



Essay writing

1. The process: the multi-faceted nature of essay writing

Overview

The first unit in this module on essay writing focuses on the processes involved in writing an essay. The main steps in the essay writing process are:

- analysing the essay question,
- researching the topic,
- taking a position on the question,
- planning your essay,
- drafting and redrafting,
- editing the final draft.



1. The process: the multi-faceted nature of essay writing



2. The argument: development and structure



3. The mechanics of essay writing

As 'redrafting' implies, the process of writing an essay is not necessarily sequential. If you have engaged with your topic, and constantly assess your position in regards to the question and your readings, it is unlikely that you will simply progress from one step to the next. It is far more likely that as a consequence of your reading you will need to reassess your position and modify it. We can view the essay writing process as a dynamic one in which you move back and forth between the various steps involved.

What is the role of the essay?

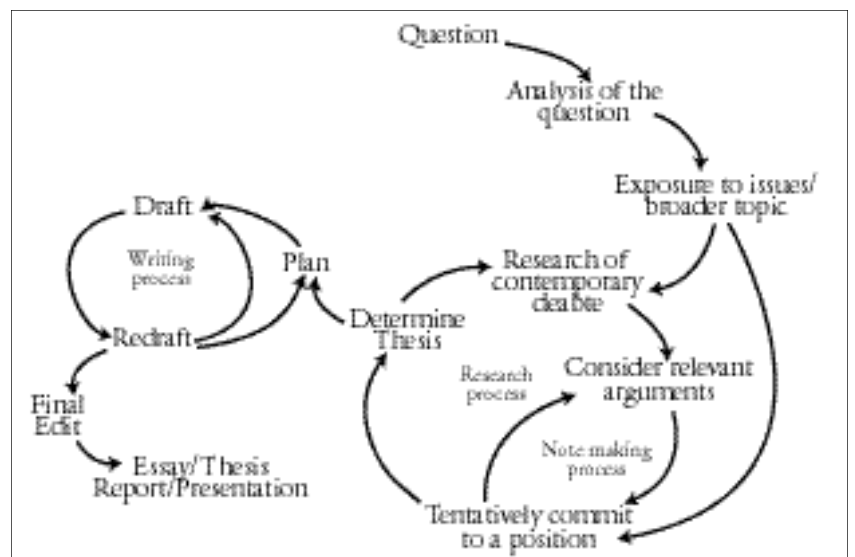
Broadly speaking, lecturers and tutors use essay writing as an assessment tool to scrutinise and evaluate your understanding of subject content. This is not to say that essays are a vehicle for 'resaying' everything taught in the course. Essays are also an opportunity for you to learn and to explore in greater depth some aspect of your course – theories, issues, texts, etc. - and in some cases relate these aspects to a particular context. Furthermore, as an essay is essentially an argument (your response to the question after close and well considered research into a topic), it is also a platform for you to articulate your ideas.

In discussing the role of the academic essay, we also need to consider the institutional context (the university), and your audience (who reads your

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the process involved in writing a university essay
- research the topic
- write analytically
- structure and develop an academic argument
- write in an academic style
- present evidence and reference correctly



essay). These elements influence the style and tone of your writing. University writing is formal and typically objective: this means everyday language and slang as well as unsubstantiated opinion is unsuitable in the context of an academic essay. Furthermore, essays are written for tutors and lecturers to assess: in other words they are written for an audience that is familiar with the conventions and practices of the discipline. Thus, you must write your essay in a formal, objective style, following the referencing and other conventions of the discipline you are studying.

Analysing the question

Understanding what the essay question means and what it is asking you to do are important steps in the essay writing process. Making an error here will mean your essay will probably fail to meet your lecturer's expectations, so a careful analysis of the question is necessary.

Essay questions are often multi-dimensional and can include a range of elements: they can contain a statement of fact to orientate the student to the topic, a question (or several questions), instructions to the student, and guidelines as to the scope of the essay (Webb, 1991). For example:

Example Essay Question (Philosophy)	
JS Mill argued that capital punishment can sometimes be justified on utilitarian grounds. Jonathon Glover argues that utilitarian considerations do not justify capital punishment.	Orientation to topic
Carefully state the essential elements of both arguments, highlighting the relevant points of similarity and difference between them.	Instructions
Can utilitarian considerations justify capital punishment in your view? Why/why not?	Questions (agree?/ partly agree/disagree)

Example Essay Question (Education)	
The age-old nature-nurture controversy about the underlying causes of the course of development continues today, with some theorists attributing the course of development to genetic influences while others believe that the complex forces of the environment are responsible.	Orientation to topic
Discuss the evidence for each of these positions and indicate how this debate will influence your work	Instruction

From these above examples you can see that it is important that you analyse the various elements within the essay question and not just the 'question(s)' within the overall essay question.

A useful starting point for analysing the overall assignment is to identify the key concepts contained in the essay question. In the above example question from education these key concepts are nature (genetic influences), nurture (environmental factors), and course of development. Another important task is to establish a relationship between the key concepts, and to think about the key concepts in terms of the overall themes of your course/subject. The Education example is from a subject on child development, so it would be useful for the student to ask questions about the identified key concepts in terms of what influences they have on a child's development. For example:

Q: What are the three instructional words?

A: _____

Q.: Rewrite or rephrase the essay question.

A: _____

Researching the topic: looking at the big picture

The process of identifying the key concepts in your essay question and formulating questions around those key concepts will prepare you to review your lecture notes and course readings in a more focussed way. Try to develop a 'big picture' of the topic in general: the issues, texts, theorists and sub-topics involved in the topic. If you don't have a concept of 'the big picture' it is quite likely that your understanding of the topic you are researching will be confused, and that you view your topic in isolation rather than as an aspect of a broader area.

To develop the 'big picture' understanding of your topic you can refer to introductory materials such as lecture notes and introductory textbooks. Introductory texts are likely to outline the main theorists, texts, issues, subtopics etc which are part of your topic. If we take the example of the nature/nurture debate from the education essay, it is likely that by looking at the course textbook and lecture notes, you would be able to determine who the main theorists in the debate are, what evidence is available to support different views, what the important issues surrounding this debate are (such as the implications for teaching and course design), and to identify what the sub-topics are. By looking at introductory texts you will also be able to establish a reading list to use as the starting point for more detailed research.

At this stage it is also worthwhile brainstorming what you already know about the topic, and to break the topic down into sub-topics. You may also find it useful to consider the possibilities in answering the question. What answers are possible?

Researching the topic: Note-taking/making

The detailed research for your essay, that is your reading and note-taking/making, will be much more efficient and critical if you read with specific questions in mind. As Clanchy and Ballard point out (1981), your notes form the raw material on which you must set your mind to work to develop and shape an argument. Therefore, your reading, note-taking and note-making should be constantly focussed on finding relevant, useful and specific information on the topic. During and after your reading and note-making you need to be thinking about the question, formulating your answer or argument and determining what evidence you are going to present in defence of your argument.

Furthermore, as implied by the term 'note-making', reading for your essay is not a passive process in which you accept and note down the arguments of 'experts', rather it is a process in which you constantly assess arguments, and their validity. You may find it useful to organise these notes into some kind of system, such as categorising your notes into relevant sub-topics. This active process of note-taking/making should result in notes which make it easier to determine the position your essay will adopt and to map out an initial essay plan. NOTE: A pro-forma for taking notes is provided at the end of this unit.

Good notes should also include accurate bibliographic details such as author, title, publisher, page number etc. When copying the exact words of the text, you must remember to note the page number of the quote (and put it in inverted commas to remind you that what you've written is in the writer's words) so that you can reference that quote correctly if you use it in the final draft of your essay. When paraphrasing or taking notes in your own words, you should also remember to note page numbers for correct referencing. Careful attention to these bibliographic details at this stage of your work will save you having to check references and page

numbers at a later stage. It will also help you avoid plagiarising the sources. Plagiarism is the use of the words and ideas of others as if they are your own words and ideas. This is considered a very serious academic crime that can be avoided by always referencing other people's words and/or ideas.

Taking a position on the question

At the beginning of this unit we pointed out that the essay writing process is a dynamic one, in which you can move back and forth between the various steps involved. At some point, you should begin to clearly see what position you can legitimately take in regard to the essay question. Before you begin to write, you will need to go over your notes, and refer back to the question to carefully clarify the position you're taking. You should articulate this position (or answer to the question) briefly in writing, in one or two sentences, before you begin to write.

Planning your essay

Once you have articulated your position you should be able to map out a plan for your essay, organise your argument and evidence, and establish connections between your points. Not all students, however, will develop a detailed plan of their essay. While some students work effectively with a fully worked-through essay plan, complete with sub-topics and the connections between the topics identified, others may work effectively with just a series of headings guiding them.

Drafting and Redrafting

Once you have constructed your essay plan, the next step is to then write the first draft of your essay. After you have done this, you may find that you need to redraft the essay a number of times to refine your structure, argument and use of evidence. This is an important process and represents the craft of writing well. In the process of drafting your essay, you may find that you have done insufficient reading in a particular area, and that you need to do more reading to strengthen the argument or evidence in a section of your essay. However, keep the scope of the essay and the word limit in mind, otherwise you may end up having not enough time to write your essay.

For further assistance with this stage in the essay writing process please refer to the next unit in this module, The Argument, which looks in detail at how to develop an argument and structure an essay. The third unit, The Mechanics of Essay Writing, discusses academic style and how to present evidence.

Editing the final draft

The final stage in the process of writing an essay is editing the final draft and this stage is a significant one. Despite this, many students skip this stage due to time pressures. Thorough editing not only helps to minimise embarrassing spelling mistakes and awkward grammar, it also provides you with an opportunity to identify any breakdown in logic in your argument. Most importantly, you can confirm if you have really fulfilled the requirements of the essay question and answered all parts of the question. For a more detailed discussion of editing, see the module Editing your work.

References

Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. (1981). *Essay Writing for Students*. Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.

Webb, C. (1991). *Writing an Essay in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Learning Assistance Centre, University of Sydney.

Woodward-Kron, R. (1997). *Writing in Commerce: a guide to assist Commerce students with assignment writing*. The University of Newcastle, Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CALT), (Revised edition).

Appendix I: Key

1.1 rephrasing an essay question

What are the key concepts and practical constraints pertaining to the determination and usefulness of product costs for decision making purposes? How adequate, for decision making purposes, are product costs calculated under the Variable Costing (VC) and Activity Based Costing (ABC) methods. Also by reference to these two matters (that is, key concepts and practical constraints), what scope is there for elaboration of ABC to improve its decision-usefulness?

NOTE: This is only one possible rephrasing of the essay question.

INSTRUCTIONAL WORDS

Analyse

Separate or break up of whole into its parts so that you may discover their nature, proportion, function, relationship, etc.

Comment

Make critical observations, even if they are fairly open-ended. Your texts, learning guide, lecture and notes should provide sufficient guidelines and your own common sense should prevail.

Compare

Find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events, interpretations, etc. Ensure you understand exactly what you are being asked to compare.

Contrast

The remarks on compare apply equally to contrast. The difference is that you should concentrate on dissimilarities.

Critically analyse

Examine the topic or argument in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.

Criticise

Student insights are expected and arguments must be justified. Express your judgements regarding the correctness or merit of the factors being considered. Discuss both strong and weak points and give the results of your own analysis.

Define

Provide concise, clear, authoritative meanings. In such statements, details are not necessarily required, but briefly cite the boundaries or limitations of the definition. Remember the 'class' to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in that class.

Describe

Recall facts, processes or events. You are not asked to explain or interpret. Try to provide a thorough description, emphasising the most important points.

Diagram

Present a drawing, chart, plan or graphic representation in your answer. Generally, you are also expected to label the diagram and a brief explanation or description may be required.

Discuss

Present a point of view. This is likely to need both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen and authoritative evidence.

Enumerate

Provide a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one, but concisely, the points required.

Evaluate

Present a judgement of an issue by stressing both strengths and advantages, and weaknesses and limitations. The emphasis is on assessing the value, worth or relevance of the matter under scrutiny.

Explain

Your main focus should be on the 'why' of a particular issue, or on the 'how' with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes and effects. You are being tested on your capacity to think critically, to exercise perception and discernment.

Illustrate

This asks for an explanation; you may clarify your answer to a problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram or concrete example.

Interpret

Explain the meaning of something and give your own judgement of a situation.

List

Give an itemised series or tabulation; such answers should be concise.

Outline

This asks for an organised description. Give the main points and essential supplementary materials, but omit minor details. Present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Prove

To confirm or verify. You should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence, or by logical reasoning.

Relate

When showing relationships, your answer should emphasise connection and associations in a descriptive manner.

Review

Re-examine, analyse and comment briefly (in an organised sequence) on the major points of an issue.

State

Express the high points in brief and clear narrative form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, may be omitted.

Summarise

Provide a brief statement or an account covering the main points; omit details.

Trace

Give the development, process or history of a thing, event or idea, especially by proceeding from the latest to the earliest evidence.

Source: adapted from Bate, D. (1979), *Essay Method and English Expression*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Group, Sydney.

