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Literature reviews

# Writing essays

Welcome to Writing Essays, the RLF’s online guide to everything you wanted to know but were afraid to ask about writing undergraduate essays.

The guide is a toolbox of essay writing skills and resources that you can choose from to suit your particular needs. It combines descriptive and practical elements. That is, it tells you what things mean and what they are; and it uses examples to show you how they work.

Writing Essays takes you through the whole essay writing process – from preparing and planning to completion. Writing essays is structured progressively and I recommend that you use it in this way. However, you will see from the sidebar that the guide is divided into a number of main sections. Click on any one of these and you will see that it’s divided into shorter sections or subsections. So you can either read it straight through from start to finish or you can go straight to the area that’s most relevant to you.

Writing Essays does not cover every type of writing you will do at university but it does cover the principal types. So you will find guides to essay writing, dissertation writing, and report writing. You will also find a section dealing with the differences between writing for the humanities and writing for the sciences and social sciences. The information and guidelines in these sections will provide blueprints you can apply elsewhere.

You will see in the topbar options above that there is also a glossary of terms used in this guide; and a list of suggested further reading and online resources.

It is important to say here what Writing Essays does not do. It does not offer detailed advice on general study skills although it does cover some aspects of reading for writing and how to write a literature review. Unlike some guides, this one does not have anything to say about using computers except: use them, and save your work often.

Writing Essays does not deal with grammar and punctuation. This does not mean that I think that these things are not important, or that you don’t need to pay attention to them – all writers do. However, my experience of working with students has taught me two things. First, that the most common difficulties in writing essays are to do with areas like understanding the question and making a logical structure. Second, that when these difficulties are fixed, problems with grammar and punctuation are easier to see and fix.

Don’t just use Writing Essays once. Make it your constant reference point for writing essays. Make it the emergency number you dial if you breakdown or can’t get started!

# Essay writing

Writing essays successfully is not a special ability that only some people are born with and it is not an elite activity that only some people are allowed to do. It is a skill that can be learnt just like any other skill. Writing essays will help you learn and develop that skill – and help you keep it honed.

Being an undergraduate means being a writer. During the three or four years of your degree course you will be writing all the time: making notes in lectures and seminars, making notes from books and articles, and writing essays. You will probably do more writing than you have ever done before – and probably more than you will ever do again. The more you do, the better you will get. Writing essays will help you get better and stay fit.

Writing essays successfully is a process that takes place over time. What you do next week builds on what you did this week or last week. Like all writing, it involves developing self-awareness about what you are doing and why, about what works and what does not. Writing essays will help you develop self-awareness about your writing.

Writing essays at university is not only a skill: it is also a practice. In a literal sense, this means that you do it over and over again. A practice also means an accepted and acceptable mode of behaviour; and one accepted and acceptable mode of behaviour connects with other accepted and acceptable modes of behaviour. So writing essays at university means that you are participating in larger ideas about, for example, how to learn, how to express yourself, how to transmit and receive knowledge.

Theresa M. Lillis, an academic who specialises in the study of writing at university, found that a large part of student anxiety was “centred on academic writing as students attempted to write within the rules of the game without knowing what the rules were.” The Writing essays resource tries to make those rules transparent.

# The author

The guide was specially written by Dr David Kennedy, an experienced writer and teacher. David was an RLF Felllow at Trinity & All Saints College, Leeds, and then a Senior Lecturer at the University of Hull.

The guide draws on his experience of working with students on a one-to-one basis to improve their essay writing skills. It also draws on the experience of other Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellows and of teaching staff in institutions where they work.

# Being a writer

### Meet the new you

Being a new student can often seem like finding yourself in one of those science fiction films where the heroine wakes up one morning and finds she’s got a brand new identity. There seem to be so many things you are supposed to be doing. Every day you seem to encounter yet another thing that you are expected to know how to do.

Writing essays at university can seem like one of those things. Even if you have always found writing easy and enjoyable, the kind of writing you are required to do at university can seem like a foreign language the first time you read it or hear it. People who have come to university straight from school find there are big differences between what worked at A level and what they are required to do now. You may have come to university via an access route where the emphasis was on producing good portfolios of coursework and materials and so involved little or no essay writing.

### Don’t panic!

Writing at university can seem like a daunting prospect when you first start to do it. Because we can all speak and write and use language, it’s easy to assume that we should just be able to do it. It’s just as easy to get frustrated when we find that we can’t and aren’t able to produce the work our tutors expect. This experience is not confined to students. Even experienced writers like me still get notes from editors saying ‘this point is unclear’, or reports from anonymous reviewers at academic journals saying ‘the argument would be stronger if the author took account of Professor X’s recent book on this subject’.

### Think of yourself as a writer

So how do you overcome this anxiety about writing at university? The first step is to think of yourself as a writer and to think of being a student as being someone who has to write. As this suggests, you can only be a writer if you are writing so turn yourself into a regular writer who does some kind of writing every day, writing they do for themselves that they find enjoyable and valuable.

### Studio journals & learning logs

You could keep a diary but it’s probably best to do regular writing that connects with your studying. You could follow the example of many fine art students and professional artists who keep what is called a ‘studio journal’ where they write about not only what they are working on but also about their reflections on the process of working, their ideas, hopes, fears, frustrations and pleasures. ‘Process’ is the key word here: writing, learning and studying are processes i.e. they are actions that move from a beginning towards a visible end and that make that movement through developmental stages.

You could keep a ‘learning log’ in the form of a notebook where you can jot down interesting ideas connected with your courses – from lectures, reading, seminars, talking and thinking. Your learning log can be both retrospective and prospective.

In the retrospective or reflective part of your learning log you write about things after they have happened. What questions did a particular lecture or seminar raise for you? What was interesting? What didn’t you understand?

In the prospective or exploratory part of your learning log you write about things that are going to happen. Your tutor has given you some reading for next week’s class: what questions does it raise? What don’t you understand? What books do you need to get from the library to find out the answers? Perhaps you’ve just read something in a newspaper or just seen something on TV that’s relevant to your course and you want to discuss it in next week’s class.

### What is a writer?

Thinking of yourself as a writer is just the start. You need to spend some time thinking about what it means to be a writer. The basic dictionary definition of a writer is ‘someone who practices writing as an occupation’ but there’s much more to it than that. One of the meanings of ‘write’ is ‘to compose’ and two of the meanings of ‘compose’ are ‘to construct’ and ‘to arrange in a specified manner’. So writing does not just mean putting words down on the page: it means putting them down on the page in a particular way and for a particular effect and purpose.

### Self-awareness

We read something and it has an effect on us. It makes us laugh or makes us sad. It makes us think ‘That’s interesting – I didn’t know that’ or ‘That’s ridiculous!’ A piece of writing produces a response from us because the writer has chosen to use particular words and has arranged them in a particular way. When your tutors read your essays, your writing will have effects on them – and you don’t want them crying tears of frustration because they can’t understand what you are saying! Your tutors will assume that everything you have written is the result of conscious and deliberate choices. Your tutors will also assume that you have written things for a particular effect and purpose. So being a writer means being someone who has developed self-awareness about what they do and why they do it. Being a writer means understanding that if you do something it will have an effect; and understanding that you have a choice about whether to do it or not.

### Use a PC

Another important practical step to becoming a successful writer at university is using a PC. If you’ve never used one then set aside some time to learn how to use a PC for writing your assignments and for making notes. This will save you a lot of time in writing, editing and producing work; and it will make writing – and studying – seem much less of a chore. Using a PC will help you with presentation – it will help you produce better-looking work. Finally, using a PC to draft and edit your work will help you develop a sense of working towards a finished text – as opposed to struggling to read your own scribbled notes.

### Use your time

Make full use of the time you are given to produce an assignment. Never again in your life will you have so much time to do your work. When you leave university and start work you will find that you are often required to complete large tasks at very short notice. If you work in a company, your boss may tell you on Wednesday morning that he needs a 20 page report by Thursday afternoon. If you work in a school, you may come in one morning and find you have to cover classes for a colleague who’s been taken ill. University is unique because your tutors give you a reasonable and often quite generous amount of time in which to complete your assignments. So if your assignment is due in three weeks, use all that time – don’t keep putting it off and putting it off until you’ve hardly any time left!

# Thinking critically, thinking clearly

### Thinking critically

Writing things down in a learning log or just doing some writing every day will train you to write better and to organise your thoughts. Most importantly, it will help you to start and think **critically** about what you are doing. Thinking critically does not mean being negative or, as one of my creative writing students put it recently, ‘dissing’ something. It means standing back from what you are doing and reading and thinking carefully and discriminatingly about it. As we shall see, thinking critically is a crucial part of writing at university.

### Thinking clearly 1: catching your thoughts

We are all born being able to think but we all have to learn how to think critically and how to think clearly. The late poet laureate Ted Hughes once wrote that “At school, I was plagued by the idea that I really had much better thoughts than I could ever get into words.” This wasn’t, he goes on, because he didn’t know the right words or because what he was thinking was too complex for the words he knew. The problem was that when he tried to write down his thoughts, they disappeared. Hughes says that we have to learn how to catch our thoughts and that we can learn how to catch them by learning how to concentrate. He suggests a simple exercise to learn this skill: look at an object intently for five minutes then spend ten minutes writing down everything you can see about the object, everything you know about it, everything the object suggests to you.

### Thinking clearly 2: seeing what’s in front of you

Hughes’s discussion of thinking and concentration comes from a creative writing book aimed at schoolchildren – which may seem a long way from having to write a psychology essay about ‘the dominance of scientific paradigms’ or a management essay about SWOT and PEST analyses. Nonetheless, his overall point is an important one: he is talking about observation. A comment by a famous poet in a creative writing handbook starts to make more sense when we remember that two of the meanings of the verb ‘to study’ are ‘to observe or analyse in detail’ and ‘to look at attentively’. One of the meanings of the word ‘student’ says something similar: ‘a person who carries on a systematic study or detailed observation of a subject’. We can’t write clearly until we can think clearly and we can’t think clearly until we can see clearly what is in front of us.

# Speaking vs. Writing

### Speaking vs writing 1: Alan buys milk

Another way to think about what’s involved in writing clearly is to think about the differences between speaking and writing. Because both use words, we assume they are the same but they are very different. The following example will help you think about the differences. Picture this: it’s Saturday morning, the family’s just sat down to breakfast when Dad realises there’s no milk. So he asks his eldest son Alan to go and get some. He says: “Drat! No milk – I can’t eat my cornflakes without some nice cold milk. Just pop out to the mini-mart, would you Alan? Better get a two pinta. Oh, and you’ll find some money in my jacket pocket.”

### Speaking vs writing 2: a robot buys milk

Now picture this: imagine you had to write a computer program to tell a robot to go and buy milk. Where would you start? You would have to think of the most logical order for all the actions the robot would need to perform in order to buy milk. Dad’s instruction to Alan assumes that Alan already knows all sorts of information: where his jacket is, which pocket he usually keeps his money, where the mini-mart is, the visual difference between a one pint and two pint carton. The robot will know none of these things unless you put them in the program. You would also have to give the program a logical name or title so that when the program loaded the robot’s brain would be able to distinguish it from all the other programs in its memory. So in your writing at university, don’t be afraid to be obvious. One of the reasons tutors set essays is so you can show what you know.

### Speaking vs writing 3: look at me when I’m talking to you

Another crucial difference between speaking and writing is that we can see people when we talk to them. We transmit and receive all sorts of non-verbal information when we’re talking to them. Think about the effect it has on you when someone talks to you but keeps staring at the floor and never looks at you once. We communicate all sorts of information by facial expression, hand gestures, tone of voice. We can’t do any of these things in a piece of writing. We have to find different ways of doing them; and we have to be sure that our writing isn’t doing things we don’t want it to.

### Speaking vs writing 4: know what I mean?

Another crucial difference between speaking and writing is that speaking is informal, less structured, more colloquial – know what I mean? When we speak, we often start sentences in the middle. An important part of writing at university is to understand who you are writing for. To put this another way, when you are writing an essay you are not down the pub with your mates. In an essay, you can’t put things like the following sentence I once read in a first draft: “Apparently, imperialism has been going for ages – how weird is that?” The person who reads your essay will expect you to write in a serious and considered way.

# Why are you writing?

### Why are you writing? 1: assessment & memory

The short answer to this question is because you have to. You have to write essays so that they can be assessed so that you can get enough credits or a good enough mark to progress to the next part of your course. However, thinking about writing like this means you only see it as a terrible chore. Instead, try thinking about writing as an integral and fundamental part of learning and studying. Think about other sorts of writing you do in your everyday life – like shopping lists or reminder notes you stick on the fridge. In both cases, you write things down in order to remember them and you remember them because you’ve written them down. As you progress through your degree you’ll find that the things you’ve written down – lecture notes, notes from course books – and things that you’ve written about – essay topics, seminar presentations – are the things that have lodged in your brain.

### Why are you writing? 2: learning, exploring & expressing

Writing and writing essays is an integral and fundamental part of learning and studying in other ways. Writing is a way of learning. If you are taking notes from a book, you have to understand what you are reading in order to make sure you’ve noted all the key points in a particular chapter or passage. Writing is a way of exploring ideas. If you’ve had to describe what someone else has said or written you have to understand it in order to do so accurately and usefully. Finally, writing is about expressing yourself clearly. Writing is about developing your communication skills. One way that you know you have learnt something is when you can use it to make a convincing verbal argument or a persuasive piece of writing.

### Why are you writing? 3: learning a skill

Another answer to this question is that writing at university is a unique opportunity to learn a valuable skill that you can use throughout your life. Writing at university will teach you how to organise your thoughts, how to analyse information, how to argue persuasively. Even if you never write another essay in your life, you will certainly have to do all those things again. Here are three places the skills you learn through writing at university can be applied later in life: a job application letter, a supporting statement as part of an application, reports you have to write as part of your job. The skills you learn through writing at university can be applied to speaking as well. Imagine that at some point in the future you have to make a fifteen minute presentation to work colleagues. Your writing at university skills can be applied here too so that what you say is in the best possible order to have maximum impact.

# How much is that degree in the window?

### Fair exchange

You are at university to get a degree but not just any degree: you are here to get the degree you want to have. You aren’t going to get that degree just for turning up but you won’t get a better degree just because you’ve done every last thing and read everything you’ve been set. You need to learn how to do two thing important things: to understand and select what’s important; and to understand what tutors expect you to do.

### I gotta use words when I talk to you

One of the most important things at university is the written word. Universities start and finish with it. Some people would even go so far as to say that academic life is founded on it. Tutors give you seminar notes and reading lists. You give them essays. However, understanding what sort of written word tutors are looking for can be confusing. So this part of the guide is going to help you to understand how to use that strange language called ‘academic writing’.

### Writing equals access

One way to think about writing at university is that it is the means by which the institution lets you get what you want to have. Written work is what earns you credits which in turn enable you to pass a module which in turn enables you to progress to the next level of your course. Written work is the means by which tutors give you feedback on your progress. Written answers are the means by which you pass exams.

# Academic writing

### What it isn’t

Dictionaries aren’t much help. They sometimes define ‘academic’ like this: abstract, impersonal, cold, over-formal. This all sounds pretty off-putting and quite negative. If you talk to university tutors, they will tell you these are precisely the sorts of things that spoil essays because students think that’s what writing at university is supposed to be like. Tutors will also tell you that academic writing isn’t about jargon. This does not mean that academic writing does not use complex theoretical or technical terminology but it does not do so in place of clearly written everyday language. It also isn’t about very long sentences and using six big words when two short ones will do. Academic writing does not mean putting yourself on hold and trying to write like a character out of Star Trek about the prevalence of sub-space frequencies being refracted by tachyon beam phase distortions.

### So, what is it?

Buried among all those negative-sounding dictionary definitions of ‘academic’ are a few helpful ones: ‘relating to scholarly performance’ and ‘speculative’. If we unpack those meanings a little we can try some definitions of our own:

i. Academic writing is writing that shows evidence of learning.

ii. Academic writing considers a subject in its different aspects, relations and implications.

iii. Academic writing reviews a subject with a sense of sceptical enquiry.

iv. Academic writing re-examines a subject in order to test and develop ideas or theories.

### Yes, But What Does It Look Like?

Our definitions sound as if academic writing always looks and sounds the same. If we look at the opening sentences of articles from a number of academic journals this clearly isn’t the case:

[1] Edwin Morgan will be seventy this year and his oeuvre is now a substantial one.

[2] This essay examines some of the ways in which racialised ideologies were constituted in the nineteenth century in the context of British imperialism.

[3] Edna O’Brien is a writer more often judged as dealing with private passions than the wider world of politics.

[4] The rapprochement of bibliography and contemporary theory has become so familiar a fact of Shakespeare studies that it is now routinely invoked as a fait accompli.

### Fingerprints 1: register & evidence of learning

All four passages have a number of identifying marks or fingerprints. We can see straight away that there’s a particular **register** of language being used. The examples about Edwin Morgan, British imperialism and Shakespeare studies use words and terms that we might not recognise: ‘oeuvre’, ‘racialised ideologies’, ‘rapprochement’, ‘fait accompli’. The writers aren’t using these words and terms to show off. They are using them because these are the words and terms that writers about the subjects of these articles habitually use. For example, the writer on Edwin Morgan could have said ‘body of work’ instead of ‘oeuvre’ but ‘oeuvre’ is a recognised term in literary studies used to refer to the totality of a writer’s work. It establishes that the writer is taking a serious approach to his subject. To go back to our first definition of academic writing, we might say that writing in this register is one way to show evidence of learning – although, of course, it’s not the only one or even the most important. We can also say that writing in this register helps to establish the right degree of formality. When a reader sees a word like ‘oeuvre’ instead of ‘books’, she is already starting to form an opinion that the writer knows what he or she is talking about.

### Fingerprints 2: specialised language used clearly

We can also see that while the writers on British imperialism and Shakespeare studies do use specialised or unfamiliar words and phrases – ‘racialised ideologies’, ‘constituted’, ‘rapprochement’ – they do so in the context of clear, direct statements. The writer on British imperialism announces clearly what the article is about. The writer on Shakespeare studies directs us clearly to the article’s area of discussion.

### Fingerprints 3: saying what you are going to do

The most important thing about all four examples is that they all announce clearly what the articles are going to be about and do so in particular ways.

Example [1] not only tells us the article is going to be about Edwin Morgan’s works: by referring to his seventieth birthday, it tells us that this is a good moment to review aspects of those works.

Example [2] announces its subject but does so with a little of that element of doubt from our third definition. The writer is going to write about only ‘some of the ways’ – i.e. she’s not claiming to be comprehensive. She’s going to write about how ‘racialised ideologies were constituted’ i.e. made up. So she’s going to talk about processes as much as finished facts. Finally she’s going to do something from our second definition of academic writing: she’s going to ‘examine’, i.e. look at carefully, look at in detail, look at from a number of different angles.

Example [3] seems to be just a straightforward statement about Edna O’Brien. However, by using the phrase ‘more often’ the writer is doing something from our third and fourth definitions of academic writing. She’s introducing an element of doubt – yes, Edna O’Brien is more often judged in one way but there are others. And that, in turn, tells us that she’s going to re-examine the ways in which Edna O’Brien is usually judged. She’s already telling us that the focus of her article is going to be on ‘the wider world of politics’ in O’Brien’s work.

Example [4] also uses particular phrases to tell us that it’s going to re-examine its subject: ‘become so familiar a fact’, ‘routinely invoked’, ‘fait accompli’. ‘Rapprochement’ is also used deliberately. It means both the ‘re-establishment or recommencement of harmonious relations’ and ‘the act or fact of coming or being drawn near or together’. So the writer might be telling us that once upon a time there was antagonism between bibliography and contemporary theory but now the two things are the best of friends. Or he might be telling us that the differences between bibliography and contemporary theory are becoming blurred. ‘Fait accompli’ means something that’s been done and is therefore regarded as irreversible and/or no longer worth arguing against. The writer is telling us that his view of the subject is going to be that something isn’t necessarily so just because we keep seeing it and keep talking about it.

### Fingerprints 4: objectivity

This points to another important aspect of academic writing: **objectivity**. By telling us that they are going to take a new view of their subjects, writers [three] and [four] are standing apart from them. They are saying ‘Yes, I know everyone says it looks like this but is that really true?’ Being objective means looking at the facts without letting feelings or prejudices – our own or other people’s – get in the way. I usually tell students: imagine you are a detective. You’ve been to the scene of the crime, you’ve interviewed the witnesses and you’ve got the forensic reports. Now you are sitting back at the police station weighing it all up and asking yourself questions about what it looks like. Does piece C of forensic evidence contradict witness A? Or do the two things just make each other clearer? If you spend any time talking to academics you’ll often hear them say that research can be frustrating because it does not always tell them what they were expecting, but that this in itself can be exciting and challenging.

### Fingerprints 5: located in a body of knowledge

The other thing that all the writers of our four examples do is to locate themselves in existing **bodies of knowledge**. They take certain facts for granted and then move on to their particular take on the subject. Our four writers aren’t going to and don’t need to spend time on proving that Edwin Morgan has a substantial oeuvre; that British imperialism involved racialised ideologies; that there’s a dominant view of Edna O’Brien; and that bibliography and contemporary theory were once opposed but aren’t any more. This is also why, for example, the writer in [1] uses the word ‘oeuvre’ and the writer in [2] uses the phrase ‘racialised ideologies’. Using a particular register of language helps to tell your readers where you are coming from and where you are going. These are important points to bear in mind for any piece of writing: who you are writing for; what you can assume they know; what you can assume they want you to tell them; and what language they expect to be told it in.

# Academic writing: key features

### The story so far

The four introductory sentences from academic articles used less than 100 words between them but by looking at them in detail we’ve been able to identify a number of key features about academic writing. Let’s try and sum them up.

i. Academic writing has a serious tone. The language used and the way writers approach their subjects are thoughtful and restrained. None of the examples were dull but even the most direct – [1] and [3] – avoided sounding chatty and colloquial.

ii. Academic writing is clear and to the point. All four examples introduce their subjects and manage to tell us quite a bit about what the writers are going to say about them.

iii. Academic writing is objective. Examples [3] and [4] do this particularly well: never mind what the accepted views are, what do these things really look like? Examples [3] and [4] also do something that is a key feature of academic writing: they take a **critical** view of their subjects.

iv. Academic writing starts with an element of doubt. It does not assume anything. It’s tentative and exploratory. It does not start by claiming to be definitive or comprehensive. The more you read academic articles and books the more you’ll find phrases like ‘Professor X’s argument suggests that there might be a sense in which…’ or ‘Taking this into account, it could be argued that…’

v. Academic writing uses **evidence**. This connects with being objective. Academic writing isn’t a place to express opinions or feelings without backing them up with facts or references. This is one of the important differences between speaking and writing. In conversation we just say what we think but in writing we have to be able to back it up.

vi. Academic writing locates itself in an existing **body of knowledge**. Any new piece of writing is a development and an extension of what has already been written on a particular subject.

### The sequel

There are some other key features which would have become apparent if we’d read the four articles in full, and which this guide will look at elsewhere. Here’s a quick summary:

i. Academic writing follows a process of reasoning. It will present the facts about a subject and a writer’s interpretation of them in a way that shows those facts are interrelated, connected or sequential; and the presentation will appear orderly, logical, even predictable or inevitable. So if we go back to our second article about Edna O’Brien, the process of reasoning might be as follows. The writer could briefly review the accepted view of O’Brien’s work. She could then look at statements that O’Brien has made – in journalistic articles or interviews – about the world of politics. She could then look at O’Brien’s novels and short stories and see how the world of politics appears or is discussed.

ii. Academic writing advances an argument. I look in detail at what an argument is in another section, but making an argument is closely connected with following a process of reasoning. As in our suggested outline for the article on Edna O’Brien, an argument moves through clearly presented, logical stages and uses and reviews evidence at each of those stages.

iii. Academic writing is consistent. This is true of all successful pieces of writing. If we’d read our four academic articles in full, we would have found that they start as they mean to go on. They don’t suddenly become colloquial or veer off into impenetrable jargon. They don’t suddenly start making wild, unsupported assertions.

# Personal or impersonal?

### To me or not to me?

One of the most frequently asked questions by students is ‘should I use ‘I’ in my writing?’ The answer is that there is no single answer. Some subjects encourage the use of ‘I’ while others actually frown on it or ‘ban’ it because it is thought to show a lack of objectivity. More confusingly, in my experience as a Royal Literary Fellow, even tutors teaching the same subject will have different views about it. Some don’t mind but others will mark students down. So, one way to answer this question is (a) to find out what the convention is in your subject; and (b) ask your tutors what they expect to see in the essays they set you. However, there are other ways to help you think about whether to use ‘I’ or not.

### Is it about you? 1: sometimes it’s personal

It can sometimes be appropriate to use personal experience or to use a personal tone in an essay. Imagine you were studying for joint honours in Spanish and Management and that you’d spent a year working abroad in a Spanish business. In your final year, you decide to write a long essay about an aspect of Spanish business practices, let’s say different management styles. Here the personal could well be appropriate. In your introduction, you might announce that the essay is going to use the theories of Professor X and Professor Y and the well-known Model of A; but you could also say that you are going to test some of these ideas against your own experiences. However, you have to judge whether it’s appropriate to do so or not – and, of course, find out whether your tutor will welcome such an approach. As a tutor myself, I like to read an essay that starts: ‘In this essay I will examine’, instead of saying: ‘This essay examines’. It reminds me that there’s a person behind the writing.

### Is it about you? 2: personal vs objective

One reason for not using ‘I’ and one reason why many tutors often dislike it is that it shows a lack of objectivity. To return to our analogy of the police detective: he does not say ‘I think X is guilty’ but rather ‘The evidence points to the fact that X is guilty’. Another reason for not using ‘I’ is that once you start it’s very easy to slip into a chatty style; and once you’ve slipped into a chatty style, it’s even easier to start spouting opinions and feelings and prejudices. A typical example would be ‘Professor X’s theory says this but what I think…’. Tutors who set and mark undergraduate essays are less interested in what you think than in what you know, what you can find out. To put that another way, they are more interested in your ability to exercise judgement than spout opinions.

### Is it about you? 3: have they asked you what you think?

Another of way of thinking about this is to ask yourself what your essay is about: is it about you and what you think? Or, is it asking you to consider different ideas about globalisation or change management?

### Is it about you? 4: personal vs useful

Another question to ask yourself is: does a personal tone add anything useful to my essay? Let’s take a point from an imaginary essay and look at the two styles of writing it. Here’s the academic version:

In the light of Brown’s criticisms of Jones’s theory, the most surprising thing about Brown’s own theory is its marked similarities to Jones’s. Smith (1997, 13-15) even goes so far as to argue that the two models are virtually indistinguishable.

Here’s the personal version:

Having looked at Brown’s criticisms of Jones’s theory, I was really surprised to see how close Brown’s own theory is to Jones’s. Smith 1997, 13-15) even argues that they are almost the same.

Both versions are saying the same thing: they are describing the fact that despite one theorist’s criticism of another, their theories turn out to be virtually the same. Both versions support this discovery by referring to another theorist.

The personal style version actually uses fewer words; and its note of personal discovery – ‘I was really surprised…’ – is actually quite attractive and gives the reader a sense of a living, thinking person behind the words. In terms of the writer’s own development and learning, it’s important that they’ve made this surprising discovery.

However, in terms of accepted and established ways of academic writing, the most important thing is the fact of the similarity between the two theories not the fact that yet another undergraduate has discovered it. The personal style puts greater emphasis on the writer’s surprise than on the similarity of the two theories.

### To me or not to me? Another answer

However, there is a way to combine the academic and the personal. Here are two more examples:

The stereotyping of the colonial subject, that which is produced through surveillance, is, therefore, always threatened with lack. It depends upon an illusory relationship of consent which seems to produce ‘in the scopic space’ a relationship between observer and observed.

To defend [my thesis] I need to look at the notion of mimicry and its relationship with mockery. How, in this drama of colonial subjectivity, does mimicry/mockery operate? What is its basis, how is it produced, what are its effects? In discussing these it will be clear that I mark a distance with Bhabha’s characterisation of mimicry…

Both passages come from the same article: ‘Spectaculars: Seamus Heaney and the Limits of Mimicry’ by Tom Herron, published in Irish Studies Review, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1999. Herron takes issue with an established critic of Heaney’s poetry, David Lloyd, and shows how Lloyd’s viewpoint fails to take account of particular developments in the poetry Heaney has published since Lloyd’s original account was published.

The article is eight and a half pages long. The first three pages summarise both Heaney’s poetry and Lloyd’s view of it. At the end of page three, Herron tells us what he’s going to argue and he does so in a personal style: ‘I am concerned’, ‘I will argue’, ‘I will demonstrate’, ‘I will term’ and ‘I argue’. The next two pages focus on a particular poem as an example of what is new in Heaney’s work. At the end of page five, we get the second passage, again in a personal style. The rest of the article develops the discussion of the Heaney poem from particular theoretical perspectives.

This has two effects. First, we get a good sense of a living, thinking person behind the writing. Second, we get an impression of active thinking as Herron stops to review what he’s said and tell us what he’s going to say next and how he’s going to say it.

### Confused?

All this can be confusing – particularly when Tutor A says it’s OK to use ‘I’ and Tutor B absolutely forbids it. It can also be confusing if you are studying for joint honours and have to keep juggling different conventions. However, to sum up:

i. Find out what the convention is in your subject.

ii. Find out what your tutors want.

iii. Think about why you want to use ‘I’ and if doing so adds anything to your essay.

# What tutors want – 1

### Just one look…

Anyone who, like me, spends a lot of time reading student essays will tell you that they can tell whether or not an essay is going to be any good without even reading it. If I see an essay that does not have proper paragraphs but just pages covered with single sentences so that it looks like a collection of notes, I will know that the writer has struggled to write a coherent answer i.e. a well structured argument leading to a logical and justified conclusion. If an essay looks right, then there is a good chance that the writer will have thought about how to structure her argument.

### Coherence – but what else?

Here’s a quick checklist of other things tutors look for and are pleased to see in undergraduate essays. Many of these are covered in other parts of this guide.

* Clear English
* Ability to answer the question
* Use of evidence to back up each stage of your argument
* Evidence of reading round the subject i.e. don’t just parrot information from one lecture or one course book
* Evidence of reflection i.e. think about the evidence and theories you are writing about and treat them objectively and critically
* Discussion of the issues and ideas that relate to the question
* Demonstration of your understanding of those issues and ideas
* Evidence that you know who said them and when, where, why and how
* Analysis not description
* Precision not generalisation
* Evidence of proof reading i.e. don’t hand in work that’s full of grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes. The person reading and marking it will just assume you couldn’t be bothered with your work.
* Evidence of editing i.e. is your material in the best possible order? Are your words really saying what you want to say?

# What tutors want – 2

### Departmental style sheets

Many departments now produce style sheets or short guides telling students how to write essays. They can cover everything from whether or not to write in the third person to how to reference in your particular subject. If such things are available, use them. They are not there for fun – they are giving you important information on a plate.

### Detailed guides

A sports science student was sent to see me by his tutor because he was struggling with his final year dissertation. ‘Have you got any guidance notes from your department?’ I asked. He sheepishly produced three or four crumpled sheets of A4. On those sheets was everything he needed to know about how to write his dissertation. It went into great detail: ‘The first stage of your dissertation is writing a 500 word abstract to be handed in on December 15th. It will cover the following points…’ Once again, key information on a plate. Check if such things are available, and if they are, use them!

# Be prepared to be flexible

### What Dr X wants

Just as some tutors are happy for you to use ‘I’ in your essays and others frown on it, so tutors will often have their own ideas about what they want to see in student writing. This can include form as well as content. Here are some examples based on my own experience:

Some tutors like clear introductions; others like students to get straight on with the subject.

Some tutors like a dissertation to start with a literature review; others prefer to see the theoretical background integrated into the body of the dissertation.

Some tutors will just stop marking if you go over the word limit; others don’t mind how much you write as long as it’s a good essay and everything is relevant.

Some tutors like work that just shows good evidence that you’ve read and understood the main points of a subject; others would rather read work that challenges accepted ideas.

### Get to know them

Sometimes an individual tutor’s preferences go against the departmental style sheet. It’s just not fair, is it? The only way to negotiate this is to try to get to know your tutors a little and understand what they want. Don’t run away the minute a lecture or seminar is over – why not stay behind and ask a question? And why not compare notes with your classmates about what particular tutors prefer and/or have said they want?

# Understanding what they want – again

### They’re back – and this time they want an essay…

In the ‘What tutors want’ section, we spent some time looking at how to understand what the university and what your tutors want from you. This will help you in your writing but so will understanding what an essay is and what it’s for. The essay is deeply embedded in academic life. You can see this from the huge number of academic journals that have the word in their title. Here’s a brief selection: Yale Economic Essays, Essays in Criticism, Essays and Studies, Essays in Physics. In this section we’ll look at definitions of the essay.

# Basic definitions

### Pop quiz

Journalist Robert Winder has this to say about essays: ‘In a way, an essay is just a grown-up version of the tie-breakers in supermarket quizzes: Complete the line “I think history is bunk because…” in not more than 10,000 words.’ So far, so funny but there are some serious points behind Winder’s witticism. Essays are relatively short and designed for a specific purpose; like the tie-breakers in supermarket quizzes, they only contain a limited amount of material.

### Dictionary definitions 1: essay equals attempt

The primary level of meaning of the word ‘essay’ is not about writing at all. An essay is an attempt to do something, an initial or tentative effort. The word also has the sense of an attempt to do something in a new area. We can also learn a lot about what an essay is by looking at where the word comes from. It comes from the French word ‘essayer’ which means ‘to try or attempt’; and this, in turn, comes the Latin word ‘exagiare’ which means ‘to weigh’. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Undergraduate essays are usually designed to get you to explore a new topic or to test your understanding of something you’ve just been introduced to. In the course of your exploration of a topic you’ll be expected to weigh up different views, theories or pieces of evidence.

### Dictionary definitions 2: essay equals literary composition

What does the dictionary say about the written essay? Here’s a short definition:

‘Literary composition (usually in prose and short) on any subject’.

Here’s a longer one:

‘An analytic, interpretative, or critical literary composition usually much shorter and less systematic and formal than a dissertation or thesis and dealing with its subject from a limited point of view’.

‘Literary’ does not mean that you have to write like a Booker prize winner. It simply means that an essay is generally concerned with books and literature – primary texts, critical studies, scientific papers – whether it’s about Shakespeare’s plays or sports nutrition.

Most importantly, ‘literary’ means that an essay is a piece of writing that is valued for its form, i.e. the way it is organized.

Both these definitions focus on the fact that essays are generally short. The longer definition highlights the same important point suggested by Robert Winder’s analogy with a supermarket quiz tie-breaker: ‘from a limited point of view’. An essay can’t contain everything that’s known and said about a subject – it takes a view of certain aspects or key features of that subject.

### “It ain’t what you do – it’s what it does to you”

The title of this section is also the title of a poem by Simon Armitage about, among other things, learning to recognise important experiences in your life. Think about writing essays as important experiences in your university life. Writing an essay is not just something you do so that tutors can assess your progress and award you credits for a particular module. An essay, like any other writing you do at university, will help your learning and understanding. It will improve your skills in self-expression. Make the process work for you – although the subject of the essay may not be about you and your personal experiences, the writing of it certainly is.

# Different varieties of essay, different kinds of writing

### There’s more to it than quoting experts

Different essays are designed to do different things. Some essays are designed to find out what you’ve learned about a particular aspect of your course. Some are designed to find out what you’ve learned at a particular stage of your course. Others are designed to see how well you understand and can apply key concepts in your subject. Different varieties of essay will require different types of writing and sometimes a single essay will require more than one type of writing. Here’s a guide to some of the most common sorts of writing and ways of organizing essay material.

### Analytical writing, or, what make something what it is

This type of writing makes a detailed examination of something in order to understand its nature and its essential features. In an English Literature essay about Thomas Hardy’s poetry, it isn’t good enough to say ‘The Darkling Thrush’ is a powerful poem. You need to say how and why the poem is powerful by looking at its component parts – e.g. adjectives, images, rhymes – and saying how they work individually and how they work together to achieve particular effects. In a management essay asking you to analyse the relevance of a particular theory to modern organizations, you would need to outline the essential features of the theory and relate them to organizational examples.

### Chronological writing, or, what happened and when

This type of writing relates a sequence of events. An obvious place this is used is in history essays but you would also use it in an English Literature essay if you need to say briefly what happens in Oliver Twist or King Lear. To cite to an example discussed elsewhere in this resource, you would also use it in a psychology essay that asked you to describe the development of scientific paradigms.

### Compare and contrast writing, or, how two things are similar and dissimilar

This type of writing examines two things and the similarities and differences between them. It is a very common type of writing e.g. ‘Compare the treatment of love and power in two of the Shakespeare plays studied this semester’. Or to use an example closer to home: ‘Compare how essay writing skills are taught to new students arriving at universities in the UK and the USA’. This type of writing can involve several of the other types of writing discussed in this section: chronological, descriptive, analytical etc.

### Descriptive writing, or, what something is like

This type of writing gives a picture of the main characteristics of something. For example, ‘How are essay writing skills taught to new students arriving at universities?’ This seems like a very straightforward type of writing. However, you should remember that there may be more than one view or description of a subject; and that saying what something is leads inevitably to saying how and why it is i.e. to analytical writing.

### Evaluative writing, or, how and why something is important

This type of writing makes a judgement about something. For example: ‘Evaluate the effectiveness of how essay writing skills are taught to new students arriving at universities.’ However, in contrast to other sorts of judgement – ‘That meal was fantastic’ or ‘Terminator 3 was rubbish’ – you have to say why and back up your judgement with evidence. Evaluative writing can involve several of the other types of writing in this section. For example, you would probably want to compare different ways of teaching essay writing skills and say which worked best.

### Summary writing, or, the key features or something

This type of writing gives a brief account of the important features of something. For example, ‘Describe the important features of how essay writing skills are taught to new students arriving at universities.’ You will probably do this sort of writing at least once in every essay you write because university essays are usually designed to assess and test your understanding of a particular topic, writer or concept. Some subjects, such as psychology, will ask students to produce short seminar reports about a particular area of study. Introductions and conclusions to essays are types of summary.

### To sum up:

There are distinct varieties of essay that require different types of writing. You can often spot which type of writing you are being asked to do from the way the essay title is phrased. However, remember that a well-written, effective essay will probably use several of these different types of writing. For example, you have to say what something is like – descriptive writing – before you can say whether or not it’s important or valuable – evaluative writing.

# Look, it’s my favourite word!

### The author confesses

About 25 years ago, when I was an undergraduate studying English Literature, I was given an essay to write on the connections between T. S. Eliot’s and Ezra Pound’s ideas about poetry and nineteenth century French poets’ ideas about poetry. No problem: I’d just been reading Laforgue and Mallarmé and had found their work interesting and unusual so off I went. Except . . . about two thirds of the way through my first draft I realised I was writing a brilliant essay about the poetry of Laforgue and Mallarmé. In fact, it was so good I don’t think I’ve ever understood their poetry better! However, of the connections between Laforgue’s and Mallarmé’s ideas about poetry and T. S. Eliot’s and Ezra Pound’s ideas about poetry, there was not a whisper.

### We’ve all done it at least once

I’d made the classic mistake we’ve all made at least once: I’d seen something I was interested in or that I’d recognised in the essay title and started writing about it. I hadn’t understood the question. This part of the guide will help you to answer the right question.

# Close encounters of the word kind

### Here’s this week’s essay

In this section of the guide we’re going to use an actual essay title to understand how to understand essay titles. Here’s the essay:

Review the evidence for links between cholesterol levels and heart disease, and evaluate the usefulness of cholesterol screening programmes in preventing heart disease.

Imagine you’ve just received this title. The first two questions you need to ask yourself are: ‘what is the essay about?’ and ‘what is it asking me to do?’

### What is the essay about?

Every essay title contains key words or terms that are specific to a particular subject, in this instance health, exercise and nutrition. Looking for these key words helps you to understand what the essay is about. In the example, the subject specific key words are: ‘heart disease’, ‘links’, ‘cholesterol levels’, ‘screening’ and ‘preventing’.

### What is the essay asking me to do? 1

Every essay title contains another set of key words or terms, which tell you the type of essay your tutors are expecting to see. These types of key words or terms are sometimes called ‘directive’. That is: they act as signposts or instructions that tell you which direction to go in and what to do when you get there. In the example, the directive terms are: ‘review the evidence’ and ‘evaluate the usefulness’.

### What is the essay asking me to do? 2

Essay titles can contain subtle variations in directive or instructional key words. Let’s rewrite part of the example slightly:

and evaluate the extent to which cholesterol screening programmes are useful in preventing heart disease.

It’s not asking you to do anything different to our original – it just sounds like it is. If cholesterol screening programmes are, say, only 50% useful then that’s the right answer to both versions of the second part of our example question. Don’t be thrown by these variations: look at them and be clear about what you are being asked to do. If in doubt look up the words in the dictionary.

### Gotcha!

When you first get an essay title, go through it and pick out these two sets of key words: subject specific and directive. Underline them or mark them with a highlighter pen. Imagine the essay title is an identity parade and you’ve got to pick out the usual suspects. This might sound like a strange analogy but some of these key words will appear in your essay titles again and again and again. Some of them are listed in the next section.

### The usual suspects

Click on any of the words below and you will be taken to a definition in the glossary. Make sure you understand what each of these key words is asking you to do. Learn to look out for them in assignment questions and topics. It will save you a lot of time.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Compare | Discuss | Interpret | Review |
| Contrast | Evaluate | Justify | State |
| Criticise | Explain | Outline | Summarise |
| Define | Illustrate | Relate | Trace |

Make it into a question

In our example, you are being asked to ‘review’ and ‘evaluate’. ‘Review’ means ‘make a survey of a subject, examining it carefully’. ‘Evaluate’ means ‘Make an appraisal of the worth of something, in the light of its truth or usefulness; and include, to some extent, your personal opinion or the opinions of others’.

You are being asked to do specific things and to produce a particular type of assignment. Many people find these directive key words rather daunting and are unsure what is required of them. If you receive an assignment like this, try turning it into a question. Imagine the assignment was in the form of two questions that asked:

Are there links between cholesterol levels and heart disease? Are cholesterol screening programmes useful?

This seems much more straightforward. When we read questions, we are already thinking of answers or starting to have an opinion. If we don’t know the answer to the question, we are already thinking of places where we can go and find out.

### And don’t forget part two!

There’s something else we’ve all done at least once: only answered the first part of the question.

Let’s look at the example title again:

Review the evidence for links between cholesterol levels and heart disease; and evaluate the usefulness of cholesterol screening programmes in preventing heart disease.

You will see that this title has two parts. Essay questions at university will often follow this format. Some questions often have a third part which tells you the sort of things you should put in your essay. For example: ‘Your answer should refer to at least two of the [books/theories/models] studied during this semester’. Always read your assignment topics carefully and see if you are being asked to look at more than one area. Many people read the first part of the question and don’t bother to read any further.

### Always break it down

Breaking an essay question down into its component parts and turning it into a question or set of questions will help you to be clear about what you are being asked to do. It will help you to avoid writing a brilliant essay about the first thing you recognise – in this case ‘heart disease’ or ‘cholesterol’. Crucially, it will help you to start thinking about how you are going to write your essay.

### Sometimes the title contains the structure

Another good reason for breaking an essay title down in the way I’ve suggested is that it can help you to think about how you are going to organise your material in terms of structure. Our example essay title has a clear two part structure: ‘links between cholesterol levels and heart disease’ and ‘usefulness of screening programmes in prevention’. So the main body or middle part of your essay could therefore look at ‘links’ first and ‘usefulness’ second.

### Don’t lose sight of the title

Another way to keep focused on the question is to put it into the header of your word processing document so that it’s at the top of every page. Your title will then be in your face throughout the essay writing process.

# Starting to answer the question: brainstorming

### You have the power to rebuild it

Now you’ve broken your essay title down into its component parts to make sure you understand what you are being asked to do, you can start to think about how to start working towards an answer. The first method we’re going to look at is called ‘brainstorming’. Brainstorming means ‘attempting to find a solution to a problem or question by collecting spontaneous ideas’. Some tutors don’t like this technique. They complain that it encourages disorganised thinking and therefore disorganised writing so that some student essays look as if they are all storm and no brain. So remember: brainstorming is only ever the first stage of the essay writing process.

### How to do it

Brainstorming means taking a pen and paper and writing quickly and intensively for a short period of time. Don ’t worry about getting things in a particular order: just get as much down on paper as you can. There’s no right or wrong way to do this. Some people prefer to write continuously i.e. they just start and keep going in one great big sentence. Some people prefer to make very quick lists of points under headings. Other people prefer to organise their ideas visually. They might take an A4 sheet of paper and divide it into three horizontal areas, one for each of the key areas in the essay: ‘heart disease’, ‘cholesterol’ and ‘screening programmes’. They would then group short notes around those topics. It’s best to experiment and find the way that works best for you. There are two types of brainstorming you can do: ‘positive’ and ‘negative’.

### Positive brainstorming

Take a pen and a sheet of paper and spend approximately ten minutes writing down everything you know and think about a subject. For example, you might start by trying to write quick definitions of all the key terms in the question: ‘heart disease is…’ etc, etc. Then you might remember that you had a lecture on cholesterol last week and were given handouts at the end about resultant health problems. Or you might remember that your tutor said in last week’s seminar that there’s some interesting new research on cholesterol. Or you might remember there’s a chapter on heart disease and cholesterol in one of your course books. Or you might think ‘we haven’t started using book X yet – perhaps there’s a section in there’. So this process will help you to access things you already know; and it will help you to think about where to get evidence to back up what you know.

### Negative brainstorming

Now take another sheet of paper and spend approximately ten minutes writing everything you don’t know about the question, what you need to know and what you are going to do to find out. For example, in your positive brainstorm you might have written quite a lot about heart disease and cholesterol but you might know nothing about screening programmes and their usefulness. Where are you going to go find out? You might start by jotting down names of likely journals or databases or articles or names of likely course books. This is also the place to ask yourself questions about what you don’t know. This will help you to think about how to use all the resources that are available. So you might ask yourself questions like: Is there more than one type of screening programme? And, if so, is one type more effective than others?

### It’s a bit like cooking

Of course, you can do your positive and negative brainstorms at the same time. You might divide an A4 sheet into two vertical columns and head one ‘what I know’ and the other ‘what I don’t know’. The important thing is to think about the process as if you are thinking about cooking something you’ve never cooked before. First, you look at the recipe to see what ingredients and equipment are needed. Second, you look in your cupboards and fridge to see what ingredients and equipment you’ve already got. Third, you make a list of what ingredients and equipment you need to buy.

### Do it with friends

Brainstorming is a problem-solving technique originally developed for use by groups of people. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t do it with friends or classmates from your course. This isn’t cheating. You sometimes hear phrases like ‘the agreed body of knowledge on this subject’. This is because academic knowledge is a collaborative process. Scientific researchers work together in teams. Articles are only published in journals when they’ve been read and criticised by other experts in the relevant field. Students can and should work together too. This is worth repeating: Students can and should work together.

### Fear of a white page

Brainstorming an essay topic with friends can help you feel less isolated. Brainstorming itself is very useful in overcoming that ‘rabbit in the headlights’ feeling we all get when first confronted by an essay title. Brainstorming will help you get past that feeling that you can’t start writing until you know what the first sentence is going to be. Brainstorming helps you realise you can ‘just start writing’.

# Starting to answer the question: after the storm

### Organising your storm

Now you’ve splurged everything you can think of onto paper, it’s time to think about organising what you’ve got. There are several ways to do this.

### Ranking

You can number the points or areas in your brainstorm in order of importance and relevance.

### Colour coding

You can go through your brainstorm and pick out references to key areas with highlighter pens. For example, references you’ve made to heart disease could be marked in red, references to cholesterol in orange and references to screening in yellow.

### Keywords

You can take a new sheet of paper and start to reorganise your material under headings like ‘heart disease’ or ‘screening programmes’.

# Other ways of getting started

### Issue trees

This is a technique developed by an American writer called Linda Flower in a book called Problem Solving Strategies for Writing. Issue trees are particularly helpful if you are the sort of person who finds it easier to think in pictures or visual layouts. To make an issue tree, you write your main point or topic at the top of a sheet of paper. For our example essay, you would write ‘heart disease + cholesterol’. You would then start to list secondary points in descending order of importance so the next level of your tree might have three terms: ‘diet’, ‘lifestyle’ and ‘health education’. Then there would be branches coming off each of these three terms.

### Questioning the question

Start to think about your essay topic by asking yourself questions about it. For our example essay these questions might include: What is heart disease? What are its main causes? What is cholesterol? How important is diet? What are the main studies and/or points of view?

### The five Ws

When I was a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Trinity and All Saints College, I did a lot of work with students writing journalism assignments. They told me about ‘the five Ws’. These are the five areas that a reporter focuses on when she’s writing a story. They make sure she communicates as clearly and as quickly as possible. The five Ws are: ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘why’. So you can try to pick out the five Ws in your essay topic as a way of organising your material. Some people add ‘how’ to the five Ws.

### Clusters, mind maps and spiders

I already mentioned that some people like to brainstorm visually by writing the key topic in the middle of the page and grouping notes around. Clusters, mind maps and spider diagrams are more sophisticated ways of doing this. They work in similar ways to issue trees.

Put the essay’s main subject in the middle of an A4 sheet and draw a circle round it. Then think about ways you could break the main subject down and write these around the circled main term. Draw circles around these terms and connect them to the main one with lines or arrows. Then repeat the process for this second set of terms. Like issue trees, clusters, mind maps and spider diagrams are particularly helpful for exploring different areas of your subject and thinking about links between them.

Don’t forget that techniques like clusters, mind maps, spider diagrams and issue trees can be applied to all sorts of subjects – not just essays on health. You could use one of these techniques to think about the main events in the plot of a novel or the main differences and similarities between two management theories. For examples of mind maps, clusters and spider diagrams, have a look at Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab.

# How not to read

### You take sixteen books & what do you get?

The student in my office was close to tears. She was three weeks into a four-week deadline for a 2000 word essay and hadn’t started writing yet. What’s the problem? I asked. Reading, she said. You mean the books you want are all out of the library? I asked. No, she said, I’ve been doing lots of reading but it turned out not to be relevant. And opening her backpack, she took out book after book until there were more than a dozen piled on and around my desk.

### Reading as wild goose chase

She’d made the classic mistake: got her essay title, gone to the library and got out as many relevant-looking books as she could and then just started reading from the beginning of the first book. Perhaps she’d glimpsed something useful for her essay in the distance once or twice; but even when she didn’t she’d just kept reading in the increasingly vain hope that something would turn up. No wonder she had used up nearly all her essay writing time.

### Why the classic mistake?

My student had made the classic mistake but in many ways it was perfectly understandable.

First, a regular and justified undergraduate complaint is that there are never enough books. A tutor recommends a book and it seems as if even before she’s finished speaking all the library copies have been borrowed. Other students even take books that are in high demand but short supply and hide them in obscure parts of the library so that only they can use them. The pressure’s on to grab as many books as you can as quickly as possible.

Second, reading is a way to avoid starting writing. Can’t think of the opening sentence? Go and read another book – something’s bound to come to you.

Third, the amount of reading you are required and expected to do at university can seem mind-boggling. Huge reading lists are handed out by tutors – six closely typed pages in the case of one ten-week English course I encountered – but often with little guidance. Students often assume they have to read all the books. There’s also an understandable anxiety that you have to read a lot of books to get a good mark. This isn’t true: you have to read the relevant bits of the right ones.

This part of the guide will give you some pointers on how to strike a balance between good reading and researching and getting swamped.

# You, the reader

### Becoming a reader

Just as writing at university is different from other sorts of writing so reading academic texts is different from reading magazines, novels or newspapers. Just because we can read one type of text, we assume we can quite easily read another. However, reading certain sorts of books is a skill that we need to learn and improve on through regular practice.

### Readers do it every day

One way to become a regular and confident writer at university was to do a little bit of writing every day. You can make yourself into a regular and confident reader at university in exactly the same way. Spend 15-20 minutes every day reading something from one of your course books or from an academic journal. This will help you become a more practiced reader. You’ll get used to the way that academic books and articles are written – which, in turn, will help you with your own essay writing. If there are words or expressions you don’t know, write them down and look them up. Next time you encounter them you won’t be fazed.

### Reading & concentrating

Academic texts can be written in a dense style and in unfamiliar language. Books that are not aimed specifically at undergraduates or are not introducing a subject often assume that readers will already have a substantial amount of knowledge about the particular subject. This means they don’t always spell things out directly which, in turn, means that reading them requires a greater degree of concentration. You may discover that you are reading much more slowly than when you read a magazine or a novel or a newspaper. You may find that you have to read a passage several times before you can grasp its full meaning and implications. Don’t worry – this is quite normal!

### Making time & space to read 1: right place, right time

Identify times and places for reading when you won’t be interrupted. The library may not be the best place – even in supposedly ‘quiet areas’ there are too many distractions with people wandering in and out or your best mate holding up a piece of paper saying ‘Fancy a coffee?’ Libraries are usually stuffy places and likely to send you to sleep after about half an hour or so. And many modern libraries seemed to be deliberately designed to make quiet, individual study impossible.

Try to work out when your best time for reading is – when do you feel freshest, at your most receptive? Some people work best very early in the morning, others last thing at night – everyone is different so try and find out what works best for you. To read well you need to be comfortable but not so comfortable that you fall asleep. Before you start reading, make sure you have everything else you need: drink, snacks, pens and paper for taking notes, dictionaries for looking things up.

And, last but not least, turn off your mobile and put it out of sight.

### Making time & space to read 2: time chunks

Don’t sit down at nine a.m. on Tuesday morning and decide you are not getting up until you’ve finished book X. Read for no more than half an hour to an hour at a time and take plenty of breaks to give yourself time to think about and take in what you’ve read. Break your reading up into bite size chunks – only you can decide what’s the right size for you, and it may well vary depending on the nature of what you are reading. Reading through a collection of poetry may not take so long as reading through a book of criticism about that collection. You can decide that a chunk is 30 minutes or six pages – it’s entirely up to you.

Each time you come to the end of a chunk, put down the book and think about what you’ve just read. Ask yourself questions about it and write the answers down. Do you understand it? What are the key ideas? What do you know that you didn’t know before? How does it relate to what you read about the same subject last week? Do the two books contradict or complement each other? Are there any words you need to look up? Is it relevant to your essay title? What notes do you need to make, if any?

This is a very important part of reading at university and will help you become an active reader. The point of reading is not just to slog through it and cross another book off the list but also to learn how to think about your subject.

# Choosing your reading

### Know your library

I was teaching a first year class on Wordsworth’s sonnet ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’. I’d set my students some questions about the poet and the poem to research for the next class. ‘Where are you going to find out the answers?’ I asked. ‘Internet,’ someone muttered. ‘And where else?’ Silence. ‘What’s that place that no-one ever goes to?’ As one person the class chorused ‘The library’.

I already knew from other students that people were reluctant to go to the library. Why? Some people voiced the common complaint that there were never any books they wanted. However, many others said it was because they didn’t understand how to use the library.

So get to know which part of the library contains books about your subject. Books in libraries are organized by subject according to the Dewey Decimal Classification system. This can seem quite complicated if you’ve never encountered it before but remember that the library staff are there to help you. Most libraries will have short guides to their stock that list the main subject areas and classifications.

Make sure you use the full range of services on offer in your library. Many university libraries will offer a range of literature and services for users: guides to doing literature searches, training in how to use the catalogue and the Internet, and a range of subject specific guides. Many libraries offer induction tours for new students – if yours does then go on it.

### Be selective

Here’s what a former student, Mark McArdle, said about reading at university in an article in The Times Higher Educational Supplement:

“It was impossible to read all the books on the reading list. I sought shortcuts. Collections of selected readings or journal articles saved me the bother of reading the original texts. Academic books can be difficult – if I found myself re-reading sentences or nodding off, I would stop. In all my time at university, I did not read one book from start to finish – I plucked out just what was needed.”

Let’s read Mark’s first and last comments again: “It was impossible to read all the books on the reading list […] In all my time at university, I did not read one book from start to finish – I plucked out just what was needed.”

Trying to read with these principles in mind is not a bad place to start.

### How to pluck, or, you don’t have to read it to find out if it’s useful

You can find out if a book is going to be useful before you start reading it. Start with the index and look up words and subject areas relevant to your essay and see if they are covered. If they are then go straight to these parts of the book and have a quick skim through and see if they look relevant. You can do a similar thing by looking at the contents page and chapter titles. Chapters in academic books are often divided into subsections and can look something like this:

Chapter 5: Reading & researching

5.1 – How not to read

5.2 – You, the reader

5.3 – Choosing your reading

You can also get a good idea of how useful a book might be by looking at the introduction. Academic authors often announce what they are going to write about in the first few pages. Or they might spend a few pages setting the scene of their subject or their view of it and then say what each chapter of their book will do.

Don’t be afraid to use books in this way – it will save you a lot of valuable time.

### How to pluck 2

Try to develop judgement about what to read. For example, imagine you are writing an essay that needs a definition of ethics although ethics isn’t its main subject. Do you need to struggle through four huge volumes with a title like The Meaning of Ethics in Western Philosophy? Or will a six-line definition from a Dictionary of Philosophical Terms be enough?

### Who does the author think she is? How old is the book?

These are important questions to ask about a book in order to decide if it’s useful. Is the author a recognised authority in her field – e.g. Reader in Sociology at the University of Brainstorm – or is she a Sunday Times journalist? Different types of author will write in different ways and with different readers in mind.

The age of a book is also important. This does not mean that old books aren’t useful but you are studying your subject now and your studying needs to be informed by current ideas. As an example, let’s think about what’s happened in Shakespeare studies over the last 150 years. In the nineteenth century, scholars were primarily interested in answering questions about the sources of the plays and whether Shakespeare’s plays were accurate descriptions of real historical events. For much of the twentieth century, the emphasis switched to the qualities of Shakespeare’s verse – how, for example, chains of imagery work within single plays and across several plays. In the last twenty years, scholars have become more interested in how the plays contain ideas about the self and the world that can be found in other contemporary sources.

The age of a book is particularly important in the sciences and social sciences where you need to be aware of the most up-to-date research. In fact, students in these subjects are often advised to ignore books and articles that are more than 15-20 years old.

### Be purposeful

Whatever you are reading at university – whether it’s for an essay or not – always ask yourself: why am I reading this? Always read with a purpose in mind. Or, to put that another way, always read towards something. Are you reading a book because your tutor said it was important or have you just picked a book off the reading list at random? If you don’t know why you are reading something then you may be reading the wrong thing.

# How to read: SQ3R

### What is it?

Many writers on essay writing and study skills recommend something called SQ3R. SQ3R is a reading tool specially designed to help you absorb information from books and articles. It is designed to increase your retention of what you read by setting study goals and giving you techniques to help fix information in your mind.

### What does it mean?

SQ3R stands for ‘Survey’, ‘Question’ and three Rs: ‘Read’, ‘Recall’ and ‘Review’. These are five sequential techniques you can use to read a book or an article:

* **Survey**
Look through the book and try and get a sense of whether it’s useful or not. Look at the index, the contents page, the chapter titles and the introduction.
* **Question**
If the book looks useful then examine it in more detail. Ask yourself questions about it. Where are the relevant sections? Who is the author? Have you heard of her and are therefore already aware of her ideas or viewpoint? Is she someone your tutor mentioned in last week’s seminar? What are the aims of the book? To sum up, ask yourself the five Ws about what you are reading: Who, What, When, Where and Why.
* **Read**
Let’s imagine there is one section that’s particularly relevant. Read that section but read it in two ways. First, read quickly, making sure you get a good general sense of what is being said and what’s relevant and what isn’t. Second, read the section again but this time make notes of the important points.
* **Recall**
Once you have finished reading the relevant section, go over it in your mind several times. Can you summarise the key points without referring back to the book or to your notes?
* **Review**
Now go back through the text again. Make notes of anything you missed out in your original reading. If necessary, expand your existing notes and make them more detailed. Ask yourself questions at this stage too. Has the book told you everything you needed to know? If not, what else do you need to read? Has the book pointed you towards any other books? What do you need to do next?

### SQR together

To get maximum benefit from the SQ3R reading technique, practise it with a friend. Two people will see different things in a text and discussing what you’ve read with a friend will be invaluable in the ‘Review’ part of the process. There’s no better way of testing if you’ve understood something than having to explain it to someone else.

# How to read: other techniques

### Skimming, scanning & studying

Another way to think about reading is in terms of different levels of intensity and speed.

Skimming means looking through something very quickly to find out if there’s anything relevant.

Scanning means that you know what you want and so are looking for specific information. Both skimming and scanning can be done relatively quickly.

Studying means that you’ve identified that a particular passage is relevant and are reading it carefully and systematically, taking notes and making sure you’ve grasped it

### What is it & who is it for? 1: style & access

Ask yourself these questions about everything you read and you’ll be better prepared for reading. If the answers to these questions are ‘a paper from a scientific journal written for other specialists’ then you can expect to find that what you read will be quite hard to follow. The writer will assume that her readers already have extensive knowledge of the subject. This may mean that the paper is not the best thing you could read as part of researching your essay.

If the answers to these questions are ‘an introduction to the subject aimed at undergraduates and interested general readers’ then you can expect to find that what you read will be written in an accessible style and will cover fundamental concepts in the subject.

### What is it & who is it for? 2: layout & usefulness

Different types of written materials are structured in different ways. They have different ‘layouts’. Understanding this can help when you are trying to decide how useful something is. Here are some examples:

Academic Articles
Articles in journals are usually prefaced by an abstract i.e. a short outline of what the article is about. Reading the abstract instead of ploughing through the whole article can save you a lot of time.

Newspaper Articles
Newspapers contain different types of articles that are structured in different ways. News articles put the important points first and flesh them out later. Opinion articles present a point of view so key information is usually contained in the introductory and concluding paragraphs. Feature articles provide in-depth background about a subject. They usually begin with a scene-setting paragraph and put the most important information in the main body of the article.

Thinking about and understanding the layout of a particular piece of written material can help you extract what you need more efficiently.

### What do I want to know?

First, ask yourself: ‘what do I want to know after I’ve read this book or article’? You can even make a sort of shopping list of things you want to find out. Then ask yourself: ‘does this book or article meet my needs?’

### Primary & secondary texts

This is an idea that comes from literary studies and is good way of thinking about differences between books and how you need to read them. A typical English Literature essay might ask you to take one of Shakespeare’s plays and relate it to Renaissance ideas about kingship. For this essay, the play would be your primary text and books about the play and about ideas of kingship would be your secondary texts.

This distinction can be applied to other subjects. Imagine you are writing a sports science essay which asks you to compare the effectiveness of different strategies for getting people to start taking exercise and go on taking exercise. For this essay, the different strategies would be your primary texts and different views of their effectiveness – for and against – would be your secondary texts.

In both examples, the primary texts are the ones you need to read and understand in detail. With the secondary texts you can be more selective. You probably don’t need to read a huge book called Ideas of Kingship in the Renaissance but you do need to read Chapter six on ‘Kingship in Elizabethan Drama’.

# Reading around the subject

### What does it mean?

Tutors are always telling students to do this and essays that show evidence of it usually get better marks than those that don’t. In a nutshell, it means using a wide range of sources and showing that you’ve done it. It means thinking creatively about where you can get information that will help you answer your essay question and help you to show a developing knowledge of your subject. Here are some of your main sources:

Lectures and seminars
Lectures usually provide introductions to and overviews of a subject. Seminars are where this material is explored in more depth. However, all tutors have different styles: one may work through the set course material while another may introduce exciting, unexpected material. Understanding these differences in personal styles will help you get the most out of lectures and seminars.

Reading lists
These can seem incredibly daunting. Discuss them with your tutors. They know you won’t be able to read all the books on the list so ask them for more guidance.

Newspapers
Find out what’s relevant to your subject. If you are a Media Studies student then you need to know that The Guardian and The Independent have media supplements on particular days of the week which not only report the latest news but have opinion pieces on current issues in the industry. Back copies will be in your library and many newspapers – e.g. The Guardian – have extensive online archives.

Trade magazines
These are specialist publications aimed at particular industries. As with newspapers, find out what’s relevant to your subject. Trade magazines report what’s current in a particular industry. They also have features on successful companies and profiles of leading figures. For example, if you are writing an essay on advertising there are a number of magazines covering this sector such as Campaign. If you are writing an essay on the retail sector then look at The Grocer. If you are writing an essay on purchasing then look at Purchasing and Supply Management. If your university library does not have what you want then go to the local city library – you’ll be surprised at the range of magazines there.

Academic journals
There will be a wide range of journals relevant to your subject. For example, in English Literature, Textual Practice and English publish articles on a wide range of subjects. There are also journals dealing only with Shakespeare or with Romantic writers or Victorian writers. Get into the library and find what they stock.

Guest speakers
Most departments invite specialists from outside to come and talk to staff and students. This is sometimes an opportunity to hear major figures in a particular field or to learn about current thinking.

Internet
You can use this in all sorts of ways. Many national newspapers now have extensive online archives. The internet is also a good place for finding quick, useful definitions of things – e.g. globalisation – and for finding pointers to further sources. There are also an increasing number of academic journals that are only published electronically.

Postgraduate dissertations & theses
All university libraries archive postgraduate work and this can sometimes be a good source of information.

Local and national Government publications
They can be good sources of information for matters of public policy. Imagine you are writing an essay on initiatives to promote healthy eating: local and national government departments will have published materials about this. Or imagine you are writing an essay about the future of broadcasting: the government will have published a number of consultation documents and policy statements on the subject.

# Taking notes

### Your words and their words

When taking notes try to focus on areas that are relevant to your particular assignment. You don’t have to have whole books in note form. Try to strike a balance between summarising what an author is saying in your own words and picking out useful quotations that will contribute to the argument you are making. Wherever possible, summarise in your own words – you’ll find that doing this will help you remember what you’ve read. And always make a note of relevant page numbers. This is particularly useful when summarising another author’s argument.

### Summarising books

Make short summaries of books that you may want to refer to again, either for future assignments or for revision. You can do these using index cards or an A-Z index book or by making a word processing document and calling it something like ‘Summaries of useful books’. The summary should include author, title and publication details and may include a list of useful chapters or useful sections identified by keywords.

For example, a summary of Ian Gregson’s book on post-war British poetry Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue & Estrangement might look like this:

**Author:** Gregson, Ian
**Title:** Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue & Estrangement
**Publication details:** Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996
**Useful chapters:** Chp 6: ‘Some versions of narrative’; Chp 12: ‘John Ashbery and British postmodernism’; Chp 13: ‘The Estranging of the Mainstream’
“comparisons and contrasts between ‘mainstream’ poetry and kinds of modernist writing which have been regarded, or are still regarded, as outside that pale”

You will see that the summary uses some of the author’s own words although this may not be possible with every book or article you read. The summary in this example might be extended a little further to include the poets that Gregson discusses in detail who feature on a course you are studying. You can also add a brief estimate of how useful the book is – this might be your own or your tutor’s. For example: ‘key text on contemporary British poetry course’ or ‘interesting but too heavily biased towards modernism and postmodernism’. This will save you time later.

### The Cornell system

This was developed over forty years ago by Walter Pauk to help students at Cornell University take better lecture notes but you can use it for reading too. It has six steps. Take a clean sheet of A4 paper and rule a two and half inch margin down the left hand side.

* **1. Record.**
As you read, simply write down as many facts or ideas in large right hand column, either in your own words or using quotations from the book you are reading.
* **2. Reduce.**
When you have finished making notes in this way, read through your notes and make notes about the key points in the left hand column. You are reducing important facts or ideas to key phrases or cue words. This may seem a little odd at first – you are making notes about a book and then notes about your own notes – but it’s a proven system of taking in information and seeing whether you’ve understood it.
* **3. Recite.**
This is an excellent way to retain and understand information. You need to say out loud and in your own words the facts or ideas you have just been reading about. To recite, cover up the wide right hand column and leave the key words or phrases in the left hand column uncovered. Then read each key word or phrase aloud and try to say the relevant information out loud in your own words. Repeat the process until you recite all the relevant information without looking at the right hand column.
* **4. Reflect.**
Now you have learnt the relevant information, you need to reflect on it. Ask yourself questions like: Why are these ideas important? How do they connect with what I already know about the subject?
* **5. Review.**
The next stage will help you to make sure you don’t forget what you have learnt. To do this you need to repeat the ‘Recite’ stage, perhaps several times a week. Remember: you are not just reading and remembering for a particular essay but to learn more about your subject.
* **6. Recapitulate.**
When you have reduced, recited and reflected on your notes for the first time, write a summary at the bottom of the page. You do not need to write everything out again word for word. Write it in your words and focus on the key points you want to remember or need to incorporate into your essay.

You can use this system to help you with exam revision too. Cover up the large right hand column leaving only the key phrases or cue words in the left hand column visible. Then say the key phrases or cue words out loud and try and recite as much of the covered up material as possible.

### Outlining

This is a way of organizing information using headings or short phrases that move from the general to the specific. Start taking notes using the left hand side of the page for general points. Then indent each more specific point further to the right. Here’s what an example looks like:

 Extrasensory perception

 definition: perception not using sense organs

 three main types

 telepathy: mind reading and transmitting messages

 clairvoyance: predicting the future

 psychokinesis: perceiving distant events

### Mapping

This is a way of making notes quickly in a graphic form. So if we reworked the notes on extrasensory perception as a map we would have ‘extrasensory perception’ at the top of the page with a definition written next to it; then a heading saying ‘3 types’; and then three arrows pointing to the different types.

### Charting

This is particularly useful when taking notes from chronological accounts. Let’s imagine you are taking notes on the history of psychology. Take a sheet of A4 paper and divide it into columns with the following headings: ‘Date’, ‘Important People’, ‘Books’, ‘Significance’.

# What planning and structure mean and why you need them

### Reasons to be structured

Have you ever got a bad mark for an essay because your tutor said she couldn’t follow what you were trying to say? Have you ever started writing an essay and found you’d used all your words on one point? If you answered ‘yes’ to one or both of those questions then you probably hadn’t thought about making an essay plan and then using that plan to structure your essay. This section will show you how to do both.

### Three parts

The underlying principle of this section is that an essay has three parts – a beginning, a middle and an end – or as they are more usually termed: an introduction, a main body and a conclusion. The section will also look at different types of structures for different questions. This section should also be read in conjunction with the section on argument because how you decide to structure your argument determines how you structure your essay and vice versa.

# Planning

### Planning for length

You can decide how much you are going to write before you even start writing. Let’s imagine you’ve just got your essay title and the word limit is 2000 words. You know you’ve got to write an introduction and a conclusion. You should allow yourself at least 150 words for each and then tell yourself that those 300 words can’t be used for anything else. That leaves you 1700 words for the main body of your essay. Making this decision about words before you even start writing will help you avoid a common problem: finding you’ve written 2000 words and haven’t started answering the question.

### Planning for content

Now look at your title again: are there any obvious instructions or divisions that can help you divide your 1700 words further? Imagine your essay title is ‘Discuss the themes of love and power in two of the Shakespeare plays studied this semester’. This is giving you a clear message about planning and structure. Your tutor expects to see a balanced discussion of two plays with similar amounts of writing on each – not two and a half pages on Antony and Cleopatra and half a page on Macbeth. So you can divide your 1700 words into 850 words per play.

### Planning on the computer

Once you’ve made this decision about dividing up your 2000 words you need to stick to it. A good way is to have separate documents on your computer. (This section assumes you write all your essays on a computer.) Let’s imagine you are writing the Shakespeare essay. Make a new folder and call it ‘(Title of your essay)’. In that folder make four documents: Introduction, Play One and Play Two and Conclusion. In the header of the Introduction type your essay title and then the words ‘introduction – 150 words only’. In the header of the Conclusion type your essay title and then the words ‘conclusion – 150 words only’. In the header of Play One type your essay title and then the words ‘play one – 800 words only’. Repeat this process for your Play Two document. You will see that I’ve reduced the amount of words for each play. This is because you will need to allow yourself a few words to link the separate documents when you put everything together.

# Introductions: what they do

### Introductions

An introduction should do at least four main things:

* i. Show that you have understood the title and what you are being asked to do.
* ii. State your objectives in the essay i.e. say what you are going to do.
* iii. Outline which aspects of the subject you are going to deal with and how.
* iv. Indicate what you are going to argue.

Another way of thinking about the introduction is that it should draw a map for the reader. Imagine you are taking the reader on a journey. Your introduction tells the reader not only the intended final destination but the route you are going to take, the method of transport, the places you are going to visit on the way, the people you are going to meet and even some of the things they are going to say.

If you can write an introduction like this then it will do a number of things. It will show the reader you have understood the question. It will show the reader you can think in an ordered, logical manner. It will show the reader that you know your subject. For every essay title there are things that tutors will expect to see mentioned. So if you can say ‘This essay will look at X using the theories of Professor Bloggs’, the person marking it is already interested.

Finally, drawing a map for the reader means drawing one for yourself. If you can say clearly what you are going to do then all you’ve to do is – do it!

### Some things an introduction can do

Present an overview of the essay’s subject e.g. ‘Scientific paradigms in psychology were first theorised in…’

Set out the main idea of the essay.

Outline how the essay title will be interpreted.

Define important terms e.g. ‘This essay will use Professor Bloggs’s definition of X which states that…’

Explain the methodology to be used in the essay and why it’s being used.

Outline the issues to be explored in the essay.

Quote from another writer to get the reader’s attention and give an idea of what the essay is about e.g. ‘This statement is typical of a large number of writers who attempt to define the impact of globalisation because…’

You may be able to add some of your own to the list.

### Different essays need different introductions

There’s no single form for an introduction. Different types of essays may require different types of introduction. Different subjects may follow particular conventions for written work. A social science or psychological study of a group of people may start with details of the research sample. A long essay or dissertation may start with a literature review. Your tutor may even tell you not to waste time on elaborate introductions. Nonetheless, the reader does need to have some idea of where your essay is going to take them and what you are trying to achieve in it.

### First things last?

All this implies that you have to write your introduction first but you don’t have to. You should certainly start out with a clear idea of what you are going to do but this can be in draft or note form. After all, you may start out thinking you are going to use the theories of Professor Bloggs and then, halfway through writing, come across the theories of Professor Smith which cast an interesting new light on your subject.

In fact, the ideal time to be thinking about your introduction is when you’ve finished writing your essay. If that sounds odd then think about this: a common problem with student essays is that they have introductions that announce X, Y and Z and then don’t do them. So always check your introduction against your essay. You’ve said everything you want to say and you’ve got your essay into a form you are happy with. Have you followed your own map? Do you need to add or remove a few things here and there? Or do you need to draw a new one?

**Sample introductions**

Here are some sample beginnings of introductions:

* [1] This book is about writing university assignments at degree level. One of the main reasons why we decided to write this book was that we wanted to help students find ways of putting writing at the centre of their learning.
Phyllis Crème and Mary R. Lea, Writing at University
* [2] Salman Rushdie once gave a lecture called ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ in which he famously described literature as like a voice-room, a place where a number of conflicting voices discuss the world in which we live.
Rebecca Stott, Tory Young and Cordelia Bryan, Speaking Your Mind: Oral Presentation and Seminar Skills
* [3] Writing is a craft – and a difficult one. Whether a writer is writing a novel or a set of instructions for assembling a futon, the words s/he chooses to assemble into sentences will have to be drafted and drafted again.
Rebecca Stott and Simon Avery, Writing with Style

# Main bodies: what they do

### Main points about main bodies

In your main body, you develop your argument by using ideas, opinions, facts, evidence, theories, models, quotations from primary texts and quotations from authorities and experts.

In your main body you work through key points and support them with evidence. You bring together different ideas about the same subject and let them have a conversation with each other which you mediate.

### Structuring your main body

How you structure the main body of your essay will depend on what sort of essay title you have and what sort of argument you are trying to make.

If you want to find out about different sorts of writing, go to [Different Varieties of Essay, Different Varieties of Writing.](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/different-varieties-of-essay-different-kinds-of-writing/)

Click on ‘Making an Argument’ on the side bar to learn more about argument.

### Some things the main body can do

Present arguments, points and theories in favour of and against the main proposition of the essay – with supporting evidence.

Give an overview of the main issue, topic or proposition and then work through the main issue’s key components.

Explore strengths and weaknesses in the main proposition of the essay. This is particularly useful for titles that ask you to ‘discuss’ or ‘evaluate’.

Identify and outline differences and similarities between two or more ideas, theories or views.

Review theories about a subject and then present examples or case studies to show which theories are most useful.

Use critics or theorists as a starting point for your own more detailed discussion. “Jane Smith argues that the essence of Hardy’s poetry is . . . but when we look at ‘The Darkling Thrush’ the first thing that strikes us is . . .”

### The scientific model

You might find it helpful to think about the main body in terms of the standard structure for scientific papers.

Materials and Methodology.This is where scientists explain how they got their data or evidence. So, in a media studies essay on the representation of women in soap operas you might start by reviewing different theories of representation. You might also talk briefly about the history of female characters in soap operas.

Results. This is where scientists analyse the data in detail. In the same media studies essay, you might explore the usefulness of these theories by applying them to a selection of soap operas and prominent female characters.

Discussion. This is where scientists say what their findings mean. In the soap opera essay, you might discuss what applying theories of representation to soap operas reveals about the representation of women.

# Conclusions: what they do

### Summing up

Your conclusion should give a sense of completion to your essay and should point to your central idea or to the argument you have been making. You should try and summarise the main points you have made – although you should not simply go over everything again. You should also revisit the question to show how you think your essay has answered it.

You do not have to try and give a definitive answer e.g. “Thus I have conclusively proved that X is the case”. This is highly unusual in academic writing where there is usually only “a sense in which X might – or might not – be the case”. Of course, if you’ve found out something interesting then say so. On the other hand, don’t try to be original just for the sake of it.

### Moving the subject on

Conclusions can point readers towards new ideas or new possibilities. Here’s a fictitious example:

“As we have seen, the majority of writers on soap operas still concentrate on ‘classics’ such as Brookside, Coronation Street, and Eastenders. Until commentators pay proper attention to teen soaps such as Hollyoaks and to the popularity of daytime soaps imported from Australia, we will not get a full picture of the representation of women.”

Here the writer is saying where work needs to be done and, most importantly, showing that she understands inadequacies in the evidence she has gathered.

### Here’s something I forgot earlier

Conclusions can point readers towards new ideas or new possibilities. However, they are not the place to start introducing large quantities of new material. A conclusion is not the place to remember that you have forgotten to include important information and hastily patch it in. A conclusion is not the place to include material from a book you managed to get from the library last night – it may unbalance what you have already written.

### It’s not about you

Students often think that a conclusion is the place to introduce a personal opinion. However, you should be very careful about doing this. Remember that the conclusion of an essay has to follow on from the rest of the essay. You can’t spend the essay reviewing information or examining theories and then say “But what I think is…”. If you have a viewpoint to put across in your conclusion, you should already have made a case for it in the main body.

### Some things a conclusion can do

Sum up your argument.

Revisit the essay title and show that it has been answered.

Give a sense of completion.

Indicate what the essay has and has not done.

Show that the writer has done what she said she was going to do in her introduction.

Offer a point of view in light of the evidence, opinions, ideas or theories that have been examined in the essay.

Establish a point or position.

# Sentences

### Compare the examples below

**Unclear example:**

Actually, storage is a real pain in small rooms. Every year students have exams and when they are over they have a problem knowing what to do with old lecture and seminar notes and handouts because tutors tell them they might be useful in the future but they can’t always see what to keep and so they just keep piling them up on their bookshelves.

**Clear example:**

At the end of every academic year, after exams are over, students have a problem knowing what to do with old lecture and seminar notes and handouts. Tutors tell students that some materials may be useful in future but students are often confused about what to keep. The result is that students just keep everything. The problem isn’t helped by the fact that they often live in small rooms with limited storage space.

### Can you spot the differences?

The ‘unclear example’ is composed of one short sentence that seems more like a note of an opinion than a sentence, and one long, rambling sentence that becomes increasingly hard to follow. Is the paragraph about storage, keeping old study materials or both? Did you get confused by all the ‘thems’ and ‘theys’? When did the paragraph stop making sense for you?

In the ‘clear example’ the writer has made a decision about how to order her material and has given the reader a clear message about the subject of the paragraph. The writer has decided that the paragraph should focus on old study materials. She has also broken the paragraph up into four shorter sentences. She has established a definite context for the paragraph: ‘At the end of every academic year…’ She has tied everything together by having her first and last sentences refer to each other by repeating the phrase ‘the problem’.

The writer of our clear example has varied the length of her sentences. This makes her writing more interesting to read and easier to understand. She uses reasonably long but not rambling sentences to set the scene of her discussion. When she gets to an important point – ‘The result is that students just keep everything’ – she uses a short sentence. This is very effective and packs a lot of ‘punch’. It makes the reader sit up and take notice.

If an essay has too many paragraphs like the ‘unclear example’ it soon becomes tiring to read and difficult to follow. It also becomes difficult for the writer. If you’ve written a very long sentence where all the ‘theys’ and ‘thems’ are confused, it’s very easy to read it back, misidentify one of them and then write a new sentence that goes off at a tangent.

### Sentences – common problems

Here I work through some common problems with sentences and give you strategies for solving them.

**Length**
Most writing guides will tell you that the ideal length for a sentence is 15-20 words. This is a very good rule to follow. You can also learn a lot about the length of sentences simply by being aware of what you are doing when you are writing. If you find yourself writing a sentence and about to go on to a third line, stop and think about what you are trying to say. Remember: the longer sentences are, the harder they are to follow.

**Main clauses and subordinate clauses**
Long sentences are made up of main clauses and subordinate. Can you say which is which in [1]?

[1] Corporate espionage is on the increase because of the growing use of computers to store sensitive information.
The main clause is the first part of the sentence: “Corporate espionage is on the increase…”
The subordinate clause is the second part of the sentence: “…because of the growing use of computers to store sensitive information.”

A common fault is to interrupt the main clause of the sentence with the subordinate clause as in [2]:

[2] Corporate espionage, because of the growing use of computers to store sensitive information, is on the increase.

It’s not clear what the writer is trying to say. We might guess that she is saying the same thing as the writer of example one, but we can’t be sure. After all, it looks as if she’s saying the same thing twice: “growing use”, “on the increase”.

**Active and passive voice**
Sentences in the active voice are much easier to read and understand than those in the passive voice.

Active voice: John’s father repaired the car.

Passive voice: The car was repaired by John’s father.

The active voice sentence uses fewer words and gets straight to the point. However, the passive voice can be useful when you don’t know the subject of the sentence or don’t want to call attention to it. For example, “The real identity of Jack the Ripper remains unknown” is better than “No-one really knows who Jack the Ripper was”.

**Unclear pronouns**
Pronouns are words like ‘them’, ‘he’, ‘it’ and ‘this’. In our bad example, the ‘thems’ and ‘theys’ started to get confused. Let’s take a sentence from our ‘good example’ and change it slightly:

Tutors tell students that some materials may be useful in future but they are often confused about what to keep.

Who does they refer to? Tutors or students? Grammatically, it could refer to either and the result is that the sentence is unclear. Now go back and read through the ‘clear example’ and you will see that when the writer does use pronouns it is always clear what she is referring to.

Another common problem is that students will introduce the subject of the paragraph in the first sentence and then not refer to it again. The result is the same: confusion.

Remember: the further away the pronoun is from who or what it refers to, the more confusing the sentence becomes.

**And and But**
Don’t start sentences with ‘and’ and ‘but’. Words like ‘and’ and ‘but’ are called conjunctions which means they are used to join things together.

[3] Poorly constructed sentences often use the passive voice ***and*** interrupt main clauses with subordinate ones.

[4] Poorly constructed sentences often start with ‘and’ or ‘but’, ***but*** this is incorrect because such words are conjunctions, i.e. joining words.

You can see that ‘and’ is used to connect two similar things; however, ‘but’ is used to qualify something.

**Lists and noun strings.**
Let’s go back to our example of an unclear sentence:

Every year students have exams and when they are over they have a problem knowing what to do with old lecture and seminar notes and handouts because tutors tell them they might be useful in the future but they can’t always see what to keep and so they just keep piling them up on their bookshelves.

You’ll see that all the conjunctions are in italics to show that one of the things that is wrong with this sentence is that is a great big list. Remember that ‘and’ and ‘but’ are words for joining things together but also remember that you can’t keep using them indefinitely.

Noun strings are usually the result of trying to cut words to stay within word counts.

[5] Noun strings usually result from student word cutting attempts.

That’s unclear – this is clearer:

[6] Noun strings usually result from students’ attempts to cut words.

**Parallel constructions.**
When you have a sequence of phrases or clauses put them all in parallel construction – i.e. the same grammatical from – so the reader can see the relationship between them more easily.

Like this:

In parts of England where flooding after heavy rainfall happens every winter, it is important for householders to learn to recognise the warning signs, to know what precautions to take, and to know when to evacuate their homes.

Not like this:

In parts of England where flooding after heavy rainfall happens every winter, it is important for householders to learn to recognise the warning signs. There are also precautions to take and knowing when to evacuate their homes is important.

In the second example, the writer has not used the phrase “it is important” to create a parallel construction. The second sentence is much harder for the reader to understand; and the whole passage lacks the flow of the first example.

# Paragraphs and links

### Paragraphs – what should they look like?

In the section on sentences, I suggested that you can also learn a lot about the length of sentences simply by being aware of what you are doing when you are writing. You can do the same with paragraphs. Have a look at your most recent essay. Do your paragraphs have wildly differing lengths – sometimes a few lines, sometimes nearly a whole page? Or are they all about the same length? If you answered ‘yes’ to the second question then you are well on your way to writing good, clear essays.

A good average length for a paragraph is somewhere between 150 – 250 or between a third and two thirds of a double-spaced A4 page. Have a look at paragraphs in books and journals to get a better sense of good paragraph length. A paragraph that is longer than this suggested length gets harder and harder to follow. A paragraph that is shorter looks scrappy, more like a note than part of a coherent, developing argument.

This does not mean that all paragraphs should be exactly the same length but it’s a good rule to follow when you first start writing essays.

### Paragraphs – what should be in them?

Each paragraph should represent a new stage in the argument and structure of your essay. A good way to think about the content of paragraphs is the ‘Rubin method’ which says that paragraphs should contain a subject or topic and a series of statements that make clear what the writer thinks is important or pertinent about the subject or topic.

Some people find it useful to think about each paragraph of the essay as a separate component which gets linked with all the others later. Other people find it easy to move from one paragraph to the next.

### Some things paragraphs can do

* Divide writing into easily manageable sections.
* Signal a change of direction in an argument: “However, when we apply Professor X’s model to the recent performance of Marks & Spencer we can see…”
* Signal the introduction of a new idea.
* Be containers for separate points in your argument.
* Summarise what’s been said so far before moving on to the next stage of an argument.

### Paragraph links

Now you’ve written clear sentences and arranged them into clear paragraphs you need to make your essay flow smoothly. You make this happen by linking everything together. Here’s an example from a book about Chinese business practices:

…By using family titles to name their colleagues, Chinese employees shape their business relations in terms of the well-known conventions and roles of the family and social structure.Interaction between employers and employees also finds a basis in family-centered codes of behaviour.

Our example shows the end of one paragraph and the beginning of another. The author’s main point is the way that family relations are the basis for all Chinese social relations, including those in the workplace. The end of the first paragraph sums up the way that Chinese workers interact. The beginning of the second paragraph starts by talking about the way that Chinese employers and their workers interact.

Read the example carefully and you will see that the beginning of the second paragraph mirrors and repeats words from the end of the first one. The words ‘employees’ and ‘family’ appear in both paragraphs. The word ‘interaction’ mirrors the word ‘relations’. The phrases ‘shape their business relations in terms of’ and ‘finds a basis in’ say similar things. The author keeps his main point – all relations are modelled on family relations – in front of the reader and then works through different examples of it.

When you read, see if you can spot when an author is linking things together in this way – it will help your own writing.

### Link words and phrases

Here are some link words and phrases that often appear at the beginning of a paragraph:

It is a question that can only be answered by…

At this point…

We need, at this point, to go back briefly to…

So far we have only examined X…

This helps explain why…

For X, on the contrary,…

Such a reading, however,…

However, what is most important…

Following the model of X, we can see that…

A significant implication of Bloggs’s theory is…

What distinguishes X from Y is…

Look at these phrases carefully: they all introduce a new beginning while referring to what has gone before. Remember: link words and phrases work in both directions, backwards and forwards.

Of course, you can also use link words and phrases in the middle of a paragraph to start a new sentence. However, make sure you don’t over-use words such as ‘furthermore’, ‘moreover’, ‘additionally’, ‘nonetheless’ and ‘similarly’ to start either new paragraphs or new sentences.

### Link-less

Another way to understand how link words and phrases work is to take a passage from a book and remove all words that seem to be superfluous to the argument.

Here is an example from Linda Hutcheon’s book A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. Hutcheon is criticising an article by another critic Terry Eagleton. Here is the passage as it appears in the book:

In fact, much of what is offered here is repeated in other theorizing on postmodernism. Like many before him (both defenders and detractors), Eagleton separates theory and practice, choosing to argue primarily in abstract theoretical terms and almost seeming to avoid mention of exactly what kind of aesthetic practice is actually being talked about. This strategy, however clever and certainly convenient, leads only to endless confusion.

Now here’s the same passage with everything superfluous removed:

Much offered here is repeated in other theorizing on postmodernism. Like many, both defenders and detractors, Eagleton separates theory and practice, choosing to argue in abstract theoretical terms and almost seeming to avoid mention of what aesthetic practice is being talked about. This strategy, clever and convenient, leads to endless confusion.

Read the two passages aloud and listen to how different they sound. In Linda Hutcheon’s original paragraph, we get a sense of a real person talking to us and trying to persuade us of her point of view. In my edited version, over a third of the passage has disappeared and the passage now reads like a collection of notes. It sounds like a robot talking. The sense of a real person talking to us has disappeared. Crucially, it’s now unclear what Hutcheon is saying about Terry Eagleton’s article. Does she agree or disagree? Does she find it helpful or unhelpful. In the edited version, the conclusion is still that Eagleton’s methodology “leads to endless confusion” but it is unclear whether Hutcheon approves, disapproves or is just giving an objective description.

Take a section from a book or journal article and try the experiment for yourself. It will help you in two ways. First, it will help you to recognise link words and phrases. Second, it will help you to understand how writers ensure that their writing has a particular effect on the reader. Understanding that will, in turn, help you achieve the effects you want in your own writing.

# Process, process, process

### The raw & the cooked

If you invite a friend round for a meal, you don’t just serve up the raw ingredients. You prepare the ingredients, cook them and then put something attractive and tasty on the table. It’s the same with essay writing: you should never hand in a first draft. Throughout this guide, I’ve emphasised that essay writing, like all writing, is a process. This means that any piece of finished writing will have passed through a number of different versions as the writer tried to make it as good as she could.

### Drafting & editing – what they mean

‘Drafting’ means ‘making a preliminary or tentative version, sketch or outline of something’. ‘Editing’ means ‘making suitable for publishing or public presentation’ and has senses of selecting, amending and revising. The two activities are closely related. Publishers employ editors to work with authors on first drafts of new books.

### What the professionals say

Here are some of the things that writers have said through the ages about drafting, editing and revising.

“Of every four words I write, I strike out three” – Nicolas Boileau, 1665

“I constantly rewrite” – Thornton Wilder, 1961

“I do a lot of rewriting. I find that the more versions you see […] the more you get it right in the end” – William Trevor, 1989

# The basics

### Stand back from your own work

A good way to approach drafting and editing is to stand back from your own work. This is much easier than it sounds but you can do it by playing some games with yourself.

First, try not to think about your essay as finished. When you read through your work, you should always be on the look out for ways to improve it.

Second, plan the time you’ve been allowed for writing an essay so that you can include putting your work aside for at least 24 hours and coming back to it with a fresh pair of eyes.

Third, get a friend to read your work. You get so close to your own work that it is difficult to see it as it really is. When a friend says “What does that mean?” you suddenly think “Yes, what does that mean?”

### How many drafts make a good essay?

There is no single answer to this question. An essay that requires a lot of reading and involves dealing with unfamiliar theories could require more drafts than an essay that asks you to compare and contrast X and Y. On the other hand, the compare and contrast essay could involve researching unfamiliar theories. You may find that the first undergraduate essays you write require more drafting than those you write in your final year. However, you should plan to do at least two drafts – and possibly three – of every essay you have to write. A 5000 word essay could involve four drafts.

Remember: all effective writing is the result of rewriting. In the next sections I’m going to assume that you make at least two drafts.

# The first draft

### Two things first

Before you can start writing your first draft you should have done two things: (i) done all the necessary reading and made notes; and (ii) made an essay plan. You should have a pretty good idea of what you need and want to say. Now you are going to say it in the most effective way possible.

### What should it look like?

The first draft is where you begin to express your ideas and organise your materials, putting them together under different section headings. It is where you sketch out the main points of your argument and illustrate them with examples. The writing is rough because you need to work through what you think, what your argument is, and what theoretical writing you are going to use at what stage.

### You don’t have to start at the beginning

You don’t have to sit staring at a blank page or a white screen waiting for inspiration to strike so you can write the first line of your introduction. Why not start with part of the main body first? You need to write about Professor Bloggs’s theory of organizations in detail anyway so why not get on with it right away?

### Keep going

The important thing is to keep writing. Remember: this is only the first draft so it does not have to be perfect. The important thing is to produce a chunk or chunks of text you can work with and start to shape into the piece of work you will eventually hand in. Thinking about your first draft in these terms will help to make the writing process less stressful.

### Don’t struggle 1: how to unblock yourself

If you really are struggling to get started try some of the following techniques.

Write a short letter to yourself outlining what you want to say in the essay.

Write for 15 minutes about any aspect of the subject you need to write about. You could do several of these 15 minutes sections and paste them together into something longer. You will have the beginnings of a good first draft.

Try a relaxation and visualisation exercise. Sit in an upright position. Both your feet should be on the floor and your hands should be resting, palms down, on your legs. Breathe calmly and evenly. Close your eyes and imagine you are walking down the corridor to the room where you are going to write your essay. You open the door. Then imagine that all the superfluous objects are magically leaving the room until nothing is left but your chair, table, books and computer or writing pad. Then open your eyes and begin.

### Don’t struggle 2: break it up & don’t get stuck

Writing is hard work. Don’t tell yourself you are not going to get up until you’ve written ten pages. Take regular breaks, perhaps every 30 or 45 minutes. If you find yourself getting stuck in the middle of a particular section stop writing. Make a brief note about what needs to go next e.g. “examples of how Hardy uses imagery”. Then start another part of the essay. You can always come back to the earlier section later.

# The second draft

### General points

Once you have made your first draft, you can revise it to see that it matches your overall argument and topic and that each section carries your argument forward.

The first thing to do is print out your first draft. Does it look anything like an essay or does it still look like a collection of sentences and notes?

The second thing to do is to read it aloud to yourself. Have fun with this and do a bit of playacting. Imagine you are impersonating a famous professor and try to read with authority. Do you sound like you know what you are talking about? Do your sentences flow or are they jerky and disjointed? Are you stumbling over short phrases or getting lost in sentences that go on for half a page?

These questions are important. You are looking at the overall shape of your essay, checking that it makes sense and that the order of your argument is clear and natural.

Next, you should focus on the individual sections of your discussion. You should work through them systematically, rewriting them as necessary to make sure that each section is clear and contains all the relevant material. You will need to make sure that they are linked together and that your argument flows clearly and naturally. You should also start concentrating on style and checking for grammatical errors and typos.

### Bring yourself in for questioning!

While you are working on your second draft, keep asking yourself: Have I answered the question? Have I answered all parts of the question? Have I included all the relevant material from my notes? Is there anything that should not be here, anything that is nice to have but not essential? Are all my points illustrated with examples? Have I missed anything?

Two really important questions to ask are:

If you’ve written “This essay will…” or “I will argue that…”, then have you?

Is everything in the best possible order?

### Using feedback

The second draft is a good time to use tutor feedback from your most recent essays. Were there any comments that indicated why you lost marks? If there is a comment in the margin like “A good point but unsupported” check your new essay for the same error or errors.

### Tone: Postmodernism is really heuristic, know what I mean?

You should start to pay close attention to how your essay is written. Is your tone consistent? Is it too chatty? Or is it overloaded with expert terminology? Or is it, like the title of this section, a meaningless mixture of the two? If you are using technical terms relevant to your subject, do you know what they mean and are you using them correctly? Remember: any reader should be able to understand what your essay is about and what you are trying to say.

However, students often worry about how to achieve the right tone. For example, how does one achieve a tone that is exploratory and tentative without sounding diffident? How can one achieve a tone that is confident without sounding dogmatic or even arrogant?

### Exploratory and tentative

A tone that is exploratory and tentative without sounding diffident is best achieved by remembering that academic writing always involves elements of doubt and of testing assertions and assumptions through the discovery of evidence.

Let’s imagine that we’re writing an essay about the meaning or meanings of T. S. Eliot’s poem ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. We might start by saying something like this: ‘Eliot once drew attention to the error of thinking that there was a single correct interpretation of the whole poem. He asserted that the meaning of the poem could not be exhausted by any single explanation.’ We might go on to say something like this: ‘At first sight, this might sound like a deliberate ploy on the part of the poet to turn interpreters away from his poem. However, if we look at…’ We could then continue by looking at different images or sets of images in the poem, deciding as we go along whether they converge with or diverge from each other. At the end of our examination, we might be able to say whether or not we agree with Eliot’s comment. The point is that by the end of our essay we will have made a journey through the poem, gathering evidence and drawing a conclusion from it.

### Confident

A tone that is confident without sounding dogmatic or even arrogant can be achieved by writing in a direct style that communicates with your readers. A confident tone is also the result of using a good range of material and actively engaging with it. The more you know about your subject, the more you will be able to say about it and the happier you will feel saying it. You will start to feel comfortable with your own knowledge.

If you quote from an expert in your subject, don’t just paste in a quotation and then move on. Respond to the quotation; try to explore its argument and to tease out the implications of that argument.
Do say things like ‘It’s clear from an analysis of Bloggs’s comment that…’
Don’t say things like ‘In my personal opinion, I think that Bloggs…’

A confident tone can also be achieved by reading widely. Are there authors on your reading lists whose arguments seem powerful and convincing? Read their work carefully and look at how they write.

# Editing – 1: getting your essay into shape

### Copy-editing & proof-reading

Now you’ve written your second draft and your essay is in the best possible shape, you need to edit it. Editing is not the same as drafting because it does not involve major writing or rewriting. Publishers and professional writers usually think of editing as involving two different but related activities. These are:

Copy-editing, which means reading your essay for content and style, checking that you have expressed yourself as clearly as you can. When you are copy-editing you should try to identify superfluous words and clumsy expressions. This will help make your essay flow better and will also help you with that perennial student problem: keeping within the word count.

Proof-reading, which means you are reading your essay for grammar, punctuation and presentation, checking for spelling mistakes, sentences that suddenly stop in the middle and paragraphs that are too long or too short. You should also check that your essay is properly formatted according to departmental requirements. Are the titles of books and articles in the right form e.g. italicised or underlined or in inverted commas? Is your bibliography or reference list in the right form? Have you followed the correct referencing system for your subject?

### Using feedback

The editing process is also a good time to use tutor feedback from your most recent essays. Has your tutor drawn attention to spelling and presentational issues? Do you find all your essays are
criticized for the same reasons? Check your new essay and fix the relevant areas.

### Upside down & back to front

Before I became a full-time writer I worked in industry buying print and printed packaging. An important part of the process was checking proofs against the original artwork. When I was relatively new to the job, a senior colleague told me the best way to check for errors was to read the text upside down and back to front.

This sounds extreme but all my colleague was telling me to do was stand back from the text. The minute we start to read a sentence we start to get involved in the meaning of the words. When we are editing, we need to pay as much attention to possible errors.

# Editing – 2: what’s on top & what lies beneath

### Two types of editing

If you find these different but related processes difficult to follow, another way to think about the editing process is to tell yourself that you need to do two types or editing: simple or surface editing; and complex or deep editing.

### Simple or surface editing

Simple or surface editing involves checking spelling, grammar and punctuation. The spell checker functions of word processing are useful but must be used with caution. For example, they won’t help you to spot words which are spelled correctly but used wrongly.

If you have any doubts about the spelling of particular words then look them up. Make sure you haven’t made any mistakes such as confusing ‘their’, ‘there’ or ‘they’re’. Make sure that you are using the right form of verbs in your sentences and not leaving words out e.g. don’t write sentences like ‘All companies needs to have business strategy’. These sorts of mistakes not only make your work harder to read: they give the impression that you have not taken much care over it.

### Complex or deep editing

Complex or deep editing will often involve redrafting and involves reading your assignment as if you were an outsider or a stranger to you and your work. Complex or deep editing involves asking yourself particular types of questions:

Does your essay have a central idea? Is it clear to the reader or is it hard to spot?

Do you raise questions that you don’t answer? Have you done everything you said you were going to in your introduction?

Have you said everything you want to say? You cannot assume that other people will know what you want to say.

Is there a definite sense of an argument developing? Can you follow your own argument? Do you agree with it? If not, then it needs redrafting.

Have you made an argument and answered the question set by the assignment or have you just put down everything you know or could think of about the subject?

Do the different points you make follow on logically?

Is there a good balance between the information you report and summarise and your analysis and view of it?

Is your use of subject terminology or special vocabularies clear and consistent?

Have you got a conclusion? Does it give the reader a sense of arrival?

Have you answered the questions you’ve been set or discussed the topic you were asked to explore?

### Finally, check your essay against your plan

If you made an essay plan when you started thinking about your assignment, now is the time to go back to it and use it as a checklist. Have you done everything you planned to? Have you missed anything out?

Another good way of doing this is to go through your assignment and make a list of the main point or points in each paragraph. Then check this list against your original plan.

When you have done all this, you may want to redraft your assignment. You may want to rewrite individual paragraphs to make them clearer. You may want to cut paragraphs or sentences that don’t add anything to your argument. You may want to put paragraphs in a different order to make your argument more logical or to give it greater impact.

# Are you looking for an argument?

### “My tutor read my essay and said he couldn’t find one”

One of the most common criticisms that tutors make of student essays is that they don’t have an argument. However, because ‘argument’ is a word that has obvious meanings in everyday speech, it can be difficult trying to understand this sort of feedback. As with other sorts of feedback, it can also be confusing because tutors in different subjects – and even in the same subject – look for different things. A Social Science tutor might look for clear, logically-ordered writing, relating theory and case studies. An English Studies tutor will be looking for evidence that students have read and understood a particular text – e.g. Oliver Twist – and can use well-chosen quotations to help answer the question.

### Does ‘evaluate’ mean the same as ‘critically analyse’?

Understanding what tutors mean by an argument is also confusing because different essays appear to be asking you to do different things: ‘[evaluate](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#evaluate)‘, ‘critically [analyse](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#analyse)’, ‘[review](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#review) the evidence for’, ‘[trace](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#trace) the outline of’, ‘[justify](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#justify) the reasons for’.

To put this another way, if your tutor asked you to write an account of your weekend in a clear, logical order that described what you did and why, you wouldn’t have any problem doing it. If your tutor then asked you to compare what you did at the weekend with national studies of popular weekend activities, you wouldn’t have any problem with that either. However, if your tutor asked you to ‘evaluate your weekend activities against the background of at least two recent studies of national leisure activities’ you might feel less certain about how to do it.

### All arguments are different but they all do the same thing

As with lots of things in this guide, there isn’t just one answer to the question ‘What is an argument?’ It’s not just different subjects that require different types of argument – different types of material do too. An essay looking at the history of scientific paradigms in psychology from 1900 to 2000 will make a different sort of argument than an essay looking at current ideas about scientific paradigms in psychology.

However, there is one thing that we can say with certainty: essays with effective arguments arrange their material and the discussion of it in the best possible order. This also tells us that argument is closely related to structure – in fact, it’s almost inseparable. A really good argument will be invisible to the reader if all your material is in any old order.
What follows in this section are a number of ways to get you thinking about what an argument is and how to make one. I will then look at different types of argument.

# Simple definitions

### What an argument isn’t

Let’s start with our old friend the dictionary. An argument in an essay is none of the following:

* [1] A heated debate
* [2] A quarrel
* [3] A dispute
* [4] A disagreement

### What an argument is

The novelist Thomas Hardy wrote in the ‘Preface’ to Tess of the D’Urbevilles that ‘A novel is an impression, not an argument’. This underlines that an argument has a definite structure and is organised for a definite purpose. Back at the dictionary, here are some useful ways of thinking about an argument in an essay:

* [1] A course of reasoning aimed at demonstrating a truth or falsehood.
* [2] A set of statements in which one follows logically as a conclusion from the others.
* [3] The act or process of arguing, reasoning, or discussing.
* [4] A coherent series of reasons, statements, or facts intended to support or establish a point of view.

### Key words

All these definitions underline essential features of an argument. Let’s isolate some key words from each definition. An argument is ‘a course’, ‘a set of statements which follow logically’, ‘a process’ and ‘a coherent series’. These key words tell us three important things about an argument:

* [1] An argument is something that moves from a definite starting point to a definite conclusion.
* [2] An argument is made up of a number of smaller parts that are clearly linked together.
* [3] An argument is made up of a number of smaller parts organised in a developmental order i.e. one part leads naturally to the next.

# More definitions

### It’s more than one, two, three, four, five, six

These three important facts make it sound as if making an argument is like taking the numbers six, one, two, five, four, three and deciding whether to order them one, two, three, four, five, six or six, five, four, three, two, one. Or like deciding to write about the odd numbers one, three and five; and then the even numbers two, four and six. This is true up to a point – making an effective argument is about deciding on the best possible order. However, it’s not the whole story.

### More key words

Let’s go back to our four original definitions and pick out some more key words and phrases. They are: ‘aimed at demonstrating a truth or falsehood’ and ‘intended to support or establish a point of view’. These, then, are the reasons for getting your material in the best possible order so the reader can move from a starting point to a conclusion in a way that seems logical and developmental. Now, of course, not all essays are designed to show whether something is true or false; but they are designed ‘to support or establish a point of view’.

### What’s the big idea?

Saying that an essay should support or establish a point of view is another way of saying that it needs to have a central idea. This ‘big idea’ needs to be apparent at the beginning and visible throughout the essay. The reader should feel they know what it is and what you have said about it when they get to the end. The reader should feel that you have reviewed relevant evidence and views and come to a conclusion based on them.

### Tell me a story

In Writing at University: A Guide for Students, Phyllis Crème and Mary R. Lea suggest that a good way of thinking about how to make an argument is to think of it in terms of telling a story. They are referring to the fact that stories start somewhere and end somewhere and have a recognisable and summarizable plot. Stories are satisfying to readers if they have a beginning, a middle and an end in that order. Read your essay back – does it read in that way?

### I can drink more than you…

Another way of understanding what an argument is and how it works is to think about the differences between an argument and an assertion. Let’s take a commonly expressed assertion: I can drink more than you and still stay sober. If two people had a conversation about this they might do little more than express contradictory opinions based on anecdote and hearsay. However, imagine the two people set out to prove the statement and to write up the results and conclusion in an essay. They would have to consider all sorts of material:

They would have decide what they meant by ‘drink’: wine, beer or spirits or a mixture of all three.

They would have to state the age, gender, height, weight and overall health of the drinkers as all these factors can influence alcohol consumption.

They would have to decide where and when and over what period of time the test was going to take place and explain why.

They would have to decide whether the drinking was going to be done on an empty stomach or whether the two drinkers could eat before and during the test; and, again, they would have to explain those decisions.

They would have to decide what the ‘more’ in ‘drink more’ meant – one drink or ten drinks. They would have to decide whether to use the recommended weekly intake of alcohol units as a benchmark or whether to ignore it. If they decided to ignore it, they would have to justify that decision.

They would have to decide what ‘sober’ meant and how they were going to test it. If they decide that the test for being sober is the ability to walk a straight line, are they going to allow any variations e.g. does a slight stagger mean someone isn’t sober. They might also decide to investigate whether there are any standard, widely used tests for deciding whether someone is still sober; and whether to use one or several of those tests. Again, they would have to explain why.

All these decisions and what the essay said about them would contribute to the argument. What the essay said about these decisions would help to support and establish a point of view.

### Silly example, serious points

An essay about who can drink more and still be sober is a silly one, chosen deliberately to get you to think about what is involved in making an argument. Even this silly essay sets out with a proposition and then attempts to prove it using evidence and theories. It reviews different theories and views and attempts to choose the most relevant and useful. In doing so it positions itself within an existing body of knowledge and within the conventions of that knowledge. It defines terms and sets limits to its discussion. It will use all these different activities – reviewing, choosing, positioning, defining and setting limits – to explore the original proposition and come to a conclusion about it. The conclusion that the essay comes to will seem logical, reasonable – possibly even authoritative – because all these different activities have contributed to it.

# Different types of argument

### Ground rules

Let’s establish some ground rules based on what we looked at so far. An academic argument:

i. begins with an arguable premise or claim. Undergraduate essays usually ask students to write about a subject that involves exploring different points of view or comparing and contrasting. For example: ‘Discuss the portrayal of the themes of love and power in two of the Shakespeare plays we have studied this term’.

ii. uses facts and evidence. An academic argument explores an arguable premise or claim using facts, evidence and different points of view.

iii. is logical and coherent. It moves from step to step in a clear, developmental manner.

iv. uses references and credits them. The facts, evidence and different points of view used to explore the premise or claim will come from outside sources; and these sources will be acknowledged in footnotes, a bibliography or a reference list.

However, although all academic arguments do these things, there are different ways of doing them.

### Theory X and Theory Y – 1

Let’s imagine an essay title: ‘Discuss the decline and recovery of Marks & Spencer using Smith’s Theory of X and Jones’s Theory of Y; and say which is most applicable.’

Let’s also imagine that both Theory X and Theory Y are well known; and that both can be broken down into five main points.

This essay is asking you to take a case and examine it using tried and trusted ‘tools’ – in this case Theory X and Theory Y.

One way to construct your argument would be to start with a brief history of Marks & Spencer. You could then work through Theory X saying if and how its five main points are applicable. You could then work through Theory Y saying if and how its five main points are applicable. Your conclusion would depend on the number of X and Y features that you have found to be applicable. You might find that more X features were applicable; or that more Y features were applicable. Or you might find that equal numbers of points from both theories are applicable.

### Theory X and Theory Y – 2

Another way to construct your argument would be to start with Theory X and Theory Y and give accounts of both. You could then work through the key points in the recent history of Marks & Spencer and look at each point in terms of Theory X and Theory Y. For example:

‘In 1993, Marks and Spencer sales fell by aa% against the previous year. Theory X states that companies in this position should do … Marks & Spencer did … This shows that…

On the other hand, Theory Y states that companies in this position should do… If Marks & Spencer had done… then… However, company statements at the time show that…’

### Pros and cons – 1

Let’s imagine a different type of essay title: ‘The provision of public service broadcasting in the UK cannot be maintained in a digital pay-per-view or subscription environment. Discuss.’

This essay is asking to discuss a statement in terms of pros and cons – i.e. arguments for and against – and to come to a conclusion.

Let’s imagine that there are four main pro points and four main con points.

One way to structure your argument would be to start by exploring the claim. You would look at the background of public service broadcasting in the UK and see what had led this claim to be made. You would also need to say something about the rise and current state of what your essay title calls ‘a digital pay-per-view or subscription environment’.

You could then work through the four main pro points and then work through the four main con points. Your conclusion would then attempt to [synthesise](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#synthesise) the major arguments against the existing state of public service broadcasting in the UK and any known government plans for the future.

### Pros and cons – 2

Another way to structure your argument would also start by exploring the claim.

In contrast to method one, you would then work through the four main pro and con points in pairs: Pro 1, Con 1, Synthesis; Pro 2, Con 2, Synthesis; and so on. Your conclusion would bring together the main points in a similar way to method one.

### Mediative argument

The methods suggested in both ‘Theory X and Theory Y’ and ‘Pros and cons’ are what are termed mediative arguments. This means that you are taking a number of different points of view and mediating between them. That is, you are saying that none of the various points of view are 100% right or 100% wrong. It is quite likely that a lot of undergraduate essays will invite you to make a mediative argument. It is a good way of exploring different points of view. If you can see and say that these different viewpoints have good and bad aspects to them, you are well on the way to thinking [critically](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#critical).

### Alternative arguments – categorical, chronological, perceived importance, sequential

Your essay question and the evidence and materials you gather to help you answer it may sometimes require different sorts of arguments. Here are four of the most common.

Categorical. An essay that asked you to look at examples of organisational structure in the USA, Europe and the Third World would be asking you to organise your material and make your argument in a categorical way i.e. by looking at different categories or classes of things.

Chronological. An essay asking you to look at the history of scientific paradigms in psychology from 1900 to 2000 would be asking you to make a chronological argument. So you would start with the early 20th Century, perhaps then look at the period 1950-1970 and then look at the closing decades.

Perceived importance. An essay title asking you to examine organisational functions and discuss their importance would be asking you to review which functions experts regard as most important. So you might well start such an essay by saying something like ‘Most management and organisational theorists agree that functions should be ranked as follows…’

Sequential. An essay asking you to examine organisational functions using the example of a successful product would be asking you to think about the processes behind that success. So you might start by looking at market research, then move on to product design and finish by looking at marketing and advertising.

An essay might even involve combining two or more of these approaches. An essay asking you to look at the history of organisational theories would be both chronological and organised in terms of how perceived importance of different functions had changed over time.

# Sources & plagiarism

### Other peoples’ words

One expectation tutors have about your essays is that you will identify and quote from a wide range of writing by other people. This is one way in which you can show that your knowledge of your subject is developing. The ability to select from and engage with a wide range of materials also shows that you are developing skills in argument and research.

However, in using other people’s words you must ensure that you reference them correctly. There are two reasons for doing this. First, you must not pass off other peoples’ ideas or words as your own as this is cheating or plagiarism. If you are in any doubt just how serious the charge of plagiarism is then look it up in your departmental or university handbook. Plagiarism is on the increase and universities are devoting significant resources to eradicating it. Many universities in the UK and elsewhere are starting to use sophisticated software to identify when someone else’s words have been copied into an essay.

Second, each subject follows particular referencing and bibliographical conventions. You will be expected to follow them. If you are not sure what they are then consult your departmental handbook that should summarise the conventions you are expected to use. If you don’t use them then you could lose marks.

### How to avoid plagiarism

In academic writing you must always indicate when you are using someone else’s ideas. If you don’t then you may find yourself accused of plagiarism. A good starting point is to make sure that when you are making notes from books or articles you note down the source – author, book and page number – as you go along. It is very easy when making notes to jot something down quickly and then find that when you look at your notes later you can’t remember if it’s your own idea or a quote from someone else.

# Direct quotation, paraphrasing & referencing

### Direct quotation

There are two ways of incorporating other people’s ideas. The first is direct quotation:

In his guide Writing at University: Some Handy Hints David Kennedy notes that,
“In academic writing you must always indicate when you are using someone else’s ideas. If you don’t then you may find yourself accused of plagiarism.”

(Kennedy, 2003: 12)

### Paraphrasing

The second way is to incorporate what another author has said into your own text. This is known as indirect quotation or paraphrasing:

Among the many guides to writing at university, one of the clearest accounts of how to reference sources and avoid plagiarism is that of Kennedy (2003) who gives examples of different ways of referencing.

### Referencing

In the writing you do at university you will be expected to demonstrate both knowledge of your subject and the ability to go and acquire that knowledge. This means that you will have to go and look at the work of others.

For example, if you are answering the question “Discuss Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and Thornton’s theory of subcultural capital and how they might be applied to student life”, it is clear that you are being told to go away and find out about Bourdieu’s and Thornton’s ideas.

So in the part of your essay that is about Bourdieu you might write a sentence that begins something like “Bourdieu first defined cultural capital in the early 1960s as ….”. In academic writing, you must say where – i.e. in which book or article – Bourdieu made this definition. You must give clear details of the book title, the date it was published, who published it and where. This is called referencing. It is sometimes also called citation. The books, articles or other materials you quote from are called sources.

So ‘referencing’ means giving evidence for statements in your essay that appear in the form of quotes, quotations or paraphrases from other authors. To put it another way: ‘referencing’ means showing the origins of the information you use in your essay.

Why is it important to reference your sources properly?

First, your tutors will be able to see evidence that you have done useful and relevant research for your assignment. They will be able to see what sort of reading you are doing – are you just looking at the course books or are you reading around the topic? Are you reading the right books? For example, it would be odd to write about Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital without referring to what Bourdieu himself has written about it.

Second, as I’ve already said, if you don’t reference your sources you could be guilty of plagiarism.

Third, including full details of your sources allows the reader to follow them up if they want to. It may be that the quotation you use from a particular book prompts the reader to want to go and find that particular book.

# MLA, APA, Harvard or MHRA?

### Referencing styles

There are four widely-used referencing styles or conventions. They are called the MLA (Modern Languages Association) system, the APA (American Psychological Association) system, the Harvard system, and the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) system.

If you are producing essays for a particular institution or even a particular department make sure you know what system it is using. Your tutors may specify one of the four listed above or they may use another one entirely. Some departments will produce sheets explaining which system they want you to use.

You can also find detailed guides to these systems in your institution’s library or on the internet. The Modern Humanities Research Association also publish the MHRA Style Book which is available from bookshops like Blackwells for around a fiver.

The following sections give the important aspects of the four conventions. For more detail, you will need to look in some of the places I’ve suggested.

**The MLA system** is a parenthetical system: i.e. bracketed references in the body of your essay are linked to full length citations in the bibliography at the end of your essay. The bracket in the body of the essay contains only the author’s surname and the page number or numbers you are referring to. For example: There are a number of different referencing styles or conventions but there are four that are used most widely. (Kennedy, 17).

If your essay quotes from two or more works by the same author then the bracketed reference should include a shortened version of the title to indicate which book is being referred to. (Kennedy, New Relations, 26)

A bibliography compiled according to MLA conventions lists items alphabetically by the author’s last name. Each entry should include, in the following order: the author’s name in full, the title of the book, the place of publication, the publisher, and the date. For example: Kennedy, David. New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994. Bridgend: Seren, 1996. Pay attention to how the entry is punctuated as that is part of the system too.

**The APA system** is also a parenthetical system but the bracketed references in the body of your essay are: the author’s surname, the date of publication and the page or page numbers you are referring to. For example: There are a number of different referencing styles or conventions but there are four that are used most widely (Kennedy, 2003, p. 17). The reference always goes at the end of the sentence before the full stop.

A bibliography compiled according to APA conventions lists items alphabetically by the author’s last name. Each entry should include, in the following order: the author’s surname, their first initial, the date of publication in brackets, the title of the book, the place of publication and the publisher. For example: Kennedy, D. (1996) New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994. Bridgend: Seren. Again, pay attention to how the entry is punctuated as that is part of the system too.

**The Harvard system** is another parenthetical system and the bracketed references in the body of your essay are: the author’s surname and the date of publication. The list of works at the end of the essay is headed ‘References’. The works listed in it appear in alphabetical order by the author’s surname and follow the same format as the APA system.

**The MHRA system** does not use bracketed references in the body of an essay. Instead, superscript numbers like this 1 are linked to a sequence of notes which appear either at the foot of the page or in a section at the end of your essay. The note contains the full reference for the book or article you are referring to. Here’s what an MHRA note reference looks like:

1 David Kennedy, New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994. (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p.26.

# Using the web

### Online material and websites

If the online material or website you are referencing has an author or a title then it should be treated according to the system you are using. However, you must indicate that you are referencing an online resource and include the URL or web address and the date when you accessed it. For example, here’s an online article referenced according to the APA system:

Girardi, Judith S., (2002) ‘Lorine Niedecker: Poetry in the Classroom’ [online article]. Available: http://grad.cgu.edu/~girardij/webpage/lorineclassroom.html. (4 December 2002)

If the online material or website you are referencing has no author then it should be included in your bibliography in alphabetical order according to the title.

### And, finally… 1: if you are really stuck, be consistent

If you really can’t find out what referencing system to use, then try to be consistent. Don’t have footnotes on page one and the Harvard system on pages two and three. Don’t reference an author like this (Smith, 2003) on page one and like this (John Smith, 2003) on page two.

Check that all the items in your bibliography or reference list are in alphabetical order and that they all follow the same format. Make sure that all the authors you have quoted from in the essay appear in your bibliography or reference list.

Similarly, make sure there are no authors in your bibliography or reference list who don’t appear in your essay. Some students do this to make it look as if they’ve been doing more work than they actually have.

### And finally…2: learn from the books you read

Look at how the authors you read for your studies use other peoples’ words. Pay attention to how they use quotations to support their argument and to how they use evidence to support claims. Learn from how they develop a balanced discussion of several points of view on the same subject. Look at the bibliographies of the books and articles you read to see how they are organised and what referencing system they follow.

# Setting out and using quotations

### Setting out quotations – 1

Embedded or run on. If you are using a short prose quotation of up to 30 words then it can be part of the existing sentence like so:

In his own comments on ‘Ulysses’ Tennyson remarked that it was written soon after Arthur Hallam’s death and expressed “my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in ‘In Memoriam'”.

These short quotations are referred to as ’embedded’ or ‘run on’ because they are not set apart from the rest of the text.

### Setting out quotations – 2

Display. If you are using a long prose quotation that is more than 30 words then it should be separated from your writing and indented like this:

In his study of dramatic monologue and impersonality in the work of Tennyson and Browning Donald Court observes that the both poets,

developed the dramatic monologue as a means of standing outside the Romantic self and objectifying it. They rejected the passionate exploration and total immersion in the self that dominates the work of Keats and Shelley, and created characters and personae who were placed in poems made from dramatic speech.

These longer quotations are referred to as ‘display’ quotations because they are set apart from the rest of the text.

### Using quotations effectively

It is not enough simply to use quotations in your essay. All this does is show that you have found something in a book. The important thing is to engage with the quotations you use. You can do this by framing them with an introductory sentence before a quotation and a sentence or two of commentary after the quotation. For example:

Many critics have written about Tennyson and Browning’s use of dramatic monologue and impersonality. A widely held view is expressed by Court (1986) who describes the two poets’ use of dramatic monologue ‘as a means of standing outside the Romantic self and objectifying it’. In contrast to Keats and Shelley, the two Victorian poets wanted to do more than just express their inner lives: they wanted to observe and contemplate them.

In this example, the writer has not just identified and used a relevant quotation. She has shown that she understands how it can be related to the wider topic she is writing about – ‘many critics’, ‘a widely held view’. By adding her own comments, she has pushed her argument forward.

### Using quotations carefully

You should always make sure that your quotations are accurate. Missing out a couple of words or inadvertently adding one in can completely change the sense of the passage you are quoting or make it completely meaningless.

However, you can adapt or change quotations from other peoples’ words but you must indicate when you have done so. Let’s use the following sentence as an example:

Although several poems in Douglas Dunn’s second collection explore longer forms – of 50 to 125 lines – the majority favour the short forms that dominated his first book Terry Street.

The most important point in the sentence is that although Dunn’s second book contained more long poems, its use of form was broadly similar to his first. In my essay I decide to miss out the part about the 50 to 125 lines:

Although several poems in Douglas Dunn’s second collection explore longer forms . . . the majority favour the short forms that dominated his first book Terry Street.

By using three dots, I have indicated that I have left something out. Similarly I can add words in to make the sense of the sentence clearer:

Kennedy notes that although there are some longer pieces in Douglas Dunn’s second collection, ‘the majority [of poems] favour the short forms that dominated his first book Terry Street.

Here I have added the word ‘of poems’ to help the sentence flow; and I have put them in square brackets to show that it is my addition.

# Recognising differences

### A history joke

A popular joke in History departments goes as follows:

Question: “Why are History articles longer than English Literature ones?”
Answer: “Because they’ve got more facts in them.”

Whether or not this has any basis in fact is open to debate but it gives a useful clue to the fact that different subjects have different writing styles and different expectations about what makes an effective piece of writing.

It is always dangerous to generalise but it would be fair to say that some subjects place more emphasis on interpretation and judgement and others place more emphasis on evidence and facts.

This part of the guide will give you some ways to think about the differences between essays for different disciplines.

# Humanities essays

### What are the humanities?

The humanities refer to subjects that study people, their ideas, history, and literature. To put that another way, the humanities are those branches of learning regarding primarily as having a cultural character.

For example, one of the UK’s academic funding bodies, the Arts & Humanities Research Board or AHRB, tends to concentrate on the following sorts of subjects: Classics, Visual Arts and Media, Modern Languages, Music and Performing Arts, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Medieval and Modern History.

### Key features – primary & secondary texts

In the majority of these subjects you begin with a primary text – e.g. a play or a film or a set of historical events. You are expected to show good knowledge of the primary text and to mount a discussion of it – or of aspects of it – that is located within current critical debate about it. You are expected to use your own judgement about other people’s judgements of the primary text.

### Key features – logical argument

Readers of your essay will look for an argument that is clearly expressed in a logical order. They will not expect your essay to follow a specific set structure. For example, an English Literature essay might start with a plot summary of the work being discussed, a quote from the work or a quote from critical writing on the work. The important thing is to use your starting point to say clearly what you are going to write about and why; and to make the rest of your discussion flow naturally from it

### Key features – balanced discussion

This is probably the one feature that distinguishes humanities essays from other sorts of writing. This does not mean that scientific papers or social science essays aren’t balanced discussions: it means that a humanities essay is more likely to have review various opinions and interpretations.

# Scientific writing

### Lean writing – 1

All writing guides – including this one – give similar advice: no unnecessary words, make every word count, keep it concise. Every sentence needs to be toned for high performance: plenty of muscle and no excess fat. This is good advice for writing in general but lean writing is especially important in scientific writing because scientific writing places its emphasis on gathering and reviewing evidence; and on conveying quantitative information. ‘Quantitative’ means ‘measured or measurable by, or concerned with, quantity’ i.e. ‘how much of something is there’.

### Lean writing – 2

Scientific writing is concerned with measurement and observation not opinion and supposition. This means that it tends not to use superlatives, comparatives or adverbs. Read through a few scientific papers and you’ll find a complete absence of words like ‘best’, ‘greatest’, ‘very’ ‘quite’, ‘rather’, ‘somewhat’, ‘really’, ‘nearly’, ‘slowly’, etc. In writing for the humanities you will regularly come across phrases like ‘There may be a sense in which’ or ‘It is interesting to note that’ but not in scientific writing.

### Scientific method

A very useful book entitled Successful Scientific Writing by Janice R. Matthews, John M. Bowen and Robert W. Matthews begins like this:

“Scientific writing almost always begins with a question that cannot be definitively answered out of our previous personal experiences.”

To put this another way, I can go and see a performance of King Lear and come away with a greatly improved understanding of how Shakespeare’s language works and why is it effective. On the other hand, I can go and see world class athletes perform and barely improve my understanding of why they perform so well. To understand their performance I would need to do some detailed research. Scientific writing therefore reflects scientific method.

Scientific method involves:

* the systematic search for intersubjectively accessible knowledge;
* the recognition and formulation of a problem or question;
* the gathering of data through observation and experiment;
* the formulation of hypotheses;
* the testing and confirmation or rejection of those hypotheses.

If you don’t know what some of these words mean, look them up in the dictionary.

It is not only beginning with a question that is important but also the way that question is answered. To answer a scientific question you need to have an organized and pre-planned way of doing so i.e. a systematic search. This way of answering the question must be reproducible by other people and must always lead to the same conclusion. This is what ‘intersubjectively accessible knowledge’ means. Stories about scientific method sometimes feature in national or international news. Someone will claim to have made an amazing discovery. Other people will try to reproduce the original experiment and fail.

### Showing evidence

One of the key points about scientific method is “the gathering of data through observation and experiment”. This data will be the evidence on which you base your conclusions. However, your essay will need to show that you have followed scientific method throughout. A good way to do this is to ask yourself questions throughout the research leading up to writing the essay.

Important questions to keep in front of you are:

* Is your work reproducible?
* Does your work involve the application of existing principles or methods; and, if so, are you applying them correctly?
* If you are departing from accepted principles or methods, why are you doing so?
* Have you made a plan for your work?
* If your research involves interviewing or studying a group of people, is the sample big enough? Are there any ethical implications? Does your institution have a policy on ethical practice in scientific work?
* What systems have you set up for collecting your data?
* Are you aware of existing work relevant to your question or hypothesis? This is particularly important as cutting edge research is published in journals first.

### Structure

Scientific writing follows rigid structures that reflect the scientific method underlying it. If you are uncertain about this, go and look at scientific journals in the library and you will see that the papers they publish are usually organised as follows:

Introduction. Your introduction should cover three main areas. You should begin by sketching the general field of interest – e.g. the performance of world-class athletes – and the type of research that has already been carried out. You should then say how your essay fits with that existing research: are you hoping to modify an aspect of it, apply a method used in one field to a new field, reproduce an existing experiment? Finally, you should state your question or hypothesis and say how you intend to answer or explore it.

What & how. The next part of your essay should deal with ‘what and how’ or materials and methods. Materials mean the things or people involved in your study. To continue with our example of the performance of world-class athletes: how many athletes did you study? what events do they compete in? was your sample mixed or did you only concentrate on sprinters and if so why? If your essay is focused on, say, the relationship of a particular diet and performance, then you would include details of that diet.

You should then say what was done, over what period of time and why. Your description should follow, if possible, the chronological order of what happened. This will not only help you to organize your writing but will also help you to present your results as the logical outcome of a logical process. If you are following existing models then you should say what they are in this section. Remember also that if you are using existing models you should make sure that you are using them correctly and not missing any stages out.

Results. The next part of your essay should state clearly what you found out. This is where you would usually put diagrams, figures or tables. You should comment on the data you present but what you say should not just be a description in words of the data. Your emphasis should be on the results that are relevant to your original question or hypothesis. However, you should not leave out results that don’t fit your hypothesis. If you have some results like this then it is important to understand the reasons and explain the anomalies.

Discussion & conclusion. This is the part of your essay where you interpret your results. You should say where your results were relevant to your hypothesis and where they were irrelevant. You should also say how your results converge with or diverge from existing work in the field. You should also try and say what the implications of your results are. For example, you might say something like this:

Although Blogg’s diet and performance model was originally developed to improve the performance of sprinters, this study suggests that it can be usefully applied across a range of track and field events.

Or something like this:

Blogg’s diet and performance model was originally developed to improve the performance of sprinters. The failure of this study to reproduce the same results across a range of track and field events suggests that its general conclusions about athletes’ performance are of limited application.

### Abstracts

If you look at papers in scientific journals you will see that they are prefaced by an abstract. An abstract is a condensed or abbreviated version of the complete paper. It gives a clear description of the contents of the paper without reproducing them in detail and is usually somewhere between 100 and 300 words in length.

It is unlikely that you will have to write one for every undergraduate essay but you will certainly have to produce one if you are, for example, a sports science or nutrition student who chooses to write a final year dissertation.

Abstracts are a very useful way of checking what you have written and clarifying what you are trying to say. Can you compress the contents of your essay into 150 words? When you have done so, are there any glaringly obvious omissions? Try writing an abstract before you start writing the essay; and then another one when you have finished. The differences may surprise you.

# Social & behavioural science writing

### Social & behavioural sciences – definitions

Social sciences deal with the institutions and working of human society and with the interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of human society. Behavioural sciences deal with human actions and try to establish generalizations about those actions in human society.

Certain terms in these definitions – ‘interpersonal relationships’, ‘individuals’, ‘human actions’ – highlight how social and behavioural sciences are different from, say, physics or chemistry. A chemist can be certain that, when she mixes the right quantities of chemical A and chemical B, she will be able to observe a certain reaction. However, interpersonal relationships, individuals and human actions are more unpredictable. This means that a range of theories have been developed to explain individuals’ actions, interpersonal relationships, and individuals’ interactions with institutions. You will hear these different theories described as different ‘schools of thought’ or ‘philosophies’.

### Method

Social and behavioural science writing, like scientific writing, also starts with questions that cannot be definitively answered out of our previous personal experiences: ‘What are the causes of autism?’ or ‘How can we stop young men re-offending?’ Like scientific writing, social and behavioural science writing also uses evidence obtained from research to try and answer those questions.

However, unlike scientific writing, the theoretical position of the social or behavioural scientist will influence the sorts of questions she asks, the way she conducts research and obtains evidence and the way she interprets it. To put this another way, it does not matter if a physicist is a Marxist but it is significant if a sociologist is.

### Method into essay – the big picture

Translating method into essay helps us to identify some of the distinguishing features of social and behavioural science writing.

A social or behavioural science essay has to show knowledge of how evidence and theory work together.

A social or behavioural science essay has to show knowledge of all the key theoretical positions relevant to the question. For example, an essay reviewing the causes of autism has to take account of theories that, respectively, emphasise biological, social or psychological causes.

A social or behavioural science essay has to use all the key theoretical positions relevant to the question to explore the question and to evaluate evidence you bring into your discussion. In an undergraduate essay, you will be referring to research that has already been published. This means it is important to understand the theoretical position behind the research.

### Method into essay – the small print

Social and behavioural science essays have other distinguishing features.

They use a wide range of references from established studies to up-to-the minute journal articles. They use a wide range of sources from writing within their own subjects to reports from newspapers and magazines.

They use empirical research. For example, different theories of autism have been developed from studies of autistic children. If you are discussing one particular theory, it is important to refer to the size of the research sample on which it is based and to the context of the research.

They often use tables, numerical and statistical data to support points in their argument.

They use theory critically. They show understanding of how theory determines the evaluation of evidence. They show understanding of whether or not a theory is applicable to a particular piece of evidence. They use one theory to evaluate another.

# Beyond the essay

### There’s more to it than writing essays

The majority of this guide is devoted to writing essays but essays aren’t the only sort of writing that undergraduates have to do. Here is a selection of non-essay writing that students asked for help with during my two years as a Royal Literary Fund Fellow:

* Letters to schools or organisations asking for help with research projects
* Supporting statements on application forms for postgraduate degrees
* Feature articles [Journalism students]
* Designing research questionnaires [Psychology and Sports Science students]
* Transcribing and editing research interviews [Sports Science and Nutrition students]
* Seminar presentations [all subjects]
* Seminar Reports [Psychology and Sociology students]
* Lesson plans and classroom reports [Education students]

Each of these different types of writing have a distinct format and a distinct purpose. There is a way of planning and writing each one of them so that it has maximum effect on your intended audience or readership.

For many of these types of writing – feature articles or lesson plans or research questionnaires – you can get expert help so I’m not going to discuss those. However, I am going to give you useful hints about some of the others.

### Seminar reports

These are increasingly common in the social sciences but students are often unclear about the difference between a report and an essay – particularly when they are asked to write a report that’s 1200 – 2000 words long. For example, psychology students may be asked to write a seminar report on a particular topic that not only reports what was said in the seminar on, say, the scientific paradigm in psychology, but also fleshes it out.

As usual, let’s start with the dictionary. Here are some of the meanings of the noun ‘report’ which will help you to think about what’s required:

something that gives information e.g. a weather report;

a record of speeches and remarks.

Here are some of the meanings of the verb ‘to report’ which will also help you:

to give an account of;

to announce or relate as the result of a special search, examination or investigation.

The emphasis in these definitions is on the conveying and presenting of information. A report does not require you to mount a balanced evaluative discussion of different points of view. It requires you to present facts, say what happened next etc. To return to our example of a report on the scientific paradigm in psychology, you would need to say that once upon a time logical positivism was the dominant school of thought in psychology and other social sciences but that now there is another school of thought called heuristic. You would need to say who first conceived these different ideas and when and what influence they have had. Unlike an essay, you would not need to support or challenge various claims with evidence.

The emphasis in a report should therefore be more on the clear presentation of factual information and less on the evaluation of different positions or points of view.

# Business-style reports

### Instructions & objectives

If you are studying a subject such as management or tourism, you will probably have to write a report on a particular subject as if you were actually doing a job in a company or organisation. You might get a topic like this:

Outline the key challenges facing P&O in the cruise market in the next five years and devise appropriate strategies. Or like this: Make a plan for introducing performance-related pay into a salaried company.

You should read this as a set of instructions that raises questions or problems which your report will attempt to answer or resolve. Answering the questions or finding solutions to the problems is the objective of your report and everything in the report should be focused on that objective.

Unlike an essay, there is no room for saying something like “It is interesting to note Professor Blogg’s theory…” Imagine you are presenting the report to your boss or the board of directors. In a real business or organisation, no-one has time just to be interested: they want answers and solutions to business issues.

The first thing to do is to clarify the objectives of the report.

### The process

Once you have received your instructions and clarified the objectives of the report you can begin to the report writing process. Follow each step carefully and remember that each step follows on from the preceding one and leads to the next one:

Defining the problem. Let’s use the P&O cruise question as an example. To complete the objectives, you need to start by considering all the relevant factors: competition, markets, destinations, customer age-groups etc. Some of these factors will be more important than others; and some may not be crucial to a five year strategy. You need to decide what is important and what isn’t and whether there is a logical order to the factors. If, for example, one of your key cruise destinations is in a country which has announced a huge rise in taxes before the start of the new season, then this might need to be considered first. Defining the problem clearly and thoroughly will determine how and what information you need to collect.

Researching the problem. Clarifying the objectives of the report and defining the problem in more detail should help you to formulate how you will gather information to meet those objectives. You need to ask yourself a number of questions: What information do I need? Where and how do I get it? What are the sources?

The answers to those questions will help you to think about another important aspect of the report process. They will help you to prioritise the information you need to collect; and decide the best order for that collection. You will be able to make a plan for collecting the information.

Analysing the information. Once you have gathered all the information you need to ask yourself if it fulfils the objectives and answers the problem. If it does not then you need to go back to the research and information collection stage and fix it. If, for example, you have decided that there are five key challenges facing cruise operators in the next five years, you will need to make sure that you have information about all five challenges.

You will also need to interpret the information to make sure that it fulfils the objectives and answers the problem. For example, if you have market research reports or market sector analyses you will need to decide which parts are relevant to your report. You may have to summarise the information you have gathered in order to present it in a clear and concise fashion.

You may also find that some of the information you have gathered puts an entirely new perspective on the objectives you clarified and the problem you defined. If this is the case, you will need to take account of it.

Conclusions & recommendations. All reports have conclusions and recommendations. Conclusions lead to recommendations. Recommendations are always actions to be taken. Let’s imagine in our example about cruises that you have a conclusion and recommendation about the age of customers as this is a key factor in future planning.

Your conclusion is: Market research shows that the average age of customers is 50+. This gives cruises an image problem for younger people.

Your recommendation is: Advertising targeted specifically at people 30 – 50; and cruise packages aimed specifically at the same age group.

Your reader should be able to see how you have reached your conclusions and recommendations. You should also make sure that your conclusions and recommendations refer back to everything in the rest of the report. If you began your report by listing five key challenges in the cruise market then make sure you have a conclusion and recommendation for each one. Similarly, don’t include a recommendation that has nothing to do with objectives or the information you’ve gathered.

Presentation. A report does not look like an essay. For example, you can use lists of bullet points to outline key points instead of developing a careful argument. You can write relatively short paragraphs. However, everything you say must be supported by appropriately sourced information. If you say that “Market research shows that the average age of customers is 50+” you must say where that information came from. Remember if you were really presenting the report to your boss, then she or he would want to know where the information came from because the company’s future actions would be based on it.

### Key features – checklist

* Show that you understand the problem by clarifying the objectives and defining the problem in detail.
* Show some evidence of original ideas in dealing with the problem through your recommendations.
* Present all your information clearly and logically.
* Be concise and be precise. Do not make generalised statements or personal judgements.
* Include relevant information so that readers can see what your analysis, conclusions and recommendations are based on. Include graphs, statistical tables, charts and maps where relevant.
* Explain where your information came from. If one of your recommendations is based on a customer survey that is several years old, then you need to flag that up and make sure that there is nothing more recent available.
* Make sure your report contains enough numbers. This is a business report and if you were really presenting the report to your boss, then she or he would expect to see costs, percentages and predictions of profits.

# Presentations

### Don’t panic!

Most subjects will at some point require students to make a presentation to their tutor and classmates; and many subjects now include presentations as a component of final year marks. Public speaking – presentations are a form of public speaking – is a huge source of anxiety for many people. Some people get so anxious they have panic attacks and others literally run out of the room saying ‘Sorry, I just can’t do this’. However, there is no reason to let anxiety get the better of you. Here are some useful things to remember about speaking in public:

First, nobody is born able to do it. Successful public speakers will either have had training or will have learned from experience i.e. practice makes perfect.

Second, nobody wants you to fail. There is nothing more embarrassing than being in the audience when the person making the presentation is really struggling.

Third, you only have to be effective not perfect.

Fourth, planning and rehearsal will make you effective.

### Key points

Here’s some key points to think about when planning and rehearsing your presentation.

Time, audience & words. How much time do you have? Ten minutes? Fifteen minutes? Think about what you need to say in that time and who your audience is. Work out how many words you can say in your allotted time if you speak in an even, relaxed manner. Time yourself. You don’t want to end up with too little or too much to say.

Get their attention. You need to get your audience’s attention right from the first word. There are a number of ways you can do this. Start with a surprising fact or statistic: “Did you know…?” Ask them to imagine themselves in a particular situation. Start with a little story that has a surprising twist in the tail that demonstrates the subject of your presentation. Remind the audience why they are there. “Today we’re going to talk about X and I’d like to start by asking you to imagine…”

Avoid handouts. Don’t start by handing out pieces of paper to your audience. It takes up valuable time that you should be using to talk to them. Handing them out will cause noise and distraction in the room. People will read them instead of watching and listening to you. They will rustle them while you are speaking which is distracting for everyone. If you feel you must give out papers do so at the end so people can take away a set of useful reference points.

Use visual aids. Anything you can put on a piece of paper will work much better on a screen, either an OHP slide or a PowerPoint projection from a PC or laptop. Slides are a great way of getting people’s attention and they help you too. For example, a list of bullet points gives your listeners a structure and reminds you what to say next. Similarly, a list of clearly visible points or facts or figures helps you to avoid long-winded explanations.

Relax, smile & look at them. Practice standing in a relaxed manner. This will help your breathing too. Don’t stand with your hands in your pockets – it looks like you’ve got something to hide and you need your hands to gesture at your slides or to emphasise what you are saying. Move around when you are speaking – you don’t have to stand rooted to the spot.

Make eye contact with your audience. Most communication isn’t verbal and good non-verbal communication makes your verbal communication more effective.

And, finally, smile. Look as if you are pleased to be speaking to your audience.

Clothing. You will probably sweat a bit so wear comfortable clothes. If you are wearing a jacket, start by taking it off. If you are wearing a shirt, start by rolling your sleeves up. Both these gestures will tell your audience that you are relaxed and ready to get down to business.

Don’t wear a t-shirt that has a bulldog on the front and the slogan British Overseas Drinking Team, Faliraki 1996. People will be looking at that – not looking at you and listening to what you are saying.

Prepare the room & check your equipment. If you can, get to the room first and organise it how you want. Do you want the chairs in rows or in a semi-circle? How many lights do you want on? Do you want the windows open or closed?

If you are going to use visual aids, make sure the equipment works.

Have a back-up plan. If you turn on the OHP and the bulb blows, what are you going to do?

**What is a literature review?**

If you have to write an undergraduate dissertation, you may be required to begin by writing a literature review. A literature review is a search and evaluation of the available literature in your given subject or chosen topic area. It documents the state of the art with respect to the subject or topic you are writing about.

A literature review has four main objectives:

* It [surveys](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#survey) the literature in your chosen area of study
* It [synthesises](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#synthesise) the information in that literature into a summary
* It [critically analyses](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#critical) the information gathered by identifying gaps in current knowledge; by showing limitations of theories and points of view; and by formulating areas for further research and reviewing areas of controversy
* It [presents](https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/glossary/#present) the literature in an organised way

A literature review shows your readers that you have an in-depth grasp of your subject; and that you understand where your own research fits into and adds to an existing body of agreed knowledge.

Here’s another way of describing those four main tasks. A literature review:

* demonstrates a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establishes the credibility of your work;
* summarises prior research and says how your project is linked to it;
* integrates and summarises what is known about a subject;
* demonstrates that you have learnt from others and that your research is a starting point for new ideas.

**Why write a literature review?**

The first step of any research project is to review the field. So let’s think about surveying, synthesising, critically analysing and presenting in more detail. A literature review does the following.

* Identifies gaps in current knowledge.
* Avoids reinventing the wheel – i.e. it saves you wasting time researching something that’s already been done.
* Allows you to show that you are building on a foundation of existing knowledge and ideas – i.e. carrying on from where others have already reached.
* Identifies other people working in the same field. Knowing who’s already working in your area and getting in touch with them can be an invaluable source of knowledge and support.
* Demonstrates the depth of your knowledge about your research.
* Identifies the important works in your area and shows that you’ve read them.
* Provides an intellectual context for your own work, and enables you to position your project in relation to others in the field.
* Identifies opposing views.
* Puts your own work in perspective – are you doing something completely new, revisiting an old controversy in the light of new evidence, etc?
* Demonstrates your research skills – i.e. you not only know about work in your area, you also know how to access it.
* Identifies information and ideas that may be relevant to your project.
* Identifies methods that may be relevant to your project.

**Key points to remember**

Here are some things to bear in mind when researching and writing your literature review.

* It is not a descriptive list.
* It is not a book by book and article by article summary.
* It is not a survey of every single thing that’s ever been written about your topic.
* It must be defined by a guiding concept i.e. essay question, research project or objective.
* It must tell the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established and agreed in your area and outline their strengths and weaknesses.

# The structure of a literature review

A literature review should be structured like any other essay: it should have an introduction, a middle or main body, and a conclusion.

### Introduction

The introduction should:

* define your topic and provide an appropriate context for reviewing the literature;
* establish your reasons – i.e. point of view – for
* reviewing the literature;
* explain the organisation – i.e. sequence – of the review;
* state the scope of the review – i.e. what is included and what isn’t included. For example, if you were reviewing the literature on obesity in children you might say something like: There are a large number of studies of obesity trends in the general population. However, since the focus of this research is on obesity in children, these will not be reviewed in detail and will only be referred to as appropriate.

### Main body

The middle or main body should:

* organise the literature according to common themes;
* provide insight into the relation between your chosen topic and the wider subject area e.g. between obesity in children and obesity in general;
* move from a general, wider view of the literature being reviewed to the specific focus of your research.

### Conclusion

The conclusion should:

* summarise the important aspects of the existing body of literature;
* evaluate the current state of the literature reviewed;
* identify significant flaws or gaps in existing knowledge;
* outline areas for future study;
* link your research to existing knowledge.

# How to do a literature search

Before you can write your literature review, you need to find out what’s out there. To do this you need to do a literature search. Here are some tips to get you started.

Define your terms. The first thing to do is to define your topic or research project; or, if you have been given a set question, make sure you understand it. Ask yourself what the key concepts are. Compile a list of keywords – and synonyms for them – and this will help you to develop a research strategy.

Search creatively. When you’ve done this, you need to identify all the relevant information sources. This may include: libraries, indexes and electronic databases, and the Internet.

Use the library. Do you know what’s in your institution’s library that’s relevant to your topic? Make sure you do – it’s an obvious place to start so don’t forget it! Remember that every book and journal published in the UK is held at the British Library and you can do inter-library loans. Ask your library staff for assistance.

Journals. Remember that journals are the best place to find the most recently published research. And don’t forget that many journals are now online only publications.

Newspapers and magazines are a good source for current topical issues, although they are not always very useful for in-depth analysis. For example, if you are writing on a business-related topic you may find useful items in The Economist, Fortune and Harvard Business Review.

Don’t limit yourself to obvious sources. For example, libraries contain books and journals but they also contain unpublished MA and PhD theses that may contain research relevant to your topic. Similarly, make sure you do speculative searches i.e. try typing in ‘The Journal of [Your Topic]’ – you may be surprised what comes up.

Other less obvious sources also include:

**Conference papers**. These are collections of papers presented at conferences and, like journals, often contain ‘cutting edge’ research. These collections are published on the Internet, in special editions of relevant journals and in one-off books.

**National and local Government publications**. These include reports, yearbooks, White and Green papers, policy documents, manuals and statistical surveys.

**Publishers’ websites**. These sites often contain summaries of recent publications and the full-text electronic journals. Two sites that have comprehensive online resources are Emerald and Blackwell Science.

You should also identify and join **online discussion lists** relevant to your topic. A site like [http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/) hosts a wide range of discussion lists for the UK academic community. These lists are great ways to contact other people working in your area and are really useful for getting a quick answer to queries like ‘Can anyone recommend a book on X?’ They are also a good way of finding out what’s going on in your subject: people often post details of forthcoming publications, conferences and seminars – sometimes even jobs.

**Databases**. For many subject areas – particularly sciences and social sciences – there are online databases listing current articles.