

Writing an Essay

What is an essay?

An essay is usually written in response to a question or series of questions. The writer's purpose is to convince the reader that his or her way of analysing, explaining, discussing or arguing about a topic is valid.

What kinds of essays are you required to write in the Australian School of Business?

Some of the essays you are required to write in the Australian School of Business are similar in type to those found in Arts Faculty courses: an issue is identified and a question is asked in relation to that issue. Your task is to construct an argument that supports your own perspective on how that question should be answered. Other essay assignments are a kind of essay/report 'hybrid' assignment. Some lecturers set assignments that are called "report essay". When this happens the lecturer wants you to write a paper that has characteristics of both essays and reports.

How do essays differ from reports?

Essays differ from reports in purpose, writer requirements and audience. Essays are a type of writing that is found mostly in schools and universities. Students write essays for teachers, tutors or lecturers to provide evidence of their understanding of a concept or phenomenon and their ability to express that understanding in well connected text. An essay is very much an individual's response to a question. It would be very difficult for a group to write an essay, whereas it is very common for a group to write a report. Essays differ from reports in organisation.



In an essay you are required to develop a logical argument in response to a particular question. The intended reader of your essay is your lecturer or tutor. Your lecturer or tutor is interested to see how well you can construct a convincing argument based on sound reasoning and appropriate use of evidence. The connection between stages of your argument must be marked very clearly by transition sentences that summarise what came before in order to introduce the next stage of the argument.

The challenge for you as a writer is to make this transition as smooth and seamless as possible. A reader cannot read some parts of your essay to learn what they want to know. A reader must read your entire essay to understand how well you can argue. Some lecturers prefer that you do not to use sub-headings in your essays. Other lecturers allow or encourage some use of sub-headings to indicate change of sub-topic, but these sub-headings should be in addition to and not replace topic sentences.

In a report, in contrast, you must indicate the structure clearly by using sub-headings for each section. Each section has a distinct purpose. Sometimes the reader may want to read one section of your report only. So each section should contain the type of information the reader expects to find in that section.

In spite of these differences essays and reports are similar in that the writing must be based on analysis and critical thinking. The expression must be clear and precise and without grammatical error.

Why are you asked to write essays in the Australian School of Business?

Essays allow your tutors and lecturers to assess your ability to:

- ★ understand the purpose of questions important in your field of study
- ★ carry out research
- ★ think critically about what you read
- ★ distinguish between sources relevant and irrelevant to answering a question
- ★ distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources
- ★ organise your ideas into a sound argument
- ★ use evidence from your sources as support for your argument
- ★ express your argument in coherent and cohesive text, and
- ★ acknowledge the sources you have used appropriately in your text.

Although you are unlikely to be asked to write essays in the workplace, the ability to express yourself logically and fluently that you develop in writing essays will provide a solid base from which you can develop competence in other types of writing.

What do you need to do to understand the question asked?

It is important to make sure you understand the question(s) you are asked to answer. You can be certain that, in almost all cases, the essay question will require you to undertake some kind of analysis. Every essay question will be about a TOPIC. But that does not mean you should write everything you know about that topic. The essay question will also give you DIRECTIONS about how to approach the topic.

The following table lists some of the direction words that are commonly used in essay questions. All the words require some level of analysis.

<i>Analyse</i>	Examine the different elements relevant to the topic and determine their relationship to each other.
<i>Compare</i>	Find similarities or differences between ideas, events or interpretations.
<i>Contrast</i>	This is similar to 'compare', but requires more focus on the differences.
<i>Criticise</i>	Discuss both strong and weak points in order to arrive at a reasoned evaluation.
<i>Define</i>	Provide a clear, concise and authoritative statement of the meaning of a term.
<i>Discuss</i>	Analyse the main features of the topic and present a reasoned point of view in relation to it.
<i>Evaluate</i>	Consider a range of arguments and reach a judgment about the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Other direction words may also be used which do not necessarily involve a high level of analysis. Direction words that do not involve a high level of analysis, such as the following words, are usually asked in combination with one or other of the direction words.

<i>Describe</i>	Outline the main features of a phenomenon.
<i>Illustrate</i>	Give examples.
<i>Summarise</i>	Outline the main points of theory or event.

What is the structure of an essay?

Unlike reports, essays are not broken up into distinct sections with specific functions. The traditional essay has no subheadings at all. Now, increasingly, lecturers are permitting and even encouraging some use of subheadings to indicate topic shift, but you should use only a few.

While you do not need to give headings to parts of your essay, you should provide a clear introduction, body paragraphs and a conclusion. There are clear expectations for what is included in each of these parts.

Introduction

The introduction to a short essay is one paragraph. For a longer essay you may have two paragraphs. In the introduction you should orient your reader to the question, perhaps by

- ★ explaining the significance of the question
- ★ providing a context
- ★ expressing a clear point of view that responds directly to the question
- ★ giving a brief indication of the order in which your ideas will be developed
- ★ indicating any limitations to the scope of your essay, for example, the time and the places or the aspect(s) of a topic that will be the focus of your essay, and possibly, defining any terms that may need defining.

Body

The body of an essay consists of a number of paragraphs, each of which should

- ★ deal with one aspect of your answer
- ★ occur in the order outlined in the introduction
- ★ begin with a "topic sentence" that identifies the main idea of the paragraph and connects it to the preceding paragraph and/or the introduction, and
- ★ provide evidence to elaborate/support the main idea of the paragraph.

Conclusion

The conclusion consists of one or two paragraphs. In the conclusion you should

- ★ briefly summarise your answer to the question
- ★ ensure that what you write follows logically from your introduction (possibly qualifying a position stated in the introduction)
- ★ avoid rambling
- ★ avoid introducing any new information, and
- ★ possibly, suggest implications or argument or areas for further exploration.

Synopsis

You may sometimes be asked to include a synopsis of around 100 words with your essay. This is more likely to be a requirement if the essay is over 2000 words. The synopsis of an essay is like the executive summary of a report. It is written after the essay has been written and gives an overview of the main argument. It is written on a separate page and put in front of the essay.

Reference list

You should list all the sources you have consulted for your essay on a separate page placed at the end of your essay. These sources should be listed alphabetically according to author's family name or institution name.

How do you incorporate evidence from your sources in your essay?

To support your analysis in answering an essay question you are required to incorporate evidence from authoritative sources. There are three ways of doing this: paraphrasing, summarising and quoting. Quoting should be kept to a minimum and only used when it is very important to use the precise wording of an author. It is obligatory to acknowledge all your sources either with references in the text or with footnotes. You may put strong focus on the authors by putting their names in a prominent position in the sentence or weak focus on the authors by giving prominence to the evidence itself and mentioning the authors' names in parentheses or footnotes. See the EDU handout 'Acknowledging sources' for more detail on how to incorporate evidence from your sources in your essay.

What are the steps in writing an assignment essay?

You cannot write an assignment essay well if you try to do it all at once. You should begin early. Essay writing is a cyclical process. The steps are listed here one after the other, but in reality you will find that you usually need to go back a few steps and repeat them in order to produce a good essay.

- ★ Make sure you understand the question you are asked to answer
- ★ Do some preliminary reading
- ★ Take notes from your reading and systematically record the bibliographical details of your sources
- ★ Identify the main themes relevant to the question asked
- ★ Decide on your position in relation to the question asked
- ★ Develop a rough outline for your answer
- ★ Select more sources to read making sure that they are relevant to your proposed answer
- ★ Order your notes from your sources according to the rough outline
- ★ Review your notes and refine your outline to take account of your greater understanding of the issues involved
- ★ Write a first draft of an answer to help you clarify your response (this draft is for you!)
- ★ Read your draft and note areas that need changing to make your response more powerful and more consistent
- ★ Write a second draft this time with the reader of the essay in mind
- ★ Edit for grammar and spelling
- ★ Write a final draft in accordance with the presentation guidelines for your course.

What makes a good essay?**A Good Essay**

- ★ demonstrates a clear understanding of the question
- ★ demonstrates critical and analytical skills
- ★ presents a reasoned and tightly structured argument
- ★ is at all times relevant to the question and does not drift off onto irrelevant topics
- ★ is written for a lecturer or tutor of the course for which it is assigned, but does not leave things unexplained on the grounds that the reader will know what is meant

- ★ is based on wide and critical reading
- ★ uses evidence effectively to support the argument
- ★ always acknowledges the sources used, and
- ★ is written in academic style.

Are exam essays different from assignment essays?

Exam essays are in most ways similar to assignment essays. The main differences are as follows:

- ★ Exam essays have very brief introductions. The answer to the question and an outline of the answer should be in the first few sentences.
- ★ While evidence is always required to support an assertion, specific sources cannot be quoted or page references given in a closed book exam.
- ★ Transition signals are particularly useful in exam essays to emphasise key points, e.g. the most significant factor.
- ★ The conclusion may be only one sentence or two and so should simply be a restatement of the answer to the question.

Are there differences across cultures in regard to what constitutes a good essay?



Researchers have observed that, just as there are differences in the way people from different cultures approach many aspects of life, there are also differences in the way people from different cultures write essays. Students who have been successful essay writers in one academic culture may find that they are not initially successful essay writers in another academic culture. English essay writing style has been characterised as being very direct. If you were taught how to

write essays in another academic culture you may have been taught to approach the question a little differently. If you want to gain high marks for your essays in the Australian academic culture it is important to approach essay writing in the way described here.

Where can I get more detailed information about writing essays?

The following books available for borrowing from the EDU Library also have detailed advice on how to write essays:

- ★ Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. 1996, *Writer's Handbook for University Students*, Harcourt Brace, Sydney.
- ★ Macqueen, C. 1998, *Getting Ahead in Tertiary Study: A Practical Guide for Business, Social Science and Arts Students*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- ★ Marshall, L. & Rowland, F. 1998, *A Guide to Learning Independently*, 3rd edn, Longman, Melbourne.
- ★ Windschuttle, K. & Elliot, E. 1999, *Writing, Researching, Communicating: Communication Skills for the Information Age*, 3rd edn, McGraw-Hill, Sydney.
- ★ Woodward-Kron, R. 1997, *Writing in Commerce*, Rev. edn, CAUT, The University of Newcastle, Newcastle.

Essay Writing Checklist

Use the following checklist to review your essay:

Doing the research

- ☐ Have I done sufficient research to be confident that I am aware of the basic facts and the range of perspectives offered on the topic?
- ☐ Have I used a range of resources? (e.g. online information, journal articles, newspaper articles)

Applying analysis and developing an argument

- ☐ Have I applied the core concepts I have learnt in this course?
- ☐ Have I identified the key issues?
- ☐ Have I used my sources to support my argument?
- ☐ Is my position clear in my response to the question?
- ☐ Have I qualified my position by careful consideration of possible counter-arguments?
- ☐ Will I leave the reader with the impression that I have been actively trying to make sense of the question and thought hard and deeply about the complexities involved?

Structuring the introduction

- ☐ Does my introduction have a statement introducing the topic?
- ☐ Does my introduction identify the key issue?
- ☐ Does my introduction indicate my position in relation to the key issue?
- ☐ Have I given a brief indication of how I will answer the question?
- ☐ Have I indicated any limitations on the scope of my essay?
- ☐ Have I defined any terms that need defining?

Structuring the body

- ☐ Have I presented my paragraphs in a logical sequence? (i.e. following the order outlined in the introduction)
- ☐ Does each paragraph develop one aspect of my essay?
- ☐ Does each paragraph begin with a topic sentence that both introduces the main point of the paragraph and connects it to the essay as a whole?
- ☐ Have I provided evidence in each paragraph to elaborate/support the main point of my paragraph?

Structuring the conclusion

- ☐ Have I provided a final answer to the question?
- ☐ Have I restated my position in a new way (perhaps modified) from the way I stated in the introduction?
- ☐ Have I very briefly summarised my main points?
- ☐ Have I made a final comment, for example, suggesting areas for further exploration, predicting future developments?
- ☐ Have I observed the requirement not to introduce new information in the conclusion?

Using the right language

- ☐ Have I checked my spelling? (Not only by using the computer spell check, but also by proof reading)
- ☐ Have I checked the grammar for common mistakes e.g. subject-verb agreement, number agreement, complete sentences?
- ☐ Have I written in an appropriate academic style (i.e. formal, objective, and not conversational or journalistic)?

Referencing correctly

- ☐ Have I acknowledged the arguments, ideas and evidence of others with in-text references? (necessary whether quoting, paraphrasing or summarising)
- ☐ Have I used the correct format for in-text references?
- ☐ Have I used quotation marks when I am quoting?
- ☐ Have I paraphrased and summarised well enough when not quoting so that I cannot be accused of plagiarism?
- ☐ Have I included a list of references organised alphabetically according to author on a separate page?

Presenting the essay in the required format

- ☐ Have I typed the essay?
- ☐ Have I used 1.5 or double spacing?
- ☐ Have I numbered the pages?
- ☐ Have I used the cover sheet included in the course outline?
- ☐ Have I checked that my essay is the required length?

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