

# Excellent Essays

*Essays are often a key part of internal assessment at school, university, or polytech. They also help develop important research, critical thinking and communication skills.*

## What exactly is an essay?

An essay is an organised collection and discussion of your ideas on a particular topic or question. It is a piece of non-fiction, or factual writing, which follows a clear structure and is professionally presented.

## Why do we write essays?

As well as contributing to your final grade, essays help you learn, by encouraging you to:

- explore a topic in-depth
- locate and retrieve relevant information
- interpret, critically analyse and evaluate facts and opinions
- construct a clear and logical argument

## How to construct an excellent essay

By following a simple step-by-step process, it will almost feel like your essay is writing itself (with you supplying the ideas of course!). This process is made up of three stages: 1 - pre-writing; 2 - writing; 3 - re-writing.

## Stage 1: the pre-writing

### a) Analyse question

If you have been given a specific essay question, read it thoroughly. This is what your entire essay will be based around, so it is vital that you understand exactly what is being asked of you. Analyse the words of the question carefully. Look for:

Content words: these indicate the general subject matter that the essay should deal with

Limiting words: these specify the particular aspect(s) of the topic that the essay should focus on

Instruction words: these tell you how to approach the topic (eg. compare, discuss, describe, evaluate, etc).

### b) Decide on your approach

This is where the instruction words become really important, as they will indicate exactly how you should structure your essay. For example, if your essay question includes the word 'discuss', this indicates that you need to discuss the key points and issues connected with the statement or quotation and any possible interpretations. Then make sure you critically analyse the evidence and provide an argument for and against, before drawing your conclusion.

### c) Research

Once you are sure that you understand what the essay question is asking you to do, it is time to start gathering your information together – that is, to begin your research.

When conducting your research, remember the following to avoid a lot of wasted time and effort:

- Read through your relevant class notes and prescribed texts to identify key issues
- Locate any additional material that you need to satisfy your understanding of the topic. This might include going to your school, university, or public library and doing a search for relevant books, or doing a search on the Internet for reputable sites
- Gather evidence as you go to illustrate and support the issues that you will discuss in your essay – an argument is worth nothing if it doesn't have evidence to back it up!
- Keep good notes of your findings - jot down key points rather than every detail. For each piece of information or evidence you find, write down where you found it (ie. book title, author, publication details and page number). This will also help you to avoid plagiarism
- Avoid getting bogged down with irrelevant details - always keep the essay question in front of you so you can refer back to it to decide whether a piece of information is useful/relevant or not.



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## Stage 2: Writing

Once you are satisfied that you have all the information you need, you are ready to begin writing the first draft of your essay. To do this effectively you need to understand that all essays have a clear, logical structure, with each part naturally leading on to the next. This structure is made up of an *introduction*, *main body* (organised into paragraphs) and a *conclusion*.

### Introduction

A good, clear introduction is vital for the success of any essay. The introduction clearly sets out for the reader what it is the essay will be addressing and should be made up of the following:

- a catchy introductory sentence to draw the reader in and make them want to read on, such as an interesting fact
- an outline of your topic and method of approach – ie. what the essay is going to discuss and how you are going to go about addressing the essay question
- Your 'thesis statement' – this is what your essay is trying to demonstrate or prove; your point of view

### Main Body

The main body of your essay is where you make your argument in support of your thesis statement (answer your essay question). It is vitally important that you think about the order in which you want to present your information so you can create a clearly structured argument. The reader should be able to follow a logical progression through your main points to your conclusion, without getting lost. A good way to remember to do this is, for each main point you want to make, remember SEX:

**S**tatement - make a statement about what you are trying to say (so, present a key point, opinion or idea).

**E**xpand - expand on this statement with supporting information and ideas (sub-points).

**X**ample - back up your point with example(s) and evidence

### Conclusion

The conclusion is what ties your whole essay together and gives closure for the reader. It should give a summary of all your main points before coming to your final conclusion (ie. what you have been working to prove). It is important that you keep your conclusion brief and do not introduce any new information at this point.

## Stage 3: Re-writing

What you have now completed is a draft of your essay. Make sure you give yourself enough time before the due date to re-read and revise what you've written. You should have the following checklist in front of you:

### Spelling or grammatical errors

The odd typo is generally OK, but repeated mistakes can leave a very bad impression for the marker.

### Paragraphs

Check the order of your paragraphs to make sure they make clear, logical sense. Do your sentences flow on smoothly from one another?

### References

Ensure that all quotes, ideas, etc that are not your own are properly referenced to avoid plagiarism (see your teacher or lecturer for the appropriate way to do this).

### Introduction and Conclusion

Re-read these and ensure that they are clear and to the point.

### Formatting

Make sure that you have followed the format in which your teacher/lecturer would like you to present your essay (eg. margins, line spacing, etc).

Congratulations – your essay is now complete!

