

Essay writing

Very few university essays will ask you to simply describe a series of events or methodology, instead you will often need to apply your subject knowledge and understanding by developing a critical appraisal of the topic at hand.

This study advice sheet explores the process of writing an essay from establishing the subject you are being asked to write about, to utilising tutor feedback on the final product.

Preparing your essay

Note any restrictions in length

You will need to adhere to these, focusing your thoughts into a short essay may require careful consideration.

Explore the criteria

Have you been given any indication of what you will be expected to do? How will the essay be marked? Can you ask your tutor for clarification?

Examine the Question

Many clues are contained within the essay question. The following question:

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of introducing Peer Appraisal into an organisation and justify its use to employees

is asking you to **consider** the advantages and disadvantages of introducing peer appraisal and then to **justify** its introduction probably by formulating an opinion of its overall benefits.

Some key words are more explicit in their demands than others. If you are at all unclear about a question ask for clarification **before** you try and write anything. Further information is included in the **What Does The Question Mean?** study advice sheet in this series.

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Why write essays?

- Consolidates your understanding
- Offers greater insight to a subject
- Stimulates your mind by assembling an argument
- Provides practice in using technical or specialist terminology
- Enables you to express your thoughts clearly and logically
- Encourages you to think and read widely and deeply

Make it clear for yourself

Write a quick version of what you think you are being asked to do. Rewrite the title or question in your own words. You may like to discuss this with friends or your tutor.

Such a statement will help you evaluate your essay once it has been written.

Putting together a response

Once you have identified what you are being asked to do, you will need to consider what information and ideas you are going to put in the essay.

Ask Questions

- What do I already know?
- What do I need to know?
- How can I find this information swiftly and efficiently?

These questions can then form the basis for your background research.

Searching for information

Based upon your questions you will need to identify what sort of information you are looking for and where would be the most appropriate place to find it.

Remember that there are many different sources of information, including:

Sources of information

- **Books**
- **Journals**
- **Abstracts**
- **Theses**
- **Published reports**
- **Statistics and surveys**
- **CD ROM**
- **Electronic databases**
- **World Wide Web**
- **Audio/video**
- **Your own lecture notes**
- **The minds of friends**

Find more specific advice on sources of information on your module's reading list and in your module outline.

Don't be afraid to look as broadly as possible. When looking for information you should remember the following:

- Search actively by asking questions when reading (see study advice sheet '**Reading Effectively**')
- Take structured notes
- Keep a record of your sources

Structuring your essay

Now that you have established your supporting information, you will need to structure this in a clear and coherent way.

You can put together a logical structure for your essay as follows:

- Introduction
- Main body
- Conclusion

Introduction

This is a very important part of your essay and may be better written later on when you know what you've put into the main body of the essay itself. You should:

- Indicate the main issues you plan to develop within the essay
- Give your essay a context - consider the wider issues or areas for discussion
- Show that you have understood the question

Main body of the essay

- Write a paragraph for each main point. Your line of argument should be developed through several clear key ideas.
- The first sentence of each paragraph can state a main point or pose a question.
- Support your ideas with examples and references from your wider reading.
- Develop arguments coherently and logically.
- Relate one idea to another - don't simply produce a string of unlinked ideas. Make sure that your essay is balanced - don't spend too long on one idea or too little time on another.
- Avoid over-stressing your own opinion at the cost of supportive evidence and a balanced argument.

Conclusion

- Summarise your main points in the conclusion.
- Offer a firm or tentative answer to the question.
- Relate your conclusion to your introduction.
- It may be useful to identify wider implications or lines of further investigation

Sifting supporting material

Using your outline plan, sort through the material that you have collected together and prioritise this by asking the following questions.

- What is centrally relevant?
- What is partially relevant?
- What is simply irrelevant?

Relate the material to your structure. Remember that such information should enhance your argument not dominate the essay. Your tutor is after your opinion and your ability to use theories and sources.

Writing the first draft

It is now time to write a draft of your essay.

While some people feel content with writing a completed version straight off, this is probably inadvisable for most of us. A draft version engages you with your material and allows you to take an overview once it has been completed. You can then evaluate your draft, making any amendments as you go along.

When approaching the first draft of your essay you will probably need to set aside enough time to write it completely without any interruptions. It is important that the thoughts and ideas flow freely throughout the length of the essay. Any significant breaks might shatter your concentration.

Writing for others

- **Write simply and directly**
- **Limit your sentence length (avoid rambling)**
- **Ensure that each paragraph has a focus**
- **Always remember that someone else has to understand what you say**
- **Use clearly labelled pictures (graphs, diagrams, etc.) if they will save words**
- **Use sub-headings to define each section**
- **Take care to clearly acknowledge the work of others**
- **List the sources of information**
- **Leave plenty of space for your tutor's comments**

Having written your essay

Don't just write your essay - make sure you read it through.

If possible try and leave your essay for a day or two once you have completed the first draft. This will give you time to distance yourself from the first creative outburst and make appraisal of your written work all the easier. It also gives you time to think of other things which could be included.

Word-processing

Most essays are word-processed but you still need to check over the spelling and grammar. Spell-checkers will not identify inappropriate words if they are spelled correctly. For example, using **affect** instead of **effect** or **crate** instead of **create**.

Checking your essay

If you carried out many of the earlier planning stages, this process should be easier than you think. To check your essay compare it with your interpretation of the original question and any assessment criteria that have been provided.

Further information

This Study Advice Sheet has been produced by Student Services at UW.

We support student learning across the University through the publication of materials such as these.

Other study advice sheets that you may find useful include:

Learning at university

Learning journals

Making oral presentations

Minimising stress

Organising yourself

Plagiarism & referencing

Reading efficiently

Revision and exam skills

Study at distance

Taking notes

Using feedback to improve your work

What does the question mean?

Working in groups

Writing reports

All study advice sheets are available to view and download on the following website:

www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills

or you can follow the links from your SOLE page.

You may also find it useful to check out the **'Moving On'** pack, accessible from the link on your SOLE page.

'**Moving On**' is a study skills package specifically designed to help you prepare for Higher Education & to become a successful student.

Contact: studyskills@worc.ac.uk

If you find any problems with your essay, ask yourself how these could be most easily resolved. Be realistic. It may not always be possible to start again from scratch.

If you are having real problems with your writing, consult your tutor.

Always bear in mind that your essay has to be read and assessed by somebody else.

Referencing and Citations

You should always list at the end of the essay the sources of quotations and other people's work that you have referred to throughout your essay.

Acknowledgements should include the author's name, the title of the book, article, report etc., the year or date of publication, the place of publication and the publisher. For example: Ghanian, H.C. (1994) Principles of Physics. London: W.W. Norton & Co. Ltd.

References can be listed either alphabetically by author or listed in the order they appear in your writing. Do check if your department has a preferred style. Whichever method you use, apply it consistently.

See the Plagiarism & Referencing advice sheet for further guidance.

Bibliography

A bibliography lists all of the texts that have informed your writing but have not been directly quoted within the essay itself.

A bibliography should come at the end of your essay, listing each text alphabetically stating the author, date of publication and publisher.

Using feedback

Your final task when writing an essay is to reflect upon the feedback received from the marker

This may be invaluable in helping you to improve your essay writing skills for future work.