

Essay (Academic Essay)

An essay (sometimes called an academic essay) explores a topic based on evidence that you have found through your readings and reaches a conclusion on that topic. The aim of an essay is to make connections between texts and ideas, engage in critical thinking and go beyond simply describing or summarising a topic to generate interesting analysis. An essay will contain a central argument which is your answer to the question and your essay demonstrates your reasons, based on evidence, for the answer that you give.

Note: If you are writing a reflective essay, please see our separate writing guide on reflective essays.

Content

The content of an essay is based around research of the topic. This means explaining and justifying your ideas on based on reliable information and examples from sources. It is important that your essay has a central idea or argument that the essay content is based around. This is known as a thesis statement.

Depending on the essay question, the essay may contain:

- a thesis statement (claim, proposition, main idea)
- context (background, framework, setting)
- reasons (support, evidence, examples)
- counter-arguments (objections, contrary considerations)
- responses (refutations, answers to objections)

These ingredients can be put together or organised in many different ways.



Structure

The key components of an essay are an introduction, a series of body paragraphs, a conclusion, and a reference list.

The introduction should introduce the context and topic of the essay, outline the structure/main points of the essay, and give the thesis statement which introduces the argument(s) you will be asserting in your essay (this is usually your answer to the assignment question). As a general rule of thumb, introductions make up approximately 10% of the total word count.

The body of your essay then expands on your thesis statement by presenting relevant information and research that supports your argument. It's important that the information is organised into clear paragraphs with a logical order. Your paragraphs should aim to guide the reader through your reasoning process and offer a clear explanation of each point so they help you develop your argument.

Each paragraph should explore just one main idea and have the following structure:

1. The topic sentence tells the reader what the paragraph will be about and may link to previous paragraph.
2. The supporting sentences develop the topic of the paragraph and include explanation, examples, details, research, quotations and references.
3. The concluding / linking sentence reminds the reader what the main topic of the paragraph was and may link to the next paragraph.

This means that a paragraph needs at least 4 sentences; one or two sentence paragraphs are not really paragraph!

The conclusion should summarise the main points and ideas that you presented in your essay. You should draw conclusions from what has been discussed in the essay, which will lead to a restatement of the thesis statement. Avoid bringing up anything new in the conclusion; stick to summarising what you have already said in your essay and reiterating your thesis statement. Like introductions, conclusions make up approximately 10% of the total word count as a general guide.

Tip

Any specific terminology should be defined and referenced accordingly. Your definitions should come from the journal articles and/or books you are using for your research rather than dictionaries.



Style

Essays should incorporate plenty of linking words/phrases and signposts make your essay easy for the reader to follow. These words/phrases help by making the connections between sentences and paragraphs clear and indicate the flow of your ideas. They also signal to the reader how to approach the information that follows. For example:

- Use words like *similarly*, *also* and *in addition* indicate that you are adding a similar idea
- Use words like *in contrast*, *however*, and *on the other hand* to make a contrast or add an opposite idea
- Use words like *therefore*, *consequently* and *as a result* to show an outcome
- Use words like *for example* and *for instance* to give an example

These words are very powerful; without them, the paper will seem to consist of a list of sentences that do not link to each other!

Checklist for your essay

- Have I got a clear introduction that introduces the topic, outlines the structure of my essay and gives my thesis statement?
- Is each paragraph focused on one main point that develops my argument?
- Are key terms and concepts defined?
- Have I demonstrated that I have read widely yet remained focused on the topic?
- Have I grouped ideas clearly so that there is a logical flow to my writing?
- Have I included plenty of linking words/phrases and signposts?
- Have I acknowledged all sources of information according to APA rules?
- Have I got a strong conclusion that summarises my main points and reiterates my thesis statement?