

# Manual

## How to write an essay

Learning about - and practicing to write - an academic essay is an important part of the education of many students. Because your comprehension of the course's content will be evaluated through an essay, reading this documentation thoroughly is worth your while. This document will (1) explain the basics, and (2) link to online resources for more information.

### 1. What is an essay?

The word essay comes from the French *essayer* which means *to try out*. It is a form of writing intended to 'test the water' for an idea. Not just any report or paper qualifies as an academic essay. In academics, the essay is a specific form of academic writing, characterized by:

- Usually being relatively short
- Containing either a *thesis statement* which conveys the point the essay is trying to make, or a *central question* which the thesis will answer (both typically near the end of the introduction)
- Underpinning the thesis statement (or answering this central question) with proof through a convincing series of arguments.

Essays regularly have 2-5 pages (regular font size 12, single line spacing). Illustrations, graphs, figures, and tables should not be inserted in the main body of the text, but added at the bottom of the essay. Essays should be properly referenced throughout. Provide a proper reference for each illustration, graph etc. you choose to use.

### 2. Essay structure

Unlike most books and reports, essays do not have chapters. They do, however, have a clear *underlying structure*. An essay is a kind of formulaic non-fiction story and as all stories do, it has a beginning, middle and end:

- The *introduction* of your essay is the beginning of your story. It introduces your topic and argues why that topic is interesting (a good strategy here is to link up with recent events through e.g. a newspaper article). It concludes with your thesis statement or central question: one or two sentences that describe the point-of-view you will make plausible in the remainder of the essay. Good thesis statements or questions have the following characteristics:
  - They are *arguably* and not *factual*, i.e. it should be possible to disagree with it. For example, "one aim of the Euratom treaty was to foster cooperation in the nuclear sector" is not really an arguable thesis statement, while you could argue over "the Euratom treaty was crucial in fostering cooperation in the nuclear sector". Similarly: "Was the Euratom treaty signed in 1957?" is not a good central question for an essay, whereas 'Was the Euratom treaty effective in achieving its goals?' could be.
  - They are *concrete and specific*, not *broad and vague*.
- The *central part* of your essay is the middle of your story where the action happens. In this part, you develop a *line of arguments* which is *logical, convincing, and easy to follow* for your audience. These arguments should draw on the sources you collect, and underpin your thesis statement (a particularly strong strategy for this is to discuss arguments of others regarding the same topic, and show why they are wrong).
- The *conclusions* of your essay are the end of your story. If you have a thesis statement, then the conclusions briefly recapitulate the main line of reasoning, summarizing how the arguments in the central part result in the thesis statement. If

you have a central question, then the conclusions should answer this question (effectively *resulting* in a thesis statement). Ideally, the conclusions end with some reflection, relevant quotation, or even call to action.

Essays use *paragraphs* as organizing structural elements. Keep in mind the following general rules for paragraphs:

- As a rule of thumb, each paragraph contains *only one* substantial idea or argument.
- As a consequence, each section (introduction, middle, conclusion) will usually consist of multiple paragraphs (although the conclusions are often only one paragraph long).
- Although it is allowed to insert *titles* or *headings*, it is neither common nor preferred. Paragraphs should follow each other logically - you can use connecting sentences for this. If the internal structure of your essay is solid, then you don't *need* headings. To put it another way, headings are no substitute for a well-structured essay (and in fact, headings are often used in fruitless attempts to 'hide' an essay's poor internal structure).

### 3. Techniques for essay writing

Many approaches to writing essays exist, and only with practice can you find the one most suitable for you. However, some general observations can be made. Only very few people are able to collect and read a number of relevant texts and subsequently churn out a coherent essay in one go. For the large majority of people, essay writing is not a batch process, but a continuous one. Their ideas and arguments develop *as they write*. Writing is not just about jotting down your thoughts: it actually *shapes* your thoughts as you write paragraphs, revise them and shuffle them around. This is of course a time-consuming process, so what you should take away from this is that you should start writing *early on* in the process of reading.

The internet provides many guides to going about this. You are of course free to look up and use guides to essay writing yourself, but keep in mind that (1) the quality of these guides varies a lot; and (2) there are many different types of (and criteria for) proper essays. The criteria you will have to adhere to are listed at the end of this document (see essay requirements). Some internet sources which provide useful tips for academic (and more specifically, historic) essays are the following:

- The Harvard College Writing Center *Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper* is a four-page .pdf file which explains the general challenges of writing about history, talks about primary and secondary sources, and provides some useful general tips. Be sure to read it:  
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic649329.files/BG%20Writing%20History.pdf>
- This University of Toronto page contains more general advice (i.e. not specifically for historical papers). Well worth a look in itself, but of more interest are the links at the bottom of the page, which take you to guides from various universities about specific issues you may encounter throughout the writing process. **Read the brief summary, and click the link if you experience problems with (or want to learn more about) any of the following aspects:** *Understanding the Topic, Using Thesis Statements, Providing Evidence, Taking Notes from Research Readings, Searching for Ideas, Overcoming Writer's Block, Organizing an Essay, Preparing an Outline, Revising and Editing, Improving Sentence Construction, Improving Transitions, Eliminating Wordiness, and Proofreading.*  
<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/general/general-advice>
- Lastly, a more informal guide that offers practical tips for the various stages of the academic essay writing process. It's written in the (somewhat annoying) style of a '10 step self improvement program' but it contains solid tips and tricks nevertheless:  
<http://www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/writers/>