

Academic Essay Writing



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Introduction

Although this Guide is about writing academic essays, all the points in the guide are relevant to the whole range of academic writing you may do on the range of OCA courses.

This study guide provides some basic tips and advice on writing an academic essay, whatever subject you're studying. It's not a step-by-step guide; you'll have to discover the methods and techniques that work best for you. But it will give you some pointers to producing clear, concise and comprehensive written work that will enhance your practical creative skills.

If you want to know more, a good bookshop should stock a range of more detailed guides to academic writing. You'll also find relevant information on Harvard Referencing and academic writing on the OCA student site oca-student.com.

What is an essay?

An essay is a short piece of writing on a specific subject that stands alone. It will usually have a reference list - a list of books and other resources referred to within the text - and may have a bibliography and footnotes, but the main body of the text is complete in itself. As an OCA student, you'll usually be asked to write a 2,000 word critical review Level 2 (HE5) or up to 5,000 word essay at Level 3 (HE6) and at MA level.

Why do I need to write essays?

If you decided to do an OCA course for primarily practical reasons - for example because you wanted to develop your skills in photography or working with textiles - you may feel apprehensive about attempting a sustained piece of written work, particularly if this is something you haven't done for a long while. There's an important academic reason for asking you to address a theoretical aspect of your chosen area: a written research element is a prerequisite for accreditation at Levels 2 (HE5) and 3 (HE6) and to gain credits towards a degree or to gain a post graduate qualification.

There are other important reasons for including a theoretical element in OCA courses:

- Even if your main focus is on developing a career as a practising artist or photographer, you may have to present a reasoned argument on paper at some point in the future, for example if you need to submit a funding application.
- Writing things down will help you to focus on the issue at hand and clarify your thoughts - in other words, it's an important part of the learning process.
- Writing in your chosen area may provide you with new insights that will help you to develop your practice.
- Researching your chosen field will help you to situate your own practice within a broader context.

Referencing

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard system of referencing.

There are guides to referencing using the Harvard system on the OCA student website here: www.oca-student.com/resource-type/academic-referencing

Carefully note down all the source details whenever you pick up the quote or piece of information. Keep a separate list (e.g. in a notebook or card index) so that this information doesn't get lost or thrown out. If you don't want to interrupt the flow of your writing, highlight references to other people's work as you write and use your list to complete the referencing later.

Whenever you note down a quote, make sure that you put quotation marks around it. If you do this, there's no chance that you'll forget and write it down as your own words later. Don't think that you'll sort out all your referencing at the end, because, by that time, you'll probably have forgotten what's come from where.

Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event – and ensure that you don't inadvertently plagiarise someone else's work.

Referencing can seem a bit daunting if you've not done it before, but if you take the time to learn how to reference properly now, it'll save you a lot of time and trouble – and lost marks – later on in your studies. It's good to get into the habit of referencing early on in your studies.

What is a Citation?

When you use another person's work in your own work, either by referring to their ideas, or by including a direct quotation, you must acknowledge this in the text of your work. This acknowledgement is called a citation.

Students should be quoting and citing when carrying out academic writing. Having completed your research - reading and viewing work you will want to include the ideas and discoveries.

Be careful to include a balance of your own words, rephrasing or summarising others' and direct quotation; e.g. avoid a long string of quotes.

To avoid inadvertently plagiarising work - see below, OCA ask that you use the Harvard Referencing system.

When you are using the Harvard style of referencing, your citation should include:

1. The author or editor of the cited work
2. The year of publication of the cited work
3. The page number of the work cited

See UCA's guide to Harvard referencing for information and examples of how to write citations. http://community.ucreative.ac.uk/media/pdf/t/q/UCA_Harvard_referencing_guide.pdf

Plagiarism and how to avoid it

Plagiarism means passing someone else's work off as your own. Occasionally students do this deliberately, but it's more likely to happen by mistake, for example if you take a sentence (or more) from another text and insert it into your essay without indicating where it's come from. Whether it's deliberate or accidental, plagiarism is an offence and may result in you failing the course. See the student regulations Document M here; www.oca-student.com/sites/default/files/oca-content/key-resources/res-files/student_regulations_2015_2016_1.pdf

Tutors have a lot of experience of student writing and will usually be able to spot a change of style, even if you've tried to disguise it by changing some of the words.

There should be no need to plagiarise because you're free to make use of other writers' work, provided that you acknowledge it properly. Develop a system to make sure that you never unwittingly plagiarise someone else's work.

Please ensure that the digital copy of your essay that you submit is saved as one of the following versions, Plain text (TXT), Rich Text Format (RTF), Portable Document Format (PDF), Microsoft Word™ (DOC and DOCX) or Corel WordPerfect®, so we are able to check your work with plagiarism software.

All students will be asked to confirm at the time of submitting work for assessment that the work;

- is their own, not copied from elsewhere, and that any use of someone else's ideas or words has been appropriately acknowledged and referenced using the Harvard system of Referencing, guides for which can be found on the student website; <http://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/academic-referencing>
- has been produced explicitly for that course unit, not copied from work undertaken previously.

Choosing your essay title

You won't usually be given a set essay title but you may be asked to write a critical review of a particular practitioner, movement or piece of art work or explore an aspect of your chosen discipline. This gives you the freedom to pursue your own interests and enthusiasms but it also means that you have to think very carefully about the topic you choose to write about.

Avoid choosing a very broad topic that you can't possibly research adequately in the time available - nineteenth-century French art, for example, or even just French Impressionist art.

Choose a topic that has a very clear focus, so that you can see immediately where you're going with it and what you need to include - or not. So, if you're interested in the work of the French Impressionists, you could concentrate on a particular artist or small group of artists or a particular theme - Impressionist representations of the city or female exponents of Impressionism, for instance.

The best way to give yourself a clear focus for your writing in the absence of a set question is to write one yourself - in other words, choose an essay title that contains an actual question or an implied question. So, for example, you could entitle your study of French Impressionist art 'What was new about the way in which the French impressionists represented the city?' or 'Was Impressionism essentially a male artistic movement?'

Alternatively, you could choose a title along the lines of 'The female painter's contribution to French Impressionism' which contains the implied question 'Where did female painters sit within French Impressionism as a whole?'

Your title should pose a question or problem. Your essay will then set out the arguments around this issue and, at the end, answer the question or resolve the problem.

Structuring your essay

Structure your essay in a way that answers the (actual or implied) question or resolves the issue set out in your essay title.

You'll find it helpful to think about your essay in three main sections:

- The introduction
- The middle section
- The conclusion.

Your essay will also have a list of references and, possibly, a bibliography. See the OCA student site for more information on Harvard Referencing.

The introduction

The introduction to your essay should be quite short - a paragraph is normally enough - but it needs to do quite a lot. Your introduction will re-iterate the question set out in the title - or 'unpack' an implied question - and explain briefly to the reader how you plan to go about answering it. You can point to the likely conclusion of your essay by saying what you expect to find, or you can leave it open and simply let your argument unfold.

Your introduction is an important part of the framework of your essay but it also needs to draw the reader in and make them feel that it's worth continuing to read. Look for something punchy or arresting to get the reader interested.

Consider the following two sentences:

'This essay attempts to establish whether women artists played a significant role in the Impressionist movement.'

'Critics give lip service to the idea of women Impressionists, but are they just being polite?'

The first sentence does the job but doesn't exactly grab the reader, whereas the second opens up an area for debate within the subject. Are artists like Berthe Morisot up there with the big names like Manet or is there an element of political correctness at work here?

This example highlights why many writers leave the introduction until last. Your research might suggest new angles that you hadn't foreseen at the start and you may need to re-work your introduction - and even your title - to absorb this. That's fine - as long as your final draft answers the question that you've set out in its title. When you start to write, think in terms of a working introduction - but be open to the idea of making changes later if you need to.

The middle section

This is the main part of your essay where you'll develop your argument. Remember that you're writing for the benefit of a reader who may not know much about the subject you've chosen, so you'll need to guide them through it in a clear and logical manner. If you just write down a series of random points - however interesting they are individually - you'll confuse and frustrate your reader.

Imagine that you're writing for the intelligent 'person in the street'. They may not know much about your topic, but they will be able to follow a coherent argument.

Develop your argument in a series of paragraphs, each of which deals with a separate theme or stage of your argument.

Organise your paragraphs in a way that takes the reader through your argument in a logical sequence towards your conclusion.

Link your paragraphs (see below) so that your reader can actually see the direction your argument is taking rather than having to work it out for themselves. Where appropriate, signpost the stage your argument has reached and where it's going next. Within each paragraph (i.e. each stage in your argument), organise the various points in a logical way that clearly develops that part of your argument. Try not to make more than one point in each sentence and use linking words or phrases to show the relationship between one point and the next. Long, complicated sentences containing two or more points will make it much harder for the reader to follow your argument. Keep it simple.

There's more on writing style later in this guide.

Linking and signposting

It can be difficult to grasp the distinction between 'linking' and 'signposting'. Links are words or phrases that take you from one sentence or paragraph to the next, in effect giving you a clue as to what's coming next and how you should interpret the next sentence. If a sentence starts with 'Therefore...' or 'So...', for example, you know that it's going to draw some sort of conclusion from what's gone before. A link can refer back as well as forward. If a sentence or paragraph starts with 'On the other hand...' you'll expect the next sentence to offer some sort of counterargument to what you've just read. But it also implies that the sentence you've just read is not the whole picture.

Signposts do something slightly bigger. They show you where you are in the argument and where it's going to go next. Consider the sentence, *'It's clear therefore that Manet was an influence on Morisot's work, but what's less clear is how she influenced Manet in return.'* This signals that you've said all you're going to say about Manet's role in the relationship - which is widely known - and are planning to move on to less charted territory concerning Morisot's influence on Manet.

Don't worry too much about what's a link and what's a signpost. Some phrases do both. Striking the right balance with your linking and signposting is a matter of judgement. You want the reader to be clear about the way your argument is going, but you don't want your essay to sound tedious or patronising. This is something that will come with practice.

Ask someone else to read your work from time to time. Can they follow your argument? Your tutor doesn't have time to agonise over every paragraph with you but will be more than happy to review your initial draft and suggest where you can make improvements to this and all other aspects of your essay-writing.

The conclusion

The conclusion draws your argument together and answers the question posed by the title and set out in the introduction. It must be based on what has gone before:

- Don't introduce new information in the conclusion.
- Don't draw any conclusions that aren't backed up by information that you've already presented.
- As with the introduction, keep your conclusion short and to the point. As a general rule, your conclusion should represent about ten per cent of your essay. Your reader has read several thousand words of argument and at this point will simply want to know what inference you've drawn from it and why.

A good writing style

The key to writing a good essay is to keep things simple. If you've chosen your title carefully, you're halfway there. Inexperienced writers are often inclined to 'waffle' to disguise a lack of material; on the other hand, too much material becomes overwhelming and it's easy to tie yourself in knots trying to squeeze in all your hardwon research. If you've chosen a sensible essay title or topic that offers you plenty of research scope without being too broad, it will be much easier to get your thoughts down on the page.

Keep your sentences clear and reasonably short. Unless you're a very confident or experienced writer, avoid very complicated sentence structures. Don't try to make several points in one sentence. As a general rule, stick to one main point for each sentence.

Varying the lengths of your sentences and paragraphs will allow you to introduce some variation without departing from a clear and straightforward style of writing. Don't make a special effort to sound 'academic'. Your tutor and the course assessors want to see evidence of relevant research and a sound grasp of your topic. They don't expect your essay to sound as if it's been taken from an academic journal.

Don't over-use the passive voice because this can make your writing sound pompous. Mixing the active and passive voices can lend variety to your writing, but the active voice generally says what you need to say much more directly. (An example of the passive voice would be '*The Bauhaus was founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar in 1919*' as opposed to the active '*Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919.*') Always avoid using slang, jargon, clichés and jokes.

First or third person?

Students often worry about whether it's alright to use the first person ('I decided to investigate how Judy Chicago's political beliefs have influenced her textile work because...') rather than the third person ('This study looks at the connections between Judy Chicago's political beliefs and her textile work...'). Traditionally, academic writing uses the third person, unless the author is expressing a personal opinion so, ideally, you should try to use the third person for the major part of your essay. Some people find this quite difficult, however, and end up sounding dull and 'bureaucratic'. Write in whatever way makes your point most clearly and allows your reader to follow your argument. But do try to be consistent - if you keep alternating between first and third person you'll confuse your reader.

Tenses

Increasingly, on radio and television, you'll hear people talking about cultural history in the present tense ('At this point in his career, Don McCullin turns large format landscape photography...') rather than the past tense. This is a matter of personal taste. The important thing is to use tenses consistently and not to jump about between the two unless there's good reason.

Spelling and punctuation

Feelings tend to run very high in this area - look at the letters pages of the broadsheets. Many people argue that the important thing is meaning and that spelling and punctuation don't matter as long as the meaning comes across and the piece is more or less grammatically correct. The problem is that poor punctuation can stand in the way of meaning and spelling mistakes irritate the reader.

If you keep your sentences short and simple, punctuation needn't be a big issue. If you're not confident about using semi-colons and colons, for example, don't use them. It's perfectly possible to write good English without them. A good way of testing your punctuation is to read your work out loud. If you have problems with reading a particular sentence aloud, the likelihood is that there's something amiss with the grammar and/or punctuation.

All written work submitted to your tutor must be typed, which means that you have the advantage of grammar and spell checks. These are useful up to a point, but beware the spell check in particular. No spell check will tell you you're wrong if you say 'David Hockney went too live in California', for example. You can always ask a family member or friend to read your draft and check for spelling mistakes.

There isn't room in this guide to discuss all the nuances of English spelling and punctuation. If you're not confident in this area, there are plenty of comprehensive guides available, for example the *Oxford Guide to Effective Writing and Speaking* (second edition, OUP, 2001).

Taking a view

Don't be scared to express critical opinion in your essay - in fact, a good essay should do this. But you must make it clear whose opinion you're giving. If you're paraphrasing or directly quoting a critic's opinion, you must make it clear whose opinion it is, together with the date, within the text itself. Direct quotes must be absolutely accurate and enclosed within quotation marks. You'll also need to reference it appropriately at the end of your essay. You'll find more information about quoting and referencing on the OCA student site.

If you feel that you want to express your own opinion about an issue raised by your essay, that's fine too. In this case it's not only allowable but essential to use the first person. You must back up your opinion with some evidence, however: *'I believe that Martin Parr is the UK's most influential photographer because...'*

Similarly, watch out for uncorroborated statements. You can't just suddenly say something like, *'Female sculptors have always found it hard to get their work exhibited'* without providing evidence for your claim. This is arguably a worse offence than offering an unsubstantiated opinion, because here the point about female sculptors is presented as if it were a proven fact, whereas it may just be your own assumption.

Sometimes you'll want to make a judgement in your essay - for example about the merits of a particular argument. Making a judgement is perfectly permissible, provided that it's relevant to what you're discussing and appropriate in terms of the information available to you. But don't base any part of your argument on your own assumptions (e.g. that women artists necessarily find it hard to gain recognition) because your reader may disagree with them and you'll fatally weaken your own argument.

Layout

Your essay will be easier to read if it's set out neatly:

- Type all work that you submit to your tutor and label each page clearly with your name and student number. Use A4 paper, leaving generous margins for your tutor's comments.
- Use one side of the paper only and number your pages.
- Leave a space between each paragraph.
- Use double spacing to allow more room for comments.

Putting your essay together

If you haven't written an essay before - or haven't written one for some time - you may not be sure how to start or what order you should do things in. It might help to think about writing your essay in a series of stages, the first of which is to choose your essay title:

- Choosing your essay title (see above)
- Gathering your research material
- Organising your research material
- Writing an outline
- Writing a first draft
- Reviewing your first draft
- Writing your final draft

Don't think of this as a sequential list of tasks that you have to follow from start to finish. For example, you may want to write a preliminary outline as soon as you've chosen your essay title to help you with selecting research material. And it's a sensible idea to organise your research material as you collect it, so that you don't disappear under a vast and disorganised pile of written material!

Gathering and organising your material

Once you've settled on a title for your critical review or essay, you'll need to gather together the information you need. The more clearly focused your essay title, the easier this will be. You'll probably get your information from a range of sources. You'll find tips on using your local library and the internet in the OCA Study Skills guide. You might also want to visit some museums, galleries or other places of interest.

Think about how you're going to store the research material that you collect - and the notes that you develop from it. You might find a card index system useful, for example. Whatever method you use, note down full details of each book, periodical, article or website you look at so that you don't have to go back and look for it later. (You could write these on a card together with the salient points of the article.) This will save you work hunting for references later - and help you to avoid unwitting plagiarism (see 'Plagiarism' previous). Now might be a good time to start drafting an outline for your essay, so that you can classify your resources by theme.

Visit the student site for helpful guides on research and study skills, time management is important as you plan your essay: www.oca-student.com/resource-type/study-guide

Writing an outline

Your outline should be detailed enough to give your tutor a clear idea of how you're going to develop your argument. As a minimum, you'll need to set out the main themes, one for each paragraph in the main body of your essay. On the opposite page is an example of a good way to lay out your essay.

Some students like to have a detailed essay plan in front of them before they start writing; others prefer to start with a broad outline and see how it goes from there. Do what works best for you - you can always revisit your outline later as your essay starts to take shape. A word of warning, though - don't let writing your essay plan distract you from getting down to work!

Send your preliminary outline to your tutor for their comments. He or she will have read lots of student essays and will be able to spot likely problems; this could save you a lot of time and trouble later. For example, your tutor may feel that you're being too ambitious and that you need to rethink your essay title. Or there might be a gap in your argument that you haven't spotted. Your outline will also enable your tutor to plan how best to help you with your written work.

Title

Changes in the representation of the female figure in Western Art

Introduction

Woman, we see her as Venus and Madonna, as an allegory of love, virtue, chastity and poetry. She is Britannia and Liberty but she is also pointed at as inferior, malevolent and sinful.

The way the female figure is depicted in art depends on views and models of conduct of a society. It has to do with an artist's personal journey and conformism or nonconformism to social and cultural norms of a particular time.

Middle section

Paragraph 1

Ancient Greece and Rome The ancient Greeks believed that the idealized perfection of the physical came from the model of divine beauty.....

Paragraph 2

In the Archaic Greek period etc

Conclusion

The journey to complete this project has been interesting but not without struggle. It started with a proposal to my tutor; I wanted to understand how the representation of the female figure has changed during the various periods of the history of Western Art.....

Bibliography

Michael Benson, Back in the City

Writing a first draft

The important thing with writing a first draft is to make a start. As long as you're clear in your own mind where you're going, you don't necessarily have to start with the introduction - a lot of people leave this till last. You might want to draft some of the main sections first, perhaps starting with the one you feel most confident about. If you get stuck with a particular section, put it to one side and start writing a different section

- but do keep writing.

Don't worry too much about style at this stage - you can come back to that later.

The important thing is to get your ideas down. Remember that you're presenting an argument so, for each theme, you need to:

- Explain your ideas
- Illustrate them with examples
- Support them with evidence
- Use links and signposts to take your reader step by step through your argument.

When you've completed your first draft, print it out and read through it carefully. (For some reason, mistakes are easier to spot on paper than on screen.) Ask yourself some key questions:

- Have I answered the question posed by the title? (This is the most important question of all.)
- Will the intelligent 'person in the street' be able to follow my argument?
- Is there too much/too little information?
- Does each paragraph deal with a separate theme?
- Are the paragraphs in the correct order?
- Is each theme explored logically within its paragraph?
- Have I provided enough links and signposts?
- Have I repeated or contradicted myself?
- Have I provided evidence for the points I make?
- Are there any clumsy or overlong sentences?
- Are there any spelling or punctuation errors?
- Are all quotations and sources referenced correctly?

It may help to read your draft aloud - to yourself or to someone else. If you've got time, it can also help to put it to one side for a day or two. When you've worked hard on a piece of writing, it's easy to get too close to it so that you can no longer view it objectively. When you come back to it after a short break, you may spot all sorts of things that you didn't notice before.

Don't worry if your work still feels a bit 'rough' - this is a first draft. You may feel that your introductory paragraph is a bit pedestrian, for example, but you can come back to this when you've got your tutor's comments.

Reviewing your first draft

Try to send your first draft to your tutor well before your final assignment to give your tutor plenty of time to respond and to give yourself time to do a thorough review in the light of his or her comments.

Try not to get upset by your tutor's comments. If you've worked long and hard on your essay - particularly if you're new to essay-writing - it can feel very disheartening to get it back covered in comments. Although it may feel as if your tutor is responding negatively to your work, this is really not the case. Your tutor's comments are intended to be constructive and give you an opportunity to remedy any problems such as a break in the logic of your argument or inadequate referencing.

You don't have to slavishly incorporate your tutor's comments. Your tutor is an expert in the field but he or she will be quite happy to enter into a dialogue with you if you're not happy about any of the points they've made. Together, you should be able to come up with a solution that satisfies both of you.

Writing your final draft

A final draft is an opportunity for you to make some last-minute changes as well as acting on your tutor's advice. It's important that you're happy with the end result, as well as your tutor. When you've made your changes, go through your final draft carefully again, asking the same questions as you did with your first draft. If you've added new material, or moved things round, you might have interrupted the flow of your original argument.

Read your final draft aloud again before you submit it.