

How to write an essay

AN ESSAY EXAMPLE

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Course Name: 10 Essentials for Assignments

Assessment: How to write an essay

Teacher: Somebody Smart

Student: Carol Fearon

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How to write an essay

Whatever your age or level of education, most people find essay writing difficult. This essay will explain the processes involved in writing an academic essay or assignment. This essay will summarise the basic requirements for an essay by looking at three stages from the question to the completed essay. Since this *is* the introductory paragraph, notice how the first sentence introduces the topic while the second states what the essay will do. Next demonstrate you have read about the topic and then explain how you will proceed.¹ Remember, an academic essay is not a novel or “who-dun-it”, the introduction should tell the reader what you are going to say.²

The first stage in the process is to read the question well.³ Analyse the question to discover what the teacher requires you to do, so note any words that tell you what to do, such as discuss, explore, critique. For instance, “compare” means to look for similarities between two or more situations or theories. Whilst “compare and contrast,” indicates you have to look for similarities *and* differences. Beware; a wonderful *description* of a theory will not get you good marks if you have been asked to *critique* that theory. Critique involves asking what, why, who, where, when, and how questions.⁴ Some questions have several parts so check which are compulsory and make sure you answer them all. Other questions ask you to choose from several options. It is advisable to make your choice early, so you are not looking for books close to the deadline when the selection may be limited. Some teachers recommend a word count for each section of your essay; make a note of it since marks will be allotted accordingly. If you write only a hundred words when the recommendation was five hundred words, then no matter how brilliant your words, you will not get top marks for that section.

¹ Ian Hunter, *Write that Essay: A Practical Guide to Writing Better Essays and Achieving Higher Grades* (North Ryde, NSW: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 13-19.

² Hunter, *Write that Essay*, 3-4.

³ Michael P. Jensen, *How to Write a Theological Essay* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2012), 22-27.

⁴ Though rather complicated at times, the following book has some clear diagrams illustrating how to think critically (see what I did there – that was a basic critical evaluation). Kate Williams, *Getting Critical* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

If you do not understand the question it is good to ask for help. You can approach or email your teacher, talk to a student advisor, or even a student in your class.⁵ However, do not wait until the deadline is looming, get help before everyone else is under pressure.

The second stage of an assignment is research.⁶ Start with what the teacher has covered in class. The online readings for that topic will probably be relevant, so check them out. The course text should help, so read the relevant chapters. Relevant dictionaries will give a good summary of a topic.⁷ In addition most teachers give a bibliography covering the course, if it seems overwhelming – ask the teacher to make recommendations from the list. Then there is the library. The library catalogue can be searched by topic as well as by author and title. Academic articles are available on the *Tūhuratanga* database; these can also be searched by topic. The structure of the question should inform the structure of your assignment, so draw up your basic structure before you start to read seriously.⁸ This can save you hours of reading that may be interesting but not relevant to the question, furthermore, if you know what you are looking for it is much easier to find it.

The quality of your source material is important. An academic source is generally one that has bibliographic references; this means footnotes or a bibliography. The exceptions are classics, such as Augustine, or authors who are iconic in their field, such as Henri Nouwen. Most books written for a popular audience will not have footnotes, and there are many in the library, this is when your judgement becomes important, as Jeanne Godfrey says, “remember that for academic work, *who* wrote something is as important as what they wrote about.”⁹ Unless the work is a classic such as Barth or Thomas Torrance, try and use the most recently published books or articles.¹⁰

⁵ The librarians can also be very helpful, both with the question and in helping you learn how to access resources.

⁶ Jeanne Godfrey, *How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 5-12.

⁷ Mostly these will be located in the reference area of the library. If you study by distance the relevant sections can be scanned and emailed to you. Often you can find the contents page on Google so you know what to ask for.

⁸ Hunter, *Write that Essay*, 9-11.

⁹ Godfrey, *How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays*, 6.

¹⁰ Godfrey, *How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays*, 7-8.

If the question says, “use at least four academic sources”, then use at least FOUR sources (using capitals for emphasis is *not* encouraged in academic literature – only italics used sparingly). This does not mean reading four complete books.¹¹ The contents page of a book will guide you to relevant chapters. If that is not much help, the opening paragraph of a chapter should tell you what it is about. This is when you appreciate how important and helpful a well written opening paragraph can be.

Most authors agree that taking notes when you read enhances your learning, but few detail how to do it since everyone tends to develop their own methods.¹² My advice is to put page numbers alongside your notes, so you can reference easily later. If you want to use a quote it is good practice to photocopy or scan that page and the book details so you can be totally accurate.¹³ Some people find it easier to photocopy and mark up any relevant book sections.¹⁴ But remember, copyright law says you cannot copy or scan more than 10% of a book. Articles can be downloaded and printed for personal use.¹⁵ Writing in library books is *not allowed* and may mean you have to replace the book.

Now is the time to write, this is the third stage of your assignment. Your notes need to be organised into the basic structure you planned earlier.¹⁶ At this stage, if you are unsure you are on the right track, you can send a bullet point outline to your teacher to check.¹⁷ Each section of your essay needs to be written as a first draft and then structured into paragraphs (see next paragraph). Remember to check word counts at this stage. References need to be added.¹⁸ The introduction is often the last thing to be written as it tells the reader what the essay is about.

The first sentence of any paragraph will introduce the topic of the paragraph; a paragraph has only *one* topic.¹⁹ The second sentence will amplify the topic, put your idea in context, or link

¹¹ This is an excellent article on how to read well by former Carey lecturer Tim Bulkeley, “How to avoid reading books (read effectively),” *Sansblogue*, <https://bigbible.org/sansblogue/education/how-to-avoid-reading-books/>

¹² Godfrey, *How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays*, 18-22.

¹³ These two disciplines will save you hours of last minute searching over the course of your degree.

¹⁴ You can also scan and use the highlighting software available with Adobe or Preview.

¹⁵ Nothing that you copy, or download is to be used to circulate among friends or publish in the church magazine because it is just so wonderful. Copyright law says it is for your own personal use only.

¹⁶ If you like to cut things up and re-arrange them – be sure you keep track of what notes come from which book/article.

¹⁷ Do not send a full draft unless you have talked to your teacher and gained permission.

¹⁸ Some people like to reference as they go; others add them later in one hit.

¹⁹ Hunter, *Write that Essay*, 25.

to the question. Following sentences give examples or bring in references to support what you have said.²⁰ There are three main ways of referring to other people's ideas. The most obvious is the quote. Williams and Carroll note that, "Generally students quote too much and comment too little."²¹ So when you quote, comment on it and say why you have used it. Secondly, you can refer to an author by name and paraphrase or summarise their argument. For example, Williams and Carroll make it clear that referencing is important since the reader needs to know where your evidence comes from.²² Thirdly, you can restate something in your own words without mentioning the source. In *all these cases* you need to reference the source with a footnote.²³ When you have adequately covered the topic you write a concluding sentence. This summarises the argument or point you have made and may link to the next paragraph. Remember, whenever you start a new topic you need a new paragraph.

The word count of your essay is important.²⁴ If your essay is too short it is likely that you lack depth in your work. Look at each paragraph; can you add detail or a quote, have you fully answered the question? If your work is too long this is good. You can choose the strongest sentences and points.²⁵ Depth is important rather than a broad approach. You can limit your scope, just explain what you are doing. If you are concerned check with your teacher to see if that is okay. Remember, to be over or under the word count by more than 10% carries a penalty.

When you have finished writing do not submit and hope for the best. You need to re-read to check that it flows well. Have you covered the entire question? Are there any weak areas that need more work? Check spelling and sentence structure.²⁶ Make sure you are referencing correctly according to the SBL Handbook of Style.²⁷ Do not forget to include a bibliography.²⁸

²⁰ Hunter, *Write that Essay*, 20-25.

²¹ Here it is obvious you need to footnote the reference: Kate Williams and Jude Carroll, *Referencing and Understanding Plagiarism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 34.

²² This also needs a footnote to their work and the page range of their ideas on this topic: Williams and Carroll, *Referencing and Understanding Plagiarism*, 5.

²³ Williams and Carroll, *Referencing and Understanding Plagiarism*, 26-41.

²⁴ Remember that footnotes and bibliography are *excluded* from the word count.

²⁵ When you are over your limit and yet cannot bear to leave something out - a comment or an aside - put it in a footnote. Footnotes can be up to 20% of your assignment but not more.

²⁶ This is a fun site to help with grammar, there are many others: "Grammar," *The Oatmeal*, <https://theoatmeal.com/tag/grammar>

²⁷ This is available in the library.

²⁸ The bibliography lists all the reference works you have used in your essay. So, if you didn't footnote it don't put it here (there can be exceptions to this *if* your teacher says to include works *consulted* as well as referenced).

Carey stipulates font size 12 and 1.5-line spacing.²⁹ Once this is done try and get someone to read your work before you submit. Leave enough time for them to do it; especially if it is a student advisor or a fellow student, they will have pressures as well. Another reader will pick up mistakes you have missed. All academics get people to read their work, this is not 'cheating', it is finding the weakness before it is too late.³⁰ There are marks for readability and style as well as for content; if you nail this then you gain extra marks.

At the end of your essay a concluding paragraph sums up what you have said. Try not to rush this conclusion, it is your farewell to the reader and should leave a good impression.³¹ Writing essays is a skill, not an innate ability, and so it can be learned. Be encouraged, it may start off seeming very hard, but it gets easier with practice. Paying attention to the stages involved will produce essays that answer questions fully and clearly and attract good marks. One final word of advice is to read the comments teachers write on your essays – think of it as personal coaching.

²⁹ Footnotes are usually size 10 (or two sizes smaller than the body of the essay) with 1.15 line spacing for clarity.

³⁰ For clear advice on what help is ok and what is letting someone do the work for you, see this book: Williams and Carroll, *Referencing and Understanding Plagiarism*, 62-65.

³¹ Hunter, *Write that Essay*, 40.

Bibliography³²

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³² Put a page break after the last line of your essay and then the bibliography will always appear nicely at the top of the page following your essay.