School of Culture and Communication
arts.unimelb.edu.au/culture-communication

Essay Writing Guide

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This is a general essay-writing guide, designed to be useful for students in all disciplines within the School of Culture and Communication. Please see your lecturer/tutor if you have any questions that this guide does not address.

The Essay

The research essay is the foundation of studies in the humanities. It is the key forum in which you get to test your ideas against those of your peers and of other scholars.

Getting started

There are some basic things that you need to remember when beginning your essay.
- An essay presents an **argument.** It does not simply present information. Your reader wants you to shape the available information, comment on it, and order it in such a way that the essay makes a point
- With this in mind, you should choose a topic that **interests** you and on which you have a strong opinion
- You should make sure that you answer **all parts of the question.** This is vital. If there is any part of the question that you do not understand, clarify this with your tutor
- Make sure to carefully examine the key words and concepts in the question so that you answer it correctly. For example:

Compare: examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their similarities and differences
Contrast: examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate theirdifferences
Analyse: Consider the various components of the whole and explain the relationships between them
Discuss: present the different aspects of a question or problem
Evaluate: examine the various sides of a question to reach a normative judgment.

Planning your essay

Planning your essay is your first and most important task. This includes dividing your time between three stages: **researching, writing**, and **editing**. Each of these stages is important to the overall success of your essay. Students often make the mistake of spending too much time on the first stage of their essay and then rushing the final stages. It is pointless to research a large body of secondary material if you do not leave time to engage with it properly.

Essays may use a mix of primary, secondary and tertiary materials depending on your discipline and topic. **Primary materials** are records of events or evidence as they are first described or actually happened without any interpretation or commentary. They are information that is shown for the first time or original materials on which other research is based. Primary sources display original thinking, report on new discoveries, or share fresh information. Examples include theses, dissertations, scholarly journal articles (research based), some government reports, symposia and conference proceedings, original artwork, poems, photographs, speeches, letters, memos, personal narratives, diaries, interviews, autobiographies, and correspondence. **Secondary materials** offer an analysis or restatement of primary sources. They often try to describe or explain primary sources. They tend to be works which summarize, interpret, reorganize, or otherwise provide an added value to a primary source. Examples of secondary sources include textbooks, edited works, books and articles that interpret, or review research works, histories, biographies, literary criticism and interpretation, reviews of law and legislation, political analyses and commentaries. Tertiary materials are sources that index, abstract, organize, compile, or digest other sources. Some reference materials and textbooks are considered tertiary sources when their chief purpose is to list, summarize or simply repackage ideas or other information. Tertiary sources are usually not credited to a particular author.

It is important that your essay attempts to contribute to and engage with current theories and developments in your field. Try to read the most recent secondary materials on your topic, as these are likely to give you the best ideas about the current debates surrounding it. You should also remember that in some disciplines in the school (e.g., Art History, English and Theatre Studies, Screen Studies, etc.) the primary focus of your essay should be the primary material (book, painting, film, or performance) under consideration. Secondary reading should, then, not be the only focus of your essay. Rather, it should help you to strengthen the claims that you wish to make about the text under consideration.

Researching your essay

In general, essays require an analytical approach and written work must present an argument. This is because essays are generally answers to questions which ask whether or not you agree with a certain statement, or which ask you to discuss something critically, to assess a statement, or to make a choice. An argument is a series of propositions, supported by evidence or reasoning, and connected in a logical manner, that leads to a justified conclusion. This is why secondary material is so important in helping you build and sustain your argument through the use of good evidence and valid reasoning. Depending upon your discipline or subject, you may need a range of secondary materials in print and electronic form, including books, journal articles, book chapters and newspaper articles.

Think laterally about the kinds of secondary materials that you use for an essay. For example, if you are writing on the representation of the heroine in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, don't just look for articles/books on Austen or *Northanger Abbey.* You may not be able to find a book or article that is solely concerned with *Northanger Abbey.* Or you might find that all of the books on the text might have been already borrowed from the library. If this happens to you, try changing your approach. You might find something useful to your essay by looking up books on the history of the gothic; or on women writers in the late eighteenth century; or on the rise of the novel. And when you're thinking about what kinds of secondary materials might be useful to you, you will find that the way in which you want to analyse the primary material will help you to choose which secondary material might be most appropriate. For example, if you are concerned with looking at issues of gender in the novel, you are more likely to find something of use for your essay in an historical account of the role of women in eighteenth-century England.

Writing your essay

When considering the way in which you would like to answer the question you choose, remember that your essay should engage with the topic in terms of the particular issues raised in lectures and tutorials. Be careful at this stage not to stray too far from the objectives of the subject. Write up a preliminary plan, making sure that you have a clear-cut introduction, a developing argument, and a conclusion.

Try to avoid making your introduction sound too much like a dictionary or encyclopedia entry: it's usually best to go straight to the issue, and then come back to any necessary background detail or definition once you have established the angle you are taking. Remember an introduction should provide context, but also explain to the reader how your essay will unfold. Similarly, your conclusion should not merely restate what you have said in your introduction. Nor should it introduce new material. Rather, it should tie all of the various threads of your argument together and point them in a particular direction. A repetitive conclusion is not an effective way to end an essay.

The best time to see your tutor is once you have a detailed essay plan, illustrating how each point of your argument follows on from the previous one and how you will use primary and secondary materials to support your claims. Once you have a plan, you can then go on to write the essay proper. Make sure that you allow yourself enough time to further develop your ideas through the writing process.

Writing for academic and practical subjects

In Culture and Communication, you will undertake both 'practical' and 'academic' subjects. These require very different writing styles. The differences between mass media writing and academic style can cause some confusion for students, particularly during the first year when you will undertake both types of subjects and are still learning what is expected of you. To summarise, the tone of academic writing is evaluative/critical/argumentative and integrates extensive references for support. In academic writing, the writer puts forward a point of view or proposition and uses their writing to support and/ or defend that point of view. Academic writers write for academic readers. They also use the writings of other academics to support their own position. Although it need not be difficult to read, an academic piece is full of complex ideas, references, citations and includes a bibliography.

By contrast, mass media writing (the type of writing used by media professionals such as journalists and the type that you see in newspaper articles, for example) has different conventions because it has different purposes and

audiences in mind. Please note that you will be given very explicit instructions about mass media writing style in these practical subjects. For all other subjects, you are expected to use an 'academic' writing style.

A note on Internet sources

Internet sources should be approached with caution. Many websites, unlike most books and articles, have not undergone any process of scholarly evaluation and appraisal before publication. Unless you are undertaking a study of, say, fan communities, it is best to limit your use of the internet to internet-based scholarly journals. To ensure that you are getting good quality internet sources, look for the words 'peer-reviewed,' or 'peer-refereed' in the journal's information. Wikipedia and the like or blogs are **not** acceptable sources of scholarly information.

Style tips

The key to a successful essay is not just content. You must try to make sure that your essay is clearly written, and easy to follow. The 'Keep It Simple' principle is useful to follow when it comes to writing. Don't allow jargon to detract from the effectiveness of your argument. Also, remember that it is useful to read through your essay aloud before submission, and/or to get a friend or relative to read it over for you.

Ensure that your essay is all in one font and well formatted. Allow spaces in the margins for the reviewer to leave feedback and check to see if double spaced text is preferred.

Some other useful tips

- Invest in a good dictionary. The *Macquarie Dictionary* is the Australian standard and, in general, English spelling is preferred to American
- Apostrophes. Students often get their use of apostrophes confused. Apostrophes indicate possession (Sally's cat) and they are also used to form contractions (can't, or isn't). One of the most common problems is confusing its (the possessive of it, as in 'its quality') and it's (the contraction of 'it is'). You should also remember that apostrophes are not required to form the plural of a number (1990s)
- Avoid repetitive expression. Try to find synonyms or other ways of rephrasing your central ideas. This will show you have a nuanced understanding of the issues
- Academic essays are generally not written in first person (the use of 'I' or 'We'). The first-person point of view is considered informal and is not encouraged in academic writing. This may be different if you are asked to write a reflective essay. If in doubt, ask your tutor/lecturer what is preferred.
- Abstracts are a concise summary of a research paper or whole thesis. Abstracts are generally used when submitting articles to journals, applying for research grants, completing, and submitting a thesis, submitting proposals for conference papers. They are rarely used in student essays, but occasionally for some undergraduate research projects and usually with graduate minor/major thesis. See below for more detail on abstract formats.
- You should make sure that your essay is the right length. Assignments that exceed the word limit by more than 10%, **inclusive of footnotes or endnotes and quotations (but exclusive of intext citations)**, attract a marking penalty of 10% of the marks that would otherwise have been awarded. Assignments that exceed the word limit by 25% or more may attract a higher penalty, including a cap on the maximum grade awarded. For example, an assignment with a limit of 2000 words will be marked down by 10% if there are more than 2200 words. If there are 2500 words or more, the maximum result that may be awarded is an H2B. For further information about the University's assessment policy, see:

  Assessment Procedure (MPF1026) in the University's Policy Library:
  Assessment and Results Policy (MPF1326)

Academic Skills

Academic Skills provides resources, workshops and individual tutorials to all students at the university, to help them improve their research, academic writing, referencing and other tasks assessed as part of their studies. You can bring a written draft to a Drop In for support with argument, flow, clear writing and referencing questions.

For a list of resources, online interactive courses, workshops, drop ins, and individual tutorials, visit:
https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills

For specific help with essay writing visit:
https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/explore-our-resources/essay-writing

The list of Academic Skills resources by skill type can be found here:
https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/about-academic-skills-and-services

Academic Skills also provide specific workshops and resources for students who are non-native speakers of English. See:
https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/explore-our-resources/language-development

Extensions and Special Consideration

As a student, you may experience extraordinary or unusual circumstances or ongoing circumstances that adversely affect your academic performance. If you require an extension for an assignment for between 1 and 10 working days, please email the subject co-ordinator with your request (at least 48 hours prior to the due date).

For extensions beyond 10 working days you can apply for special consideration if your academic work is adversely affected by problems beyond your control. Relevant circumstances include illness, various forms of stress, and compassionate grounds. However, your academic workload (i.e., the studies you have undertaken to complete with full knowledge of assessment loads and dates of submission) does not constitute grounds for Special Consideration.

For detail on Special Consideration policy and how to apply visit:
https://students.unimelb.edu.au/your-course/manage-your-course/exams-assessments-and-results/special-consideration

Useful Information

- Students must submit assessment via the online submission portal on the LMS site for the subject. This will act as an electronic receipt of assessment submission. Students are expected to retain a copy of all work submitted for assessment.

- Students are entitled to feedback responding to their assessment. All essay-based assessment completed during the semester must be returned to students with comments. Individual subjects and assessments may have a rubric that outlines marking and evaluation criteria, however a general results scale is as follows:

Grade	Description	
80%-100% H1	First-class honours, excellent	Superior analysis, comprehensive research, sophisticated theoretical or methodological understanding, impeccable presentation - work that is (in at least some respects) erudite, original exciting or challenging. Marks of 95% or above are for truly exceptional work and should always be validated by double marking.
75%-79% H2A	Second-class honours, Level A, very good	Scholarly presentation, thoroughlyresearched, well argued. Complex understanding of subject matter, subtle argument, and analysis.
70%-74% H2B	Second-class honours, Level B, good	Average or better than average work, with solid research, perceptive analysis, effective preparation, and presentation.
65%-69% H3	Third-class honours, competent	Good understanding of key ideas, sound analyticalskills, well presented, researched, and documented.
50%-64% P	Pass, satisfactory	Completion of key tasks at an adequate level of performance inargumentation, documentation, and expression.

0%-49% N	Fail, not satisfactory	Where a student fails a subject, all failed components of the assessment must be double marked.

- Feedback on FINAL assignments (excluding tests / exams) will be made available to students after the University's official release of results date in the relevant semester.

Plagiarism and collusion

Plagiarism, or the act of representing as one's own original work the creative works of another, without appropriate acknowledgment of the author or source, is taken very seriously in the School of Culture and Communication. If a student is found to have deliberately plagiarised the work of another - including copying the work of other students - the penalties are severe.

Collusion is the presentation by a student of an assignment as his or her own which is in fact the result in whole or in part of unauthorised collaboration with another person or persons. Collusion involves the cooperation of two or more students in plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Both the student presenting the assignment and the student(s) willingly supplying unauthorised material (colluders) are considered participants in the act of academic misconduct.

Examples of plagiarism

The following are examples of plagiarism where appropriate acknowledgement or referencing of the author or source does not occur:
- Copying directly (or allowing to be copied) paragraphs, sentences, a single sentence, or significant parts of a sentence. An end reference without quotation marks around the copied text may also constitute plagiarism
- Copying ideas, concepts, research results, statistical tables, computer programs, designs, images, sounds or text or any combination of these (this included both academic and non-academic material)
- Paraphrasing of another's work closely, with minor changes but with the essential meaning, form and/or progression of ideas maintained
- Relying on a specific idea or interpretation that is not one's own without identifying whose idea or interpretation it is
- Cutting or pasting statements from multiple sources or piecing together work of others and representing them as original work
- Presenting as independent, work done in collaboration with other people (e.g., another student, a tutor)
- Submitting, as one's own, all or part of another student's original work
- Preparing an original and correctly referenced assignment and submitting part or all the assignment twice for separate subjects or marks
- Cheating in an exam, either by copying from other students or by using unauthorised notes or aids.

Avoiding plagiarism

A good rule of thumb is, if in doubt as to whether to give credit to another author for an idea, give credit. When writing up your research notes for incorporation into an essay, make sure that you enclose all quoted sources in inverted commas. This means that when you take notes from your reading, you need to distinguish very carefully between the words that you copy directly and your own paraphrase of a passage. Anything you paraphrase and then place in an essay must have an accurate page number placed at the end of it, and you must place any direct quotes in inverted commas. Paraphrasing is, however, a dangerous method to adopt as it can often lead to unconscious plagiarism if you only end up making tiny changes to the author's words.

Given the dangers inherent in paraphrasing, it is often better to quote from a critic and then explain your own understanding of what the critic says. This demonstrates not only that you have undertaken the required research for an essay, but that you can also apply this research to your own ideas. For example, you might say,

Bloggs (2020, 16) notes that Byron's heroes "are clearly designed to be read as substitutions of the poet himself". In other words, what Bloggs (2020) is suggesting is that Byron's poetry capitalised on the more sensational aspects of his personal life.

What happens if you lecturer or tutor thinks that you have plagiarised?

If your lecturer or tutor thinks you may have plagiarised in an essay, they report the suspected academic misconduct to the dean or Head of Department. From there a series of steps are undertaken that may involve a disciplinary process. For detail on this process visit: https://academicintegrity.unimelb.edu.au/plagiarism-investigation-and-penalties

For more information, please see the [Academic Integrity at the University of Melbourne website](#).

Documenting your sources

There are many ways of documenting your sources. You should make sure that you are consistent in your application of the method of documentation you choose, and that all relevant information is given. Please keep in mind that your discipline might have a preferred method of source documentation, so it is important that you find out whether this is the case before you begin your essay.

Note: Keep track of all quotations that you have taken from sources, including page numbers. There is nothing more frustrating than having a great quote that you want to use in your essay and not being able to locate where you found it.

For specific detail on how to cite and reference in your essay refer to the Baillieu Library's citation guide, *re:cite* http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/recite/

Various disciplines have referencing and citation practices and conventions. It is important to check with your tutor or lecturer to understand the appropriate referencing style for each subject. If you lecturer or tutor does not specify as style you should be able to use any style provided you use it accurately and consistently.

Reference management software

Reference management software (also known as citation managers or bibliographic management software) provide many useful features that can help you with your research such as:

- storing and organising your references
- generating citations and bibliographies in the style you prefer; and,
- easily converting referencing styles to suit publication requirements.

For detail on referencing management programs such as Endnote or Mendeley please visit:

https://library.unimelb.edu.au/recite/reference-management-software

Ordering your reference list or bibliography

The bibliography should be organised alphabetically. Bibliographies organised by subject matter should be avoided. But if, on the advice of your tutor or lecturer, your topic requires a bibliography organised by subject, please discuss the most appropriate methods of citation with them. It is also important that you double-check that every item in the footnotes is to be found in the bibliography; it is easy to leave items off the bibliography. Archival sources, interviews etc., should be included within the alphabetical listing of the bibliography.

Bibliographic annotations

For essays and theses, the bibliography need not be annotated. However, check with your lecturer or tutor to determine if an annotated bibliography is required.

Numbering footnotes

Footnote numbers should preferably be placed without brackets slightly above the line[1] (superscript) at the end of the phrase or sentence or paragraph to which they refer. If for some reason you are unable to produce superscript numbers, it is an acceptable alternative to place footnote numbers in brackets on the line (1) at the end of the phrase or sentence or paragraph to which they refer. Footnotes are to be numbered consecutively throughout the thesis and placed at the foot of the refer page to which they refer. **Footnotes** are preferable to **endnotes**. Footnotes can easily be converted to endnotes and vice versa in programs like Microsoft Word.
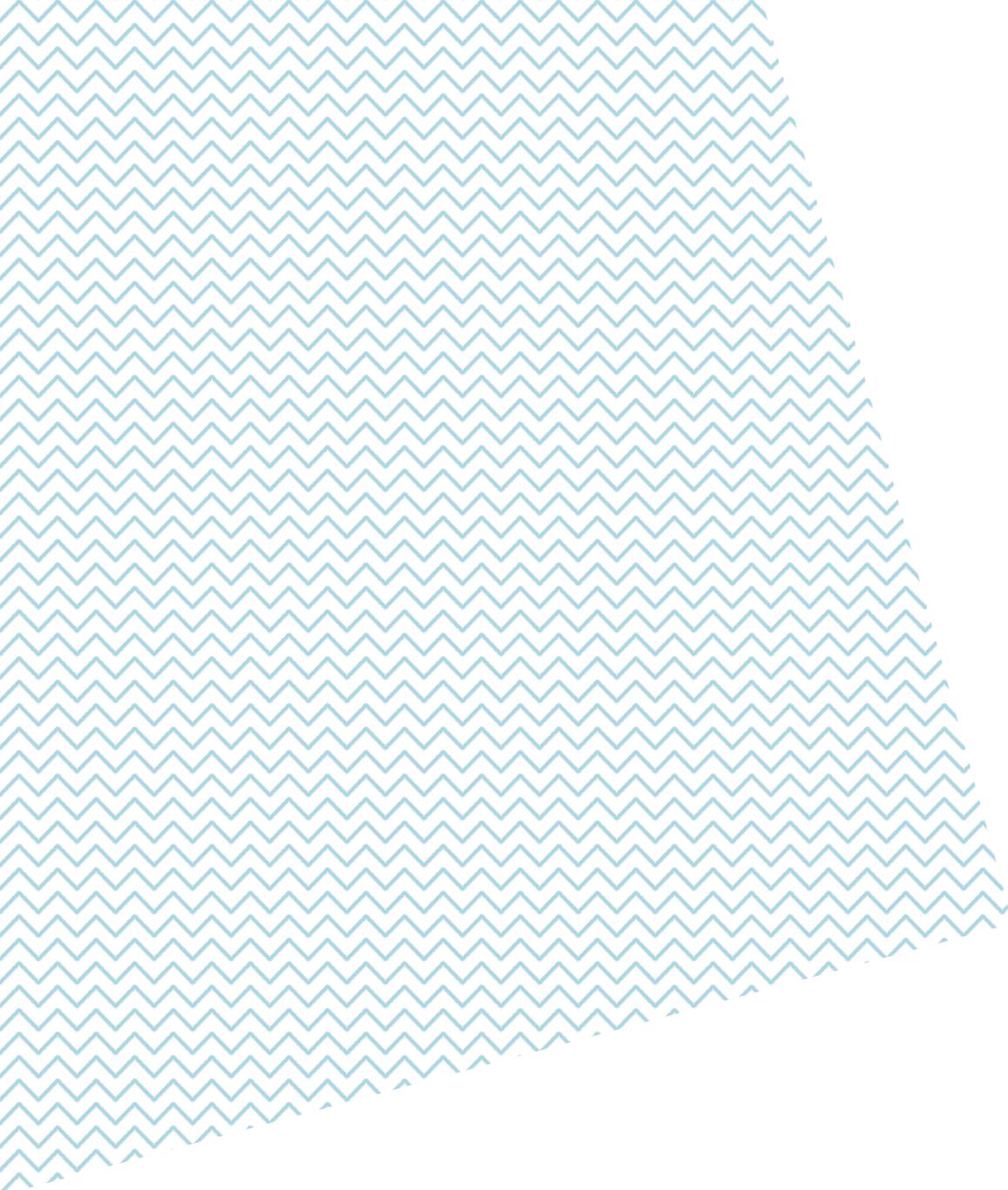
Further reading on presentation

- Australian Government Publishing Service, *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 4th ed., (Canberra, 1988).
- University of Chicago. Press. *The Chicago Manual of Style*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- is probably the most detailed manual of American practice for publications. It is, on the whole, more detailed than required for undergraduate essays, but useful for postgraduates.
- Peters, Pam. *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- *Macquarie Writer's Friend. A Guide to Grammar and Usage*, Sydney: The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 2002. This is a good practical guide, useful at undergraduate level.

Abstracts (Synopsis)

Check with your tutor or lecturer to see whether an abstract is required. An abstract or synopsis (i.e., a summary of your argument) of about 100 words should be attached to the beginning of the thesis. **The abstract is not your opening paragraph. It is entirely separate from the thesis itself**. As a rule of thumb, the opening paragraph should state the problem which youare about to explore and the way in which you are going to explore it. The conclusion should explainthe conclusions you have reached on the assumption that the bulk of the thesis is still fresh in thereader's mind. The abstract should set out in a condensed form the problem, the main stages of your discussion, and your conclusion. For examples of abstracts see the abstracts in academic journal articles. Make sure that your abstract does in fact summarise your argument - sometimes theses have excellent abstracts that have nothing to do with the thesis.

Other resources

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005.
- Barnet, Sylvan and William E. Cain. *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature.* 10th ed. NewYork, Longman, 2005.
- Barnet, Sylvan, Pat Ballanca and Marcia Stubbs. *A Short Guide to College Writing.* New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005.
- Cuddon, J.A. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. London: Penguin, 1992. Evans, D. and P. Gruber. *How to Write a Better Thesis.* Carlton South: Melbourne UP, 2002.
- Fabb, Nigel and Durant, Alan. *How to Write Essays and Dissertations: A Guide for English Literature Students*. Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2005.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.* 6th ed. New York:Modern Language Association of America, 2003.