AN ESSAY WRITING CHECK LIST

AND WRITING AID

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by

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Introduction

Writing essays is very much part and parcel of the lives of most students. Yet, particularly in first year, essay writing is the source of much uncertainty. First semester essays are particularly daunting and the sheer relief when an essay is submitted, and the euphoria when passed, is almost palpable.

One reason that essays are so formidable is that essay writing skills are assumed rather than systematically taught. Even when subject guides are read carefully, and even when they are comprehensive, I sense that students are chartering unknown waters when it comes to their first essay in semester one.

This guide attempts to provide an introduction to some of the skills and expectations of essay writing. It consists of two parts. The first is a checklist of questions which students are invited to ask at various stages in the essay writing process. The second is the same checklist with a commentary, which amplifies and explicates the issues contained in the checklist.

I have tried to avoid the rather peremptory 'do and don't, you should and shouldn't' approach. Such an approach is high handed, can be demeaning but, most importantly, is usually counter-productive to the creativity required of a good essay. So the reader asks the questions of themselves and the commentary is intended to be encouraging and helpful rather than symptomatic of any power relationship between the author and the reader.

That's the intention. With the questions I think it works but I would ask readers to interpret what I'm advocating as worthy of a try rather than the last word. I certainly don't regard it as that!

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ESSAY WRITING CHECK LIST
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Writing essays is as common as many find it difficult. The following is a series of questions which are designed to assist in the process of approaching, researching and writing an essay. Students should regard these questions as expectations of a good essay!

Questions to ask before you undertake your research and write your first draft

• Have I read the question very carefully?
• Can I break the question into parts?
• Is there more than one question in the essay question?
• Have I highlighted the most important words in the question?
• Have I asked: What does this essay question ask me to do? Can I state the question in my own words?
• Have I appreciated the verbs of instruction in the question (eg. analyse, describe, discuss, evaluate)?
• Have I appreciated the importance of verbs (or adverbs) in the question itself which provide some guide as to what is expected (as for example in the question: 'Do race and ethnicity *perpetuate* inequality?)
• Have I brainstormed (written down quickly) all the issues which could be relevant to the question?
• Have I written down some of the possible answers to the question?
• Have I written down what would be required to answer the differing possible answers to the question?
• Have I restated or reformulated the question into argument form? Have I asked: What is my argument going to be?
• Have I understood that whatever my argument is it must be a direct, explicit and specific answer to the question?• Can I see any way to incorporate empirical, conceptual or theoretical issues irrespective of the type of question.
• Have I read *all* the instructions in the subject outline (or DSO: Detailed Student Outline)? Do I have a very clear idea of the expectations in the DSO?

Questions about the research

• Do I know the extent of the research required? In other words, do I know how many books or journals etc I must read?
• Where can I find the information required to develop an argument?
• If the books are unavailable have I put them on hold?
• Do I know what I'm trying to find out from each book or journal I'm reading? Have I got a list of questions I'm asking each reading?
• As I've been reading have I detected some common topics or themes within, or similarities and differences between, the readings?
• Have I developed my own index of themes and ideas relevant to my argument which is my answer to the question? Am I writing down the different references to the same themes or ideas which is relevant to the question and my argument. (Consult the back of most textbooks to find the index).
• Have I identified in my index those places in my reading in which a different view has been put, or there is a subtle variation on a major perspective I've identified?
• Have I typed out my bibliography as I do my reading?

Questions about the research findings; more planning!

• Now I have done the research, noted it and have an index, can I add to the list of relevant issues which I brainstormed previously?
• Can I categorise the list into themes?
• Does my research necessitate any qualification or amendment to my original argument. If so, what is my argument now?
• Have I formulated my argument by translating what I have found into 'so this is what I will argue'?
• In my planning and statement of my argument in the Introduction have I developed the argument into a fuller statement even more representative of the position I intend to adopt?
• Does the argument include a direct and explicit answer to the entire question? Is the proposed answer organised around an argument?
• Have I included the contrary and opposing evidence in the statement of my argument around which my answer to the question is organised?
• Have I determined the order and method by which I will present the material so that it advances/augments my argument?
• Can I state my procedure, that is, can I state the order in which I will introduce relevant parts of the argument to answer the question?
• Are there some issues I must include? Are there some issues I can exclude? Are there some issues about which I am unsure?
• Can I state the arguments of others fairly and with due regard to the detail and subtlety of their argument? Can I avoid 'setting up a straw man'?

Questions after writing the essay: my checklist

• Is my essay double-spaced typing with a wide margin?
• Have I met or exceeded the word length stated in the DSO?
• Does my essay reflect the thought and research undertaken before I started the first draft.?
• Have I realised that the entire essay is my conclusion to the assignment and therefore is not a report or a series of findings, or a description? Have I realised that the essay is my conclusion to the entire assignment and should be written as such?
• Have I answered the question as well as addressed the relevant issues? This is important because submitted essays often mention the relevant issues without adequately and directly organising the issues around an argument.
• Have I realised that to describe is not to argue and my answer requires the latter?
• Is my written conclusion to the essay a summary of an essay which is rather descriptive and not organised around an argument? If it is, I should start again and use this conclusion as my Introduction and argument.
• Does my answer address all parts of the question?
• Have I engaged with the contrary or opposing evidence or views?
• Have I cited *every* reference I have used whether in direct quotes or in my own words?
• Have I included every possible reference in order to demonstrate the extent of my research and my understanding of the issues? Or, have I included every possible reference to evidence (empirical or statistical evidence), concepts, theories or models?
• Have I *substantiated* every claim?
• Have I used paragraphs (5-6 sentences)?
• Have I have avoided 1-2 sentences as paragraphs?
• Have I checked to see that I have not used dot points or notes in my essay?
• Are there obvious links between each sentence and each paragraph?
• Are there obvious links between each paragraph and the question?
• Have I checked to see that there are no run-on sentences (when two sentences which should be separate, are strung together)?
• Have I checked to see that I have completed all the sentences (that is, there are no sentence fragments)?
• Have I checked to see that my spelling is correct.
• Have I checked to see that I have used apostrophe's correctly?.
• Have I quoted exactly as in the reading from which it was obtained? Have I italicised any quote (when I shouldn't have done), or put it in a different line-spacing from the original? If unsure, have I checked the original?

Questions after writing the essay: my checklist (continued)

• Have I ensured that all direct quotations three lines or over are indented?
• Have I used the language to state clearly what I wanted to get across? Is my use of English commensurate with my intention of 'getting my message across.'
• Have I used the language to the full.
• Have I avoided colloquial and conversational (such as 'getting my message across').
• Have I avoided unnecessary words? Have I edited my essay in order to delete all unnecessary words.
• Does my essay have the correct balance between clarity about my argument and procedure throughout, on the one hand, and being too wordy, on the other?
• Have I avoided the use of the word 'you' when directed at the reader?
• Have I used the same word repeatedly? If so, is there a more accurate alternative?
• Have I ensured that I have checked the dictionary whenever I have used a word I have not previously used and the meaning of which I am unsure? Am I absolutely certain about the accuracy and precision of the vocabulary I have used (both the technical or disciplinary language, and the non-technical)?
• Have I used the same tense throughout my essay?
• Does my essay sound straight-forward, even simple, when I read it?

After completing the essay

• Have I read and edited the essay again?
• Have I checked to see if I've addressed the question and presented my essay in such a way that the reader will readily understand my answer?
• Do I have a conclusion on the last page?
• When I've finished can I say: 'It's not so much what I have learnt that makes this essay a good one; it's what I've done with my findings that count?
• Have I included the bibliography?
• Are *all* the pages stapled together?
• Have I included a title page with my name, seminar leader, day and time of the seminar and the due data?
• Have I resisted the temptation to insert my essay into a plastic folder?
• Have I submitted the essay to the appropriate person and in the correct place?
• Do I have a receipt of my submission?
• Have I printed a spare copy or photo-copied my essay?

If you've done all the above, you can look forward to a good result!!!

Comments about the question.
The following are comments which may be helpful as you begin your assignment. Many of the comments are obvious although some may surprise you; some are more practical, others require some thinking. The latter are based on my view that emphasises the importance of the time spent thinking and writing about the questions before you actually begin your research and writing the drafts of your essay. Here are the questions and the commentary.

- Have I read the question very carefully?

It sounds like such an obvious thing but it is essential to read the question carefully. This is even more important if your essay question was selected hurriedly (often out of necessity), or at the beginning of the semester when you weren't too sure about the details of the question apart from its initial appeal. There's no problem with that, but it does mean that as your understanding of the subject matter has changed and developed so will you understanding and interpretation of the question.

Of course you've read the question, but have you read it slowly, aloud, deliberately and with different inflections (for example, ending the sentence with a lower or higher tone?) Have you read it two or three times on different occasions.

- Can I break the questions into parts?

Here I'm referring to a one-sentence question which has several parts. Initially, the two parts may be difficult to detect but, further reflection and analysis, reveals there are parts. So, here I'm not thinking of two specific questions (indicated by more than one sentence and more than one question mark). I'm referring to a single question comprised of parts.

Occasionally, the subject matter and/or the question necessitates answering the questions quite separately. But usually the sections of a question, those stated in the question and those you have detected, are ideally combined or joined in some way. If there are two parts to a question you might see how they can be linked or joined in your answer.

The reason for this is that the best answer to a question is an argument that you have formulated and developed as a result of your research. I'll emphasise this later, but the point here is that it is helpful to detect the parts of the question and then deliberately join them in one argument (for which there might be several parts).

Consider the question: Does class or stratification best explain the distribution of resources and access to good and services in Australia? In this question 'class' and 'stratification' indicate the two parts of the question (which must be related, of course to the distribution of resources and the access to good and services). The question requires incorporating both concepts into your answer and thus you argument. Now that you have identified them you can start to consider both - separately and together; you can start to explore how the concepts are related, if

and how and to what extent they are similar or dissimilar. This will assist in the development of your argument.

Breaking the question into its parts is helpful because it can alert you to all the various strands or issues in the question. At first glance, or even after several readings, all the parts of the question may not be immediately obvious. This is *not* because it is a trick question, or because some parts are camouflaged, or because the question has an underlying purpose (i.e., it is tendentious in some way). However, analysing the question carefully may reveal possibilities for answering the question you hadn't detected during previous readings.

- Is there more than one question in the essay question?

Much of what has been said above can be applied here. There is one difference though, namely, that in the previous question, the student undertaking the essay question was the one who detected the parts. Here, the parts are obvious. There are at least two sentences and two question marks.

Sometimes the sentence 'If not, why not?' or 'If so, how?' are telling; they reveal the parts. Sometimes they are less obvious. The important thing is to read the question carefully in order to detect them. Once you have identified the parts of the question regard them in a similar way to those discussed in the previous dot point.

- Have I highlighted, underlined or circled the most important words in the question?

This is just a simple tip to assist in examining the question yet again. It's like reading a poem a different way, perhaps lowering or raising the tone or volume of your voice at the end of a sentence. Inflections of this sort sometimes enable us to detect the emphases and the slight or subtle differences in meaning.

That's the idea here. By seeing the main words highlighted it is may help you to see the question in a different light, with alternative connections between the main words and therefore some more options for formulating your argument and undertaking research. When you see alternative emphases or options write them down for future reference.

- Have I asked: What does this essay question ask me to do? Can I state the question in my own words?

It's often helpful to list what the question asks you to do, particularly when you do it in your own words, or aloud, or discuss it with a friend. A question is something with which you are invited to engage, with which to converse, with which to 'to and fro'. Even the most simple of questions, those that are apparently straightforward, can be engaging, and can justify conversation and returning.

You may find that a first reading will yield one set of expectations and interpretation; in subsequent readings you will discover alternatives. Sometimes

they will cancel each other out (that is, they are mutually exclusive) but, on other readings, they will complement or supplement a previous understanding which might prove useful in the development of your argument.

A good test of understanding is to be able to articulate the question to yourself, or to discuss it with a friend.

- Have I appreciated the verbs of instruction in the question (eg. analyse, describe, discuss, evaluate)?

The verbs of instruction are very important at least as you start to engage with the question. Verbs such as 'analyse' (which means to break down into respective parts, find the elements of, show the essence of) are of critical importance in reading the question.

'Evaluate' is another word which is sometimes used in essay questions. It can mean 'comment on the value of', or 'ascertain the value of'. So, essay questions are asking the writer to make some judgements about something, to determine the worth of a position or argument, or to show why a position or concept is flawed or deficient in some way, why it is or isn't sufficient for the task, why it is or isn't 'all its cracked up to be' (Incidentally, while I've used a well-known saying, its best to avoid conversational language like the latter unless used for a specific purpose and then put in quotations. See later).

The word 'criticise' causes some problems for students because they sometimes think that it is necessary 'to get stuck into' a position, or that the word in the question implies or suggests that the author regards the position as totally inadequate - and you should too! However, while 'criticise 'can mean to expose the inadequacies of a position, it does not mean you must try to expose flaws which do *not* necessary exist. This will demonstrate your lack of understanding of a position - which is the last thing you want to demonstrate! So 'criticising' or 'being critical' can mean to identify the strengths and weakness of a position and, depending on the position, make a judgement about whether the strengths are greater than the weaknesses. 'Critical' can mean to 'weigh up the evidence for' an argument or a position.

- Have I appreciated the importance of verbs (or adverbs) in the question itself which provide some guide as to what is expected (as for example in the question: 'Do race and ethnicity perpetuate inequality?')

In the question above the word *perpetuate* is like an instruction and certainly should be taken seriously; the question is not about *any* connection between race and ethnicity and inequality, but about how the former *perpetuates* the latter.

When a question includes words such as 'comment', 'consider', 'examine' or 'discuss the relationship' between two or more variables it is necessary to explore them comprehensively. In one sense they contain some ambiguity but that gives you some room to manoeuvre your conclusions into an argument which answers the question. 'Comment' or 'consider' do not suggest writing a preliminary or provisional answer. A 'draft' essay would do that. Such words are most

helpfully interpreted as: 'from all the possible comments or arguments about an issue which one(s) do you find most satisfactory and why?'

'Discuss the relationship between' does not mean that you should merely discuss the issues as if they were distinct and separate; it means something like: 'discuss the connections, the links, between the variables'. The emphasis here is on the relationship. Even if you discuss the issues separately at some stage in your essay, how they relate (if they do) is the salient issue; answering the question necessitates outlining how the variables are related in the *Introduction* of your essay, it should be the focus or point of your essay, and addressed in the *Conclusion*.

- Have I brainstormed (written down quickly) all the issues which could be relevant to the question?

Even before you have started researching it is sometimes helpful to brainstorm all the issues which are relevant to the question. It is important to emphasise that discussing issues in an essay is *not* an answer to a question; there's a huge difference between the two. (see later.)

However, a list of the relevant issues helps to broaden the approach to, and the scope of, your research, Brainstorming is an effective technique. In this context it involves recording every thought that comes to you. There's no need to hesitate; you can screen the issues later. As the thoughts come, write them down.

Such a task may be more difficult in some questions than in others. But the more difficult it is to brainstorm the more important it is to think about the question long before you start writing. For example, questions which ask you to apply a particular theory, concept(s), a disciplinary approach to another theory, or even a profession, require very careful thought. Likewise, any question which asks you to compare and contrast the work of two thinkers.

Consider the question: Is Sociology helpful in a particularly profession? Is so how? There are many issues which are relevant here - too many! Writing them down helps to sort them out, to categorise them, and provides a basis for your research and the formulating of your argument.

Consider the questions:

- Compare and contrast the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber on religion?

- Outline the strengths and weaknesses of the postmodern critique of modernity?

- What are the major changes caused by internationalisation and globalisation?

- How is the sociology of knowledge relevant to our understanding of the role and function of institutions (for example, education or religion)?

- Sociologically or philosophically speaking, in Australia are we are as free as we are led to believe? Comment.

Hopefully, some of the above questions would not be asked in the above form! The reason for considering them is that they are very broad. Consequently, they attract attention but are often more difficult to answer than first realised. Writing down all the possible issues is one method of identifying what the question is about or, more accurately, all the possible issues which attend the question.

- Even before I begin my research have I written down some of the possible answers to the question?

This is a theoretical question because the suggestion comes *before* you undertake your research and draw some conclusions about how you might answer the question. However, even at a very early stage in the assignment process it is helpful to be aware of the possible answers to a question. Then, as you do your research, you will begin to identify the answer that you regard as fitting the evidence gained from your research.

It is significant that most questions have more than one possible argument. Consider the question: Does race and ethnicity perpetuate racism? 'Yes' or 'no' are obvious possible answers. But what about *qualifying* the 'yes' or 'no'.

There are other options but remember that at this stage we are exploring possibilities *before* we have undertaken the research in order to examine the possible answers, in order to see the variety of ways the essay may be answered and argued. One answer to the question is to argue that: 'yes' I think the evidence supports the claim that race and ethnicity do perpetuate racism but the evidence requires that the answer be qualified. In other words the answer is affirmative but the argument is qualified by arguing that race and ethnicity are not the only factors, or not the most important factors.

So, some of the options to consider when answering such a question are:

- *yes*;
- *no*;
- *yes but qualified* because there are other factors which also perpetuate racism;
- *no but qualified* because they are more important factors which perpetuate racism.

There are other options too. For example, another possibility is to question the use of the word *perpetuate* which literally means 'to make perpetual', or 'to cause to be continuous'. In the context of the question *perpetuate* could be qualified to mean 'to compound', 'to aggravate', 'to further', 'to worsen', 'to exacerbate'. Not all these words mean the same thing, of course, but they are sensible options which are worth considering before and as you undertake your research.

Consider the question: 'The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 was essential to end World War II! Discuss' . Here, again, there are several options including: 'yes', 'no', 'yes but qualified' or 'no but qualified'. It is also possible to examine words like 'essential'. For example, was the dropping of the atomic bomb essential in the sense that it was the only option, or was it essential in conjunction with other actions designed to hasten the end of the war.

Have I written down what would be required to answer the different possible answers to the question?

There is one significant advantage in analysing the essay question in the way described above, namely, it enables you to answer the following questions. How will the content be different in each of the possible answers I have identified? What will I need to discover in order to respond at least adequately to the different possible answers to the question? Thus, identifying some possible ways to answer the question provides some options and directs and guides your research.

Consider two possible answers to a question: 'a yes qualified' and a 'no qualified'. The content of your essay will probably be different according to you answer. The suggestion here is that *before* you undertake the research it is worth thinking about what research findings would justify or warrant one answer rather than another, and how that might influence your research.

- Have I restated or reformulated the question into argument form? Have I asked: What is my argument going to be?

Even at this early stage in your assignment it is possible to have an inkling of what you might argue in your essay. This is sometimes a new and daunting prospect. Yet we have all argued about something with someone; we have experienced one person defending one position while we have defended another. We all know what it means to provide reasons to reject one position and produce or adduce evidence for the one we are defending.

In essence, this is what is expected as an answer to a question. After you have written down any alternative answers, and what would comprise an adequate answer to them, select the answer or position which you consider at this stage to be the strongest. The argument is the position you are defending. Because *you* are defending it, it is *your* argument; because you developed and formulated it, it will be unique. It is, therefore, critical to think carefully about your argument or, in other words, your thesis even *at this early stage.*

So the above question becomes: Have I developed my argument by writing out what I think I will find in my research, developing options and selecting the strongest, and then saying: 'That's what I'm going to argue'? In an essay, an argument is derived by forging a clear and direct link between your overall findings and the question. So, in your research you may have found x,y, and x. This can be reformulated into argument form by stating that in your essay you will argue a, b, and c (which you have discovered in your research in resource x, y, x).

This is what is meant by reformulating the question into argument form. It is a matter of making three distinct steps:

- understanding the question very clearly;
- drawing conclusions on the basis of your research;

- stating in your Introduction to the essay that: 'In this essay it will be argued that...' and then inserting your argument based on the conclusions and summary of your research.

- Have I understood that whatever my argument is it must be a direct, explicit and specific answer to the question?

In some ways this section is repetitive but it is significant, nonetheless; it returns to the essay question. When answering the question it is necessary to ensure that the answer confronts the question 'head-on'.

In some ways, this is a reminder that even a good discussion of (relevant) issues does not constitute an optimal answer to the question. As noted previously, a broad, general discussion of issues is not an answer to a question. However, the issue here goes further. It emphasises that even when a argument or thesis has been developed, even where there is evidence of creative thought, and irrespective of the amount of research and writing, the question is still intended to be answered directly, explicitly and specifically.

The mere use of an argument will not necessarily answer the question and the better arguments do not usually happen by accident. Unless specific steps are taken an argument may deviate. Similarly, a creative answer will not be regarded as an answer if it does not answer the question directly.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that an answer formulated around a carefully planned and organised argument is less likely to deviate from the question. Even here, however, it might be helpful to ask the question: how does this paragraph, how does this page, contribute to the answer? The question: Have I 'hit the nail on the head'? might also be helpful?

Students are encouraged to be as creative as the evidence allows, to be subtle in their interpretation of the question. However, if the question is not answered directly what might be considered creativity has transgressed into irrelevance, or trespassed into answering another question.

Sometimes there is a fine line here. That's why it's worth thinking about it before you begin researching and writing. For example, consider the question: How do sociologists understand crime and delinquency? Which theory has the most explanatory power?

One answer to such a question might adopt a procedure which refers to a number of *sociological* theories, discusses their strengths and weakness and comes to the conclusion that one has more explanatory power than the others. That would be a creative thesis. If, however, the essay adopted a similar procedure but with *psychological* theories (when the question was about sociological theories) the answer would be neither creative (in the sense intended here) nor a direct, explicit and specific answer to the question.

- Can I see any way to incorporate empirical (statistical), conceptual or theoretical issues irrespective of the type of question.

This may seem quite strange. After all, if the question appears to involve a description of events or statistical evidence, why incorporate concepts and theories or arbitrate between the views of differing authors? If it's not asked, why include it in the answer?

Some balance is required here. But if the question is about class in Australia there are not only debates in the literature about the distribution of wealth and income, there are also debates about what constitutes a class, a vast theoretical literature, debates about the relative importance of class in relation to gender and race and, more recently, debates about whether class is a meaningful or helpful descriptive or theoretical concept.

It will be expected that the best essays will at least demonstrate some understanding of the literature and, therefore, of related issues and debates. So, without going overboard, if you can incorporate a theoretical perspective in seemingly empirical or statistical questions, or include empirical issues into theoretical questions, and use concepts (such as class, culture, socialisation) in all your answers irrespective of the question, or enter into debates between positions or authors, your answer will be all the better. Sometimes these issues can be addressed in footnotes but the more important issues in the literature are best woven into the argument.

- Have I read *all* the instructions in the subject outline (or DSO: Detailed Student Outline)? Do I have a very clear idea of the expectations in the DSO?

It might sound a little odd that you return to the DSO. However, while you have begun your assignment you have not yet started researching and writing. So, return to the DSO where there may be expectations about this essay, or other relevant information, which should be factored into your preparation and writing.

For example, normally it would be inefficient and unnecessary to spend more time on a 1000 word essay than a 3000 word essay. The suggestions noted previously do not change but the amount of time devoted to an essay should be proportional to the word limit and proportional of the total assessment. That is, if you spend a week preparing for a 1500 word essay it is likely that more than two weeks would be required for a 3000 word essay. If the 1500 was worth 20% of the total assessment, then a 3000 word essay worth 50% should attract more time.

In a nutshell, the information in the DSO about the number of words and the proportion of marks for an essay are a good indicator of the amount and quality of work expected. Receiving a high grade for a 1000 word essay worth 20% is a cause for celebration but it is unlikely that exactly the same amount of effort will yield a similar result in a 3000 word essay worth 50%.

There may be other helpful information in the DSO. For example, as questions are designed to assess content and skills you may find that the extent of research

for a 1000 word essay is less than for a 3000 word essay. It might be that the argument is more important in the shorter essay. If the shorter essay was a short literature review, however, the extent of the research is as important.

Most of this information you will find in the DSO. Some of it may *not* be in a section on the specific assignment. For example, the expectations for a seminar paper may be outlined in the general section on assessment and, because they apply each week, they may not appear in each weekly question. Nonetheless, it is assumed that the student knows, for example, that the research should be limited to the references listed. In summary, there may be all sorts of information and expectations about your essay questions which is invaluable in writing your essay in the DSO. Ask yourself: have I read the DSO again?

Questions about the research

To this point, you haven't started the research for your assignment, let alone started writing! It may feel as if you've spent hours on it already with very little to show. But, by now, you will be well-prepared and the thinking and brainstorming you have done will be time well spent. Now, to the research stage of the assignment!

- Do I know the extent of the research required? In other words, do I know how many books or journals etc I must read?

This information is probably in the DSO. Higher grades demand that the minimum expectations are met and, on some occasions, exceeded. Overall, the more references the better although they will not be used efficiently if they are only mentioned in the bibliography. We'll come to that later but, briefly, make use of *all* the resources you have located in your research.

It is difficult to make generalisations about the number of references required for an essay assignment but between 5 and 10 references for every 1000 words is a guide. In longer essay (over 2,500) closer to 10 references would be helpful.

Please remember that the above 'rule of thumb' is a guide only. Certainly, if your essay is about wealth, poverty, marriage, family and divorce, crime and delinquency, for example, there is a vast literature, many potential references and you should have no trouble locating them. However, if you have been asked to critically evaluate a particular book, or the work of a particular author, then the depth of analysis is as important as the number of references. If your essay is about a particular author, or an issue in which an author has made a contribution, the distinction between *primary* and *secondary* literature is important. *Primary* literature was written by the particular author; *secondary* literature is written about the author or the issues raised by someone else.

So, am I clear about the expectations, those stated and unstated, regarding the type of assignment, its assessed value and, therefore, the number of references I would be advised to consult and cite in my essay?

- Where can I find the information required to develop an argument?

In the past, acquiring information was often the difficulty. Journals were sometimes not in the library and books were often unavailable. Now, the difficulty may be information overload; there is just so much information and bibliographies showing where they can be located. The *Internet* is a valuable source of information about resources (eg., bibliographies) and information on any topic. Such resources are there to be used without neglecting articles and books already in the library or on reserve.

- If the books are unavailable have I put them on hold?

If you can think ahead it will save time and you will be able to obtain the resources you need. Other resources may require an intra-campus or inter-library loan. Doing a resource list as early as possible and adding to it continually, is not only essential for research, it will also mean you are not reading everything at once and you will be developing your Bibliography. It will also avoid a frantic rush near the due date when it's ideal to avoid compromising the quality of your research and writing by trying, belatedly, to obtain material which was available earlier.

- Do I know what I'm trying to find out from each book or journal I'm reading? Have I got a list of questions I'm asking each reading?

Sometimes it is relatively simple matter to find the material required, particularly when the entire article or a chapter in a book are relevant. More frequently, however, it is necessary to *locate* the relevant information. This is always assisted if you have a clear idea about why you are reading the particular resource. Having some key words of ideas, some particular definitions or questions, will expedite the process.

You might be able to identify the most relevant part of an article of chapter, or use the index to streamline the task. It is often helpful to read the first and last part of an article or a book. That might help you decide which parts are relevant, or they may direct you to the parts that are pertinent.

- As I've been reading have I detected some common topics or themes within, or similarities and differences between, the readings?

As you have been reading you may have noticed that specific topics arise; the author(s) refer to the same topic repeatedly. Alternatively, you may observe other authors presenting additional or opposing evidence or views on the same or related topics. The authors may:

- emphasise or present different issues;

- discount or refute varying views.

Whatever, careful reading will detect similarities and differences in the issues and topics, and arguments about them, which are very helpful in sorting out and

ranking the evidence. In any evident, the lost of possible relevant topics grows. The next step will assist to record this valuable information.

- Have I developed my own index of themes and ideas relevant to my argument which is my answer to the question? Am I writing down the different references to the same themes or ideas which is relevant to the question and my argument. (Consult the back of most textbooks to find the index).

As you identify topics and themes which are relevant it may help to write them down. That is, record the topic or theme on a sheet of paper and its location or source. In order to save time try to be quite specific about the referencing (so include the issue or theme, title and page number). In doing this, you are developing your own research index similar to those in the back of a book.

Consider the essay assignment: Critically evaluate the following statement. 'Class is no longer an accurate analytical or descriptive concept in Sociology.' As you read the major works on this topic you will find many different perspectives on every aspect of the question. Some authors will defend the idea of class, others will argue it is obsolete; some will emphasise a particular theoretical position while others will defend another; both may use the same or varying theoretical, or empirical or statistical evidence.

Consider in every reading, for example, the different positions stated, what is rejected and why, and the varying theoretical and empirical evidence which substantiates or refutes the author's argument. Such issues become themes and, for every theme, there are any number of permutations. These are very helpful because they provide the information which can be collated, sorted and ranked into an argument which you will advance in your essay.

If these are recorded under similar headings with the exact reference (author, title, page number) it is easier to locate them when necessary. The information in your index will be of great assistance as you plan your essay, cite the evidence in your essay or quote the author directly. When this is undertaken for more than one theme, you have developed what amounts to your own index of themes.

- Have I identified in my index those places in my reading in which a different view has been put, or there is a subtle variation on a major perspective I've identified?

This is a testing question; while related to the previous question it goes a step further. It asks: have you have identified the small differences in the definitions, arguments or the evidence in the different resources? Have you identified any subtleties or nuances in the arguments?

Sometimes small differences can be ignored particularly when you are working with an overall theme which is akin to developing generalisations (that is, a trend for which there may be exceptions). However, once you have been able to discern a trend which becomes a theme it is helpful to be able to differentiate between the various positions even when they are concerned with the same themes or appear similar in some respects.

Another name for this skill is 'to distinguish' between the variety of positions. To distinguish in such a way is to show what is distinct about one position relative to another; in other words, to make distinctions.

We make distinctions all the time. We distinguish from all actions those which we consider good and bad; from all the arguments heard we distinguish those we consider valid and invalid. A well-known distinction is that between 'form' and 'content'. The 'form' refers to the way something is done; the content refers to what is presented.

So the *form* or *mode* of your studies (how you undertake it) may be external, but the *content* (the syllabus) is the same as that studied by internal students. In most essay assignments expectations about form are the same (that it, is it to be in writing) whereas the content may differ (because there is question choice).

So, can you distinguish between the different positions, arguments and evidence that you have read and are reading? It is difficult on some occasions to be able to distil arguments in such a way that the differences are emphasised or highlighted. Writing down the similarities and differences between positions is one way to do it; imaging that you are debating with a friend, or imaging a play in which the actors adopt different positions and are arguing between themselves, are others. Whatever method is used, the quality of an essay is advanced when the differences between positions are carefully highlighted, distinguished and examined.

- Have I typed out my bibliography as I do my reading?

Rather than prepare your bibliography as the final part of writing an essay, try preparing it as you proceed. That way you will have a record of the resources you have used, and it will be more detailed and representative of the work you have done.

Questions about the research findings; more planning!

- Now I have done the research, noted it and have an index, can I add to the list of relevant issues which I brainstormed previously?

Remember that one of the first tasks suggested was to prepare a list of all the relevant issues summarised by using a word or phrase The suggestion here is that you return to that list and add any others that you may have discovered in your research. You may have discovered some issues that you may not have even considered previously.

You may now feel inclined to abandon much of your earlier list but, before you do, try to identify in what directions your research has taken you. Ask: Are there any changes in direction or emphasis? Where has my research taken me that I did not expect?

At this stage, the suggestion is to deal with more general issues, not themes or the formulation of your argument. That comes a little later. At this time try to

determine if the additional issues take you in any different, complementary or supplementary directions which lead you to think about different ways to interpret the question or suggest other issues to include (or even exclude).

- Can I categorise the list into themes?

The next step is to categorise your latest list into themes. This is a very important part of the assignment process. In this sense, categorise means to gather those issues which are similar or related in some way. All that is required is linking those issues which are connected or linked in some way and recording them together.

For example, consider the question: 'Critically evaluate the policy and rhetoric of Australia's post-Second War migration policy from 1945-1998.'

There may be a number of relevant terms you found in your research for this essay. As a list, they may seem daunting because they seem to have no connection. But try to forge some links. You may have written such words or terms as 'assimilation', 'integration', 'multiculturalism', labour market, trade union's attitude, Pauline Hanson, enclaves, language policy, 'make them like us', 'melting pot', 'wealth', 'poverty', industrial relations, labour policy, wages, racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, gender issues, white Australia policy, who benefits - them or us?, selection criteria, qualify and disqualify, access to goods and services, forced to live and work in special areas, working conditions, Snowy Mountain Scheme, educational advantage and disadvantage, implications of policy, values motivating policy, rhetoric in newspapers, equality, Sir Arthur Calwell, refugees, camps for illegal immigrants, legal rights, theories about, - and so on.

The above list is merely a selection but it does show what brainstorming and research can reveal. The task now is to sort them out, to bring together all those terms which are related - and give them a name. To do this identify the *main* terms. In this case, they include (but are not restricted to) the names of the various policies.

So, for example, under the heading *assimilation*. it is possible to bring together terms such as 'make them like us', Sir Arthur Calwell, Snowy Mountain Scheme, 'who benefits - them or us?, working conditions, white Australia policy, values motivating policy.

Much more could be written about this but from your increasingly large list of issues you can derive themes which are really the heading you give a list or related words. Sometimes this will be obvious as you glance at the list; sometimes there will be a word in the list that best summarises the list into a theme; sometimes it might be necessary for you to provide the term which describes what has become a theme. Whatever, you will have developed some themes which will be very helpful in constructing your essay and formulating your argument.

- Does my research necessitate any qualification or amendment to my original argument. If so, what is my argument now?

It is now time to coax yourself to identify your argument. One way to do this is compare your original, tentative argument with the argument that is emerging. So return whence you started and see how your thinking has changed and your understanding of the issues has developed. Can you identify how your thinking has changed or been augmented and in what directions? Can you see how issues which at first seemed irrelevant can now be incorporated into your argument? Any authors, debates, ideas, issues, topics, theories or theorists which you have added will prove very useful in the next task - formulating your argument.

- Have I formulated my argument by translating what I have found into 'so this is what I will argue'?

This question follows-up another posed previously when you were thinking about *your* answer to the question. The task now is to actually do it as an integral part of writing your essay. You have discovered a range of themes, arguments from various authors and issues or topics. It's now time to collate them into your argument.

Although students often find this stage difficult, the step from findings to argument, from discoveries to thesis, is quite methodical and involves two steps.

Step 1. Depending on the question, identify which issue(s), topic(s), theme(s) or perspective(s) from an author is/are the strongest, the most relevant or valid (that is, for which the soundest reasons or explanations can be given). You may wish to rank them in order of importance or validity.

Step 2 Then restate what you have found into argument form. This is what I mean by 'reformulate'. You have undertaken the research, located the issues and views and information and perspectives, that are most relevant. Now, reformulate the most valid or sound, or the most relevant, of what you have discovered by saying: '*This is what I've found, so that's what I'll argue!'*

Consider the question: Critically evaluate the following statement: 'The family as we know it is in decline?'

You evidence might show that while the family is changing it is not necessary becoming unpopular; while the families are more diverse and different from the 1950s and 1960s, there is no evidence of a wholesale breakdown. Your evidence might even support the claim that there are some indicators that the family is adapting remarkably well to fulfil its institutional function. *This is what you have found, so that's what you can argue.*

That is your finding so your argument becomes:

The argument in this essay is that while the family is changing it is not necessary becoming unpopular; while families are more diverse and different from the 1950s and 1960s, there is no evidence of a wholesale breakdown. It will also be argued that there are some signs which indicate that the family is adapting remarkably well to fulfil its institutional function, often to the detriment of individual family members and certain families.

You now have your argument!

Consider the question (although it's really a statment): 'Increasing globalisation and internationalisation have changed Australian society for good and the better'. Critically evaluate.

If your evidence indicates that the changes have been for the good and the better, you argument is just that. So you might formulate it in this way: in this essay it will be argued that the changes caused by globalisation and internationalisation are for the good and the better. Or, this essay argues that the changes caused by globalisation and internationalisation are for the good and the better.

If, as I suspect, you research will show that the results of both are mixed then formulate the argument in that way: It will be argued in this essay that the results of globalisation and internationalisation are mixed.

There are some additional possibilities here. For example, if your research suggests that the benefits and the burdens are unevenly distributed and the overall result exacerbates rather than improves the condition of certain groups, then that could be added to your argument.

Your argument then becomes: In this essay it will be argued that the results of globalisation and internationalisation are mixed so that the benefits and the burdens are unevenly distributed.

- In my planning and statement of my argument in the Introduction have I developed the argument into a fuller statement even more representative of the position I intend to adopt?

In the previous section, the method of proceeding from findings to an argument was outlined. It is ideal if the several sentences which stated the argument can be developed into a statement of about one paragraph (a minimum of about 4-5 sentences and a maximum of 8-10 or a third to half a page). So, the above statement of the argument in the previous question on the family could read as follows with the section in bold being added.

> The argument in this essay is that while the family is changing it is not necessary becoming unpopular; while families are more diverse and different from the 1950s and 1960s, there is no evidence of a wholesale breakdown. It will also be argued that there are some signs which indicate that the family has been used by the state to fulfil its institutional function, often to the detriment of individual family members and certain families. **In this regard, the evidence suggests that recent government policy has created increasing disincentives for women with children to enter or remain in the workforce, thereby continuing the trend for women to work in the unpaid workforce in child care at home. Thus, the evidence presented support the argument of the socialist feminists.**

You can see that even though it is only two additional sentences, the additions amplify and expand the statement of the argument, providing the reader with

more information on your approach to the question. In addition, it introduces a theoretical perspective which, although not specifically a part of the question, is certainly an integral part of any creative answer. Once you have done this it is worth making the following checks by asking two more questions

- Does the argument include a direct and explicit answer to the entire question? Is the proposed answer organised around an argument?

You will recall that your task is to formulate an argument around which to answer your question..Your argument might include relevant debates in the literature, concepts, evidence, statistics, theories and the work of theorists which did not seem relevant when you first began but now do; your research may have disclosed issues which you didn't even think were pertinent when you chose the essay question.

Now, you can see how they are relevant and are an integral part of your essay. The additions are the fruits of your research and thoughtfulness; they contribute to your creative approach, and answer, to the question. Creativity of this kind will be rewarded - but *only* if you have demonstrated that you have answered the question 'head-on', directly, explicitly and specifically.

So, at this time when you are formulating and developing your argument it is appropriate to revisit the question, to return to your earlier notes about the question and the results of your answers to the first series of questions.

If you have ensured that the statement of your argument in your introductory paragraph is directly linked to the question you will have met the requirements. If you're uncertain, try to forge the links between your research and your answer, your question and your argument more tightly. Try inserting some keys words or ideas from the question in the statement of your argument, or demonstrate clearly how your argument answers the question. Occasionally, it will suffice to insert a short footnote (perhaps with references) which makes some qualifications, or explains why your are excluding a marginal topic but demonstrates your understanding of the issue and its (marginal) connection to the question.

- Have I included the contrary and opposing evidence in the statement of my argument around which my answer to the question is organised?

Any contrary or opposing evidence you have located has the potential to augment you argument considerably. As such, it is should be addressed not omitted, engaged not dismissed, and taken seriously not minimised. In this context, it is worth considering inserting it in the statement of your argument. For example, your statement of argument could include your conclusion that certain views are inadequate for one reason or another. The statement might include something like: 'in this essay it will be argued that the evidence presented for x and y are flawed or inadequate ... etc', or 'it will be argued that the views s and t are inferior to views a and b ... etc'.

Even these suggestions may 'show your hand' earlier than you would have preferred, or perhaps they are a stated a little too strongly. Consider the following question: 'There are no such things as social problems only claims

about them. Critically evaluate.' The inclusion of any contrary evidence to the argument around which your essay is organised could include a statement such as: 'The argument in this essay is that, despite their claim and popularity, views a and b do not sufficiently explain the social construction of 'social problems ... etc'

- Have I determined the order and method by which I will present the material so that it advances and augments my argument?

After you have prepared your argument, the next task is to determine the order in which, and the method by which, you intend to present it. This is a very important task, almost as important as the formulation of your argument but more straightforward in some respects because you have already made decisions which will shape the procedure.

There are many issues to decide. For example, once I have decided on my argument, what will I introduce first? Within the word limit, what space should I devote to the arguments in the literature which are most inadequate? Should I mention and critique them individually or do they share sufficiently common ground for them to be addressed together?

Your argument may not be so much about theories but statistical evidence and, as suggested above, it is essential to include any contrary or opposing evidence. Here, too, there are questions. For example, how should I introduce the contrary or opposing evidence? Should I introduce it in the same section of the essay or refute it throughout? How much should I include in the text and how much should I footnote?

Writing essays involves working out the balance between a range of factors and information, and one test for the balance is whether *it maximises or otherwise the evidence in favour of your argument around which your answer is organised.* It is often difficult to assess this, particularly as we are the creators or the essay writers to whom the work is very close. Perhaps discussing the issue with a friend may help.

However, the point about your procedure is that it is the method by which you order the presentation of your argument in order to advance and maximise your answer. The procedure could be the same order as the ranking of your evidence although, in an essay, I tend to refer to the weaker arguments first. But whatever order you use try to ensure that it optimises your answer. The procedure is so critical because it is the link between the question and your answer. It deserves careful consideration.

If you are having difficulty thinking about your procedure, that is, how your essay will proceed, imagine it as a pathway which begins from your statement of argument to your conclusion. Draw a path of some kind and, starting and the top and proceeding downwards, insert an order of all the evidence, issues, the perspectives or theories, along which you want to proceed or the reader to travel with you.

As there is more than one possible path, try ordering the material in different ways. Then ask the question: which pathway best supports, augments and enhances the argument around which my essay is organised.

Sometimes I think of my essay as akin to telling a joke in which I must cover all the details in order that the punch-line makes sense. And just as when I tell a

joke the details *and* the punch line are important, so it is with an essay. If the details of a story line in a joke are incorrect or out of sequence the punch line won't make sense; if the punch line is not stated accurately and fluently, the details are a waste of time. Of course, any writing is not a joke but, nonetheless the ordering of the details, the procedure, on the way to the conclusion, are essential. Overall, in my view, your argument is advanced by reaching a grand crescendo; the procedure is critical because it's the pathway to a climactic end.

- Can I state my procedure, that is, can I state the order in which I will introduce relevant parts of the argument to answer the question?

Now that you have considered your procedure, your sequence, it's time to write it. Usually the procedure occurs after an introductory paragraph and the statement of the argument. It is connected by phrases such as the following.

- The argument begins with an examination of ...
- It is necessary to outline the procedure adopted... etc.
- After analysing the salient point of ..., the examination proceeds to ... etc.
- In order to highlight the argument, the essay begins with ... etc

Or the paragraph may begin in this way. 'There are four main steps in this argument. The first is that ... Secondly ...' and so on.

- Are there some issues I must include? Are there some issues I can exclude? Are there some issues about which I am unsure?

This question provides another opportunity to consider the content rather than the form of your essay. All essays select; in including some material they, of necessity, exclude other material. Now, before you actually write your essay, it is worth spending some time to consider what you have included and excluded and to ask whether the balance optimises your answer to the question.

- Can I state the arguments of others fairly and with due regard to the detail and subtlety of their argument? Can I avoid 'setting up a straw man'?

Sometimes the arguments you use are complex and are difficult to distil and summarise. Another difficulty is ensuring that the arguments you have used are accurate, that they reflect or represent (re-present) the material you are using. In fact, collecting themes and their references, and collating different passages which allude to the same point or position (and the accompanying references) is one way to demonstrate to the reader that you have stated a position as accurately as possible. Your previously prepared index provides an excellent way to do this; the groundwork has been done.

Note that I suggested *references* - the more references for the same point the better because you have demonstrated that an author is saying the same thing on more than one occasion and in different places. If it appears that the author has changed position over time, or is inconsistent in the same article or book, or in other publications, then demonstrate this with references. If there are too many inconsistencies you may decide to reappraise your what you initially thought the author was arguing or claiming.

There are ways to demonstrate that you are aware of other possible interpretations. For example, you may wish to alert the reader that you are aware that there may be some inconsistencies in a particular author's position but that the weight of evidence suggests that their overall position is as you have stated. In order to portray this, you might write: 'Although author x suggests b [references cited], the overall position author x holds seems to be c [cite more references].'

Another option is: While some claim that author x suggests b [references cited], the overall position x holds is c [references cited here and in the proceeding section].

It's now time to write and complete your first draft.

Questions after writing the essay: my checklist

- Is my essay double-spaced typing with a wide margin?

When I was a student I was tempted to use double space if I couldn't achieve the word limit, and space-and-a-half if I had too many words! Double spacing facilitates reading.

- Have I met or exceeded the word length stated in the DSO?

Overall, if you have insufficient words, it may be necessary to undertake more research. Often it will necessitate returning to your notes and resources in order to re-consider how you could include material currently under-utilised or not used at all.

If your draft essay has exceeded the word limit, it may be a sign that more organising and refining of your argument and procedure are required. It may also be necessary to condense your essay. There are many ways to do this including writing less on less important topics, collapsing similar arguments, combining some of the research under one heading or theme, or using the references or footnotes to demonstrate your understanding of the literature and any dissimilarities. Another method of reducing the number of words used will be discussed later in the use of language.

In essay writing, what counts is not so much what you know but what you do, and can do, with what you know; paramount in essay writing is not so much what you have discovered, but how it is arranged, managed and organised.

- Does my essay reflect the thought and research undertaken before I started the first draft?

The following questions have been discussed previously but it's timely to ask them again as a reminder and a check.

- Do I have an Introduction in which my argument and my procedure are stated?

- Is the statement of the argument about a paragraph (5-6 sentences)?
- Does the argument begin: 'In the essay it will be argued that ...? Or 'The argument advanced in this essay is that...' Or equivalent?

- Have I stated the procedure I will use? (For example, have I stated the steps by which I will present my answer organised around my argument?) Or, have I identified (say) four parts or stages to my argument and referred to them in that order throughout the essay?

- Have I used the procedure, stated in the Introduction on the first page, throughout my essay?

- Do I have a conclusion on the last page?

- Have I realised that the entire essay is my conclusion to the assignment and therefore is not a report or a series of findings, or a description? Have I realised that the essay is my conclusion to the entire assignment and should be written as such?

Sometime before the due date it's common to hear someone say: 'I must start my essay'. While they might mean 'I must start the research', it's more likely that they mean that they must start writing their essay. This reveals a common attitude, namely, that the essay writing *is* the essay as if nothing much happens, or should happen, before the writing. So when they say, 'They must begin' they convey the view that the essay writing *is* the sum total of the assignment or, at least, its most important part.

What has been emphasised previously, is that much thought, reflection, time and writing has already occurred before the first draft of the actual essay is written. In this important sense, *the essay is the beginning of the conclusion to the assignment;* the first page of the essay is not the beginning of the assignment but the first page of its culmination.

More is involved here than a change of mind-set, although it may involve a change in the way essay assignments are viewed. The idea that the essay is the end of an assignment has practical consequences because you are answering the question not as someone who is neutral or new to the topic, but as someone who is involved, or has been involved.

In your involvement you have engaged with the research, and you have made decisions about what should be included and excluded. From all the information that you have located you have derived or adduced your argument. In this process you have decided which evidence and research is most cogent, sound and valid, and most adequately supports the argument around which you will answer the question. You will have also used criteria by which you have decided to include and exclude, and to give more weight to some arguments than others. These may be implicit or explicit but they have exerted their influence on you.

All these and many other issues have been considered *before* you write your essay; your essay has been conceived prior to the start of writing. Your actual essay, the writing, is therefore the conclusion, the final part of your answer to the question. As such, it can be written with some authority, not in the sense of the last, absolute and dogmatic statement on the issue, but in the sense of being confident that the research and consideration, the 'weighing-up' of issues, your

planning and the formulation of the argument, comprise your final say about the essay question to the due date.

After the due date you may discovered something that may cause you to alter or modify your argument. However, when starting to write you are concluding your assignment; *your entire essay is the conclusion of the assignment*. So your essay is not a step-by-step account of what you have discovered; it is not a report in the sense that it is an itemised series of findings. It is your overall response to the question based on your research, reading and thinking. It is based on the way you 'weighed-up' the issues by criteria which you understood to be relevant and important. From beginning to end, then, the actual essay is your final word; in its entirety, it's your conclusion to the question, to the assignment.

- Have I answered the question as well as addressed the relevant issues? This is important because submitted essays often mention the relevant issues without adequately and directly organising the issues around an argument.

When reading essays I have noticed that there is a tendency to address ideas which may be relevant to the question rather than answer the question directly by organising the same ideas around an argument. Simply put, an itemised list of ideas does not usually comprise an answer to the question. It is the writer who has the opportunity to forge links between the relevant issues and the question. You are invited to do more than merely mention the relevant issues; you are invited to sort them, arrange them, and organise them around an argument.

For example, consider the question: Were the causes of the *end* of the Cold War merely the reversal of its causes after World War 2?

This question is about, *inter alia* (that is, among other things), the decline of the previously known USSR, the decline of Soviet influence in Europe, and the dismantling of the Soviet satellites and the Berlin Wall. Answering the question by listing these and other relevant issues without drawing them together may amount to a passable essay.

However, I am arguing in this guide that an essay is an argument which brings together all the various strands into a carefully stated argument. More than a list is the hallmark of the sort of essay about which I am discussing. It may include a list but the items are carefully connected under an umbrella which is your argument.

- Have I realised that to describe is not to argue and my answer requires the latter?

This question is similar to the previous one although the emphasis is different. The previous question was about issues by themselves not constituting an argument. In this question, the point being emphasised is that describing a position does not necessarily mean that it is part of argument unless the writer explicitly draws the links between the information being described and the argument.

For example, it may be necessary as part of your answer to discuss the work of a theorist. Merely repeating what the author wrote as accurately as possible - as

important as that is - is insufficient. It is necessary to state how the material about which you are writing is making a point which is part of, and relevant to, your answer which is organised around an argument. The reader cannot be expected to know or guess what particular point you are making, or even why and how the passage is relevant. Forging those links is the writer's responsibility. Merely describing a point of view, or a theory, will *not* make the necessary connections with the question; that is the writer's privilege.

Consider the question about the causes of the end of the Cold War in the previous section. To simply describe the events leading up to the Cold War and its end, perhaps in chronological order, would not answer the question as I'm suggesting. Thus, as important as events undoubtedly are to the answer to such a question, 'to describe' is not the same as 'to argue'.

- Is my written conclusion to the essay a summary of an essay which is rather descriptive and not organised around an argument? If it is, I should start again and use this conclusion as my Introduction and argument.

This question may sound a little strange. However, essays which are not organised around the student's argument, essays which mention issues but do not collate them into an argument, or essays which describe positions rather than use those positions as part of an argument, often use the conclusion (that is, the concluding paragraph) to tie the issues and descriptions to the question.

They are often very excellent summarises which would have been readily reformulated into an argument around which the question may have been answered. My written comment on essays at this stage is often: 'I'm sorry that this sounds so perverse, but this conclusion would have been a very good place for you to begin your essay!'

So, judge for yourself! If you think that such a comment is pertinent to your essay, start again. It is *un*likely that you will require more research; you do have the opportunity to re-formulate your argument and re-organise the material around your argument.

- Does my answer address all parts of the question?

Another reminder. Return to the question in the DSO, and your earlier notes on it, and check to see that every part of the answer is answered directly. Also check that the balance is defensible. In other words, ensure that the amount on any one part or section is justifiably commensurate with the question.

So, if there are three parts to the question ensure that you have answered them all, and that all parts are addressed about evenly. There is some flexibility here depending on your argument but, overall if there are three parts to the question they should receive about the same treatment. Certainly, the last question should not appear to be merely 'tacked on' or a token gesture.

- Have I engaged with the contrary or opposing evidence or views?

This is yet another prompt to memory in order to ensure that you can answer the question in the affirmative. Ask yourself if there is any way you can add any more contrary or opposing views without necessary being sidetracked. Perhaps a footnote or an addition to an existing sentence will suffice.

The following phrases may be useful: 'Although x claims that [and then state the opposing view]' or 'While c holds that (and state the view]' or, 'an opposing view is presented by d'. Such phrases are appropriate, concise and economical ways of engaging with differing views.

You might also try: 'While author e emphasises y, author f offers a dissenting view which discounts the importance of etc.' Other alternatives include, 'In contrast to author x, author a claims that ...' If the author agrees about some issues but not about others, you may try: 'While authors a and b agree about issues y, they disagree about issues r, s, and t ...'

As you are re-reading your essay, and in the editing process, it is timely to ask this question - and others like them - in order to increase your critical engagement with opposing and contrary views.

- Have I cited *every* reference I have used whether in direct quotes or in my own words?

The issue here is straightforward: it is necessary to acknowledge the use of another person's idea. They should be acknowledged irrespective of whether you have quoted directly (using quotation marks) or used your own words to summarise someone else's ideas. If you have paraphrased another person's ideas, definitions, distinctions, evidence, statistics - essentially if it was derived from a source - the reference requires citation. Even if there is only a trace of another person's work, it should be acknowledged by referencing.

Two more points.

1. There are many places to find out how to reference but it is quite straightforward. Using the Harvard system, referencing in the body of your essay is usually by author or authors without initials, the year of publication and the page numbers. In the case of this publication any reference would be as following: (Fopp 1999, pp. 3-19).

   If the author is mentioned in the body of the essay then it is only necessary to insert the year and page number(s) in the brackets after mentioning the author. So: 'Fopp (1998, p. 4) argues that essays are answered optimally by using an argument around which the information is organised and the question answered directly.'

2. If you are in doubt about whether to reference or not it is appropriate to err on the side of caution. It is better to acknowledge if you are unsure than to use ideas without acknowledgment.

   In summary, acknowledging the work of others is essential. In fairness, the use of their work is credited to them. By the way, the issue here is different from the substantiating or supporting your argument with evidence.

Referencing is one way to do that. Here the issue is acknowledging in your essay the contribution of others.

- Have I included every possible reference in order to demonstrate the extent of my research and my understanding of the issues? Or, have I included every possible reference to evidence (empirical or statistical evidence), concepts, theories or models?

The previous question asked if you had recognised the work of others. Acknowledgment by referencing also serves another function in essay writing, namely, to demonstrate the extent of your research and your understanding of the issues. As this is something that you will want to demonstrate convincingly, referencing is not only important in order to recognise the work of others, but to show your own scholarly work.

In my experience some students seem to gain the impression that too much referencing will disadvantage them. It is, of course, better not to use only one book (unless the assignment is a book review or there are expectations which limit the number of references). However, *more* referencing than less usually indicates that the student has compared views and organised material which are indicators of a scholarly approach.

So, any reference to definitions, distinctions, evidence, opinions and perspectives, statistics, technical language of jargon, theories, or views which are derived from others - no matter how indirectly - should be referenced not only to be fair to your source but in order to demonstrate your scholarly approach, the extent of your research, and your ability to handle and organise material around an argument which is your answer to the question.

- Have I *substantiated* every claim?

It is necessary to support every claim you have made. Others words which amplify this point are: adduce evidence for, corroborate, collaborate, support, substantiate, obtain evidence which attests to, every claim you make.

By 'every claim you make' I include every piece of evidence from your research, every link forged in the essay, every point you want to make, every conclusion you make (no matter how small).

There are several ways to do this. One is by referencing (see above). Another is by providing or adducing reasons for your claims. This involves carefully explaining how the evidence supports the claims you are making. It involves carefully making the connections between the evidence and the point you are making or how you are using that evidence

This is an important part of *your* answer. It is, in part, what makes it unique. The evidence is usually from someone else, but the argument, the procedure, the way the essay is weaved together, and how and for what purpose the evidence is used, are yours.

So, an essay has references which recognise the contribution of others. Ideally, your understanding of the relevant literature will be comprehensively

demonstrated. However, there is also your contribution to the essay which is quite unique. This involves *your* argument, procedure, content, conclusion and, significantly, how you use the evidence to substantiate and defend your claims and make connections. These are your words. They are not just 'padding'.

- Have I used paragraphs (5-6 sentences)?

Paragraphs vary in sizes but they are intended to be sentences related to a particular topic. Overly long paragraphs do not facilitate reading and understanding, and shorter paragraphs are not conducive to the flow and continuity required of answers organised around an argument.

Thus, paragraphs of 5-6 sentences, or two paragraphs a page, is a good rule of thumb. It is not an iron-clad rule though, so don't be too worried if a paragraph is a little longer. In this case, you might ask: are there more than two distinct topics in this paragraph? If there are, two paragraphs would be possible.

- Have I have avoided 1-2 sentences as paragraphs?

This question follows from the last. Several sentences are not really paragraphs; they tend to make the essay unnecessarily abrupt and, as indicated above, are not conducive to the flow and continuity required of an answer organised around an argument. If you do have 1-2 sentences used as paragraphs in your draft, more planning may be required with some time spent making the necessary links between your paragraphs. Alternatively, you may be able to connect the offending sentences into the previous or next paragraphs.

- Have I checked to see that I have not used dot points or notes in my essay?

Like 1-2 sentences used as paragraphs, dot-points tend to make essays unnecessarily abrupt and are not conducive to the flow and continuity required of an answer organised around an argument. Used sparingly, they can contribute to the economical use of words but usually they are not necessary in essay writing (although they are effective in report writing). In my view, they are best avoided.

- Are there obvious links between each *sentence* and each *paragraph*?

Continuity is the hallmark of a good essay. To ensure that there are obvious links between each sentence and between each paragraphs try some of the following.

- Read each sentence aloud asking yourself, 'What are the links with the previous sentences and are they clear?'

- Ask: 'Can I demonstrate the links?' What evidence can I see for the links between sentences and paragraphs (for example, common words, or themes)?

- Have I used introductory or joining phrases which facilitate the continuity of ideas to begin the sentence (for example, 'As such...'; 'Consequently, ...';

'However, while ....'; 'In this context...'; Irrespective of ...'; 'If ... then ...'; 'Although ...'). It is unnecessary to use such sentences all the time but they facilitate the forging of links.

One of advantages of organising your answer to the question around an argument is that the argument itself imposes a flow, a sense of connection, and the continuity required of a good essay. However, even if you have a sound argument it is a good idea to check the links between every sentence and every paragraph.

- Are there obvious links between each *paragraph* and the *question*?

This is somewhat of a reminder but in the editing process it is worth checking to ascertain if you achieved in your first draft all the connections you intended. My experience of writing suggests that the first draft does not usually meet my own expectations, let alone something as complex as a weaving my argument into the body of the essay.

In some places I may have emphasised the argument too much. In other words, I might have 'gone over the top' while in other places the connections are missing, insufficiently emphasised, unclear or lacking the subtlety I intended. Sometimes, the first draft reveals the need for a modification of the argument or augmenting it in some way.

The point here is that the first draft will reveal the places where the essay does not do what you intended, and the second draft provides the opportunity to address any inadequacies, and forge the links between your answer and the question even more.

- Have I checked to see that there are no run-on sentences (when two sentences which should be separate, are strung together)?

This last sentence, without the brackets, would be a run-on sentence. They arise, I suspect, because there is an increasing tendency to write as we talk, that is, increasingly conversational language is used in essay writing. A run-on sentence is usually two sentences ungrammatically strung together into one.

It is true that grammar and syntax are changing and that while some readers may judge a sentence as ungrammatical, others may consider it as an infelicity of style, and others may not be concerned. However, anything which undermines clarity is best avoided. Thus, when grammar intrudes so that you are not 'getting your message across', it is counter-productive.

In my view, run-on sentences can come into this category. The use of the word 'however' in the middle of a sentence will usually indicate a run-on sentence: 'It was a stifling hot summer night however we were in air-conditioned comfort.' Run-on sentences are easily rectified either by joining the two sentences with 'but' or 'while' or 'yet' or their equivalent, or constructing two distinct sentences..

- Have I checked to see that I have completed all the sentences (that is, there are no sentence fragments)?

A sentences fragment means that the sentences is incomplete; the idea(s) or words required for a grammatical sentence, are yet to be included. They are easily identified if you read your essay out loud as if you were reading it for a presentation of some kind.

- Have I checked to see that my spelling is correct.

Spell-checking programs on computers are great aids but they can miss words which are spelt correctly but are inappropriate. For example, if your typing has led you to confuse 'there' with 'their', or 'two' and 'too', it will remain undetected. So, there is no substitute for a very careful reading.

Try reading several times with a break between. Often the longer the break between readings the better because time decreases the likelihood of the mind automatically correcting any mistakes without really seeing them.

- Have I checked to see that I have used apostrophe's correctly?

This is a common problem. Apostrophe's are used for possession (eg., the author's view) and in contractions (such as, when 'it is raining' becomes 'it's raining'). Incidentally, when used for possession, 'its' does not have an apostrophe (for example, speaking of an ant, 'its body was smaller than the crumb it carried').

- Have I quoted exactly as in the reading from which it was obtained? Have I italicised any quote (when I shouldn't have done), or put it in a different line-spacing from the original? If unsure, have I checked the original?

Direct quotations indicate where you have used an author's work directly. Unless the quote is over three lines (which should be indented) the reader will know it's a direct quote by the quotations marks. Single quotations marks (') are generally used nowadays; double quotations marks (") are used for quotations within a quote.

As the quotation is someone's work it should be quoted *exactly* as in your source. So, there should be no italicised word(s) unless in the original. If you do want to emphasise some part of the quotation, italicise the word or words required and then insert 'emphasis added' after the quotations in square brackets, that is [emphasis added].

If it is necessary to change the tense this is conveyed simply type the new word in square brackets. If there is a mistake in the original (perhaps a spelling mistake) or antiquated and inappropriate language (such as sexist language) this can be quoted directly with the word 'sic' in square brackets after the offending word, that is, [sic].

- Have I ensured that all direct quotations three lines or over are indented?

As indicated above, words over three lines are usually indented at the left margin. This simply means writing or typing the quotations about a centimetre inward (toward the right) from the normal left hand margin.

- Have I used the language to state clearly what I wanted to get across? Is my use of English commensurate with my intention of 'getting my message across.'

As you will have gathered, I regard essays as a creative works often involving very complicated concepts, empirical evidence, perspectives and theories. In order to accurately reflect what you are trying to communicate it is essential that the language you use is equal to the task.

Overall, the language of an essay should be simple without being simplistic. Ideally, the language will not be circular, or unnecessarily repetitive, or wordy. Clumsy and awkward sentences which could easily be simplified will be avoided, and the positions of other authors will be stated in the strongest possible terms (even when criticising them). Ideally, the use of every word will be 'weighed up' and every sentence considered and re-considered. The use of appropriate technical terms (sometimes known as 'jargon') is one indicator the language is commensurate with the task.

- Have I used the language to the full.

Essays which are written with flair and balance are a joy to read. When arguments are nicely juxtaposed (set side by side), when the language used to arbitrate between different perspectives is precise and concise, when ideas and sentences are balanced (perhaps using semi-colons), when language is vivid (without being exaggerated), when the language used simply flows from one thought and word to another, when language is appropriately colourful and metaphorical (in parts), then reading essays is like reading a good novel or a carefully constructed poem.

I have avoided using the word 'don't' in this guide; such peremptory words as 'should' and 'don't' are not only unnecessary, they convey the wrong messages about creativity in essay writing.

But when it comes to written expression in essay writing, I suggest you consider doing what I say rather than what I do! Don't forget/remember:

- that sentences can be written in different ways and with different word orders;

- that metaphors are 'part and parcel' of all language and, in moderation, can be used and explored when writing essays;

- any enjoyment you derived when you have studied language and literature;

- the poetry or stories you have read, the rhyme and rhythm of language and thought, which were captivating, not in the sense of being captive but in the sense of triggering deeper thoughts and feelings, and which were winsome, not in the sense of winning some (and losing some!), but in the sense of being drawn, charmed and delighted.

Be encouraged to use the language to the full.

- Have I avoided colloquial and conversational (such as 'getting my message across').

In colloquial language we use sayings of which most native speakers are aware. I've used them in the commentary. If you do use them in an essay, they are most appropriately put in quotations marks.

Conversational language is that which we use everyday. In this language we augment our words with body language, inflections in the voice, and with variations in pitch and volume which add to the communication. Noteworthy is the obvious fact that when writing an essay we do not have these additional methods of 'getting our message across'.

Another aspect of everyday language is that it is more wordy, or can be more wordy. If the same method is adopted in an essay, the sentences are often clumsy, convoluted and cumbersome.

Given that we have always used conversational language, it is not surprising that there is a temptation to use it in essay writing. However, without the gestures of body and the variations of voice, and with the increased probability of wordiness, it is best avoided. Try to develop your own style of clear, concise, plain and precise writing.

- Have I avoided unnecessary words? Have I edited my essay in order to delete all unnecessary words.

Even if aware of the problem of colloquial and conversation language, we sometimes 'slip-up'. To identify and delete the superfluous words requires very careful and task-orientated reading. The following provide some example of the changes that can made for the better during the editing process. The second sentence or phrase is the clearer, edited and shorter version of the first; the underlining indicates the part of the sentence or phrase which has been modified.

- The living conditions <u>in which people live</u> - The living conditions <u>of people</u>

- <u>Looking at the author's</u> definition it excludes - The author's definition <u>excludes</u>

- Is it possible to understand another person <u>whose perspective is different from mine</u>? - Is it possible to understand another person from <u>my</u> perspective?

- In a nutshell, the information about the number of words and the proportion of marks for essays <u>in a particular subject which are contained in the DSO</u> provides a good indicator of the amount and quality of work expected - In a nutshell, the information <u>in the DSO</u> about the number of words and the proportion of marks for essays provides a good indicator of the amount and quality of work expected.

- Nonetheless, it is assumed that the student knows, for example, that the research should be limited to those <u>on the list</u> - Nonetheless, it is assumed

that the student knows, for example, that the research should be limited to those listed.

- In summary, there may be all sorts of information and expectations about your essay questions which is invaluable in the DSO. - In summary, the DSO may contain all sorts of information and expectations about your essay questions which is invaluable.

- Journals were often not available. Journals were often unavailable.

- Let's say the question is... - Consider the question...

- The next thing to do ... - The next task...

- Overall if you do not have sufficient words to complete your essay ...- Overall, if you have insufficient words to complete your essay ...

- On what grounds, for what reasons, do we decide that we should be respectful rather than disrespectful of other cultures? - On what grounds, for what reasons, should we respect rather than disrespect other cultures?

- There may be a number of relevant terms you may have come across in researching for this essay. -There may be a number of relevant terms you found in your research.

- There are many ways to do this including collapsing arguments that are very similar ... - There are many ways to do this including collapsing similar arguments .

- Have I checked to see that I have not used one or two sentences as paragraphs? - Have I avoided one and two sentence paragraphs?

There are many ways to improve the clarity of written work. However, the above are rather poor examples but they are common. The reason I know is that most of them came from my own writing; I saved them as I wrote! I'm suggesting that the second sentences are clearer and shorter than the first.

- Does my essay have the correct balance between clarity about my argument and procedure throughout, on the one hand, and being too wordy, on the other?

I have emphasised the necessity of clarity about the argument around which essays are organised. Occasionally students comment that the writing of the argument on the first page, the statement of procedure, and all the connecting sentences, are superfluous 'padding'. They comment that what they are writing is too much of themselves.

Provided that personal pronouns are not over-used - and they can easily be avoided altogether - there is no problem or dilemma here. The point is that all the sentences which might seem to be padding are 'part and parcel' of your argument. They are integral to your essay because they help integrate it; they assist in informing the reader about how you intend to answer the question and,

as you use words to link the parts of your answer together, they provide the clues to the preceding and proceeding parts of your essay. Thus, they contribute to its continuity.

In addition, because your essay is organised around an argument the words that are regarded as 'padding' often enable the other information used in the essay to be handled more concisely and economically. Further, because the words sometimes regarded as 'padding' are linking parts of your answer together they bring the other information into sharper focus. Consequently, the reader is more confident about the point you are making and the information your are using to substantiate it.

Nevertheless, there is a balance which optimises the clarity and minimises any 'wordiness'. The point in the above question is to encourage you to be alert to both and the need for a balance.

- Have I avoided the use of the word 'you' when directed at the reader?

Occasionally, students use the word 'you' in an essay: 'You can demonstrate this by referring to an example'. Taken literally, it refers to the reader even if it is meant in the plural. It is best avoided, particularly as the entire essay is addressed to the reader.

- Have I used the same word repeatedly? If so, is there a more accurate alternative?

For example, rather than use repeatedly the phrase 'the authors state' it may be more accurate to say 'the authors argue, reject, agree, disagree, dissent, maintain, claim, assert, emphasise, highlight' or whatever is the most appropriate, concise and precise word.

- Have I ensured that I have checked the dictionary whenever I have used a word I have not previously used and the meaning of which I am unsure? Am I absolutely certain about the accuracy and precision of the vocabulary I have used (both the technical or disciplinary language, and the non-technical)?

Spell-check programs are excellent but it is worth checking your spelling as you edit your essay. Use a dictionary whenever in doubt.

- Have I used the same tense throughout my essay?

For example, have I written one or other but not both of the following throughout the essay: Marx *stated* that or *states* that? I usually use *past* tense when referring to authors; other authors use the present. Consistency is the important issue.

- Does my essay sound straight-forward, even simple, when I read it?

Essays answer a question. Sometimes, after reading a student's essay I am struck with what I have remembered. The essay seemed straightforward and even simple. When I re-read it, I realise that it has been well researched, rigorously

organised and concisely written around a clearly stated and defended argument. Combined, this has contributed to a memorable essay even if my initial impression was that it was relatively simple.

So, if issues have not been trivialised, if your essay reads well and is simple, it may be a very good sign; it may indicate that you have prepared and written a very good essay.

After completing the essay

- Have I read and edited the essay again?

In my view, editing is one of the most under-rated tasks in any form of writing. It is a time-consuming task but the longer the period of time between writing and editing the fresher the approach. Essays written well before the due date allow the time for the editing required. Also try to ask someone else to read your essay, and include someone who is not undertaking the subject. Three or four attempts at editing is optimal particularly for a longer essay (e.g., over 2,500 words). This would be insufficient for an even longer essay or thesis.

- Have I checked to see if I've addressed the question and presented my essay in such a way that the reader will readily understand my answer?

Here are few more questions will suffice! Have I made my answer to the question so clear that the reader does not have to do what I should have done? In other words, is my answer and argument obvious? Have I made the links between various parts of the argument clear? Have a I drawn and stated the conclusions? Have I read the answer at least twice since finishing the essay and edited my work thoroughly? Have I ensured that there are no missing or superfluous words?

- Do I have a conclusion on the last page?

The conclusion presents the opportunity to demonstrate how you have answered the question, the link between the question and the argument as your answer, and your findings. The conclusion may include a precis of the evidence which you have adduced, the material which justified your conclusions, and a brief summary of your argument.

Ideally, conclusions might also contain a brief statement of any implications of your research, or tangents which were not relevant to the argument which might be very interesting in the context of the issues discussed. Thus, the conclusion might foreshadow other issues of research or interest. However, this discussion is brief and does not swamp the overall purpose of the conclusion noted above.

- When I've finished can I say: 'It's not so much what I have learnt that makes this essay a good one; it's what I've done with my findings that count?

This might sound a bit strange. However if, as I've argued, your argument is most important, then the formulation and development of the argument throughout the essay is central to your answer. So, it might be that you have

learnt a great deal but how you have used that information to construct your argument is most important.

- Have I included the bibliography?

Bibliographies are important because they show the extent of your research and whether you have met the expectations stated in the DSO. Clearly, the longer the essay the more items the reader could expect to find in the bibliography.

- Several more obvious questions worth adding to the checklist include the following.

  - Are *all* the pages stapled together?
  - Have I included a title page with my name, seminar leader, day and time of the seminar and the due data?
  - Have I resisted the temptation to insert my essay into a plastic folder? This is a particular aversion of mine!
  - Have I submitted the essay to the appropriate person and in the correct place?
  - Do I have a receipt of my submission?
  - Have I printed a spare copy or photo-copied my essay?

If you've done all the above, you can look forward to a good result!!!