

Writing a Successful Essay

Keywords: Essay Writing; Assessment; Student Support; Essay Structure; Feedback

Introduction

Essay writing is a fundamental skill for many students, both in human and physical geography as well as other disciplines. An essay is a short piece of writing (often no more than 3000 words) on a particular subject that makes sense to the reader 'by itself'. In an essay you are usually tasked with responding to a title or question by putting together a clear argument that will lead the reader towards a conclusion.

Being able to write a successful essay is important academically, but the transferable skills and attributes you develop are equally as important for professional life after study. Writing an essay allows you to assess your own personal response to a question and deepen your learning about a topic. In so doing, it provides you with the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge you have gained and show your understanding. You will consult and refer to a range of literature, which should be presented in a logical manner to develop and defend your argument. Indeed, presenting a structured argument, reinforced and developed through literature, is the fundamental goal of writing an essay. Because of these critical, communicative and research-based skills, essay writing has traditionally been a 'favourite' assessment format amongst academics to assess your learning. Although the assessment methods for geography students have diversified over time, not least as technology has enabled the development of creative online formats, the essay remains a fundamental feature in the assessment diet of most programmes.

This 'Directions' article has been written by a student and staff team and is aimed at an undergraduate student audience. We will take you through the full process of 'writing' an academic essay, from developing your understanding of the essay title or question, to preparing your first draft, seeking and acting on feedback, through to concluding your essay. While focusing on coursework essays, much of our advice will be relevant to examination

essays. Throughout this article we will include top tips from students, using their voice to highlight what has worked for them.

There are a number of common mistakes that students make when writing essays. These include not fully addressing the question, poor essay structure and flow, being too descriptive rather than critical/reflective, using too many (or too few) words per idea/issue and making statements and arguments that are not supported by literature. In Figure 1 we present a simple workflow model that, if followed, will help you to avoid these common mistakes. This article will work through each of these steps to guide you through the process of writing a successful essay.

<Figure 1: An effective essay writing workflow model>

Explaining the essay writing workflow model

Step 1: Understanding the essay question

As noted above, your essay offers your response to a question or title. Sometimes you are provided by your tutor/instructor with a selection of essays to choose from. Students who had recently completed an essay assignment were asked to provide advice for their peers. They said:

'Look at the questions as soon as the tutor gives them to you'

'I would suggest picking a question that you like ... It's going to get hard as you focus in more depth, but stick to that question'

Making an early start was highlighted by many of the students, and essay writing time management is discussed further below. The students also mentioned that it was easy to get distracted and to start thinking about a different question. We recommend selecting a question that interests you and for which you can see a way through an answer with reference to lecture notes and early reading. Changing questions mid-way through the time allowed can be risky and we recommend only doing this after careful reflection and discussion with your tutor/instructor.

Essays should always seek to answer the question set and they will be judged on how far that question has been answered. It is crucial, therefore, that you fully understand what is being asked of you. The starting point is to focus on what the essay question is ‘telling you’. You should carefully look at each word and gather as much guidance as you can as to what to include in your essay. The words used in the question act as your pointers. As you are deconstructing the question you should start to formulate your plan to ensure that you respond to every ‘element’ of it. This is a valuable use of time at the beginning of the process. Throughout your essay, it can be easy to drift away from the question by discussing material that may be interesting to you, but which is irrelevant and will be penalised by the marker. A good technique to stay on track is to ‘BUG’ the question (Figure 2).

<Figure 2: The ‘BUG’ technique for understanding essay questions>

The first step of ‘BUG’ is to draw a box around the command words (also known as essay direction words) to make them stand out. Command words are imperatives which demonstrate the approach the essay requires. A selection of commonly used command words are explained in Table 1.

Table 1: *Commonly used command (essay direction) words*

Analyse	Break down a problem into separate parts and show how these parts relate to each other to make the whole
Assess	Examine closely with a view to ‘weighing up’ a particular situation. In conclusion, state your judgement clearly
Compare/Contrast	State how things are alike or not alike
Critique	Point out both the strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points
Discuss	Consider the various points/present all sides of an issue and then arrive at a conclusion
Evaluate	Make a judgement based on evidence and support it. Give the good and bad points

Explain	Provide facts and reasons to make something clear and understandable
Justify	Give some evidence/reasons, supporting your statement with facts
Review	Examine the information critically. Analyse and comment on the important statements
Synthesize	Combine components or elements to form a connected whole
To what extent	Indicate the degree to which something exists, happens or is true

The 'BUG' process continues by ensuring you understand key words and that you refer back to both the command and key words as you write your essay. You can see the 'BUG' process in action if you look at the introductory, main body and concluding paragraphs, with accompanying tutor comments, in the online supplementary material.

Step 2: Searching and synthesizing literature

Once you have 'BUG'ed your essay question, you should start searching for literature and synthesizing key points for your essay draft. As you do this, you should think widely about your question, brainstorming and/or mind-mapping ideas about how to answer it. This section will only discuss a small number of key points as a previous JGHE Directions article (Rewhorn, 2018) and many textbook resources have covered literature reviews in greater detail (e.g. Kneale, 2011; Healey & Healey, 2016).

Remember, you should only include material relevant to the question. Irrelevant material not only wastes words, but will be penalised since it suggests a lack of understanding of the question. If left unstructured, the literature searching and reading stage can use up large amounts of study time. Some top tips to read more efficiently and effectively include:

- Actively consider which literature sources to target, so you don't spend time reading less relevant material. Consider which journals are well known within your discipline. For example, if you were writing about teaching and learning in geography, the 'Journal of Geography in Higher Education' would be a good place to start looking. You should consult reading lists and course guides, and speak to teaching and library staff if you are unsure.

- Read with a purpose. You should be looking for particularly relevant material, rather than paying equal attention to all material. It sometimes helps to research specific points rather than the broad essay topic.
- Read critically, considering information in light of the knowledge you have already gained. This will make you aware of contradictions or different viewpoints. Read widely so you are not swayed too far by the conclusions of one author or paper.
- Be systematic with your note-taking. Record the most relevant material and ensure that you collect full reference details (including page and volume numbers for journal articles). Try to avoid copying out large chunks of writing directly from texts.

It is the reading that largely shapes your answer as you draw from existing ideas to build your argument. Even with directed reading do not underestimate the time it takes to find, process and extract key points from journal articles, book chapters, reports and websites. When you start reading, each article will provide new information, but after a time you will begin to read similar points as you reach saturation. So the important message with reading is ‘stick with it’ because it gets progressively easier. You will begin to recognise arguments and your ideas will start to develop.

Step 3: Preparing a first draft

Although you will refer to literature throughout your essay, your own thinking and personal synthesis of ideas is essential. An important step in completing a successful essay is to write a first draft, which you will revisit and build upon. Geography students reflecting on the process of essay writing noted:

‘Start planning as soon as you begin the module’

‘Get that first draft done, take a week to think about it yourself, change it, and then seek tutor feedback’

The importance of careful time management across the essay writing process was highlighted by the students. Some said it was challenging to start writing, but ‘when you actually start doing it, it isn’t that bad’. So, just do it! Begin by re-reading the question and selecting the main ideas from the literature that will form your argument. This will be driven

by the command words. Write down the facts and examples to support your main ideas, remembering that there is no one strategy or 'right answer' (though you should be ready to defend your argument). Most essays will follow the same generic structure (Figure 3). Plan your draft essay around these sections (perhaps using them as headings in your first draft).

<Figure 3: Overall structure of a successful academic essay. Note: you can find examples of introductory, main body and concluding paragraphs, with accompanying tutor comments, in the online supplementary material.>

Do not underestimate the importance of the introduction. It gives the reader their first impression of your answer and they will start to consider the mark they might award by the end of this section! You are aiming to inspire in the reader the confidence that you are in command of the topic. Usually, half an A4 page of text is plenty in terms of length and it is a good idea to revisit and finalise your introduction once you have finished writing your essay. In the main body, you should aim to communicate key facts/knowledge, leaving plenty of room for analysis. Refer back to the discussion above regarding the inclusion of irrelevant material and remember that what you choose to exclude from your argument is just as important as what you include. You can use graphs, figures, photographs and tables to clarify your argument but, if you do, make sure their use is appropriate and always label them fully and refer to them in your essay. They should be used as part of your argument and as such should be placed as close as possible to the discussion about them. Do not use abbreviations, colloquial terms or slang and remember to reference all sources and direct quotations fully, including sources for your figures. Every source cited in your essay should be listed in your reference list at the close of the essay.

An effective final paragraph is very important and can partially compensate for a poor essay. As with your introduction, your conclusion should be concise and should not introduce new ideas. You may want to finish by looking outwards to the bigger picture or relating the question to the future in order to leave the reader thinking. Finally, proof-read your first draft carefully to correct spelling and grammatical errors.

Step 4: Self-reflecting and seeking tutor feedback

It is worth remembering that the first version of anything you write is a draft that requires development before it is a quality product. An eminent American professor calls the first draft the sacrificial draft – one that is written specifically to be changed for the better. Quite simply, you won't do as well if your first draft is submitted as your final product. Writing an essay is not about hitting the word limit and then handing it in. Your essay is finished when you believe (and preferably when instructor commentary shows) you have answered the question, presenting evidence and critical thinking. As one student remarked at the end of the essay writing process:

'first class work is not a first draft – sadly it's like the twentieth draft'

Higher marks come in later drafts as you layer up the complexity, adding detail to the facts you have assembled, improving critical insight and clarifying the structure. To help you improve your work you can seek advice from your friends and your tutor/instructor, establishing deadlines for your progress. Gaining tutor commentary whilst you are writing your essay (often called feed-forward) is extremely useful, as noted by students:

'The bit in between my draft and writing the final essay was the best bit because I knew what I was doing and I enjoyed that process of making it better'

You will likely experience different levels of support when developing your essays during your degree. However before seeking advice from others it is a useful exercise to self-assess your work. When your essay assessment is introduced to you, you should also be given the marking criteria against which your final essay will be graded. Look over these criteria and reflect on how well your draft essay meets these requirements. The language used in these standards can be quite complex and hard to interpret. Table 2 offers some student interpretations of common essay marking criteria used at a British University.

Table 2: *Student interpretations of example essay marking criteria*

Criteria	Student Interpretations
Excellent theoretical/conceptual grounding and excellent discussion of significance and validity within the discipline.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The information provided in the essay is factually correct and relevant to the discipline, using sources from journal articles in support. Sources have been well researched and come from recent journal articles, although for some topics older articles might also be appropriate. • Ensure that the ideas you have developed are supported by previous work in the area. The work must also explore and advance new areas/ideas to be valid and significant.
Thorough and rigorous argument. Excellent level of depth and conceptual sophistication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You should explore all of the possible sides to an issue and weigh them up against each other. You should go into detail when doing this and ensure you refer to key underlying concepts. • Make clear why you believe your arguments should be taken into account. • A thorough argument considering all limitations and bringing out conclusions based in the debate.
Original/innovative use of an impressive range of sources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use academic literature - text based and web based – to support the points you make. • Sources must be varied and not come from the same location. • Make sure you have covered a number of angles with your reading, not just a few papers here and there. • Use this reading to define your answer – take control of your essay.

You should come to see feedback as an 'in-task' learning process and not something that follows a final assessment grade. Many tutors/instructors will be happy to answer specific questions you might have following your self-assessment. On courses with small numbers of students tutors might offer an opportunity to discuss part or full drafts of your essay ahead of final submission, whilst for large courses feed-forward might take the form of directed

peer discussion undertaken inside or outside of class. Constructive critical feedback can give you excellent guidance on how to improve your work. It is worth considering all of the suggestions and comments you receive and trying to act on them prior to submitting your essay for formal grading. Students who have followed this process comment:

'I never understood how good getting feedback is ... I'm definitely going to take advantage of it this year'

'Getting feedback enabled me to understand the way forward and act on it ... without it I don't think I would have actually passed'

'I knew I had the power in my hands to improve and act ... and by acting on the feedback it put in my head what I need to do to achieve in assessments of this nature in the future'

In the above quotes the students reflect on the value of feed-forward in helping them to improve their essay. Research has shown that students who receive and act on tutor commentary ahead of final submission out-perform those who do not, both within task and with respect to future essay-based assignments (Hill & West, 2019). The students comment on the importance of being able to discuss their work face-to-face with a tutor or their peers as opposed to reading written comments. Different tutors will be able to offer varying levels of individualised support. For some this may include discussion of a full draft, but for others this may be commenting on essay plans or answering specific questions you have about your developing work. The important point is not to be afraid to ask your tutor what they are able to offer.

Step 5: Making final edits and submitting

Receiving feed-forward on draft work can be an emotional experience:

'It's quite disheartening when you're like I tried so hard on this and there is still so much more I can do'

You may feel somewhat deflated and disappointed if your draft was not as strong as you had hoped. However, it is important for you to remember that you have time to implement the feedback to increase your grade:

‘That was the main thing, it wasn’t the final mark; you’re done there’s the feedback. I knew I could go away and change it’

Students who have undertaken the draft writing and feed-forward process reveal different techniques and strategies for acting on the feedback (Table 3). Feed-forward clearly allowed these students to tackle some of the common essay writing mistakes we identified earlier in the article.

Table 3: How students act on tutor feed-forward comments

Student Quote	Key Points
‘When I get feedback I do the easy bits first, so if I get caught out for time I have done something’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with the small edits and comments. Then work your way up to tackling bigger issues. • Make sure you proof-read carefully prior to the final submission so that all minor points have been tackled.
‘I went back and tried to improve the paragraph that I showed you and then I used that as like a template for everything else’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have received comments or suggested edits to one section, make sure you follow this advice and implement it throughout the essay. • Feedback is often more generic than specific, so make the most of these comments throughout the essay.
‘I looked at the areas that you highlighted, and went back through the articles. I tried to be a lot more critical of what they were saying and thought how I could then implement it in the essay’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes you will need to go back to the literature searching and reading stage following feed-forward. • Do not be worried about ‘going backwards’. This is very common and going back with a fresh pair of eyes will be to your benefit.

Conclusion

Writing essays is challenging but it can also be an enjoyable experience, which allows you to develop numerous specific and generic skills. By following the process we outline in this

article, you will hopefully feel more prepared to tackle your essay assignments and avoid many of the common mistakes made by students. Ensure you fully understand the question, search for and synthesise your reading material, leave enough time to prepare a good draft, and self-assess your draft before seeking and acting on peer and/or tutor feedback. The advice from our students has been shown to deliver successful academic essays. There is no reason why *you* cannot raise *your* grades by following their advice.

Useful Resources

Essay writing study guide - University of Leicester:

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/writing-essays>

Essay writing self-check questions - University of Leicester:

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/questions-to-ask>

Strategies for essay writing - Harvard University Writing Centre:

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/strategies-essay-writing>

Eight tips for great essay writing - Oxbridge Essays:

<https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/essay-writing-tips/>

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Healey, M. & Healey, R. (2016), How to conduct a literature search, in Clifford, N., French, S., Cope, M. & Gillespie, T. (eds), *Key Methods in Geography* (3rd Ed pp. 44-61), London: SAGE.

Hill, J. & West, H. (2019), Improving the student experience through dialogic feed-forward assessment, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (in print). Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1608908>.

Kneale, P. (2011), *Study Skills for Geography, Earth & Environmental Science Students, third edition*, London: Hodder Education.

Rewhorn, S. (2018), Writing your successful literature review, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 42(1), 143-147.