Essays at university level

How are essays at uni different from those you’ve written in the past?

Essays at university are different because:

• at university you won’t be expected to write down all you know or think about a topic. You need to analyse what the question is asking you to do, and then address that question with a reasoned argument – one that uses reliable evidence to persuade your reader.

• there are new academic cultures: tribes and territories. There are very different ways in which knowledge is expressed in different disciplines (eg, Psychology, Law, Physics). Therefore, the ways in which you write and express knowledge – and reference – vary.

• the ways in which you may have been taught to write may not be as acceptable. Typical forms of writing pre-university include the ‘pros and cons’ essay and the ‘positioning’ essay - but these are often quite different from the ways in which you are expected to write at university.

• there are different writing genres – forms - according to the discipline in which you are studying (eg synoptic essays, critical book reviews, tort papers).

• there are different scholarly conventions – especially in terms of referencing – which catch a lot of new students unawares. You might assume you ‘know’ how to present your work and reference, but then find that there are particular scholarly conventions for Law as opposed to Psychology, as opposed to Political Science and so on. So you have to learn these too.

The point is you need to check expectations, so do yourself a couple of favours:

• Consult your course guide as to what’s required.
• Consult your lecturers/tutors.
• Refresh your writing skills:
  – if an undergraduate, do the Essay Writing course
  – if a postgraduate coursework student, do Research Essay Writing
  – if a higher degree research student, (MPhil or PhD), do Thesis Writing on the Academic and Professional Skills Program.