

Hur skriver man en *academic essay*?

(sammanställning: Cornelius Holtorf HT 2005)

Writing Essays

Unfortunately there is no simple answer to how to write an essay. However, there are general principles you can follow. Remember that by giving you an essay to write, the lecturer is asking you to demonstrate a number of things:

- your ability to read and understand the complexities of the material
- your ability to recognise similar and differing viewpoints in what you read
- your ability to pick out relevant ideas from the reading to include in the essay
- your ability to use the library effectively to find relevant books and articles on the essay you have been given
- your ability to write an essay which critically analyses what you read (2)

Don't leave the essay to the last minute

The academic essay is a very difficult genre. Writing essays requires considerable abilities in reasoning, scholarship and literacy. It takes time and effort to do a good job. Rushing it will virtually ensure that you won't make the grade. (1)

Don't merely reproduce what you think the lecturer wants

This might also seem odd. Essays are not, however, exercises in reproducing and rehashing "correct" answers; unlike exams, for example. Essays test your ability to question and criticize things – including the ideas of your lecturers – and to show that you can develop a coherent counter-arguments and bring forward additional evidence. Some lecturers take great delight in reading criticisms of their own ideas; especially good, well-argued criticisms. (1)

Writing introductions

Before you write your Introduction, you should have gone through the steps of Brainstorming, Researching, and writing a Plan or Outline.

An effective Introduction, whether it is for an essay, report or any other form of writing, must:

- introduce the topic of the essay (in your own words)
- give some general background information
- indicate the main points to be covered
- perhaps indicate the method of organisation of the whole paper
- hopefully arouse the reader's interest in the topic. (2)

Make it clear at the outset what you are arguing for or against

Papers are almost always satisfactory when beginning with a clear statement of the position or argument that you are to discuss. Always make it clear at the outset whether you propose to attack or defend that position or argument – and indeed, always indicate your position in regard to any argument that you set down for discussion. These points may seem obvious, but they are frequently neglected. Try to get into the habit of paying attention to them; it is a necessary skill not just in doing essay writing, but in general communication. (1)

Use the work of others – but always use your own words

It is not adequate merely to summarize the views of the lecturer, or one or more of the authors you have looked at, though these will no doubt influence your conclusions. Do not merely reproduce the views of some author in their own words. This, on its own, is never adequate and if an essay contained no more than a section lifted straight from a reference book, the essay would fail badly. On the other hand, this does not mean that one cannot use quotations from texts. One can make moderate use of quotations to good effect in essays, but one should always use them only having put forward the view in your own words, or after having explained the meaning of the quotation as you understand it. Never use quotations for anything more than an additional articulation of the position that you support or do not support, and never try to "prove" anything by an appeal to someone else-it is simply not good scholarship. (1)

Writing Critically

For most essays you will need to write about a number of different viewpoints based on the reading you do. Below is an example of a piece of university writing which references the information but would not impress a lecturer.

Muscat (1992) says that drugs are great but Jones (1991) says that they are awful.

In this example, the writer has shown from which authors she obtained the information. This is good. However, there is no critical analysis of these two points of view. To do this, the writer needs to go a step further by pointing out to the reader the weaknesses and the strengths in the authors' arguments or discuss points that are particularly interesting or controversial. Below is the previous example written in a more critical, analytical style. Note the referencing.

According to Muscat (1992) drugs are useful because they can alleviate pain and discomfort. This relief from pain can be demonstrated in a situation where a person is dying and the drug morphine is administered to the patient to provide some relief from pain. However, Jones (1991) argues that drugs are dangerous because people can become dependent on them. She cites cigarettes and alcohol as particular examples of dangerous drugs. Muscat (1992) and Jones (1991) are accurate in their explanations of how some drugs can be used and their effects. However, they both fail to demonstrate both the positive and negative aspects of drugs. They also fail to discuss the complexities of a society that allows consumption of legal drugs in the form of tobacco and alcohol and illegal drugs, for example, heroin. (2)

Coherence

Plan your essay so that your reader will always know where he/she is being led, and how what you say at any point fits into your overall theme. The reader should never have to ask themselves how a paragraph in your essay relates to what you had been saying in a previous section. You might even use headings, sub-headings, numbered paragraphs, etc., as a way of making clear how your points are to be understood. Another good way of doing this is to use "signposts" in your essays which have the effect of guiding your reader through the points that you are making. Examples of this are expressions like "Following from this point..", "Given this argument ...", and paragraph starters like, "Firstly", "Secondly", and "Thirdly" etc. Making deliberate use of signposts will also help you gather your thoughts on the essay topic. This is a most useful technique, and lecturers look for it in your essays. (1)

Use lots of examples

It is critically important to make use of examples. The more difficult or subtle a point is, the more useful it is to use an example or an analogy to illustrate. You might like to think of examples yourself, or you might draw them from the texts that you happen to be reading, but wherever they come from, an example will always help your audience-and your lecturer-understand what you are trying to say. (1)

Give reasons for what you say

One of the essential things about essay writing generally is that it is an enterprise where an attempt is made to answer certain questions by careful and rigorous reasoning and detailed argumentation. The student should not rely on tradition, authority (including that of a lecturer), faith or hunch, and he/she should distrust bold assertions for which no reasons or arguments are given. The true student should not be dogmatic and always willing to evaluate arguments for or against a view and arrive at a conclusion based on his/her deliberations. No simple instructions can be given as to how to reason rigorously, or to present good arguments. This comes with practice. But make sure you always give reasons for what you say. Don't just assert things. (1)

Apply what you learn from lectures to how you argue and reason in essays

Try to apply what you learn from the lecturers and from the way points of view are argued in class in the presentation of your essays. Classes model the kind of thinking required in essays. (1)

Always be relevant

Always stick to the point when you are writing an essay. For example, if you are asked to "critically assess" such-and-such a position or argument, or to discuss a view, you should give a brief statement of the positions or arguments concerned, then get on with a consideration of arguments for or against that view. If you refer to the views of some writer on the position or argument you are discussing, make sure that you keep to those views which really bear in on the matter in hand. Expunge all unnecessary information that might clutter the first draft of your essay: get rid of repetition, literary frills and fancies, side issues, unargued points about the lecturer's preferences for a certain theory etc. Also, get rid of any obscurity. In an overall sense, attempt to be as brief and succinct as possible and concentrate what detail you do provide on your central arguments and/or criticisms of other arguments. Make these detailed points powerfully. (1)

Clarity and Precision

This is critically important: it constitutes reasons for passing or failing essays. One simply cannot write essays well without being clear and precise with one's expression. (1)

Writing to a word limit (page limit)

Students often find it difficult to write enough words. If this happens to you then it is probably because you have

- not done enough reading and so do not have enough to write about
- generalised too much and have given no examples of what you are trying to explain

- you have written a descriptive account of the literature rather than a critical analysis

If you have written far too many words then it is usually because

- you have not selected your material effectively enough and therefore have written about everything to do with the topic. (2)

Writing Conclusions

A piece of writing is not complete without a conclusion. A conclusion should:

- address the question / topic/ aim as stated in the Introduction
- summarize key ideas
- introduce no new information
- provide own view, based on evidence presented, if required (2)

Enjoy yourself!

The essay is used for assessment but is also an opportunity for you to learn. Make sure you enjoy the process of essay writing. Don't leave things to the last minute, take lots of breaks, discuss your work with others, and do the best job you can. (1)

Källor:

(1) Tips on Writing Academic Essays in Philosophy By W. Martin Davies.
http://www.erraticimpact.com/html/tips_on_writing_academic_essays.htm (accessed 30 Sept 2005).

(2) Teaching and Learning Support. Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia.
<http://ceds.vu.edu.au/studentlearning/ReadingWriting/Writing/WritingGenres/WritingGenresIntro.htm> and linked pages (accessed 30 Sept 2005)

See also

Silber, C. A. (1995) Some general advice on academic essay-writing.
<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/essay.html> (distributed as handout)

Johnson, Tom (2004) How to Write an Essay: 10 Easy Steps.
<http://www.aucegypt.edu/academic/writers/> (a comprehensive and very useful guide to successful essay writing – **very warmly recommended for reference!** Note that some of what is stated here does not apply to B students at Lund.)