

Writing Academic Essays

Originally the word 'essay' meant an 'attempt' or 'practice'. It has come to mean a piece of writing on a specific subject, but it is worth remembering its root so that we don't become too precious and perfectionist about his activity. Your essay should be 'trying out' ideas and arguments to see if they fit (as Raymond Chandler might have said).

In practice writing an essay usually involves responding to a question or title. The writer leads the reader from the title through to a set of conclusions. This can be quite complex and no formula can guarantee success, but there are a number of precautions that can be taken. And since success in HE depends largely on written work, it is important that you develop the required skills.

The purpose of writing an academic essay is to provide written evidence of your ability to:

1. research material,
2. select and organise arguments,
3. express your ideas in a logical, coherent manner, and
4. reach conclusions based on evidence.

Types of Essay

You need to be clear about which style of essay you are expected to produce - check this with your subject teacher. The following are the most common:

The reflective essay speaks directly to the reader in a conversational style. The reflective essay maintains a 'voice' or sense of the writer's personality.

The persuasive essay defends a position and makes a case, considers and refutes alternative arguments, and proves an opinion. It takes account of other sides, providing evidence that they are wrong: dismissing them without evidence weakens its argument.

The expository essay explains a topic, and often demonstrates the complexity involved in taking a position, which has to be defended, as in a persuasive essay.

The review evaluates a piece of work, implies a personal opinion. However, objectivity is maintained and, as in a persuasive essay, assertions are proved.

The literary essay explores meaning and construction in a piece of literature. It is more complicated than reviewing, focusing on structure, character, theme, style, tone, and subtext etc..

The research essay compares the work and texts of others, going to source material, synthesizing ideas on the subject and using them to explore a topic.