

Academic essay

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- explains the academic essay as an academic style of writing;
- looks at the structure of an academic essay;
- looks at the main types of academic essays;
- explains how to write an academic essay; and
- provides you with a quick checklist that covers most aspects of writing an academic essay.

What is an academic essay?

For our purposes, we can define an academic essay as a document that has a defined structure – an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

What are the main types of academic essays?

If we look at the intent of the academic essay we can define three main types:

- Descriptive – describes a subject, e.g.; a person, place or event.
- Expository – explains a concept or theory.
- Argumentative – presents an argument through reasoning and the use of evidence.

The argumentative 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 assigned question by thinking, reading and writing your way to a considered position/stance, or **thesis statement**. The thesis statement is expressed as one or two sentences in the introductory paragraph of your essay, and supported in the body of the essay 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/focus statement and the major points you make to support it (your topic sentences). 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/focus statement or failing to support it or 'stick to it' are two of the more common mistakes made by undergraduate essay writers.

Producing the essay

Formulating a coherent and logical argument takes time and thought. To produce an essay you will need to write a number of drafts – more than two. Professional writers understand the necessity of drafting. 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;
- 'trying on' (and kicking off) propositions and ideas;
- writing and refining your thesis statement and topic sentences;
- selecting examples and illustrations;
- playing with paragraph order; and
- using transitions to make the relationship between ideas clear.

Editing and proofreading at the sentence level comes later. The more complete and thorough this process is, the better the end product – your final version – will be.

The writing process differs between individuals and you will discover more about your own process the more you write.

Some general tips are:

- Start early. Read and analyse the essay question as soon as you receive it. Note down your first ideas.
- When researching: Make notes when reading; record bibliographic information from the sources you refer to, quote from and paraphrase; start making links between the writer's observations and your own thoughts on a topic.
- Brainstorm to generate ideas. Use lists, words and phrases. Write down whatever comes to mind.
- Based on your brainstorming, generate a working thesis statement – it doesn't matter if it is clumsily expressed at this point. You can revise it later.
- Begin planning your essay.
- Allow a rough draft to be rough. In a rough draft you are writing for yourself, not for your reader. You are working to formulate ideas; later you can polish at the sentence level. Try to get your ideas down as fast as you can. Revise later.
- When you're feeling 'blocked' in your writing, do something mechanical, like compiling your reference list.

Essay structure

Your essay will need the following:

An introduction which:

- sets out the context/background of your argument;
- introduces the content of the essay;
- introduces the theoretical perspectives you will be using;
- may define key terms (alternatively you can do the work of definition in the second paragraph);
- sets out your thesis statement/line of argument/central contention; and
- explains how the essay will be organised (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/line of argument/central contention;
- contain developing sentences which extend on or amplify the topic sentence;
- give evidence/examples/references which support/relate to your topic sentence; and
- provide a concluding/linking sentence;

A conclusion which:

- restates your thesis statement/line of argument/central contention;
- summarises the points and evidence you provided to support your thesis; and

- may suggest areas for further research/investigation.

Style

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

- **Did you read and unpack the question?**
- **Have you completed the research and critically reviewed the material?**
- **Have you planned your essay?**
- **Does your introduction set the scene by providing a context, history or background?**
- **Have you elaborated on and provided supporting evidence for your thesis/focus in the body of the essay?**
- **Does your conclusion restate the thesis and include a summary of the main points?**
- **Did you answer the question?**
- **Have you developed and maintained an appropriate writing style?**
- **After you've finished writing, did you edit your essay and check spelling and grammar?**
- **Have you submitted the essay in the required format?**
- **Have you kept a copy of your essay?**

References

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