# Writing your Essay

This comprehensive guide outlines the steps involved in writing an essay, covering everything from the initial apprehension of facing a blank page to refining and editing your final draft.

We encourage you to explore the sections that are most relevant to your current stage in the writing process, using the navigation bar (press ctrl + f to make this appear). If you are short on time, you may wish to advance directly to the final section, which highlights key areas to focus on for enhancing your essay writing.

# Acknowledging feelings about writing

You may have heard of expressions like ‘fear of the blank page’ and 'writer’s block’, demonstrating that it's normal to find writing daunting. Acknowledging how we feel about writing can be helpful in understanding where we are starting from.

But it is also worth thinking about how writing can be enjoyable for us and how to create a suitable creative environment. Although this might not be possible all the time, it's good to be mindful of what a pleasant writing experience feels like for you.

## Activity

Spend a few minutes thinking of your answers to these questions, then write your responses.

1.Where and when do you write?

2. What makes you anxious about writing?

3. What do you enjoy about writing?

# Understanding why we write

Essays are often set as assessments in order to give you the opportunity to showcase your ability to craft an argument. They can also be exercises in precision, with word counts that may appear short, designed to encourage you to aim for clear, concise writing, and to demonstrate that you can select the most significant points backed up by evidence to answer a set question. In this sense, an essay differs from other pieces of academic writing, such as a scientific report. A report may have predetermined sections and subsections, and can be quite formulaic, with expectations for each section; an essay is more intended to demonstrate your engagement with other authors’ ideas and evidence to critically reflect on your own arguments.

## Quick reflective activity

Based on this understanding of an essay’s purpose, what skills do you think the person marking your essay is looking for you to evidence? Type your response below.

## What skills do essay-based assignments test?

Skills essay markers usually look for:

* Synthesis of learning and ideas from across the course
* Understanding of the topic
* Accurate citation of sources in line with a specified referencing style
* Ability to structure a piece of work
* Logical reasoning
* Critical analysis
* Presentation according to required formatting
* Understanding of the discipline/subject area

Skills essay markers don’t focus on:

* On-the-spot recall of facts and dates
* The ability to describe in detail everything you’ve read
* Use of flowery language
* Repetition of material from lectures
* Correct pronunciation of terminology
* Use of words with long syllables
* Ability to perform an experiment
* Ability to write by hand under timed conditions

Taking time to read the assessment criteria that your marker will use to mark your essay can give you a clearer understanding of what their expectations are. This will also help you to focus your writing on what the essay needs to achieve; essays are not intended to discuss everything that has been said on the topic. Instead, choose a focus and develop a few key points that answer the question. Your reader will appreciate being able to see that your writing has a clear direction.

It is also worth considering what you are interested in writing about. If you are given the option to choose an essay question or even to devise one of your own, this gives you the opportunity to choose a topic that you are particularly interested in. Choosing a topic that intrigues you will make your reading, writing and editing more enjoyable! Consider what you want to contribute to your field by writing your essay.

# Identifying an essay's components

## Writing the Essay Introduction

### What makes a good introduction?

The introduction is vital for making a favourable impression on your reader, who is also likely to be responsible for assigning your mark. In simple terms, you need to tell the reader what your essay argues and provide them with a clear plan of how it will make its case. This may sound straightforward but it’s often challenging to get right.

Many writers will often refine the introduction as the final stage of the essay writing process. This is because the main purpose of the introduction is to provide a clear outline of what the essay will cover (themes, controversies, arguments, etc.). For this reason, it is often better to finalise it once the rest of the essay is complete ([Greasley, 2016](https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=66VmDAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Greasley%2C++Doing+essays+%26+assignments+essential+tips+for+students&ots=WmGH-d9-n3&sig=AIUeLJs60ewECYr6u-iRbPJ-0NA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Greasley%2C%20%20Doing%20essays%20%26%20assignments%20essential%20tips%20for%20students&f=false)). Creating a rough outline before you begin writing will be essential for ensuring you are clear about how you intend to answer the question and the topics you intend to cover! You should re-visit and refine your introduction regularly as part of the essay writing process.

### What should your introduction include?

While there are no hard and fast rules about what to include in an introduction, it should provide the reader with a very clear idea of what to expect within the piece of writing and how you intend to answer the question or problem that you have been set. This will usually involve stating a concrete position on the topic: this should be the overall argument that each point in the body of your essay works to support.

You should also introduce the key examples you use to support your argument, so your reader knows what to expect your essay to focus on. This can function to narrow your argument so your claims are more convincing. Finally, your introduction can communicate your enthusiasm for the subject you’re writing about and spark your reader’s interest in reading on. Try looking at different introductions to articles and book chapters to notice how other writers hook their readers‘ interest.

Incorporating these elements will help to get your reader on side and enjoy reading the rest of your essay.

The order in which you incorporate the elements below may change depending on your writing style, but writing sentences which accomplish the following will ensure that you write an effective and engaging introduction:

* Establish the significance of the topic you will be writing about.

You should make reference to the wider context, or contexts, surrounding the issue or controversy you will be writing about. This can also be an excellent place to demonstrate your enthusiasm for your topic.

* Outline the problem or debate you will be discussing

Use these sentences to narrow the focus of your topic from the wider issues mentioned above. This section should relate as closely as possible to the essay question or title.

* Define the scope of your essay

Give some indication of which examples or topics you will be using and why.

* State your position or argument

Sometimes known as the main argument, or “thesis statement”, this is the single most important part of your introduction. You need to provide your reader with a very clear sense of what your purpose is. What are you going to be arguing for or against? What position will you be taking or supporting? Why is this significant?

* Outline your structure or supporting evidence

This is where you can begin to be more specific and establish links with the main body of your writing. You could introduce the case studies or examples you plan to use, and give a brief indication as to how you intend to use these to support your main argument.

## Writing the main body of your essay

### The purpose of the main body

The main body is where you will spend the majority of writing time. It will usually take up around 80% of your word count. In the main body, you will:

* Expand on the topics or areas you mentioned in the introduction.
* Build your argument by writing about and analysing the evidence you found when researching.
* Structure your argument into paragraphs that guide your reader through the argument you are making.

### Short, relevant, and critical

Long paragraphs can confuse your reader and make them lose track of your argument. Remember, one paragraph should include only one idea. The topic sentence can help to keep your paragraph short by ensuring you focus only on one idea at a time.

Your job as a writer is to convince your reader of your ideas and answer the assignment question you have been given. Each paragraph should develop your argument in some way. If you are struggling to connect the paragraph to your wider argument or assignment question in your concluding sentence, you may need to rethink if that paragraph is still relevant.

You need to make sure every paragraph in your essay is critical and that it helps build your argument. If you only have evidence sentences, your work will be too descriptive. Make sure you have an equal balance of evidence sentences and analysis sentences to keep your writing critical.

### Connecting Your Paragraphs

As well as keeping your paragraphs short, relevant and critical, you also need to make sure your writing flows, ensuring each paragraph connects to the next smoothly. Using transition words and phrases will ensure you connect your paragraphs and clearly guide your reader through your argument. Here are three ways you can do this:

* Reinforcing or adding to an idea

This can be used focusing on a different element of the same source or example or providing different types of evidence to support the same point.

Examples: ‘Furthermore’, ‘Additionally’, ‘Moreover’, ‘Therefore’, ‘Likewise’, ‘Similarly’.

Example in a sentence: "Manchester is similarly a major hub in the ‘indie’ music scene.”

* Contrasting with an opposing idea

This can be used when discussing one idea in a paragraph, then moving to an opposing idea in the next.

Examples: ‘In contrast’, ‘However’, ‘On the other hand’, ‘Unlike’, ‘Conversely’, ‘Nevertheless’.

Example in a sentence:  “On the other hand, cities such as London and Liverpool can claim they are at the heart of popular culture in the UK.”

* Signposting to an earlier idea

This can be used when referring directly back to an idea presented in a previous section to build upon your argument.

Examples:  'As noted earlier’, ‘As previously argued’, ‘As outlined above’, ‘As previously discussed’.

Example in a sentence:  “As previously discussed, many of the most successful bands in the last two decades have come from Manchester.”

### Academic Phrasebank

### For more vocabulary suggestions for connecting your paragraphs, we highly recommend you visit the University of Manchester's [Academic Phrasebank](https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/). This resource features useful words and phrases for different components of essay or report writing,

## Writing the Essay Conclusion

### What makes a good conclusion?

Your conclusion should signal to your reader that the end of the essay has been reached. It should provide a thoughtful end to your work and not merely summarise the points made throughout your essay. Your conclusion is an opportunity to have your final say on the topic where you can look beyond the scope of your essay. For example, you can do this by acknowledging the limitations of your research, suggesting further research or making future predictions about the topic.

### Writing techniques for your conclusion

Here are several techniques you may wish to try to add style to your conclusion and achieve the right tone.

* **Mirror your introduction**: Remember the themes and language you used in your introduction. For example, you could revisit scenarios, concepts or images.
* **Change of tone**: Use a change of tone to signify an end to your essay. Whilst your introduction is assertive and your main body provides justification to the assertions made in the introduction, the conclusion is your opportunity to be reflective, suggestive and perhaps offer your final, more personal viewpoint.
* **Asking ‘So What?’:** To help you articulate your thoughts in your conclusion, imagine someone is asking you ‘So what?’ or ‘Why should anybody care?’ and answer those questions.

### What should the conclusion include?

* **The answer to the assignment question**: mention the title or question and answer it fully. Rather than give a full summary of the main body of the text, you should clearly summarise your main argument and state how your writing answers the original question you were asked.
* A **brief summary**of the paper’s main points.
* A **proposed course of action**or a solution to an issue. If readers are convinced by your argument, what needs to change?
* **Suggestions for further research**or **discussion of the implications**of what you've argued.
* **Acknowledgements of the limitations of your essay or research**: when writing an essay, you have a finite word count, so there may be areas you could have explored further, or perhaps there are limitations to the existing research on your topic.

However, your conclusion should avoid including any of the following elements:

* **Any new material or arguments:** if you have a new thought or idea when writing your conclusion, go back and explore this fully in the main body of your essay.
* **Contradictions:**do not include anything which contradicts your argument or final opinion.
* **Lengthy summaries:** The conclusion should not be a long summary of all the points made in the main body of your essay. While a brief summary of the main points is necessary, the conclusion should avoid repeating content already covered.

# Planning the writing process

You’ve been set a question, or you’ve made your own – where next? A plan can look different depending on how you work best. For some, a first draft is their plan which is then refined through multiple edits; for others, a mind-map showing how ideas are connected and the sources supporting these ideas helps to organise their thoughts. Maybe a linear bullet-point list works. Try experimenting with different techniques. It may be that the same approach does not suit you for every assignment or question. Part of researching is figuring out what works *now*.

## Breaking down the question

A good place to start, whether you've chosen a question created by a tutor or created your own research question, is by breaking the question down to determine what it is asking you, or what you have asked yourself, to investigate.

Academic questions are often posed because there is a debate to be had in the field, and writing is your opportunity to contribute to that debate.

Usually if you have been set a question there will be at least one ‘instruction word’ which is asking you to do something specific. Find what this is initially.

Once you’ve found the instruction word, look over the question for any terms you may need to define. As mentioned above, the question has likely been asked because there is a debate still to be had, so terminology may be contested. Make a note of how you are going to interpret key terms and include sources which align with your understanding and can be used to support your interpretation.

Many of the ‘instruction words’ commonly used in questions are ‘open’. Words like ‘discuss’ or ‘examine’ give you space to take the question in a direction you are interested in. However, this will also require you to introduce a justification as to why – are there sources which point to this being a fruitful avenue of investigation? Is this direction a current gap in the literature?

For more support with this early stage of the planning process, take a look at our online guide to [breaking down the question](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/breaking-down-question/story_html5.html).

## Developing a working argument

It can also be helpful to have an idea of what you are going to argue at this stage, even if it is very loose. This ‘working thesis’ or ‘working argument’ can be refined as you read and write.

Once you have a rough idea of where you would like to take your response, go through your notes and any previous reading you have done which is relevant to the question. Then start to search for additional literature until there are sources supporting all points you wish to make.

Having an idea of an argument, however loose, at this stage can be helpful in providing a framework for searching and criteria for the points to include in the essay or exclude. With any type of academic writing, the focus should be on depth rather than breadth and it is better to include fewer points but in more detail, than skimming over many.

When you have assembled the literature you would like to include, start to organise:

* 1. How one source interacts with another.
	2. Which order makes sense for you to introduce your points. There is no right or wrong, only how you are going to make your case.

By this stage, you should have a clearer idea of what your argument or thesis line will be. Go back to your initial version and see if you can refine it.

These steps can be produced as a linear list, a mind-map, put on post-its and moved around to order them.

It is important to note that the plan does not need to be perfect before you start writing. Often there are refinements made in the process of writing. The plan should be there to help scaffold and support your thinking. You do not need to be rigidly held to it.

Any piece of academic work which you see published has gone through multiple edits, often by a group of people – the author(s), the peer reviewers, editors, and then back to the author to check final proofs. Your assignments will be no different, so leave time to write and re-write.

## Points to consider:

**Essay length**: connected to the parameters which are already within the question or those you choose, remember that no piece of academic writing is supposed to cover everything on the topic. For longer essays you will be able to include more ideas but ensure that the focus is depth rather than breadth and each point included is fully explored.

**Prioritising**: balancing competing deadlines can be difficult. Plan ahead as much as you can and know how long it takes on average to research, write and edit assignments. Those assignments which are longer and have more credits attached should demand more time.

**How long will it take?**: Ensure you allow time enough to research, write and edit. Part of the planning process is being realistic about how long you may need to spend on each section. How many words can you write in a day, on average? How long do you need to edit your work? The editing process is as important as the writing. Remember to also include a small time buffer for anything unexpected.

# Beating writer's block

## Podcast transcript and checklist

Getting stuck on a piece of work happens to everyone, and there are some methods you can try to get back on track. We're going to list a few now, and describe how they can help you.

* **Take a break!**Stepping away from your writing can give you a fresh perspective. Take a walk, listen to music, or do something else you enjoy to clear your mind.
* **Re-read your prompt.**Sometimes you might get stuck on what to write about, so re-reading the essay question or the title of the assignment can generate more ideas for you.
* **Brainstorming.**Write down any ideas or facts relating to the topic that you're writing about. Don't worry too much about grammar or structure when brainstorming; all you're looking to do is generate some ideas to get you started again.
* **Work out what’s not working.** Sometimes to proceed with an essay, you might just need to fix what isn’t working for you. It could be where you’re working, so a change of location could improve things. It could be that you’re struggling to think of points to discuss, so you might need to do some more reading. It could even be you’ve chosen the wrong essay to attempt, so you might need to try a different question if one is available. Whatever it is, taking some time to decide what isn’t working and fixing that can really help get you started again.
* **Reading.**Take a break from writing and do some reading instead. This could mean reading back through the work you've done so far to see what else needs to be added, or this could give you something else to discuss. It could also mean doing extra reading around your topic, as this should help give you extra material to discuss in your own work.
* **Create an outline**. Sometimes we don't know where to go next with an essay, or we might find that we are repeating ourselves. Create an outline or plan for your assignment can break down what point you will make in each paragraph, what evidence you're going to use to back it up, and how it will lead to the next paragraph. This can help to clarify what you're trying to achieve and make the actual process of writing easier.
* **Create a reverse outline.**You may have already written a draft of your essay and know it needs more work to fix the structure or flow of the ideas. It can be tricky to know which sections need rewriting and how they are going to be rewritten. A reverse outline is like a plan of your essay after the fact! As with a pre-writing outline or pre-writing plan, write down what point each paragraph makes, which evidence you use to support that point, and how it connects to the next paragraph. This can help you see the overall structure of your writing to identify: **missing points** where you need to write a new paragraph; **points in the wrong order**where you need to move paragraphs around, or **irrelevant points**where you might need to delete paragraphs.
* **Voice notes or talking to a friend**. If you’re unsure how to proceed with writing try speaking instead, either by taking voice notes or talking about your work with a friend. You might find that it’s easier to generate ideas this way.
* **Rubber Duck method**. This was originally designed for programmers, used to debug code, and the Rubber Duck Method is a way to identify problems in your own work, by explaining it to a Rubber Duck (or another inanimate object). It helps to identify and resolve issues by verbalising the problem out loud. It might sound strange, but do give it a go! It just might work for you.

## Free writing activity

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Use your phone or another device to set a timer for five minutes.
3. Try to write down whatever you can about your topic. You don't need to use full sentences, just write whatever you can think of – whatever pops into your head.
4. As you go, ignore any spelling mistakes and try to avoid deleting anything: there are no wrong answers here and anything related to your topic is worthwhile writing down. Continue writing as much as you can and keep going until the five minutes is up, trying to get as many of your thoughts as possible down onto the page.
5. Take another deep breath and then a moment to reflect: how did that feel?

Writing down what you can, withholding any judgement or self-criticism, can help you to notice what you already know and identify any questions you still have about your topic. You can then do some targeted research to answer those questions.

If you found it hard to type your response to the activity, you could try writing using pen and paper. This can help you avoid the temptation to delete what you're writing. You can also try repeating the same activity in a blank Word document, setting your timer for a bit longer to see how much you can write in, for example, half an hour.

Sometimes this activity can help you generate new turns of phrase or clearer ways of expressing your ideas. Make sure to save your free writing responses for later in case you want to reuse any of the wording in your writing.

# Editing your essay

Once you have your first draft, it's time to do some editing to get your work ready for submission. Editing can be a tricky process if you’re new to it or unsure what steps to take, so we’ve put together some things for you to try.

A good way to approach it is to edit in stages. Focus on one aspect of your essay at a time, such as structure, grammar or formatting. This will help you focus, and prevent getting overwhelmed by focusing on everything at once. Some common ‘stages’ that you could consider are:

* **Wordcount:**

**Too many words.** If your wordcount is too high start by looking at your paraphrases and quotes. Can you cut down the amount of words used? Can you summarise instead? Is it actually adding to the point you’re making, so do you need it at all? From here you can look at cutting any unnecessary words you’ve put in; do you need all your adjectives and adverbs?

**Too few words**. Don’t start adding direct quotes just to fill up your wordcount; direct quotes should be used sparingly and your tutor will recognise what you’re doing. Along the same lines, don’t go through adding words just to make up the wordcount. If you’re under the wordcount, read back through and see if any points are underdeveloped that you can expand on, or if there are any areas of your subject you haven’t touched upon yet.
* **Structure.**An essay should be one continuous piece of writing that flows from one point to the next, developing an argument as it goes. Firstly, you can make sure you have no headings or subheadings (a heading to indicate your reference list is fine). Then check how your essay reads. Does each paragraph tackle a distinct point? Do the paragraphs transition into each other properly, making your points easy to follow? Reading the essay aloud can help here; if you don’t want to read it aloud yourself, you can try using text to speech software.
* **Referencing.** Make sure to go through and check all your references. Are they formatted correctly? Is the information correct? While you’re reading your work you can see if there are any gaps where a reference could be added as well. Have you provided enough evidence to back up the points you’re making?
* **Consistency with formatting.**This is a common error and something else to search for when you are editing your work. Consistency with formatting can encompass several different things. Here are some examples:
* **British English vs American English spelling.**Check if one is preferable before you start by referring to your Course Handbook or the specified style guide. If either is acceptable, don't switch between the two. If you've decided to use one, use it for the duration!
* **Font Size and Style**. Ensure you are being consistent with your font choice and style throughout.
* **Line spacing.**Check what the requirements are for line-spacing: usually this will be double-spaced. Keep the line-spacing the same throughout the document.
* **Paragraph alignment.**From reading books and journal articles, you might be used to seeing text "justified": where the text is aligned with the left and right margins of the page. However, for essays you're usually expected to keep your writing left-aligned; this makes it easier for your marker to read because the spacing between the words is consistent. And you want to make things easy for whoever is marking your work!

# Improving your writing

## Less Time/More Time

Sometimes there just isn’t as much time as we’d like to refine and polish an assignment. If there is time-pressure, some basic points to check through include:

* Have you answered the question? As obvious as this might sound, it is good to check that what you are arguing is clear and precise. Could a reader point to your thesis line in your work?
* Are all sources correctly referenced?
* If you find one paragraph is most of a page, consider breaking this into two or three.
* Are you analysing the sources? It is not enough to simply paraphrase, summarise or quote another researcher’s work – what is your critique? What is your interpretation of the source or sources?

However, if there is more time available, here are some ideas of how to develop your writing style:

* One of the best ways to improve writing is to read more. If you find another academic author whose style you like, try experimenting with it and make it your own. How do they refer to others’ work? How do they present their argument? Although there are certain expectations and conventions in academic writing, there is nevertheless still room for idiosyncrasies of style.
* Can you include potential critiques of your argument and then take them down? See the section on the Toulmin Method in the Library's My Learning Essentials online guide to [Developing and Communicating your Argument](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/developing-argument/) for further information on this.

If you have time to walk away from the completed assignment and then go back to it a day later, see if you can:

* Amend the argument – having re-read your piece, does the argument need tweaking to suit the literature included? This could mean making it more radical, perhaps you have the sources to support this in the text, or it could mean making the argument more specific but nuanced; again, see how you have interpreted the cited literature.
* Delete any unnecessary sentences – such as where you are repeating yourself or reiterating the same point but slightly differently.
* Include more complex and nuanced analysis. For example, is there something in the literature that you did not spot the first time round?
* Are there connected ideas which you haven’t included? Careful with this one! Connected ideas and sources can be included as discursive footnotes to show wider reading and understanding, but these should be used sparingly.
* Do you answer the question (if you have been given one), or take issue with it? Particularly if you are in the humanities, questioning the premises of the question and offering a new direction as a final ‘twist’ at the end can be something to experiment with.
* Are you working within a particular theoretical framework? Rather than ‘applying’ theory in a section for instance, can you sustain a Marxist, or Feminist reading throughout?

Developing your own writing style and being able to construct an argument that is unique is one of the ways in which you can improve your essays. This takes practice, so do not be hard on yourself if it does not work exactly as you had imagined the first time. Although it may be tempting to turn to Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) at this stage, or when you are time-pressured, this is unhelpful in the long-run.

Due to the way Large Language Models work, the algorithms governing the production of the output will ‘match’ it against training data to determine how relevant the generated text is before it appears as an output. What this means is that GenAI outputs are necessarily conservative (‘matching’ what has previously been written). Academic scholarship is instead future-oriented and interested in what is new. Writing an essay is your opportunity to add something new to the discipline within which you are working. Don’t waste it!

# Summary and further support

You've now reached the end of this guide. We've taken you through the process of preparing to write, overcoming obstacles to writing, and identifying how to improve what you've written. You should now have strategies and techniques to use whether you're facing the challenge of a blank page, reorganising the structure of a first draft, or adding the final polish to your submission. Remember that getting better at writing essays is about practice, not about getting things perfect the first time round. Make writing a habit to help build your confidence at putting your ideas into words and get used to drafting and editing your essays to bring out your best.

You can find links to further guidance and support for working on your essay writing skills on our [Library Support for Writing](https://www.education.library.manchester.ac.uk/mle/packages/writing/) page.