

ESSAY WRITING

WHAT TO WRITE

An essay should:

- ✓ begin with a **title** which sets out the issues that it will deal with
- ✓ take the form of an **argument** which leads the reader from the title at the beginning to a conclusion at the end
- ✓ contain a beginning - the introduction
- ✓ contain a middle - the main body of the essay
- ✓ contain an end - the conclusion

Introduction - this should set out what you are going to do and how you are going to answer the question

Creating a flow in your arguments:

Giving detailed attention to the mechanics of constructing a flowing argument out of a set of separate points is extremely valuable in building up your own skill in constructing an argument.

Spell it out - Be aware that your reader cannot see into your mind. She/he may not be able to see connections between points which seem perfectly obvious to you. When you are writing it is always safer to spell out quite clearly how your points are meant to link up to each other.

Signposting - this is extremely important. Readers easily get lost while following you in your journey across a range of ideas. You need to be very generous in supplying pointers as to where you have come from and where you are going.

Listing points - this can be useful when you want to get through a number of them quite quickly. However there must be an explanation of why the lists are there.

Conclusion - an essay should end by taking a brief sweeping look back over the argument of the essay and also a look back to the title of the essay. The conclusion should show the reader how the discussion in the essay has 'answered the question'.

Writing essays is a very important part of studying for 3 reasons:

- ✓ it enables **assessment** of your progress
- ✓ it strengthens your general powers of **self-expression**

ARGUING

Arguing in an essay is not at all the same thing as 'having an argument' in everyday terms. Two people arguing in normal life will often encompass anger and confrontation, stubbornness, irrationality, wild generalisations and emotion. Your argument in an essay should aim at the opposite of these. You should try to be **objective, precise, logical**, concerned to back your case with **evidence**, and be **open to doubt and criticism**.

Objective - a key technique in everyday arguing is to try to get people to 'sympathise' with you and then imply that they should therefore accept that what you say is true. In other words, you try to win over their emotional support first and hope that they will then, out of loyalty, accept that your thought-processes are sound. In an essay, however, the assumption is that ideas must 'stand on their own feet'. They should be able to survive detailed logical inspection, unsupported by emotional commitment. You have to write about your ideas as though you don't care about them - as though you are just drawing them to the attention of your reader out of a sense of fair play.

Precise - Another technique in everyday arguing is to use words very loosely, stretching them to cover all sorts of ideas, so that the resulting vagueness as to what you are saying will blind people to the inconsistencies of your position. In essays, by contrast, you are expected to be careful about the way you use words. It matters which words you choose in making a particular point.

Logical - Essays are supposed to be based on reason and logic. Your points shouldn't just be scattered around. They should follow some sort of sequence, such that your reader can see the connection of one point to the next. Rather than throwing a handful of gravel at your target, you mould together a few good sized stones in a lump of clay and then take careful aim. The concerted attack is immensely more powerful than a welter of separate ones. This is why you have to try to make sure that your ideas fit together smoothly; that the overall effect is convincing.

Concerned with evidence - Your other weapon besides logical reasoning is to provide evidence to support your case. You cannot expect your reader to believe what you say simply because it is you saying it. You have to show your grounds for saying it.

Open to doubt and criticism - Finally, your arguments should be presented in the spirit that they are unlikely to be the whole story. You don't have to be cringing and apologetic about what you say. But you need to be capable of seeing some strength in alternative views. It is part of the spirit of operating in a world of logic and evidence that you acknowledge that new evidence and new arguments will emerge and that you may, quite legitimately, change your mind when they do.

'SPEAKING' TO YOUR 'READER'

Writing is a very special form of 'conversation'. You are talking to someone you cannot see and who never answers. But you know he or she is 'listening' and reacting mentally to what you say. You have to take all the responsibility for deciding **what** is to be discussed and **how**, and for **sustaining** the other person's **interest**. You are also responsible for establishing the **relationship** between you and the 'listener'.

This is one of the trickiest things about writing. You have to convey a sense of who you are assuming your reader is, and of the frame of mind in which he or she will be approaching your words. You also have to convey a sense of who you are claiming to be; from what position you are 'speaking'. Are you speaking as an expert on the subject under discussion, as a witty entertainer, as a patient explainer, or what?

There are two basic issues here. You have to develop a sense of your **'audience'** and of the right **'tone of voice'** in which to write.

A sense of 'audience' - who are you to assume your audience to be when you write an essay? Is it someone who is very learned and critical or someone who knows nothing and couldn't care less about the subject? The standard formula is to say, **'Write for the intelligent person in the street'**. In other words, assume that your reader has not read the books you have been studying, but that she/he is interested in the question posed by the title of the essay and is capable of picking up your arguments quickly, provided you spell them out clearly.

Your writing 'voice' - who are you to present yourself as? Basically you are expected to be a **calm, detached observer**, pointing out to an equal (who happens not to be informed on the subject) some arguments which are relevant to a question you are both interested in (i.e. the question in the essay title). It is not easy to find a comfortable writing 'voice'. It may take several essays before you can settle on a satisfactory one. One of the main reasons for getting stuck at the start of an essay is the difficulty of trying to work out where you are 'coming from'. Sometimes you have to take several shots at your opening before you can find a voice with which you can proceed.

Criteria of good essay writing:

When a tutor reads your essay she/he will be asking the following things:

- ✓ have you **answered the question** in the title?
- ✓ have you drawn on the **relevant parts of the course** for the main content of your essay?
- ✓ do you show a **good grasp of the ideas** you have been studying in the course?
- ✓ have you presented a **coherent argument**?
- ✓ is the essay written in an **objective analytical style**, with appropriate use of **evidence** etc.?
- ✓ is the essay **well written**? (i.e. is it easy to read?)

HOW TO WRITE IT

LEARNING THE 'CRAFT' OF WRITING - Each of the stages in the craft of essay writing is important in its own right. And each requires you to develop your own techniques. If you are to fulfil your potential as a writer you need to give careful thought to each stage, experimenting with different approaches and looking back over your successes and failures to refine your strategy.

The main stages are:

- ✓ thinking about the essay title
- ✓ gathering together material for the essay
- ✓ getting some ideas on to disc
- ✓ organising the material
- ✓ writing the first draft
- ✓ reviewing your work and re-writing in the light of the essay title
- ✓ writing a final draft

Thinking about the essay title - take a good look at the title a few days before you intend to get down to serious work as:

- ✓ it helps you to make sure that you cover all the necessary ground with your reading
- ✓ you will find that having the title floating about at the back of your mind for a few days helps you to clarify what the question is asking and to shape a strategy for approaching it.
- ✓ thinking carefully about the title is a vital part of producing a good essay
- ✓ it is very important to look carefully at each of the words, or phrases, in turn. Otherwise you can easily waste a lot of time writing about things for which you will get very little credit
- ✓ don't try to start writing an essay until you have collected together plenty of notes drawn from the course and your research

Getting ideas onto disc:

- ✓ the quality of the essay you eventually produce will be closely linked to the richness and range of your informal, scrappy jottings.
- ✓ if you are the sort of person who finds it hard to find enough to write about in your essays, the note-jotting stage is where you should focus more effort

Organising the material - ESSAY PLANNING

- ✓ it is important to think in broad strategic terms in sketching your essay plan. You should try to work out a sequence which will enable you to arrive at a conclusion you would like to draw

Groping towards an essay plan - often the point at which you are groping towards a suitable plan for your essay is quite uncomfortable and unsettling. Because your thoughts are slowly resolving themselves, the shape may take quite a time to emerge. When it does, it may be so simple as to make you wonder why it took so long. However, the simplicity is a sign that your thoughts have reached a stage of resolution.

- ✓ the planning stage is of crucial importance, since it is at this point that your argument acquires its central coherence
- ✓ if you tend to write too much, it is at the organising stage that you need to make tough decisions. You must limit your essay plan to what can be managed in the space you have
- ✓ if you are a person who tends to write too little in your essays, you may not be giving enough attention to how much explaining you have to do to get your points across to someone else. You probably need to discuss more examples and show

more carefully how your points link up with each other.

√ 'talking' in writing takes all your powers of concentration. Because of this you need to have the substance of the essay already worked out

Creating the outline:

Organising your thoughts is easily accomplished by using a pre-writing process called **mapping**.

Mapping and the 5 Ws and H:

Mapping is a pre-writing thought process that helps you to organise your thoughts and information on paper resulting in an informal outline.

You can begin mapping by drawing a circle in the middle of a blank piece of paper. Then draw about ten lines coming out from it. Now write your thesis statement in the centre of the circle. Once you have done this now **brainstorm** your ideas/thought processes. A framework for achieving this is the **5 Ws and H:**

√ **WHO**

√ **WHAT**

√ **WHEN**

√ **WHERE**

√ **WHY**

and

√ **HOW**

SOURCES:

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