An essay is a piece of writing which discusses ideas and concepts in a clear order. It is a chance to demonstrate to your tutor that you have fully grasped key ideas in your subject area, and that you can explain them clearly.

What does an essay look like?
It begins with an introduction giving a brief overview of the essay. The main body of the text then explains the ideas in detail. This part is split into short paragraphs (200-300 words each), each dealing with a key point. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main ideas and draws the conclusions, bringing the essay neatly to a close.

How do I decide what to write?
Firstly, look closely at the question or assignment brief, underline key words, and think about how they relate to what you have been learning on your course. What you write should clearly tackle the brief and learning objectives, and refer to the key ideas and concepts covered on your course – not just your personal experience or your own opinions.
If you do not fully understand the ideas, go back to your lecture slides and notes, and consult key texts on your reading list. Further reading will give you a clearer idea of what you should write about.

An essay needs to have a clear argument. What does this mean?
In academic terms, an argument is not a quarrel, but rather a point of view supported by a clear line of reasoning and evidence. You should be able to sum up your argument in one sentence, which is called a ‘thesis statement’. For example, if your essay topic is play and child development, your argument could be ‘play is important to child development’, or ‘the importance of play in child development is not yet fully understood’.

Your argument should be based on your reading on the topic, rather than a personal opinion or guesswork. You should read academic books and articles from your reading list (not just popular books or websites), and make notes on the conclusions researchers have drawn. After looking at 3 or 4 recent academic books, you should begin to see what researchers have found out to date, and base your argument on this.

What makes a good essay?
- Answering the question(s)/focusing on the topic(s) set.
- Addressing the relevant learning objectives
- Discussing the ideas covered in your lectures and set reading
- Showing that you understand the material covered
- Presenting an argument that makes sense, supported by evidence
- Sounding objective and taking a balanced view
- Clear writing
How do I make an essay plan?

Once you have done some initial reading and have decided on your argument, you can draw up a mind map or a list of ideas which you think will help support your point of view. Look at these words and ideas, and imagine you now need to explain the topic to a friend. What would be the best place to start? What will they need to understand first? Which points are connected? How would you explain the concepts in more detail, and show how they fit together? The answers to these questions should tell you how to order your points into an initial plan, which you can then flesh out and turn into an essay.

How do I develop my argument into an essay?

There are 4 key elements you can draw on to build up your argument:

- **Ideas from academic authors**: theories and models put forward by researchers in academic publications. Make sure you reference them clearly to avoid plagiarism.

- **Research evidence**: conclusions drawn from academic research, or specific data such as figures and statistics. Again, make sure you reference them.

- **Logic**: what conclusions reasonably follow from the evidence and the points you present? For example, if play has been found to improve hand-eye coordination, and improved coordination contributes to the overall development of a child, you can logically conclude that play has a positive impact on child development. If A leads to B, and B leads to C, A therefore logically leads to C. A logical sequence makes for a strong argument.

- **Critical thinking**: what you read while researching your topic may not be the whole story. Are there any problems with the studies you are looking at? Was the researcher biased in any way? Thinking critically means evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence, and considering any counter-arguments. Try to be as objective as possible.

**Support**

For more information, consult *The Good Study Guide* by Andrew Northedge (The Open University, 2005), on which some of this factsheet is based. It is available from the library under 371.30281 NOR.

Alternatively, Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1-to-1 and small groups tutorials.

To book an appointment, contact the Student Information Desk:

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