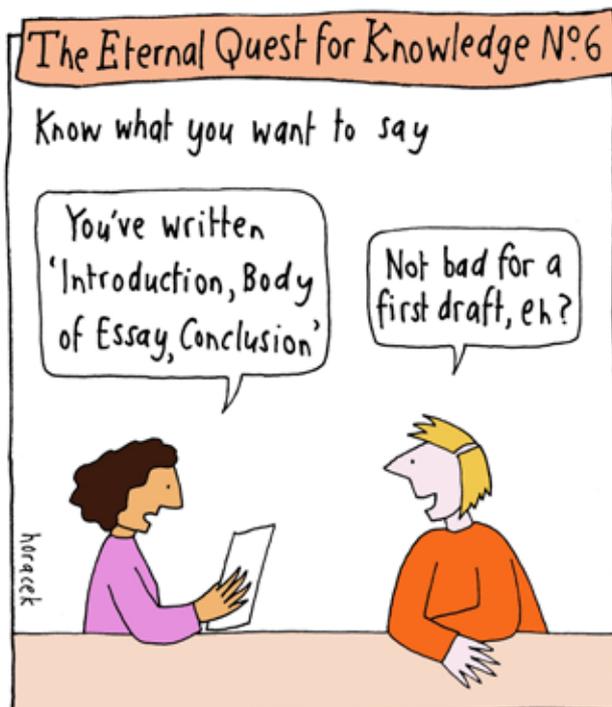


Writing an essay in 12 steps

Writing an essay is a messy, complex, often frustrating process that, nevertheless, can be ordered and managed in several stages. Remember that it is usually a circular rather than a linear process, that your argument will help develop your writing—and that the process of writing will develop your argument and your use of evidence.



1. Analyse and define the topic or question

While an essay question will always have a topic, your first hurdle is to identify and then explore the underlying question/debate/problem within that topic that is central to your course. For example, a Political Science question such as: "What were the causes of the Second World War?" is not asking for a list of causes that you then describe. It is asking: in what way or to what extent did various factors contribute and how were they interrelated? Understanding how the task is situated within your discipline/field/courses is crucial to developing a comprehensive answer.

2. Identify some key ideas

Remember that any essay question does not stand alone: its purpose is to assess how well you understand some key concepts, theories or conflicts in your current course. Consider these concepts, theories or conflicts while you are preparing your essay. Look

at course outlines, lecture notes, seminar readings to identify key themes of the course.

Use brainstorming or mind-mapping techniques to identify key ideas.

3. The first literature search

Initially it is often difficult to find readings: search library catalogues, abstracts and databases for material (do a course in the library to learn how). However, when you find sources the amount of reading is often overwhelming. Ask yourself: what is relevant? What is more central and what is less important?

Think strategically: who are the key writers in the field? How can you identify these? Do the course readings contain useful articles? Start with the key writers in the field that your lecturer recommends, and then progress to articles, books and journals as you narrow your search for more specific or specialised material.

4. Read

Initially, one of the greatest challenges at university and in essay writing is learning how to read academically. When you read, read for a specific purpose: what is the writer's argument (in the research phase)? How does this writer refute the position of another writer (later in the research phase)? Are the elements of grammar correct in my essay (in the later stages of editing)?

Consciously select and apply a reading strategy (see later in the handbook). Read to obtain an overview of

what people are writing on the topic: where are the debates within this topic? What are the key issues of these debates? Are there any key theorists writing on the topic? What evidence is being used to justify each position or interpretation of the topic?

Consciously select and apply a note-taking strategy.

5. Work towards constructing an argument

Try to express your argument or position in one clear sentence. For example: "This paper argues..."

Select, from your readings, evidence and ideas that might support your argument.

Next, consider what things you need to do to persuade the reader of your position. Will you need to define key terms, compare and contrast, critically evaluate the literature, provide background context, analyse a case study, and so on? Once you have thought of the things you will do, this is called the structure of your argument and it provides a potential outline of the main sections of the essay.

6. Construct your argument around an outline

The first division of your topic into parts represents your view of what is important in these debates: this is your preliminary analysis. Remember this may change as you write, as you read more, and as your essay evolves.

Keeping the required length of the essay in mind, transfer key ideas and supporting ideas from the brainstorm session to a linear structure (outline). This outline is the bare bones of the essay.

Prepare a more detailed outline with a section and sub-section plan.

Expand or contract the outline to suit the length required. Add or delete main points, supporting points, the evidence you will use to explain and support them, potential responses to counterarguments or challenges to your position.

Remember: you may need to read more in order to flesh out your ideas.

7. Write the first draft

The purpose of this draft is to work out what you think about the question, in relation to what you have read. Follow your outline. Resist the temptation just to summarise the ideas you have read, by excessively quoting for example; rather, use these ideas to answer your question. Try to write it all in one go, but do not be too concerned about the order of paragraphs or the quality of the writing—you can develop and polish the essay once you have something down worth developing and polishing.

Focus on one section of your essay at a time. You can have a go at writing your introduction but come back and rewrite it after your first draft.

8. Do some more focused reading

Identify where you need more information. It is easy sometimes to find a position and just follow that argument in your essay. Read more critically than this: what are the different positions or the strengths and weaknesses of each? Identify where you need more information.

Widen/extend/narrow your literature search for more material. Find examples to support your main points.

9. Take a break

Put some critical distance and time between yourself and your work. This will help you to return to your essay with fresh eyes.

10. Revise your first draft; work on a second draft

As you write your first draft your ideas and arguments clarify and often the focus of your argument comes together in the last sections of the essay or in the conclusion. In your second draft make sure your argument also appears in your introduction and builds consistently throughout the sections of your essay.

Give this draft to someone else for comments and feedback, for example, a friend, your partner, a fellow student, or

an ASLC adviser. Take note of their comments.

11. Edit

Use a checklist for editing the final draft, which incorporates formatting requirements as well as things you know you often have problems with, eg referencing, expression, etc.

12. Hand it in and reward yourself!

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