

How to write an assignment

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INTRODUCTION

Most of your written assessments will be in the form of essays, assignments, or research papers. These may range from a few hundred to a few thousand words. For this reason, it is important that you learn to write good essays, to get good marks, and to graduate. But in addition to good grades, essays are to be pursued for their intrinsic worth. If you can write a good essay it means several things:

- You can gather *relevant information* on a given topic.
- You can *process and evaluate* this information.
- You can *represent existing ideas* honestly and *present your own ideas* logically.
- You can use English (or your chosen tongue) to *express these ideas* in a form that can be easily understood.

So, we write essays (or other forms of assignment) to help us learn and demonstrate our learning.

Assignments all have the same process:

- Understand the question.
- Research the information.
- Evaluate your information.
- Organise and start to draft the structure for your work.
- Write, edit, refine.

Reading the question

You will be given a specific essay question to answer. Assignments can look complicated. They often have several sections, make sure to read **all** the instructions before you start—then take it *step by step*.

At the **end** is important information:

- **Word count:** you will be penalised for more than 10% over or under the word count.
- **Due date:** this will help you to plan.
- **Weighting:** as a percentage, this will help you know how much time to spend on the assignment.

Sometimes an assignment will give you a *choice of topics*. **Choose which topic you will answer as soon as possible**, this will give you plenty of time to research and write.

How to make the decision—writing an essay on a topic that appeals to you is easier than writing on a topic which does not interest you. Take the following points into account:

- Go with your gut instinct (what immediately appeals to you).
- Make sure your topic has enough resources available.
- Don't always choose the topic you are most familiar with (how will this enable God to speak to you through your study?).

Once you have chosen a topic, narrow it down. For example: You choose to write a 1000-word essay on salvation. What can you say about salvation in 1,000 words? Narrow it down to salvation as defined or illustrated by the apostle Paul. Narrow it down again, salvation as expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans. Narrow it down again, Salvation as expressed by the apostle Paul in Romans by the word 'reconcile'. You now have a much more *focused* essay topic and one which could provide a brief but interesting overview of the term reconciliation as an aspect of Paul's understanding of salvation within the book of Romans.

By *narrowing the topic*, you provide space for more depth in your essay.¹ This will get easier as you learn how to do research. If you are unsure, ask your teacher if what you propose is ok.

¹ Depth is the academic word for detail. For example, you will put in more detail in describing a Trout than if describing fish in general.

WHAT IS THE QUESTION ASKING?

If a specific question is asked, then a specific answer is required. Many students who are very competent, submit essays that **fail to answer the question**. So, read the question **carefully** to understand what the teacher is looking for, the learning outcomes will help with this.² Highlight what you must **do**, for example, reflect, analyse, or compare. And what you need to do it **with**, how many key points and whose opinion? Once you understand what the question is asking you can answer it **specifically**. If you do not understand ASK your teacher. Ask a specific question: What do you mean by this? How should I structure that?

Here are some examples of how to *read* different essay questions:

INTRODUCTION TO PASTORAL CARE

Assignment 1: Reading Report (600 words)

For this assignment, students need to write a **Reading Report** based on the course's required text—namely, Cloud and Townsend's *How People Grow. What the Bible Reveals about Personal Growth*. Sydney: Strand Publishing, 2001.

Structure for reading report assignment

Here the teacher tells you how to plan your essay—use it! Following a set structure teaches you how to write well.

1. A **title page** at the front of your assignment with the **course number**, **course name**, **assignment name**, **teacher's name**, **your name**, the **due date**, and your **word count**.³ (The word count excludes the words from your title page, footnotes, and bibliography). You will also need to include a separate page at the end of your assignment for your bibliography.

All assignments need a title page with these elements—maybe make a template to use each time. You also need to copy and paste the *Declaration of originality* onto the title page.

Remember this—it makes a big difference.

You need to think about what you are reading—see the **Please note** on next page...

Here is the limiting factor—just two things, and how to write about them—explain.

2. **Interaction** with Cloud and Townsend's material, including:
 - a. Identifying **two** new thoughts or learning in regards to pastoral care that you specifically appreciated in the book and an explanation as to **why you feel** this way. Please include appropriate quotations and footnotes of the material to which you refer. (Approx. 300 words).

Here is where you question the authors—it is ok to *disagree*. It is a skill you need to learn. Just remember to explain.

- b. An idea or application you **question, doubt, or disagree** with from the book, and an **explanation** as to why you feel that way. (Approx. 200 words).

This is the **application**—all courses at Carey have this. It makes you apply the learning to your own situation. Remember it needs to relate to what you wrote in the first parts.

3. **One** thoughtful idea as to how you would specifically **apply** your learning from the book **to your pastoral care work** in your own cultural and/or church context. (Approx. 100 words).
4. A **bibliography** with Cloud and Townsend's book and at least three additional academic works that you have engaged with to produce the report.

For details of how to do a bibliography see *10 Essentials How to do Referencing*.

² You will find learning outcomes just below the textbook requirements on the course outline.

³ An example of a title or front page is available on *10 Essentials How to Write an Essay*.

Please note: I am looking for more than just a competent summary of the book. I am looking for your ability to **agree** and **disagree** with the authors, as well as your ability to **apply** your learning to your own situation. Each task identified above needs to be engaged with in your assignment. Marks are awarded in proportion to the recommended word count.

Length: 600 words
 Due date: 22 March
 Worth: 20%

This is what the teacher is asking for in your essay.

INSIGHTS INTO CHURCH HISTORY

Assessment 1: Biographical Study

Discuss the **significance** of one of the following figures:

- Philip Melancthon
- John Knox
- Menno Simons
- Richard Baxter
- Charles Simeon
- Hannah More
- Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury
- Billy Sunday
- Billy Graham
- Pope John XXIII
- Mother Teresa

What is important about the person's life—what did they achieve? What difference did they make?

Pick one!
 When you choose your figure make sure you have good accessible resources to enable you to create A GOOD ACADEMIC ESSAY.

"Major modern" = a source recognised as of good quality by the academic world. "Modern" = relatively recent, say, after 1950.

Structure for written essay: Your study will have a **bibliography** of at least **4 quality items** and will include at least **one major modern** biographical history book and **one academic article** (or, alternatively, two major modern biographical history books).

If you are choosing a recent figure like Billy Graham or Mother Teresa it is important that you utilize quality **academic** historical resources and not light-weight popular material.

You need critique/analysis of the person not 'fan' material.

Whoever you choose to study, it is crucial that you **do not simply summarise** the person's life. Focus instead on **analysing** their life. **Why** was it significant? **Why** is it worth us knowing about that person today? Identify **4 or 5 reasons** why they are significant, and then shape your essay around those reasons. A good history essay does not just describe events or tell a story about someone. Rather, it presents an argument, it defends a position⁴—using historical facts in support of that position.

Length: 1,000 words
 Due date: 31 March

Analysis = asking questions.

Structure for presentation:

1. Past (45%)
 - Demonstrates accurate understanding of **key events** in the person's life.
 - Displays good awareness of the person's **context** and their **significance** in church history (that is, the impact they had on the church and/or society).

Only the important stuff—that had impact in their day.

⁴ See the section on *Writing the Assignment*.

2. Present (17%)
 - Demonstrates **insight** into the **influence** of the person’s life and leadership on the contemporary church.
3. Future (33%)
 - Explores the possible implications for **your personal** leadership and ministry practice.
4. Academic Measures (5%)
 - Evidences thorough and careful research.
 - Constitutes a clearly structured and **well-articulated argument**.
 - Provides appropriate referencing and bibliography (with at least 4 quality academic sources).

This is the application to today—first the church.

This is the application to YOUR situation—ministry—it is 33% so this is 1/3 of the essay!

Not a random group of points/ ideas! It needs progression and order—the next section on *Planning* will deal with structure.

The *structure* of the essay will be covered in the section on planning.

Here is an example of an **exegetical** question from:

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Exegesis of a Gospel passage

An exegesis of a Gospel passage in its **historical** and **literary** setting; ability to **relate** the results of study of the biblical text to **contemporary** life; locating and using appropriate resources; ability to present work clearly in correct academic format. Use both **primary** and **secondary** sources to support what you say.

This summarises your task, later this may be all the information you get—so use the detailed explanations well—it will help you learn to understand questions.

“Primary” sources are original documents, e.g. the Bible.
“Secondary” sources are books about the topic, commentaries etc.

Structure for the written essay: Write an **exegesis** of Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV) following the method outlined in week 6 and as detailed below:

There was a lesson on this—check out week 6 notes!

An exegesis is a type of essay. There are others, critical, comparative, case study, book review, etc.

Explanation:

1. INTRODUCTION—What is this passage about?
 - **Summarise** its content in a sentence or two. Do not retell the whole story.
2. CONTEXT—Where does this passage fit in Mark’s narrative? The context of the passage (approx. 300 words)
 - **Mark’s Gospel as a whole:** Locate the passage in **one sentence** into the structure of Mark’s Gospel.
 - **The immediate context:** Describe the **narrative context** of your passage. What material is placed immediately before and after this passage? Are there specific connections that are significant for understanding the passage? Remember that bio (ancient biographies) are carefully structured to convey meaning. This narrative context is vital for interpretation.

Look for descriptive words—they tell you what to do. Don’t know what they mean—google or ask.

Teachers often recommend the number of words for parts of an essay; this reflects how much work each part requires and how important it is to the overall essay. So, *follow the recommendations*—teachers will use them to allocate marks.

This tells you exactly what to do—if the information is less helpful, you can ask the teacher what they are looking for.

Find out what terms like this mean so you know what to do.

3. CONTENT—What does the passage say?
The content of the passage (*approx. 900 words*).

- Work through your passage **verse by verse** highlighting all significant features in the text.

This may include:

- Providing some **background** information on the historical, cultural and religious background to what is described.
- Pointing out any **distinctive** Markan literary features such as repeated words, verbs (and their tense and voice) which are particularly important.
- Ending with a brief and clear **summary** of what **message** this passage would have conveyed to **Mark's contemporaries**—in other words, what is its specific message “in their town”?

If you are not sure how to do this there are many books on how to do exegesis in the library. It involves the highlighted features:

REMEMBER—do not quote long passages of scripture. Give their reference and explain how they help us read the passage.

Obviously, you cannot deal fully with every aspect of the passage within the word limit, and **you will have to decide** what you think is most important for the text's message but do look carefully at the detail of the passage and **try not to omit anything of major significance** for its interpretation. **Demonstrate awareness** from your reading of the main issues debated in the commentaries about this passage. A well-written essay will be referenced biblically and be supported with secondary literature. A Study Bible is not a suitable secondary source at university level. The librarians are available to help you find suitable sources... email or ring them.⁵

Your aim is to answer the question well—not defend a minority reading of the text. Leave controversial opinions to class or student discussions.

4. APPLICATION—Integration of key point.
The application of the passage (300 words).

How could the message of this passage be applied in **your context?** Develop **one** application to your own context (to yourself as a follower of Jesus, or to a particular part of the Christian community) of the general truths and principles you have identified. This should be practical and specific.

There are many sources to help you develop an application. Many commentaries have a contemporary application.

Use **footnotes** to identify sources of quotations, information and insights, and where appropriate to supplement the discussion in the main body of the assignment. Footnotes are NOT included in your word count.⁶

This means all works you use, not only those you quote or reference. Often you are only asked for ones you have referenced.

Provide a **full bibliography** in correct format of all works used in the preparation of your assignment. It is not necessary to list the Bible in the bibliography – I assume you'll be using that! Do however list commentaries, other books and articles. This is NOT included in your word count.

There should be at least **FOUR** items in your bibliography.

Four means four. it is the minimum that is necessary. More would be better, but not too many—you will notice repetition. That means there is no new information.

Resources:

Your primary source is the **Bible** itself. Be sure to read the passage you select several times and make your own notes and observations. Get to know it really well. Read it in various translations to pick up different nuances. The relevant section of the course text book will be helpful as you begin to gather information.

These are hints on how to work well. Take advantage of them!

Bible Dictionaries will also have articles on the Gospel (e.g., the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* in the IVP Dictionary series or the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*). A Bible dictionary article is an excellent place to start gaining background information for your exegesis.

⁵ For details of how to find resources, check out *10 Essentials How to Learn Efficiently*.

⁶ For help with footnotes consult *10 Essentials How to do Referencing*.

Commentaries on Mark's Gospel will be essential. There are four commentary entries scanned and on CareyOnline to which I recommend you refer, although you may replace these with other recent commentaries. I encourage you also to use your information literacy skills to track down appropriate resources in the Carey library and the online journal database.

Length: 1500 words in total
 Due date: 26th April 11.55pm
 Worth: 30%

This means extra credit will be given to those who do some extra work to find their own resources.

GLOSSARY OF STUDY TERMS

There are some key words that are commonly used in questions, the meaning of these should be clearly understood.

Analyse	Take to pieces and determine what makes up the various parts. Examine minutely and critically.
Compare	Liken one thing to another and discuss the degree of likeness and unlikeness.
Contrast	Set things in opposition to show the difference between them, including the degree of difference, if any. N.B. Many examiners ask to 'compare and contrast' but if you are only asked to compare, this means to contrast as well (and vice versa).
Critique	Weigh up all aspects by careful examination and deliver an opinion upon.
Define	Give the exact meaning.
Describe	Set out the features, qualities, or properties of what is asked, in detail. In some subjects' diagrams as well as words are required.
Discuss	Consider or examine by argument; investigate for and against.
Enumerate	Specify the items by numbering the points.
Evaluate	Interpret, analyse (take apart the whole), then synthesise (put together) the significant points and make a judgement upon them.
Examine	Inquire into, investigate by considering critically, weighing and sifting information/opinions.
Explain	Make plain, clear; expound and illustrate the meaning of, and account for.
Illustrate	Make clear, explain by means of description and example.
Interpret	Explain the meaning of - which generally involves translating information from one form to another thereby showing a complete understanding of it.
Justify	Prove or show to be just or right; to show grounds for.
List	Number the items or ideas down the page.
Outline	Give the main general features, facts or principles.
Prove	Demonstrate by argument or reasoning, test.
Relate	Tell, recount; establish relation between.
Resolve	Separate into its component parts (analyse) and explain
Review	Go back over and look carefully and critically.
State	Set out the facts explicitly and with formality.
Summarise	Give a concise account of the main points.
Trace	Follow the course or track of events. ⁷

Doing the research

FINDING AND SELECTING INFORMATION

It is now time to get that precious information from the library. While this may appear to be the hardest stage initially, it becomes a simple procedure with a little practice.

1. You need to **create a bibliography** for your topic. That means finding out where you can access information. The *course notes* will normally provide a bibliography for the course. *Online readings* and the *course text* are also valuable. It is a good idea to begin to look for information in *Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias*. Often, they will have bibliographies as a guide to further reading. They are found in the **Reference Section** of the library (though earlier editions can be found on the general shelves), some are available online as *e-books*.
2. Begin with the most **up-to-date** and thorough resources available and work backwards. This eliminates the need to read a lot of smaller, less useful works.
3. **Journal articles** are essential to any serious research and a great source of information for all students. They are more up to date than books, frequently better written and more digestible. They are on the journal shelves in Carey library but are accessible online via *Tūhuratanga* and *OpenAthens* (see the library guide).⁸
4. Find which **shelves in the library** cover your topic, and skim through the books, looking for any information that is relevant to your topic. There are labels on the shelves for topics, Dewey numbers at the end of the shelf, and you can always ask where your topic might be located.
5. **Commentaries** are valuable sources for exegesis as well as helpful summaries on texts and topics. The most up-to-date works will be the most helpful. For distance students, many commentaries are available online.

You should now have a comprehensive bibliography or list of useful books. This is the research phase of your essay complete. In addition to your course books you should now read this material and start taking notes.⁹ As you take notes it is important for referencing that you note page numbers, full details of the source, and make sure quotes are completely accurate.

Planning your essay

So, you have decided upon your essay question and you have compiled a reasonable bibliography. You have then read the material from the most up-to-date works, books, journals, etc. and have made notes as you read. Now what? Now it is time to plan your writing task.

During *planning* we decide what to say; during *writing* we work out how to say it.

Planning is concerned with *content*, not style. It involves re-reading notes, sifting and sorting facts, ordering ideas, and deciding priorities. It requires taking a stance toward a question topic, or issue from your research.¹⁰

Again, *flexibility* is essential in preparing an essay. A minority of students prepare entirely in their heads and rely on flashes of inspiration as their pen flies across the page or as the keys click on the keyboard (some of them do well). For most of us, however, we must plan in detail on paper using headings, sub-headings, bullet points, etc. Find out how you work best and improve your technique over time.¹¹

Be warned—the danger of having no written plan is that your writing will lack coherence and direction. The reader will sense that you are not in total control of the material. The essay will be disjointed, and you will get lower marks.

Even authors of fiction have a clear plan. J.K. Rowling famously wrote the end of the last book in the Harry Potter series seven years before the first book was published.

If you know where you are going, getting there is easier.

There are many ways to plan an essay. First is using the question to give structure to your essay. This will ensure you cover all the points you need to.

⁸ Journal articles cannot be borrowed, only used in the library.

⁹ Note-taking is covered in 10 Essentials *How to Learn Efficiently*.

¹⁰ "Taking a stance" means having a personal opinion about the subject or a particular interpretation of the subject.

¹¹ There are many books on how to write an essay. Ask where they are, and get all the help you need.

PLANNING USING THE QUESTION

READING REPORT (600 WORDS)

Structure for reading report assignment:

1. A title page at the front of your assignment with the course number, course name, assignment name, teacher’s name, your name, the due date, and your word count. (The word count excludes the words from your title page, footnotes, and bibliography). You will also need to include a separate page at the end of your assignment for your bibliography.

2. **Interaction** with Cloud and Townsend’s material, including:
 - a. Identifying **two** new thoughts or learning regarding pastoral care that you specifically appreciated in the book and an explanation as to why you feel this way. Please include appropriate quotations and footnotes of the material to which you refer. (Approx. **300** words).
 - b. **An idea** or application you question, doubt, or disagree with from the book, and an explanation as to why you feel that way. (Approx. **200** words).

3. **One** thoughtful idea as to how you would specifically **apply** your learning from the book to **your pastoral care work** in your own cultural and/or church context. (Approx. **100** words).

4. A bibliography with Cloud and Townsend’s book and at least three additional academic works that you have engaged with to produce the report.

No introduction is needed for a book report. An introductory sentence will do. Then a paragraph for each of the two ideas, with reasons why.

Each paragraph needs to be 150 words.

Next paragraph is one thing you disagree with—one paragraph, 200 words.

One idea to use in your context—brief as only 100 words—but still a separate paragraph.

Please note: I am not looking for a summary of the book. I am looking for your ability to agree and disagree with the authors, as well as your ability to apply your learning to your own situation. Each task identified above needs to be engaged with in your assignment. Marks are awarded in proportion to the recommended word count.

Length: 600 words
 Due date: **23 March**
 Worth: 20%¹²

It is important that your time planning takes note of due dates. There are penalties for late submission.

Remember this! it is MOST important in a plan to concentrate most depth/words where the teacher wants to see it.

The percentage tells you how many hours work you should give to this.

This is a simple structure, three sections and four paragraphs. There is a video on how to structure a paragraph in the writing section.

¹² A course is 150 hours--36 hours of lectures, then readings, etc. So, between 10 and 20 hours work for this assignment.

BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY (1000 WORDS)

Discuss the **significance** of one of the following figures: I assume you have picked one!

Structure for written essay:

Your study will have a bibliography of at least 4 quality items and will include at least one major modern biographical history book and one academic article (or, alternatively, two major modern biographical history books).

If you are choosing a recent figure like Billy Graham or Mother Teresa it is important that you utilize quality academic historical resources and not light-weight popular material.

Whoever you choose to study, it is crucial that you do not simply summarise the person’s life. Focus instead on **analysing** their life. Why was it significant? Why is it worth us knowing about that person today? Identify 4 or 5 reasons why they are significant, and then shape your essay around those reasons. A good history essay does not just describe events or tell a story about someone. Rather, it **presents an argument**, it defends a position—using historical facts in support of that position.

Length: **1000** words
 Due date: 31 March

↑
 State the point you are making, then back it up with evidence. Each point is one paragraph. The skill is picking the significant points of their life.

Structure for presentation:

1. Past **(45%)**

- Demonstrates accurate understanding of **key events** in the person’s life.
- Displays good awareness of the person’s **context** and their **significance** in church history (that is, the impact they had on the church and/or society).

↑
 Focus is church/society not personal life. This is the evidence part.

2. Present **(17%)**

- Demonstrates insight into the **influence** of the person’s life and leadership on the **contemporary church**.

↑
 Could be general, but usually there is one thing that stands out (the significant factor in detail is better than waffle about influence). This is one paragraph, only 170 words. Don’t forget evidence!

3. Future **(33%)**

- Explores the possible implications for your **personal** leadership and ministry practice.

↑
 This is a significant part of the assignment (two paragraphs). People find application hard, but you need to pick one or two points and develop them for your life/ministry.

4. Academic Measures **(5%)**

- Evidences thorough and careful research.
- Constitutes a clearly structured and well-articulated argument.
- Provides appropriate referencing and bibliography (with at least 4 quality academic sources).

←
 This will affect your whole essay. See these marks as a bonus for writing well, so work at the skills involved. Look at the section on writing and referencing.

EXEGESIS OF A GOSPEL PASSAGE (1500 WORDS)

Structure for the written essay: Write an **exegesis** of Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV) following the method outlined in week 6 and as detailed below.

Explanation: The context of the passage (approx. **300** words).

This **section** is 300 words, approximately two paragraphs.

1. INTRODUCTION—What is this passage about?

- Summarise its content in **a sentence or two**. Do not retell the whole story.

Look for the words that tell you the depth you need.

“Describe” implies more depth, but not engagement with the material.

2. CONTEXT—Where does this passage fit in Mark’s narrative?

- Mark’s Gospel as a whole: Locate the passage in **one sentence** into the structure of Mark’s Gospel.
- The immediate context: **Describe** the **narrative context** of your passage. What material is placed immediately before and after this passage? Are there specific connections that are significant for understanding the passage? Remember that bio (ancient biographies) are carefully structured to convey meaning. This narrative context is vital for interpretation.

3. CONTENT—What does the passage say?

The **content** of the passage (approx. **900** words)

This is four to six paragraphs, depending on the number of points you have and the detail you give each. This is the major section of the essay.

- Work through your passage **verse by verse** highlighting all significant features in the text.

This **may** include:

- Providing some **background** information on the historical, cultural and religious background to what is described.
- Pointing out any **distinctive** Markan literary features such as repeated words, verbs (and their tense and voice) which are particularly important.
- Ending with a brief and clear **summary** of what message this passage would have conveyed to Mark’s contemporaries—in other words, what is its specific message “in their town”?

Don’t miss anything important. What you highlight will determine the balance of background and Markan features. Remember, one topic per paragraph.

Obviously, you cannot deal fully with every aspect of the passage within the word limit, and **you will have to decide** what you think is most important for the text’s message but do look carefully at the detail of the passage and **try not to omit anything of major significance** for its interpretation.

You need to make decisions about what to include.

4. APPLICATION—Integration of key point

The application of the passage (300 words)

Two paragraphs, one application needed. So you will need to develop the application in some detail.

How could the message of this passage be applied in **your context**? Develop **one** application to your own context (to yourself as a follower of Jesus, or to a particular part of the Christian community) of the general truths and principles you have identified. This should be practical and specific.

Length: 1500 words in total
 Due date: 26th April 11.55pm
 Worth: **30%**

You need to spend at least 20 hours (up to 30) on this assignment. So, plan your time.

Remember to leave some words for a closing sentence or two.

AN ALTERNATIVE ACTION PLAN:

1. **Read over your notes:** Make a list of every important point or topic or reference.
2. **Classify and organise the points:** Put those important points into some form of logical, chronological, and theological order.¹³ What needs to be known at what stage? Classify by themes, issues, priorities. Keep the essay question in front of you as you plan. Material not directly related to the question—discard!
3. **Work out the Main Argument:**¹⁴ This will be refined and altered as you progress. But what is it exactly that you want to say? If you are presenting a point, then present it positively and with force. If you are summarising an argument, then make sure it is logical and authoritative. Whatever the purpose of your essay is, make sure that you achieve that purpose. Don't apologise for your ideas or shrink from presenting them forcefully in a scholarly manner.
4. **Introduction:** Every essay needs to have an introduction. This gives a clear statement of the problem, issue, or topic, defines terms, and indicates the limits of the essay. The introduction must be clear, crisp and engaging. You want to entice the reader into the essay, not put them to sleep!
5. **The body:** This should be a logical development of an argument or point of view. It should attempt to be a *progressive* solution to the problem stated in the introduction. As you took notes you would have made subject headings, these may form the basis of paragraph topics. Each new topic needs a new paragraph.
6. **Conclusion:** This section presents the findings of the study and a solution or an approach to the solution of the problem initially stated. Above all, the conclusion should be a positive regurgitation of material already covered. DO NOT introduce new material in the conclusion. It should satisfy the marker that you have met the requirements of the task.
7. **Cross Reference:** Now cross reference your notes with your plan. As you read books for your essay you made notes. Every time you note an idea, issue, or quote, make sure you write an accurate reference down for it. That way you don't have to run to the library every five minutes to check up on material. If you quote someone, make sure you have the book's details including the page number of the quote, etc.

Writing the Essay

A good essay needs to focus on **style, structure, and content**. The challenge in writing an essay is to blend energy and flair with authority and credibility.

1. STYLE

Purpose

In a good essay the reader is aware that the writer is in control of the material from the first sentence to the last. There is a sense of direction and purpose. Most essays lack a sense of purpose because the writer has attempted to complete the essay in one go. An essay will convey a sense of purpose if the writer has thought, planned, and read sufficiently *before* writing the essay.

Voice

Writers need to sound confident in their essays, but they also must be reasonable, fair-minded, and respectful of other opinions. *You must state your position clearly and then back it up* with examples, illustrations, and arguments. If you disagree with another position that is OK, but *you must state why*.

¹³ This is an excellent help with essay planning: Ian Hunter, *Write that Essay: A Practical Guide to Writing Better Essays and Achieving Higher Grades* (North Ryde, NSW: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

¹⁴ What is an academic argument? It is a well-reasoned and well supported case for your point of view (or someone else's point of view that you support). It is respectful of other's opinions and even though forceful, it is always polite and considerate (calling your opponent uninformed or ignorant is not allowed).

Types of essays

There are *many different types of essays* from exposition to argument. Your different courses will require different styles of essays.

1. **Expository essay**—You will be marked on your ability to:
 - Understand the issues clearly: You must identify the important ideas, rank these ideas in order of importance, and understand the relationship between the ideas.
 - Select appropriate material for discussion: You must collect and sift information, only mentioning the most important points. Make sure your material is balanced and thorough.
 - Organise this material: The essay needs a clear focus which is made explicit in the introduction and then developed in the body of the essay. Present ideas in a logical, orderly fashion.
 - Write a clear, straightforward answer to the question: Pay attention to the details of style.
2. **Argument essay**—You will be marked on your ability to:
 - Form and articulate: a sharply focused and well-reasoned argument.
 - Support the argument: You must be able to prove each part of the argument using factual evidence and sound logic.
 - Defend against attack: You need to anticipate objections to the argument and answer them.
 - Be objective and critical of the argument: Acknowledge areas of weakness in your own position.
 - Point out weaknesses: you build a case by exposing weaknesses in the opposition's argument.

2. STRUCTURE

The following points are important when writing the body of an essay.

- **Balance description with analysis**: it is not enough to just recite facts and support them; you must illustrate your argument. *Why* is this point important? Of *what* relevance is this to the whole essay? It is *your* job to make this clear.
- **Go straight to the point**: Markers are not impressed with waffling. They admire essays which get on with the business of answering the question in a direct way. The introduction sets the pattern in this respect.

3. CONTENT:

The most important aspect of the essay is *what you say*.

Building a case

- Every essay contains an argument or a position you wish to convey, the role of the main argument is crucial to the essay.
- It determines what supporting ideas and evidence the writer chooses to include in the essay.
- It determines the order of ideas.
- It gives focus and coherence to the piece of writing.

The main argument must be **precise, well-focused, engaging, and well-reasoned**. It must also be capable of being developed in the space allowed by the essay. This means choosing a topic and then narrowing it down.

Once the main argument has been stated you then convince your marker to accept it or at least accept that it is a reasonable argument. You do this by using four means.

1. **Support the argument**
 - Cite facts to back up your claim. This must be specific.
 - Explain logically why your argument makes sense.
 - Quote experts who agree with you. These should be relevant and reputable authorities.
2. **Concede its weaknesses**

Ignoring a powerful challenge to your argument does not make it go away. All arguments have weak points. A marker is impressed when you can be critical of your own ideas as well as those of others. It shows an honest, objective, and fair perspective and gives the essay credibility.

3. **Defend the argument**

This involves raising any objections that may arise and answering them.

4. **Refute the opposition**

Expose the weaknesses in the opposition's argument by pointing out where *faulty logic* and *inadequate evidence* has been used. By refuting your opposition's case you can then argue for the validity of your own.

If you start to use these four strategies, you will see your grades increase along with your understanding of the issues involved. You will also develop a clearer 'voice' of your own.

GETTING BEYOND THE FIRST DRAFT

Good writing involves about 40% *research*, 20% *writing*, and 40% *revision*. Your first draft will need to be *re-written* with spelling corrected, and all the thoughts logically stated.

Think about your audience, an essay is not preaching or chatting with friends. You need to use academic language. However:

Make it *interesting* and easy for your teacher to read. They have a lot to mark!

Check you have covered **all** the question asked. Too many students write great essays but miss a whole section.

Is it too short or too long? The solution is the same:

- You need to *narrow* the topic. Then you know what to read.
- You read *more deeply*.
- So, you have *more to say*—or less to say it about!

Now take a break...

- Have a **break**—ideally a day, but even a coffee break will help a fresh approach.
- Read the essay **aloud**. This will reveal poor sentence structure.
- Get a **friend** to read it. They will spot gaps in your argument.

This is not cheating. All academics get people to read their work prior to publication. Just do not ask your friends to fill the gaps. That is your job!

Do not forget to leave time for doing the bibliography and footnotes. Getting those right will add marks.

FINALLY, FORMAT

Unless otherwise stated in course requirements, assignments should be typed in a nice clear font—Arial, Calibri, Times New Roman, or Cambria—12 point font with 1.5 line spacing. Footnotes are usually size 10 (or two sizes smaller than the body of the essay) with 1.15 line spacing.