

If the number of detailed points is three or lower, it is very unlikely that you have chosen the right question to answer.

If you have a number of points to make, with examples to help you explain them, and can see points which oppose your opinion and good ways to argue with them, you have probably found a question which will produce a good essay for you.

1.2 Understanding the question

Before you start answering the question, you need to check that you have understood what it is asking you to do. It's sometimes easy to ignore what you are actually being asked to do because only part of the question appeals to you. When this happens, you may find that you have lost marks for failing to answer the question.

The first thing to do is to look for the question's **key-words** – these are the words which explain exactly what you are being asked to do. This useful list of key-words with explanations can also be found in your STUDYfax:

Account for	give an explanation of why something is as it is. (It does not mean to give an account of – see “Describe” below.)
Analyse	examine the subject in detail, breaking it down into sections if this is appropriate.
Argue	prove the case for something, using evidence and reasoning.
Assess	evaluate something, using the opinion of experts wherever possible to assess its worth.
Comment on	write explanatory notes, giving a view on.
Compare	investigate the similarities (and sometimes differences) between two things.
Contrast	set in opposition in order to expose the differences (and sometimes similarities) between two things.
Criticise	give your judgement about the merit of theories or opinions, or about the truth of facts, and back your discussion by use of the evidence.
Define	set down the exact meaning of the word or phrase.
Describe	provide a full and detailed account of something.
Discuss	investigate and explore the arguments for; sift and debate, giving reasons pro and con.
Enumerate	number and list arguments one at a time.
Evaluate	make an appraisal of the worth of something, in the light of its truth and utility; include your personal opinion.
Explain	make plain, interpret, and account for.
Illustrate	use a figure or diagram to explain or clarify, or make clear by the use of concrete examples.

Interpret	expound the meaning of, make clear and explicit; usually also giving your own judgement.
Justify	show adequate grounds for decisions and conclusions.
Outline	give the general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasising structure and arrangement of main features.
Prove	demonstrate or establish the truth or accuracy of something, making the case point by point.
Reconcile	show how two opposites have similarities.
Relate	show how two things are connected to each other, and to what extent they are alike, or affect each other.
Review	make a survey of, examining the subject critically.
Show	demonstrate or establish the truth or accuracy of something.
State	present in brief, clear form.
Summarise	give a concise account of the chief points or substance of a matter, omitting details and examples.
Trace	follow the development or history of a topic from some point of origin.



Activity 2

Look at the following list of questions. They are all very similar in the sort of knowledge they assume, but they are asking you to use that knowledge in different ways. Try to work out what sort of response is required by each question. It may help if you underline the key-words in each.

- 1 *“The growth of single-parenting is the most significant factor in the rising rate of youth crime.”* Assess this statement.
- 2 Relate the growth of single-parenting to the rising rate of youth crime.
- 3 Explain the effect of the growth of single-parenting on the rising rate of youth crime.

- 4 State the evidence behind the statement that the growth of single-parenting is directly responsible for the rising rate of youth crime.
- 5 Account for the argument that the growth of single-parenting is the most significant factor in the rising rate of youth crime.
- 6 Discuss and evaluate the view that the growth of single-parenting is the most significant factor in the rising rate of youth crime.

You should have worked out by now that the questions are asking you to do very different things. Not all of them allow you to state your own opinions on the subject and some simply assume that you agree with the assertion contained in the question. Mark in pencil with a circle those questions which assume you agree that single-parenting is responsible for the rise in youth crime. Mark with an asterisk any that invite you to put your own point of view on the statement.

When you have done this it should be obvious that some of these questions would cause considerable problems for people disagreeing with the central assertion. Only questions 1 and 6 invite disagreement with it, while question 5 asks you to look at the reasons which might lead someone to make the assertion. Questions 2 and 3 are entirely loaded in favour of the assertion while question 4 would probably be easier for someone who agreed with it.



Don't panic

- Look at the question you have chosen.
 - Make sure you know what its key-word is asking you to do.
 - Make sure you understand the question as a whole and not simply its separate parts.
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2 Finding and using information

2.1 Which information?

Now that you have decided on your question, you need to think about the information you will use to help you answer it.

It is very rare for an essay question to require no more than information in response to a question and sometimes the amount of information you need can be quite small. You may be surprised to find how little of the information you have gained has to be reproduced in your coursework and exam essays. But remember that good essays work on the iceberg principle. Nine tenths of the information and ideas that go towards the making of an essay should stay below the surface. The tenth that you write down should be supported by your wider, unwritten knowledge and the skills you have developed during the course. The essay you write on a single topic can show your tutor or examiner how well you have engaged with the course as a whole.

However, you do need to know what information is required and how important it is. Not all information has the same value for the purposes of your essay. As this can vary from subject to subject (or even from essay to essay) you may have to ask your tutor about this. A good way of working out which information is relevant is testing it by asking yourself, “Does it help me to answer the question?”



Activity 3

Use the space below to jot down all the sources of information you might use to answer one of the essay questions in Activity 1.

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Don't panic

Choose the essay question you want to answer and jot down the sources of information you plan to use.

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You might have included:

- books
- articles
- lecture notes
- notes or recollections of seminar discussions
- information you need to acquire for the essay - by observation, experiment, survey, etc.
- a core text you are studying
- general knowledge
- thoughts and ideas generated by discussion with friends
- films, television programmes

Now go back to your list and add anything that has occurred to you since you made it.

The next thing to do is to work out how important each source will be to your essay.

Put a circle round any source which is **absolutely vital** to the essay. This should apply only to any source without which you could not write the essay. For example, if you are writing a set essay on a book or film, that is your only vital source – your primary source of information.

Now, mark the other sources you will use in the following ways:

- Underline any source which can give you **useful background information** (the kind of information you shouldn't get wrong in any essay).
- Draw a dotted line under any source which can give you **background information** (the kind of which isn't vital but which may produce good ideas).
- Draw an asterisk next to any source which has **interesting ideas** to which you can respond (you don't have to agree with these – in fact it's often better if your essay does not agree with critics' ideas).

These are all secondary sources.

Obviously some sources may have more than one secondary marker.

Lecture and seminar notes are particularly liable to contain a mixture of factual and critical information. While you may have to use the factual information and may want to develop some of the ideas and opinions suggested by a lecturer, do this sparingly. Lecturers tend not to like seeing their lecture notes recycled as a student's essay. They often feel that those students' essays that repeat their own point of view fail to do that point of view justice. It's better to find out what your own point of view is and stick with it.

Crediting sources: important note

If you are using written sources, remember to note down page number, author, title, date, name of publisher and place of publication. You should credit all sources in the text or footnotes of your essay, so that the marker can be clear about which ideas are your own and which come from your sources. Quotations should be indicated with inverted commas and full details of their source should be given. If in doubt, look at *Information Citation and Control* in this series.

2.2 Distinguishing facts from ideas

When you start reading books and re-reading lecture and seminar notes, one of the most important things you have to do is to distinguish **facts** from **ideas and opinions**.

Most source documents certainly blend facts with critical approaches to them. It's up to you to disentangle facts from the author's (or lecturer's) ideas so that you can identify the approach taken and make clear in your essay whether you agree or disagree with it.

Look for two kinds of ideas and opinions:

- ideas and opinions that are stated as such by the author/lecturer – where your disagreement is clearly invited;
- ideas and opinions which underlie the source as a whole. These may be more deeply entangled with the presentation of facts, so that they slant what is being said. You will find this kind of “slanting” in newspaper reports.



Activity 4

Read the following passage about the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and its aftermath. Try to mark and identify, in pencil:

- **facts** – circle any factual information;
- **stated opinions** – mark them by underlining with a dotted line;
- **words and phrases that suggest underlying opinions** – mark them by underlining.

In my opinion – a thousandfold strengthened by the Russian experience – the great mission of revolution, of the SOCIAL REVOLUTION, is a fundamental transvaluation of values. A transvaluation not only of social but also of human values. The latter are even pre-eminent, for they are the basis of all social values. Our institutions and conditions rest upon deep-seated ideas. To change those conditions and at the same time leave the underlying ideas and values intact means only a superficial transformation, one that cannot be permanent or bring real betterment. It is a change of form only, not of substance, as so tragically proven by Russia.

It is at once the great failure and the great tragedy of the

Russian Revolution that it attempted (in the leadership of the ruling political party) to change only institutions and conditions, while ignoring entirely the human and social values involved in the Revolution. Worse yet, in its mad passion for power, the Communist State even sought to strengthen and deepen the very ideas and conceptions which the Revolution had come to destroy. It supported and encouraged all the worst anti-social qualities and systematically destroyed the already awakened conception of new revolutionary values. The sense of justice and equality, the love of liberty and of human brotherhood – these fundamentals of the real regeneration of society – the Communist State suppressed to the point of extermination. Man’s instinctive sense of equity was branded as weak sentimentality; human dignity and liberty became a bourgeois superstition; the sanctity of life, which is the very essence of social reconstruction, was condemned as unrevolutionary, almost counter-revolutionary. This fearful perversion of fundamental values bore within itself the seed of destruction. With the conception that the Revolution was only a means of securing political power, it was inevitable that all revolutionary values should be subordinated to the needs of the Socialist State; indeed, exploited to further the security of the newly acquired governmental power. “Reasons of State,” masked as the “interests of the Revolution and of the People,” became the sole criterion of action, even of feeling. Violence, the tragic inevitability of revolutionary upheavals, became an established custom, a habit, and was presently enthroned as the most powerful and “ideal” institution. Did not Zinoviev himself canonize Dzerzhinsky, the head of the bloody Tcheka, as the “saint of the Revolution”? Were not the greatest public honours paid by the State to Uritsky, the founder and sadistic chief of the Petrograd Tcheka?

The perversion of the ethical values soon crystallized into the all-dominating slogan of the Communist Party: THE END JUSTIFIES ALL MEANS.

Now write down in the space below as much as you can about the author’s own point of view, suggesting, if you can, the precise perspective of the author on events.

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When you have completed this, look at the end of Section 2 (on page 16) for some information about the author. After reading this you may wish to go back to the extract and reconsider your conclusions.

2.3 Putting your own point of view

As you may have realised by now, it's vital for you to identify **your own point of view** in relation to the question you have chosen to answer. When you know what your own point of view is, you will find it much easier to use the various sources available to you.

You are expected to give reasons for your agreement and disagreement with other people's ideas. You can't do this unless you know where you stand in relation to them. This is true whatever you are discussing – it may be a film, a poem, a historical movement, a legal judgement or a sociological phenomenon.



Activity 5

This exercise should give you some ideas on how having your own point of view helps you to use other people's opinions.

Imagine that you have been asked to write an essay with this title:

“Students deserve a grant they can really live on.” Discuss.

You have three extracts from statements on the subject, and have already identified quotations which seem to represent the core of each argument. These quotations are:

- a** *“Students are living off the back of the state. I don't see why I, as a taxpayer, should pay to support them. Everyone knows they spend their money on booze, cigarettes and drugs.”*

- b** *“In a country with high unemployment, there’s no reason why a student should be expected to live on an amount lower than that provided by Income Support.”*

- c** *“England would be a better place if we went back to the old days, when students got to university because their parents could pay for them and scholarships were reserved for the exceptional few. In that way the universities would create an elite, capable of leading both industry and the country.”*

First, identify your own point of view on the subject (which need not coincide with any of those given in the three quotations).

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Then think how you might use those three quotations, one by one or in relation to one another, to develop your own argument.

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Try to look for the point of view about society which underpins each quotation – how is this apparent from the quotation itself? Then, bearing this in mind, explain why you agree or disagree with each quotation. If you agree with any of the quotations, explain why and try to develop and extend its argument.

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Now work all these quotations and your response to them into a passage of argument which might be used in an essay with the given title.

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Note on Activity 4

The extract comes from the “Afterword” to My Disillusionment in Russia, written in 1922 as My Two Years in Russia and first published in Britain in 1925. The author was the prominent anarchist and feminist, Emma Goldman (1869-1940), who initially supported the Bolshevik Revolution.

3 Planning your argument

3.1 Sorting out ideas

Now you have thought about the title and background of your essay, it's important to plan your argument. You probably have a number of ideas. (If you seem to be suffering from writer's block, look ahead to section 4.1 on p. 28). The time has come to sort out your ideas so that they are clear not only to you but also to the person who reads and marks the essay.

The first thing to do is to sort your ideas into **argument** and **evidence**.

The **argument** is a summary of your answer to the question. It should develop through the essay, with every point building on the one before.

The main argument can probably be written down in five or six short sentences. These sentences are vital and form the core of your essay. Each sentence will need to be explained and evidence should be brought in to support it. You may also wish to introduce arguments conflicting with the sentence so that you can explain why you support one view rather than another.

The **evidence** is what you use to back up your argument. It may consist of facts, quotations from core texts, survey material, other people's ideas and so on.

The evidence to support your argument, and your analysis of it, will form the bulk of the essay. However, you must remember that its role is to support your argument. You need to explain why you are introducing this evidence. Make it clear to the reader.

If you want to say something but can't see how it fits into your argument, it probably doesn't. Leave it out. (If you really can't bear to omit it, put it in a footnote or an appendix where it doesn't detract from your argument as a whole.)



Activity 6

Imagine that you have been asked to write the following essay:

"British Rail will benefit from privatisation." Discuss.

Here are the sort of ideas you might jot down when you are trying to think about your essay. They are not set down in any order but just written down as they might pop into someone's mind:

- BR is very expensive
- Would Young People's Railcards *etc.* continue after privatisation?
- Government elected on platform of privatisation
- Value of free market
- Comfortable way to travel
- Ecological
- Too many companies competing
- Difficulty of central timetabling/ticketing
- Poor service
- Trains need to run on time
- We as country own BR – don't sell our property (and profits)
- Privatisation successful in past for consumers
- Would jobs be safe?
- Problem of strikes
- Quick journey London – Leicester
- Travel for disabled who can't drive
- What about unpopular routes?
- Government's responsibility to provide coherent transport policy



Don't panic

Note down all the ideas you can think of for your own essay in the same way. Then follow the rest of the instructions.

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- Go back to your list of arguments and write down the underlined ideas beneath the relevant arguments.
 - Look at any ideas that are left over. Does any of these suggest a line of argument you have missed? If not, cross it out.
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What you have now is the beginning of an essay plan. You can see at a glance:

- if you have sufficient arguments;
- if each argument has sufficient ideas attached.

You should have at least 4 or 5 arguments. If you don't, you need to think of some more.

If you have a line of argument with no ideas following, you need to think of new ideas for amplification, illustration or opposing arguments.



If you like, you can go on now to put the arguments in an order in which each will follow on from and develop the idea before. If you are following the *Don't panic* path, you should definitely do this now.

3.2 Structuring an argument

The best kind of argument in an essay is carefully structured, so that each point you make follows on from the one before and develops it.

An essay shouldn't be a list of separate points. It should be the kind of argument that is written to encourage the reader to share your point of view. To do this, you need to have a clear sense of direction.

Some people find it helpful to think of a single intelligent reader who criticises all your arguments and disagrees with their conclusions. If you want to use this idea, think of this person as someone who can be persuaded if you construct your argument in the right way. You should concentrate on:

- putting your arguments in the right order;
- using sufficient evidence to back up everything you say;
- stating points that oppose your own point of view and arguing with them.



Activity 7

Imagine you have to argue in favour of the idea that Christmas has become too commercialised.

Look at these five arguments that you could use:

- Christmas has become a prime period for sales of alcohol.
- Children are trained to become too demanding by excessive toy advertising on television.
- Poor people suffer at Christmas because they can't afford all the trimmings which the media imply they should have.
- Christmas is primarily a Christian religious festival; its commercialisation is unacceptable because it puts pressure on people of other faiths, or of no faith at all, to share in its celebration.
- Christmas should be a time when families can be happy together.



Don't panic

Write down your own core arguments as separate points. Then follow the instructions below.

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See if you can work out an order for these arguments in which each is connected to the one before and the one following it. If there is no clear connection, try to think of an example, illustration or amplifying argument which could provide a connection. Write them down in order in the space below.

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There is no single correct way of putting this argument in order. What is important is that you feel happy that you can make the connections between arguments clear to your reader.

3.3 Complicating your argument

By now you should have a good idea of what constitutes an argument and some ideas about how to develop this argument with evidence. However, you may still have some doubts about how you are going to back up this argument.

This section is going to consider three useful ways of backing up an argument: backing it up with evidence, adding detailed analysis and using opposing arguments to strengthen your own position.

3.3.1 Supporting an argument with evidence

The easiest way to support an argument is to use detailed evidence to help make your case. For example, suppose you were writing an essay in which you argued that rising crime is a consequence of poverty. It

isn't enough just to state that argument; you need to produce evidence to back up your point of view. You might choose to look at any surveys which claim to make the link you are advancing. Don't just introduce the evidence. Explain exactly why it supports your argument and which aspects are particularly important. And look at the surveys carefully. Could someone advancing a different point of view use the surveys to support their argument? If they could, how sure are you of your own position?

3.3.2 Adding detailed analysis

Detailed analysis is often thought of primarily as a tool of literary, film and art critics. It can be used for other purposes too, for example, in close examination of historical evidence or in working out the exact meaning of a law or legal precedent. Students of literature, film and visual arts may wish to apply techniques of detailed analysis to the writings of critics as well as to the texts they are studying.

Obviously different subject areas may require different kinds of detailed analysis and the materials requiring analysis may vary. Again, it is always important to connect the kind of analysis you are undertaking to the argument you are putting forward. Make the connection clear to the reader.



Activity 8

Look at the following passage. It is an extract from a newspaper report (*Daily Graphic*, Saturday, 2 March 1912) describing a night of organised action against property by suffragettes, who were stepping up their campaign for votes for women:

The West End of London last night was the scene of an unexampled outrage on the part of the militant suffragists. The women "furthered their cause" by doing thousands of pounds' worth of damage to the windows of West London shopkeepers.

Bands of women paraded Regent Street, Piccadilly, the Strand, Oxford Street, and Bond Street, smashing windows with stones and hammers.

In all quarters the outrage, carefully planned and organised, occurred with startling suddenness, and shopkeepers found their property damaged and destroyed before any steps could be taken to prevent the onslaught.

By seven o'clock practically the whole of the West End of London was a city of broken glass. Shutters were put up and in some cases temporary barricades erected. In nearly all cases the work of destruction was executed with hammers, which the women carried concealed under their clothes. Many of the rioters were

young girls, and were terribly nervous when the crucial moment arrived.

One of the most noteworthy factors in the scene was the general attitude of the crowds which collected with astonishing rapidity. Bitter hostility to the women was expressed on all sides, and there is no doubt that had any recurrence of the outrages been attempted later in the evening the women would have been severely handled in spite of the presence of the police.

In all about 120 women, including Mrs Pankhurst, were arrested.

This is clearly the kind of passage you might use in arguing that the press is biased.

Just quoting the passage doesn't get you very far; you need to look at the passage and explain just how the bias makes itself evident. These are some of the questions that might help you find evidence of bias and the writer's/editor's point of view:

- What sort of words does the writer use to describe the suffragettes? Write some down below. Do they suggest that the writer sympathises with them or their cause?

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- What, if anything, does the writer say about the reasons for the suffragettes' action? What does this suggest?

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- What words and phrases indicate the writer's sympathies? Who does the writer sympathise with?

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- How can you work out what aspects of society the writer values? Note down words, phrases and sentences which help you to explain this.

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When you have answered these questions, try to work out how your answers could help you put forward any of the following arguments:

- Press bias means that there is no such thing as a straightforward account of events.

or

- The actions of suffragettes tended to be described in terms of the political bias of Edwardian society.

or

- Suffragettes not only needed to draw attention to their cause; they needed to find a means to convey the arguments in favour of votes for women.

Different arguments might lead you to highlight different aspects of your close reading, but in all cases a close reading of the passage could be a useful means to explain and amplify your argument.

3.3.3 Using opposing arguments

It is always helpful to be aware of arguments that would conflict with your own point of view. Sometimes you will find these coming from critics, lecturers or other students; sometimes you will think of them for yourself as you put your own case. If you take opposing views into account when writing your essay, you can use them to strengthen your own argument.

Suppose that you were arguing that women are under too much pressure to lose weight. You could probably think of a number of pieces of evidence to support your case. You might add a detailed analysis of an advertisement or a column in a slimming magazine. But you could also strengthen your argument by putting a strong opposing argument – that being overweight is always unhealthy – and then analysing and disagreeing with it. The kind of arguments you could put might be:

- that most women who diet are not overweight;
- that dieting can cause stress;
- that obsessive dieting has a yo-yo effect, with its own health risk;
- that anorexia and bulimia are dangerous, as is being underweight.

The arguments you put in response to the opposing point of view would not only help to persuade any-one reading your essay. They would also help to strengthen your own original point.

This sort of technique can be used in a number of subjects to elaborate and strengthen your own arguments. It may also help you think through your own point of view more clearly.

3.4 The right length

One of the worries often expressed by new students is how they can write an essay to the required length. Students often find that the essays they are asked to write at university are a lot longer than essays they were asked to write in A-level or Access courses. Obviously the skill of writing to a greater length is one that will be developed through a university course – you may not get it right the first time. But there are some ways in which you can help yourself get used to the new length.

- Work out how many words you will get on a page (whether it's a piece of paper or a page on a word-processor). This will give you some idea of exactly how much space your essay will have to fill.

- Consider how long every point you make is likely to be. Is one point in your argument going to take more space than the others, when you have developed it fully? Is one going to be quite short?
- How much space will your opening and concluding paragraph take?

If you know all this in advance, you should be able to work out whether your essay is going to be the right length as you are writing it.

If, as you are writing your essay, it seems rather long, see if you can explain things more concisely. If it seems rather short, see if you have explained your arguments sufficiently.

Don't ever lengthen an essay by repeating a point or by adding extra evidence to back up a point you have already made fully.

4 Starting to write

By now you should have lots of ideas about planning your argument and backing it up. This section deals with the technical questions of how to turn the plan into an essay.

4.1 First words on paper

Sometimes it's easy to start writing your essay. You have plenty of ideas, the development of the argument is straightforward, and you're happy that you can back it up with sufficient evidence. If you're in this happy position, you don't need to read the rest of this section.

However, if your mind has gone blank and you can't think of any words to express your ideas, this section may help.

Almost everybody feels stuck over an essay once in a while. It's not that you can't write the essay; it's just that you don't seem to be able to work out how to get started. Sometimes you simply need to get your confidence to a pitch at which is possible to write an essay.

Different techniques work for different people. Here are four ideas that might help:

- Give yourself a small but manageable target, with a reward at the end. For instance, you could look at section 4.2 and try to write an introductory paragraph. When you have done this, whether you are satisfied with what you have done or not, reward yourself with a cup of coffee. Even if you aren't happy with your introduction when you go back to it, the important thing is that you have something on paper that you can amend and edit.
- Write a letter to a friend (real or imagined) to explain all the problems you are having with this essay. Tell the friend why the question is so difficult and why it's so hard to get to grips with this topic. Explain why the material is so difficult to manage. By the time you have done this, you will at least have analysed the difficulties facing you. You may even find that as you are writing this letter your mind automatically shifts away from the difficulties toward some of the ways you might overcome them and write the essay.
- Brainstorm. Spend no more than five minutes writing down as many words and phrases as you can think of connected with the question. Go back and circle the ones which suggest ideas to you.

Note: If you are using this method, you must be particularly careful not to use irrelevant material when it comes to essay writing. Your essay still needs to have a clear argument and good use of evidence.

- If all else fails, you may simply be over-tired and over-worked. Do something pleasantly self-indulgent that won't last for too long. You might go for a walk, have a bath or watch a favourite television programme. While you are doing this, forget all about the essay but keep remembering that you are having a special treat. If you end up feeling better about yourself, you may find that this feeling spills over and provides the confidence you need to write your essay.

4.2 The introduction

The introduction to your essay should be the paragraph in which you start answering the question and indicate some of the arguments and evidence you are going to use in the essay as a whole.

Keep it short

Don't be like those politicians on television who argue round the question instead of answering it. You have only a limited amount of space and should use it as well and fully as possible. It's very easy to go astray by using irrelevant information in your introduction.



Activity 9

Read these introductions to an essay and decide which best introduces an answer to the question:

Should Shakespeare's plays form a central part of the National Curriculum in English? (Answer with particular attention to two plays.)

- a** *William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) is considered by many the finest dramatist that England has ever produced. He was born in Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire and was popular in the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. His plays are still popular with young people, as is shown by the success of Kenneth Branagh's films of Shakespeare. Some people think that his plays are too difficult for schoolchildren to read and do not agree with some of the ideas he puts forward, but recently the Department of Education has decided that all schoolchildren should read some of his work. I feel there is a lot to be said on each side of the question.*

b *Shakespeare's plays have been the subject of considerable controversy lately, with some critics suggesting that they perpetuate outmoded and dangerous stereotypes and others regarding their plots and language as a rich part of England's cultural heritage. Two plays, Othello and The Merchant of Venice, which are often studied in school, have come under particular attack for racial and gender stereotyping. By examining each in relation to its probable effect on a class of 14-year-olds it can be demonstrated that both could, to a minor degree, increase the effects of negative stereotyping in the classroom. However, it is possible for teachers who follow Equal Opportunities guidelines to use the stereotyping in the plays to initiate useful classroom discussion as well as introducing the children to the varieties of English Renaissance language.*

You can probably find faults with both introductions. There's no such thing as a perfect introduction.

However, introduction **a** is full of waffle. A great deal of the information has nothing to do with the question. There is no need to include Shakespeare's dates or any facts about his life. Statements are not linked to any argument and do not respond directly to the question asked. The writer seems unsure about what point of view to take and just states other people's points of view. A sentence that includes the words "I feel" is always suspect because it suggests that the writer doesn't have a good argument or sufficient evidence to substantiate what is being said.

Introduction **b** quickly engages with the question. It sketches in a little background to the debate but then outlines the area of argument on which this essay will concentrate. The two plays to be examined are named, as are the ways in which they will be considered. Some of the arguments which will be advanced in the essay are introduced and the writer makes clear to the reader just what position is being taken. It's an introduction which draws the reader straight into the debate and sounds interested and engaged with the issues raised.

4.3 Making connections

When you are writing, you need to make the links between points and paragraphs clear. Sometimes this will be apparent as you write; one point will lead naturally into another. However, it can help to keep in mind a list of link words and phrases which emphasises the connections you are making. Here are some link words and phrases that you might like to use; there is space for you to add some of your own:

- On the other hand
- However
- Nonetheless
- At the same time
- By contrast
- Similarly
- Not only
- Thus

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Notice how other writers use these and other link words and copy any techniques that seem particularly effective.

4.4 Concluding

It is often very hard to construct a concluding paragraph for your essay. After all, at this point you have probably said everything you want to say. Your main aim should be to keep the reader interested to the end. If in doubt, keep the conclusion brief. While it can be a good idea to suggest a new approach to the question, this shouldn't seem as though it's a whole argument you forgot to put in earlier.



Activity 10

Go back to the question on whether Shakespeare should be part of the National Curriculum. Here are two possible concluding paragraphs. Which do you prefer?

- a** *Having considered a number of perspectives, it seems that, although we should take account of what is said by the critics of Shakespeare in schools, the 1990s classroom still benefits from a careful consideration of Shakespeare's plays. However, the weight of the argument may change as social and political considerations vary and it is possible that, by the year 2000, a different conclusion might be necessary.*
- b** *To conclude, this essay has set out two points of view on the subject of Shakespeare's role in the National Curriculum. On balance I think that Shakespeare should have a central role because he still interests schoolchildren today as I explained with reference to the immense popularity of small-scale touring productions. Also it should not be forgotten that Shakespeare influenced a number of other writers and if schoolchildren don't read him they might find it difficult to understand other writers. So Shakespeare should still be studied in schools today.*
-

I find the first paragraph more interesting to read. It is shorter and reads as though it leads on naturally from a considered line of thought.

The second paragraph is dull and repetitive. The idea about the popularity of small-scale touring productions seems as though it was left out earlier and has been added at the last minute. Worst of all, the writer seems to have decided on an argument (being in favour of Shakespeare in schools) only in the very last paragraph.

5 Sample essay plan

It might help you to look at a sample essay plan. Remember, this diagram isn't what your essay has to look like; it's just here to give you some idea of a possible basic plan for a structured essay. As you are writing your own essay, you might like to glance at this plan to remind you of some of the ways in which an essay can develop or just to see how your own essay plan compares with it.

Introduction (give some idea of a response to the question and mention some of the evidence the essay will discuss).

lead into

Argument 1 (state and amplify)

Back up with firm evidence, explaining its relevance to the question.

connect with

Argument 2 (state and amplify)

Back up with evidence. Use critical judgements on the evidence. Evaluate the critics and respond to them. Relate this to the question.

connect with

Argument 3 (state and amplify)

Back up with evidence. Use techniques of close analysis to explain your position on the evidence and how this relates to your argument and the question.

connect with

Argument 4 (state and amplify)

Back up with evidence. Indicate opposing arguments in relation to the question. Explain why you disagree with these.

connect with

Argument 5 (state and amplify)

Back up with evidence. Connect to some of your previous arguments and begin to summarise.

lead into

Conclusion (briefly sum up and indicate the wider implications of your arguments).

6 Concerns about grammar

This section isn't going to be a long list of grammar points. You can find books on basic grammar elsewhere. There is even one published cheaply for children by Ladybird Books which might meet your needs. This section is simply going to suggest a few ways in which you can fulfil the essential aim of good grammar – to write as clearly as you can.

6.1 The language of essays

Different kinds of writing require different kinds of language. You have to write in a way that is appropriate to your audience and circumstances; think of the differences between speaking to a shop assistant and speaking to a parent, or between writing a letter to a close friend and writing a formal job application. Essays don't have to be written in an especially difficult or complex style. However, you should avoid a conversational approach or too imaginative a writing style.



Activity 11

Read the three paragraphs below and try to decide which is written in the style most appropriate to a university essay:

- *People must have got very upset when the First World War started. After all, Sarajevo's a long way away and I bet hardly anyone had heard of Archduke Franz Ferdinand when he got shot. But they were all rather keen on war then because they didn't know what it was really like.*
- *The declaration of what we now call the First World War in the summer of 1914 seems to have come as a surprise to a large number of people in England. However, the conflict sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo caused some enthusiasm among certain groups in the British population. Writings of the time suggest that many people viewed the war as no more than a chance for adventure.*
- *The pistol shot that rang out in the streets of Sarajevo on a quiet day in June 1914 was soon to reverberate through the peaceful fields and country lanes of England. Ignorant, in that glorious summer, of what sacrifices war would entail, each village, town and hamlet sent forth its menfolk, whose broken bodies would soon stain with blood the battlefields of Flanders.*

The first passage is conversational in style and encourages elements of waffle. The second is appropriate for an essay. It's fairly plain and concentrates the reader's attention on what is being said rather than the style which is being used. The third belongs in a novel or politician's speech; it encourages the writer to think in terms of stylistic flourishes rather than content.

6.2 Aiming at clarity

The first thing you need to ask yourself about your writing is: Have I made it easy for the reader to follow what I am saying? If you are unsure, try reading your essay aloud. If you don't find it easy to read it aloud yourself, it probably won't be easy for anyone else to read and understand what you are saying.

Some useful tips are:

- Keep your sentences short.
- Try to express everything as simply as you can. (The really clever thing is to express complicated ideas in a way that makes them seem easy. If you could explain nuclear physics in terms that would be understood by a 5 year old, you would probably be a genius.)
- Don't forget the reader. Remember there is someone out there who has to read and understand what you have written.

6.3 Paragraphs

Paragraphs divide your essay into manageable sections. There is no definitive rule about how long paragraphs should be but, if in doubt, start a new paragraph.

You might try to organise your essay according to the following rules:

- When you start a new argument, start a new paragraph.
- When you introduce a new piece of evidence, a detailed analysis or an opposing argument, start a new paragraph unless it follows directly from a brief statement of a new argument.
- When you think the reader could pause for a moment without losing the thread of what you are saying, start a new paragraph.

6.4 Sentences

Many people find it hard to tell a sentence from something that is not a sentence. There are strict grammatical rules for identifying a sentence but a useful rule is:

A sentence begins and ends a clear idea, thought or action.

While conversational speech, novels and poems can replace sentences with phrases and even single words, all university essays should be written in sentences.



Activity 12

Try to work out which of these groups of words is a sentence:

- a** It is a sunny day today.
- b** James I, whose son was executed in the English Civil War.
- c** Considering the influence of Gertrude Jekyll on gardeners.
- d** Now I have handed in my essay, I feel ready for a holiday.
- e** Difficult to write sentences.
- f** I'm not having too many problems with this exercise, all things considered.
- g** Winning the Oscar – a great achievement for Steven Spielberg.
- h** Time to go home.

If you think you are having problems, it might help you to know that there are only three sentences. Tick the ones that you think are sentences and try to turn the others into complete sentences.

a is a sentence. **b** is not a sentence – the idea about James I is not completed. **c** is not a sentence – it lacks direction. **d** is a sentence. **e** is not a sentence – it doesn't explain who is having the difficulties or when they are occurring. (Try: "It's difficult for me to write sentences." Or, if you want to make a general observation, "It's difficult to write sentences.") **f** is a sentence – the phrase "all things considered" works clearly in relation to the main statement. **g** is not a sentence although it would work as a headline. Try substituting the word "was" for the dash. **h** is not a sentence. It's acceptable in speech but, when written down, it needs to be changed to "It's time to go home".

6.5 Using unfamiliar words

Many students seem to think that when they come to university they have to start using long words in their essays. This is not always true.

You can divide unfamiliar words into two categories:

- Those that are part of the expert knowledge you need to acquire as part of your course. These terms should be explained to you in the course of lectures and seminars. Obviously you will have to use some of these terms when writing essays if they seem to be required by the question asked. However, you don't have to use all the terms that have been explained to you in lectures. Stick to those that you know are necessary and relevant to the question asked. As other terms become familiar, you will find yourself using them without difficulty.
- Those that sound good and that seem to be used a lot by people teaching the course. On the whole, don't use these unless you are sure of their meaning and know how they should be used in sentences. It may take a while to get used to some unfamiliar terms. Allow yourself the time you need and, at the same time, look at the way in which other writers use these terms. In this way you will not only become familiar with their meaning but also get a good idea of how to place them in the sentence.

Some large dictionaries can help you. Don't just look for the meaning of the words that you need to know and understand. Look for examples of how the words are used in sentences. You should also look out for critical texts which use difficult words and see how they work in their context. It may help to keep notes of the sentences – or even paragraphs – in which difficult and unfamiliar words occur.

7 Revising your essay

Try to allow time to revise your essay. If you are handwriting your work, allow time to write out your essay again. If you are writing your essay on a word-processor, print out your draft and amend with the whole draft in front of you.

7.1 What to look for

It can be hard to criticise your work. If you can, give yourself a break (overnight, perhaps) before going back to look at what you have written. Obviously there are many areas you may wish to examine but here are three main questions to ask as you go through your work:

- Is it clear?
- Is it convincing?
- Is it easy for the reader to grasp the writer's (your) point of view?

If the answer to any of these questions is “no” at any point in your essay, you need to start rewriting. You may want to rephrase, add more evidence or even undertake a substantial rewrite.

Rewriting an essay is not a sign of failure. Many people find that their ideas evolve best through a process of redrafting. If that's how you work, you have to allow enough time to make your essay as good as you can.

7.2 Techniques of editing and redrafting

The best way to edit an essay (unless it requires substantial rewriting) is with a different coloured ballpoint pen. In this way you can see not only your amendments but also your original draft. If you need to write an extra paragraph, mark your first draft with an asterisk and a number, and then write the new paragraph on an extra, numbered page.

When you have edited your essay, read it through to check that the connections between arguments and paragraphs are still clear.

Finally write it out again or make the necessary amendments on your word-processor. Then re-read it again, asking yourself the three questions in 7.1.

Don't forget to check your final draft.

8 When your essay is returned

8.1 Looking at the mark

This can be a dreadful moment. Prepare for it by finding out what range of marks is usual in your subject and how they correspond to degree classes. If you don't even know what the pass mark is, you won't know what your mark means.

Your first response will probably be to the mark itself. You will be pleased or unhappy. However, after this you need to use any feedback, whether given orally or in writing.

8.2 Using feedback

Feedback comes in various forms. There may be written comments in the margin and at the end of your essay. The lecturer may see students separately in tutorials. You may be given feedback in general terms in the course of a lecture or seminar.

Try to make notes on orally given feedback.

Not all feedback is negative. Some should tell you what you are doing right. Take note of this.

A lecturer may wish to suggest an alternative point of view or a helpful further avenue of enquiry. This can be a good sign – it can suggest that the lecturer is engaged by the ideas expressed in your essay. See if the lecturer's ideas are of interest even if you have completed all the course-work for the module. Thinking through all the ideas offered by one module will help you prepare for the next.

However, some feedback suggests room for improvement.

Lecturers are concerned with the following questions:

- Did the student understand the topic/the course as a whole?
- Did the student fulfil any assessment criteria laid down in a Course Guide or other material made available to students?
- Did the student understand what was required by the question?
- Did the student construct the essay well?

See which areas the lecturer suggests for future improvement. Then, when you have time, look at your essay again and spend an hour or so working out how you could have improved it. This may seem a rather depressing exercise, but if you do this you may find yourself better prepared for the next essay.

Happy writing

9 Bibliography

Goldman, Emma (1970) *My disillusionment in Russia*. New York, Crowell

Paull, Dorothy (1984) *Ladybird spelling and grammar*. Loughborough, Ladybird

Further reading

If you wish to develop your technique further, you will find a selection of texts on essay writing in the University libraries and bookshops. Many guides to study skills also include sections on essay writing. Some to look out for are:

Clancy, J. and Ballard, B. (1982) *How to write essays: a practical guide for students*. Harlow, Longman

Fabb, N. and Durant, A. (1993) *How to write essays, dissertations and theses in literary studies*. Harlow, Longman

Northedge, A. (1990) *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes, Open University

Palmer, R. (1992) *Write in style: a guide to good English*. London, Spon

Parker, D. (1994) *Tackling coursework: assignments, projects, reports and presentations*. London, D.P. Publications. [Aimed at business students]