



Survival 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 1: Analyse the question

This stage ensures you answer the question(s) fully.

- Identify important subject words in the title.
- Identify instruction words and decide what you need to do.

Stage 2: Check the assessment guidelines

This stage is important to ensure you fulfil the assessment criteria and meet the learning objectives.

- Read the assessment guidelines thoroughly.
- Check you understand the learning objectives.

Stage 3: Make a rough plan

This stage helps you 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.

Stage 4: Read/research and make notes

This improves your understanding and ensures you 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.

Stage 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.



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Stage 6: Draft the body of your text

This stage enables you 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.

Stage 7: Edit and check and against your plan

This stage ensures 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?

Stage 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 should state the position you are taking (your 'thesis statement') and give an outline of your structure.
- The conclusion should sum up key points and implications, and clarify the 'message' that you want the reader to remember.

Stage 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'.
- TextHELP is installed on University computers: use this software to read your work back to you.

Stage 10: Referencing

It is important that you acknowledge the sources of the ideas that you have used, to avoid plagiarism.

- Search for 'referencing' on the 'Library and IT' homepage for course-specific guidance.
- 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.

- Join a tutorial or workshop on the [Study Development tutorial and workshop webpage](#) or search 'YSJ study development tutorials.'
- Access our Study Success resources on the [Study Success webpage](#) or search 'YSJ study success.'