

## The essay writing process

### Seven suggested steps to the essay/assignment writing process

1. Plan
2. Analyse question
3. Find information
4. Read and make notes
5. Draft an outline
6. Write
7. Edit and proofread

#### Plan

- Choose the question if there are options. Think carefully about your particular interests, the knowledge you already have, and how easy it will be to find material and resources (check with library staff)
- Read the marking schedule closely so you know exactly what the tutor is looking for and what marks are allocated for each part of the assignment
- Check the word count and work out how many words should be allocated to each section of the assignment, according to the marking schedule and standard Essay structure.
- Note the due date and work out a timeline which leaves plenty of time for research, writing, editing and proofreading. You will save yourself a lot of pressure if you start in good time!

#### Analyse the question

- Make sure you understand exactly what the question means and what you have to do – if you are unsure, check with your tutor
- Underline the topic words – what are the key subjects the assignment is about
- Underline instructional words (describe, explain, analyse, summarise, compare etc.)– check the study guide to make sure you know what they mean and what you need to do

#### Find information

- Start with course material and recommended readings
- Ask library staff for help with additional sources (books, journal articles, DVDs)
- Check online resources and databases – ask library staff about access to EPIC databases
- If necessary, talk to experts or conduct interviews
- Make sure you note down the bibliographic details of all the sources you find (author(s), title, place and date of publication, publisher), including online sources (include date

when you retrieved the information). You will need this information for your reference list at the end of the assignment

- Keep a record of where you find each source – this will save you time if you want to look at something again

### Read and make notes

- Scan or survey chapter headings, summaries/conclusions and indexes to find key information. You will not have time to read everything
- Skim-read the information which looks like it might be useful
- Once you have found the most useful information, read carefully and make notes – either on paper or in a computer document. Keep all the material for the assignment in one place: either in a ring-binder or an online folder
- Identify possible quotations and make sure you copy them down exactly
- Make sure you note the source and the page number for all the information you note down. This will save you hours of time and frustration when citing material in your essay and compiling your reference list

### Draft an outline

- Your essay will consist of an introduction, a body containing several paragraphs, and a conclusion (see Essay Structure)
- Decide what your argument is going to be – what is the main idea you will use to answer the question
- Work out the topics you will address which together will form your argument. Each paragraph will discuss one such topic, with a topic sentence, followed by examples and evidence to support it (see Writing Paragraphs)
- Organize the topics into a logical structure so each paragraph flows to the next, with each point building on the last one
- Organize your information so that the material for each topic is grouped together

### Write

- Writing assignments can be stressful and many students find it hard to get started. So if this applies to you, you are not alone!
- Check what style of writing is required for the assignment – formal/academic (see guide to Academic writing); informal (which might include using bullet points or numbering); personal reflection (your personal views and ideas about the topic); impersonal and objective (that is, not using ‘I’ or ‘me’ much). If you are unsure, ask your tutor
- Your first draft does not need to be perfect! It is important just to get something down in writing (on paper or on-screen) which you can then edit and make better. Writing it down can help clarify your thoughts

- Don't try to write your introduction first. Start with the body of the essay, using your outline and expanding each section. Remember that each paragraph should contain one main idea, followed by some explanation or expansion, with examples or evidence to support it. Together, the main ideas expressed in each paragraph will form your argument
- Make sure you reference your work according to the APA Referencing style, so that all quotations, paraphrases and ideas which come from someone else are acknowledged. You must not plagiarise (claim someone else's work as your own)!
- Write the introduction and conclusion at the end of the process.
  - Your introduction will state the intention of the essay and how you plan to answer the question.
  - Your conclusion will summarise the topic, restate your argument (in different words) and draw themes together. It will NOT include any new material
- You will need to revise and rewrite your draft. Try to leave yourself enough time to take a break (several hours or overnight if possible) and come back to it with a fresh eye
- Compile your bibliography (all the sources you have used) or a reference list (just the sources you have actually cited in the essay), using APA Referencing – check the marking schedule or ask your tutor to establish which type of list is required

### Edit and proofread

- Ask yourself the following questions as you work through what you have written
  - **Most important** - Have I answered the question and covered all the requirements of the topic?
  - Does what I have written make sense?
  - Is there a good, logical flow from paragraph to paragraph?
  - Am I using language that I understand?
  - Do I have a good introduction and conclusion which clearly state what my argument is?
  - Have I referenced my assignment correctly, within the text and in the reference list or bibliography?
  - Is the essay within the permitted variations on the required word count? (every course will have different guidelines on how far assignments may be above or below the set number of words)
- Check spelling, grammar and punctuation – see Punctuation guide and use Spellcheck and Grammar Check (remember, though, that they will not necessarily pick up every mistake). Make sure sentences are complete. Reading the essay out loud can help pick up errors
- If possible, ask someone you trust to read the assignment for you – it is amazing what a fresh eye can pick up! Library staff can sometimes help with this
- Add a cover page and number your pages. Each course will specify what must be included – usually student name, student number, course, and assignment number or

title. These details may have to be included on every page – check with your tutor. Some courses will include a template cover page which must be completed and attached to the assignment

### The characteristics of a good essay

- Ideas are clearly expressed
- Stays focused on the topic
- Easy to read
- Logical structure
- Introduction states intention of the essay
- Body develops ideas and demonstrates broad reading
- Correct referencing in body and reference list
- Demonstrates examination and understanding of the topic
- Good presentation
- Conclusion summarises the topic, draws themes together, restates findings, and does not contain new material

### Adapted from:

NorthTec Tai Tokerau Wananga. The essay and assignment writing process. Retrieved from [http://lgdata.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/docs/1811/473151/The\\_Essay\\_and\\_Assignment\\_Writing\\_Process.pdf](http://lgdata.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/docs/1811/473151/The_Essay_and_Assignment_Writing_Process.pdf), 14 May 2013.

Open Polytechnic. Assignments. Retrieved from <http://www.oenpolytechnic.ac.nz/study-with-us/study-resources-for-students/assignments/>, 8 May 2013.

Open Polytechnic. How to write an assignment. Retrieved from <http://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/study-with-us/study-resources-for-students/assignments/how-to-write-an-assignment/>, 16 May 2013.

### **Further reading** (available from the library)

Anderson, J. & Poole, M. (2001). *Assignment and thesis writing*. Milton, Australia: John Wiley and Sons.

De Luca, R. & Annals, A. (2006). *Writing that works: a guide for tertiary students*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Auckland, N. Z.: Pearson Education New Zealand.

Greasley, P. (2011). *Doing essays & assignments: essential tips for students*. London: Sage Publications.

Page, M. & Winstanley, C. (2009). *Writing essays for dummies*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley.

Hacker, D. & Sommers, N. (2013). *The pocket style manual : APA version*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St Martins.

Levin, P. (2004). *Write great essays! : a guide to reading and essay writing for undergraduates and taught postgraduates*. [United States]: Open University Press.

Thoreau, M. (2006). *Write on track : a guide to academic writing*. Auckland, N.Z.: Pearson Education New Zealand.

Magdalinski, T. (2013). *Study skills for sports studies*. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge. Chapters 6-9 cover various aspects of academic writing, including essay writing, using evidence and avoiding plagiarism.

Turner, K., Ireland, L., Krenus, B. & Pointon, L. (2009). *Essential academic skills*. Rev. ed. Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press.