

Eight tips for good essay writing

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<http://www.aber.ac.uk/aberskills>

1. Answer the question

Make sure you have accurately interpreted the question. Things to identify include:

- **Key content words** that are related to the topic or theme of the task.
- **Fixed process words** that direct what you have to do (usually critical verbs).
- **Variable aspects** of content or process, which give you choice of examples or issues.
- **Ambiguities** or aspects of the question that are not clearly defined or may be interpreted in more than one way.

2. Plan before you write and plan while you read

Planning: the plan begins with your own interpretation of the question.

- Identify the main issue from the question.
- Identify your aims: the critical goal, or expected outcome of your discussion.
- Identify how you will investigate and discuss the issue.
- Consider how many stages or sections you will need to reach that goal.
- Set a word count for each section to avoid writing too much at each stage (this should be 10% less than the required word count to allow expansion room on any of the ideas).

Refer to your plan throughout, but be flexible and adapt it as you find new ideas.

Reading: from the main issue and from the module reading list, identify your reading sources.

- Make sure you are working with primary and suitable secondary sources (mostly books and scholarly journal articles).
- Start writing your bibliography as you read. It is easier to delete works you do not refer to later than write a whole bibliography at the end.

- Avoid questionable web-based material. If you don't know the author's name, date and place of publication, the identity of the author is not clear and the material should not be used.
- Read around the main issues that are related to the question. You do not need to cover the full history or development of the issue.

3. A good introduction

A good introduction tells the reader what the essay will be about. If the introduction is clear it leaves the reader with a good impression from the beginning. It could be approximately 10-15% of the word count (though there are no rules on this).

Things to include:

- Background information that contextualises the main issue.
- Your interpretation of the issue as identified from analysing the question (but do not repeat the question).
- The aims of the essay and sometimes an indication of structure (less common in arts and humanities essays).
 - Use the infinitive to write the aims, e.g. "...to identify the main differences between...".

While an introduction appears at the beginning, it is often not possible to accurately reflect the whole argument, outcome and structure of your essay until you have completed it. Plan and draft an introduction as you begin, but always makes sure it is the last thing you edit after completing the rest of your essay. That way it will accurately reflect the contents of the essay.

4. The body of the essay

This is the main part of the essay, in which you should firstly review the literature that is pertinent to the main issue. This could be any of the following (or a combination):

- A thematic review (comparison of main ideas and theories).
- An argumentative review (contrasting critical perspectives).

- A historical review (significant events or stages in the development of current thinking on the issue).
- A chronological review (the timescale of development).

A good literature review is the foundation of the essay and any critical or practical analysis, empirical investigation or case study, will not be as strong without it. It is essential to situate your own ideas in relation to established perspectives on the issue. Reviewed literature (whether as a separate section or embedded throughout the essay) should account for approximately 50% of the word count for the body of the essay.

Trough the body of the essay and in relation to reviewed literature you will be creating a critical analysis or practical assessment of how the principle works in practice. This will be exemplified in critical discussion, practical experiment or case study. In the arts and humanities it is more common to see the critical analysis and in the sciences and social sciences it is more common to see practical experiment and case study.

5. A good conclusion

A good conclusion tells the reader what the essay was about. It should summarise the main issue and outcome of the essay, but not introduce new ideas. The conclusion could account for up to 10% of the overall word count. Things you could include:

- A summary of the main issue in relation to how you discussed, exemplified or analysed that issue.
- A statement of outcome or relevance of your findings.
- Recommendations (where applicable) for further research or development on the issue.

6. Citations, quotations, references and bibliography

Good referencing is essential in academic writing. The difference between good practice and bad practice can sometimes be a matter of accurate citation and referencing.

- Always check your departmental style guide or module handbook for requirements. If you are working between different departments do not assume

what is appropriate for one is appropriate for the other. If in doubt ask the department.

- When you use ideas in your essay that are based on anything you have read you need to cite the author and include a reference to that author's work in your bibliography.
- This MUST be done for everything you refer to that is not your own and it MUST be done whether you quote an author's words directly or whether you paraphrase the author

Citation: the author's name, critical phrase being used, year and page number. These can be written in your sentence (integral citation) or appear in brackets (non-integral citation), or appear in footnotes (check departmental style guide for use of these aspects of citation).

- **Integral citation:** "According to + author's surname (year: page number)..."
- **Integral citation:** "Author's surname + verb (asserts, argues, suggests, etc.) (year: page number)..."
- **Non-integral citation:** "Research conducted in 2007 argues that (author's surname, year: Page number, or footnote)"

Quotation: a quotation is the use of "the exact words of the author". It must have quotation marks and be accompanied by a citation. A quotation should appear within your own sentence structure if it is less than two lines long. If it is three lines to five lines long it should be set apart as a separate text block and indented by one tab space on the keyboard, e.g.

"The words you see here are the exact words of the author and they represent an aspect of the argument that exemplifies or summarises ideas in a very succinct and powerful way."

(Morgan, 2012)

Reference: the full details of a single published resource you have cited. This includes authors surname, initials, editor if appropriate, title of work, subtitle if appropriate, edition if second or later, place of publication and publisher.

The following examples use the Harvard referencing system. Other referencing systems contain the same information, but in a different order. Your department will specify which system you must use.

Books

Brumfit, C. & Johnson, K. (Eds.) (1979). *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chapters in edited books

Hymes, D. (1971) "On Communicative Competence." In Brumfit, C. & Johnson, K. (Eds.) (1979).

Journal articles

Sheldon, L.E. (1998). "Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials." *ELT Journal* 42/4: 237-46.

Web-sites

Morkes, J. & Nielsen, J. (1997). "Concise, SCANNABLE and Objective: How to Write for the Web." [On-line]. <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html> (accessed 1/1/2000).

Bibliography: the bibliography is the full list of references for works you have cited in your essay (sometimes you will see "References" instead of "Bibliography". It must be in alphabetical order of surname and you should not use bullet points to organise it.

A final note on citation: if in doubt, cite it

7. Write in your own words

In general it is better to paraphrase most of the ideas you are citing. Paraphrasing summarises another author's work and connects those ideas critically to your own argument and the main issue and aims of your own essay. Always question how you are connecting these ideas so that you do not only summarise without making the critical connection.

- What you should not paraphrase: fixed concepts, essential ideas, names, places, dates, etc.
- What you cannot paraphrase: grammatical items such as articles (a/an/the), conjunctions (and, but), prepositions (in, at, on, by).
- What you should paraphrase: any aspects of personal expression or opinion.

Sample text:

"Technology and the internet pose complex challenges for school leaders; these challenges should not be underestimated. While the internet presents new issues to sort through and new ground to tread, it surely is here to stay. Now is the time to explore the internet's potential for meeting the educational needs of diverse groups of students and involving their parents in student achievement. And schools that take command of the internet as a tool to accomplish overriding goals, such as improving student achievement and galvanizing parental support, will benefit in the long run."

(NSBF, 2000)

The same text with all examples of personal expression underlined:

"Technology and the internet pose complex challenges for school leaders; these challenges should not be underestimated. While the internet presents new issues to sort through and new ground to tread, it surely is here to stay. Now is the time to explore the internet's potential for meeting the educational needs of diverse groups of students and involving their parents in student achievement. And schools that take command of the internet as a tool to accomplish overriding goals, such as improving student achievement and galvanizing parental support, will benefit in the long run."

(NSBF, 2000)

Sample paraphrased version:

The NSBF report (2000) identifies a number of crucial concerns for the use of the internet in education. As a new medium in the development of educational resources and methods, the internet is a valuable means through which the needs of a wide range of students can be addressed. In addition, it suggests that parents can be increasingly involved in their children's learning, fostering greater student achievement. Teachers that recognise and participate in the development of such ideas, despite facing some difficulties at the beginning, will contribute positively to increased educational standards on the whole.

Note the use of the citation and the change of emphasis that connects it to my own argument:

...the development of educational resources and methods

...will contribute positively to increased educational standards on the whole.

8. Effective layout, presentation and style

Make your work look good and make it look professional. The impact of good layout and presentation should not be underestimated and you may gain extra marks for this in your essays. When you have identified the layout features you will use, be consistent with those features. Before that though, you must make sure that you are choosing appropriate features for layout. Some examples are given below:

Typeface:

For the body of the essay use a *serif* font, like Times New Roman or Cambria (this document is written using 11 point Cambria, with examples and bullet lists in 10 point Calibri). Unless specifically requested not to do so, text in bullet lists, diagrams, images and separate text block quotations can be written using a *sans serif* font, like Arial or Calibri (note that Arial is a bigger font than Times New Roman, so if you are using 12 point Times New Roman, you would use 10 point Arial for diagrams, images, etc.).

Line spacing:

If this is not specified in essay guidelines, 1.5 or 2.0 line spacing is a good choice. This makes the text more readable and allows the marker to write comments between the lines.

Headings and sub-headings:

Use bold typeface for headings and sub-headings. 12 point is a good size for headings as it will look bigger when it bold is used.

Bold, *italic*, underlining and CAPITAL LETTERS

Bold, italics and underlining should not be used in essays to emphasise words or phrases. Words speak for themselves. Italics are reserved for words from Latin or other languages. Bold may be used in headings and diagrams. Underlining would only be used in specific examples where we need to differentiate visually between different items. Uppercase (capital) letters should be avoided unless being used as head words in diagrams for specific presentation reasons.

Diagrams, tables and images

When using diagrams, tables and images always include a figure or table number and give each item a title. Refer to figure numbers in the preceding or subsequent text and interpret all images. Do not include these without interpretation.

Punctuation

Consult a punctuation style guide and be consistent with all aspects of punctuation. Do not use exclamations marks (!) in academic writing.

Spelling and grammar

Always check spelling and grammar at least twice. It is acceptable to use the spelling and grammar check features of programmes like Microsoft Word, but these cannot tell the difference between words that are pronounced the same but have different spellings (e.g. gate vs. gait; foul vs. fowl). Always conduct a final check with your own eyes.

Sentences and paragraphs

Do not use one sentence paragraphs. Group associated ideas into paragraphs and make sure you have a least one paragraph break per page. Most paragraphs in academic writing run from approximately 8-10 lines for a short paragraph to 15-17 lines for a longer paragraph. When your paragraphs are longer than this, read them to see whether you can break them into shorter paragraphs.

Line breaks and paragraphs

Be consistent with paragraph breaks. Either use a full line break and start subsequent paragraphs at the left margin of the page, or if you prefer, start the opening sentence of each section at the left margin and indent the first line of subsequent paragraphs by one tab on the keyboard.

Drafting, proofreading and editing

Never submit the first draft of any piece of work. It will almost certainly have errors in all these features and inconsistencies in argument and style. Many drafts are required for a good essay.

John Morgan, 2012-2016. For more information on free courses for academic writing see: <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/student-learning-support/>

Individual writing consultations in Welsh or English are available with the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) Writing Fellows. E-mail writers@aber.ac.uk to request an appointment.