

Writing an Essay

Essays are a particular form of writing, with their own structure and conventions. This guide explains the conventions of the essay and shows you how to create clear, well-structured essays that communicate effectively with the reader.

Related guides: [‘Planning an Essay’](#) and [‘Essay Presentation’](#).

The key elements

A good essay takes the reader into account by clearly presenting material in a way that is logical, coherent and easy to follow. Before you begin to write your essay, you need to select and order your material in the form of an essay plan. When you have an effective essay plan you are free to concentrate on the expression of your ideas and information. You can learn to guide your reader by being aware of how to use the key elements of an essay. This guide shows you how to make the best use of:

- the introduction
- paragraphs
- evidence
- the conclusion

The introduction

The introduction is a signpost for your reader, showing how you intend to answer the question and your understanding of the key issues. An introduction should have the following three elements:

- **Context and Background:** set the central issue in context and explain why it is worth examining;
- **Interpretation of the Question:** use the words of the title to show your understanding of what is involved in answering the question, and define any terms;
- **Outline of Structure:** orientate your reader by describing how your discussion will be structured.

In practice, the introduction can be written last, as it is only once you have finished your essay that you really know what you are going to say. However, you should have a good idea of what you will say in your introduction before you begin writing as it will help you to understand your task clearly and focus your writing, even if it changes later on.

The use of paragraphs

Your essay plan should show clearly what the main sections of your essay will be and which points will be included in each section. Ordering your points in each section should also take place at the planning stage. You now need to use paragraphs to take your reader step by step through each section. Each paragraph you write should express clearly one point or one aspect of a point. Your paragraphs should link together to provide the reader with a sense of logical progression, using 'signpost' words and phrases such as *however*, *nevertheless*, *on the other hand*. These signposts remind the reader of the overall structure outlined in the introduction. A paragraph can have its own internal structure which:

- introduces the paragraph's point and purpose;
- presents and comments on evidence and illustrations;
- makes a link to the next paragraph.

See the guide [Using Paragraphs](#) for more information.

The use of evidence and/or examples

You should use evidence to illustrate and support your points. Evidence may be the opinion of an expert, your own findings, or the results of a study or experiment. It may be written or in diagram format. Use the evidence to:

- add authority to your point;
- add credibility to your argument;
- add interest and useful illustration to your discussion

Opinions and evidence should always go together. Your essay should not state evidence without any analysis of what point it demonstrates, nor should your essay offer an opinion that is not justified by evidence.

Whenever you refer to someone else's ideas or opinion you must acknowledge your source through referencing. It may be in the form of a quotation, signalled by inverted commas ("...") or you may paraphrase or summarise an opinion or idea followed by a reference to its source. There are two main ways of referencing your evidence:

- the use of a number in superscript (¹) referring to a note at the end of the essay or bottom of the page;
- the inclusion of the author and date of publication in brackets in the body of the essay with the full details included in your bibliography.

At the end of your essay you must include a bibliography which lists all the books you have consulted in writing your essay, whether or not you have referred to them in your essay. A bibliography should include the details of author, title, date, place of publication, publisher and edition for each book (with editors and page extents for articles in edited collections). A journal article should include the title, year and volume number as well as the page extent of the article.

Which referencing convention you use is determined by your subject discipline, and most departments have their own preferred style of referencing and bibliographies. Check your department handbook for details. For further advice, see the guide to [Referencing](#).

The conclusion

The conclusion is another signpost to your reader. It gives you the opportunity to:

- revisit the original question;
- demonstrate that you have answered the question by
- summarising the main points of the argument;
- re-stating your point of view.

You should not include new material in your conclusion, but you might:

- consider the wider significance and implications of your argument.

Drafting your essay

Planning your material before you begin writing should reduce the need for drafting. Whether or not your department requires all essays to be word processed, learning to write essays on a computer has many advantages. It enables you to make amendments and changes to your essay easily without the need to re-write whole parts of the essay. If you find it necessary or useful to make a first draft by hand, then write each section on a separate piece of paper, so that changes can be made easily.

Do not try to make significant changes to the sequence of your material through re-drafting. Go right back to the planning stages and revise your original essay plan or make a new one. Remember that just as the essay question should be your focus in the planning stages, you can regularly refer to the question in the writing of your essay. Use the essay question to check that you are keeping to the point and that all your material is relevant to answering the question.

Editing your essay

It is often difficult to edit your own writing. Read your work aloud, carefully adhering to the pauses of the punctuation you have used. This will help you identify problems with clarity of expression or sentence structure. Spell checks on computers are useful, but be aware that they do not identify an inappropriate use of a correctly spelt word. Have a break from your essay (preferably overnight) to make a final check more effective.

You must also ensure that you conform to the word limit set by your tutor. The word limit is designed to ensure that you write enough to engage fully with the subject, but that you do not write more than is absolutely necessary through lack of concise expression, focus or selectivity.

Presentation

Your department will have its own guidelines for the presentation of essays which may include word processing, layout and anonymity. Check your departmental handbook for details.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Support Service**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.

	<p>Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.</p>	<p>This guide is based on a study guide produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester.</p> 
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