

Guide to Academic Writing

How to Write an Academic Essay

The Overall Process

1. *Identify the key assignment demands* – e.g. analysis, recommendations etc.
2. *Brainstorm ideas* – be careful to focus on the assignment question
3. *Identify required information* - decide how to source all relevant material
4. *Gather and record information* - make effective notes
5. *Create an outline essay structure* - make it logical and perspicuous
6. *Write a first draft* - draw each section together into a coherent whole
7. *Revise draft(s)* – do so continuously; get into the habit of writing regularly
8. *Create a bibliography* - format in Harvard style
9. *Final Draft* – make sure you have met the key assignment demands
10. *Proof read* – fix grammatical and spelling mistakes

Academic Writing

Academic writing is distinctive in three main respects:

Style – simple, clear and precise.
Structure – logical with clear sign-posting.
Content – honest, rigorous and cautious.

Style

- Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple straightforward prose. Academic topics are deep and difficult enough already without being muddled with pretentious or verbose language. Short sentences and tight paragraphs are the order of the day.
- Never assume without proper reflection that the reader will automatically understand what you are trying to say. Make every effort to help the reader understand your line of thought.
- Always be as precise as possible. Offer unambiguous definitions and clarify concepts where necessary. The reader should never be put in a position where they are forced to choose between different possible interpretations. After all, they might choose the weaker alternative!
- Avoid emotional language and appeals based on feelings rather than on valid evidence-based reasoning. The reader should never feel emotionally pressured into accepting a claim.

Structure

- **Essays involve giving arguments, and a good essay is a sustained argument.** In other words, a good essay is a reasoned defence of some claim. The crucial question when you make a claim is always: *why?* Why do you think that? What is your evidence or justification for saying it? The central aim in writing a good essay is not merely to describe a particular topic or theory, but to state your own views about the topic and to give *reasons* for them.
- **Focus your essay. Be as targeted and specific as possible.** Don't just regurgitate lecture notes or summarize the readings indiscriminately (for example, avoid using long quotations, unless you plan to critically analyse them). Be careful to pick out the points that really matter for the precise question you are attempting to answer. It is much better to make a small point well than to gesture vaguely at a number of larger claims none of which you can adequately defend.
- **A good essay begins with a thesis – the conclusion you'll be arguing for.** This thesis should be clearly stated in the first paragraph, even in the first sentence. The first paragraph or two should also contain a brief summary of your own reasons for accepting the thesis - i.e. the main premises in your argument.
- **The rest of your paper should be a paragraph-by-paragraph defence of this claim.** Your primary goal should be to make it as easy as possible for the reader to understand what it is you are trying to argue. The best way to do so is to offer the reader sign-posts. At a minimum, you will need to do the following:
 - 1) *Explain your thesis* – if you are discussing an argument or theory, explain it as clearly as you can. Give examples to illustrate what it says, and what you want to say about it.
 - 2) *Present a sustained defence of your claim* – each paragraph of your essay should have a definite purpose in building your defence. A good rule is to make the first sentence of every paragraph a mini-thesis, and to follow it with evidence and explanation (think of each paragraph as a mini essay in itself). A good test is to go through your essay, reading only the first sentence of each paragraph. Can you still follow the flow of the argument?
- **Think! The point of an essay is not just to summarize what other people have said, but to be creative.** Think of academic writing as a form of creative non-fiction. Be encouraged to try out your own ideas and objections. Think of new counter-examples to arguments, or new objections to theories you encounter in class or in your readings. Of course, you don't have to disagree. A great essay might defend whatever is being discussed; for example, by showing why a tempting objection doesn't really work.

A central part of critical thinking is to consider how someone might reply to your points. Think of the ideal essay as the organised written equivalent of a back-and-forth argument, point and counter-point.

Content

- The first rule and cardinal virtue of academic writing is intellectual honesty. Always treat opponents' views fairly and don't be afraid to highlight weaknesses in your own argument.
- Intellectual rigor is also of paramount importance. Always be careful to reflect on your assumptions. Are they likely to be accepted by someone who does not share your particular perspective? If not, then you will need to convince your opponent with explicit arguments to avoid the charge that you are simply begging the question at issue.
- Do not overstate premises or conclusions. If a weaker premise will do the same job as a stronger one, use it. Don't offer hostages to fortune. Be cautious!
- When considering possible responses to your argument, don't be tempted to select obviously weak objections that can be easily demolished (i.e. straw men). Careful readers will see through this ploy and think less of your argument.
- Don't over-inflate the authority of those you are writing about. Academics are not omniscient and should not be treated as such. The only authority that really matters in an academic context is the authority of a good argument.

Summary

- Write clearly and concisely
- Be careful what you assume
- Do not overstate premises or conclusions
- Treat opponents and opposing views fairly
- Avoid pretentiousness
- Avoid inappropriate emotional appeals and discriminatory language
- Keep the authority of those you are writing about in perspective - the only genuine authority is the authority of a good argument

Common Mistakes

- Describing something rather than critically analyzing it
- Failing to evaluate and revise early drafts properly
- Formulating a thesis that is either too broad (overly ambitious) or too narrow (trivial)
- Assuming that the reader will be able to figure out what you meant to say (as opposed to what you actually did say)
- Overstating what has been proven
- Attacking an author's character instead of his or her argument
- Presenting unsupported assertions instead of good arguments
- Padding the essay with irrelevant or redundant passages
- Using quotes from others in place of well-developed arguments of your own
- Failing to offer the reader sign-posts to guide them along