



Creating the University of the Highlands and Islands

Essay skills

"Then you should say what you mean" the March Hare went on. "I do" Alice hastily replied; "at least – at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."

Lewis Carroll

There are many, many guides and texts on essay writing which can be invaluable resources but in the end there is no substitute for practice! Essay writing is a skill that will improve as your studies progress. The following pages give some general information on essay writing skills which may give some useful pointers. More information can be found at the following links

- [Skills4Study](#)
- [Manchester Metropolitan University](#)
- [How to Study](#)

How do I get started?

Underline key words

- Analyse the question
- Look for the relationships between different parts of the question
- Draw a Mind Map

Ask yourself

- what is the lecturer getting at here?
- What are the issues he / she wants me to explore?

If in doubt check!

Plan your answer

- Use this plan to guide your reading

As you are reading, stop and ask yourself more questions

- Does this relate directly to the question?
- Does this agree with what I have read before?
- Do I need to do more research/reading?

Organise your notes

- Remember to take notes using your own words or clearly highlight direct quotations
- Always reference your notes - it will save time later
- Colour-code or number them and sort into relevant piles
- Will the notes cover your plan or do you need to do more research

Give yourself plenty of time

- work from your plan
- write the first draft and leave it at least overnight before re-reading
- ask yourself - does it answer the question set? is it correctly structured, intext and endtext referencing completed, does it meet the guidelines (adheres to wordcount, covers all areas etc)?referenced
- re-draft

Try to finish your essay a few days before it is due and then go back to it.

Essay structure

All essays follow a basic structure

- Introduction – *say what you are going to say*
- Development of key points – *say it*
- Conclusion – *say what you have said*

Introduction

Introductions are normally the last piece of the essay to be written. This may seem odd, but if you do it earlier, it is likely to be much more difficult. This is because an introduction tells the reader what you are going to talk about, the order in which you are going to do it and you probably won't finalise this, until you've written the first draft.

An introduction should do the following things:

- **Analyse the question** - explain the title in your own words
- **Explain how you intend to tackle the subject**- highlight the issues you are going to discuss and the order in which you are going to deal with them
- **Define key terms** – don't use dictionary definitions: books, articles, critical essays are the best sources of definitions

It may sometimes be necessary to have a **second introductory paragraph** to explain the

background to the subject or to explain basic assumptions you are making.

You may want to begin with something that grabs the reader's attention - a quotation, an interesting fact, an apparent paradox. This should be no longer than a sentence or two.

Development of key points

If your essay is a continuous, undivided piece of text, it will be very hard for any reader to pick out the shape of the argument, or any particular part of it. Paragraphs, therefore, are a means of dividing the writing into meaningful and linked continuous text. Not all will be of equal length. Some will illustrate their arguments in more detail, or with more examples. There can be no fixed rule for length, but in general, paragraphs of over 300 words can be hard to follow and paragraphs of under 50 words tend to look slight.

Paragraphs have a structure a beginning, a middle and an end. The topic sentence acts like an introduction to the paragraph it sets out the topic, which the rest of the paragraph will develop. The sentences in the middle explain, develop, illustrate or modify the main idea in the topic sentence. The last sentence often returns to the ideas in the topic sentence to show how it was developed.

It is important that paragraphs should link together; otherwise, they become a series of short disjointed essays, instead of a longer, cohesive one. This can often be done using **linking words and phrases**.

However – this means that what comes next is somehow opposed to, or an exception to, what came before

Example - **However, the situation in Somalia is very different.**

Although – means that what you have just said is a justified qualification of the main point, but does not invalidate it.

Example - **Although all this is true, the economy is still in decline.**

Despite – means that what you have just said in the previous paragraph may seem to contradict the main point, but it does not, in fact, actually do so.

Example - **Despite all this, the economy shows signs of growth.**

More linking words and phrases: **moreover, in addition, another reason for... , contrary to what Jones states... , it is clear that these points impact on the concept of ... , to conclude, finally**

Further practice in paragraph and sentence structure can be found using the following URL:

- **[BBC Skillwise](#)**

Conclusion

Before starting to write the conclusion **re-read the question** to ensure that you are still tightly focussed on what it is asking you to consider. Exactly what the conclusion contains will vary, according to the question you are answering.

- **If the question asks you to make a judgement between differing or opposing views or theories**

The earlier parts of the essay will contain descriptions and explanations of these different views. Your conclusion should then be the place to make your judgement and justify it, in detail and with as many reasons as possible. This may well take up a large proportion of the essay.

If you have been unable to decide that one view or theory is better than the others, then say so in your conclusion. This can be the mark of an honest essay, and even of a very good one, provided that you have done two things: you must have reviewed the evidence completely, and shown why it is difficult to reach a definite conclusion.

- **If the question asks you to decide how far you agree with a proposition**

The early sections will contain explanations of all the issues to be taken into account and all the possible approaches to them. Actually answering the question '**To what extent do you agree ...**' is done in the conclusion. This will inevitably take up a considerable amount of the essay, as you will have to explain why you think as you do and then relate it to everything you have previously described.

- **If the question asks you simply to discuss a proposition**

This is the point at which you will need to consider the arguments more generally. This may involve discussing the issue in relation to basic principles, or looking at it from a different point of view or putting it into a broader context.

- **If the question simply asks you to explain or describe**

The conclusion will be short. You need only highlight the most significant points and make some general comment. Even in this case, though, **it is not enough to say**, 'Thus it can be seen that ...' **followed by information already given out in the main body of the essay**. You need to make some evaluative comment on what has been explained or described.

Summing Up

All essays need a short generalising paragraph to round it off. Whatever else it contains, it must, at some stage, **relate back to the question**.

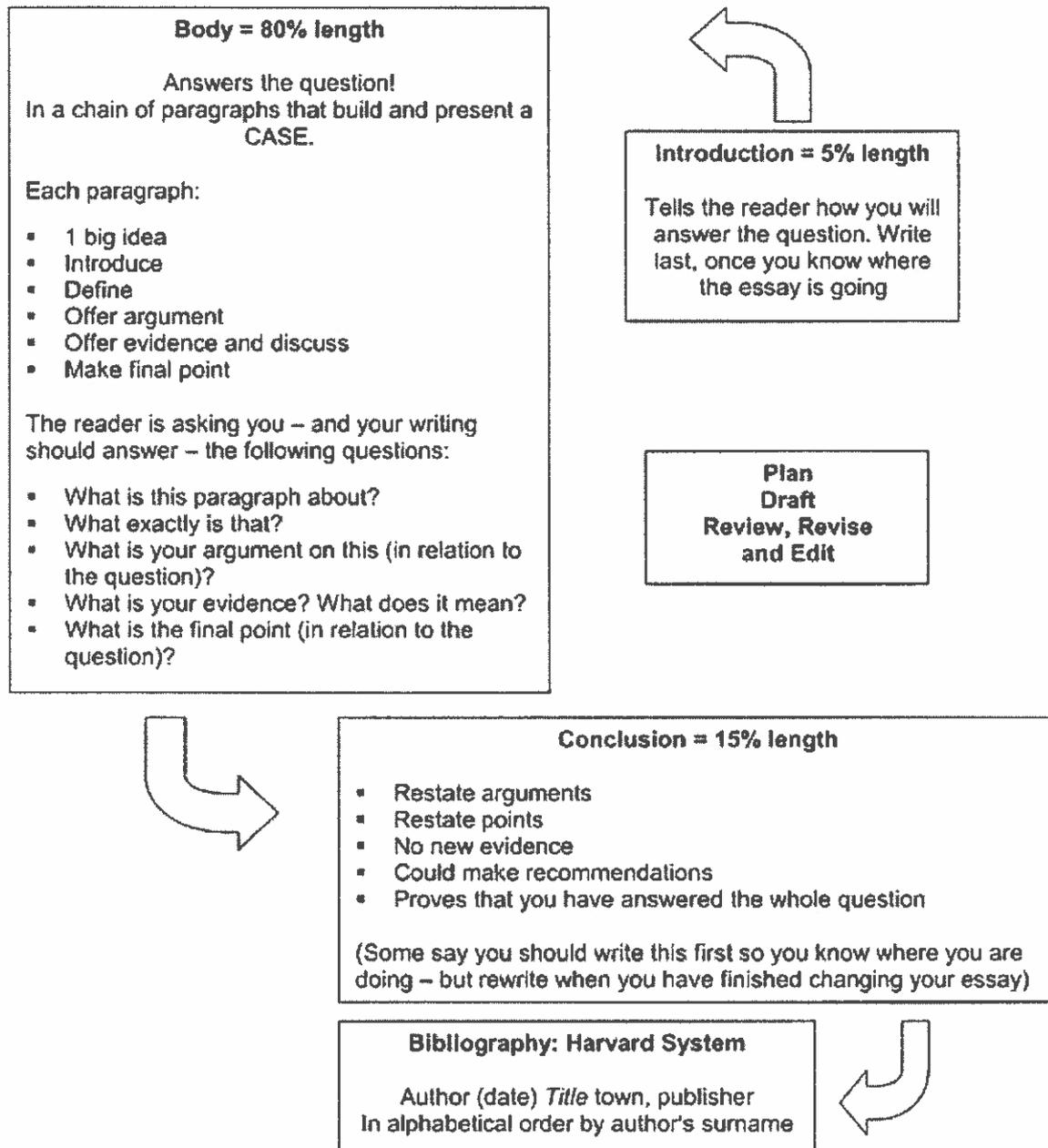
You can test the effectiveness of the conclusion by asking whether it would tell a reader who had not read the earlier part of the essay

- **What the original question was**
- **What your answer to it is**

It is often a good idea to use this paragraph to put the issues you have been describing into a wider context but don't start on a whole new line of argument at this stage.

The structure of an academic essay:

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Taken from Burns,T and Sinfield,S. (2003) *Essential Study Skills: The complete guide to success at university*. London, Sage.

Essay titles – analysing the question

Essay titles often contain two different types of words – content and process words. It is important to distinguish between these.

- Content words / phrases are those which indicate the subject matter of the essay.
- Process words / phrases are those which indicate the treatment required, i.e. how you tackle the subject matter.

For example "Explain and evaluate the Keynesian argument for increase in government spending as a cure for economic crises"

'Explain' and 'Evaluate' are the process words, the rest is the content phrase.

An essay title can also be asked as a direct question, for example:

"What doubts can be raised about the conventional stereotype of the vandal?"

This list explains some of the commonly used process words and phrases:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| ■ <i>Analyse</i> | <i>Resolve into its component parts. Examine critically or minutely.</i> |
| ■ <i>Assess</i> | <i>Determine the value of (see also Evaluate).</i> |
| ■ <i>Compare</i> | <i>Look for similarities and differences between – perhaps reach a conclusion about which is preferable and justify this clearly.</i> |
| ■ <i>Contrast</i> | <i>Set in opposition in order to bring out the differences sharply.</i> |
| ■ <i>Compare & contrast</i> | <i>Find some points of common ground between X and Y and show where / how they differ.</i> |
| ■ <i>Criticise</i> | <i>Make a judgement (backed by a discussion of the evidence or reasoning involved) about the merit of theories or opinions or about the truth of facts.</i> |
| ■ <i>Define</i> | <i>State the exact meaning of a word or phrase. In some cases it may be necessary or desirable to examine different possibilities or often used definitions.</i> |
| ■ <i>Describe</i> | <i>Give a detailed account of...</i> |

- *Discuss*

Explain, then give two sides of the issue and any implications
- *Distinguish/differentiate between*

Look for the differences between...
- *Evaluate*

Make an appraisal of the worth / validity / effectiveness of something in the light of its truth or usefulness (see also Assess)
- *Examine the argument that...*

Look in detail at this line of argument
- *Explain*

Give details about how and why it is...
- *How far*

To what extent... Usually involves looking at evidence / arguments for and against and weighing them up.
- *Illustrate*

Make clear and explicit, usually requires the use of carefully chosen examples.
- *Justify*

Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions; answer the main objections likely to be made about them.
- *Outline*

Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasising structure and arrangement.
- *State*

Present in a brief, clear form.
- *Summarise*

Give a concise, clear explanation or account of... presenting the chief factors and omitting minor details and examples (Cp. Outline)
- *What arguments can be made for and against this view?*

Look at both sides of this argument.

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