



Planning and writing an essay

Examining the title

Read the question carefully and check that you understand what you are being asked to do. Identify key instructions such as account for, assess, compare, contrast, describe, discuss, evaluate, explain, outline, and questions such as why, when, what, how, and use them to determine the material you need to cover and how you need to organise it. Make sure that you understand the meaning of unusual or specialised words or phrases.

Producing a plan and collecting material

Once you have done some preliminary reading it is useful to produce a plan for your essay. This will help you to organise your ideas and enable you to plan your research and gather relevant material from your blog, forum postings, books, articles, electronic media or other sources purposively. Your plan should be a list of the main points which will form the basis of your argument or discussion. As your work progresses, you may discover that you need to modify your plan as your ideas change, or you find that some material is not available. Select your research material carefully, seeking advice from your tutor if needed.

Reading and note-taking

It is helpful to make brief notes when reading. This will enable you to list the key points and evidence you need to write your essay and help you to understand and digest what you have read. Record the source of your notes and the relevant page numbers. Develop a system for storing your research notes and references (perhaps in a loose leaf file or card index) so that they can be retrieved easily.

Structuring your essay

An essay consists of a beginning, a middle and an end. These are the:

Introduction, which explores the question, provides context and indicates the direction or structure of the argument to follow.

Discussion, which develops a logical argument from a series of points and supports it with relevant evidence such as facts, examples, illustrations, data tables etc.

Conclusion, which draws together your ideas, summarises your argument and demonstrates that you have answered the question.

Writing your essay

Many students find it difficult to start the writing process. You may find it convenient to write your introduction first but it is not essential to work through an essay from beginning to end. Some students prefer to write their essay in stages and then combine the separate parts to produce the final polished version. Try to write clearly and precisely and to explore one major point per paragraph.

Reviewing and editing your essay

It is always useful to produce a draft version of your essay. This will enable you to:

check that you have answered the question
 re-order points to strengthen your argument
 check grammar, punctuation and spelling
 add or remove supporting evidence
 check the length of your essay.

Presenting your written work

It is important that work produced at undergraduate level follows accepted academic conventions. You will be familiar with many of these from your reading but applying them to your own work takes practice and patience. Mastering presentation conventions is one of the objectives of undergraduate work and your tutor can provide further advice as needed.

Quoting from sources

If you want to quote material from other authors in your assignment you can do this directly (reproducing the actual words of the author) or by using paraphrase (describing the author's idea or ideas in your own words). Direct quotations are usually reserved for important or provocative points, for example ideas or language which need to be discussed or produced in support of an argument. Try to keep direct quotations as short as possible because one of the objectives of writing an assignment is to express your own views in your own words. Short quotations should be placed in inverted commas. Long quotations, if used, should be indented from the main text and do not require inverted commas.

Acknowledging sources

When you use material or arguments (including quotations) from other writers' work it is important to acknowledge your debt and to include a reference identifying the source. If you do not you may be accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism is the deliberate copying of passages wholesale (or disguised by paraphrase) from books, other students' work, etc, without acknowledgement. Plagiarism is dishonest and is always penalised.

References

There are three main ways of presenting references. Seek advice from your tutor about which to use but remember that once you have chosen a method for your assignment you need to apply it consistently in that piece of work.

Footnotes Each point or quotation to be referenced is numbered consecutively (using brackets (1) or superscript ¹) and a list of numbered notes is provided at the foot of the page:

eg 1. Lockyer, R. (2005) *Tudor and Stuart Britain*, p.36.

A short form can be used for subsequent references to a title:

eg 2. Lockyer, p.120.

3. *Tudor and Stuart Britain*, p.120.

If consecutive references are taken from the same source *ibid.* (meaning in the same place) or *ibid.* plus page number are used:

eg 4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.*, p.40.

Material taken from an article in a journal or from the internet should be similarly acknowledged.

Endnotes The same conventions are used as for footnotes but the notes are listed at the end of the assignment, chapter or book.

Harvard system An author date note with page numbers is enclosed in round brackets and inserted in the text directly after the point or quotation. Full details of the work are provided in the bibliography.

eg It has recently been suggested (Guy 1988, p.36) that...

In some subjects, for example music or art, you may need to refer to material such as specific passages of music or individual paintings in your assignment. Your tutor will advise you about the appropriate referencing conventions for your subject.

Bibliography

You need to include a list at the end of your assignment of all the books, articles, internet sites etc. which you have used to write your essay. The list should be given in alphabetic order of authors' surnames with:

for a book: author's surname and initials or first name, publication date, title (italics or underlined), publisher and place of publication.

eg Eliot, T.S. (1957) *On Poetry and Poets*, Faber & Faber, London.

for an article: author's surname and initials or first name, publication date, title of article (in inverted commas), title of periodical or book (italics or underlined), editor's name or volume number and page numbers. eg

Tarling, D.H. (1975) 'Archaeomagnetism: the dating of archaeological materials by their magnetic properties', *World Archaeology* 7, 185-197.

for material from the internet: author's surname and initials or first name, title of page (in inverted commas), title of complete work if page is part of a group of documents, date page was created, URL (in angle brackets), date you saw page (in round brackets). eg

Stratford, Jenny, 'The treasure roll', *Richard II's Treasure*, 2007, (11 July 2007).

Layout

Assignments must be word-processed. For ease of administration and marking please:

include your surname in the file name
use A4 paper
write the title of the assignment on the first page
number and write your name on each page.