



Top Tips for Writing an Academic Essay

2021 ESSAY COMPETITION

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Understand The Question

This is an essential part of the writing process, and is one of the most common reasons why students sometimes don't get the results they were hoping for.

What is the question asking from you? Are you critically evaluating something? Comparing and contrasting? Looking at a particular case study? Evaluating the usefulness of something?

These are particularly common phrases found in essay questions, and each indicate a different set of expectations.

The wording of the essay question will tell you how the essay should be written, and it will indicate how to focus both your research, and your writing.

Example: Was the gutenber printing press the most important invention in the past 1000 years?

This question is asking you to consider the gutenber printing press and its impact on the world. However, in order for you to assess whether it was the most important invention, you need to also consider a few other significant inventions from the past 1000 years to provide a comparison.



Research

Conducting research is essential for you to be able to create a convincing argument, however the source of your information should be credible and accurate.

Wikipedia is a good place to start your research and gain background knowledge to then complete more detailed research, however the information is not always correct and you should not rely on the information as fact.

Google Scholar provides a good opportunity to access academic articles and monographs (books). These can be complex and challenging to read, however the abstract, or introduction, may provide useful information.

Other good sources are academic and well-regarded journals, such as Nature or the New England Journal of Medicine.

When conducting research it is very helpful to keep a record of what information came from which source. This will be useful for referencing.

Planning

Essays present a logical, reasoned argument in response to a specific question. An effective structure will help to facilitate your argument so it is clear to the reader. Your response should be focussed and progressive, and planning is essential to this.

Planning is a crucial stage from the research to the writing, and it is worth giving thought to how you will order your ideas, and what the central argument of your essay will be.

How To Approach Planning

1. Break down the different parts of your question

- What does the task word mean? (e.g. discuss, argue, describe) and identify specifically what you need to write about.
- If the question is broad, decide what aspects to focus your answer around

2. Mind map the topic

- Identify what you already know about the topic
- Try to identify what your instinctive response to the essay question is
- Identify some research questions to guide your reading

3. Research

- Where has your information come from?
- Engage with what you are reading, asking questions and challenging viewpoints - how do you know that this information is accurate? Is the author an expert? Does this information make sense when combined with everything else you have learnt?
- Only note things relevant to the question and do not include everything about the topic

4. Key Points for Discussion

- From your research you should now bring together key points to answer the question.
- Organise these points - which are related? Which are counter-arguments?
- Begin to group ideas and decide on what the overarching argument of your essay is going to be, based on the evidence you have gathered and analysed.

5. Logical order for your points

- You can summarise each point on a separate card or note and physically move them around until you find the best flow.
- Think about the progression of your argument
- How does one point link to the other, before and after? How does your argument build?
- Readers should be guided through your essay, and understand how and why your argument is progressing.



Introduction

The introduction should be like a roadmap to the rest of your essay. You should explore the question and highlight any problems that the questions might create for you.

Example: 'What work should be considered 'a literary classic' and isn't?'

This question is difficult to answer in 500 words because there are so many different interpretations and definitions of a 'literary classic'. You can acknowledge this in your introduction - it shows your reader that you have taken time to think about the question fully.

You should outline what your main argument is and introduce factors that you will discuss.

By the time your reader has finished your introduction, they should know what your opinion* is and which key arguments you are going to discuss in the remainder of the essay.

Remember, include the main points that you are going to include in your essay and show that you have fully understood the question.

*When giving your opinion, it can be more convincing if you avoid writing in the first person. Instead of saying 'I think...' or 'I believe...', try to use more general terms that highlight that you have conducted research.

Example: 'Recent research highlights that....', 'Experts suggest...', 'The data shows that....' - in each of the cases you should reference your source of information since you are quoting someone else's research (see our Referencing Guidance).

Structure

The remainder of your essay should be structured into paragraphs. Each paragraph should discuss a new argument or theme. Where possible, you are encouraged to consider arguments that disagree with your own opinion.

Example: Others believe that the invention of smoke detectors was the greatest engineering success of the past 50 years because it has saved an inestimable number of lives.¹

This doesn't mean you should contradict yourself - take time to show why the counter-argument is less convincing than your own argument.

Ensure that each paragraph is directly linked to the question. If the link to the question is not immediately obvious, make sure you explain the link clearly, for example, by repeating the wording of the question.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should be a summary of your points and an opportunity for you to reiterate your core argument. It is a good forum to highlight any links or relationships between your key arguments and should leave the reader with a clear understanding of your response to the question.

Highlighting the potential for further developments in the field in the future can be a positive way to end and encourage your reader to seek further information. This may also serve to highlight the importance of the topic but it is not essential and should not be forced.

¹ Rohde D., Corcoran J., Sydes M. and Higginson A. (2016), 'The association between smoke alarm presence and injury and death rates: A systematic review and meta-analysis', Fire Safety Journal, Vol. 81, pp. 58-63

Essay Checklist

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☐

I understand what the question is asking

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I have made a note of my instinctive response to the question

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I have noted down my existing knowledge regarding this question

☐

I have made a list of information that I need to find out from research

☐

I have researched the opinions of other experts and academics regarding this topic and decided whether I agree or disagree with them, and why

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My essay grabs the interest of the reader

☐

My introduction provides background and context, helping my reader understand the topic

☐

The introduction contains a thesis statement that provides focus and signals my overall argument.

☐

I have used paragraphs logically to help structure the essay



☐

Each paragraph presents an idea, argument or issue

☐

I have shown how my paragraphs are connected using linking sentences

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My conclusion draws connections between my arguments

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The significance of the essay topic and question is emphasized in my conclusion

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My conclusion does not contain new ideas, arguments or evidence

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I've read through the referencing guidance and have credited all of my research appropriately

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I've proofread my essay and am confident that it is accurate and free from errors

☐

I have asked someone else to proofread my essay and applied their feedback

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I have submitted my essay using the Immerse Education Essay Competition Entry Form.

Good Luck!



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