

Student Feature - Advice on Writing an Essay

Written by E-International Relations

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This guide is aimed at a beginner, typically a student embarking on their first year of university study. There is much more that can be said, and further skills that will need to be acquired and/or sharpened over your studies. However, this guide should be enough to get you started and give you a chance of turning in a decent piece of work. An interactive learning tool to writing an essay, Alex Essay Writing Tool, is also well worth a look in addition to the tips below.

Note: This is just a general guide. You will need to read the specific guidance your assessor has given you *carefully* for your assignment as there may be things that they have required that contradict and/or are not featured below. So, use this as a tip sheet only and pay attention to your institutional guidance in the first instance.

READ

Before you attempt to write anything you must read around the subject you have chosen / been assigned. You should do this from scholarly sources, not just by searching the internet as you need to be able to trust the information you read. The best way to ensure this is to use your university library holdings as the basis for your reading. It's absolutely fine to do a bit of quick searching of key terms on the internet when you find yourself stuck, but as best practice do not take any explanation for granted unless you see it explained the same way on at least two different websites.

As you read, make notes. Each source that you read you should get into the habit of making a short set of notes about it so you can quickly remember the key points of that source. You can do that on paper if you print the source out, or on a set of digital notes/documents you make on your computer.

When you think you have a basic feel for the subject, you should organise your notes and begin to plan out your answer.

STRUCTURE

Organise your answer so that it has:

- Title: The question you have chosen. You are usually not permitted to adapt or change it.
- Introduction: In one paragraph explain what the question involves and your plan for answering it.
- Main section: Set out in turn the points that are relevant to the answer. They should be linked: they combine to form an argument that answers the question, not merely describes the topic one point after another. You should be making *an analysis*.
- Conclusion: bring the points together which you used in the main section and recap them. Make clear how they answer the question and draw a firm, convincing, line under your essay.

ARGUMENT

You need to argue a case that answers the question. All questions require analysis in which you weigh and judge the arguments in the sources and the evidence they offer. Set out your case in your introduction and indicate/preview

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how you will proceed. Everything you write should contribute to confirming that case.

EVIDENCE

All your points need to be substantiated. For any observation you make you need to be able to answer the question 'How do you know this?' This can be accomplished by citing expert sources, making a logical case based on factual evidence / data or by employing examples, statistics etc. as proof.

RELEVANCE

Everything you write should directly contribute to answering the question. Material that does not serve that purpose is irrelevant. So if you find yourself going off topic, delete that text. It will earn you nothing and frustrate the reader/markers. Include only the points that directly contribute to answering the question. You will have to read widely to ensure that your answer is thorough and you are able to be convincing.

STYLE

You should write in a clear grammatical way. Punctuation and spelling are relevant because they contribute to clarity. Each paragraph should contribute a distinct point in your argument but should be linked to both the previous and the succeeding paragraphs. Avoid short paragraphs (2-3 lines) and overly long ones (more than 350 words). Try to think around the theme of 'one major point per paragraph'. Keep it simple and guide the reader through each point logically. Avoid complex, multi faceted, arguments as you may find that you confuse yourself and the reader.

SOURCES

You should consult as wide a range of relevant materials as possible and the essay should reveal them. It is unlikely that you will be able to write an adequate answer unless you have consulted at least five different sources. Do not just recite a textbook. You need to be able to read around the issue and show some confidence handling various interpretations/angles. You should avoid using multiple, or very long, quotes. Use your own words to engage with and interpret sources (using in-text citations) and show you understand them – rather than just quoting long passages, which is a poor method.

AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

You can expect that your essays will be plagiarism scanned by sophisticated software that most universities use, and in addition lecturers are adept at spotting foul play. So ensure that you reference your work adequately. To use the words of others without acknowledgement is plagiarism, a serious offence. It can typically lead to punishments ranging from a mark of 0 for an assignment to expulsion from your degree scheme.

MOST IMPORTANTLY – ANSWER THE QUESTION!

All the above will be unimportant unless you answer the question. Typically, questions will allow you to form your own interpretation and there will be no exact 'correct answer'. However, it is vital that you do arrive at a clear answer of some sort to the question as it was posed. After doing so much hard work, don't fall into one of the most common traps of all and end up going off on a tangent. You will rarely be credited for it. Following instructions is usually part of the assessment criteria of an essay and developing a plausible answer is item one on that criteria.