Editing

Editing involves checking whether all your points are in the right order and that they are all relevant to the question.

Be ruthless at this stage – if the information isn’t directly answering the question, cut it out! You will get many more marks for showing you can answer the question than you will for an unordered list of everything you know about a topic.

Put yourself in the reader’s position – can they follow the points you are making clearly? You know what you are trying to say, but will your reader? Are there gaps in your reasoning to be explained or filled?

Proofreading

Identifying your own mistakes and correcting them is an important part of academic writing: this is what you do when you proofread.

Ideally leave a day between finishing your essay and proofreading it. You won’t be so close to your work, so you will see your errors more easily. Try reading your essay aloud, as this will slow you down, make you focus on each word, and show you when your sentences are too long.

It can help to have a friend read through your work but developing your own proofreading skills is better. Your friend won’t always be available!

Also check that all your references are complete and accurate (see our paper and online guides to Referencing).

For more information....

See Essay writing 1. Planning your essay
See Essay writing 2. Writing your essay
See the Study Advice website for guides on Referencing, Proofreading and Academic writing.

This guide is the third of three looking at essay writing at university. It includes advice on:

- Good academic writing style
- Integrating evidence and your own ideas
- Critical analysis
- Editing and proofreading

Academic writing style

Academic essays should be written in a formal style. Avoid:

- clichés (“the flaws in this argument stand out like a sore thumb”)
- contractions (e.g. don’t, aren’t, it’s)
- phrases that sound like speech (“well, this bit is really fascinating”)
- subjective descriptions (“this beautiful sculpture”)

Use the first person “I” only where appropriate (e.g. when writing up your own experience or a professional case study). Where possible use the third person, for example “It can be argued...” instead of “I think...”

Use plain language – you don’t have to search for a more “academic-sounding” word when a simple one will do. Markers are looking for clear and accurate expression of ideas, not jargon or confusing language. Shorter sentences are usually clearer than long complex ones, but make sure it is a whole sentence and not just a clause or phrase. (See our paper and online guides on Academic writing for more advice on this.)

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Integrating evidence and your own ideas

Your argument is your reasoned answer to the essay question, supported by evidence. The books, articles, and research material that you read for your essay provide this evidence to back up your points. The way in which you select and interpret the evidence, and explain why it answers the question, is where you demonstrate your own thinking.

For each point that you make in your essay, you need to support it with evidence. There are many different kinds of evidence, and the type you use will depend on what is suitable for your subject and what the essay question is asking you to do.

For example, you might back up a point using a theory (one kind of evidence) then show how this theory applies to a specific example in real life (another kind of evidence).

A model for a paragraph that includes evidence and your own ideas:

1) Introduce your point (your own words)
2) Add the evidence to support your point (quoted or paraphrased evidence that needs to be referenced)
3) Explain how and why this evidence supports your point and what you think of it (your own interpretation and critical thinking)
4) Explain how the point helps answer the question (your own argument)

As you get more experienced with essay writing, you will want to adapt this model to suit the structure and shape of your ideas.

Critical analysis

Critical analysis is a key skill for writing essays at university; it allows you to assess the various ideas and information that you read, and decide whether you want to use them to support your points.

It is not a mysterious skill that is only available to advanced students; it is something we do everyday when assessing the information around us and making reasoned decisions, for example whether to believe the claims made in TV adverts. Nor does it always mean disagreeing with something – you also need to be able to explain why you agree with arguments.

Critical analysis involves:

1. Carefully considering an idea and weighing up the evidence supporting it to see if it is convincing.
2. Then being able to explain why you find the evidence convincing or unconvincing.

It helps if you ask yourself a series of questions about the material you are reading. These questions can act as a model to help you think critically:

- Who is the author and what is their viewpoint or bias?
- Who is the audience and how does that influence the way information is presented?
- What is the main message of the text?
- What evidence has been used to support this main message?
- Is the evidence convincing; are there any counter-arguments?
- Do I agree with the text…and why do I agree or disagree?

Including more critical analysis in your essays

Avoid unnecessary description – only include general background details and history when they add to your argument, e.g. to show a crucial cause and effect. Practice distinguishing between description (telling what happened) and analysis (judging why something happened).

Interpret your evidence – explain how and why your evidence supports your point. Interpretation is an important part of critical analysis, and you should not just rely on the evidence “speaking for itself”.

Be specific - avoid making sweeping generalisations or points that are difficult to support with specific evidence. It is better to be more measured and tie your argument to precise examples or case studies.

Use counter-arguments to your advantage – if you find viewpoints that go against your own argument, don’t ignore them. It strengthens an argument to include an opposing viewpoint and explain why it is not as convincing as your own line of reasoning.

For more on critical analysis see [http://learnhigher.ac.uk/Students.html](http://learnhigher.ac.uk/Students.html) or Stella Cottrell (2005), *Critical Thinking Skills*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.