

Organising your thoughts into a coherent piece of writing is an important part of academic life, but many students find essay writing a daunting proposition. The task can appear less formidable if it is seen as a sequence of sub-tasks, the completion of one task leading to the next. Good organisation will save time and unnecessary stress, and lead to better essays.

All essays should have an introduction, body and conclusion. The introduction attracts the reader's attention and indicates the main points and structure of the essay. These main points are then developed in the body of the essay. A main point may take one or more paragraphs, depending on the length of the assignment. You should use linking words to connect your ideas and paragraphs. The conclusion draws your arguments together and leaves the reader with your final thoughts on the subject. (SLC leaflets on these areas are listed at the back of this leaflet.)

ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENTS

Essay requirements vary from subject to subject. Your topic course book should give details regarding the expected format and which referencing style is preferred, and often provides suggestions for how to approach the topic itself. If you are still not clear on what is required, check with your tutor.

SELECTING A TOPIC

Ask yourself what you will learn by choosing to write on a particular topic. Your interest, knowledge and background will influence your choice. You should also take into account how easily you can find resources on a particular topic. Jotting down ideas may help you to identify what you already know and what you need to find out.

ANALYSING THE TOPIC

- What **exactly** is being asked of you? Is it a description, a well-documented argument, a personal view or something else? Read all the information and suggestions your course book contains for that assignment – often lecturers go out of their way to provide the questions that they want covered in each section, which can form the outline of your essay.
- Select the **key content words** of the topic and look up the definitions.
- Identify the **instruction** words, such as *compare*, *discuss* or *explain*. They will help you to use your information. (See the glossary below for more examples.)
- How does the topic tie in with the course and the lecturer's expectations?
- What are the **main points** you want to make? List any other points that could be relevant. How do these points link together?
- From this analysis, **make a plan** with headings and sub-headings.
- Add some notes which can be built upon under each heading and sub-heading.

The above steps of analysis help focus you on the topic so that you begin your deeper research with an idea of what you are looking for.

BE SELECTIVE IN YOUR READING

- What evidence will you need to prove, illustrate or develop each point? If you go to your reading with appropriate questions in mind, your reading will be more **focused**.
- Begin your reading by gathering your references and spend 5-10 minutes investigating each. Look at the abstracts (if they exist), subheadings, diagrams, tables, graphs, the conclusions and the introductions. Decide which references will be most useful (i.e. which provide a broad view and which deal with specific issues). **Prioritise** your reading.
- Read with the topic in mind and skim material until you find relevant information, which you should then read more closely. Don't waste time reading irrelevant material.
- Stop reading and noting when you find you are not reading anything useful, or when you realise that you are just putting off the final writing stage, as this will reduce your time allotted for writing.

WRITE A DRAFT

Write your notes up into full sentences. Make sure you have one controlling idea for each paragraph. Other sentences in that paragraph must relate to that controlling idea. Add examples where you can to support your ideas.

You should expect to go through several versions of an essay before you come to the final draft. Try to organise your time so you can leave the essay for a couple of days before you re-write a draft. That way you can see inconsistencies more easily.

STYLE

Academic writing should be formal. Normally you should avoid the personal pronoun 'I', but check this with your department. Your writing should be clear, and you must use in-text **references** to support your information.

FORMATTING

Make sure that you use the font size and margins suggested in your topic handbook. You should normally use double spacing and indicate the start of a new paragraph by either an indent or an extra line space. All pages should be numbered.

DRAFTING

You should expect to go through several versions of an essay before you come to the final draft. Try to organise your time so you can leave the essay for a couple of days before you re-write a draft. That way you can see inconsistencies more easily.

PROOFREADING

When you have finished the essay, read it through carefully and look for mistakes. Be aware of the sorts of errors you often make.

The following illustrations show how an essay may be structured and provide an example of an essay outline.

General Essay Structure

Example Essay Outline

Introduction

- About 10% of the essay. Start the **introduction** generally.
- Narrow down your essay by the end of the introduction to indicate both what the essay will do and how it will be organised. This is called your **thesis statement**.

The concern for equity in regard to the treatment of boys and girls in school has been a key issue in Australia for the past 25 years...

Thesis statement

This essay, encompassing different school types and the roles of various stakeholders, argues for equal opportunities for boys and girls, to enable them to achieve their full potential within and following their school experience.

General

Body

- About 80% of the essay.
- Each paragraph should make a new point.
- The number of paragraphs will depend on the length of your essay.
- Linking words should be used between paragraphs to make the essay flow smoothly.

Historical perspective

General gender differences

- school experience
- socio-economic status
- assessment

Coeducational schools

- self-esteem
- subject choice

Single sex schools

- subject choice
- single sex classes in co-ed schools

Specific

Conclusion

- About 10% of the essay.
- Start the **conclusion** with specific reference to your arguments.
- End more generally.

In this brief survey of boys' and girls' education, it has been argued that . . .

A combination of differential treatment of boys and girls, particularly where segregation offers improved access to subject choice in the absence of intimidation, and concerted efforts to minimise sexism in schools, will work towards a situation in which education is fair for all students.

General

(Outline based on Miller, JC 1999, 'Differentiated educational provision', unpublished assignment in the topic UBEU Education Context, University of South Australia, Magill.)

GLOSSARY OF INSTRUCTIONAL WORDS

| | |
|--|---|
| Account for: <i>give reasons for</i> | Factor(s): <i>the circumstances bringing about a result</i> |
| Give an account of: <i>describe</i> | Evaluate: <i>decide and explain how convincing, valuable or important something is</i> |
| To take into account: <i>to consider, to think of</i> | Explain: <i>analyse in order to show reasons, causes and effects</i> |
| Analyse: <i>divide into parts and describe each part; discuss a problem</i> | Function: <i>what something does: its purpose or activities</i> |
| Argue: <i>systematically support or reject a position by presenting reasons and evidence for acceptance or rejection</i> | Identify: <i>point out and describe</i> |
| Assess: <i>decide how important something is and give your reasons</i> | Indicate: <i>show, explain</i> |
| Assume: <i>first accept that the following is true</i> | Illustrate: <i>give examples or diagrams that prove your answer is correct</i> |
| Classify: <i>arrange into groups or classes</i> | Implications: <i>results or effects which may not be obvious</i> |
| Comment on: <i>explain why something is important</i> | Limitations: <i>explain where something is not useful or not relevant</i> |
| Compare: <i>describe the ways in which two things are alike</i> | List: <i>provide an itemised series of points (often expressed in point form)</i> |
| Concept: <i>an important idea</i> | Outline: <i>give an organised description in which you state the main points but omit detail</i> |
| Concise: <i>short, brief</i> | Prove: <i>confirm or verify by stating and evaluating evidence or by logical reasoning</i> |
| In the context of: <i>referring to, inside the subject of</i> | With/by reference to: <i>make sure you write about the following subject</i> |
| Contrast: <i>describe the ways in which two things are different</i> | Relate: <i>emphasise connections and associations</i> |
| Criteria: <i>what standards you would expect; what questions you would expect to be answered</i> | In relation to: <i>only a certain part of the first topic is needed</i> |
| Criticise: <i>discuss, pointing out faults and disadvantages</i> | Review: <i>re-examine, analyse and comment briefly on the major points</i> |
| Deduction: <i>the conclusion or generalisation you come to after looking carefully at all the facts</i> | Role: <i>what part something plays, how it works, especially in co-operation with others</i> |
| Define: <i>provide clear, concise, authoritative meanings</i> | State: <i>formally set out a position</i> |
| Discuss: <i>give evidence to support the different sides of an argument and then propose which is the most convincing</i> | Summarise: <i>choose the main points of a very wide subject</i> |
| Distinguish between: <i>describe the differences between two (or more) things</i> | Validity, valid: <i>is there evidence and are there facts to prove this statement?</i> |
| Elaborate: <i>'yes' or 'no' is not enough. Answer fully with reasons and examples</i> | |
| To what extent is x true?: <i>Discuss, explain in what ways x is true and in what ways x is not true.</i> | |

USEFUL REFERENCES

- Hay, I, Bochner, D & Dungey, C 2006, *Making the grade*, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
 Shields, M 2010, *Essay writing: A student's guide*, Los Angeles, Sage.
 Warburton, N 2007, *The basics of essay writing*, London, Routledge.

STUDENT LEARNING CENTRE
 REGISTRY BUILDING ANNEXE

TEL: 61-8-8201 2518
 E-MAIL: slc@flinders.edu.au

INTERNET: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/SLC>
 POSTAL: PO BOX 2100, ADELAIDE, SA 5001