

Writing essays

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For further information and the full range of study guides go to: <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn> An extended version of this study guide is also available from this site.

What is an essay?

An essay (one of the most common types of assignment at university) is a piece of academic writing generally between 500 and 5000 words long. The word 'essay' originally meant a first attempt or practice, which perhaps suggests some kind of provisional exploration. Essays are an intellectual exploration of a topic, involving looking at different arguments and evidence and developing the writer's perspective.

An essay is more 'discursive' than, say, a report – i.e. the points are developed in more depth and the language may be a little less concise. Typically, it will consist of a number of paragraphs that are not separated by subheadings or broken up by bullet points (unlike in a report). However, some lecturers may allow or encourage subdivisions and headings, as this can help both the writer and the reader with the structure of the content. In that case, an essay may begin to look more like the preferred format of some journal articles.

Please note that different courses and programmes at the Plymouth University have different expectations and assessment criteria regarding the content and structure of essays. Always consult your course handbook and/or the module leader if you are unsure about any points of style or presentation of your essay.

Why write an essay?

The purpose of writing an academic essay is to provide written evidence of your ability to research a topic, weigh arguments, organise your thoughts, express these thoughts in a logical, coherent and critical manner, and reach conclusions which follow from the evidence and the arguments you put forward. There will be a constraint on the number of words you can use so, inevitably, you need to be selective about content.

How to research, plan and write an essay - a 10-step process

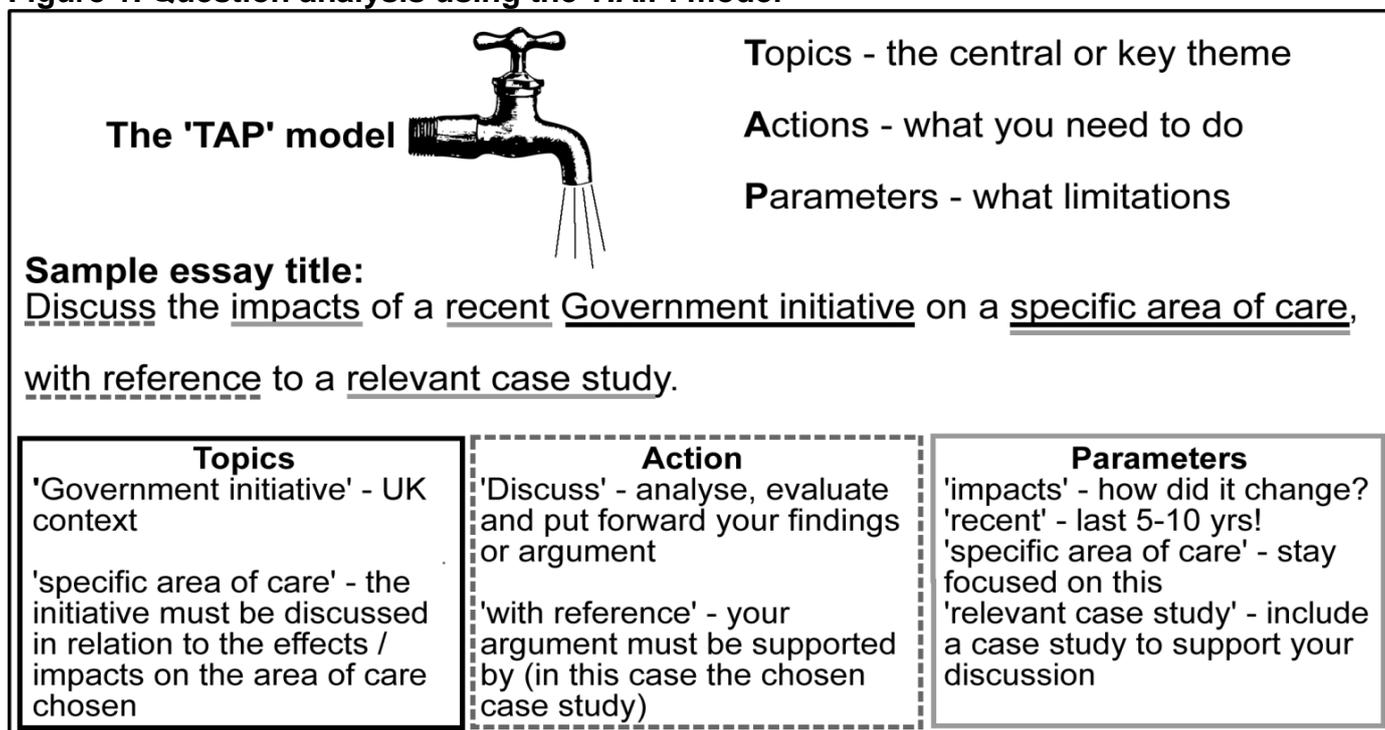
Writing an essay, no matter what the topic, is a complex process; it requires a lot of practice, and unfortunately no formula can guarantee good written work. There is no right or wrong way of approaching an essay; however there are certain tasks that should help you produce a good piece of work.

Step 1: Interpret the question and identify the key topics

The first crucial step is to interpret the question; essays questions use specific terms and which reveal how the question might be answered. Question analysis is a crucial part of the essay writing process; the most common reason why students fail assignments is because they do not read or analyse the question correctly.

One method of question analysis is the 'T.A.P. model'. First identify the **Topic** - what the main theme is; then the **Action(s)**, i.e. what you have got to do; and finally the **Parameters** - the scope or confines of the task. It is worth spending a bit of time on this, making sure you are clear on what is being asked of you. If are still not clear, contact your tutor **BEFORE** you start work on the assignment.

Figure 1. Question analysis using the T.A.P. model



Following on from the question analysis, try to identify the key topics and what you already know about these; a 'mindmap' can be a good way to collect your thoughts and identify essential information and make and record connections between related points. You will find out more about mindmaps in Study Guide 5 Note-making.

Step 2: Organise your time

You need to plan your time carefully, find out when the essay is due and work backwards, allowing sufficient time for proofreading and re-drafting. You will need to spend at least half your time on research and gathering information, and the other half on writing. Construct a weekly schedule (refer to our study guide on getting organised for an example of this), and block out set periods of time during each week to work on your essay. Keep your schedule to hand and consult it regularly.

Step 3: Read (do your research, make notes)

There are numerous sources for you to make use of when collecting relevant information, much of it available in the University library as well as online. These sources include academic texts (books and journals); government statistics; newspapers and magazines; and research reports. This gathering and researching stage is important as the quality of your written material will reflect the range and quality of information you have gathered.

Step 4: Think (and establish your position)

Think about what conclusions your reading has led you to draw. Then write a brief outline of what you would like the essay to say. Keep this outline to hand and refer to it on a regular basis. This will help keep you on the right track and prevent you from over- or under-writing key sections.

Step 5: Plan (to give your writing structure)

Arranging your notes into a logical order will help you develop a structure for your work. A well-structured essay comprises an introduction, main body and conclusion. Each of these sections has a distinct purpose and is equally important. The introduction is essentially a map for the reader; it sets out the path that your essay will follow. The purpose of the main body is to set out your argument; the conclusion draws together the main threads of your argument as you summarise the most important points and then show that you have answered the question.

To help structure your argument, consider using a framework for each paragraph, such as 'Claim > Justify > Support > Implications' (adapted from Mitchell and Riddle, 2000; see figure 2 below) or the Critical Thinking Model.

Step 6: Writing

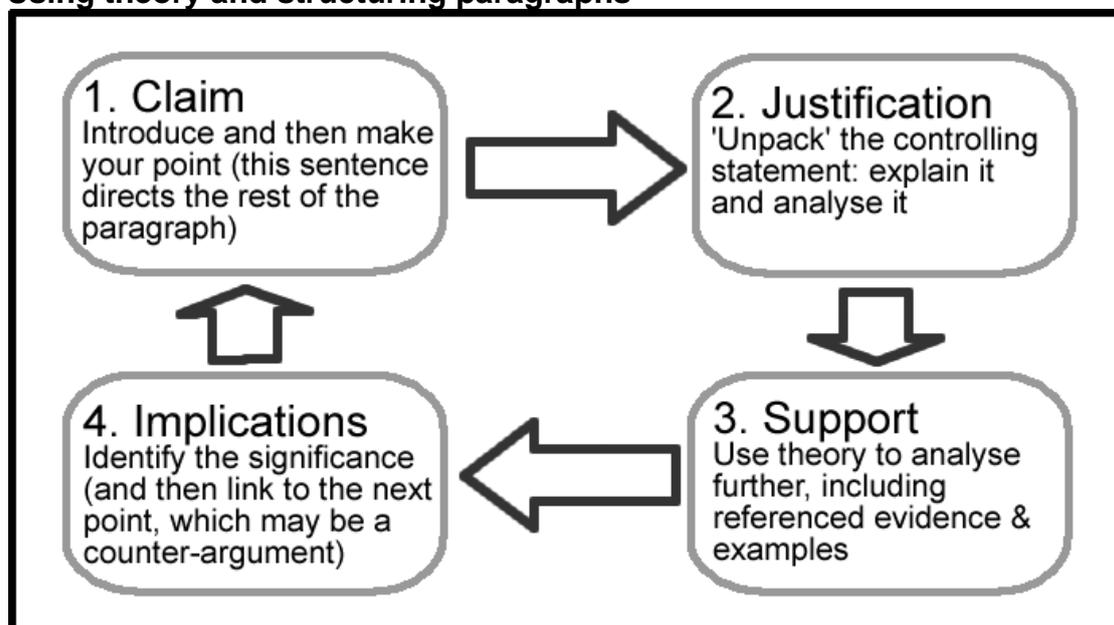
You do **not** have to write the various sections of the essay in the order that they appear in the final draft. Some people write the

introduction last, after the main body of work has been written. On the other hand, if you've done plenty of planning, then writing the introduction first can give you a clear idea where you are going – as can starting with the conclusion. This might help keep your writing more focused.

Given that your essay or assignment is fundamentally your exploration of the topic, its purpose is to present your well-researched argument. Your opinion should always be supported by evidence. As highlighted by Coles (1995), evidence can take different forms according to your discipline, including: examples, quotations, the results of case studies, data in the form of figures, diagrams, tables, graphs and anything else that is appropriate to the subject you are discussing. Importantly she also emphasises that simply quoting, reiterating or referring to the evidence is insufficient: every kind of evidence needs to be discussed, addressing possible different interpretations, implications and conclusions that can be drawn from the data.

Use the following model (figure 2) to help you keep your argument focused and your paragraphs structured around a specific point. Think of each paragraph as a micro-essay, in other words, just like the entire essay, each paragraph should have an introduction, main body and conclusion. The introduction to your paragraph is the best place to make your claim. This may be a 'topic sentence' which summarises and introduces the main point of what you are going to say in your paragraph. The body of the paragraph then expands on this sentence by providing definitions, further explanation and discussion of the evidence and examples. The argument then needs 'wrapping up' - the paragraph has its own conclusion. This may involve discussing the implications, which can often link to the next point, in the next paragraph. The extended version of this study guide provides further detail on using theory and structuring paragraphs.

Figure 2. Using theory and structuring paragraphs



(Adapted from Mitchell and Riddle, 2000)

Step 7: Referencing

It is important to identify the sources of material you use, whether quoting from (i.e. using their exact words) or paraphrasing (changing the wording of) the work of others. Whether you are quoting or paraphrasing the work of others, you must acknowledge the original author and include the reference, both within the essay and in an organised list at the end in the 'reference list'.

Referencing is not really a step in its own right but rather something you should begin as soon as you start to gather information about different sources: keep track of what material comes from where so that you can easily include the correct references in your writing.

If you are not sure whether to reference something or not, err on the side of caution and reference it. Omitting references is not acceptable and may result in losing marks or even failing an assignment and being accused of plagiarism.

Plagiarism is the act of taking and using another person's ideas and presenting them as if they were your own, and is taken very seriously by tutors. If even a small section of your work is found to have been plagiarised, you may be assigned a mark of '0' for that assignment. Many tutors and programmes now use plagiarism software that searches electronically for similar or matching text.

The extended version of this study guide provides examples of citing and referencing various sources under the Harvard system, and more guidelines can be found either in your programme handbook, in the Plymouth University's *A Guide to Referencing* on the portal, or in *Cite them Right* (Pears and Shields, 2010).

Steps 8 & 9: Draft (redraft) and refine (edit and proofread)

The purpose of your first draft is to test the developing structure and framework of your essay and begin to construct and develop your argument. This draft is only rough; it is not supposed to be perfect and it will need revision. The aim of the second draft is to improve the overall presentation, comprehension and coherency of the essay. Before approaching the final draft, leave the work alone for a short while. You may find it necessary to re-read and edit your essay more than once.

It is extremely important to proofread what you have written before submitting your work; you will invariably come across mistakes which can easily be corrected. Preferably proofread your work aloud, as you tend to take more notice of the punctuation, natural pauses and general sentence structure, compared to when you read silently. At the proofreading stage you should check for errors with spelling, grammar and punctuation, coherence and structure of the essay and the overall presentation of your work (see the checklist, below). Note that other people are allowed to

highlight errors or areas for improvement in your work, but any revisions must be done by you.

Step 10: Review marker's feedback

If your marker has given you comments about your writing, it is really valuable to think about how you might put their suggestions into practice next time. It will probably help you to look through your work and see if you can spot where you've lost marks, and consider swapping with a friend so you can help each other.

Language

When writing your essay, try to be concise. The most impressive answer is invariably presented in a direct and straightforward manner. Attempt to be natural and sincere in your writing and avoid the use of jargon and slang. However, as essays are a formal kind of writing, you should also take care not to use conversational or colloquial language.

The language you use in your essays should not reflect prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, religion or ability. 'Coloured', for example, was once considered acceptable for use but, since the 1960s, it has come to be regarded as offensive to many black people.

If you are unsure about the appropriateness of certain words or phrases, refer to your course handbook or ask your tutors for more guidance.

Presenting your written work

Good presentation demonstrates that you are thorough and organised, whereas mistakes ('typos') and an inconsistent format do not reflect well upon your work. Ensure your essay is formatted as requested in your assignment brief or programme handbook; otherwise you may lose 'easy' marks. Some courses require you to submit your work electronically – but do check with your tutor as the rules can vary.

Hand-written work, where your lecturer accepts it, should be legible and clear, and written on every other line. Leave sufficient margins and only write on one side of the page. For word-processed work, type essays in 12 point font size with 1.5 or double spacing. Choose typefaces and fonts that are clear and easy to read, for example, Times New Roman or Arial. Leave top, bottom, left and right margins of 2.54cm (the standard default), and number the pages. Ensure that your name, student registration number, title of the relevant module, code of the relevant module, name of the module leader, assignment title, and date of submission are all included on the title/front page.

Essay-writing checklist

Before you submit your work check it over one more time. Use the list below to help you:

1. Does the essay answer the question/deal with the topic that was set? (Read the brief again)
2. Does it cover all the key points and a range of arguments or viewpoints? (Have you missed one side of the argument?)
3. Have you covered the main points in sufficient depth? (Use the Critical Thinking Model in study guide 8)
4. Is the essay analytical in style and questioning in approach? (as above)
5. Have you developed and sustained the argument throughout the essay? (Check what you're actually saying)
6. Is the argument logical and realistic? (as above)
7. Is the content accurate and relevant? (check your sources are reliable and up to date)
8. Is the material logically arranged? (check the structure by drawing up a contents list)
9. Is there a sense of direction, a reason why one paragraph follows another? (Consider doing some mindmapping, or going back to ones you've already made)
10. Is each main point well supported by examples and argument? (check your use of evidence)
11. Does it clearly distinguish your ideas from those of others? (make sure there's a reference by every bit you've borrowed)
12. Do you acknowledge all sources, in the main body and at the end? (check your referencing, and Plymouth University guidelines on plagiarism)
13. Have you used an appropriate number and range of sources? (you don't have to read the whole library, but one or two authors' viewpoints won't be enough)
14. Is the essay the correct length? (check the brief)
15. Have you included a word count? (on the cover sheet)
16. Have you written the work in an appropriate style, and simply and clearly? (Would an academic who wasn't a specialist in your subject understand it?)
17. Is the grammar, punctuation and spelling correct? (Spell-check, grammar-check, and use a dictionary and grammar guide)
18. Have figures and tables been used appropriately and referenced? (check your guidelines or the generic Plymouth University referencing guidelines)
19. Is the essay well-presented, with the right spacing, font, font size and cover sheet? (check your handbook)

References

Coles, M. (1995) *A student's guide to coursework writing*. Stirling: University of Stirling

Mitchell, S. and Riddle, M. (2000) *Improving the quality of argument in higher education*. Middlesex: University of Middlesex

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2008) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.

Recommended reading

Cottrell S. (2008) *The study skills handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Press

Northedge, A. (2007) *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Levin, P. (2009) *Write great essays*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

For further information and the full range of study guides go to: <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn>
An extended version of this study guide is also available on our website.

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