

Skill development guide: writing a critical essay

In an essay at university level you are never just ‘writing all you know’ about a subject, or simply ‘describing’ something. You are being set a specific problem to think about in the light of the course learning objectives. Your task is to *argue* a case in relation to the question posed in the title. An essay has an **argument**– a point of view or thesis that it is designed to prove. Everything you say in the essay should be relevant to the argument or thesis.

As Andrew Northedge (1990) writes, ‘arguing’ in an essay is not at all the same thing as ‘having an argument’ in everyday terms. When you hear two people ‘arguing’ in normal life, there is often a hint of anger, emotion, irrationality and generalization. Your argument in an essay should aim at the opposite of these: you must be **objective, precise and logical**. **Analysis** in an essay involves identifying and critically evaluating assumptions.

You must also support your case with evidence. In order to make sure you do this in the most effective and efficient way, clarify the following points with your lecturer before you launch into essay preparation:

- The number of sources to be used
- The citation or documentation procedures required
- The length and format of the completed paper.

The writing process itself can be divided into three stages:

- Pre-writing – ie preparing to write
- Writing – ie composing a working draft
- Post-writing – ie revising, editing and proofreading

Each of these stages is examined in detail in this part of the skill development guide.

Pre-writing

Prepare to reserve up to one-third of the time allotted for pre-writing activities. Pre-writing involves:

- Narrowing the focus
- Developing a research question
- Researching
- Note-taking
- Documenting sources
- Organizing an outline

Narrowing the focus

If your lecturer has not provided you with a specific issue or aspect to investigate, your first task is to narrow the topic and isolate an important problem or a major controversy on which to focus your attention. Here's how:

- Do some preliminary reading to list some potential issues for consideration
- Brainstorm issues and exchange ideas with fellow students
- Use diagrammatic techniques to reveal connections between ideas
- Discuss your choice of focus with your professor.

This is a crucial stage of the process because the issue, aspect or feature that you select will provide the focus for your investigation. The research question that emerges from your preliminary reading and brainstorming is the beginning of your thesis, argument or point of view. The answer to the question will form your thesis, argument or point of view.

Developing a research question

Try to formulate a single, challenging question that demands analysis and argument – a question that can be stated precisely and succinctly in just one sentence. If possible, discuss the question with your professor. Knowing the research question or purpose of your essay enables the next stage of your research to be more focused and directed.

Researching and documenting sources

Use a variety of source materials, books, current journals and credible internet sites. Analyse the material to reveal a wide range of interpretations and information. Evaluate all your sources carefully for authenticity and reliability.

The evidence that you unearth in your research will fall into two broad categories:

- Factual information or data
- Ideas, judgements, inferences, theories and opinions

Part of your task as a researcher is to determine whether a piece of evidence is an established fact or a personal opinion. Here are a few tips to help you do this:

- **Read critically:** do not accept ideas and opinions blindly.

- **Be skeptical:** read between the lines and beyond the print.
- **Question continuously** as you read and examine carefully the arguments and hypotheses of the authors. Raise your own challenging questions.
- **Be objective:** a controversial topic has two sides to the argument. Always consider both perspectives and approaches before presenting your own opinion.

Ask your lecturer whether you are expected to use professional or only peer-reviewed journals.

Note taking

There are four main types of notes:

- Direct quotations (directly quoting someone else's words)
- Paraphrasing information and ideas (putting the author's ideas into your own words)
- Summarizing information and ideas
- Personal insights, comments, and questions.

The information presented in the first three bullet points above *must* be documented and acknowledged in your essay.

Documenting sources

Although many methods of documenting reports are currently in practice (Guffey & Nagle, 2007) we will discuss only one: the APA (American Psychological Association) method. The APA recommends that in-text citations (ie quotations or references to others' ideas) of fewer than 40 words should be made in the following style:

According to some OB theorists, "Invaluable as the deskilling/enskillling debates is for our understanding, it cannot help but gloss over the actual behavioural processes that surround technological change and organizational development" (Bratton, Callinan, Forshaw, & Sawchuk, 2007, p.439).

In this example, the authors' names are provided inside the parentheses at the end of the sentence. Note that the period (or full stop) comes *after* the parentheses. When you quote work by three to five authors, subsequent references can use the first named author, followed by '*et al.*' The reference above would therefore be abbreviated to read '(Bratton *et al.*, 2007, p.439)' in subsequent appearances.

An alternative approach is to include the author's name in a 'signal' phrase in your sentence. This is particularly useful if you wish to indicate the authority of the source.

"Gender," noted sociologist Judy Wajcman argues, "is woven into the very fabric of bureaucratic hierarchy and authority relations" (1998, p. 47).

The author of the quotation is clearly named in the sentence, so only the date and page number are needed in the parenthetical reference.

Note that the period (or full stop) comes after the parentheses.

At the end of your essay you should include a page entitled 'References' giving full details of all the works you have referred to in this manner. The conventions for referring to different types of resources are as follows:

Resource type	Example of reference style
Book – individual author(s)	Bratton, J. & Gold, J. (2007). <i>Human resource management: Theory and Practice</i> (4 th ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Book – corporate author(s)	Wood Gundy Ltd. (1974). <i>The Canadian Money Market</i> , Revised. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
	American Psychological Association. (1994). <i>Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association</i> (5 th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
Article in an academic journal	Charlwood, A. (2002). Why do non-union employees want to unionize? <i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i> 40 (3), 463-491.
Article in a newspaper	Lewis, D. (2003). Women mentors on the rise. <i>The Globe and Mail</i> . 12 February 12, C8.
Internet	Tillman, H. N. (1998). Evaluating quality on the net. [Online]. Available: http://www.hopetillman.com/findqual.html .

For a more comprehensive review of APA documentation go to:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_apa.html

Organizing an outline

The essay has three main parts:

- Introduction
- Body (four or more main sections)
- Conclusion.

The paragraphs below give an indication of what should be found in each section, and you should plan your essay accordingly. You may find it helpful to return to this section when you are actually writing, to remind yourself to stick to the rules!

The introduction

This should state concisely what your essay seeks to examine. It consists of the following:

- Background
- Significance
- Purpose
- Thesis statement
- Explanation of the approach you intend to take.

The introduction provides the reader with background information – for example, historical context – and establishes the direction of the essay. The background information may be descriptive, narrative, or biographical. Then you need to explain the focus (problem or issue) of the essay and its importance as a field of study. Next indicate the purpose of your essay, which shows the direction of your assignment by stating your research question. Also reveal the intellectual debate surrounding your issue by indicating the range of viewpoints. Finally state your argument or thesis (answer to your question) clearly.

The body of the essay

This must be solidly based on the topic in question. Your essay must have at least four (and almost certainly more) main paragraphs to support, explain and expand on your thesis. Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence that states clearly the main idea of the paragraph. The following sentences provide supporting details (quotations, summaries, paraphrases, your ideas). A concluding sentence sums up the paragraph and clarifies its role in the development of your thesis and may also act as a transition to the next paragraph. Transitions between paragraphs should be smooth and the presentation of ideas should flow evenly from one paragraph to another.

Remember, you are not being asked to answer the question ‘off the top of your head’ or on the basis of prior knowledge. You are being evaluated partly on how well you

demonstrate knowledge and understanding of relevant published material. You must, however, credit all sources of ideas and quotations using APA documentation style.

The conclusion

This should be brief and summarise your ideas and present any conclusions that have emerged from the discussion. Never begin with ‘In conclusion’!

Your concluding statements should add strength and credibility to the ideas presented in your introduction. They should summarise the major supporting points by linking the major conclusions that you developed in the body. It is useful to restate the research question to remind the reader of the purpose of the essay. You could also identify the broader significance of your work and/ or suggest interesting aspects for further investigation.

Your essay plan should consist of a list of major points that each section of the essay will cover.

Writing

Your only aim at this stage is to get your ideas down on paper. Don’t worry about spelling, punctuation or word choice; your aim is not to produce a ‘perfect’ draft. Refer to your essay plan if you find yourself getting stuck and, if you have a brain block, take a walk round the room and then begin again at a different part of the essay. You can come back and sort out the unfinished bits later, when a solution may be more obvious.

If possible (if you are organised enough!), put your draft aside for a day before you begin the post-writing stage.

Post-writing

Post-writing consists of revising, editing and proofreading.

Revising

Revising (meaning ‘to see again’) refers to those changes that improve the overall content or expression of ideas. Revising examines **structure** and **content**. You may uncover gaps, flaws in logic, omissions, or unnecessary details. Revision also examines **styles** (expression of ideas, word choice). The following steps may be useful:

- Review the underpinnings of your argument.
- Check the outline, major points, and supporting details.

- Review individual paragraphs' structure, length and support, focusing on:
 - Topic sentences
 - Sufficient support
 - Transitions
 - Smoothly integrated quotations, summaries, paraphrases
- Revise for style:
 - Word choice
 - Sentence variety
 - Clarity

Editing

Editing refers to changes that correct errors in mechanics; that is, failure to adhere to the rules of English. At the editing stage you should look carefully at your:

- Sentence structure
- Grammar
- Punctuation
- Spelling

Proofreading

Proofreading refers to those changes that correct formatting or typographical errors in the essay. Look carefully for any mistakes in:

- Title
- Spacing
- Page numbering
- Spelling (typos)
- Any other details that contribute to visual correctness – e.g. the format/presentation of long and short quotations

A final checklist

Before submitting your essay, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can you quickly identify your thesis – that is, your central argument?
2. Does your thesis remain evident and central throughout your essay?
3. Do you support your thesis with adequate evidence?
4. Have you answered all aspects of the question?

5. Is there a clear, logical relationship between the paragraphs?
 6. Are there 'signposts' or transitions between paragraphs?
 7. Have you avoided contractions (e.g. 'It's; couldn't')?
 8. Have you looked carefully for errors in style (e.g. sentence structure, grammar, punctuation and spelling)?
 9. Have you stated your conclusion clearly?
 10. Have you correctly documented your references using APA style?
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Sources

- Northedge, A. (1990). *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University
- Robertson, H. (1999). *The research essay: A guide to essays and papers*. Ottawa: Piperhill.
- Heller, R. (2002). *Respond in writing*. Ontario; Thomson-Nelson.