



Essays

What is an essay?

The purpose of an academic essay is to present your **point of view**, sometimes known as a **position** or **argument**, on a particular topic. This means that an academic essay:

- is a persuasive piece of writing that analyses a topic and persuades a reader that the point of view presented is correct, and
- is developed, explained and supported using evidence from experts based on reliable and academic sources which are all acknowledged using a referencing system.

What does your lecturer expect?

Lecturers and assessors of your essay will have particular expectations for each assignment so **read the task requirements** carefully. However, generally all essays require you to:

- **develop** a point of view in relation to a topic through research and thought;
- **persuade** your reader that the point of view you have developed is well supported by the ideas and information you present;
- **construct** your thoughts, as expressed in your writing, based on a number of reliable (academic or scholarly) sources of information, ideas and theories;
- always **acknowledge** the sources when you use them by using a referencing system;
- **structure** your essay appropriately according to the point of view you have taken, and
- **write** your paragraphs and sentences clearly in a formal and objective style. Lecturers are looking for cohesive writing where the ideas flow smoothly and logically.

What type of thinking is needed?

You need to **think broadly** to help you to see the big picture by:

- considering different points of view on the topic
- brainstorming and arranging possibilities into a mind map

You need to **think critically** about what you read by:

- evaluating the reliability of the sources you use
- examining the arguments provided in detail
- asking critical questions

Some examples of critical questions could be: 'Are there any gaps in the logic of the writer?' 'Are there other elements of the argument which may be more important?' Review the link below for more tips on thinking critically.

You need to **think analytically** to connect the evidence you have directly to the question or the task.

Useful points to remember are:

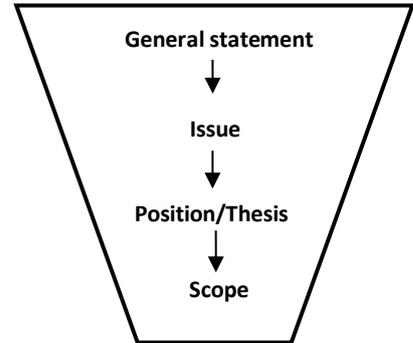
- avoid just stating the evidence; explain how it is relevant or significant to the question, and
- plan, read and take notes thinking this way so avoid leaving it until you begin to write your first draft.

What does an essay look like?

Most essays will be written in full paragraphs without headings, dot points or any visual elements (tables, graphs). Your lecturer however may have particular expectations for each assignment so **read the task requirements** carefully. A common structure is represented below:

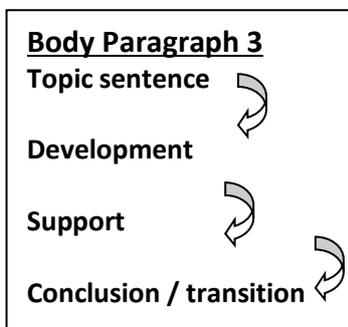
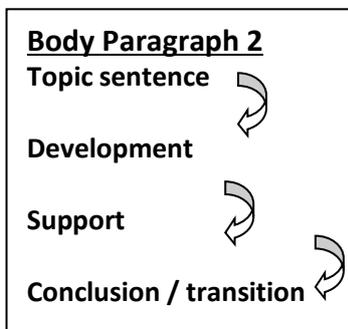
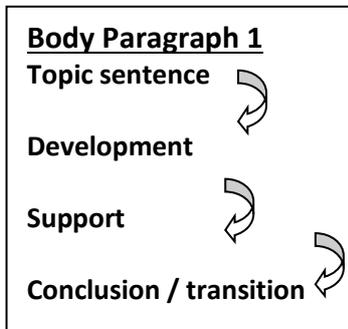
The Introduction

- The introduction is approximately 10% of the total word count.
- It goes from broad to specific focus:
 - a general statement to establish the context
 - the issue / area of focus
 - your position (answer to the essay question)
 - the scope of the essay (the main ideas you will focus on)



The Body Paragraphs

There are usually 2 or more body paragraphs depending on your word limit and your scope.



What is a body paragraph?

A paragraph explains and supports your position/answer to the essay question. Organise your body paragraphs in the same order as the scope in your introduction.

Topic sentence

A topic sentence lets the reader know what the focus of the paragraph is. It should match the scope mentioned in the introduction.

Development

Development is where you explain / expand on the idea presented in the topic sentence.

Support

Support can come in the form of examples / theories / studies / expert opinions relevant to your thesis statement and the scope. Remember to reference ideas which are not your own.

Conclusive/transition statement

This sentence concludes the paragraph and/or indicates that a new focus point is in the next paragraph.

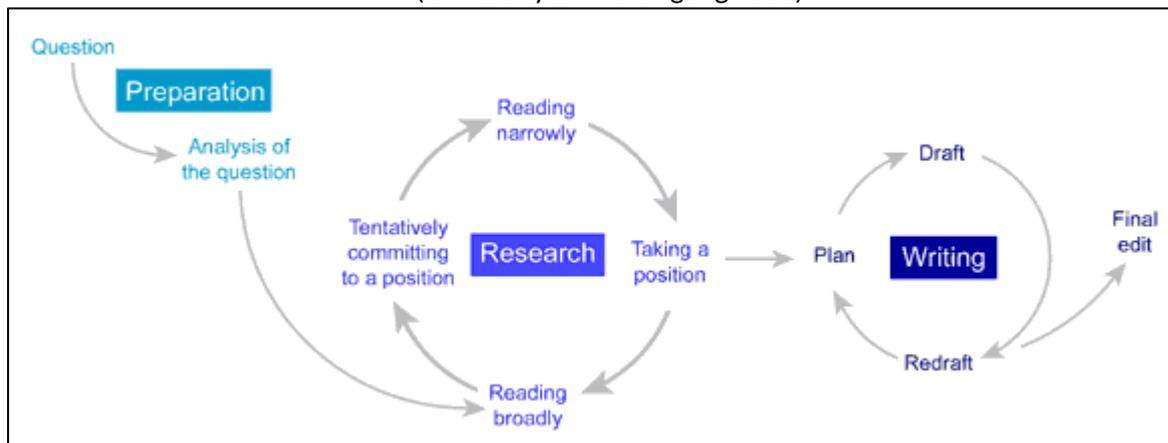
The Conclusion

- A brief summary of your essay (approximately 10% of the total word count)
- Restates the thesis and scope of the essay using different words to avoid repetition
- Does not include new information/ideas
- Can include a conclusive statement to show your position and thoughts in relation to the broader topic

How do you plan, prepare and write an essay?

To demonstrate a consistent point of view and be persuasive, you need to categorise your ideas carefully. This takes *a lot of thought* and *analysis* and therefore, *time*. Consider the following steps in relation to the diagram below. You will notice that you will rarely cover what is required for each step in one go. Most commonly, you will need to revisit steps in the process as you think, digest, analyse and organise the point of view you wish to argue.

Steps in planning, preparing and writing an academic essay (University of Wollongong 2000)



*See the useful links at the bottom of this resource for more details on any of these stages

Analyse the question

Be sure you understand what the task words are (what you are being asked to do) and what the topic words are (the focus of the information). This is vital to make sure you stay on track. Also check the word count so you are able to make a 'guesstimate' or rough plan for the essay. Knowing the word limit will also serve as a guide for the number of sources you will need.

Read broadly

You may need to begin with some general reading to familiarise yourself with the issues being discussed. This will help you to gain an overall understanding of the points of view currently being discussed.

Tentatively commit to a position

Decide on a point of view at this stage and keep it in mind when looking for more details. This point of view may change or alter slightly after you have read more but it will allow you to read 'actively' as you find more details.

Reading narrowly for specific detail

Keeping your tentative position AND the question in mind, start reading for more detail. Remember if you take notes, you should be clear about why you are recording this information. A useful question can be "In which section of my essay will I use this information?" or "What point of my argument will this evidence support?"

Make a specific plan

Once you have read specifically and taken notes, make a more definite plan. This is where you will categorise your information into themes so that each paragraph argues one point to support your overall point of view, and all of the information relevant to that point is in the same paragraph. To do this you need to be clear about your position. Dot points can be useful here as you are only organising the information. You may notice that there are some gaps in your evidence, so you may need to go back and do some more reading and note-taking.

Write a draft

This does not need to be perfect so just get started by focusing on the main ideas you want to express. You can look at refining the sentences after when you edit before the final version. At this stage, focus on the clarity of your expression as it is your responsibility to ensure your lecturer can easily understand and follow your argument.

Revise and edit

Look at your first draft with fresh eyes! Plan your time so you revise your first draft at least a day after you have written it. This will make it easier to detect any errors or unclear sentences. Systematically check that you have discussed one idea per paragraph and have expressed your ideas clearly. Edit your work carefully and make some notes before you complete your final version.

Complete the final version

From the notes you have made during your revision, write the final version and then proofread it before submitting the assignment.

References

University of Wollongong 2000, *Essay Writing*, Uni Learning, UOW, viewed 18 December 2014, <<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/1b.html>>.