Much of the work you will be asked to do at University is written. Written work is not only a way of communicating your understanding of a topic, but can also be a learning process in itself, prompting you to think about how to organise your knowledge and find new connections.

Essays are one of the most common ways you will be asked to communicate your learning at university. University essays are discursive and analytical. They need to be written in appropriate language and carefully referenced. Your marker will be looking out for errors, so make sure you have plenty of time to check your work meticulously.

To write a great essay, you need to control your ideas to produce a critical discussion that is well-supported with evidence from your reading and focuses on the brief. The advice in this guide will help you to do that.

Planning and structuring your essay

The first thing to do when preparing to write an essay is to make a plan. You could just rush in and write everything that comes into your head, but that would make it difficult for your marker to read and would reduce the effectiveness of your ideas. These will make much stronger arguments if you group them together than they would do on their own.

Answering the question

A very common complaint from lecturers and examiners is that students write a lot of information but they just don’t answer the question. Don’t rush straight into researching – give yourself time to think carefully about the question and understand what it is asking.

Our tip: Set the question in context – how does it fit with the key issues, debates and controversies in your module and your subject as a whole? An essay question often asks about a specific angle or aspect of one of these key debates. If you understand the context it makes your understanding of the question clearer.

Is the question open-ended or closed? If it is open-ended you will need to narrow it down. Explain how and why you have decided to limit it in the introduction to your essay, so the reader knows you appreciate the wider issues, but that you can also be selective. If it is a closed question, your answer must refer to and stay within the limits of the question (i.e. specific dates, texts, or countries).

Underlining key words – This can be a good start point for making sure you understand all the terms (some might need defining); identifying the crucial information in the question; and clarifying what the question is asking you to do (compare & contrast, analyse, discuss). But make sure you then consider the question as a whole again, not just as a series of unconnected words.

Re-read the question – Read the question through a few times. Explain it to yourself, so you are sure you know what it is asking you to do.

Try breaking the question down into sub-questions – What is the question asking? Why is this important? How am I going to answer it? What do I need to find out first, second, third in order to answer the question? This is a good way of working out what important points or issues make up the overall question – it can help focus your reading and start giving your essay a structure. However, try not to have too many sub-questions as this can lead to following up minor issues, as opposed to the most important points.

Generating ideas

Before reading - This is a really valuable stage which many people miss out, but it makes your
reading and planning much easier. Before rushing into your reading, note down your initial thoughts about the question - a spider diagram or mind map is good for this.

The kinds of things to note briefly are:

- What you already know about the topic – from lectures, seminars, general knowledge.
- Things you don't know about the topic, but need to find out in order to answer the question.
- Initial responses or answers to the question – what you think your conclusion might possibly be.

This helps you start formulating your argument and direction for answering the question. It also helps you focus your reading, as you can pinpoint what you need to find out and go straight to the parts of books, chapters, articles that will be most relevant.

After reading - After your reading, it is often good to summarise all your findings on a page. Again, a spider diagram can help with this.

Bringing together the key points from your reading helps clarify what you have found out, and helps you find a pathway through all the ideas and issues you have encountered. If you include brief details of authors and page nos. for key information, it can act as a quick at-a-glance guide for finding the evidence you need to support your points later.

It also helps you see how your initial response to the question might have changed or become more sophisticated in light of the reading you’ve done. It leads into planning your essay structure.

Planning your essay

Having a plan makes it much more likely that you will end up with a coherent argument.

- It enables you to work out a logical structure and an end point for your argument before you start writing.
- It means you don't have to do this type of complex thinking at the same time as trying to find the right words to express your ideas.

- It helps you to commit yourself to sticking to the point!

You need to work out what to include, and what can be left out. It is impossible to cover everything in an essay, and your markers will be looking for evidence of your ability to choose material and put it in order. Brainstorm all your ideas, then arrange them in three or four groups. Not everything will fit so be prepared to discard some points (you can mention them briefly in your introduction).

Outline what you are going to include in each section:

**Introduction**: Address the question, show why it's interesting and how you will answer it.

**Main body**: Build your argument. Put your groups of ideas in a sequence to make a persuasive argument. One main point in each paragraph.

**Conclusion**: Summarise your arguments and evidence, and show how they answer the original question.

**Writing a summary** - Some people plan best once they have written something, as this helps clarify their thinking. If you prefer to write first, try summarising the central idea of your essay in a few sentences. This gives you a clear direction for working out how you are going to break it down into points supported by evidence. You can then use one of the methods below to write a more detailed plan.

**Different planning methods**

**Spider diagrams / visual plans** - These are sometimes known as mind maps. This kind of plan gets all the main ideas down on a page with key words and phrases round the central question. You can then order your ideas by numbering the arms of the spider diagram. This method is flexible and creative, so is good to use first even if you like to order your points in linear form afterwards. Example of a spider diagram.

**Bullet points / linear plans** - This type of plan lists the main points using bullet points or numbers. It can be a brief outline of the main point per paragraph, or a more detailed plan with sub-
points and a note of the evidence to support each point (e.g. source and page no.).

**Our tip:** If you know you tend to write too much, cut down the number of individual points in your plan. If you find it difficult to write enough, expand on some of your points with sub-points in the planning stage.

No plan is perfect, so be prepared for your ideas to change as you write your essay. However, once you have an initial plan it is much easier to adapt it and see where new things fit if your thinking does change.

**Writing your essay**

When you are writing your essay, you will need to think about the particular role each section has in the overall essay. This will help you to see what information needs to be included and how you should be organising it. This page will help you to understand how each section of an essay functions.

**Introductions and conclusions**

Introductions and conclusions are not just the bits tagged on to the ends of your essay. They form a conceptual framework which the reader will need to understand your arguments. Always keep your reader in mind when writing the beginning and ending to your essay:

- What do they need to know at the start so they become interested in reading your essay and can follow the rest of your argument?
- What do you want to leave them with as the main message of your essay at the end?

The best introductions and conclusions tell the reader exactly what they need to know to understand the main body of the essay.

**Writing your introduction**

An introduction gives your reader a way in to your essay. It is like consulting the map before starting on a journey; it situates the journey in the surrounding landscape, and it identifies the main route.

You can think of an introduction as covering three things: what, why and how.

- **What** the question is about – explain your interpretation of the question and what it is asking you to do.
- **Why** the question is important – put the question into context and identify the main issues that are raised by the question.
- **How** you are going to answer it – let the reader know what you are going to cover in your essay in order to answer the question.

If you want to narrow down a very open-ended question, tell your reader that you are doing this in your introduction. Explain briefly that you are aware of the many issues raised by the question, but that you are only going to focus on one or two in detail… and why you have chosen these particular aspects.

Here’s an example:

**Question:** "To what extent do you agree that regional inequalities in the UK are persistent and widening?"

**What the question is about:** The links between geographical location and distribution of resources & wealth in the UK.

**Why this is important:** Because some regions in the UK are more prosperous and better resourced than others – Why is this? What causes the inequalities between regions?

**How I am going to answer it:** Have to narrow down "regional" and also "inequalities" – so will compare the unemployment rates, average salaries, and job opportunities in Oxfordshire and Lancashire as a case study.

**Writing your conclusion**

Reading a conclusion should be like looking at a photograph after coming back from the journey; it should capture the essence of the journey and allow people to reflect on where they have been.

You will need to summarise the main points of your argument, relate these points back to the question, and show the answer you have reached. Think about what your reader knows now that they didn't know at the beginning.

If your essay question asks you to come to a judgement, for example "To what extent..." or "How far do you agree…", this is the place to
clearly outline your reasoned judgement. It doesn't have to be a straight agreement or disagreement, but it is better to have a well reasoned side to your argument, instead of trying to combine every viewpoint into a muddled whole.

It is good practice not to introduce any new information in a conclusion, as the main task here is to close the framework of your discussion by referring back to the questions opened up in your introduction. However it is sometimes appropriate to look forwards and speculate about future developments or trends. In many disciplines the speculative paragraph comes just before the conclusion.

Your conclusion should leave the reader with a clear picture of your main argument, and also leave them feeling positive about your ideas.

Don't end your conclusion with:
- an apology, or a sentence that dwells on the incompleteness of your argument. For example, avoid finishing with, "If I had more time, I would also have covered...". You may wish to raise some limitations in the conclusion, but do this in the middle of the concluding paragraph, and then end on a strong, positive sentence, such as "It has clearly been shown that..."
- a rhetorical question. You may believe that it leaves the reader thinking deeply about your argument. However, it actually leaves the reader unsatisfied, as they expect you to come up with an answer to the question that you have raised.

Writing the main body sections
In the main body of your essay, you will be developing the ideas and arguments you have outlined in your introduction. You need to integrate your own ideas with evidence from your reading and other research, and critical analysis. It's better to discuss fewer things in more depth. Organise your writing in three or four groups of related arguments to keep your overall argument coherent and under control. Look for themes rather than putting all the arguments for, then all the arguments against. Your discussion will be more sophisticated and critical if you can integrate the fors and againsts in each paragraph.

Write in paragraphs and think of each one as a mini-essay:
- introductory sentence (what this paragraph is about)
- main body (statements, evidence and critical analysis)
- concluding sentence (what was said in this paragraph)

Make sure you've provided a reference for every idea you got from your reading. You will need to include a citation at the point where you mention the text, and also full details in your bibliography, organised in alphabetical order of author.

Stay focused as you're writing. Keep your essay question in front of you and keep in mind your end point - the main message that your essay is working towards. Make it clear how your arguments and evidence relate to the essay title and be ruthless in discarding anything that isn't relevant. Irrelevant information can actively lose you marks!

Getting started and keeping going
If you've made a plan, you will have a good idea of what you are going to include in your essay. That may not make it any easier to start writing!

You might either:
1. Start with your introduction. This can help you to get your ideas sorted, and give you a reason to stick with your plan.

or...

2. Leave your introduction until you've written the whole essay, then go back and add it later. Instead start with the paragraph or section you feel most confident about and build up from there. A good way to get started is to write down the questions rather than the answers. So for your introduction, you might write, "What is this essay going to be about? Why is it interesting? How am I going to organise my discussion?" Then try answering each of the questions in turn.

If you get stuck when writing your essay, it is sometimes because you are not clear what your main ideas are yet. Take a step back and write...
yourself one or two sentences, explaining in simple terms what you are trying to get across. In particular, think about the message you want to convey overall in answer to the essay question.

It often helps to explain your ideas to a friend, as putting things into words starts untangling your thoughts. Your friend can tell you the parts of your argument that they don't understand, and these are the points you need to clarify. (You can always do the same for them when they come to write their essay.)

If you know you take ages crafting each sentence, allow yourself to write a rough draft just to get all the ideas down. In this draft, type quickly without editing as you go along. Don't worry about the exact choice of words at this stage; it is much easier to work out the phrasing when you have all the points on paper.

Developing your essay writing

If you want your essay to get the best marks, you need to make sure everything is right: the way it's written, the use of evidence, and the critical analysis. You will also need to redraft and edit your work, and to make sure there are no minor errors that might make it look as though you have been careless. This page will help you to make sure that your essay gets the mark it deserves.

- Academic essays should be written in a formal style. Avoid:
  - clichés (“the flaws in this argument stand out like a sore thumb”)
  - contractions (“don’t”, “aren’t”, “it’s”)
  - phrases that sound like speech (“well, this bit is really fascinating”)
  - subjective descriptions (“this beautiful sculpture”)

Be cautious about using the first person "I". It should be used where the alternative would be inappropriate (e.g. when writing up your own experience or professional case study). In other cases, you might choose to use the third person, for example "It can be argued" instead of "I would argue". It's worth checking with your marker how they feel about you using the first person - for instance, it may be more appropriate in a humanities essay than a science one.

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.

Integrating evidence and your own ideas

Your argument is your reasoned answer to the essay question, supported by evidence. The books, articles, and other 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.

**Important:** every time you use an idea which you got from your reading, you MUST include a reference to where you found the material. This is the case whether you quote directly, or write it in your own words.

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, paraphrased or cited evidence that must 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 every day when assessing the information around us and making reasoned decisions: for example, whether to believe claims made in TV adverts or by politicians. 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. Try using these questions 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?

**Some ways to get more critical analysis into your essays include:**

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). It can help to highlight each in a different colour to see what the balance looks like.

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 your argument if you include an opposing viewpoint and explain why it is not as convincing as your own line of reasoning.

**Editing and proofreading**

You might have had enough of your work by now, and be hoping to just hand it in! However, it’s worth taking some time to check it over. Markers often comment that more time spent on editing and proofreading could have really made a difference to the final mark.

**Editing**

Editing includes 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 in a controlled and focused way 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? Have you provided signposts to show where your argument is going next, and where it’s been?
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.

If you often get comments on your sentences, try working on one paragraph at a time, and putting each sentence on a new line. This will make it much easier to spot common errors, for instance, sentences which depend on another sentence for their meaning, or are missing parts. Once you've checked it, you can join all the sentences back up in the paragraph again and move on to the next.

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!

While you're proof-reading, also check that all your references are complete, accurate and consistently formatted.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on Essay Writing. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/essays

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice