**2018/19**

**Essay-writing**

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**preparation for higher education**

**academic skills**

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**1. What is an essay?**

Essays are the most commonly used form of assessment in higher education. In the arts, humanities and social sciences, essays are especially important and may, in some circumstances, be the only way the work of a student is assessed. Therefore, having good essay-writing skills is essential if you want to be a successful student at university or on an HN course at college.

An essay is a piece of writing, which responds to and seeks to answer a specific question. A typical first year university essay is 1,200-1,500 words in length; in some subjects (e.g. Scottish Literature) the length may be up to 2,500. Most essays are assessed and contribute towards your final mark.

Each university and department will have its own preferences regarding the presentation of essays and referencing systems. You should find out about that before you start writing.

For general information on essay-writing see the **Useful links** section at the end of this document.

**2. Essay questions**

The process of writing an essay starts with understanding the question that you have been asked to answer. Here are some examples of essay questions:

* To what extent are nations and states constructed? (Modern History).
* Evaluate the claim that social media makes us more social (Sociology).
* Desire is more often a source of despair than a source of pleasure in Early Modern literature. Discuss with reference to two works on the module (Early Modern Literature).
* To what extent was the French Revolution was one single coherent event from 1789 to 1799 rather than several parallel revolutionary movements? (History).
* Did those involved in the Baltic crusades intend to convert the so-called ‘pagans’ of these regions? (The Crusades and Medieval Society).
* Is it justified that developmental psychologists are more interested in qualitative change than quantitative change? (Psychology).
* Can there be a viable state without nationalism? If so, why; if not, why not? (International Relations).

The first thing to do is deconstruct the question. This should be done before starting on detailed background reading and note-taking.Academic staff, when setting essay questions, generally adhere to a set formula containing these three key elements:

* Subject.
* Focus.
* Command Words.

Deconstructing a question means identifying the subject, focus and command words it contains.

**Subject**

This relates to the general topic or theme of the course. The subject might not be explicitly obvious in the wording of the question. So, be sure to think through what the question is about and which part of the course it relates to.

**Focus**

This is the crucial part. You must be clear what the focus of the question is, otherwise, you could end up answering another one. For example, what is the focus here? People? Languages? Belief systems?

* People who speak radically different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently. Discuss with reference to at least two different recommended readings (Social Anthropology).

The focus may be obvious, but it may also be implicit and, therefore, you need to look carefully at the question before feeling confident enough that you have understood what it is really asking.

**Command Words**

It is important that you understand exactly what the command words used in essay questions mean. The most typical command words are:

* Compare.
* Contrast.
* Describe.
* Examine.

Below is a list of many more command words that you may find in essay questions, alongside a brief explanation of their meaning.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Account (for) | Explain. Make clear or intelligible; illustrate the meaning of. |
| Analyse | is the ability to break a problem down into manageable parts and select relevant or valid information |
| Appraise | Evaluate. Make a judgement based on evidence and criteria. |
| Assess | To weigh-up or judge to what extent conditions are fulfilled. |
| Categorise | Group phenomena together using some standard. |
| Comment | Brief expression of opinion. |
| Compare | Examine the similarities and differences between two of more objects, ideas or processes. |
| Consider | Think over; ponder on; reflect on, perhaps by drawing upon theory to help the process. |
| Contrast | Point out differences between. |
| Criticise/Critically Analyse | Point out defects; pass judgements; show errors. |
| Define | Show clearly the outlines of; give the precise meaning. (In many places the word ‘list’ could be used in place of ‘define’). |
| Describe | A detailed account. |
| Differentiate | Recognise differences between. |
| Discuss | Argue the case for and against. Detailed writing required. |
| Distinguish (between) | Make clear the differences between one ‘thing’ and another. |
| Evaluate | Make a judgement based on evidence and criteria. |
| Examine | Scrutinise; investigate; or inspect carefully. |
| Explain | Make clear or intelligible; illustrate the meaning of. |
| Illustrate | Make clear; explain by means of examples. |
| Indicate | Show; point out; make known; reveal. |
| Interpret | Using your own expertise, explain the meaning of; or assign significance to. |
| Judge | HE logo bwGive an opinion or decision based on evidence. |
| Justify | Show to be true, right or reasonable; give reason to. |
| Outline | Brief general description or summary without detail. |
| Present | Declare plainly or in detail. |
| Prove | To confirm or verify; establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence. |
| Reflect | Think over; ponder on; consider; perhaps by drawing upon theory to help the process. |
| Relate | Tell a story, describe. |
| Show | Reveal; disclose; reveal by logical sequence. |
| State | Declare plainly or in detail. |
| Suggest | Propose ideas, or solutions, or reasons. |
| Summarise | Make a brief statement of the main points. |
| Trace | Explain stage by stage. |
| Verify | Show to be true. |

**3. Essay writing**

An essay contains three main parts:

* Introduction
* Body
* Conclusion

It can be compared to a sandwich or, more imaginatively, a sweetie paper |>( )<| However you imagine it, the basic idea remains the same: that an essay is composed of three core sections, with the juicy bit in the middle.

**The introduction**

The introduction to an essay is very important. An introduction acts as a guide to your reader; it is like a map. After reading your introduction, the reader should have a good idea about what they are going to find in your essay. Listed below are some tips for writing an introduction:

* Do not make claims in the introduction that you cannot back up in the body of the essay and make sure you do everything you say you are going to do.
* Write the introduction after you have written the essay. In this way you will have some idea of what you are introducing! Some students start with a ‘working’ introduction that gets ditched once the essay has been written and a better introduction can be substituted.
* Don’t be timid. Introductions which state, ‘This essay will attempt to explain’, give the impression you don’t know what you are writing about. Immediately the reader is sceptical of your work.
* Two tips to get you started writing an introduction: i) summarise each paragraph of your essay into one sentence. String the sentences together and you have a start. Or, ii) take your essay plan and string it together with words. However, beware: introductions which read ‘This essay will first. . . Then it will . . . Finally it will show that . . .’ may lack subtlety and flair.
* Look at introductions to research papers in your subject area to gain an impression of the style used.

**The body**

A simple paragraph is made up of three parts:

* Idea or concept is presented.
* Idea or concept is developed with evidence presented to support idea.
* Summing up and link to next paragraph or section.

Paragraphs should not be stand-alone bits of information. To check whether your paragraphs are working, ask yourself at the end of the paragraph:

* So what?
* How does this information help me answer the question?
* Have I made it clear how this information relates to the question?

**The conclusion**

The conclusion is a summing up of the essay. Never be tempted to add a new idea in the conclusion. It is more than a one-sentence summing up. It may well be a quarter or third of your essay. Exactly what is in your conclusion depends on the nature of  
the question.

**Other tips**

Here are some additional tips to help you produce well written work:

* You should remind yourself that practice makes perfect and that if you understand something in your head; it can take a few attempts before you communicate this in writing effectively in the appropriate academic style.
* Make good use of a thesaurus or scientific dictionary. You do not have to buy them; you can use the thesaurus on Word or find one online. Your library will also have some that you can borrow.
* Sometimes, it may be useful to write your work in the way that you might say it and then go over each passage you write replacing informal language with academic words. For example, you can replace “I noticed that” with “it was observed that”.
* You should avoid the use of “I” in your academic work. Instead of writing, “In this report I will discuss” try “this report discusses” and so on.
* Conceptual categories are useful for organising the content of your work. Conceptual categories are found in many places where things have to be organised; e.g. in a music shop music is arranged into genres and in your video shop, films are arranged into drama, horror sci-fi etc. so that you can find what you’re looking for quickly. Your written work can also be arranged into categories, paragraph by paragraph, and presented in a logical order so that a reader can understand your work easily.
* Always consider the reader! Think of how you would understand your writing if you were reading it for the first time, or even if you knew nothing about the subject. One way communication can be more difficult than you think: just think about a favourite food recipe that you make without thinking about it, and then try to describe it to someone who has never cooked it before. If you make your work clear, concise and easy to understand, this may also help towards better grades!

With perseverance, you will become a confident academic communicator and will take these skills with you from university to the workplace. Remember, help is always at hand, and your university has learning support for academic skills.

Effective Learning Advisers are in place at your university to help you develop your skills. You can attend workshops, one to one sessions and lectures on a range of areas, for example, note taking, essay and report writing, presentations and effective reading.

**4. Useful links**

Have a look at the following university student learning service web pages for more information about essay writing:

[University of Edinburgh](http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergraduate/student-life/academic/support)

[Edinburgh Napier University](http://www.napier.ac.uk/study-with-us/undergraduate/student-support)

[Heriot-Watt University](https://www.hw.ac.uk/is/skills-development/study-support.htm)

[Queen Margaret University](http://www.qmu.ac.uk/ELS/)

[University of Dundee](https://www.dundee.ac.uk/academic-skills/)

[Abertay University](https://www.abertay.ac.uk/student-life/support-and-services/learner-development/)

[University of St Andrews](https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/students/advice/academic/)

[University of Stirling](https://www.stir.ac.uk/campus-life/learning-support/student-learning-services/)