Essays and Assignments

Student Learning Advisory Service

www.kent.ac.uk/ueit/слас
Essay writing process

Step 1: Analyse the question
- Check requirements
- Check learning outcomes
- Deconstruct question
- Brainstorm ideas

Step 2: Read and make notes
- Focus on question
- Record sources

Step 3: Draft essay plan
- Line of reasoning
- Structure

Step 4: Draft the essay
- Introduction
- Paragraphs
- Conclusion

Step 5: Referencing
- Matching in-text with referencing list

Step 6: Editing
- Logic and cohesion
- Spelling, grammar, punctuation
What’s the Point? Why Write?

• Consolidate class material/learning
• Extend understanding through addition reading, research and reflection
• Develop an informed opinion
• Work within ‘constraints’
  - time & word limit
  - academic conventions (references, etc.)
• Learn how to present and express concepts and ideas in a clear, professional & effective manner
What Tutors are Looking For…

Every assignment varies, but basically tutors mark:

- **Content**: an appropriate range of *reliable* academic views, theories, ideas, arguments
- **Organisation**: ability to structure a coherent and plausible set of *arguments* (paragraphs, etc.)
- **Grammar & spelling**: good communication skills
- **Technical academic conventions**: full bibliography, proper referencing, word count, etc.
Marks of a Good Assignment

A good assignment....

1. Focuses on the set question/topic/task
2. Has a clear structure - easy to follow
3. Is well researched - evidence based
4. Adheres to academic conventions
5. Is correctly referenced
6. Is well presented – word limit, page numbering, margins, line spacing, font type, spelling …
Getting Started

• 90% of any good essay is what you do before you start writing
  – the last thing you do is write!

• Essence of task is ALWAYS
  – Careful planning and preparation
  – Thorough background research
  – Readiness to challenge and probe topic
  – Careful drafting
  – Careful proof-reading and checking
Research Plan

• Start by deconstructing the question
  – What is the key **topic** or theme to be explored?
  – What are the instructions? (Discuss, critically evaluate, etc.)
  – Are there any specific limitations or instructions?

• Draw up a list – the research agenda:
  – What do I need to find out about the topic
  – Where will I go to get that information
  – How many *different* views and perspectives should I look for?

• Be ready to add to the list as you go along
  – Almost certainly you’ll discover new ideas en route
Organise

• Work back from assignment deadline
• Allow time for revision, problems - & rest!
• Allow plenty of ‘thinking time’
• Consider resources needed:
  - library (including local library)
  - online journals and other resources
  - websites (use with caution!)
  - buying books?

www.amazon.co.uk
www.abebooks.co.uk
Choosing Study Material

• Go for **variety** (types and angles)
  - Journal articles (from reputable journals)
  - Books, unpublished work, conference papers,
  - Reports, government publications, etc.
  - newspapers, magazines, CD-roms, DVDs, …
  - But *don’t* rely on lecture notes alone!

• Check (scholarly) Reliability
  - known author/publisher
  - biased? does it matter?
  - length of bibliography

• *Always* keep information to write up reference
Reading

• Go for ‘smart’ targeted reading:
• Key question: what do I need from this
• Skim text for clues:
  - chapter/section headings
  - use index/contents/abstract
  - look for key words/ideas/phrases
• Focus ruthlessly on assignment topic
• Take ‘relevant’ notes only
• Record sources – you’ll need them!
Making Notes

As you read:

• Don’t mark library books – but note key points
• Paraphrase, summarise in your own words
• Note a few **key quotations only**
• Read critically all the collected information
• Ask: do I need *all* this information?
• Summarise ideas/theories/information in your OWN words (practice the art of précis)
• Start to organise thoughts: what are the **key points** in this chapter/article/section….?
Taking Notes

Myth, Mind and the Screen – J. Izod (CUP 2001)

Impact of moving image on imagination clear to see: characters become public figures (p1)
Pictures arouse intense emotional response: colour, light, camera angle, lens, movement, voices, sounds, pace and ‘elegance’ of picture enhance or detract from appeal (p2)
Links between watching film and *dreaming* explored since Munsterberg in 1916
Rapprochement between post Freudians & post Jungians (p2)
Freudian tendency: trace every adult disturbance to traumatic childhood:
  • Dervin: cinema is dark/nocturnal with huge figures – infant’s perspective; full of primal sex and danger signals (life/death) (p3)
  • Weakness of Freudian/Lacanian approach: unconscious is not given power to reassemble symbolic elements (p6); unconscious seems to conceptualised by repressed infantile experiences; symbols shield the ego from full power of experience (p6)
  • Freudian theory also tends to see all sexuality in unconscious as perverted
Jungian theory by contrast sees this site of great creative energy – to be gripped by fiction is evidence of exploration of deep-seated needs (p7)
  • Jungian theory also expects intertextuality of symbols offscreen (p7)

As you take notes:
• ALWAYS make a note of the bibliographic details
• ALWAYS make a note of the PAGE NUMBERS
  You WILL need this information later for your references…..
• By all means develop own shorthand BUT remember you must be able read your notes!
• Note only what you need….  
• Highlight key points
Critical Thinking

Most common objection: reports are ‘descriptive not analytical’

**Descriptive:**
- States what happens
- Reports ‘facts’/results
- Summaries books
- Outlines theories
- Explains ideas
- Lists details
- Gives information

  Mechanical & wooden
  flat & simplistic

**Analytical:**
- Identifies key issues
- Evaluates strengths
- Considers alternatives
- Evaluates alternatives
- Gives reasons for choices
- Looks for links/causes
- Challenges (logic, data, etc)

  Probes & tests:
  informed & reasoned
First Sketch

Start to organise basic material:

1. Linear notes
   - Intro: key theme...
   - Main body:
     - point 1
     - point 2
     - point 3...
   - Conclusion

2. Diagram
Generic Essay Plan

- Introduction (5-10% of words)
- Body Presenting & evaluating evidence
  - main theories/arguments/evidence
  - counter-arguments (BUT....)
  - evaluation (on the one hand...)
  - ALWAYS support your ideas with reasoned argument (i.e. give reasons)
- Conclusion (ca.10% of words)
- References
- Bibliography - everything used for preparation
- Appendices
First Draft

• Don’t be surprised by writer’s block – it’s normal
• The beauty of computers is you can always change things later…
• Don’t start writing until you have finished your research and your initial thinking
• BUT don’t be surprised if your ideas change
• If necessary, just start writing…
• Stick to your plan (and watch word limits)
• Check for fluency and flow of argument
Be Persuasive

• Typically, an argument is persuasive if it is backed up with some convincing evidence
• Generally, in academic terms, acceptable evidence falls into three groups:
  1. A cited authority: a recognised expert in the field, who is fully referenced
  2. Empirical research – your own research which has been validly tested
  3. Logical (structured) argument
Academic writing

- Formal (but not pompous or flowery)
- Focussed tightly on designated topic
- Based on background research
- Carefully structured
- Tentative/cautious – don’t claim too much
- Impersonal (third person language)
- Fully argued and referenced
Formal

• Avoid casual fonts
  – Do not use fonts such as this or this

• Avoid informal language or slang
  – ‘stuff’, ‘this is a pain’, ‘cool’ or even ‘mega-cool’....

• Avoid abbreviations unless absolutely necessary
  – Such as e.g. i.e. etc.

• Avoid phrasal verbs:
  – ‘come up with’ meaning ‘suggest’

• Avoid irony, sarcasm, or humour

• Do not use contractions
  – ‘isn’t’, ‘can’t’, ‘won’t’, ‘don’t’, shouldn’t’, etc.

• Spell out abbreviations or acronyms at first use
  – Unless they are ‘common knowledge e.g. the BBC
Formal

• Do NOT use imperatives or instructions
  – ‘mix this’, ‘add that’, ‘go left’, etc
• Avoid assertions (this is clear, obvious, etc.)
  – ALWAYS give reasons to backup argument
• Avoid questions (incl. rhetorical ones)
• Avoid clichés
  – in this day and age, knight in shining armour
• Avoid sexist language
  – use plural forms instead: Students and their …
• Use of ‘that’
  – He believed that the introduction of …
Cautious and Tentative

• Never claim too much
  – There are always exceptions

• Avoid unsubstantiated assertions:
  – ‘should’, ‘must’ or ‘ought to’ language
  – Better to use:
    • probably, likely, seems, appears, suggests, tend to, could be argued, perhaps, etc.
      http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/results.htm

• Make sure you can back up your claims
  – Three standard methods of support
    • Recognised academic authority
    • Empirical evidence from reliable research
    • Logical argument
Impersonal

• Do not use: I, my, me or we, our, us
  – Instead This was a difficult situation…
    It is believed that …
    The results suggest that …

• Do not use expressions like: As we can see
  – Instead It is clear that…
    This shows that.
Four Cs of Academic Writing

Academic writing is *always*...

- **C**lear
- **C**oncise
- **C**ohesive
- **C**orrect
Final Draft

• Give yourself space (at least a day) – go away!
• Proof-read your text – several times
• Fine-tune the argument
• Check your references:
  - have you fully referenced every point?
  - have you checked page numbers?
  - have you checked the required format?
• Try reading essay out loud – does it make sense?
• Do obvious things like: spell-check, word count, etc
• Make sure Reference list & bibliography attached
• Complete Coversheet; sign anti-plagiarism statement
• Submit essay – and let go!
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Further Resources

• The Assignment Survival Kit (Ask):
  www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/ced/themes/learnhigher/ask/index.html

• Student Learning Advisory Service
  www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/slas

Please give us some feedback:
https://survey.kent.ac.uk/slas-workshop