



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

ACADEMIC SKILLS UNIT

# Tertiary Essay Writing

*organisation*  
*essay* Referencing  
Critical thinking reports  
Referencing seminars  
**results** *essays*  
READING *academic*  
*essays* Argumentation  
Referencing writing  
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# TERTIARY ESSAY WRITING

Essays are a common form of assessment in many tertiary-level disciplines. The ability to construct good essays involves understanding the process and the conventions of essay writing.

This booklet looks at ten common steps involved in essay writing. The more experience you get in writing essays, the more comfortable you will become with this genre. However, even an experienced essay writer needs to be deliberate and thorough in order to write a well-constructed essay.

## 1. TIME MANAGEMENT

A 2000–3000 word essay should be started three to four weeks (or earlier) before the due date. This allows time for topic analysis, planning and research, writing the first draft, revision and presentation. Plan to spend about 50% of your time on analysis, research and planning, 25% on developing a draft, and 25% on revising, editing, referencing and proofreading.

For example, if you expect to spend 30 hours preparing a 2000-word essay, 15 hours would be spent analysing the question, finding relevant material, reading and note-taking. This would leave 7.5 hours to prepare the first draft and another 7.5 hours to revise, edit and proofread your work.

You may need to spend more (or less) than 30 hours to prepare a 2000-word paper – the example above is only a rough guide. The main thing is that you allow yourself enough time to be thorough in the planning, writing and editing stages; otherwise, you won't be able to achieve your best!

It is also a good idea to get someone else to read over your essay for any language or logical inconsistencies of which you might not be aware. You should allow some time for this, as well as time to consider any changes suggested by the person who has read over your work.

## 2. CHOOSING A TOPIC

After scheduling time to research and write your essay, the next step is to choose an essay topic. A list of questions or topics is often provided by the lecturer. When choosing one, you should take into account:

### WHAT INTERESTS YOU MOST?

The best way to stay motivated is to do what most interests you. Choose a topic you want to explore in more depth. Also consider whether a deeper understanding of a topic might benefit you.

### WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

It is good to do a little preliminary research on the topic(s). See whether there are enough resources (books and journal articles) on the topic of your choice. If everyone is doing the same question, it may be difficult to access library holdings for some time! You can, however, borrow from other tertiary libraries if you need to. And don't forget journal databases!

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW ALREADY?

It makes sense to choose a topic about which you already have some ideas. This way you can think about potential arguments that can go into the paper even before you start your research and you can also build on knowledge you already have. On the other hand, if you have the time, you might want to broaden your horizons and choose a topic you are not familiar with.

## 3. ANALYSING THE QUESTION

When preparing to answer an essay question, it is important that you understand it well. Sometimes students misunderstand the essay question, or address only part of what is being asked. You are expected to write a tightly structured argument focused on the question or topic. So before you start, you need to carefully analyse the question.

First make sure that you fully understand the question. Check the meaning of any word you do not understand in a general or specialist subject dictionary. You might also need to consider that there are more specific uses of these words in your lectures and readings.

A good technique can be to copy the essay question out on a blank piece of paper and to separate and number – or colour-code – the parts of the question. Underline key words and identify their function as described below. Once you have done that, you can rephrase the question in your own words.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR?

You should look for three kinds of words when analysing your essay question:

- Process or directive words
- Content words and phrases
- Limiting words and phrases

#### Process or directive words

Directive words tell you what you are required to do – for example: *discuss*, *critically analyse*, *compare*. It is important to understand the meaning of these words so that your essay will answer the question and address the topic.

Here are some examples of common directive words:

Directive word	Definition
account for	Give a justified explanation of why and how something is the case.
analyse	Divide into parts or elements to discover the nature of something. Describe the function and relationships of the parts to identify possible problems or weaknesses.

argue	Make a case for accepting or rejecting a position by systematically giving reasons and evidence for or against it. Demonstrate that you are aware of opposing viewpoints and provide grounds for rejecting them.
assess	Examine from different viewpoints, weighing up strengths and weaknesses. Make a considered judgement.
comment on	Provide an informed and supported viewpoint.
compare	Identify characteristics that are similar. Also stress differences where relevant.
contrast / differentiate / distinguish	Identify characteristics that are different. Emphasise similarities where appropriate.
critical(ly) / criticise / critique	Analyse systematically from different perspectives and identify positive aspects as well as limitations. Draw conclusions from the analysis and express an informed judgement.  This does not mean to criticise in only negative terms!
define	Determine essential qualities. State concise and clear meanings, but omit details. Mark the limits of the definition and emphasise differences to similar items or objects.
describe	Characterise, recount and relate systematically.
discuss	Analyse and critically examine in detail. Consider pros and cons in order to come to a supported assessment and conclusion.
evaluate	Assess
examine	Investigate closely, paying attention to detail and considering implications.
explain	Make something clear by elaborating on it. Give reasons and try to analyse causes.
illustrate	Explain and clarify by the use of concrete examples, data, diagrams, etc.
interpret	Explain something and make its meaning explicit. Give your own judgment.

justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions.
list	Present in an ordered way.
outline	Present the principal features and how they relate to each other in a logical order. Include all main points and omit details.
review	Survey and examine critically and comprehensively. Comment on controversial aspects.
state	Present the main points briefly and clearly. Omit details and examples.
summarise	Give a short and clear description of the main points.

## Content words and phrases

Content words establish the general focus of the question and define the field or subject area of the topic. The content words or phrases are underlined in the following examples:

- Discuss the development of French opera.
- Outline Piaget's theory of development.
- Explain George Herbert Mead's theory on the development of the self. How can sociologists use it to understand the self and society?

## Limiting words and phrases

Look for words that limit the scope of the topic and make the question more manageable. For example:

- Discuss two perspectives on...
- How relevant is this to Australian society?
- What is the crucial variable?
- Outline the major causes of...
- How can sociologists use this concept to understand the self and society?

It is often necessary for you to limit the question yourself. If the question is very generally worded, limiting its scope will enable you to write in more depth about a particular aspect. For example, the following topic is very broad and could form the basis of a doctoral thesis as easily as a 2000-word essay:

*Discuss and analyse the roles of women in society in the period 1000-1350.*

It would be appropriate to limit this question by indicating your focus, for example, on peasant women, or aristocratic women, nuns, women heads of state, women in paid work, women in service, women in England or China or France, or women whose lives have been extensively documented.

If you decide to limit your discussion in this way, always check with your tutor/lecturer. In your introduction, state how you have limited the question and your justification for doing so. For example: 'This paper focuses on the lives of peasant women since they were the largest group in society.'

This is a good example of a topic that does not explicitly direct you to form an argument. Although you may feel you can write descriptively about the women, you still need to develop an argument relating to the question. For instance, how could you account for changes over time, or between women from different regions or countries? Can you analyse the roles women played in the context of the prevailing social order? Can you formulate an argument about the contribution of the women to the economic wealth or religious life of the community?

Once you have a good idea of what the question requires you to do, of its scope and its focus, you can then think about how you might answer this question given what you already know. This step is called *brainstorming*.

## 4. BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming involves thinking about the topic and generating as many ideas about it as you can. At this stage you may not know a lot about the subject matter of your essay, but it is still important to think about what you need to address and jot down your preliminary thoughts and ideas.

You can draw upon both your general knowledge and the information from your lectures, tutorials and subject reading. Through the brainstorming process you will become aware of ideas you want to pursue and information you need to locate during the research and reading stages.

It is important not to narrow your thinking at this stage; you should explore your ideas in an open and uncritical way.

To brainstorm, use a large piece of paper. Have the question in mind and write down all the related issues, theories, arguments and evidence that you are aware of at this stage.

### When brainstorming, include...

- **any ideas triggered by the question**
- **questions you need to answer in order to write the essay**
- **possible lines of thought, research or argument**
- **any evidence you are aware of to support possible arguments**
- **words you must define.**

At this stage you may need to think about how much breadth or depth your essay can have. The word limit is a factor here but you should also ask yourself how many main ideas you can address and how much information you can present.

You might also think about whether it would be appropriate to include personal opinion or experience. This is more appropriate for some subjects than for others. However, it is important to be aware of any preconceived ideas or biases you may have. Allow yourself to be open-minded to new ideas and possible directions the essay's argument might take.

## WHY IS BRAINSTORMING AN IMPORTANT STEP?

Brainstorming gives you the beginnings of a writing plan – at a time when you are close to the question and therefore less likely to miss parts of it. You should notice a central theme or argument emerging. This process also helps you to focus your research by raising more specific questions to answer (this helps to minimise unfocused meandering through the set reading). It further helps by giving you some ideas about what you might want to write about. Keep in mind that, as you discover more about the topic, your ideas will shift and change. This is part of the process.

## 5. PLANNING

After brainstorming, develop a tentative plan to guide your research. The degree of detail in the plan depends on the question itself and how much knowledge you have at this stage. Even if you have only limited knowledge, you are still likely to be able to create an outline of possible sections. Include subheadings and note down background information and definitions you may need to write in.

A plan helps you formulate the central argument or theme of your essay, as well as generate sub-arguments. It also makes it easier to stay on track as you start to research and write.

If you have an argument at this stage, organise your points to support it, and arrange your ideas or sections into a logical order. You may also be able to identify some of the evidence you could use to support your points.

If you have very little knowledge about the topic and no argument yet, generate some headings and sub-questions using the essay question as your starting point. For example, if your question is:

Discuss and evaluate the legal approach to euthanasia and criminal responsibility in Victoria. (2000 words)

You might tentatively break this topic down into the following parts:

1. **Introduction** (150 words).
2. **Discussion** of the current state of the law on euthanasia and criminal responsibility in Victoria (400 words).
3. **Evaluation** of the current situation:
  - A. What are the **problems** with the current law? What/who are the drivers of reform? Include detailed discussion of the most recent/influential case (600 words).
  - B. What reform **proposals** are there? Are they viable? How have these problems been addressed elsewhere? What conclusions/recommendations can I make about the current state of law (700 words)?
4. **Conclusion** (150 words).

Breaking the task down into smaller sections – each with its own focus and purpose – makes the task more manageable. And generating sub-questions within each of the sections helps you stay focused as you read for your essay. If you estimate how many words you might spend on each part, it will also give you an indication of how much reading you need to do for each section.

As in the previous example, university essays often ask you to describe or outline a theory, or the current practice in a field, and then to critically analyse or evaluate it. Remember that the latter part – the critical analysis – is the more important part of your essay. Its relative importance should be reflected in the number of words you allocate to it.

While the process for writing a tertiary essay is fundamentally the same for an essay in any discipline, you should be aware of discipline specific expectations as well. These are provided in any guidelines to essay writing given by your department or faculty. This is the stage at which you want to check these guides. Each department has slightly different expectations and requirements.

Because you are preparing your essay for a particular subject, you need to engage with and to address that subject's key concepts and objectives. It is therefore useful at this point – and certainly before you begin writing – to re-read the course description and course objectives.

## **6. RESEARCHING THE TOPIC**

While you will often receive detailed reading lists as a starting point for research, the onus is on you to develop skills as an independent researcher. This requires becoming familiar with the various university libraries, journal databases and search engines, with periodicals, newspaper collections and other reference materials.

### **SEARCHING ADVICE**

Working out where to find information and who to contact for advice is one of the most important skills to learn at university. Taking the time to become familiar with the university's information services and library branches will serve you well throughout your tertiary education. You will be several steps ahead if you learn early and well how to access the information you may need to carry out your literature research.

### **Exploring encyclopaedia, bibliographies**

The university libraries have brilliant reference collections. While internet searching is increasingly effective, not all sources have been put online. Browsing along the reference shelves is an important component of finding and sifting information. Subject encyclopaedia, dictionaries and bibliographies will help you gain a grasp on research and concepts used in your field.

### **Searching journal indexes, electronic journals**

Publication patterns are changing rapidly. Such changes are working in your favour! More and more full-text journals are available in digital format. Many publishers even offer personalised pages that register your research strategies and email the tables of contents of your favourite journals.

## Seeking the expertise of specialist staff to help you...

- **with your search strategies**
- **with getting the most out of databases**
- **track down information held in other libraries**
- **access rare and archived material**
- **organise information**
- **with advice on citing sources.**

Library staff offer classes on making the best use of the catalogues, searching databases effectively and managing your reference information using the software program EndNote. The following suggested links will help you get started:

### **University Library homepage**

<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/>

### **University Library catalogue**

<http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/>

### **SuperSearch**

<http://search.lib.unimelb.edu.au>

### **Information skills classes (catalogues, database searching, EndNote)**

<http://library.unimelb.edu.au/services/classes>

### **LibGuides**

#### **(subject-specific guides and resources)**

<http://unimelb.libguides.com/index.php>

### **Specialist librarians**

#### **(individual consultations for graduate students)**

<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/learn/consult/>

## HOW MUCH TO READ?

Some students overestimate the expectations of academic staff regarding the quantity of research required; some underestimate. At tertiary level, you will often find that there is more reading than you can possibly get through. Ask your tutor or lecturer for guidance as to the number of references they expect you to consult and use in preparing your essay. Even when the focus of a question is on a core text, it is assumed that you will read more widely in preparation for writing an essay.

## GETTING STARTED

Begin with general reading; any text-books on your reading list will help you understand your topic in the context of a bigger picture. Then move on to journal articles on specific aspects of your topic. Recent journal articles are generally considered of more value

in academic writing because 1) they contain more current information, research and discussion on the topic than do many books published years earlier, and 2) they are often peer-reviewed and cited by other academics which makes them a more reliable and recognised source of information and ideas.

Reliability and accuracy of information is an important aspect of tertiary research; this is one reason why most websites are of limited use and have less respectability in academic writing: how can you verify that the author of the webpage is presenting accurate information?

## RESERVE LIST

Your lecturer may have placed a selection of material on the library Reserve List. To find out which books are on this list, go to the following webpage, accessible from the library catalogue page:

<http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/search/r>

Enter either the course name or number, or the name of your lecturer. You will then find a list of any books, photocopied articles or other media on reserve for your subject.

You only have access to reserve items for two hours (or sometimes 24 hrs) so use your time wisely. Turn to the table of contents and the index and identify the parts of the book specifically relevant to your question. As you cannot borrow the book, it is necessary to take notes as you go. Make sure that you read the bibliography closely as it may contain useful references to journal articles and other books you may want to read.

If you need to use photocopies, only photocopy those pages that are absolutely essential for you to refer back to. Make sure that instead of just underlining large sections, you annotate the photocopied margins with your own comments about what you have read and how it fits into your essay. Note, for example, how a particular point, a useful definition, and evidence or examples will fit into your essay.

## RECORDING A REFERENCE

It is most important to remember to take full bibliographic details of everything you read. Record the page number of each passage that you paraphrase and each quotation you transcribe. EndNote, a bibliographic software package, is available free to all University of Melbourne students. It is invaluable for keeping records of references and you can enter your notes into the program as well making them 'searchable'. You can download EndNote from the library website. For further details about availability and installation, check the following website: <http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/endnote>

## NOTE-TAKING

Take your notes in an organised way, either in a notebook or directly onto your computer. Don't ever write in a library book: you know how annoying it is to come across a marked-up book in the library – and how difficult it is to read! Not to mention the fact that the book is library property!

If you are reading a book, it can be more effective to simply bookmark the relevant part of the text and keep going than to take notes as you read. At the end of each chapter assess the relative degree of importance of each marked section, and then take notes. Be selective. Excessive note-taking can be a substitute for thinking critically about what you are reading. Look for the main points of an article. What is the writer's main

contention or idea? What evidence or examples are used to support that idea? What conclusion does the writer reach? Where do you stand in relation to that contention or conclusion?

It is good to take point-form notes in your own words. This is the best way of ensuring that you understand the material you are using. It also means that you have already done the work of paraphrasing the ideas from the original source.

The more you read, the more focused your ideas will become. How does your reading reinforce, contradict, or suggest alterations to your original brainstormed ideas and plan? Continue to evaluate the reading in terms of its relevance to your essay question. It helps to stay focused by keeping a copy of the topic and your tentative plan with you while you are reading. As you do more reading, you may need to change or develop your plan.

## **READING CRITICALLY**

You need to evaluate your reading continuously. It is not sufficient simply to reproduce, summarise, report or describe what others have found. Just because something is published, or the author is well-known or respected, doesn't mean that it is true, valid, or unchallengeable. You need to test the opinions and findings of an author against the evidence provided, against the opinions and judgements of other writers, and against your own point of view.

### **Questions to ask when you read critically:**

- **Why has the author come to this conclusion?**
- **How conclusive or valid is the proposition?**
- **How sound is the methodology?**
- **How practical are the author's ideas?**
- **What are the strengths and weaknesses of the author's argument?**
- **What cultural or intellectual preconceptions and biases does the author seem to bring to the writing?**

Critically engaging with the reading involves thinking about what an author is saying, and not just looking at what he or she is writing as a source of information that you can use in your essay. While you will frequently use information other authors provide as evidence to support a point you are making, you should first evaluate their arguments and evidence for yourself.

When assessing an author's argument and supporting evidence, you do not need to rely solely on your own thinking. Authors who hold contrasting points of view on a topic are an excellent resource. They help you evaluate arguments and evidence put forward in a particular text.

### **How to use related texts in your essay:**

- **Can you contrast different points of view?**
- **Can you support what one author says by reference to another author?**
- **Can you recognise the assumptions being made by an author?**
- **Can you extend what the author is saying to its logical conclusion? Does the proposition still make sense?**
- **Can you identify the implications of an author's proposal?**

## WHEN TO STOP READING?

Finally, you need to develop a sense for when you have read enough. Part of this is determined simply by time constraints: organise yourself and start writing so that you have a completed essay by the due date (or before)! But you also need to determine when you have enough material to work with in order to develop a well-thought-out, well-researched essay. You don't want to have so much information and so many readings to integrate that the essay becomes confused and dense. And you don't want the essay to simply be a string of other sources patched together! Other readings merely support and help substantiate your own ideas. *Your* ideas and the development of *your* original argument are still going to be the bulk of the essay.

You have done enough reading when you have formulated a clear argument, supported by relevant and up-to-date research in your field.

## 7. REVISING THE PLAN

Once you have read several texts related to your chosen question, it's time to review your initial plan. While you carried out your research, new ideas and evidence contrary to your planned argument may have emerged. You need to elaborate upon your plan or modify your argument in the light of such developments.

Most essay questions require you to take a position. This is the time to be clear about what *you* want to say, in light of what you have discovered since you first read the question.

At this point your direction and tentative conclusions should be getting clearer. You should try to clarify your thesis (argument), and the points you wish to make to support this thesis, together with supporting evidence and examples.

Think about the order in which you wish to present these points. This could be in order of importance, or you may follow a chronology, or you might group arguments into comparisons and contrasts. There are many possible structures but you do need a logical, ordered framework.

There is no single correct answer to an essay question. The lecturer is interested in what you think, and whether you present your ideas in a structured way through a reasoned argument, focused on the question. Your argument should be well-supported by evidence: include examples or points from your reading. Plot out your revised plan as carefully and completely as possible – either on paper or on computer. If you indicate on your plan where your direct quotes, paraphrases and examples from readings fit into your overall scheme (noting the page numbers from the original source), this will facilitate the actual writing process. You can work closely from your detailed plan to construct your essay; it's useful to keep your plan by your computer for reference while you write the first draft.

## 8. WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

Many students find the transition from researching to writing difficult. You need to resist the temptation to continue researching, and to be aware of the various means of procrastination (e.g. tidying your desk, or finger-painting with peanut butter and honey, or knitting a tam for your French poodle). If you have already prepared a detailed plan and are

aware that a first draft is only ever a rough attempt that requires further editing, then you will find it easier to begin. Your first draft is for yourself. Write freely and get the content down. Don't aim for perfection; you can improve the style, clarity, expression and spelling later.

Students who have difficulty writing essays often believe that it is because they can't write. It is often the case, though, that what might seem or feel like 'grammar' problems results from not having clear ideas about your topic. While writing skills are, of course, important, *thinking* is at the core. In other words, many essay-writing problems arise because a student's thinking is not fully worked out in relation to the question or topic. If you are struggling at the first draft stage, go back to your plan – do you need to revise it? Where are the gaps? Is your argument clear and supported? Are you clear about what you want to say?

The task of essay writing becomes easier as your familiarity and experience with this type of writing increases. Understanding the basic structure and elements of an essay, how to use sources effectively, and knowing the conventions of academic tone and style certainly helps make writing easier.

## ESSAY STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT

All essays require an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The introduction orients the reader to your topic and approach. Its function is to tell the reader two main things: what the essay will be about and what you will be arguing. The body develops your argument and analysis. The conclusion of the essay brings everything together, making the conclusions of your discussion clear for the reader.

You will have planned your argument and ideas during and after the reading phase. If you have done this carefully, you should have a fairly good idea how the essay's argument will be structured. It may happen, however, that in the process of writing the first draft you will change your mind about the order of presentation of ideas, or even about some aspects of your argument. Therefore it may be necessary to return later to the introduction and rewrite it to reflect your changes to the structure of the essay. Or you may find that you want to start with writing the body of the essay, or a section of the body that you feel most certain about, comfortable with, or interested in. If you take this approach, make sure that the essay ends up with a logical development of ideas, and again that the introduction reflects this overall structure.

### Introducing your essay

The introduction serves to set the focus of the essay and provide a map for your reader. Whether you write it first or later, you should review it and make changes after you have completed the main body and conclusion of the essay. The introduction should focus a reader's attention on the central theme of an essay. It should clarify how you intend to interpret or limit the question and give a clear, but brief, overview of your argument and the main points supporting it. You may also need to make it clear how you are defining key terms in the question.

### The body of your essay

As you write the body of your essay, you will probably have several open books, photocopied articles, pages of notes (or their electronic equivalent, in EndNote for example), and your essay question and plan in front of you. As you develop each point,

refer back to the essay question and think about how the point you are making both relates to the question and develops your argument. If its relation is not clear, explain the relevance of your point.

### **Paragraphs**

Paragraphs are an important structural element of good writing. Each paragraph should develop a point or topic – for this reason they are the foundations upon which your argument is built. A paragraph should include a topic sentence, which states the main idea of that paragraph. It is often the first sentence in the paragraph. The topic sentence is underlined in the following example:

Hurricanes, which are also called cyclones, exert tremendous power. *These violent storms are often a hundred miles in diameter, and their winds can reach velocities of seventy-five miles an hour or more. The strong winds and heavy rainfall that accompany them can completely destroy a small town in a couple of hours. The energy that is released by a hurricane in one day exceeds the total energy consumed by humankind throughout the world in one year.*

A topic sentence introduces the paragraph's main idea. In the ensuing paragraphs you then elaborate and provide supporting evidence for that idea. However, when you have only indicated the issue that is to be addressed and can only draw the main point out after your discussion and examples, the topic sentence will be the last sentence of a paragraph. For example:

*Albert Einstein, one of the world's geniuses, failed his university entrance examinations on his first attempt. William Faulkner, one of America's noted writers, never finished college because he could not pass his English courses. Sir Winston Churchill, who is considered one of the masters of the English language, had to have special tutoring in English during elementary school. These few examples show that failure in school does not always predict failure in life.*

Whether it comes first or last, a good topic sentence contains only one idea and sums up what the paragraph is about.

Other sentences elaborate the topic of your paragraph by giving supporting details, facts, examples and quotations. Every sentence in a paragraph must be clearly related to the main idea. The sentences in a paragraph should also be logically ordered.

The length of a paragraph is determined by its complexity and significance to the overall argument. The main function of the concluding sentence of a paragraph is to draw the information to a logical conclusion and link it to the next paragraph. Each paragraph should be the next logical step in the development of your argument. To make sure this occurs you need to have thought about the best order for your ideas, and how you will develop your argument.

### **Coherence**

Coherence relates to the smooth and logical development of both the main points and the related details in a piece of writing. Coherence can be enhanced through careful use of transition signals. Transitions are words or phrases that show the connections between ideas or between sentences. The table below gives examples of different types of transitions and the words and phrases you can use for them:

Type of transition	Transition word or phrase
Addition	additionally, and, also, as well as, furthermore, in addition, moreover
Comparison	correspondingly, equally, identically, in comparison, in the same way, likewise, similarly
Exemplifying and illustrating	e.g., for example, for instance, including, markedly, specifically, such as, to illustrate
Contrast	alternatively, but, contrarily, conversely, however, in contrast, instead, on the one hand ... on the other hand, yet
Emphasis	above all, again, certainly, especially, in fact, indeed, most importantly, of course, particularly
Concession	although, even though, despite, nevertheless, notwithstanding, whereas, while
Cause or effect	as a result, because, consequently, due to, hence, since, subsequently, therefore, thus
Concluding or summarising	all in all, in conclusion, in short, finally, in summary, to review, to sum up, on the whole
Clarification or restatement	i.e., in essence, in other words, namely, that is

## Concluding your essay

The conclusion brings together the different strands of your argument. The claims you made in your introductory paragraph have now been fully developed and substantiated, so you can reiterate them more assertively.

A conclusion can also explore:

- the significance of your findings
- the implications of your conclusion
- any limitations of the approach you've taken.

You can also mention factors beyond the scope of your essay that would be of interest to investigate. The conclusion should not, however, contain any new material.

Finally, your conclusion should refer back to the topic and end on a well-reasoned note.

## USING SOURCES

Your essay's argument emerges from and demonstrates your critical reading of relevant texts. The points you make to support your argument need to be supported with evidence from your reading, and your sources must be properly referenced.

In academic writing it is not enough to make a valid point; you must back it up with evidence. This supporting evidence can come from the ideas of other authors, factual information, statistics, logical argumentation and so on. The kind of evidence you employ depends on the discipline in which you are writing.

Below are two examples from student essays that demonstrate how you can use sources and referenced material from other authors to develop your own points.

The first example explores the difference between fantasy and fairy tales by offering a critique of one author's interpretation. Note that it draws on the work of a second author to develop an alternative definition. Both direct quotation and paraphrasing are used; this offers detail without unduly slowing the pace of the essay.

*When Cooper describes fantasy as 'a metaphor through which we discover ourselves' (1999, p.23), she implicitly identifies her work within the field of fairy tales where 'internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events' (Roberts, 2000, p. 34). Indeed Cooper views fantasy as an expression of both dreams and the unconscious, especially when using medieval artefacts as the cipher through which these processes can be understood (1999, p. 44). Cooper appears to see fairy tales and fantasy as synonymous, and yet other authors suggest that fairy tales are very different in origin and evolution from works of fantasy. According to Roberts, fairy tales and folk tales are the product of oral cultures and their psychology is unconsciously imbedded in the story as it has been transmitted and shaped over numerous retellings (2000, p. 16). Fantasy writing, on the other hand, is more often than not a conscious construction of psychological motifs—a conscious reproduction of unconscious impulses that evolve naturally in the fairy tale (Roberts, 2000, p. 18).*

The second example includes material from various sources to explain an Education Department strategy. The author here incorporates into her own sentences definitions developed by other writers:

*Acknowledging that a 'whole-school approach' (Hill & Crevola, 1997) is required if middle years reform is to succeed, the Education Department is not instructing schools to adopt middle years reform. Instead, the strategy's aims are: 'To assist individual schools and clusters of schools to review their current practices and develop a strategic approach to effective change that leads to improved learning outcomes and increased opportunities for students in Years 5-9' (1999, p. 9).*

*In other words, if we employ Owen's definition of policy as 'a strategy undertaken to solve or ameliorate some problem' (2001, p. 66), the state government policy response to the middle years problem has been primarily to support and entice individual schools to reform themselves.*

Note how the interpretation offered in the last sentence of this paragraph is supported by the preceding discussion that sets limits on the topic ('the Education Department is *not* ...') and defines key terms ('if we employ Owen's definition of policy as ...'). Note too that the citations for both the direct quotes and paraphrases

(based on the APA 5th reference style) include the page number from the original text. This gives readers the information they need to locate and consult the referenced source directly if they wish.

Use quotations that directly support your argument and have something critical to say. It is best to avoid long quotations (say, over four lines of text). It is better to demonstrate that you understand what the author is saying through paraphrasing and summarising. Your reader is interested in reading *your* argument, *your* interpretation and *your* analysis.

### **Quotations should be used...**

- **when you can't find appropriate synonyms to paraphrase the original and are concerned that using other words may distort the meaning of the original**
- **when the original wording is particularly memorable, witty, succinct or appropriate**
- **when you are using evidence from a primary source as supporting evidence for the point you are making.**

Lecture notes are not normally considered appropriate reference material. Your notes are your record of what you think you heard. Contact your lecturer if you want to locate a particular reference.

Using other authors' writings to provide supporting evidence or to refute points of view as you develop your argument is a crucial academic skill. It does, however, take time and practice to develop. One of the best ways to develop your own ability in this area is to pay attention to how the writers you are reading for research use their sources.

### **A note on plagiarism**

Plagiarism occurs when you use someone else's *words or ideas* in your work without acknowledging the source. Even if you do not quote directly, always reference the source of ideas you use in your work. If you have only generally referred to another writer's ideas or concepts, you should still acknowledge this. When you use a direct quote, copy it *exactly* (that might include typographical errors or other mistakes!), acknowledge it fully with an in-text citation and include the page number the quote comes from.

## **ACADEMIC STYLE**

Academic writing uses a distinct style and tone. It is formal, precise and – owing to the nature of the topics being discussed – often technical and complex. The complexity of academic inquiry does not mean that academic writing needs to sound pompous or be difficult to read. It does, however, need to be as objective, precise, and concise as possible.

### **Clarity**

A necessary feature of academic language is clarity. When writing university essays, avoid using slang – for example 'kids' instead of 'children' – and emotionally-charged words – for example 'outrageous', 'ridiculous', 'hideous'. While you may know what you mean by these words, your reader may not. Imprecise language is unlikely to add to your reader's understanding of the topic which should be your primary goal.

## Formality

A familiar or chatty tone should be avoided as well. Compare the two passages below. The first is written in an informal style while the second is more academic. The underlined phrases are commented on below.

*When you look at the Australian economy between 1929 and 1985, you find lots of differences. Before 1939, many workers didn't have jobs between 1930 and 1939. After 1945, about 2 in 100 male workers weren't in jobs. Getting a job was very easy for every healthy worker, even for women. But it's all different now in the 1990s and it's very hard to get a job if you're young and have no job experience, and especially if you're a girl.*

- 'you look': are we 'looking' at the Australian economy or analysing it? Also, who is the 'you' doing the 'looking'?
- 'lots': this is not a precise modifier
- 'didn't': contractions are not generally used in academic writing
- 'about 2 in 100': this is ambiguous: were there only 100 male workers? Or does the author mean two in every 100 workers? Also, write out numbers from one to nine.
- 'a job': this term is very broad and can include paid employment as well as leisure occupations. It is not clear what meaning the author here had in mind.
- 'very easy': again, this could be interpreted in a range of ways
- 'it's all different now': what is different? In what ways? This needs to be more precise.
- 'it's very hard': again, what does this mean exactly?
- 'no job experience': see note on 'job', above
- the last sentence, starting with 'But...' is a compound sentence which uses the conjunction 'and' to piece together more than one complete sentence: it should be broken into two sentences at 'It's very hard...'

Note how many of these difficulties of interpretation are resolved when a more formal and precise style of writing is adopted:

*When reviewing the Australian economy in the period 1929–1985, several differences become apparent. In the pre-War period a considerable proportion of the workforce experienced unemployment. It is claimed that up to 30% of male trade union members were unemployed between 1930 and 1939. In the post-War period the male unemployment rate was approximately 2%. Full employment was virtually the case, even for female members of the workforce. However, the situation in the 1980s has changed and unemployment rates have increased. It is extremely difficult for young inexperienced workers in general, and for young inexperienced female workers in particular, to obtain work.*

(Adapted from: McEvedy, M. R., Packham, G. & Smith, P. (1985). *Writing Assignments*. Melbourne: Nelson).

In short, academic writing aims to be clear, concise, unambiguous and accurate. Its characteristics include: objectivity, nominalisation and technical terminology.

## Objectivity

Since the emphasis of academic writing is on intellectual ideas and factual information rather than on emotions or individual experiences, you should avoid expressing personal

opinions arising out of intuition, feeling, prejudice or your own experience. If you are asked to write a reflective essay, however, this will include your personal experience.

### **Use of passive voice**

Academic writing traditionally uses the passive voice so that the use of pronouns is minimised. For example:

*Research was conducted into the breeding habits of marsupials in the north-west region of Victoria.*

The passive construction of this sentence ('was conducted') works to focus the reader's attention on the topic rather than the researcher. (It is taken for granted that the author was the one doing this research.) If this sentence is re-written in an active voice, note how the 'I', rather than the research topic, becomes the subject of the sentence:

*I conducted research into the breeding habits of marsupials in the north-west region of Victoria.*

There is, however, no hard-and-fast rule that says you can *never* use the active voice in academic writing. Instead, your choice of active or passive voice should be determined by the focus of your sentence, and by the conventions of your discipline. If in doubt, take your cue from your research readings or ask your tutor or lecturer what the conventions are for your discipline.

### **Making tentative statements (hedging)**

In academic writing it is common to make tentative or qualified statements rather than strong claims. There are a number of reasons why you might want to be cautious about being too direct or overly confident in your opinions. For one, you don't want to sound dogmatic. Since academic writing aims to be objective and rational, let the evidence speak for itself, and leave it up to the reader to decide whether your argument is conclusive. Another reason for hedging your claims could be that – even if you have a lot of evidence in support of your argument – you want to demonstrate your awareness that other interpretations or conclusions are plausible or that future research might refute your thesis.

You can make tentative statements using modals (such as *can/could, may/might*), verbs (*appear to, indicate that, seem to, suggest that*), adverbs (*almost, apparently, frequently, maybe, mostly, perhaps, possibly, probably*) and adjectives (*certain, likely, main, most, possible, probable, unlikely*).

Although double-negatives (e.g. *The results are not inconclusive*) can have a similar function, they are usually avoided in academic writing.

How assertive you want to sound will relate to the evidence you provide and might depend on your discipline. Pay attention to the use of qualifiers when you do your research and think about how strong you want your claims to be while writing.

### **Nominalisation**

Another common feature of academic writing is nominalisation, whereby actions/processes (verbs) become things (nouns). This practice enables more information to be compacted into a single sentence. Take, for example, the following sentences:

*Germany invaded Poland in 1939. This was the immediate cause of the outbreak of the Second World War.*

These sentences can be condensed into a single sentence by nominalising the action ('invaded') described in the first sentence:

*Germany's 1939 invasion of Poland was the immediate cause of the outbreak of the Second World War.*

Note that the entire first sentence becomes a single noun group – 'Germany's 1939 invasion of Poland'. Not only does this nominalisation enable the idea to be condensed to a single sentence, it also helps to focus the reader's attention on the main claim or issue: the contention that the invasion was the immediate cause of the war.

## **Discipline-specific vocabulary**

Another feature of academic language is the use of abstract and technical terms. It is important that you become aware of the common terms and specific language practices of your discipline. Compile a glossary of terms and definitions that you come across in the course of your study: Observe the language used by your lecturers and tutors. Make note of new vocabulary you encounter in your readings, and make sure you understand it! A specialist dictionary in your subject can also be useful. In your essays you will be expected to demonstrate your understanding of discipline-specific language and technical terms.

## **9. EDITING**

Once you have written a first draft, it is good to have a break so that you can distance yourself from what you have written. If you can, leave it for a day or two before returning to it. After a break you will be able to re-read what you have written with a fresh and more objective perspective. This way you will be better able to discover any inconsistencies in logic or argument, weak vocabulary or grammatical mistakes. You may even find that you have thought of some new idea to incorporate.

It is important to allow time for editing. You need to edit for structure and argument; expression, grammar and spelling; and correct referencing.

### **EDITING FOR STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT**

When reading through your first draft consider the following:

#### **Introduction**

- Does your introduction tell the reader how you understand the topic, e.g. does it give background or contextual information?
- Are key terms defined if necessary?
- Does it clearly preview your argument?
- Does it provide the reader with a map of your essay?

#### **Body**

- Does each paragraph have one and only one main idea?
- Do all the sentences in each paragraph contribute to that main idea?
- Do the points you are making follow logically?
- Is the connection between one paragraph and another clear?
- Is your argument consistent?
- Is any one section too long or repetitious?

## Conclusion

- Does the conclusion bring the strands of the argument together?
- Does it leave the reader in no doubt about your position in relation to the question?

As you edit, imagine someone else reading your essay. At every step, you need to tell the reader exactly what you are doing. If they have to stop and think, 'How does this point relate to the question?' or 'What is the point being made here?' then you have not done your job of communicating clearly to the reader.

After editing for structure, you should be happy with your argument and the way you have developed and supported it in the essay. You now need to edit for expression and spelling.

## EDITING FOR EXPRESSION, GRAMMAR AND SPELLING

You need to make sure that your grammar, punctuation and spelling are correct. Are your sentences complete, clear and concise? Do your sentences read easily and are they without ambiguities? Review your work at this point for unnecessary repetition and overuse of any words or phrases.

It's also important at this stage to check all of your pronouns: *he, she, it, they, them, this, that, these, those, who, which* etc. Is it clear what your pronouns are referring to? It can sometimes help to read your work aloud or ask a friend to read it for you.

## REFERENCING

Most departments require a specific referencing style (APA and Harvard are two common styles). If your department does not have a style guide for referencing and your subject reader or the assignment sheet doesn't nominate a referencing style, find out the name of the style generally preferred by the department or ask your lecturer which style you should use. Find a printed or electronic style guide and take some time to study it. Make sure you have applied the style *consistently* and *accurately* (down to the smallest detail!) to each reference in your essay. Remember also to create a reference list or bibliography which conforms to your department's referencing style requirements. If you use EndNote to generate your citations and reference list, this task will be greatly simplified.

Once you have edited for structure, argument, expression, grammar, spelling, and checked referencing, your essay is ready for submission.

## 10. SUBMITTING

You will need to find out from your department or faculty how to submit the essay. Some departments require online submission, either through the LMS or other means; others may require you to download and print an official coversheet, which you would then attach to the front of a hardcopy of your essay before submitting it to the nominated place. Normally you are asked to present a hardcopy (without a folder) stapled in the left-hand corner. Check your faculty or subject essay writing guide or LMS site on the correct procedure for submissions.

It is essential that you make a hard- and/or soft-copy backup of your essay before submitting it!

When you get your essay back, look over the feedback from the assessor. Use this to improve and develop your essay writing skills. If you have further questions about essay writing, consider making time to take one of the ASU's writing workshops, enrol in an

online moderated academic writing course in AIRport (<https://airport.unimelb.edu.au/>), or make an appointment with the ASU or equivalent learning support service in your faculty to discuss the draft of your next essay.

Mastering the skills of writing a good academic essay takes time, but following the steps in the process outlined here should set you on the way!

## 11. RESOURCES

### FURTHER READING

Bailey, S. (2006). *Academic writing: a handbook for international students* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Behrens, L., Beedles, B., & Rosen, L. J. (2005). *A sequence for academic writing* (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson/Longman.

Behrens, L., & Rosen, L. J. (2005). *Writing and reading across the curriculum* (9th ed.). New York: Pearson/Longman.

Davis, J., & Liss, R. (2006). *Effective academic writing 3, The essay*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, A. P. (2003). *A short guide to academic writing*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

McMeniman, L. (1999). *From inquiry to argument*. Needham Heights, Mass: Allyn and Bacon.

Savage, A., & Shafiei, M. (2006). *Effective academic writing*. 1, The paragraph. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shiach, D. (2007). *How to write essays: a step-by-step guide for all levels, with sample essays*. Oxford: How To Books.

Williams, J. M. (2000). *Style: ten lessons in clarity and grace* (6th ed.). New York: Longman.

### USEFUL WEBSITES

#### **Academic Skills Unit information and publications on**

- writing:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/writing>

- reading and research:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/reading>

- style:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/language/style>

#### **Papers: Expectations, Guidelines, Advice, and Grading**

by two English professors from the University of Toronto, Canada

<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~dwhite/papers.htm>

#### **Writing Lab**

from Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/writinglab/>

## **The Elements of Style**

by William Strunk

<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

## **Writer's Handbook**

from The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/index.html>

## **Writing a Research Paper**

<http://larae.net/write/paper.html>

## **Writing Resources**

from the Writing Center at the University of Michigan, USA

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/studentservices/writingresourcesreferences>

## **Ten Commandments of Writing**

by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper

<http://blogs.ubc.ca/rmst221/files/2010/01/10comms-dacre.pdf>

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/>

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Published by Academic Enrichment Services

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