Tip Sheet Academic Essays

This tip sheet outlines what an essay consists of, with a focus on the structure, argument and style required for this piece of work.

What is an academic essay?

Most academic essays will require you to present an argument through reasoning and the use of evidence. In the process of planning and drafting your essay, you will need to respond to the essay question by thinking, reading widely and taking a considered position based on evidence. This position is summarised in the thesis statement. The thesis statement is expressed as one or two sentences in the introduction, and supported in the essay's body by a series of topic sentences, one in each paragraph.

Each topic sentence is in turn supported by evidence and examples from your readings and research, reflection, observation and analysis. Your essay should connect your thesis statement and the major points you make to support it (your topic sentences in each body paragraph). It should also connect the topic sentences with the evidence and examples you use to develop and illustrate them. Failing to provide an adequate, workable thesis statement or failing to support it or ‘stick to it’ are two of the more common mistakes.

What is the process for writing an essay?

Formulating a coherent and logical argument takes time and thought. To produce an essay, you will need to write a number of drafts. Your first draft is unlikely to persuade your reader as to the logic of your argument. This is because you are still writing to work out what you think about a subject.

Give yourself plenty of time to plan, draft, redraft, revise and edit your work. Between your first thoughts on a topic and the finished essay is a lengthy and interesting process of:

- conducting research, analysing, engaging with, synthesising and arranging information,
- writing and refining your thesis statement and topic sentences,
- selecting examples and illustrations to develop each topic sentence into a body paragraph,
- playing with paragraph order to better support the thesis, and
- using transitions to make the relationship between ideas clear.

What is the structure of an academic essay?

Your essay will need the following:

An introduction which:

- sets out the background for your argument,
- introduces the content of the essay,
- may define key terms
- sets out your thesis statement, and
- explains how the essay will be structured (i.e. order of points).

A body containing a number of paragraphs, each of which will:

- present a topic sentence or central idea supporting your thesis statement,
- contain supporting sentences which expand on the topic sentence,
- give evidence/examples/references which support to your topic sentence, and
- provide a concluding or linking sentence.

A conclusion which:

- restates your thesis statement,
- summarises the points and evidence you provided to support your thesis, and
- may suggest areas for further research.
What style of language should be used for an academic essay?

There are a number of academic stylistic conventions you should follow when writing:

- Use standard English avoiding American spellings.
- Write in the third person unless otherwise directed.
- Avoid slang terms, clichés and colloquial expressions.
- Avoid gender bias and sexist language.
- Avoid emotive language.
- Be direct – use the active rather than the passive voice.
- Be concise

Essay checklist. I have:

☐ Read and unpacked the question.
☐ Completed the research and critically reviewed the material.
☐ Planned my essay.
☐ Written the introduction so that it sets the scene (by providing a context, history or background).
☐ Elaborated on and provided supporting evidence for my thesis/focus in the body of the essay.
☐ Restated the thesis and included a summary of the main points in the conclusion.
☐ Answered the question.
☐ Developed and maintained an appropriate writing style.
☐ Edited my essay and checked spelling and grammar once I have finished writing it.
☐ Attended an assignment drop-in run by the Academic Skills Centre to review my work.
☐ submitted the essay in the required format by checking the unit plan.

References


Contact

If you have any questions about this material, please contact ECU’s Learning Advisers at learningadviser@ecu.edu.au