Guide to Essay Writing

Study Development Factsheet

There are several stages involved in creating an effective essay at university. This factsheet provides a step-by-step guide to writing better essays. For each stage, we have explained why it is important, and then outlined the key things that you need to do.

	Stage	Why?	How?
1	Analyse the question	To make sure you answer the question(s) fully.	• Identify important subject words in the title. • Identify instruction words and decide what you need to do.
2	Check the assessment guidelines	To fulfil the assessment criteria and meet the learning objectives.	• Read the assessment guidelines thoroughly. • Check you understand the learning objectives.
3	Make a rough plan	To identify relevant research topics and limit unnecessary reading.	• Brainstorm: write down your ideas and identify what you need to research. • Mind-map your initial ideas: try to identify links, common themes and a possible order. • Use reading lists to look for clues and select the most relevant sources.
4	Read/research and make notes	To improve your understanding and provide reliable, academic evidence for your ideas.	• Start with an overview of each book or article: look at the table of contents, the abstract, the subheadings. • Think of your key questions: have them in front of you as you read, to keep you focussed. • Write down the answers as you find them, keeping a clear record of sources and page numbers. • Write a short summary of what each source says before moving on to the next one.
5	Plan the structure of your essay	A good plan keeps you on track and highlights how much weight (how many words) to give each topic.	• Draw a mind-map or spider diagram. • Use colour and images to connect ideas. • Identify an appropriate / logical order. • Draw up a list of points and subpoints. • Divide up your word count: allow 10% each for the introduction and the conclusion, and decide how much to spend on each of your points and subpoints.
6	Draft the body of your text	To present and develop your argument.	Write a paragraph for each idea: • Introduce the idea. • Explain the idea. • Give supporting evidence. • Use sign-posting words and phrases to move from one paragraph to the next.

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	Stage	Why?	How?
7	Edit and check against your plan	To make sure your points answer the question and are presented in a logical order.	• Think Big – Have you followed your plan? • Think Medium – Does each paragraph stick to one point? • Think Small – Does each sentence make sense?
8	Write the introduction and conclusion	The introduction needs to make a good first impression and present your argument. The conclusion clearly states the position you have arrived at.	The introduction: • States the position you are taking (your 'thesis statement'). • Gives an outline of your structure. The conclusion: • Sums up key points and implications. • Clarifies the 'message' that you want the reader to remember.
9	Proofread	Good spelling, grammar and punctuation make your ideas clearer, and stop you losing marks.	• Read your work aloud, paying particular attention to commas (short pauses) and full stops (longer pauses). • Avoid contractions: write 'do not' for 'don't'. • Accessibility tools such as Microsoft Editor and Read&Write are available through your YSJ account, which gives access to Microsoft Office, Word Online and AppsAnywhere. Such software goes beyond spellchecking to include read aloud and immersive reader modes that intuitively help you to revise and improve your work.
10	Referencing	Acknowledge the sources of the ideas that you have used, to avoid plagiarism.	• Search for 'YSJ referencing' or navigate from the Library homepage for guidance specific to your course's referencing style. • List all your sources in alphabetical order by surname of author in the reference list.

Support
Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1 to 1 and small group tutorials.

- Book a tutorial or join a workshop on the YSJ study development tutorials webpage.
- Access our Study Success resources on the Study Success webpage on the YSJ study success webpage.

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