Essay Writing

A Student's Guide

MunLing Shields

SAGE Study Skills

Essay Writing

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MunLing Shields

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Introduction: How to Use this Book

Who the book is for

Students who are new to university range from young adults fresh out of school to mature adults returning to formal education after some time away. International students come from entirely different educational systems. All will have different essay writing experiences: from very recent to very little. Whatever your background, you are probably new to the UK university experience and will be concerned with meeting the expectations of this unfamiliar environment.

University essays are a specialised form of communication, with their own expectations, rules and conventions. This book seeks to do away with learning via the 'hard way' of trial and error and provide a practical, meaningful guide to developing essay writing skills. It is not just a set of instructions, however, like those you follow to put together a piece of flatpack furniture. Writing an essay is more like what a skilled craftsman does in order to create a unique and individual piece of work. This book will equip you with the know-how to be a skilled essay writer: it will tell you why things have to be done in certain ways and how this can be achieved.

Tutors in a variety of disciplines who want to help their students write better essays in their subjects may also find this book helpful. Examples and conventions can be adapted or added as appropriate for different disciplines. In addition, tutors teaching writing may find it a useful supplement, an extension of their own expertise.

This is a generic book on essay writing. It is one that all students can adopt in order to learn about writing an essay on any subject in any discipline, provided the information is used in an informed, critical way to suit the demands of their own different subjects.

What it sets out to do

The overarching aim of this book is to help you develop a solid, deep approach to learning and writing, which you can transfer to your own subjects and into your working life. Many employers hire graduates to do jobs that may seem to bear no relation to their degree course: a science graduate may be employed in events management; someone with a literature degree may get a job in public relations. That is because they believe that university graduates will be able to apply what they have gained from university study to non-discipline specific projects that will require skills such as independent learning, critical thinking and problem solving. Requiring you to write essays is one of the main ways in which universities seek to develop those important skills, and what underpins this is the notion that developing a balanced, critical argument in the form of an essay is in itself an activity which promotes learning.

If facts and information were all one gained from going to university, then the whole experience would be a waste of time and money. Facts and information are freely and easily available these days. It is what you can do with such facts and information that is important for your success both at university and in your career.

Throughout this book, therefore, you will be guided towards a deep approach to learning through the activities and reflections. A surface approach relies on memorising facts and following instructions, often without any real insight or understanding; a deep approach questions and builds on knowledge to create meaningful 'databases' of information to be used with discrimination. Writing is both a process and a product, and the two aspects are equally important. It is in itself a *learning* process, because writing about something makes you think about it in a much deeper and more focused way. That is why writing an essay is difficult – it is not just a matter of putting 'facts' on paper.

This book is written in a student-friendly and informal style. Specialist terminology will be employed at times, but it will be used in context and explained. It will take you through the essay writing process in an easy-to-follow way.

How it is organised

There are numerous ways to organise a book on essay writing and no one way will satisfy everybody. Whereas a book has to be presented in a linear, sequential way, the writing stages are recursive. I have chosen to present this book chronologically after Chapter 1: from receiving the essay assignment to handing it in. However, because a writer has to consider so many aspects of writing at the same time, information in some chapters may be revisited in others, and some information, which may seem insufficient in some chapters will be expanded on more fully in others. When giving advice on 'How?' I will try to relate it to 'Why?'

Chapter 1 provides an important overview to help you make sense of your university experience. Why is essay writing so important? And why is academic writing so rule-bound? What is expected of students? What has writing got to do with learning at university? What is a good essay? This chapter provides the over-arching *why* for essay writing.

Chapters 2 and 3 supply strategies for understanding the essay question in order to plan different essay types.

Chapters 4 to 7 deal with skills that will enable you to source information effectively, read purposefully, take and make notes, think, read and analyse critically, and use academic conventions correctly. These may seem to deviate from the main theme of writing, but remain essential enabling skills. You cannot produce an academic essay out of thin air – you have to assemble all the necessary components first. You will have had different experiences of these pre-writing skills, and thus should decide when and how you wish to use these chapters.

Chapters 8 to 11 target the skills for actually writing the essay. They include structuring, organising and presenting information in different essay types and ways of making your essay read smoothly, logically and fluently. These constitute the drafting, revising and editing stages in the writing process, and they must definitely be viewed as cyclical. The final chapter, Chapter 12, distils all the skills discussed to focus on writing an exam essay.

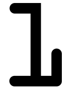
The 'Reflection and Review' section at the end of each chapter gives you further opportunities to delve deeper into the learning aspects discussed.

The activities

Where appropriate and relevant, examples and activities for reflection and engaging with the topic will be included within the main text. These are kept

to a minimum, however, as my survey indicated that most students do not have the time to attempt the many tasks often found in books of this type. These activities will help you build a clearer understanding of a particular aspect, but you will not be disadvantaged if you do not attempt them. Where answers are required these are given immediately or are to be found in 'Reflection and Review'.

The 'Reflection and Review' section also contains some suggestions and activities for further practice and for developing self-awareness, effective study and reflective skills as appropriate. Further reading and other useful resources are also provided. You are strongly advised to note what this section has to offer!



Learning and Writing at University

chapter themes

- Academic writing has to communicate.
- Essays are just one type of academic writing.
- Essay writing is a process.
- Learning at university involves more than just knowing facts.
- Assessment, marking criteria and marks reflect expectations.

Chapter 1 gives you an overview of why writing is important at university. Understanding this will put you in a better position to write more effectively as it will provide you with the background you need to make sense of why essays have to be written in a rather prescribed way. Part of this simply involves developing your understanding of what your tutors expect of you, but another very important aspect has to do with the fact that writing seriously about something is also in itself a way of learning about it.

Writing for communication, learning and assessment

Writing is a form of communication, but at university it is also used both to stimulate learning and as a basis on which to assess you. It plays a big part

in the mission of the university, which is to develop its students so that they can fulfil their potential and to award qualifications which reflect how far that potential has been fulfilled.

Facts and ideas must go into your writing, but the tutor who reads your essay will already know a lot of these – so what you actually communicate is your interpretation or understanding of the subject. This is what your tutor does not know, and it is what will persuade him or her to give your work a certain mark. At the same time, the discipline of presenting information and ideas in the form of a clear, logical argument will in itself help you to develop a deeper understanding of the issues. That is because it forces you to decide what to include and what to emphasise, how to illustrate what you mean, to make links explicit, and so on. Seeing writing in this way will help you understand why it can be a challenge, but it is also the first step in enabling you to rise to the challenge. It is thus not entirely true to think of reading and listening to lectures as the 'learning bit' and writing assignments simply as the way you can show tutors what you have learnt.

One of the most perplexing aspects of writing for students is to be given feedback which tells them that it is not clear what the essay is about. They protest, '*But it's perfectly clear to me*!' When you write an essay, it is easy to forget that you are writing both *about* a topic and *for* a reader who has certain expectations, so saying, '*Ah, but what I meant …*' – though understandable – is not acceptable. Your reader, who will usually be your tutor, will never know what you really meant unless this it is the same as what you really wrote.

Your aim in any kind of writing must be to communicate your thoughts and ideas to the intended reader(s). You should remember this even if the reader is yourself – for example, when you are writing a diary or making notes. Have you ever read some of your previous notes or parts of an old diary and had absolutely no idea what you were talking about? If your writing here was clear, you would have understood it without having to rely on your memory.

In order for optimum communication to take place, your writing at university must therefore conform to some shared standards and expectations. University codes and conventions for behaviour determine what is expected in academic writing. Tutors, researchers and students are all expected to share common ground in terms of behaviour, values and attitudes. This commonality is sometimes referred to as 'academic culture'. To be successful, you must adapt to this and be part of it. For example, universities in the UK will expect a commitment to the following:

- respect for everybody within the culture;
- respect for learning;
- respect for intellectual property;

- fairness;
- equal rights and non-discrimination;
- independent learning.

These values determine much of what is expected in academic writing. Different disciplines may emphasise or minimise different aspects of learning in the culture. For example, different subject areas may have different research traditions: some will be geared towards empirical research and will spend a lot of time doing experiments in laboratories, or working on statistical data collection and analysis. Others will focus on reading and on text and discourse analysis, others on creative output, and so on. However, all academic disciplines will subscribe to the basic principles listed above.

Effective written communication

This section examines the fundamental principles of all effective written communication, starting with a brief consideration of a form of writing we are all familiar with: personal writing.

Personal writing

activity 1.1

Pause for reflection

Write two short messages:

1 An email (or text message) to a close friend and course mate who was with you last night, and whom you have arranged to meet after class;
2 An email to your tutor (with whom you had an appointment).

In both cases you should tell them that you will not be able to meet them today because you have a bad hangover from last night.

Did you produce two identical pieces of writing? It would be very odd if you did! You were writing on the same subject in both cases, but the different readers and purposes made you compose very different messages. Although

the reasons for writing may be similar (cancelling an appointment), the purpose of one appointment was social while the other was 'business'.

This example tells us something of fundamental importance for all written communication. In order to write effectively, we always need to consider the following:

- the audience (who is the intended reader?);
- the purpose (why are you writing?).

In addition, there are two other considerations which will depend on the answers you get to the 'who' and 'why' questions above, and these are content (the 'what?') and organisation (the 'how?'). These will determine:

- your choice of information and words;
- the grammar and sentence construction;
- the mechanics (spelling, punctuation);
- the style (formal or informal way of writing).

Who? Why? What? How? are the four questions which must to be answered if you want your message to be clear – whatever type of writing you wish to produce. I will refer to these as the 'four Qs' in this chapter.

The four Qs in academic writing

We will now examine the four Qs in academic writing, to show how the 'Who?', 'Why?' and 'What?' lead to the 'How?'

- **Who (your reader):** *Who* will read your work? The main reader will be the tutor(s) of the course, who will most likely have had a hand in setting the assignment. The reader will therefore be a person who is knowledgeable about the content matter of the assignment and who has designed the task with certain expectations in mind. This is especially true of the essay. The reflective diary/journal is a tool for developing self-awareness and reflective skills and is usually assessed by both your tutor and yourself.

  Reports may also be read by other interested parties, including your course mates; reviews could be published and read by many in the field; laboratory reports are not only for your tutor, but are also records and evidence of the process and results of work or experiments you have done (especially in psychology and other sciences).
- **Why (your purpose):** *Why* do you write at university? The most obvious reason is that you have to! Written assignments are still the most common way to assess what students *know* and what they *can do*. You write because you want

to get the qualification that proves you have learnt something and can communicate this. Importantly, however, the act of writing is a learning process in itself. When you approach writing critically, you engage in a thinking and learning process which is part of the university tradition. All these are important reasons for writing at university.

To understand specifically why you have to produce a particular piece of writing you need to understand the learning outcomes of the module (see page 16). Understanding what you achieve when you successfully complete an assignment will give you a sense of satisfaction and purpose. Understanding the language of learning outcomes also means you know why assignments and essays are designed and worded in the ways they are.

- **What (the content):** The answer to the question of *what* you write is of course the content and context of your writing. Different types of writing, and even different types of essay, require you to select information in a discriminating and appropriate way. Until you have understood an essay question, you will not know what information is most relevant.
- **How (structure and style):** *How* you write refers to the way information is organised or structured and the way or style in which it is put together, and this may vary from one type of writing to another. For example, reports have a clear structure with headings and are written in a specific reporting style. They are very different from essays, which are almost always presented as continuous prose written according to academic conventions (see page 11). All academic writing is formally structured in a recognisable style, and this must be consistent and appropriate for the particular type of writing. Nevertheless, each type of writing must comply with the academic standards set by most courses, which require a more or less formal style as well as accurate grammar, spelling and punctuation.

  This academic style can be confusing to students as it can differ quite radically between different types of writing (for example, a formal essay and a reflective diary entry). Indeed, you may well need to write in more than one style within one piece of work (as when nursing students, for instance, have to reflect on practice and relate theory to practice in the same essay). To make it even more difficult, different subjects or even tutors may or may not accept stylistic variations. When in doubt, ask your tutor and look at examples of good practice.

As you can see, the question of How is very much determined by the Who, Why and What. Although you may think you only want to know about the How of writing essays, you cannot really gain a full understanding of that until you have some answers to the first three questions.

While this book covers one particular type of writing – the essay – the basic principles set out here can be applied to other types of academic writing. The four Qs may give different answers for different assignments, but they will always be useful answers.

Types of writing at university

You may be required to produce any or all of the following types of writing in an undergraduate or postgraduate course:

- summaries;
- essays;
- project reports;
- portfolios of work;
- laboratory reports;
- a dissertation;
- research papers/articles;
- exam answers;
- journal articles;
- book/chapter reviews;
- case study analyses;
- reflective journals and essays;
- reflective diaries and logs.

If you chose to arrange this list according to how formal you think each type of writing is, you would probably agree that reflective diaries and logs are the least formal and research papers and articles the most formal. Each type on this list differs from the others. Therefore you should know what each one requires you to do before you attempt it. Essays belong to the more formal end and are the focus of this book, but it is useful here to point out some of the main differences between three common types of formal academic writing.

Three common types of academic writing

One of the first writing assignments that students face is a report or an essay. One of the last and most important will often be a dissertation. These are discussed together in this section because they are each formal and have similar formal characteristics, but they are also different.

It is important for you to know the differences between an essay and a report early on while at university. How frustrating it is to be told 'You have written a report instead of an essay as instructed'. These are considered here for this very reason, but also in order to answer the question that must be foremost in many students' minds when reading a book on essay writing: 'What *is* an academic essay?'

- **Similarities between essays and reports**

  Reports and essays (and dissertations) all require:

  - a formal style – this is a prerequisite of most academic writing;
  - a formal structure – namely, an introduction, a main part and a conclusion;
  - analytical thinking – that is, argument which shows you have analysed the information from your reading or research in a critical way;

  - careful proofreading and neat presentation – this means your work must be free from typographic errors and grammar and spelling mistakes, and should be wordprocessed.

- **Differences between a report and an essay**
  Table 1.1 summarises the *main* differences between a report and an essay. However, it must be stressed that there are many types of reports and different essay types, and therefore you need to be prepared for crossovers.

Table 1.1 Main differences between a report and an essay

	Report	*Essay*
Purpose	To convey specific information	To show how well you have understood the question and how well you are able to answer it
Purpose	To present information, data, results of research	To present an argument or ideas in response to the essay question
Reader/Purpose	Is meant to be read quickly	Is meant to be read carefully
Structure/Style	Is structured into sections with different headings	Is structured as an argument in one piece of prose with clear Introduction, Body and Conclusion
Format/Style	Uses numbered headings and subheadings	Does not usually use numbered sections
Referencing/Style	May not need in-text citations and bibliography/reference list (depending on type of report)	Always needs in-text citations and bibliography/reference list
Structure/Style	Uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet points where applicable	Links ideas into cohesive paragraphs
Visuals/Style	Uses visuals wherever necessary (tables, graphs, illustrations)	Rarely uses visuals
Style/Writing	May be written using a mixture of styles	Is usually written in one (formal) style
Structure	May need an abstract (sometimes called an executive summary)	Will only need an abstract if very long, or if tutor asks for one
Structure	Often contains several conclusions, depending on the terms of reference (aims and purposes)	Will contain a conclusion which answers the question
Structure	May end with recommendations and/or appendices	Seldom has recommendations or appendices

The terms used to describe an essay will be made clear in the course of this book. As you can see from the row in the table on format/style, an essay will not even *look* like a report at all. They look different because they have different functions. In many ways, reports are easier to write – facts are communicated

in a straightforward, direct way and they follow a more or less standard structure. Essays demand a more skilful use of structure and language in order to sustain very varied arguments.

Although these differences can be summarised, as with all generic and generalised information, it is best for you to find out exactly what your own department, course and tutor expect. Some courses and tutors may expect or accept headings, subheadings and diagrams in their students' essays, particularly in such subjects as Business, Design, Technology and Health.

- **The dissertation compared to the report and essay**

The dissertation is a challenging and exciting piece of work that awaits most of you in your final year at university. It demands that you use the skills of research, writing, critical thinking, time management, etc. that you have been developing in the first two years, and certainly all the information you can get for the topic you have chosen. It is helpful to know, even if you are only in your first year, how your writing skills are being developed towards writing this extended piece of writing. I often hear students say 'I've never written a dissertation before': yes, but neither has anybody else as they start their third year. However, everyone should have written essays, reports and other types of academic writing. Ask yourself the four Qs each time you are faced with producing an unfamiliar type of academic writing.

Unlike essays and reports, the question, topic, terms of reference and purpose of your dissertation will usually be determined by you and not your tutor, although their approval will probably have had to be sought. You will be expected by Year 3 to have reached the sort of academic maturity required to put together an extended piece of work, usually of between 5,000 and 8,000 words, for an undergraduate dissertation. The length of the dissertation means that it must be divided into chapters, with appropriate headings, subheadings and numbering. From this point of view, it looks like a report.

The table below is based on Table 1.1, and the middle and right-hand columns illustrate the characteristics of a dissertation that are also found in a report and essay.

Table 1.2 Characteristics of a dissertation

	Dissertations may have these features	
	in common with Reports	*in common with Essays*
Purpose	To convey specific information	To show how well you have put together a research project to answer the research question(s) you posed
Purpose	To present information, data, results of research	To present an argument or ideas in response to the research question

Table 1.2 (Continued)

	Dissertations may have these features	
	in common with Reports	*in common with Essays*
Reader/Purpose	Is meant to be read quickly (the abstract)	Is meant to be read carefully (the argument)
Structure/Style	Is structured into sections or chapters with different headings	Is structured as an argument
Format/Style	Uses numbered headings and subheadings	
Structure/Style	Uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet points where appropriate (e.g., under certain headings like Recommendations)	Links ideas into cohesive paragraphs
Referencing/Style		Always needs in-text citations and bibliography/reference list
Visuals/Style	Uses visuals wherever necessary (tables, graphs, illustrations)	
Style/Writing	Written using a mixture of styles (e.g., Presentation of Data *vs* Literature Review sections)	Written in one (formal) style
Structure	Needs an abstract or summary	
Structure	Often contains several conclusions, depending on the research questions/focus	Will contain conclusions in keeping with the argument
Structure	May end with a recommendation/ discussion section and appendices	

Depending on the topic and discipline, a dissertation may look and read more like a report or a long critical essay. Although report and dissertation writing is not the focus of this book, the essay writing skills and strategies that are covered in depth are all transferable to other types of academic writing. Throughout this book it will be emphasised that when you learn how to write using the deep approach to writing and learning (see page 16), you will be better able to see the connections between known and new situations, events or knowledge, and to learn more effectively. Whatever academic writing is required, it is helpful to start with a consideration of the process.

The writing process

Many books on writing mention four stages in the process of academic writing: Pre-writing, Drafting, Revising and Editing. These steps must not

be seen as separate and unrelated – to be approached in a linear fashion. Rather, they must operate in a cyclical fashion and overlap. This book is organised according to these stages.

The four stages

Pre-writing, as the name suggests, involves the preparation for writing. For any particular assignment this is the stage where ideas are generated, and will include:

- reading the assignment carefully;
- analysing it;
- drawing up a rough plan;
- sourcing the necessary data/information;
- reading widely, and reading in depth;
- taking and making notes;
- discussing ideas and information with others;
- refining the plan, and so on.

It is at the pre-writing stage that you bring into play skills which may not be seen as 'writing' skills in themselves, but which will nevertheless have a great impact on the quality of your writing. You cannot write a good academic essay unless you also have the enabling skills of reading and research, note-making, paraphrasing and summary writing. These skills are dealt with in this book for this very reason.

In practice, ideas are often generated as you write, and exploring such newly developed ideas will often require you to revisit some aspects of pre-writing. When you write, the fact that you have to express and communicate ideas on paper forces you to think more deeply about them.

You are ready to start **drafting** parts of your essay when you think you know the shape which it will take and are confident that you have acquired enough information to put it together. Drafting involves:

- Arranging your ideas into some kind of structure to give your essay a shape.
- Writing paragraphs to connect your ideas. Although thinking and planning are essential, the act of writing will create changes. As you start to put words on paper and connect them up, they take on a life of their own, and you might have to change direction or implement new ideas.
- Thinking about form and function, namely the language and style you will use. However, at this creative stage, it may be that you do not want to worry too much about the mechanics of writing such as spelling or even well-formed sentences.

When drafting, you may want to spill everything out in creative surges, completing your first draft in one sitting using your notes; or you may choose to write a couple of paragraphs at a time, filling in the gaps in your original plan. There is no one right way – only what you prefer and what the situation dictates. However, it is not advisable to delay the first complete draft for too long as you might lose your train of thought or change your mind too drastically. It is far better to complete a first draft as soon as possible, leave it for a while, and then come back to it with a fresh mind for the next stage. Indeed you may need to go through a few rough drafts before you find the best approach.

Revising involves re-drafting or re-writing, and even re-planning. This is rather more focused than writing the first draft. You now have a clearer idea of what you want to say, and you should start thinking more about your reader and purpose. You may perhaps need to refine your argument or examine the supporting evidence. To do this, you might have to make your writing clearer by re-organising, re-phrasing, re-examining your views, and so on.

Reading your essay aloud or having someone else read it are some of the methods that students may employ at this stage. Some writers revise as they go along, while others wait until they have finished the first complete draft. Again, there is no single right way of doing this.

Editing is the final, very important step before you hand in your assignment, and you may have already edited partially as you were writing. This is when you need to take on board any feedback you have received and:

- check that you have followed all the conventions, rules and instructions of your course/subject/department;
- check your spelling, punctuation, grammar and references – both in the text and in the bibliography;
- consider the presentation (or layout) of your essay.

Evidence of editing is often missing in student assignments that have been put together in haste, perhaps the night before. You stand to receive a lower mark than your hard work deserves if you do not go through this step conscientiously.

This brings us to the question of marks: the most important aspect for you. How can you get the best mark possible? You will get the best mark when you are able to show that you have learnt what was expected of you from the course. Writing an academic essay carries you through the learning process; the final product reflects how well you have learnt. You will need to use a whole range of intellectual or cognitive skills when you write an essay as well as a whole range of approaches, techniques and strategies to learn (and therefore to write) better.

Getting the best mark

The surface and deep approaches to learning

Learning is not just about the acquisition of facts, and at university it is certainly not about simply memorising and regurgitating them in exams and assignments. If you believe this, you may not spend enough time reflecting on and assimilating the knowledge gained and too much time collecting facts and trying to remember them. This is the *surface approach* to learning and it may indeed help you do a reasonable job in objective tests, where the answers required are either wrong or right. However, in essay writing the emphasis lies not on how many facts you have collected on the topic, but on how well you are able to put the relevant information together to answer the question posed.

When facts are remembered discretely, connections between new and existing knowledge are often missed. Connections across different modules in a programme may not be made and you may see them as separate instead of connected entities. Effective learners can relate the new and the known and fall back on life experiences and are able to look at facts objectively and critically. They take the *deep approach* to learning which demands more effort and time. Understanding how best to learn – and particularly the part that reflection plays – can help you learn more effectively.

Most learning theories would concur that learning effectively involves reflecting on an activity or experience both before and after it happens. In the last 20 years, there has been considerable movement towards making the act of reflection a focus in itself in higher education, bringing it to the fore by introducing reflective tasks and writing into the academic regime. Previously, reflective writing was mainly something that professionals such as teachers and nurses were encouraged to consciously engage in. Many disciplines now encourage their students to reflect in a more conscious, deliberate and structured way by using portfolios, learning journals or diaries for their set tasks. However, you should be aware that reflection on its own is not enough to promote learning – you must act on your reflections.

If you want to know about learning theories and your learning style preferences, the 'Reflection and Review' section at the end of this chapter offers some further investigation.

Understanding learning outcomes

University assignments try to direct you towards developing the deep approach to learning. All modules have stated learning outcomes, and these will have been very carefully developed by tutors, in some cases in consultation

with staff from other universities. Assessments, including essays, will refer to these learning outcomes, and information about them will be provided with module descriptors.

Some students may not read these module descriptors carefully, which is a pity because everything they need to know about a module is reflected there: the number of hours involved, who is teaching it, the syllabus, and the modes and deadlines of assessments. The terms 'learning objectives' and 'learning outcomes' inform you about what the course aims to do and what you will have learnt on successful completion. Examples 1.1 to 1.3 below show how learning outcomes are presented to students at different levels.

example 1.1

Learning outcomes: level 1 module

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

1 describe or define concepts and cosmological terms from the syllabus and so demonstrate a broad awareness of simple concepts in cosmology;
2 solve elementary problems in basic cosmology;
3 summarise scientific information and concepts and draw conclusions;
4 use library or online resources to research a scientific topic;
5 collate material from a variety of sources and write a coherent essay in this subject area.

example 1.2

Learning outcomes: level 2 module

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

1 describe the contents and discuss the complexities of the overall structure of the Milky Way;

(Continued)

2 explain the physical principles and processes involved in the Galaxy's evolution and relate them to its present-day structure;
3 solve numerical problems in this subject area (for example, relating to the dynamics of the component stars or involving the interplay of a number of physical processes);
4 plan, research and produce a structured scientific essay in this subject area;
5 analyse conceptual problems, make inferences and provide reasoned arguments to justify the conclusions drawn.

example 1.3

Learning outcomes: level 3 module

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

1 analyse the scientific motivation for current initiatives in astronomy research;
2 analyse how scientific objectives drive the planning and development of major research programmes;
3 prepare a critical literature review of a current research topic;
4 critically assess information and concepts and draw conclusions from them;
5 use IT resources at a high level to deliver a scientifically mature seminar;
6 summarise and communicate scientific ideas.

(Examples 1.1–1.3 are from the module catalogue *studyastronomy.com* of the School of Computing, Engineering and Physical Sciences, University of Central Lancashire, available at www.studyastronomy.com/uploads/files/modulecatalogue.pdf, accessed 15 January 2009.)

Note the verbs used in the descriptions of the learning outcomes in the examples. Learning outcomes are not written arbitrarily: they are based on theories about how knowledge is acquired. The verbs describe what students are capable of doing cognitively or intellectually if they succeed in the assignments set for each level. You will notice, for example, that the Level 1 outcomes

use verbs like ‘describe or define’; at Level 2, ‘describe … and discuss’; and at Level 3, ‘analyse’ and ‘critically assess’. Essay questions are also set using these verbs, as you will see in Chapter 2.

The ‘Reflection and Review’ section provides further reading to help you understand the concept of learning outcomes and the different levels of learning (for example, Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive domain).

Learning expectations and marking criteria

The learning outcomes of a course set out what students will be able to do if they pass the assessments set for the course. Learning expectations are what tutors expect from student assessments to show that they have achieved the learning outcomes, and the extent to which they are judged to have done so will be reflected in the marks awarded for each assignment.

Tutors will usually explain these expectations by providing their students with a Marking Criteria guide, which also clarifies how the marks correspond to the criteria. Be sure you understand the marking criteria for each piece of written work, as these may vary from course to course.

What does your mark mean? Generally, essays are marked out of 100 per cent and the mark divisions correspond to the degree classes as shown below:

Table 1.3 Degree class percentages

Mark	*Degree class*	*Characteristics*
70% and above	Class 1	Distinction, excellent – has met all the criteria and achieved all the learning outcomes.
60–69%	Class 2.1	Good, above average – has met most of the criteria and achieved most of the learning outcomes.
50–59%	Class 2.2	Satisfactory, average – has met the essential criteria and achieved some of the learning outcomes.
40–49%	Class 3	Below average – has met some of the criteria but has not achieved some of the essential learning outcomes.
Below 40%	Fail	Has not met most of the criteria and not achieved the essential learning outcomes.

Essay Marking Criteria What are the ‘criteria’ mentioned above? A Marking Criteria guide will normally cite the following criteria:

- *Relevance*: of the answer to the question, or whether it has been fully understood and answered.
- *Knowledge*: accuracy of information, appropriateness of facts and ideas, breadth of reading and use of literature.
- *Analysis*: of evidence – appropriateness and quality of argumentation and critical evaluation.
- *Argument and Structure*: the structure and organisation of the main argument in the essay.
- *Originality*: of ideas, aims, approaches, conclusions; independent thinking.
- *Presentation*: quality of writing (style, spelling, punctuation, grammar and referencing).

An essay may not meet all the criteria to the same degree and thus the final mark may be based on an overall assessment of its strengths and weaknesses against the different criteria. Obviously, if an essay does not answer the question posed at all, it will fail – no matter how well written it may be.

Tutors use guidelines to assess the criteria for marking essays and also to explain and justify the mark allocated. Table 1.4 on pages 21–22 shows how one course uses a grid for such a purpose. This grid explains how the overall final mark was arrived at by describing performance against each criterion. If you know what the criteria are, you can evaluate your essay before you hand it in to make sure you have done your best to satisfy them. You will also be able to learn from your mistakes when you receive feedback on how well you performed against each criterion and to seek specific help or support to improve if necessary.

The relevance of academic writing

The words *theoretical* and *academic* are sometimes used pejoratively in the sense of 'irrelevant' or 'of no practical value'. And it is true that unless you choose to remain in academic circles, you might never again have to write another essay once you graduate. In reality, however, and particularly if you are able to adopt the deep approach to learning, the skills you develop when writing at university will all be transferable to and desirable in your future life and career. These include research skills, logical and critical thinking skills, clear expression, independent learning, communication skills, organisational skills, time and task management skills, self-awareness, reflective skills, and many others. Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, academic writing is a highly relevant aspect of self-development.

Table 1.4 Essay marking criteria

Mark	*Relevance*	*Analysis*	*Argument and Structure*	*Originality*	*Knowledge*	*Language/ Presentation*
70% and above	Directly relevant to the task; also able to address the implications, assumption and nuances of the topic.	In-depth analysis of the evidence, arguments or other material considered, resulting in clear and illuminating conclusions.	Coherent and logical structure, making creative use of an appropriate mode of argument and/or theoretical models(s).	Distinctive work, showing independent thought and critical engagement with alternative views.	Makes effective use of an excellent knowledge base and shows thorough understanding of relevant material.	Very well written with standard spelling and syntax, lucid and resourceful style, and appropriate format and bibliography.
60–69%	Directly relevant to the task.	Good analysis, clear and orderly.	Generally coherent and logically structured; appropriate mode of argument and/or theoretical model(s).	May contain some distinctive or independent thinking; may begin to formulate an independent position.	A substantial knowledge of relevant material showing a clear grasp of themes, questions and issues.	Well written with standard spelling and syntax, a readable style, and acceptable format and bibliography.
50–59%	Some attempt to address the task; some less focused parts.	Some analytical treatment, but may be prone to description or to narrative which lacks clear analytical purpose.	Some attempt to construct a coherent argument, but may suffer loss of focus and consistency, with issues stated vaguely or model(s) couched in simplistic terms.	Sound work but expresses a personal position only in broad terms and in uncritical conformity to one or more standard views of the topic.	Adequate knowledge of a fair range of relevant material with intermittent evidence of an appreciation of its significance.	Competently written with only minor lapses in syntax and spelling, with acceptable format and bibliography.

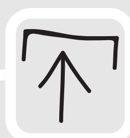
(Continued)

Table1.4 (Continued)

Mark	*Relevance*	*Analysis*	*Argument and Structure*	*Originality*	*Knowledge*	*Language/ Presentation*
40–49%	Relevance to the topic intermittent; issues reduced to their vaguest and least challenging terms.	Largely descriptive or narrative, with little evidence of analytical skill.	A basic argument may be evident, but tends to be supported by assertion only and lacking clarity and coherence.	Largely derivative; no personal view is adequately formed.	Limited understanding of a narrow range of material.	Poorly written, with significant deficiencies in expression, format and bibliography that may hinder the reader.
0–39%	Complete irrelevance to requirements.	Inadequate and often inaccurate description and paraphrase.	No evidence of coherent argument or structure.	No evidence of personal thought; cursory paraphrase/ quotation, or mostly plagiarised.	Lack of basic knowledge necessary for understanding of the topic.	Mostly garbled and negligently presented.

chapter summary

- You are expected to communicate effectively in academic writing.
- Different types of academic writing will make different demands.
- Essay writing is a process and each stage is purposeful.
- The process is cyclical and develops the learning as well as the writing experience.
- It is necessary to understand the criteria used for marking your essay in order to understand the mark awarded and to learn from the feedback.



reflection and review

The activities and suggestions that follow invite you to review the current skills, preferences or approaches you have in relation to writing; Activity 5 explains learning outcomes and learning levels with reference to Bloom's taxonomy and Activity 6 offers suggestions for starting to develop a proactive way of learning to write independently while at university.

1: Current writing skills

Rate how good you are in the following skills needed for essay writing at university from 1 (= poor) to 5 = (excellent):

1 taking and making notes from reading
2 reading critically
3 analysing essay questions
4 organising information
5 structuring an essay
6 writing good paragraphs
7 writing good introductions and conclusions
8 using critical analysis in your writing
9 writing in an appropriate academic style
10 referencing
11 writing a bibliography
12 revising and editing your work
13 writing exam essays.

(Continued)

From your ratings, what can you conclude about your essay writing skills? How would you go about developing those skills that you have rated as poor?

2: SWOT analysis

SWOT (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, **T**hreats) analysis was developed as a tool for assessing the environment of a business to enable decision making and development. It is used here as a means to assess your own personal environment and how this affects your learning and writing in an academic situation.

- *Strengths* include any relevant experience and know-how which you possess, as well as personal qualities.
- *Weaknesses* may be negative experiences and beliefs with regard to learning and writing, or the lack of certain skills.
- *Opportunities* are resources available at university and elsewhere and life and study opportunities to help you succeed.
- *Threats* include any circumstances and situations that may hinder your will or ability to succeed.

Note that strengths and weaknesses are personal factors. These can be harnessed, managed or changed. Opportunities and threats are external circumstances or forces. They include factors like health or responsibilities which may be outside your control.

Table 1.5 SWOT analysis for developing academic learning and writing skills

Strengths: my qualities, experience, knowledge	**Weaknesses**: what I do not have confidence in; any negative attitudes
Opportunities: what is available to help me; what will open up to me if I succeed	**Threats**: what can hinder and weaken my chances of success

Work on your Weaknesses; utilise your Strengths; make use of Opportunities to cultivate and motivate yourself; minimise Threats by pre-empting them.

3: Time management

Your university webpages will probably have tips about time management. This is an important aspect of being a successful student – you must be able to manage the deadlines for all your assessments and everything that completing them entails. Manchester University: (see www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/**time_management**/ accessed 19 May 2009) has some useful information on this.

In addition, to begin with, a good strategy would be to analyse how you actually use your time. Draw a 24/7 grid like the one in Table 1.6 and fill it in conscientiously for a couple of weeks. Include everything you do for every hour of

Table 1.6 24/7 Time monitor

	a.m.																							p.m.
Time / *Day*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*
Mon																								
Tues																								
Weds																								
Thurs																								
Fri																								
Sat																								
Sun																								

(Continued)

each day. Then look at how you spent your time and reflect on what was time-wasting and how you could cut down on this.

4: Learning Styles: Felder–Silverman

In 1988, a Learning Styles Model was developed by two educationists called Felder and Silverman. The model details eight learning styles on four axes. The four axes can be mapped onto four stages of learning (Doing, Reviewing, Concluding, Planning). When you are faced with new information, how do you prefer to approach it: learn it, use it, make it your own? On each axis, you will fall into one of the two learner types and will also have a preference for one axis on which to operate.

Table 1.7 The Felder–Silverman Learning Styles Model

Axis	*Learner type*	*Learner type*
1 Sensing or Intuitive (experiencing new information mode) DOING	Sensing (SEN) Likes: learning facts, solving problems in a straightforward way Dislikes: complications, surprises	Intuitive (INT) Likes: discovering connections and possibilities, innovation Dislikes: repetition, drawn out explanations
2 Visual or Verbal (presentation of new information mode) REVIEWING	Visual (VIS) Likes: being able to see – pictures, diagrams, charts, films, demonstrations	Verbal (VRB) Likes: words – both written and spoken
3 Active or Reflective (making sense of new information mode) CONCLUDING	Active (ACT) Likes: doing something with the information; working in groups	Reflective (REF) Likes: thinking about the information by him/herself; working alone
4 Global or Sequential (structuring new information mode) PLANNING	Global (GLO) Likes: learning in big jumps; knowing the big picture first	Sequential (SEQ) Likes: learning in logical, linear steps

(Adapted from: University of Central Lancashire's Employability Pack)

Go to the website sponsored by the North Carolina State University for its faculty and students. Dr Richard Felder's webpage provides a very comprehensive discussion of learning styles (http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Learning_ Styles.html accessed 17 January 2009). Find the page called *Index of Learning Styles* and do the test. When you submit this, a results sheet will be generated for you which will describe the type of learner you are. You can then click on *Learning Styles Description* and you will be told how you can improve your learning.

There are various other learning styles questionnaires and inventories which are available in some study skills textbooks as well as online, and the website www.businessballs.com is a useful resource if you are interested in learning theories and learning styles.

5: Levels of learning: Bloom's taxonomy

The table below is adapted from W. Bloom et al.'s taxonomy of the cognitive domain. You will be in a much better position to understand what is expected of you when you write an essay if you have a fuller understanding of what underlies those expectations. Bloom's taxonomy sets out what is now widely accepted by educators as the basis for planning courses and writing learning objectives and outcomes, and by tutors for setting essay questions. It is named after the educator who developed it. A taxonomy is a kind of categorisation.

In the table below, reading down, there are six levels of cognition in the left-hand column. The column in the middle explains what each means, and the other column contains samples of verbs used for writing learning outcomes (as above), and also those that are often used in essay questions. The table sets out what is expected when operating at each cognitive level. As students progress from their first to their final years, they will move through all the levels and will be assessed to ascertain their ability for each one. Level 1 is the most basic level, level 6 the most advanced.

Table 1.8 Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain

LEVEL (6 = most complex; 1 = least complex)	*EXPLANATION*	*SAMPLE VERBS*	
6. EVALUATION	Appraises, assesses, or critiques on the basis of specific standards and criteria	judge recommend	critique justify
5. SYNTHESIS	Originates, integrates, and combines ideas into a product, plan or proposal	create design	develop
4. ANALYSIS	Distinguishes, classifies and relates the assumptions, hypotheses, evidence or structure of a statement or question	analyse categorise	compare contrast
3. APPLICATION	Selects, transfers and uses data and principles to complete a problem or task	solve demonstrate	apply construct
2. COMPREHENSION	Translates, comprehends or interprets information based on prior learning	explain summarise paraphrase	describe illustrate
1. KNOWLEDGE	Recalls or recognises information, ideas, and principles	list name	state define

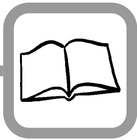
(Adapted from: Huitt, W. (2004) Bloom et al.'s taxonomy of the cognitive domain. Educational Psychology Interactive. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved 14 November 2008, from http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/bloom.html)

(Continued)

6: Writing Information File

Here is a suggestion for something you can do to enable you to relate information from this book to your own course and use it for your own needs: start a 'Writing Information File' for your modules. Collect whatever information you think is relevant to understanding what is required of you at this point, and also any useful writing resources. Here are some examples:

- module handbooks – read these and then ask questions about what is not clear;
- collate information for essay writing assignments;
- note the differences in expectations;
- list any useful university sources;
- list any useful web sources;
- look at the types of writing required on your course and find some samples from the library or archives in your department or from your tutors.

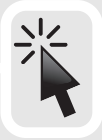


further reading

Morley-Warner, T. (2000) *Academic Writing is* ... Sydney: CREA Publications.

2

Answering the Essay Question



chapter themes

- Using the A-List to analyse the question.
- Understanding different types of instruction words.
- Different types of essays.

In this chapter, we begin the discussion of the writing process in greater depth, starting with the first stage: pre-writing. What do you do when you receive your first essay assignment? You may know of friends who will go and get all the recommended reading from the library and start reading up on all the topics, or some who will wait till the last few days before the deadline, panic, and then choose a question at random and skim through a couple of books. So how do you begin an essay assignment to make sure it answers the question posed?

Finding a focus

Both of the extremes mentioned above are to be avoided. Instead, you should read all the questions carefully as soon as possible and choose one (or two) in an area that interests you especially. Not such a difficult start, is it?

Having chosen the question which you want to answer – what next? Would you immediately set about reading everything on the topic? Start writing? Spend some time thinking about it? Make a time plan? Make an essay plan? Plan every paragraph you are going to write in detail? You might choose a particular approach because of your preferred working style, or perhaps because of circumstances. But how you approach your essay will invariably affect the final product.

Lecturers often comment that some student essays show a lot of potential as far as knowledge and facts go. However, these sometimes receive low marks despite the work that has clearly gone into them. Here are some common feedback comments.

- The essay lacks focus – it does not really answer the question.
- The essay is not organised or structured in a cohesive, easy-to-follow way.
- There is a lack of direction.
- There is a lot of information, but it is not clear how it contributes to the development of the answer.
- The ideas are not clearly linked.
- The connection between paragraphs is unclear.
- The essay is too descriptive – more critical analysis is needed.
- The wrong style has been used.

So how do you develop a focus? How do you organise? How do you know you are using the right style and language? All these concerns can be addressed if you understand the question fully. If your analysis of the question is not accurate or is incomplete, you might get quite a few of these negative feedback comments. In the worst case, an essay does not answer the question at all and so it fails. This illustrates how important it is to get things right from the very beginning.

If you have been given a very broad topic to write an essay (such as 'Tourism' or 'The effects of global warming'), you must find a focus yourself by asking yourself what it is you want to explore and talk about and give your opinion on, and then specify this explicitly at the very start of your essay. You could also write your own question on the topic to answer if this is what your tutor has told you to do.

Understanding the question

In Chapter 1, you saw that essay questions are set for a purpose – because tutors want their students to look at facts in a certain way to fulfil certain educational objectives. You are expected to be able to present relevant knowledge as directed by the question. Apart perhaps from the first assignments set for Year 1 students, university essays tend not to have general titles such as

'Environmental Pollution' or 'Management Styles', and instead will take the form of carefully worded questions.

In order to focus on what is wanted by the question, you will have to break it up and look at the parts closely. To understand why you have to go through this procedure, you need to understand that essay questions may not be as transparent and straightforward as they seem at first glance. They usually demand more than you think. Spending a little time thinking about the question is likely to make the rest of your work more straightforward, and ensure a better final product.

Explicit and implicit demands of questions

Explicit demands are expressed in those words that are usually easy to identify as important when considering how to answer the question – words such as 'discuss', 'review', 'evaluate', and so on. These will be the terms that catch your eye immediately on reading the question.

Implicit demands are what lie behind these and other words and what you may have to consider in order to understand exactly what the question wants you to do.

Essay questions usually require you to recognise not only what is explicitly expressed in the question, but also what else is implied. The following are quite easily identifiable in an essay question:

- **Subject/Topic** – what is the question on?
- **Instruction** – which word(s) tell(s) me what I should do?
- **Focus** – which aspect of the topic or subject do I need to focus on?

However, within these explicitly expressed demands there may also lurk implicit demands, and the only way to get at these is to delve more deeply. To illustrate, here is an essay question to analyse.

> Discuss the issues that new international students have to face in UK universities.

Even a cursory read will identify the following explicit demands:

- **Subject/Topic** – new international students.
- **Instruction** – discuss.
- **Focus** – the issues these students face.

If you choose to address only these explicit demands, you might be thinking that your essay should be a list of the issues. However, if this is all you present you will not get a very good mark.

For a start, you have to know what it is you must do in order to 'discuss' in this essay. 'Discuss' here requires you to review the issues, not list them. You have got to say something about the issues – but what exactly?

A more thoughtful approach will reveal the implicit demands. You could make the following observations and ask questions about what lies behind words such as: ‘new’ – what are the issues that only *new* students face? Are there issues that are common to all students, but which new students may find more difficult to deal with? Also ‘international’ – are the issues relevant to all international students, regardless of where they come from?

What issues are specific to new, international students? Are there issues that are common to all new students but which international students may find more difficult? ‘UK universities’ – are the issues specific to *UK* universities; might they not apply to universities in the students’ own countries? What are the differences and similarities? ‘Discuss’ – how do you organise what you want to say about the issues?

When you analyse the question closely it will become clearer – but the answer may also become less straightforward than you first thought! You can begin to see the related issues that may have to be clarified; terms that need defining and explaining; a chain of cause and effect, and so on. You might also suspect that you should not just write an essay listing and describing all the issues; you will need to have a line of reasoning or argument and then organise the information in a logical way to enable your reader to follow it.

How you meet these implicit demands will impact on the way you approach the essay, what you should read and write about, and how you organise the information. It will of course also impact on your mark.

Many students do not go beyond addressing the explicit demands of the essay question and as a result will have too much or too little information. Those students who choose to write down everything they can get their hands on will also put themselves in danger of plagiarising others’ work unknowingly. Beware the dangers of going online and cutting and pasting information that looks relevant or copying from books and articles. It is not the amount of information you have that will impress the marker, but the relevance of the information and what you do with it.

Question and instruction words

Most essay titles contain question or instruction words. It is what these words require you to do in your essay that makes the implicit demands. Sometimes a ‘question’ will be phrased as a statement, for example ‘Giving unemployment benefits to people causes more problems than it solves’. The instruction word you have to add for yourself in order to write a balanced essay on this is ‘Discuss’.

The common question words are the ‘wh-’ words: *why*? *what*? *where*? *when*? *who*? and *how*? Essay questions using these words will usually have two

parts, the first of which is a question, and the second an instruction word to make the question more specific, such as:

What ... ? followed by: *Describe ..., Explain ..., Discuss ...*, etc.
Example: 'What are the ways to prevent the spread of viruses? Discuss with reference to the nature of viruses'.

Why ...? followed by: *Explain ..., Compare and contrast ..., Discuss ...*, etc.
Example: 'Why is it important to eat a well-balanced diet? Explain by comparing different body needs at different stages of human life'.

How ...? followed by: *Describe ..., Explain ..., Discuss ...*, etc.
Example: 'How is weather predicted? Describe a typical weather prediction for the next day and one for five days'.

When we ask questions orally, we do not usually use instruction words. Instead we tend to use the familiar question words and prompt with other words when further clarification is necessary. When writing, you must make sure you understand exactly what all the words in the question require you to do. Activity 2.1 is to test your understanding of some common instruction words followed by a table giving you the answers.

activity 2.1

How well do you know what instruction words mean? Match the instruction word in Column 1 with its meaning in Column 2.

	Instruction words		*Meanings (scrambled)*
1	**Analyse**	(A)	Use examples from a range of sources to demonstrate your understanding of the subject.
2	**Assess**	(B)	Explain various perspectives and present a logical argument.
3	**Compare**	(C)	Weigh up the importance, success or value of something with evidence to support your view.
4	**Contrast**	(D)	Write down the main points relating to the subject.
5	**Critique**	(E)	Break up an issue/event into its component parts and explain how these relate to one another.
6	**Define**	(F)	Give a detailed account, questioning and exploring the relevant issues.
7	**Describe**	(G)	Point out the limitations and usefulness of the subject in question.
8	**Discuss**	(H)	Explain the precise meaning of something.

(Continued)

Instruction words		Meanings (scrambled)	
9	**Evaluate**	(I)	Consider the importance or value of something.
10	**Examine**	(J)	Concentrate on the differences.
11	**Explain**	(K)	Examine the similarities and differences.
12	**Illustrate**	(L)	Examine how a topic has been studied and comment on the value and limitations of its treatment.
13	**Justify or prove**	(M)	Connect the main points/issues in a cohesive, concise way.
14	**Review**	(N)	Explore the case for and against a claim.
15	**State**	(O)	Give a detailed account of a topic.
16	**Summarize**	(P)	Give a precise account, with reasons for why or how it is as it is.
17	**To what extent ...**	(Q)	Make a case for a particular perspective. Establish the truth through supporting evidence or logical reasoning.

Now check your answers with the table below.

Did you manage to match the instruction words with their meanings easily? You may have found that some of the words seemed to overlap in meaning, and taken out of context were difficult to differentiate. 'Assess' and 'evaluate' may be tricky to distinguish, for example; and 'discuss' perhaps seems to be more than just 'explain'. If you had these reservations, congratulations! You are exercising your critical abilities and you are absolutely right. How much simpler it would be for essay writers if there were formulae available for answers!

Table 2.1 Common instruction words in essay questions and what they usually mean

Instruction words		Meanings	
1	**Analyse**	(E)	Break up an issue/event into its component parts and explain how these relate to one another.
2	**Assess**	(I)	Consider the importance or value of something.
3	**Compare**	(K)	Examine the similarities and differences.
4	**Contrast**	(J)	Concentrate on the differences.
5	**Critique**	(G)	Point out the limitations and usefulness of the subject in question.
6	**Define**	(H)	Explain the precise meaning of something.
7	**Describe**	(O)	Give a detailed account of a topic.
8	**Discuss**	(B)	Explain various perspectives and present a logical argument.
9	**Evaluate**	(C)	Weigh up the importance, success or value of something with evidence to support your view.

Table 2.1 (Continued)

Instruction words	*Meanings*
10 Examine	(F) Give a detailed account, questioning and exploring the relevant issues.
11 Explain	(P) Give a precise account, with reasons for why or how it is as it is.
12 Illustrate	(A) Use examples from a range of sources to demonstrate your understanding of the subject.
13 Justify or prove	(Q) Make a case for a particular perspective. Establish the truth through supporting evidence or logical reasoning.
14 Review	(L) Examine how a topic has been studied and comment on the value and limitations of its treatment.
15 State	(D) Write down the main points relating to the subject.
16 Summarise	(M) Connect the main points/issues in a cohesive, concise way.
17 To what extent ...	(N) Explore the case for and against a claim.

Knowing what the instruction and the question words mean is very useful, but it is not the only clue to what the question demands. In order to identify clearly the explicit and implicit demands of an essay question, especially when you are a novice, some guidelines for a more thorough analysis may be helpful. The A-List below provides these.

The A-List for analysing the question

The A-List is a systematic method which can be followed to analyse the question and ultimately to suggest a preliminary structure for an essay. It is called the A-List as a mnemonic to help you remember the steps involved in analysing a question, all of which start with 'A'. Follow it step by step in your first attempts, and soon you will be analysing your essay questions as a matter of course. To find out what the question requires you to do, make sure you understand what all the As stand for. The first three are:

1 **Area**: what is the topic or subject of the question? Where is it in my syllabus? Under what classification will I be able to find relevant books in the library?
2 **Aspect**: which key word or words concerning the Area should I focus on? (These are the very important words around which you will research and plan your answer.)
3 **Angle**: what do I have to do? What is the question and/or the instruction word? How should I approach the question?

When you get to the third A in the list, you will have identified the explicit demands of the question. Indeed, you may already have begun thinking about the implicit demands.

There is a fourth A, and this is of special importance if you want to be spot on. Here you have to dig deeper and look at the words that are associated with the Angle and the Aspect.

4 **Audit**: check all the words (examples on page 38) in the question thoroughly, including those you have already identified above.

- Ask yourself questions about the instruction and the question word: what do they mean? What exactly do I have to do? What is involved? What should I do if there is no instruction or question word, but simply a title consisting of a statement such as '*IQ tests do not test intelligence*'?
- Look for words that tell you the scope or limitations and the direction to take. For example, '*In the last 50 years*' tells you what time period to consider, while '*With reference to X*' tells you that X should be a key focus of your essay.
- Ask yourself questions like: do I need to define some words or terms? Should I explain the background to a situation? What can I infer from the way the words are put together? Are there some key words associated with the Aspect which are particularly significant?
- Think and read between the lines: talk to yourself, look at different situations. The more you open up your mind, the more you will find to ask, investigate and put down on paper.

This activity is sometimes called brainstorming – I prefer to think of it as looking for connections by using the deep approach to learning. Going carefully through these four 'As' will uncover aspects of the essay question which may not be revealed by a less thorough analysis.

Making the A-List analysis visual

Put the AREA in a box.

Circle the ASPECT(S) (key word/words).

Put the <ANGLE> (the question/instruction word) in brackets.

AUDIT by underlining ____, double-underlining ____; using punctuation marks such as ??, !, symbols such as *, +, //; colours, or whatever takes your fancy.

Use plenty of arrows in all directions to show the links, and write the relevant words and phrases beside these.

Figure 2.1 The A-List

Some people work better if they have visual clues rather than words alone. You have a choice here between simply doing your analysis in the form of written notes, and using graphics and colour to make it a more visual task. You should try out both methods as they both have their advantages and you will get to use both the left and right parts of your brain (see Chapter 6). You could use highlighting, underlining, circling or different colours and images, in addition to making little notes. The simple visuals below can be used to analyse the sample questions that follow so that you have something to work from which is simple, clear and vivid.

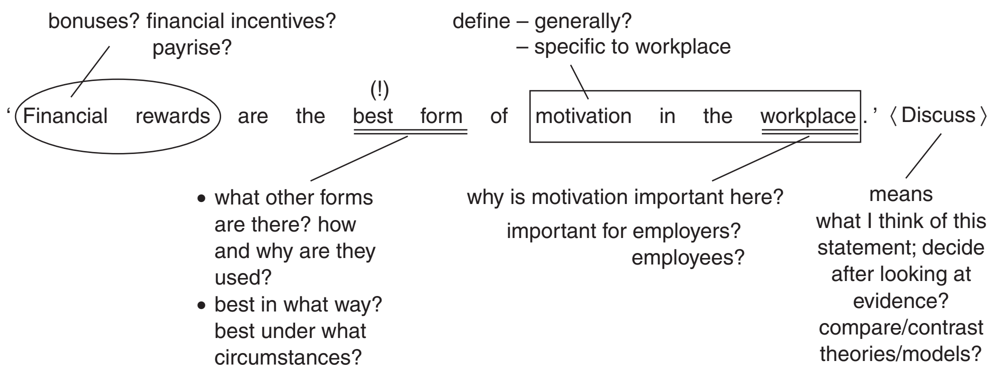
Write down or type out the essay question on a piece of A4-sized paper in biggish lettering, landscape-wise, making sure you have lots of space to write all over.

activity 2.2

Using the A-List

Here are two questions to analyse using the A-List. When you have attempted them, compare your version with those in Figure 2.2 below.

1 'Financial rewards are the best form of motivation in the workplace'. Discuss.
2 'Explain motivation with reference to the workplace'.



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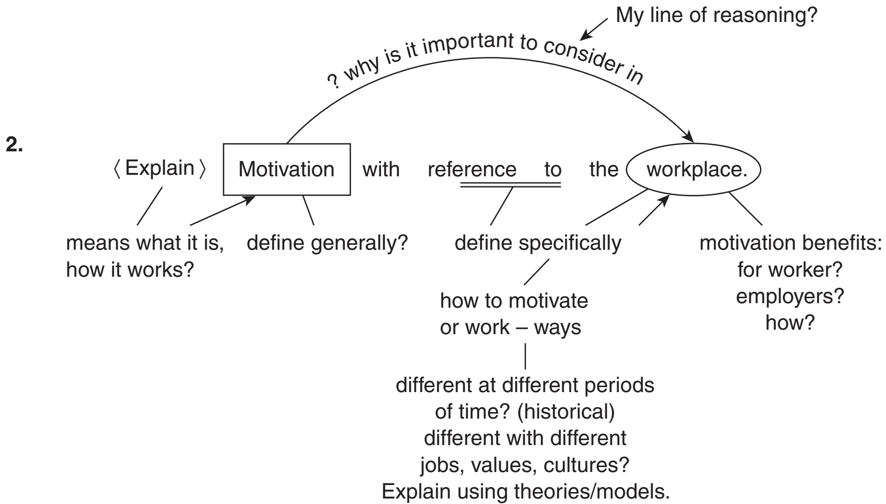


Figure 2.2 Question Analysis

As you can see from your analysis, although both questions are concerned with motivation in the workplace, they demand different ways of addressing the issue. The instruction word 'explain' in Question 2 suggests a different approach from 'discuss' in Question 1. What is the difference?

Two broad types of instruction word

You may have already realised that the instruction words in Table 2.1 seem to fall into two broad types: one that has to do largely with the presentation of facts, and the other requiring a more evaluative approach. Test this impression by doing the next activity.

activity 2.3

The two types of instruction words

Divide the instruction words in Table 2.1 into two types:

Type 1: Those that require you to look at evidence critically and to evaluate or make a judgement.

Type 2: Those that require you to investigate facts thoroughly and present them in an organised and considered way.

Did you get this division?

Type 1 (evaluative): assess, critique, discuss, evaluate, justify or prove, review, to what extent
Type 2 (factual): analyse, compare, contrast, define, describe, discuss, examine, explain, illustrate, review, state, summarise

Note that 'discuss' and 'review' can belong to both categories, as illustrated below.

Although this is a useful classification, question and instruction words should never be considered in isolation – you must always consider the context of the question. The other words in the question will make the meaning of the instruction word clearer. Knowing the expectations of the course and level you are at will also make the assignment instructions clearer.

As mentioned previously, 'discuss' can belong either to Type 1 or Type 2. Take a look at these two examples:

1. *Discuss the effects of soil erosion.*
2. *Soil erosion is the most serious form of soil degradation. Discuss.*

A thorough audit will reveal that although the essays are both on soil erosion, they will not be similar in structure. The instruction word 'discuss' seems to have different expectations for the two qusetions. That is because 'discuss' in Question 1 is a Type 2 question word, while in Question 2 it is Type 1. Question 1 requires you to talk about the effects of soil erosion by explaining why soil erosion happens, where it happens and what the implications are. Question 2 requires you to explain the different forms of soil degradation and why soil erosion is considered the most serious. You cannot do this well if you do not evaluate the seriousness of erosion as compared to other types of degradation.

Similarly, the instruction in a Year 1 assignment to 'review' an article or book may require you to describe what the article/book is about and how the writer has developed his approach and argument. However, a review in a Year 3 assignment would probably have to contain elements of analysis and evaluation and you would be expected to have read other writers on the same subject in order to evaluate the content and approach taken by particular authors.

'Analyse' is a Type 2 word, but the purpose of analysing something is often so that you can draw conclusions about it. In addition, when you 'assess', 'discuss', 'evaluate' or 'review' (Type 1 words), you may have to 'define', 'describe', 'explain', 'summarise' and 'illustrate' (Type 2 words) as necessary. Although this division is broad, it does help with getting you started on thinking about how you should approach an essay.

Different essay types

Different instruction words will therefore demand different approaches to writing essays. Instead of talking about the different types of essay for every instruction word, it is more convenient to work from the broad division of instruction words to another broad division – the two most common essay types.

The Judgement and Exploratory essays

Let us look again at the two questions you analysed earlier. From your analyses, and from the instruction words, it is clear that these are two different types of essays.

1 '*Financial rewards are the best form of motivation in the workplace*'. *Discuss*. (Type 1 instruction word)

The analysis of this question (Figure 2.2) showed that the topic or area is motivation in the workplace, and you will have to define and explain what it means and why it is important. The phrase 'financial rewards' identifies the key aspect, and you are required to say whether they are the best form of motivation. This means you have to find evidence to show that they work (or not) and consider other rewards that have been shown to work (or not). You will also have to review some theories critically. The reader wants to know if you are able to evaluate the theories and arguments to make a judgement. The Type 1 word 'discuss' indicates that what is required is a **Judgement** essay.

2 *Explain motivation with reference to the workplace*. (Type 2 instruction word)

Your analysis of this question (See Figure 2.2) showed that you have to define and explain motivation in its general sense as well as its importance in the workplace. Since the focus or aspect is the workplace, you should concentrate on explaining relevant work-related theories of motivation. These theories may conflict with one another, and you should draw attention to this. The reader wants to know if you can explain these theories logically and clearly, pointing out any similarities, contradictions, controversies and developments as you go. The Type 2 instruction word 'explain' shows that what I call an **Exploratory** essay is required here.

This type of essay *explores* an issue or process, usually to describe, analyse and explain in an organised way.

The two different types of question word will therefore lead you to write two different types of essay. It is of course an over-simplification to suggest that there are only two different types of academic essay (and we will look at others later). Nevertheless, many academic essays will fall broadly into one of these two categories, and the distinction is a useful starting point for planning and ultimately for structuring and writing an essay.

Judgement essays have also been referred to as 'discussion' or 'argumentative' essays. **Exploratory essays** are also known as 'expository' or 'factual' essays. In general:

- Judgement essays require you to take a stand. Your essay must be based on facts or evidence, of course, but you must organise these facts in such a way that they will convince the reader of the strength of your stand or viewpoint (whether you choose to voice it at the beginning or work towards expressing it in the conclusion). To construct a Judgement essay you will need to build up a case or an argument for defending a viewpoint.
- Exploratory essays require you to examine and investigate an issue in detail, arranging the evidence or facts in a meaningful way. This does not mean that you must not look at the information in a critical way, but in the main, this type of essay does not require you to take a position. You may need to explain why something is as it is and in doing so you may have to evaluate the information, but what the reader wants from you is a clear, balanced explanation – not an attempt to argue for a particular viewpoint. The 'reasoning' in this type of essay has to do with presenting the information in a logical and structured way.

Two other types of essay that are common at university are the Reflective essay and the Literature Review essay. The instruction words associated with these are 'reflect' and 'review', and the meanings of these words require special consideration in planning the corresponding essay. The next chapter discusses in some detail the planning of all four types.

This chapter has taken you through the process of addressing the question carefully. When you get used to what is involved in using the A-List, analysing your own essay questions should not be too time-consuming. You will find that you will be able to work on the four 'As' in the A-List simultaneously and identify the type of essay you have to write quite quickly. The work you do in this pre-writing stage does take up some time, of course, but you should look on this as a worthwhile investment which will pay real dividends when it comes to the actual writing.

chapter summary

- Going through the parts of an essay question systematically is a necessary condition for understanding it fully.
- Putting together the results of your analysis will result in a clearer picture of the type of essay the question demands.

reflection and review

1 Practise analysing all the essay questions from each module of your course. This will enable you to make more informed decisions when you have to choose from a list of questions.

2 Which of the following questions would you put into the Exploratory essay category, and which into the Judgement essay category? Remember that you do not have to know anything about the subjects to do this.

Questions

1 Explain Honey and Mumford's Learning Cycle model and its application in the Learning Style Inventory.

2 'A knowledge of your learning style preference(s) can help you to work on your strengths and weaknesses to improve learning'. Discuss with reference to the work of Honey and Mumford.

3 'Mind-mapping is a far better method of note-making than other methods'. Do you agree?

4 Compare and contrast the usefulness of linear notes and diagrammatic notes for study at university.

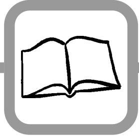
5 Explain Belbin's team roles model. How would a knowledge of this theory help an organisation succeed?

6 'Teams are more likely to succeed if roles within the team are better understood'. Discuss with reference to Belbin's team roles model.

Check your answers below. Do you agree with this division? How did you come to your conclusions?

Judgement essays: 2, 3, 6
Exploratory essays: 1, 4, 5

3 To practise focusing when you are only given a topic or title to write an essay on (that is, you are just given the Area), derive your own Aspect and Angle to find a focus and a direction. Write out the question that you would like to answer on the topic.

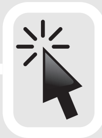


further reading

Williams, K. (1995) *Writing Essays*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

3

Planning Different Types of Essay



chapter themes

- Drawing up plans for the Judgement and Exploratory essays using the results of the A-List analysis.
- Giving the essays a preliminary structure from the plan – the fifth 'A'.
- Understanding the demands of the Reflective essay.
- Planning and structuring the Reflective essay.
- Understanding the demands of the Literature Review essay.
- Planning and structuring the Literature Review essay.

In this chapter, we shall continue with the pre-writing considerations in order to plan the different essay types that are most commonly encountered at university.

The essay plan

As with any complex undertaking, an essay plan should not be regarded as something rigid that you must stick to no matter what. For example, when you plan a holiday you would probably want a travel itinerary to give you an idea of where it is you are heading, how you can get there, what you might enjoy on the way and what you can expect when you finally arrive. Once you start on your journey though, you may decide to stay longer in one place, forego another, or set off somewhere in the general area of the itinerary for which you

had not planned. However, unless you happen not to care where you end up and how you get there, there will be some considerations that you must take into account in advance for any holiday, so a flexible itinerary is always helpful.

Similarly, a plan for an essay will show you the general direction you have to follow in order to answer the question. This allows you to focus on the relevant reading and research and helps you to develop your argument or line of reasoning. It should not, however restrict your creativity as you read more on the topic and learn new things. When you begin drafting you might well deviate from your original plan. Remember, writing an essay is a learning process in itself.

To start with it is useful to remember that, traditionally, academic essays are organised into three distinct parts:

- the Introduction;
- the Body (or Main Part);
- the Conclusion.

This is actually a very useful reference point that will provide you with a framework when you are planning.

You may be familiar with planning in a linear way by using bullet points. You might also have had some experience of using spider diagrams, mind maps or concept maps when planning. Mind maps are useful for expanding an aspect identified in the question. How to use mind maps to make notes will be covered in Chapter 6.

In this chapter, I would suggest that you start with the visual representation of the A-List analysis from Chapter 2 and then use this as a basis for a more detailed written plan. Even if you are not particularly keen on visuals, a diagram can often help by presenting a plan as a whole, with all the parts included and their connections. When you can see the whole picture you can better understand the workings of the parts and connections.

To practise making preliminary plans we will again use the questions you analysed in the practice activity in Chapter 2 (see page 40).

The Judgement essay

1 *'Financial rewards are the best form of motivation in the workplace'. Discuss.*

Your previous analysis of this question showed that what is required here is a Judgement essay, that is, there is some debate about this claim and therefore you need to have a viewpoint. The instruction word/Angle is very important in planning: in a Judgement essay, you must look at the different viewpoints.

In this case, you have to ask yourself who says that financial rewards are the best form of motivation and why, and who says there are other forms which are just as good and why. The observations, questions and notes to yourself from your Audit would have reflected this.

You are now ready to consider another A-word – **Arrange**. This refers to applying the results of your analysis and arranging the observations and questions into the framework of your essay structure: Introduction, Body and Conclusion. Sort out the general, which could go into the Introduction, from the specific – this will go into the Body. The Conclusion of a Judgement essay should then contain your viewpoint.

On the same piece of paper on which you analysed the question, write out a preliminary plan; this could be something like the example shown below. At this point you will have lots of question marks. You will probably expect that these will be answered when you do your reading and research, and that you may come up with more questions and observations. This is the nature of the deep approach to learning. This preliminary plan can help you to select some relevant reading to start you off and find suitable information for your essay. At this point you will probably not know much about the topic: perhaps only what you have learnt from lectures or some preliminary reading. Nevertheless, talking through the questions you raised during the Audit will enable you to make the sort of plan you need at this stage. You will need plenty of space to fill in the points you picked out from your notes as you read.

example 3.1

Planning the Judgement essay: arranging the results of the audit

Introduction

- Define motivation. Explain? Give examples?
- Why is motivation in the workplace important?
- For whom is it important? The worker(s)? The organisation? How?
- What theories have been put forward on this topic?
- What are other forms of motivation – how do these work?
- How am I going to approach this essay – do I want to state what my viewpoint is and support it with evidence from theories? Or should I state that there are several viewpoints and from the theories I consider, conclude with my own viewpoint?

Body of essay (discuss each theory/argument separately? Limit to recent theories?)

- theory/model 1; explanation and examples;
- theory/model 2, 3, etc; explanation and examples;
- include my own/other writers' insights into similarities/differences; different perspectives, different considerations.

Conclusion

- From evidence found in the theoretical arguments in the Body above, what can I conclude? Where should I stand regarding the statement? Give reasons. (Should not agree or disagree 100%. Sitting on the fence also not a good idea: have a *balanced* viewpoint!)
- Or from evidence and arguments to support my viewpoint (stated in the Introduction) and from the weaknesses in evidence and arguments to the contrary, show my viewpoint is justified. My viewpoint: are financial rewards the *best* form??

Planning a Judgement essay is essentially straightforward. There will always be at least two main viewpoints, and these will have been put forward by several people in their theories or models. Your discussion of them then constitutes the evidence. The argument within your essay consists of your own viewpoint, which is supported by this evidence. Academic essays on the whole are not the same as debates: you do not agree or disagree 100 per cent. If such strong views do exist, then they may be indefensible and they are not really worth discussing. Academic essays require you to show you have a balanced viewpoint by considering differing views.

This planning process can be quite enjoyable and certainly beneficial, and the more you practise going through it, the faster you will arrive at a preliminary structure. The terms 'argument', 'evidence' and 'conclusion' are used extensively to discuss academic writing and you will probably see them in the feedback comments from your tutor. What they mean when used to talk about academic reading, thinking and writing will be discussed in Chapter 5. We will also revisit structuring in Chapters 8 and 9.

Table 3.1 displays broadly what you have to show the reader in a Judgement essay, and at which part of the essay you should do it.

The Exploratory essay

Some students will be daunted by the idea of having to make a judgement on an issue, and may well think that writing an Exploratory or factual essay is much easier because all they need to do is present lots of facts. This is not

Table 3.1 What a Judgement essay should show

In a Judgement essay, show that:	*Where in the essay? How?*
• You understand the question and know the subject and possible controversies; you have a plan for the essay discussion.	In the **Introduction**, define and explain key/important words and terms; state what has been said about the subject; state where you stand or say that you will discuss the issues and come to a conclusion.
• You know and understand the different views and interpretations; you can defend your stand and show weaknesses in opposing views; you know differing views can have different merits.	In the **Body**, present/summarise the arguments and evidence for different viewpoints, or in support of your stand but with reservations for the opposing view. These arguments must be organised in a clear and logical way.
• You can persuade through your facts and evidence and can make valid interpretations.	In the **Conclusion**, link up and summarise the gist of your argument and make a judgement; or summarise the evidence to show that your stand in the debate is a valid and defensible one.

entirely true. Exploratory essays can be just as demanding of critical analysis as Judgement essays, and in addition, they can be more difficult to structure as there is no standard way to build up an argument.

The second question you analysed requires an Exploratory essay:

2 *Explain motivation with reference to the workplace.*

Once again, having that analysis means you are ready for the fifth 'A' – of **Arranging**. On the same piece of paper on which you analysed the question, write out a preliminary plan; this could be something like the example below.

example 3.2

Planning the Exploratory essay: arranging the results of the audit

Introduction

- Define motivation; different places/people – different definitions? Is there a general one? Definitions for the workplace?
- Why is motivation in the workplace important?

- Does it depend on the type of work? The period in history?
- For whom is it important? The worker(s)? The organisation? How?
- Short historical summary of how organisations have tried to motivate their workforce?
- What theories have been put forward on this aspect of motivation?
- How will I organise my essay? My line of reasoning?

The last point is the most difficult part of an Exploratory essay. You should not just describe one theory after another. Instead you need to find a thread to connect them and provide you with an argument. For example, you could:

- review motivation theories historically, charting the changes in beliefs, attitudes, nature of work;
- compare motivation theories in relation to different types of work;
- review motivation theories from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries only;
- select a few very different theories/perspectives to discuss in more depth.

Obviously, you will need at least a basic knowledge of this topic in order to begin work. Notes and handouts from lectures and any recommended reading are especially useful at this point. Depending on the 'storyline' you choose, the Body will be structured differently. The argument of the essay is your line of reasoning or storyline, your focus, your approach to answering the question, what makes the best sense to you. State this line of reasoning in the Introduction. The important factor is to be able to group your facts according to the direction you wish to pursue.

Body

As stated above, the Body can be organised differently according to your line of reasoning. As an example, let us consider the first of the four possible storylines mentioned above. If you decide to look at motivation theories historically, you will need to split the historical events into meaningful chunks – you will not want your essay to be just a list of dates followed by a description of the theories. For example, it may be that you can look at the various influences during these periods:

- Industrial Revolution (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries);
- Scientific Management (nineteenth to twentieth centuries);
- post-Second World War;
- influence of the social sciences;
- contemporary/current approaches.

The length of the essay expected from you is a good guide to the depth and breadth you need. If the essay expected is to be less than 2,000 words you may

(Continued)

want to focus on one or two aspects of the above only, merely mentioning the others in the Introduction.

Conclusion

The conclusion of an Exploratory essay, unlike that of a Judgement essay, does not require you to make a judgement. Instead, you need to pull all the threads together and give a summary of the main points (but not repeat every point) and direct the reader to appropriate and relevant future trends and developments, issues to address, etc. In the example here, a suitable conclusion could be that motivation at work depends on the type of work; political, social, economic factors; technology, etc., and how these influences (and others due to the changing nature of work) should be considered now and in the future.

Table 3.2 displays generally what you have to show the reader in an Exploratory essay, and in which part of the essay you would do this.

Table 3.2 What an Exploratory essay should show

In an Exploratory essay, show that:	*Where in the essay? How?*
• You understand the demands of the question; you know the subject/topic in the depth expected.	In the **Introduction**, define and explain key terms; what issues are important; say how you are going to organise the facts.
• You understand the subject/topic and are addressing the question and not merely presenting facts about it; you can develop an argument logically.	In the **Body**, carefully select what facts to include; connect these in the most economical way for easy comprehension; analyse the principles, apply the principles, explain (especially processes); relate theory to practice ... There are numerous ways to organise these essays, depending on your focus.
• You can make sense of the facts you have gathered.	In the **Conclusion,** draw together the various strands and/or extract general principles from your description and explanation.

The Literature Review essay

The word 'literature' in this context refers to the body of published work on a topic or subject. For example, you could refer to the published research written on climate change as 'the climate change literature', or that on

evolution as 'the literature on evolution'. A review of the literature requires a comprehensive, systematic look at all the important writing on any particular aspect of a topic or subject. In order to do this you will have to read the important published work – the theories, hypotheses, frameworks, models, empirical studies, and so on. This review would summarise the various interpretations and positions, commenting on whether they are complementary or contradictory, or simply differ in their emphasis. In addition, when writing a literature review in your second or third year, you may be expected to discuss the merits and limitations of the various arguments, theories or models.

Features of the Literature Review essay

A Literature Review essay will be set in order to direct students to the important theoretical aspects of a subject through reading the 'seminal works' (those publications which have had a lasting influence on debate). Your first port of call for a Literature Review assignment will be the recommended textbook, or any general textbook on the subject. A recent introductory textbook of this kind will give you a good idea of the state of the art. It will help you shape your essay by:

- giving an overview of the research so far.
- pointing out different interpretations or 'schools of thought'.

A bonus here is the bibliography, which can direct you to read important original texts and other relevant publications.

Literature Review essays can also provide excellent practice for writing a final year dissertation. Most undergraduate and certainly postgraduate courses will require students to produce a dissertation with a literature review chapter. When you come to write a dissertation you will want to know the answers to questions such as:

- How does my dissertation fit into the existing scholarship?
- What is my perspective on the topic?
- Why have I chosen my topic? Is there a gap in the field? How am I filling that gap?

By reading the literature, you can both identify and justify the niche you plan to fill.

In Years 1 and 2 you are being prepared for this aspect of university work when you are required to write a Literature Review, but this is also one way of assessing the breadth and depth of the reading you have done on a topic

up to that stage in the course. The purpose of such an assignment is clearly to 'review', and you will have to decide exactly what to review as well as show you know what a review entails.

As with all academic essays, you are expected to demonstrate your understanding of some main aspects of your course and show you are able to synthesise this knowledge via a formally organised piece of writing.

Obviously, if you are in your final year of study and are writing a literature review for your dissertation, this will have to be quite focused and relevant to your research. It will also have to be a much more critical discussion than that found in a first or second year assignment where the purpose is to familiarise students with the state of the art of the subject.

Generally you review the literature by asking questions such as:

- What is the extent of the literature?
- What are the important theories, models, frameworks?
- What background should these be discussed against: historical, chronological, economic, geographical, linguistic, sociological (etc.)?
- Have the theories and hypotheses been followed up? How, and by whom?
- Have they stood the test of time?
- Are there other theories? How do they compare?
- What are the different interpretations?

Planning the Literature Review essay

The basic planning method should be familiar to you by now. Go through the A-List to analyse the question and come up with a preliminary plan of the essay. The Angle is to review, and you should Audit for the specifics. Arrange and plan the essay to move from the general to the specific.

example 3.3

Planning the Literature Review essay: arranging the results of the audit

Introduction

- background to the literature to be reviewed – what, why, who (general), asking questions as above;

- point out the overall trends, conflicts in theories, models, methodology, evidence, conclusions;
- say what your interest/focus is; state the limitations and how you are going to structure your argument.

Body

Organise this according to preference, for example, by writers/exponents of theories. For each writer/theorist, include:

- a summary of the main thesis/argument/theme, outlining the evidence that was given;
- an assessment of the arguments above.

Alternatively, do this according to common factors such as chronology, qualitative *vs* quantitative research methods, etc. This part of the Literature Review is very much a product of critical reading (covered in Chapter 5).

Conclusion

- What can I say about the various theories in terms of how they relate to present circumstances/trends, current events, etc.?
- Are there any gaps, inconsistencies, flaws in the findings – what are the implications for further research?

This type of Literature Review essay is similar to the Exploratory essay category in that you are required to explore and consider the literature critically, but you do not have to pass a final judgement as to which is the best approach or theory.

Table 3.3 displays generally what you have to show the reader in a Literature Review essay, and in which part of the essay you would need to do this.

Table 3.3 What a Literature Review essay should show

In a Literature Review essay, show that:	*Where in the essay? How?*
• You are familiar with the seminal works on the topic, subject or discipline under review and understand the main issues; you can organise the discussion logically.	In the **Introduction**, briefly give the background to your topic, subject, discipline (e.g. historical, geographical, scientific, educational) and its importance. Say what aspects you will review, and state limitations clearly. State the focus of your essay.

(Continued)

Table 3.3 (Continued)

In a Literature Review essay, show that:	*Where in the essay? How?*
• You can identify the main works/ issues you have read and can discuss works that are especially significant; you are able to pick out similarities and differences in theories, models, frameworks, interpretations, and so on.	In the **Body**, organise the discussion of the selected works in a logical way: describe chronologically? Historically? Cause and effect? Compare and contrast? Do more than describe and summarise: analyse and critique.
• You can draw conclusions about the state of the art, and what further developments may involve.	In the **Conclusion**, draw together and summarise the highlights of your review. Conclude with what you might consider worthwhile future developments or research.

The Reflective essay

The two broad types of essay – Exploratory and Judgement – can be identified by analysing the essay question closely. These two types of essay are usually written in a formal style. In Chapter 1 it was suggested that on a continuum from formal to informal writing, the reflective essay falls more towards the informal end. The importance of reflection in learning was given as a reason why the reflective essay is being used by more and more programmes at university. These programmes promote this type of essay as a means of encouraging students to learn from conscious reflection on their learning. They are based on the belief that reflection is crucial to effective learning, and should therefore be explicitly encouraged. Remember, reflection is always personal and so the style and language used to write reflective essays are correspondingly less formal.

Features of the Reflective essay

You are most likely to be set Reflective essays:

- at the beginning of a course, so you can think about your goals and needs early on;
- at the end of a course, so you can think about the outcomes and what your next step could be;
- before you go on a work placement;
- after the work placement experience;
- throughout the course as part of your PDP (Personal Development Planning) or as part of a learning log or journal assignment.

They may also be used throughout a course if reflection is seen as being essential to professional practice. Nursing and teaching programmes, language courses and those in creative arts are some examples of such courses.

The aims of the activity for reflection are usually stated clearly in the brief. For a work placement, for example, you will be provided with information and instructions on its aims, the aspects you could reflect on – for example, personal observations, the outcomes of the learning aims – and even any theories you may have to consider in order to make sense of your observations.

A Reflective essay is the product of a conscious plan to reflect on certain aspects of learning. You may find this type of essay less mystifying than some others, and have fewer problems understanding the instructions as they will usually be set out in a clear, detailed brief. You may also find it easier to write in a personal, informal style. However, this does not mean that no planning is necessary: a failure to plan carefully could mean your essay ends up as a random collection of anecdotes and thoughts.

Reflective essays have a proper structure like other academic essays, and have most of the characteristics of the essays mentioned in Chapter 1. However, the purpose and the content – and by default, the style and language – will be different from formal academic essays. The Reflective essay, in addition to or instead of facts and evidence, may also include:

- personal aims;
- programme aims;*
- self-evaluation of current skills, needs, action plans;
- reference to feedback;
- evaluation of your own choices, outcomes, learning, performance, development;
- evaluation of the programme;
- learning from critical incidents, observations;
- recognition of your own emotional responses (personal feelings);
- personal action plans based on the reflection activity.

  (* includes work placements, year abroad, internships, etc.)

As you can see, many of these things are of a personal nature, and when writing up reflections you are being encouraged to reflect not only on the cognitive side of your learning but also on the affective side, that is, how your feelings helped or hindered your learning.

Reflective essay briefs are usually not worded in the form of questions or titles, but as instructions on what to focus on for the exercise. The instruction word is therefore usually 'reflect on'. There are several models of reflection which you can follow in order to write about reflections and their outcome. Gibbs' (1988) model is straightforward and may be used as a guide for planning and structuring the reflective essay. The model includes the following.

1 **Description**: what was the experience?
2 **Feelings**: what did you feel/think when it happened?
3 **Evaluation**: what was good or bad about the experience?
4 **Analysis**: what can you relate it to?
5 **Conclusion**: what else could you have done?
6 **Action plan**: what would you do the next time round?

A Reflective essay is commonly the end product of smaller reflective tasks, such as entries towards a reflective journal. For example, if as part of your course you had to go on a work placement for a few weeks, you may be required to write a reflective entry every day and then collate these into a reflective journal or diary at the end. From these entries, you would be able to write a Reflective essay on your experience.

Below are two examples of the brief or set of instructions for writing a Reflective essay.

example 3.4

Briefs and instructions for writing Reflective essays

1 Reflective evaluation of plan and execution of a learning activity (1,200 words). Using a lesson plan you have prepared, demonstrate the extent to which the activities link to the overall learning experience and critically evaluate the lesson in terms of both its delivery and the learners' experience. Reflect on your own learning and explore what you have learnt about yourself in order that you may exploit this in other contexts.
2 Write a 1,500 word account of a critical incident from your clinical training. The work should contain an introduction to reflective practice, followed by a description of your chosen incident. In order to analyse the incident you will need to discuss the appropriate theories which apply to that incident and make some links between clinical practice and your reflection on it.

Planning the Reflective essay

Read the assignment brief carefully and identify the Area and Aspect(s) which you are going to focus on when reflecting (the Angle). Audit for the

specifics. Arrange and plan the essay to move from the general to the specific, as in the example below.

example 3.5

Planning the Reflective essay: arranging the results of the audit

Introduction

- Background to the reflection activity: where, when, why, how, what tasks (general)?

Body

- Depending on the aims, organise according to (for example) time frame? Similar observations? Task types? Then follow the stages of a reflection model such as Gibbs', from Stages 1 to 4 (see page 56).

Conclusion

- As in Gibbs Stages 5 and 6: what can I say about my learning from reflecting on this activity? What can I do next time? What are my action plans for personal development?

The Reflective essay is a personal account of a learning activity. Unlike the formal academic essay, you can describe your feelings and opinions. You may have to use evidence and theories to support or explain the significance of your personal observations (for example, in Stage 4). However, the main aim of this type of essay is to guide you towards a deeper approach to learning through reflecting, not only objectively about the issue, but also on what it is you feel and what you are able to observe, and to then relate this to your own life and personal experiences.

This type of assignment has elements of both the Exploratory and Judgement essays: reflection is a personal exploration and the judgement or viewpoint you will reach about an activity will be based on your personal feelings and observations – so how was it for *you*?

The audience or reader here is primarily you yourself, as it would be if you were writing a private diary. The tutor is a secondary reader in that he or she cannot dispute the credibility or contents of your reflection. The reader can

only judge the way the writing has been put together: is it focused? Is it clear? Have the aims been achieved? Is this a genuine attempt to learn from the activity? And so on. These expectations will be made clear both in the brief and in the marking criteria and learning outcomes of the activity.

The table below summarises in general terms what you will have to show the reader in a Reflective essay, and in which part of the essay you would need to do this.

Table 3.4 What a Reflective essay should show

In a Reflective essay, show that:	*Where in the essay? How?*
• You understand the activity and rationale for the reflective exercise, and understand the reflective process.	In the **Introduction**, briefly give the background (from the brief) and aims; explain details of your involvement (where, when, how, why, who, etc.). State how you plan to set out your reflections.
• You are able to follow a model of reflection, you are conscientious, consistent and sincere when logging your reflections; you understand the implications of your feelings and actions, and you can relate theory to practice where relevant.	In the **Body**, describe the background to your reflections, present your thoughts, feelings and action plans in an easy-to-follow way: chronologically? Categories of experience to reflect on? According to aims, critical incidents, case studies ...?
• You can make sense of the reflective activity and can summarise your reactions to the process.	In the **Conclusion,** draw together the aims, your feelings, your actions and your plans to offer an opinion on the activity/findings from your own perspective.

Note that the Literature Review essay and the Reflective essay are not dealt with in depth in this book as they can be subsumed under the Exploratory and Judgement essays as explained.

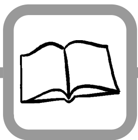
Whatever type of essay you are writing, once you have made a plan based on a careful analysis of the essay question, you can begin to gather together the information you will need before you start writing. Chapters 4 to 7 will deal with getting this information and knowing what to do with it. If you would like to continue with planning, structuring and writing the essay, however, it is best to go straight on to Chapter 8.

chapter summary

- Make a preliminary plan of the type of essay required.
- Know what the reader expects in the different types of essays.
- Plan to meet those expectations in the appropriate part of the essay.

reflection and review

1 Practise planning the essay questions that you analysed in Chapter 2. Check your analyses and plans with your course mates.
2 Ask a friend to let you look at an essay on a topic you know. Do you think it has answered the question? Is it well planned?



further reading

For reflective writing:

Cottrell, S. (2003) *Skills for Success*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (see Ch. 7).
Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D. and Jasper, M. (2001) *Critical Reflection for Nursing and the Helping Professions – A User's Guide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (see Ch. 3).

4 Acquiring Information

chapter themes

- Choosing what to read.
- Reading for different purposes and the various ways of reading.
- Reading techniques and strategies: SQ3R.
- Listening to lectures: SQLR.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the issues around sourcing information for your essay and knowing what you should do with it. Although they are not specifically chapters on 'writing', how you approach reading and listening will determine whether your essay will contain the relevant information needed to answer the question set. Reading and listening for information are essential skills in the pre-writing stage.

Acquiring information is not just a matter of reading as much as possible or recording all your lectures. You should be able to read and listen purposefully and selectively and to retain this information, and you need to develop strategies to do this.

Identifying and selecting resources

You will find lots of material on your subjects and you will have to work hard to cope with all the necessary reading. You will need to learn to 'read smart'

rather than ‘read everything’, or you will be overwhelmed. Many conscientious, hardworking students spend their time reading widely. This is very good practice if your aim is to gain background knowledge in your subject. However, this type of reading also has its limitations, and when you are faced with an essay question, your reading needs to be purposeful and disciplined.

What follows is a guide on how to find information with a specific purpose in mind, starting right at the beginning, when you first look at the essay question. Each of the five sections below concludes with a sentence in italics summarising the key point – so if you wish, you can immediately start to practise what we are preaching.

Choosing the question Remember, your tutors set essay assignments with certain learning aims and objectives in mind. The topics they have chosen are those they consider the most important for you to know for your course and the discipline. Often you will be asked to choose from a number of questions. You may opt for a question on the topic area that you are most interested in and want to learn more about. Or you may choose a question because you know quite a lot about the topic and consider it to be the easiest one. Depending on circumstances and personality, some students will want to take the easier option while others will look for a challenge. Choosing a question is an important first step. If you do not think about it carefully, you might change your mind later and waste a lot of time.

Select the topic or question you are most interested in and want to find out more about or the one that you are most familiar with (if you are given a choice).

Understanding the essay brief Read all the instructions and any other information on the essay brief carefully to make sure you know the implications. For example, the word limit gives you an idea of the depth and breadth expected in your essay and the amount of time you should spend on research. The weighting of the essay (e.g., 50 per cent or whatever of the module mark) gives you an idea of its importance for your final grade. The marking criteria tell you what is expected in your essay.

Analyse the chosen question thoroughly and make a rough plan as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Examine your essay brief closely and make sure you understand the implications of the instructions and other information given.

Consulting resources There are three very important things to bear in mind here.

- Use what is to hand.
- Know your university library.
- Utilise search engines and websites.

The first and most obvious resource to consult is what you have to hand. This will include the recommended textbook (if any), the notes you took at the lectures, and any handouts you were given. Relevant handouts and lecture notes on your topic can give you a good idea of what is expected of you – you must at least cover the same ground. Lecture notes and handouts are normally brief, because their purpose is not to tell you everything about a topic but to guide you when you follow up with further reading. That is why bibliographies and reading lists are usually given out after certain lectures or in handouts.

You might want to think about buying a recommended textbook as you may have difficulty in getting it from the library if it is a popular book. However, this 'set book' should not be the sole source of information for your essay. It might be a good source for revising for exams, but an essay requires that you read more than one book.

Sometimes there will also be a recommended reading list in the assignment brief or for the module. From these resources, select the books and journals related to the topic you have chosen. In order to do this you need to be familiar with your university library. Access the library catalogue immediately to identify the relevant books and journals available. What types of loans are possible – regular or short-loan, or are they for reference only? Are the texts available as e-books or e-journals?

Find out about other books in the Area of your chosen question if your first choices are not easily available. Are there other books not on the reading list but which have similar titles and classification numbers? If you cannot get the books you want immediately, these are good to fall back on. Remember you can also place a reservation for an unavailable book. You should also get to know what your library has to offer in terms of journals, e-books, e-journals, inter-library loans, newspapers and research links (such as Athens), and then set about learning how to use these resources and links.

Every university in the UK will have a direct link to its library on the homepage. If you have not done so already, it is worthwhile exploring every aspect of the library from the library pages. Exploring physically is also a good idea: most university libraries will run tours for new students as part of their induction in the first few weeks of the new academic year. Often there are also virtual tours if you miss out on these.

Librarians are very knowledgeable about their services and resources, and are friendly and helpful people who love their work – go to them if you are ever in need of advice on how and where to find information. In addition, many universities will have librarians who are dedicated to particular subjects and who will know a lot about what is available in those fields. Find out if your library has someone like that and get to know the librarian responsible for your subject.

You should also use search engines and websites. Students often turn to the internet and consult Google or go to a website like Wikipedia to get information. This is all very well, but do remember that Wikipedia is fine as a *starting point*, to give you some initial ideas and background information, but it is *not* considered a reliable source as there is no formal control over the quality of the information as there is with journals and books. Note that tutors will not put Wikipedia on your reading lists! It is therefore unadvisable to use Wikipedia information without verifying it against more reliable sources. However, it is worth noting that some entries do refer to some excellent books, articles and other sources – so do use these to find what is relevant for you.

You may get lots of information by using search engines, but some of it will be obscure, unreliable or debatable. Be sure you know what you are looking for, or you will waste a lot of time here. With all e-resources, you need to use the same reading strategies as you would if you were reading printed text. Avoid simply cutting and pasting what looks like relevant information without really reading and understanding it. Like most easy options, it will not lead to the best results. You should also remember that most tutors will want to see evidence that you have also consulted books or journal articles on the topic.

Websites are good for primary sources like original records or data such as letters, manuscripts, diaries, newspapers, speeches and documents produced by governments and organisations.

You should assess the reliability and impartiality of websites to make sure that a balanced approach is used to present information. Those belonging to educational institutions are generally more reliable than personal websites. Government sites can also provide useful information but some may have a political bias, while company websites for the most part will present a rosy picture of their organisation and industry.

For any website, you can tell the type of organisation and the country of origin from the three-letter domain code of the URL (Uniform Resource Locator, or website address) and the two-letter country code. For example, for uclan.ac.uk: 'uclan' = University of Central Lancashire; 'ac' = academic institution (university); 'uk' = United Kingdom. Some educational institutions, including schools, may use 'edu' instead of 'ac'. For example, for usyd.edu.au: 'usyd' = University of Sydney; 'edu' = educational institution; 'au' = Australia.

Other common organisation codes include: 'gov' = government, 'com' = commercial site, and 'net' = personal or other site.

Identify and judiciously select the resources available to research your topic.

Choosing relevant resources How do you know if the resources you have identified really contain the information you need? Here you need to be

selective – do not borrow all the books and articles you can get hold of, and then leave most of them unread; nor should you read everything from cover to cover and then promptly forget what you have just read. Photocopying page upon page, or printing out and saving masses of information you find on the internet, is unhelpful and can cause an information overload. What you do need to do is to go through the material you have identified and quickly shortlist in the following way:

- Note the edition and date: is it current? Is this important for your topic? Unless the book is a 'classic' and the information has not dated, choose the most recent edition. This is vital if current statistics are important or if the subject of the book is one which dates very easily (such as IT).
- With books, read the blurb on the back cover, what other writers say about the book, the table of contents and the index.
- Skim through the identified chapters quickly.

Go through these steps with any book you are considering for use in your essay, and choose only those that are relevant. Working like this may seem time-consuming at first, but you will get better results and waste less time later on.

Skim and scan your sources for relevance and general information.

Reading effectively Doing research for an essay means gathering information from relevant sources to answer a question. You may think that you already know quite a lot about the topic in general terms. This is good as it is important that you start with what you already know. To write an academic essay, however, you cannot rely only on your experience or general knowledge of a topic. You must also show that you have read what the authorities or specialists have said about it, and that you can put this into context. Your course will expect you to show that you know how to use knowledge acquired through reading.

Reading for research involves putting together information from various sources in an organised way. It requires you to engage proactively and critically with the text and the writer of that text.

Use tried and tested reading strategies to read effectively. One such reading technique, SQ3R, is discussed later in this chapter.

All academic books will have bibliographies and by using these you will probably find many more books that may prove to be interesting and relevant. Wanting to read more on a topic you are interested in is to be encouraged, so hit the books as much as you have time for. However, be aware of time constraints and do not get side-tracked from your plan.

Reading for different purposes

Reading for learning purposes demands different skills from reading for pleasure. Learning purposes include reading for knowledge, reading to write specific essays, and reading for exam purposes.

activity 4.1

Pause for reflection: reading for different purposes

Reflect on how you read your favourite newspaper or magazine.

Which section do you read first? Why? Is it difficult to follow what is written? Will it be easy to tell someone what you have read?

Which sections do you read after this section? How do you read them – headlines only, or everything in detail? Why? What do you remember from the paper when you put it down?

Now reflect on how you read a novel by a favourite author.

When do you read it? Where do you read it? How do you feel when you are reading it? What do you do when you are reading? Would you be able to tell someone else about it easily?

Think of all the other printed material you read that is not for study purposes and ask yourself the questions above. Your answers will show your approach to 'normal' reading and your feelings when doing this type of reading.

Now, reflect on how you read for a written assignment like an essay.

What differences do you find in: your feelings, your concentration and attention, your memory span, the process, the outcome, and so on?

It would be surprising if you do not find marked differences. Most of us will discover that reading a 'serious' book for an essay which is to be assessed demands more from us. We *have* to read it (whether or not we feel like it), there is an outcome which will be judged, there is also a deadline, the contents may not be very exciting, and the language could be formal and difficult to follow – all these things work against a relaxed approach to the reading. Even if we love the subject, reading about it in order to write an essay requires a different approach from reading it for pleasure. So how should you read for written assignments at university?

Approaches to learning and ways of reading

When you use a surface approach to reading you may not be able to see past the words and choose to memorise 'facts' and sections of texts solely to use in exams or assignments without real understanding. When you use the deep approach you try to understand the reading process and to construct meaning from the text you are reading. You already began the deep approach to writing by using the deep approach to reading when you analysed the questions in Chapter 2 – in this case, reading the question carefully. Try to continue this deep approach to reading to make textbooks more personal and meaningful (and therefore less 'boring' or 'dull') by understanding your reasons for reading and engaging with the content and the writer. Table 4.1 summarises the surface and deep approaches to reading.

Table 4.1 Features of the Surface and Deep approaches when reading for an essay

Surface	*Deep*
Superficial focus on task – e.g., interpreting an essay question at face value only. Focusing mostly on Area. Reading on a topic without a focus.	Deep focus – analysing the question: Why? What? How? Who? When? Focusing on Area, Aspect, Angle and Audit. Reading based on analysis and plan.
Specific, unrelated parts are picked out for no particular reason.	Connections are always being considered; previous knowledge is related to new knowledge.
Information is memorised in isolation.	Information from many different sources/courses becomes knowledge which is used to develop an understanding of new knowledge.
Facts and concepts are accepted without reflection.	Theory is related to everyday experience and practice as well as to other theories.
Arguments and evidence are not distinguished from one another.	Argument is seen as having to be supported by evidence.
Information is seen and acted upon discretely.	Content is organised and structured into a coherent whole.
Motivation is external – assessment-driven.	Motivation is internal – learning driven.

Based on: Atherton. J. S. (2009) *Learning and Teaching*: *Deep and Surface Learning* (http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/deepsurf.htm and accessed 1 June 2009)

Should you read all the study material using the deep approach? As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, you begin the information gathering process by surveying the resources quickly to determine their relevance. This is a

surface approach. You have to read for different reasons at different stages of the reading process and therefore you should use corresponding approaches and ways of reading as summarised in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Different ways of reading

Reading: (why, what)	*Way to read (how)*	*Approach to learning*
To get background and to put the topic into perspective (state of the art)	Survey	Surface
To obtain specific factual information: reading only relevant parts of relevant sources (e.g., finding a name in a telephone directory, looking for a particular date in a history book)	Scan	Surface
To get general impression of what is on offer (e.g., to find out what the contents of a book or chapter are)	Skim	Surface
To analyse, evaluate, critique information (in textbook, reference book, journal)	SQ3R (see below)	From surface to deep

To make things easier for students, many textbooks summarise chunks of important information in a crisp, bullet-point style. This is very useful for a variety of reasons. However, you should not be tempted to read these summary notes only and not bother with reading the chapter. You will not have picked out the main and supporting points yourself and so may miss parts of the whole picture; in order to remember these ready-made notes, you may have to learn them off by heart. This can result in a real lack of understanding of the topic and very superficial learning. There really is no short cut if you want to read to learn.

Reading techniques and strategies

Various techniques have been developed for the best way of reading and getting the most out of academic literature so it is worthwhile familiarising yourself with some of these and developing your own strategies. Here we will look at one such technique in some detail as an example – the **SQ3R Reading Technique**. This technique was first introduced by F.P. Robinson in 1946 in a book called *Effective Study*. It has stood the test of time and is a useful technique for reading academic texts as it helps you to fully understand what you are reading and to take notes for later use.

The SQ3R reading technique

Using SQ3R involves progressing through the five steps of:

- **S** = Survey
- **Q** = Question
- **R** = Read
- **R** = Recall
- **R** = Review

You can use this technique to read an article, a chapter or just a paragraph. In practice, you would break up a book into manageable chunks to use this method. You will take longer to read using SQ3R, but your understanding will be greater and you will also retain the information for much longer, even without the notes you will take.

When reading to write an essay, you will not find all the information to answer the question in one book. Unless you have to study a book in depth in a literature course and then write an essay about it, you would have to select the book(s) and chapters first by using the first three steps.

To illustrate the use of the five steps, let us consider reading a chapter you have identified. You can adapt the technique to reading an article in a journal or something online. Be ready with pencil and paper when you sit down to read.

S: Survey (before you begin the actual reading) Check out the chapter. This should not take too long and will give you a good overview.

- Check the length, and establish possible chunks so that you will not have too much to process in one go.
- Read the title and subtitle and pause to think about them briefly – it seems like an obvious thing to do, but many students do not do this in a conscious way.
- Read the introduction and the conclusion or summary – these will alert you to the main points and to how the writer has approached the topic.
- Read the main headings and subheadings – this will provide you with a structure or framework around which the details can be built.
- Take a look at any additional features in the chapter – are there tables, diagrams? These are visual aids so use them to establish a holistic picture of complex ideas, statistics and connections.
- Make a written note of the details of the chapter (the chapter number, title, number of pages) and the book it comes from (see the next section).

This first step Survey is a combination of three different ways of reading: skimming, scanning, and reading for an overview.

Q: Question (make a note of the questions you have)

- What do you expect the chapter to tell you? Based on any previous knowledge you have of the subject and your essay focus, formulate the questions that you want answered.
- Change the headings and subheadings in the chapter to questions or, if there are end of chapter questions, pick out some that seem relevant for your purposes.
- Having these questions and looking for their answers will give you food for thought when you begin the R steps.

When you question you engage with the text and the writer. Your questions will ensure that you will not read passively but instead initiate a dialogue with the text, as it were. You will also begin to read critically as you will want satisfactory answers!

R1: Read The first of the three Rs requires you to find the answers to your questions (taking notes of the main idea and any related information).

- Take notes of the answers, separating out the main points from the supporting material and any examples. Some students highlight or underline relevant parts. This is only useful if you are selective and are keeping the essay question in mind. Using different colours can help. Some students scribble notes in the margins. This is a good way to use your own words and summarise or paraphrase. Only write such notes and highlight in your *own* books!
- Separate out the claims from the evidence that is provided (see Critical Reading in Chapter 5). What you are doing is breaking up the text to understand it better and this is the first step in critical analysis.

R2: Recall/Recite (write out your notes or say them out loud)

- Refer to the questions you have now made. Without looking at the notes you have taken, try to answer these questions *in your own words*. When do you do this? It depends, but it might be a good idea to recall at the end of each of the manageable chunks you identified as you surveyed the chapter.
- If you cannot answer a question then you must go back to the relevant section of the text again. This will train you to concentrate as very often we let our minds wander when we are reading.

You can say out loud what you remember from your notes or write them out roughly in linear or diagrammatic form, depending on your preference. You can go through R2 as many times as necessary. Why would you do this? Because by recalling the content as accurately as possible you will ensure that you have understood what the text is saying.

These first two Rs are therefore steps in reading to understand structure and content. Only when you have understood what the writer had to say are you ready to assess it critically.

R3: Review (*make* notes, think critically)

- Construct an overview of the topic of the chapter based on how, to what depth, and in what detail the chapter has addressed your questions.
- Reflect by comparing, contrasting, categorising and re-organising.
- Make more focused notes. *Taking* notes involves extracting information in a more discrete fashion (for example, in sections) as you read. *Making* notes takes this one step further by showing the connections between ideas from the notes you have taken, and it is often what you will do *after* your first reading. You may organise using mind maps or other diagrammatic representations such as tables and grids. Write summaries or paraphrases if this helps you to understand better (see also Chapter 6).
- Use your comprehensive notes to evaluate any claims the writer makes. Compare the arguments with those of other writers you have read. Or make a note to yourself to read what other writers have to say on the same topic.

As you can see, the SQ3R reading technique is not an easy option. However, it is more effective than passive reading – you will not waste time trying to memorise great chunks of information, but will instead use this time productively by training your memory and improving your concentration. Most of all, it will make reading a lot more interesting because it will bring you to a stage in the reading process when you can assess information and ideas and use these in your essay.

Using the SQ3R technique requires a conscious effort at first. However, with practice it will become almost automatic. Good readers will vary their technique depending on the text, the focus, the detail required, the amount of information needed, and so on. If you read with a focus, you will learn to switch between surface and deep approaches depending on how relevant the material is to answering the essay question. The great German poet Goethe said 'I am learning to read' – when he was past his 80th birthday! Remember, it is a skill in itself, it is something invaluable, and it takes time to master!

The SQ3R method of reading requires you both to *take* and *make* notes. By the time you enter university you will have developed your own way of taking notes, or putting things into note form as you read or listen, and of making notes by combining these first notes in a systematic and purposeful way. Some ways will prove more effective than others. (Chapter 6 discusses some techniques for this.) You might want to consider incorporating them into your way of taking and making notes to come up with something you are comfortable with. Always try to make use of what you already know and do.

Acknowledging others' work

At university you are required to respect intellectual property. The academic essay requires you to demonstrate this by informing the reader clearly where the evidence for your essay has come from and thus you will avoid unintentional plagiarism. This has the added advantage of telling your tutor that you have consulted credible sources. Noting the details of the chapter is recommended in the Survey stage of SQ3R. Before you put the book/chapter/journal article away, make sure you have the following details in an easily accessible place, whether this is filing cards, a notebook or in a named file in your computer.

- Author: name in full and make sure you have identified the last name or surname correctly.
- Title: note the edition/journal number.
- Year of publication (for the edition you have used).
- The city/country where it was published and the name of the publisher.
- The page numbers of the chapter or article (for example, pages 35–60).
- If you see a quotation that you might want to use, write it out as it is and note the page it came from.

You will need this information when you are getting your essay into shape and to compile the bibliography. If you need more information for writing the bibliography, this basic list will enable you to find the original source. The conventions for presenting information in your essay are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Information from lectures

We have just looked at a technique for reading. So what about one for listening to lectures? Lectures are often misunderstood and abused. Students may think that they are not that useful, because they often take place in a huge lecture theatre filled with too many students, some of whom would rather not be there. Students have been known to use lecture time to doodle, daydream, take a little nap, write text messages or have private conversations. In fact, a lecture is one of the best ways to get a holistic picture of a topic in a focused and connected way. A good lecturer will be able to condense a topic down to its main points and also explain the information in a clear, concise way. A good lecture is not just a 'one-size-fits-all' reading, delivered in a monotone, but the lecturer's own take on the topic, based on the latest research, and often explaining those things that are known to cause students difficulty. In addition, some lecturers will set aside time for questions, and this is a good opportunity to increase your understanding of the subject.

During lectures, you can get valuable clues about the importance of different aspects of the topic and even – if you are lucky – a clarification and discussion of essay questions for the module.

If you use the deep approach to learning, what you do during the lecture will be just one stage in the process of learning from it. There are actually three stages altogether: what you do *before* the lecture, *during* the lecture and *after* the lecture. In order to learn effectively from lectures, try to use a variation of the SQ3R technique.

The SQLR technique for listening to lectures

The SQLR technique for listening to lectures is an adaptation of the SQ3R technique for reading. Just as we read for different purposes, we listen for different reasons. Listening to a lecture requires a different mindset and approach from listening to Radio 4 on your way to class, or to a documentary on TV when you are doing the ironing. You need to be mentally prepared to get the most out of it. We will now go through the four steps in the three stages.

Before the lecture (SQ) Survey the topic before the lecture. Think about its relation to the other topics in the subject and what you already know about it; read any relevant handouts that might be available online (e.g., on WebCT) and go through the relevant chapter in the recommended text – a quick read for background information will serve at this stage. You can also talk about it with your course mates and find out what they know. Is the lecture topic especially relevant for your essay? What do you want to get out of it?

Think of some Questions you hope the lecture will address. You can only do this if you have gone through the Survey stage. The preliminary survey and the formulation of questions will prepare you mentally for what is to come, and will also help you be a more involved listener. You will be on less unfamiliar ground when you attend the lecture, and so taking notes will be easier.

During the lecture (L) While you can take a break when you are reading, listening involves your total concentration for the duration of the activity. If you are late for the lecture you will miss the introduction or overview which the lecturer may give, and then find it more difficult to keep up with the flow. You may also disrupt other students' concentration. If you do not pay full attention or just listen passively you will not retain much of what you hear. Even if you do listen attentively, it has been shown that we only remember around 50 per cent of what we hear, and up to 30 per cent of that may be inaccurate! Also, after a few days you might not remember anything if you have not got something written down to remind you.

Taking notes is therefore an important activity when you listen. Getting an outline from the tutor is all very well, but if you have not actively tried to make sense of it as you are listening it is unlikely to have much meaning later on. Instead, you may have to add it to the growing list of facts you have to memorise.

Listen for the main points and any supporting information, and take notes in a note-book or annotate the handout if you have been given one. Do not try to take everything down – omit examples or just note a couple for clarification, and use any standard abbreviations you are familiar with. If you use your own abbreviations, make sure you will know what they mean later. Symbols are also very useful shortcuts.

Remember that these will be very rough notes. There will not be much time for reflection and you cannot make links and connections without losing your listening concentration. Some useful standard abbreviations and symbols are to be found in 'Reflection and Review'.

After the lecture (R) Review your notes by checking against those taken by others attending the same lecture to fill in gaps in each others' information. Have all your questions been answered? When you think you have got most of the information from the lecture, you should take time to make a good set of notes which will help you later on in your essays or exam revision. If the lecture proves especially useful for answering your essay question, make a set of notes to expand on when putting it together.

Make notes using any note-making system you prefer. Connect the points to make better sense and separate the main points from any supporting points, examples and analogies. Go back to your notes while you still remember the lecture and make any amendments that are necessary. As with SQ3R, the Review stage in SQLR is very important for learning. If you prefer listening to lectures without having to take notes you could tape the lecture and replay it at your leisure, section by section, taking notes at your own pace but making sure you also make a set of your own notes in the Review part of the process.

chapter summary

- Use a variety of resources for acquiring information for your essay.
- Use different reading techniques to obtain information for different purposes.
- Apply techniques and strategies for purposeful reading in order to obtain relevant information to use in critical writing later on.
- Apply techniques and strategies for purposeful listening at lectures to ensure you get as much relevant information as possible.

reflection and review

1 Reflecting on lectures

Assess your skills for listening to lectures and practising reflection consciously. Use the following reflection starters at the beginning of the semester to help you monitor what you do in lectures. Reflect honestly and congratulate yourself and say '*Keep up the good work*' or '*Can do better*!' These starter activities can be used to compile a learning/reflective journal.

Reflection starter A

Date of lecture: .... I did not attend *

Before the lecture:

1 I knew what the topic was before I went to the lecture.
2 I knew the name of the lecturer.
3 I thought through what I already knew about the topic.
4 I did a bit of background reading on the topic (textbook or online resources).
5 I thought about some questions I wanted answered.

During the lecture:

6 I was late for the lecture and missed the first few minutes.
7 I was distracted during the lecture.
8 I took some useful and relevant notes.

After the lecture:

9 I discussed the lecture and compared notes with friends.
10 I made neater, focused notes from those I took during the lecture.

* I found out what I missed in the lecture from my friends and from notes and handouts.

When you monitor your performance at lectures, you will also learn about how you are developing as a learner. After a few lectures, you may want to move on to the follow-up, Reflection Starter B.

Reflection starter B

Look at your answers for Reflection Starter A, and ask yourself:

- What have I learnt about what I do before, during and after lectures?
- Have I changed for the better or worse or not at all?
- How has my behaviour affected my enjoyment and understanding of the lectures?
- What are my strengths when listening and taking notes at lectures?
- What are my weaknesses?
- Have I developed strategies to overcome any problems?

2 Practice

1 Use the SQ3R technique to read selected chapters of your recommended texts. File the notes you make to practise note-making, paraphrasing and summary writing later on (see Chapter 6).

2 Use the SQ3R technique to read a chapter which you have identified as being relevant to answer your essay question. File these notes to use later when you begin drafting.

3 Check if you know the abbreviations and symbols that can be used instead of words and phrases in the following table. These are common and useful in note-taking. If you make up your own, be sure you will know what they mean when you read your notes again.

Table 4.3 Abbreviations and symbols

Abbreviations		*Symbols*	
compare with	cf	therefore, thus, so	∴
for example	e.g.	equal to, the same as	=
and so on	etc.	not equal to, not the same as	≠
and others	et al.	plus, and, more, next	+
in other words	i.e.	minus, less, fewer	–
important to note	nb	greater/less than	> <
important	impt	proportional to	∞
organization	org	equal to or greater than	≥
especially	esp	approximately, almost	≈

(Continued)

Table 4.3 (Continued)

Abbreviations		*Symbols*	
group	grp	insert (something omitted)	/
population	pop	results from, is caused by	⇦
government	govt	leads to, results in	⇨
learning	lrng	increase/decrease	⇧⇩

It is also helpful to devise a code for your thoughts in your notes. For example:

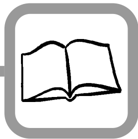
? = you want to question something or find out more;

* = something important to remember;

! = check this out;

and so on.

Your subject will have its own special vocabulary so devise a list of abbreviations for those words that often come up in lectures when talking about the subject and start to use these yourself.

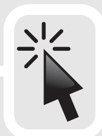


further reading

Payne, E. and Whittaker, L. (2000) *Developing Essential Study Skills*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.

5

Assessing Information Critically



chapter themes

- Why critical thinking and reading are part of critical writing.
- What is meant by critical analysis.
- What constitutes critical thinking.
- What is critical reading? Is it the same as critical thinking?
- What does it mean to write critically?

The topic of this chapter – assessing information critically – encompasses thinking, reading and writing critically. It is arguably central to the university experience as a whole, and is something tutors will look for in essays. The facts you learn may go out of date and you will have to learn new skills. This is particularly true in 'fast moving' subjects such as genetics and IT. Being able to assess information critically and to express your viewpoints in writing are skills that most essays at university will seek to develop.

Critical thinking and reading for writing critically

A critical approach to writing begins in the pre-writing stage and only ends when the essay is submitted. To take this approach is to also take the deep

approach to learning. This chapter focuses on what you need to know and do in order to be 'critical', and explains some of the terminology used. You cannot write critically if you do not know what thinking and reading critically entail. Writing an essay involves discussing what you have read.

Speed-reading book after book will not turn you into a critical thinker and reader. Critical thinking is as much a mindset or attitude as anything: one which has to do *not* just with finding the right answers to questions, but also with finding the right questions to ask in the first place, and it is certainly not something which can be learned in a series of 'easy steps'. Nor is it something that can be associated with academic life alone: you are thinking critically, for example, if you ask a salesman: *'Yes, but what exactly is it that makes this one more expensive than that one?'*

The good news is that if you are able to relate what is in this chapter to your experience of reading, thinking and writing at university and to the ground already covered in this book, then you are already part way there, and this chapter will take you one step further on your journey.

You may not be very sure what your tutor means if the essay feedback tells you that you have not been 'critical'. To be able to show that you have been 'critical' in your essay you need to demonstrate that you have read and thought critically. In fact, by the time you have reached the third 'R' of the SQ3R reading technique (Review), you will be well on the way to doing this. You will have gone through the text very carefully and reflectively and read it in an active, questioning way, analysing the sections and distinguishing the main points from examples or reasons. You should have reached the stage where you can answer these questions:

- Am I convinced by the answers that the writer has offered to my questions?
- What are the reasons for my saying yes or no?

By moving beyond understanding what the text says to thinking about the arguments and the assumptions underlying the arguments you are moving towards reading critically.

However, do you sometimes feel that you are not qualified to 'criticise' the claims, models or theories put forward by people who must know much more than you? This may be due to the negative connotations of the word 'critical' and its association with finding fault. But another meaning of 'criticise' is to form or make judgements, and this is what is expected from you. When you are told to be more critical in your essays, you are mainly being advised to be less dependent on just describing what you have read or what you already know, and instead to show that you can express an informed opinion. To do this, you have to read in an active, reflective, thorough, and analytical way.

Critical analysis

In order to evaluate what a text says, you must first break it up into its components – that is, analyse it. The first two 'Rs' in SQ3R, Read and Recall, require you to do this. Analysis is a powerful tool for understanding a complex issue. It is used extensively in all fields of study. But analysis is a means and seldom an end in itself – an analysis is only as good as what you can make of the results and when writing a critical analysis, you have to show the reader you have indeed got results.

Analysis is a prerequisite for critical thinking. In many essay questions, students are asked to 'critically analyse', which suggests that you have to go beyond analysis to give the views you have formed by thinking critically about the results of the analysis. Critical analysis is central to all academic work. It involves critical thinking and reading in the deconstruction of what you read.

Being critical has to do with the deep approach – you need to ask questions and look for the answers. You will have to start with questions about the overall context of a text and progress to those about the writer's argument and intentions, and here you may consider the language and style and how these affect the precise meaning and clarity of the message.

For example, when you read about the bombing of Hiroshima in a history book, you will probably learn 'the facts': what led to it and the outcomes, namely, the causes and effects, through a careful analysis of the text. The critical reader also finds answers to questions such as the following.

- The book: does the date of publication suggest it is current or outdated? What about the coverage or scope – is this well researched? Does it have an extensive bibliography? What have reviewers said about it? What about the depth and focus – are these too general, or very narrow?
- The ideas: are they current? Are they outdated? Have they been superseded, and if so by what?
- The argument: what is the central line of reasoning? What is the evidence? Is it sufficient and relevant to support what the writer is claiming? Is it logical?
- The organisation of the argument: does everything link up and add up?
- The writer: is there any bias or a hidden agenda? Does the writer's background or experience colour the evidence or the argument? What are the assumptions being made?
- What do other writers on the same topic have to say? Are this writer's views part of mainstream thinking, or something most others would not agree with?

A critical analysis of a text involves examining it in context and analysing its claims, evaluating how these are arrived at and supported. Depending on the

type of text and the **purpose** of your analysis, you could critically analyse just about anything: how well the information is presented, how persuasive the arguments are, and even how entertaining it is if that is your brief. Basically, you must answer this question: does the text do what it is supposed to do?

Writing a critical analysis therefore involves critical reading and thinking. If you are not sure at this point what some of the terms used above mean, the rest of the chapter aims to make them clearer.

Critical reading *vs* critical thinking

Critical reading and critical thinking work together. While it is useful to think of working out the components of a text (that is, analysing the text critically, or reading critically) before thinking about the claims (evaluating them, or thinking critically), in practice the two go hand in hand. When we talk about reading critically, we will have a written text in mind, and reading it critically involves asking questions about the text and the writer. Critical thinking is exercised in relation to the text and how it is structured and written. In practice, of course, we can exercise critical thinking about anything we can see, hear or imagine, and not only what we read.

Critical thinking is thus a broad term that encapsulates the type of deep thinking that all university students should aspire to, and involves among other things:

- evaluating the products of thinking and creating (ranging from an object that somebody has designed to a written text);
- questioning assumptions;
- engaging with the process completely: that is, thinking about your own assumptions and reactions and what might have contributed to them.

You respond to events or circumstances in everyday life by exercising critical thinking skills: for example, when you assess advertising claims or political speeches, choose health products, buy a car, decide on a university course, and so on. The more you know about something, the better you are able to develop an informed opinion on it. When you have to make a decision about something really important, you do your homework as thoroughly as possible so as to be able to evaluate or make a judgement confidently.

However, when put into a new or unknown setting (like university in the first year), you may lose some self-confidence and even a clear sense of your own identity. When pressed to form an opinion of claims made in an

academic text, you might become confused and feel inadequate and unable to react.

Part of the reason for this could be that you have not had to read dense academic texts before. However, you may be reassured to hear that a lot of dense texts can be stripped down to their basic claims, and indeed that part of critical reading is doing just that. You will need to assess these claims with the understanding that, while academic writers do not normally set out to lie to their readers, the fact that they are academics and are able to get their work published does not in itself guarantee that their views are 'right'. That will be apparent to you as you read more widely, and find that different writers come to different – even opposing – conclusions on the same issue. So you have to examine the strength and validity of their claims, and you can do this by reading and thinking critically. If you are studying art, design, architecture, the sciences or medicine, you will also have to demonstrate criticality in other ways (for example, through observation and experimentation). We have to develop our critical thinking skills in all areas if we want to be successful at university, and in our careers and professions.

The characteristics of a critical thinker

Critical thinking is not that easy to pin down and those of us who are unsure about what it involves may wonder whether we have such skills. It is also the case that some people do have the skills but are not consciously aware of using them, and would probably not be able to put these into words. People will tend to have some idea of what general characteristics they possess, however, so that is a good place to start. To get to grips with the concept of critical thinking, then, we could take the first step by asking about the key characteristics of a critical thinker.

To think critically, you will need to adopt the characteristics listed below.

Rational You will:

- not allow yourself to be swayed by your emotions or those of others;
- actively seek evidence and follow it up;
- find the best explanation through clear and thorough analysis.

Self-aware and honest You will:

- look for any motive or bias in yourself;
- recognise the assumptions you make and any prejudices you have;
- acknowledge that you can make mistakes.

Open to persuasion You will:

- evaluate evidence in an unprejudiced way;
- consider other viewpoints and interpretations;
- recognise the worth of new developments;
- not only take and accept the popular view.

Disciplined in your judgement You will:

- avoid jumping to conclusions;
- recognise attempts at manipulation;
- weigh the arguments and evidence extensively and intensively.
  Kurland, 2002 (available at www.criticalreading.com and accessed 17 January 2009)

Critical thinkers do not set out to be sceptical or cynical, but to question. They do this not because they think people are out to deceive them, but because they need to make up their own minds.

We can deduce from the above what the characteristics of *uncritical* thinkers are. Emotion and feelings will stand in the way of clear critical thinking, and in an academic setting it is important to distance our feelings in an evaluation. That is one reason why academic writing is formal and impersonal. Academic writers (and readers) have emotions like anyone else, but their feelings about an issue should not interfere with their assessment of someone else's viewpoint on it.

In order to talk about what critical reading and thinking involve you need to know the precise meaning of the terminology involved. Words such as *argument*, *claim*, *conclusion*, *evidence*, *reasons*, *line of reasoning*, *fact*, and *opinion* have been used both in this chapter and earlier parts of the book and you will probably already have some idea of what they mean in other contexts. In the following sections, we shall look at their meanings when talking about critical analysis, thinking, reading and writing.

Assessing arguments

An argument in academic settings has nothing to do with a disagreement or a quarrel. It is a concept with origins in logic, and when used to talk about critical thinking and reading it has a fairly clearly defined meaning. In order to assess an argument you will need to analyse it, or break it up into its components. In order to construct your own argument in an essay you must therefore know what components it should have to ensure that it is sound.

The components of an argument

Writers use arguments to **persuade** or convince readers that what they are claiming is true, logical and believable. The **claim** is embedded in the **conclusion** of the argument: *this is what I want you to agree with*. The ultimate aim of a lot of writing is to persuade readers to accept a writer's point of view. When writing an essay, you will need to construct an argument that will persuade your tutors that you have the knowledge and communication skills to address the essay question.

To be able to convince readers, writers must give strong, substantiated reasons, warrants or **evidence** to support their claims (conclusion) and present the argument in an organised, logical way. If a critical reader can reach the same conclusion as you by analysing your evidence, then your writing has been successful. As a reader, you have to assess the claims or conclusions made by other writers by analysing the reasons or evidence they put forward.

If you analyse an argument (including your own) therefore, you should find:

- an element of persuasion (that is, it sets out to persuade; sometimes this is stated explicitly, sometimes it is more implicit);
- a conclusion (or claim);
- reasons or evidence to support the conclusion.

When you try to persuade someone without giving any reasons you are giving an **opinion**, as when somebody says 'I think Manchester United are the best team in the world'. This is the **conclusion** you have reached, but you have not given your reasons for this conclusion. If you are then challenged and you present all the reasons you have, you will have constructed an argument. Whether the listener is convinced or not would depend on your evidence. And of course where football is concerned, the evidence will always be debatable. Debating evidence is a feature of critical thinking. The strength of your argument will rest on the strength of your evidence, and whether it is sufficient to support the conclusion.

Remember, if your readers do not come to the same conclusion as you despite the solid evidence you present, it could be because they are being affected by their feelings and are not thinking critically!

In a written argument, the conclusion will usually be given at the beginning or the end, although it can appear anywhere within the text. In addition, the longer the text, the more complex the analysis will be. The main argument may be made up of several sub-arguments, each with its own intermediate conclusion, which will build towards the main conclusion of the argument for the entire complex text.

example 5.1

Arguments

In the following examples of arguments, the conclusion is underlined each time. The rest of the sentences make up the evidence.

1 Cars are bad because their exhausts pollute the environment.
2 Since car exhausts contain carbon dioxide and other pollutants such as sulphur, cars can be considered bad for the environment.
3 In theory, you should be able to burn petrol or diesel with air in an engine to produce only carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water (H_2O). The rest of the exhaust fumes would be the nitrogen (N_2) that came in with the air. However, the fuels we burn in car engines are made up of hundreds of differently structured hydrocarbons that burn in different ways and at different rates. The exhaust fumes contain some that were partially burned, some that reacted with others and some that reacted with the nitrogen. While some of the components of exhaust fumes have no adverse effects, some constituents contribute to climate change and others are hazardous to human health. It follows that without sufficient regulation, cars could be a major contributor to environmental pollution.

activity 5.1

Identifying arguments

Are these arguments? What are the reasons for your decision? You can check your answers in 'Reflection and Review'.

1 Badgers carry diseases which can make people ill.
2 Foxes kill thousands of chickens each year and should be culled.
3 Dogs are man's best friend.
4 Horses can carry people on their backs or pull carts or ploughs.
5 As people with ginger hair burn easily in the sun, they should wear sun-block when they go out.

Evidence: fact or opinion?

What distinguishes an argument from an opinion is that an argument will offer reasons or evidence for the conclusion. But when the evidence is your own or other people's opinions rather than fact, the resulting argument will be weak and unsubstantiated.

To test whether evidence is valid and reliable, you will have to check that it is based on fact and not on the writer's opinion. A fact can be verified or proven, whether by observation or research, or substantiated by empirical data. A fact is solid evidence, as in: *In the survey, 53 out of 80 respondents said they preferred chocolate ice-cream to strawberry*.

An opinion is based on a belief or a purely personal viewpoint. Therefore it has not been proven in a conclusive way. Opinions are expressed all the time, whether sought or not; it is very human to want to state our opinions, and in everyday life we should have no inhibitions about giving or receiving them. However, when you are assessing arguments in critical thinking or reading, or putting together your argument in an essay, you must be able to recognise whether the evidence is based on opinion or fact. Facts will usually take the form of examples, statistics, case studies, experiments, analogies, observations, or data from authorities and primary sources such as archives.

This is not to say that writers should not express opinions. As a critical thinker however, you must be able to recognise these for what they are, and evaluate them accordingly. An experienced mountaineer giving an opinion on an aspect of climbing is more credible than your boyfriend whose only experience of mountain climbing has been watching it on TV. As a student writer, your evidence must be based on the authorities you have drawn on (books, journals, lectures), and you must be able to say where you found it by stating your source. When you can discuss the evidence and arguments in an informed way in your writing, you will have been reading and thinking critically, and are thus writing critically.

activity 5.2

Identifying arguments

Some of the statements below are arguments and some are not. Some conclusions (C) and evidence (E) are based on fact (F), and some are expressions of opinion (O). Do you agree?

(Continued)

What can you say about a conclusion where the evidence is opinion rather than fact? Are claims based on fact always true?

1 It rains a lot in the north of England, even in August (E/F), so there is really no good time to go there. (C/O)
2 It doesn't matter what time of year you go to Singapore if you want daylight (C), since countries on or near the equator have equal hours of day and night all year round. (E/F)
3 We need cold weather at some time of the year (C), as our bodies can't stand heat all the time. (E/O)
4 The sun never rises at the North Pole in winter. (F: can be used as evidence, but is not by itself an argument)
5 People are less depressed in the south of Europe (C) because the sun shines more. (E/O)
6 People living in the far north are more depressed than those living in the south. (C/O, not an argument)

The following can be concluded from this activity.

- The evidence may be factual, but this does not mean that the conclusion is valid – you may need to offer additional evidence to link the cause and effect (as in No. 5).
- A conclusion can be coloured by personal opinion, as in No. 1, where the implication seems to be that 'rain is bad'. The argument would be valid if it had a caveat – for example, 'if you like sunshine, there is really no good time to go there'.
- When a conclusion is based on opinion, the argument cannot stand (as in No. 3).
- The only truly sound argument is No. 2.
- Nos. 3, 5 and 6 are examples of flawed arguments.

Conclusions and reasons or evidence are often linked by such words or phrases as: *therefore*, *since*, *it follows*, *it can be seen*, *so*, *because* (see also Chapter 9).

Identifying flawed arguments

Flawed arguments are those that are inadequate or incomplete, or where the reasoning is questionable so that 'it doesn't follow'. Some of these have been discussed in previous sections. Arguments are flawed when:

1 There is a conclusion but no reasons or evidence:

   Organic food is better for reasons of health. (Opinion);

2 There is evidence for something, but it does not lead to any conclusion:

   Organic food is grown without pesticides. It does not contain additives. It usually tastes better. (Two facts, one opinion, no conclusion);

3 The cause and effect in the evidence are flawed:

   My friend read many books for his essay (cause) *and got an A* (result). *I read as many books as him, so I will get an A too*. (Conclusion)

   The claim here seems to be reading a lot will automatically result in an A, regardless of whether there is any understanding of what has been read.

4 There are illogical connections:

   Men's skulls are bigger than women's, so their brains must be bigger (evidence). *They must therefore be more intelligent than women*. (Conclusion)

   The mass of a brain does not in itself determine intelligence – otherwise whales and elephants would be running the world instead of humans!

5 The evidence is not sufficient to support the conclusion:

   Forty per cent of the people in the survey said they disliked the presidential candidate (evidence). *It follows that she will lose the election*. (Conclusion)

   The word '*will*' in the conclusion requires a much more robust reason to be given for it to hold. If the survey showed that 90 per cent disliked the candidate, the conclusion is valid. However, the evidence is sufficient to support a weaker conclusion, which may be indicated by changing one crucial word: '*It follows that she may ...*'.

Statistics are viewed as 'factual', but they can be misused and it is best to check how they have been gathered. This includes asking questions about the sample taken for the survey. How many people were surveyed? Who were they? Was it a random sample or were they all from a similar background? And so on. Unless the sample was a good representation of the population surveyed, a percentage can be very misleading. If you read that '80 per cent said they would vote for the opposition', you might think that the current governing party should not even bother campaigning – 80 per cent is a big majority. But perhaps not: it could be as few as four people if the sample only contained five! The size of the sample is an important factor, and you need to know this to evaluate any statistical evidence.

The sample you choose is also important. If I do a survey to find out how many people prefer spinach to broccoli, I could stand near the spinach in the vegetable section of a supermarket and ask the people buying it, 'Do you prefer spinach

to broccoli?' If I did so, the results of my survey would not be reliable as most people would not buy something unless they liked it. So in this case, the sample chosen is not a true representation of the population as a whole.

Arguments can also be flawed if they are based on an over-generalisation, which is similar to small sampling. For example, if a few children develop a rash after wearing a type of T-shirt, a consumer's organisation may conclude that the material it is made from is harmful to skin. An over-generalisation from insufficient evidence can therefore lead to a false conclusion, and a flawed argument.

activity 5.3

Identifying flawed arguments

Try to identify the flaws in these arguments. You can check your answers in 'Reflection and Review'.

1 Many students drink beer, so drinking beer gets you a degree.
2 Cars will kill us all because of their exhaust fumes.
3 Mobile phones emit radiation that is harmful for health.
4 Girls get better exam results than boys because teachers prefer girls.
5 This credit card is recommended by the Olympic champion, so it must be reliable and worth having.

In addition to analysing an argument for flaws in the reasoning, you should also be aware of any hidden agendas, bias or assumptions that the writer may have. And as a writer, try to be aware of your own prejudices. These are discussed below.

Hidden considerations

Hidden agendas You may have had the experience of being told by somebody that they were doing something for a particular reason, only to discover later that they had had a completely different motive. This is referred to as a 'hidden agenda', and critical thinking can unmask it. When reading critically, check for hidden agendas. There might not be any attempt

to deceive the reader, and the true motive may even be altruistic. But you must recognise this for what it is.

Many products on the market will refer to science to back up their claims. Scientific investigation is based on impartiality and objectivity, and the sole aim is to find the truth. Some companies may use the results of scientific studies to make claims about their products – for example, that toothpaste X 'is 40 per cent more effective in removing plaque than other leading brands'. This is fine, as long as the claim has been based on a real scientific study which has used rigorous procedures and come to this conclusion.

Scientists in medical research laboratories may well investigate the causes of the build up of plaque, as well as ways of preventing it and of treating or removing it. Any findings from such a study might be very useful to a company which wanted to develop a better toothpaste. Yet it is unlikely that their study would focus so narrowly on ranking the effectiveness of commercially available toothpastes according to certain criteria unless they had been hired by a consumers' association to do so. In this case, the study might well have been impartial and objective. On the other hand, if they were paid by one particular toothpaste company to carry out their research, there is a very strong likelihood of a hidden agenda. You should then question their rigour and objectivity.

Bias Researchers may sometimes be biased in some aspects of their research design and end up with findings that are debatable; it is up to the reader to identify where this bias has occurred. For example, it has been said that most IQ tests are biased towards people who have been part of similar educational systems and cultural backgrounds to the test designers, and that IQ scores are therefore not comparable across different cultures.

example 5.2

Bias

The thrifty genotype hypothesis has been widely used to explain the high incidences of non-insulin dependent diabetes among westernized Native Americans, Australian Aborigines and Pacific Islanders. For example, on the island of Nauru in Micronesia more then 30 per cent of people over the age of 15 have diabetes. The thrifty genotype means there is a rapid release of

(Continued)

insulin in response to high blood sugar levels. For our ancestors, this would have been useful, as the body would store fat in times of plenty. However, nowadays there is plentiful food and this over-production of insulin leads to obesity and insulin resistance resulting in high levels of blood glucose and symptoms of diabetes.

From '*The Thrifty Genotype Hypothesis*' (Jobling, M.A., Hurles, M.E. and Tyler-Smith, C. (2004) *Human Evolutionary Genetics*. New York: Garland Science, p. 422)

This is an example of scientific writing, but the definition of the thrifty genotype is an example of Eurocentric bias. When the thrifty genotype was first proposed, it was simply assumed without question that Europeans had the original and most common genotype and that Native Americans, Australian Aborigines and Pacific Islanders had a novel thrifty genotype. However, some researchers now think that the thrifty genotype may be the original form, and it is Europeans who are unusual in that they have a 'non-thrifty' genotype. This 'non-thrifty' genotype means even abundant, sugary diets do not cause the levels of diabetes among westerners that are found in other populations in the world who eat a similar diet. A false assumption has therefore led to bias.

Assumptions There are some beliefs that we will take for granted as being true – so we do not question these assumptions and may base our arguments on them without thinking. Our different backgrounds and upbringing, culture and experience may affect our beliefs.

Assumptions may also originate from what might appear as indisputable *fact*: photographs, statistics, 'authorities' or 'experts', and so on. Yet photographs can be ambivalent or downright misleading, statistics can be based on poor data collection methods (as we have seen), and even the most eminent authorities can get it wrong sometimes.

You may recall that part of the justification for the invasion of Iraq was the claim that the regime had weapons of mass destruction. This was supported by intelligence experts, and part of their evidence was photographs taken by state-of-the-art satellites. The assumption that the photos were indisputable evidence was the misleading factor in this case.

We live our lives making decisions which are influenced by numerous assumptions, and this is natural – indeed, we *have* to make some assumptions. When we drive or cross the road, we have to assume that other motorists will follow the traffic rules. When we buy food we have to expect it to be safe, and when we go to a doctor we assume they can make us feel

better and so on. However, it is generally better to be careful and be a defensive driver or pedestrian, to read labels and check drug information. Assumptions, both our own and those of other people, need to be examined just as much as evidence. When you write you must read your own writing carefully to identify where you may have made certain assumptions which will weaken your argument. If the assumptions made are not facts, or if there are other explanations and reasons that you have not considered, then you need to question your argument. If this can only hold if the assumption also holds, then the validity of this argument can be questioned if the assumption is false.

The text below is a made-up example of an argument that is based on assumptions.

example 5.3

In the seventeenth century, a Jesuit missionary writes a diary entry shortly after arriving in China:

> *The inhabitants of the village are poor and rather uncouth* (conclusion). *They eat from communal dishes in the centre of a round table* (evidence); *the food is prepared by cutting meat and vegetables up into small pieces* (evidence); *and the diners seize this food as quickly as possible with two wooden sticks held in one hand and thrust it into their mouths* (evidence).

What he observed was seen through European eyes: if middle-class people at home do not eat from communal dishes and the food is all cut up into small pieces, then the villagers must be poor; they are also uncouth if good table manners at home dictate that you should eat at a moderate pace, perhaps using a knife and fork. The underlying assumption here is that what he is used to is universal, and anything which does not conform to these norms is in some way an aberration, or even wrong. It could well be that he was right about the villagers, but the evidence given will be insufficient for a critical reader.

You will find numerous examples in history books of assumptions made on the basis of first encounters in new lands. You may think it unlikely that we will find such assumptions in the literature of today. However, if you read critically, you will find assumptions based on religion, race, culture, gender and age, in a lot of published material, and even in textbooks for schools and universities.

activity 5.4

Identifying assumptions

Can you spot the assumptions made in the following arguments? Check your answers in 'Reflection and Review'.

1 There is nothing wrong with breaking the speed limit if there are no speed cameras around – people do it all the time.
2 Killing a person is murder, so abortion must be murder.
3 Chemicals should not be added to food because they are unnatural.

The essay as argument

A question that tutors will often ask in their feedback on student essays is: 'What is your argument?' They are really asking: 'What is the point you are trying to make?' If your tutor cannot find an argument in your essay, it will usually mean you have not organised it well. It could be just a collection of descriptions, explanations, and so on, all going nowhere.

An essay must be an argument with a clear conclusion, and all the information in the essay must be relevant and should contribute to that conclusion. The argument will usually be summed up in the Conclusion part of the essay. This is used here to illustrate the point that the whole essay is an argument. How to structure the essay and the main argument will be dealt with in Chapters 8 and 9.

In the following example, the conclusion of a Judgement essay, the evidence is summarised and the claim (conclusion of the argument) is evaluated.

example 5.4

The conclusion of a Judgement essay

Soil erosion is the most serious form of soil degradation. Discuss this claim.

This essay has shown that soil erosion in recent times has been accelerated by human practices like overgrazing and using unsuitable cultivation

processes, to the extent that it is becoming the most serious form of soil degradation [*This shows agreement with the claim. Also contains some reasons discussed*.] Although other forms of soil degradation like salinisation, nutrient loss and compaction occur, soil erosion is becoming a widespread environmental problem as its impact is felt not only at the place of erosion, but also where the soil is deposited, and everywhere in between when soil is carried by water during heavy rains or by windstorms [as *above*].

The conclusion of an Exploratory essay is not a viewpoint which indicates whether you agree or disagree with a claim. Instead it is a considered take on the issue based on the evidence you have presented. It shows you have answered the question in a way that is logical and balanced. The evidence used in this kind of argument should justify your take and show how you have developed the answer to the question. The essay has to lead up to the conclusion by discussing all the evidence in an organised and logical way. In the next example, the conclusion that the effects of soil erosion are disastrous is backed up by a summary of the evidence (the areas affected and the effects). To go one step further, new claims arising then point the way to future action.

example 5.5

The conclusion of an Exploratory essay

Discuss the effects of soil erosion.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that soil erosion affects farmland, coasts, properties (etc.) and the effects (name some) can be disastrous [*The effects of soil erosion are summarised; a conclusion is reached*.] More sustained efforts to control the various effects may have to be implemented in the areas which are most vulnerable. Furthermore, climate change may cause soil erosion where this has not previously been a problem [*The conclusion leads to further claims.*]

Your essay will have a clear argument if the reader can identify what you have set out to do and where you are going (the conclusion), and how and

what you have used to get there (the evidence). Whether you get a good mark or not will then depend on how convincingly you have put the evidence together and how credible your reasons are.

In order to 'write critically', you need to start with a critical assessment of the essay question, through to a critical reading of the information you select as evidence, before presenting a strong argument using the appropriate language and style. You can then assess your own writing critically. Thus, only when you can think and read critically will you be able to write critically.

chapter summary

- Critical analysis involves critical thinking, reading and writing.
- Critical writers will question all aspects of what is read and what they themselves write.
- Arguments must be checked for flaws and supported by factual evidence.
- A critical approach to writing will result in an essay which is relevant and appropriate in its structure, argument and style.

reflection and review

Answers to activities

- Activity 5.1
  1. *Badgers carry diseases which can make people ill.* (Not an argument – incomplete – no conclusion)
  2. *Foxes kill thousands of chickens each year and should be culled*. (Yes – reason and conclusion)
  3. *Dogs are man's best friend*. (No – no evidence is given)
  4. *Horses can carry people on their backs or pull carts or ploughs*. (No – incomplete – no conclusion)

5 *As people with ginger hair burn easily in the sun, they should wear sun-block when they go out*. (Yes – reason and conclusion)

- Activity 5.3

1 *Many students drink beer, so drinking beer gets you a degree.* (Conclusion is not clearly linked to cause)

2 *Cars will kill us all because of their exhaust fumes*. (Conclusion with inadequate reason)

3 *Mobile phones emit radiation that is harmful for health*. (Reason with no conclusion)

4 *Girls get better exam results than boys because teachers prefer girls*. (Opinion/reason leading to an illogical conclusion)

5 *This credit card is advocated by the Olympic champion, so it must be reliable and worth having*. (Based on the assumptions that someone who is very good in one field must also be an expert in another, and is impartial, etc.)

- Activity 5.4

1 *There is nothing wrong with breaking the speed limit if there are no speed cameras around – people do it all the time*. (Assumption: if other people do something and there is no danger of being caught, then there is nothing wrong with it).

2 *Killing a person is murder, so abortion must be murder*. (Assumption: an unborn foetus is a person).

3 *Chemicals should not be added to food because they are unnatural*. (Assumption: only natural things can be good).

Practice

1 Improve your critical analytical skills by selecting short pieces of writing such as articles from newspapers, magazines and journals, and ask and answer questions such as:

What is the argument? What are the conclusion(s) and evidence? What is the writer's purpose? Is there bias? Are assumptions made?

Evaluate each piece of evidence. Do these strengthen or weaken the argument? Are you convinced? What are your reasons?

Now try to put together an argument of your own to say what you think of the piece of writing.

further reading

If you wish to develop your critical thinking and reading skills further it is very worthwhile to follow a course on critical thinking, reading and writing. There are also a number of helpful books on this subject:

Butterworth, J. and Thwaites, G. (2005) *Thinking Skills*. Cambridge: CUP.
Cottrell, S. (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Argument*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Van Den Brink-Budgen, R. (2000) *Critical Thinking for Students* (3rd edn). Oxford: How To Books.

6

Managing Information

chapter themes

- What plagiarism is and how to avoid it.
- Techniques for note-taking and -making.
- Summary writing skills.
- Paraphrasing skills.

Information has to be managed in order that you can access it quickly and then use it correctly. The information you get from reading and listening to lectures will be easier to remember and use when you make systematic notes from these activities. The mechanics of recording and using the information obtained are skills you need in order to manage all the information you will have obtained for your essay. These can be referred to as 'enabling skills', and are very much a part of the efficient use of pre-writing time. Mastering these will help you to avoid serious pitfalls when using information.

Plagiarism and how to avoid it

Essays may seem to make conflicting demands: on the one hand, your essay must be 'all your own work'; at the same time, however, it might get a very

poor mark or fail if you do not show that you have used ideas from the literature – that is, *others*' work. Reconciling these two demands and avoiding plagiarism have to do with *using* what you get from other sources properly *and making it your own*.

When making notes you should be careful that you have not inadvertently used the exact words and ideas in the original text and then transferred them to your essay *without proper acknowledgement*. It may seem tricky to learn to write in a certain way without copying exactly. However, you must understand other people's ideas and emulate the style of academic writers when writing a formal academic essay and then learn to develop your own academic style of writing. One of the first things to do here is to learn to reference properly.

Referencing is the method you use to incorporate information from other writers into your own writing. This information has to be selected, noted, synthesised, re-phrased and condensed in your own language. You cannot *copy* someone's ideas, but you can *refer* to them in your essay.

Students will sometimes get entangled in conventions for referencing and worry about remembering the different rules. You do not have to know the 'rules' by heart. But you do have to know how and when these are to be used when writing your essay.

Knowing why referencing is important is key. Not referencing correctly will result in plagiarism. Plagiarism is using other people's ideas and words without proper acknowledgement: plagiarising is therefore stealing something – nothing that you can touch, but words, ideas, plans, tables, diagrams, or even music and the plots of plays or films. Plagiarism is a serious offence at university and the consequences may be even more serious than a fail mark for the essay in question. To avoid plagiarism, you have to be very disciplined when reading, making your notes and writing up information.

When asked why they might plagiarise, students give various reasons. Apart from last-minute panic, factors such as ignorance of academic culture, conventions and expectations will very often be cited. Some students may think they can impress their tutors if they can pass off others' ideas and words as their own. Others might hope that using the words of other writers will show more sophistication in their style and language use. In addition, educational practices may be different outside the UK or western cultures and some non-UK students may not be aware of the differences if they have never written an essay in English before.

Plagiarising from other students' old essays is also not a good idea – your tutors will be able to detect changes in style or the lack of a coherent argument. Universities may also use sophisticated software nowadays that can detect plagiarism from published material, online material and even other student writing. Many students plagiarise from electronic sources, which any reader can Google to check up on.

Deliberate plagiarism is one thing. However, inadvertent plagiarism is another and students who claim they are not really clear about what constitutes plagiarism may have a point, as the following activity shows.

How do you know when you have crossed the line between what is acceptable or not acceptable as being your own work? Many writers of guide and reference books on writing for students introduce plagiarism by asking their readers to consider what they think it means to them (e.g. Swales and Feak 2004). Here is a short questionnaire – what do you think? What do your course mates or lecturers think?

activity 6.1

What is plagiarism?

Look at the eight statements listed below. There would be 100 per cent agreement that No. 1 is plagiarism and No. 8 is not plagiarism.

What is your opinion of statements 2 to 7? To what extent do you agree that they constitute plagiarism? Do you agree or disagree completely with any of them? Where are the grey areas? What are the reasons for your answers?

1 Direct copying of a paragraph or section, with no changes, and no quotation marks or acknowledgement of the source.

2 Substituting synonyms for a few verbs, nouns or adjectives in a direct copy of a paragraph or section, *with* an acknowledgement.

3 Substituting synonyms for a few verbs, nouns or adjectives in a direct copy of a paragraph or section, *withou*t acknowledgement.

4 Re-organising a paragraph or section so that the sentences are in a different order or some are omitted, *with* an acknowledgement.

5 Re-organising a paragraph or section so that the sentences are in a different order or some are omitted, *without* acknowledgement.

6 Copying sentences or phrases from a few sources and stringing them together with a few of your own words, *without* acknowledgement.

7 Re-writing (or paraphrasing) a paragraph, changing the language, structure, amount of detail and examples, and acknowledging the original source.

8 Quoting a sentence or section, using quotation marks and acknowledging the source of the quote and the page in the text from which it was taken.

You can understand the confusion here when you try to give answers or percentages to the statements. Does everyone agree? Is everything black and white? Different tutors, departments, courses, and universities may have different expectations.

- Most people would agree that No. 7 is acceptable and does not constitute plagiarism.
- However, Nos. 2 and 4 give rise to questions. Is there an attempt to trick the reader into believing that the information has been paraphrased? Or is it just ignorance?
- If, as in Nos. 3, 5 and 6, no acknowledgement is given, is the deception more serious? Or is the ignorance deeper?
- Should all these examples be penalised strictly? Or might some writers just be guilty of poor paraphrasing and summarising skills, the omission of references or ignorance regarding what constitutes academic writing, and therefore should be given a second chance?

Every department in every British university will have a written policy on plagiarism, which is often included in course handbooks. This sets out what is considered plagiarism (and other acts of cheating) and the penalties for doing so. Make sure you read this and if you have any questions, ask your tutors.

You should also try to follow the examples of Nos. 7 and 8 above in your writing. Re-writing and re-wording are important skills – if you read the text critically and take useful notes to work from, then you are already half way to doing this well.

So the important question is, how do you make effective notes to work from? How do you use these notes in your assignments? Very importantly, how do you then make it clear in your text that you have used ideas from other people? In order to manage information and avoid plagiarism, you will need to use the enabling skills of: note-taking and -making; paraphrasing and summary writing; and citing and referencing.

Note-making methods

Although some people use the terms ‘note-taking’ and ‘note-making’ interchangeably, it is important to distinguish between the two. Taking notes is a more passive activity; making notes is creative, and requires personal involvement. A secretary *takes* notes at a meeting; the participants *make* notes from the proceedings for themselves. Some people use the term ‘note-making’ to subsume note-taking as well.

For study purposes, making notes is the logical step up after taking notes. Note-taking and -making techniques were discussed in Chapter 4 in SQ3R and SQLR. Note-taking is what you do when reading (during the first ‘R’ of SQ3R), or when you are listening to a lecture or talk (during the ‘L’ of SQLR). Some people like to take and make little notes to themselves as they read or

listen. Whatever you do in the first stages, if you are going to use these notes for an essay or exam, it is wise to make a set of these to tidy things up and to ensure they are comprehensible, purposeful and focused. The amount of detail you include in your notes will depend on your purpose for making them.

So is there a single best way to make effective notes? I would say no, despite claims to the contrary. We choose our preferred method(s) because of different learning styles, time factors, different circumstances, or perhaps because we have only ever tried the one way. If this is your reason, do not limit yourself – try different methods and even combinations, depending on the purpose. You might be pleasantly surprised at your creativity and its benefits.

Method 1: linear notes

Many of us may have started making notes in a linear way – that is, one point after another, like a shopping list – with or without bullet points or numbering. Indeed this may be the easiest and most obvious way. We listen and read in linear time, so when we record the information, it follows that it is 'easier' if we do so in a linear manner as well.

However, you can improve upon a simple series of bullet points by organising it with headings and subheadings, with corresponding numbering. These linear notes are familiar and may be reassuring to have.

Using the decimal system (1.1, 1.2, … 2.1, etc.) for numbering means you can easily see what belongs where, and it will also enable you to organise from the general (the main headings) to the more specific (right down to examples). If you wish, you can use common abbreviations and symbols. Some people prefer to write out complete words. You should omit those words that do not add meaning like the articles *a*, *an* and *the*.

Below is an example of linear notes using the decimal system:

example 6.1

1 Arthritis

1.1 Meaning

- joint disease associated with inflammation;
- results in pain, stiffness, loss of function with signs of inflammation at one or more joints.

(Continued)

1.2 Types

1.2.1 Rheumatoid Arthritis

- idiopathic, chronic, generalised inflammatory disease;
- affects many parts of the body, esp. synovial membranes of joints and tendons.

1.2.1.1 Clinical features

- starts with weeks or months of general malaise +/– weight loss, mild fevers;
- joint symptoms often start in hands and feet in symmetrical way, but any pattern is possible;
- joints painful, swollen and stiff, worse in morning;
- advanced disease produces joint deformity;
- damage to large joints dominates clinical picture.

1.2.1.2 etc.

1.2.2 Osteoarthritis

- very common degenerative disorder of joints;
- characterised by loss of articular cartilage, thickening (sclerosis) of underlying bone.

1.2.2.1 Clinical Features

- asymmetrical joint involvement with pain related to joint use (hence worse at end of day), varying degrees of immobility, deformity;
- morning stiffness wears off after 15 min exercise;
- symptoms weather-sensitive.

1.2.2.2 etc.

Method 2: diagrammatic notes

We are all familiar with tables, graphs, grids and charts. These summarise information visually and are very useful as quick references. They are often used when writing reports. You can change your linear notes to more visual diagrams if the information is suitable for this form of presentation.

Examples of their use are for displaying similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages, historical data, classification and so on.

Below is an example of diagrammatic notes in grid form.

example 6.2

Comparison of the main clinical features of rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis

	Rheumatoid arthritis	*Osteoarthritis*
Pathogenesis:	inflammatory	degenerative
Sex:	M:F = 1:3	M:F = 1:1
Age:	20–55	50 +
Joints:	MCP, PIP, wrists, MIP	DIP, 1st CMC, hips, knees
Other features:	rheumatoid nodules, extra articular manifestations	Heberden's nodes, Bouchard's nodes
Blood tests:	anaemia, raised ESR, RF 70–80% positive	Hb normal, ESR normal, RF negative
Synovial fluid:	cloudy high viscosity white blood cells RF positive	clear low viscosity cartilage fragments RF negative
Symptoms:	systemic disturbance with: anorexia fever weight loss Early morning stiffness > 15 mins	no systemic disturbance EMS < 15 mins

Information from: Boon, N.A. et al. (2006) *Davidson's Principles and Practice of Medicine* (20th edn). Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.

Method 3: mind-mapping

Mind-mapping is a method for linking the ideas about a central topic together visually. It has been used in some form or other for a long time by educationists, theorists, engineers, etc., and in many fields and disciplines. When you drew a visual representation of the rough plan of the answer to your essay question, you were using the concept of mind-mapping. Tony Buzan (see Further Reading) developed mind-mapping in its modern form, but concept-mapping, spider diagrams, webbing, and mind webs are all conceptually similar.

In *The Mind Map Book* (2003), Tony and Barry Buzan extol the virtues of using the mind creatively. To summarise the underlying theory, learning becomes optimum when both hemispheres of our brains are used, and Buzan claims that mind-mapping allows this to happen. Most people studying or working at universities will tend to use or depend more on the left hemisphere of their brains as this controls reason, logic, sense of time and words, which are used a lot in academia. People in the creative arts will tend to use the right hemisphere more as it has to do with holistic thinking, colour, imagination and emotion.

The two hemispheres are designed to work together – for example, when you sing a favourite song you remember the lyrics (left hemisphere) and the tune (right hemisphere). You remember people you have met by their name (left hemisphere) and by their face or appearance (right hemisphere). In fact, very often we may forget the words of a song or the name of a person, but not the tune or the person's face. This suggests that information stored in the right hemisphere may be more easily retrieved from our memory.

The left brain/right brain theory is another way of explaining preferred learning styles. Most people will have a dominant side (preferred learning style) and when faced with a new or difficult learning situation will tend to use the preferred side and learning style. It makes sense that we should develop both hemispheres of the brain, and hence different learning styles, for maximum learning. Mind-mapping can encourage us to link information across the two hemispheres to achieve maximum learning.

The questionnaire mentioned in 'Reflection and Review' may confirm or determine your preference for left or right brain learning – or you may find that you are one of those lucky people who are comfortable with using both hemispheres.

Mind-mapping is easy to learn and you can use it to plan essays, take and make notes, prepare exam revision answers, do problem-solving activities, analyse case studies, brainstorm ideas, and so on.

How to draw a mind map

1. In the middle of a large piece of paper (A4, landscape), write the topic of your notes and enclose it in a circle.
2. From this, draw branches radiating out – the number of lines depends on the number of main points or themes you wish to include. Remember that you can always add more. Each branch comprises a key word or image.
3. From these main branches, add side branches which are related to the main branch but are of less prominence, for instance examples of the main branch.
4. What you have now is a mind map giving a holistic picture of the central theme and its connections.

To personalise your mind maps, you could use colours, images of your topics and other creative artistic devices you have at your disposal. Mind maps are

useful as they can be remembered holistically. However, many students do find them inadequate to represent all the information they need to know about a particular topic because they lack detail, and others will find that the condensed words and phrases just fail to jolt their memories. It has been suggested that several mind maps may be needed in order to represent a complicated topic. The key word(s) of side branches could be expanded into mind maps in their own right.

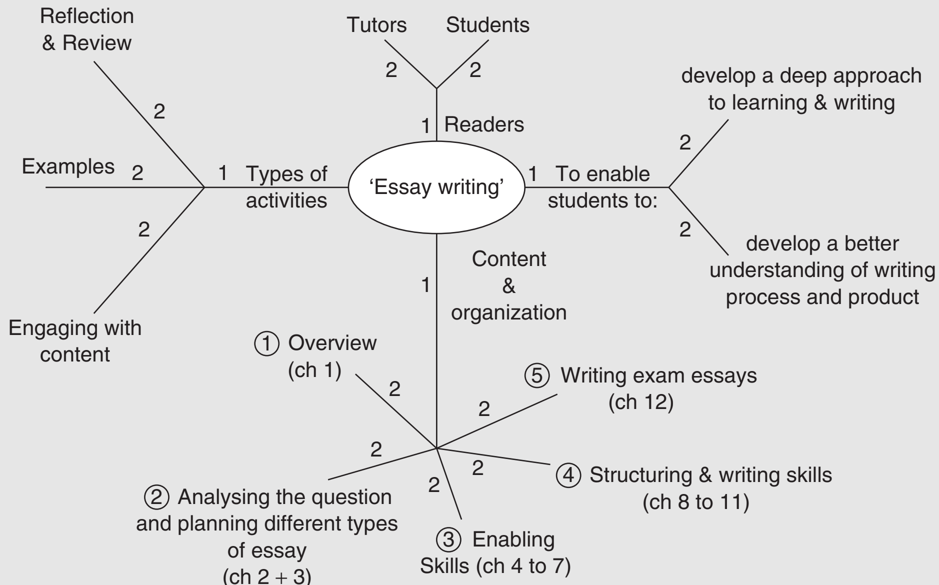
I would not advocate using just one method exclusively. Combining methods as appropriate and as they suit your way of learning is best. Note-making skills, whether in a linear or visual representation, can easily be 'transferred' and used to analyse and plan essays as was done in Chapters 2 and 3.

Here is an example of a simple mind map.

example 6.3

A mind map

This is an example of a possible mind map of this book. Only the first two levels are included. The more levels you have, the more details you can put into the mind map.



Whatever form your notes are in, the relevant parts will have to be fleshed out in your essay; you must incorporate this information into your own text, using your own words as far as possible.

Ways to incorporate information

The following methods of incorporating information into your essay from your notes or a text have already been mentioned:

- You could write a summary from your notes. A summary is considerably shorter than the original text. Summaries of sections, chapters, or even books are useful in essay writing.
- You may want to express the writer's ideas in your own words, for example by rephrasing a paragraph you have read, with the help of the notes you took. Paraphrasing is a very useful tool and is usually preferable to quoting. A paraphrase may contain fewer or about the same number of words as the original.
- You can also decide that the exact words are what you need from the original. If so, you must quote.

We will look at each in more detail.

Summary writing

It is a logical progression from having a set of useful notes on a particular text or passage to writing a summary which you can use in your essay. This section reiterates the SQ3R technique mentioned earlier for making a comprehensive set of notes. Linking the important points to produce a summary is the final step. In the advice below, points 1 to 3 are strategies for *reading* and *taking* notes; 4 to 7 are advice for *making* notes; and point 8 is about *writing* a summary.

How to write a summary

1 Look for the main information you want from the text using SQ3R. Scan the text and take notes on or highlight/underline for:

- the general organisation and purpose of the text (the central argument);
- headings and subheadings;
- topic sentences (usually first or last in each paragraph);
- the main points under each paragraph/section;
- any other relevant examples/sentences.

2 Look for further arguments/evidence to support the central argument.

3 Identify the focus of each paragraph/section.
4 Decide how to make your notes clear and easily accessible (linear or diagrammatic). Try to have a specific question or focus.
5 Make notes using the method chosen but:
   - do *not* write full sentences;
   - do *not* use words you don't understand;
   - do *not* copy whole sentences or phrases;
   - *remember* – your notes should show that you have processed and selected the information you needed from the text and not just copied this down without thinking.
6 Note the author and details of the title, date and publication.
7 Refer to the source material again to make sure your notes are accurate, and revise these as necessary (the third 'R' in SQ3R).
8 Now use your notes to write a connected piece of writing – the summary. Make sure this:
   - is organised as a clear and logical paragraph(s) (see Chapter 8);
   - is well linked, for example by using topic sentences and linking words (see Chapter 10);
   - uses accurate and appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure (see Chapter 11);
   - does not use too many words from the original (especially ones you do not understand);
   - is accurately referenced (see Chapter 7);
   - conforms to the instructions (such as a word limit) if the summary is required for a specific purpose.

A summary must select the essential points from a text. However, you may not need all these points to support the argument contained in your essay. Choose only those points that you wish to use as evidence or reasons.

Paraphrasing

When you want to incorporate what a particular sentence or paragraph says into your essay but do not want to quote or use the exact words, you will need to rephrase or paraphrase it. Paraphrasing involves reading and understanding a section of source material and rewording it to express the writer's ideas in your text. You should not just use synonyms to replace particular words here and there. You must show that you understand what the text says and express the meaning in a different way. This may involve changing the grammatical structure and order in which the information was presented. You might also have to use some synonyms or change the parts of speech (e.g. verbs to nouns).

Paraphrasing a sentence As we have already seen, if the only change you make to an original passage is to use a few synonyms this may be seen as plagiarism. When you want to paraphrase a sentence, you should understand what it says as a unit and reword accordingly. Here is an example:

> **Original:** *'A large part of the reason for working, performing well and resolving conflict in this corporate culture is the pleasure derived from such relationships' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2007: 159).*
>
> **Paraphrase:** *Employees in this corporate culture value relationships and therefore enjoy working together harmoniously (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2007).*

This is based on an understanding of the original. '*A large part of the reason for working, performing well and resolving conflict*' is taken to mean that employees like to work in harmony, and this is because '*the pleasure derived from such relationships*' implies that they enjoy good relationships very much.

How to paraphrase a paragraph

1. Read the selected paragraph using the SQ3R method.
2. Refine your notes in the process.
3. Join your points together into a continuous piece of writing.
4. Reread your paraphrase, changing the grammar and organisation if necessary.
5. Check your paraphrase against the original text. Does it say the same thing in a different way?
6. Don't forget your reference.

Paraphrasing is best done at paragraph level as a paragraph works as a whole, with a main idea, supporting ideas and a conclusion (see Chapter 8). Here is an example from a student essay.

> **Original:** *The sadness that a loss brings has certain invariable effects: it closes down our interest in diversions and pleasures, fixes attention on what has been lost, and saps our energy for starting new endeavours – at least for the time being. In short it enforces a kind of reflective retreat from life's busy pursuits, and leaves us in a suspended state to mourn the loss, mull over its meaning, and finally, make the psychological adjustments and new plans that will allow our lives to continue. (Goleman 1995: 70)*
>
> **Paraphrase:** *Initially, grieving causes us to withdraw into ourselves: we focus on our loss, and lose interest in what normally keeps us busy or what we usually enjoy. Eventually, however, the process enables us to become psychologically ready to move on and lead a normal life again. (Goleman 1995)*

Guidelines for paraphrasing

1. **Meaning:** this must not be changed; you must keep the original relationship between the main ideas and supporting details intact.
2. **Grammatical Structure:** change the grammatical structure of the original by using conjunctions or by dividing up long sentences, substituting nouns or noun phrases with adjectives, and so on. A knowledge of grammar will help here, but basically it is a matter of saying the same thing in a different way.
3. **Words:** use common synonyms/expressions and simpler phrases instead of the original words. You do not have to change specialised vocabulary (such as 'adjective', 'plastic', 'theory', 'neutron'), proper names (Europe, World Health Organisation), numbers and formulae (50%; 2000KW/m; 1984) or commonly used nouns ('computers', 'television', etc.).
4. **Style:** has to be consistent with your own and not an imitation of that of the source, even if your own style seems less than perfect to you.
5. **Length:** can be shorter but not too much longer than the original.

You may well be one of those students who can leap straight from reading a text to making a paraphrase or summary of the relevant information, and can then insert this into your essay without going through the note-taking and -making stages. This 'short cut', however, may turn out to be a mistake. Paraphrasing demands a very skilful use of language, a thorough understanding of the content, and the ability to connect discrete chunks of information together quickly. A good essay plan is essential if you choose this method.

Using quotes

Using the exact words from the text – or quoting – may seem to be the simplest way of incorporating what a writer has said into your essay: all you need to do is copy the exact text and make sure you show exactly where you copied it from. However, it is not as straightforward as this. If your essay has one quotation after another you are likely to fail. Using too many quotes or none at all will certainly lower your mark. There is no hard or fast rule for the number of quotes you should have. Check your module descriptor or ask your tutor. You must use quotes judiciously and in the right way, as explained below.

When you use a direct quote it must be:

1. **Justified** This means you must have good reasons for wanting to incorporate the exact words. These are usually the following.

- The words themselves are the subjects of the discussion – for example, when definitions or phrases are compared.
- They show authority and are part of the argument.
- The words are the best and most succinct way of expressing the precise meaning.

Example 1: The central issue however is finding the most appropriate method (or methods) to answer the question. As Aldridge (2004: 11) puts it: 'To force all questions into one method is methodolatry, not methodology'.

2 **Indicated** The quotes must be embedded within quotation marks or separated from the text around them. The importance of this cannot be overstated: failure to show clearly that you have taken the words from another writer is plagiarism. There are several considerations.

- If the quotation is a short one of less than four lines, it should be incorporated into your paragraph. In this case, the quote should be:
  - preceded by a comma (,) or a colon (:), whichever is grammatical in the sentence (as in Example 1 above);
  - enclosed in single quotation marks ('...') in British texts (as in Example 1), or double quotation marks ("...") in American texts. However, you will find crossovers. Quotes from direct speech are always enclosed in double quotation marks;
  - written exactly as in the original, except where the quotation is long and you want to shorten it. The words omitted are then replaced by three dots (...) (as in Example 2).

Example 2: 'To sustain this interest we must ... become better acquainted with them.' (Goethe, cited in Naydler, 2006: 32)

- If you wish to explain a reference in the quote, the word(s) should be enclosed in square brackets [ ] (as in Example 3).

Example 3: 'The decoction of the leaves in wine, being drank, is singularly good to provoke women's courses, and settle the suffocation, strangling of the mother [hysteria], and all other diseases thereof'. (Culpepper, 2007: 195)

- If there is a mistake in the original: add '(sic)' to show that it is not your copying mistake.

Example 4: 'An eyewitness said, "She was definitely under the affluence (sic) of alcohol".'

- If the quotation is more than four lines, quotation marks should not be used. Instead, the quote must be set differently from the rest of the text. It must be indicated by:

- a wider margin;
- a different font such as italics;
- narrower spacing between the lines.

Example 5:
Goethe expresses the view in these words:

> *To escape the endless profusion, fragmentation, and complication of modern science and recover the element of simplicity, we must always ask ourselves: what approach would Plato have taken to a nature which is both simple in essence and manifold in appearance?*
>
> (Goethe, cited in Naydler, 2006: 44)

3 **Referenced** This means that you must give essential details of the source. These can appear before or after the direct quotation, and include:

- the surname of the author;
- the publication year of the article/book;
- the page number where the quote was found.

Full details must then be included in the bibliography/reference list. The quotations discussed have followed these conventions.

Example 6 illustrates how the reference to a quote should appear in the bibliography.

Example 6:

Quote: 'Nettles are so well known, that they need no description; they may be found by feeling, in the darkest night'. (Culpepper, 2007: 195)

Reference in bibliography: Culpepper, N. (2007) *Culpepper's Complete Herbal*. London: Wordsworth.

To conclude, here are two paragraphs of an essay to illustrate how a student has incorporated information into her writing by using the methods mentioned in this chapter.

example 6.4

The English herbalist Nicholas Culpepper (1616–1654) has been described as a 'celebrated and useful physician' (Johnson, cited in Culpepper, 2007: xii). He wrote several books which attempted to make medical treatments more

(Continued)

accessible to the layperson by educating them about maintaining their health. He also wrote extensively about herbs and their astrological connections as he believed there was little reliable information available on this subject at the time: 'to find out the reason of the operation of Herbs, Plants, &c., by the Stars … I could find but few authors, but those as fill of nonsense and contradiction as an egg is full of meat' (Culpepper, 2007: viii).

According to Wood (1997: 46), Culpepper differentiated between the 'physical' or 'manifest' properties of the plant, and their 'hidden' or 'specific' properties.

> I say of the manifest virtues, and qualities, viz. such are obvious to the senses, especially to the taste and smell: for it hath been the practice of most Physicians, in these latter ages as well as ours, to say, when they cannot give, nor are minded to study a reason, why a herb, plant, &c. hath such an operation or produces such an effect in the body of man: It doth it by an [sic] hidden quality. (Culpepper, 2007: 555)

Wood goes on to explain that Culpepper believed that using the physical properties of the plant 'did not get to the core of the problem, only palliated it [covered it up]'.

Bibliography

Culpepper, N. (2007) *Culpepper's Complete Herbal*. London: Wordsworth.

Wood, M. (1997) *The Book of Herbal Wisdom: Using Plants as Medicines*. Berkely, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Chapter 7 explains how to make references to information sources explicit in your text and how to put together a bibliography.

chapter summary

This chapter has focused on why and how information for your essay can be managed to avoid plagiarism through:

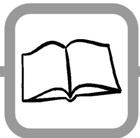
- Strategies for making useful notes.
- Tools for incorporating information into your essays.

reflection and review

1 Right brain, left brain?

Visit the Middle Tennessee State University website at www.mtsu.edu/~studskl/hd/hemis.html (accessed 21 May 2009), for a short but interesting questionnaire to help you check your preference for using the right or left hemispheres of your brain and the implications.

2
- Practise summarising and paraphrasing, using the notes you took from lectures or reading in your own subject.
- Volunteer to edit course mates' writing, focusing on the use of quotes.



further reading

Buzan, T. and Buzan, B. (2003) *The Mind Map Book*. London: BBC Worldwide Ltd.

Most university websites will have a page to advise students how to avoid plagiarism. The following is written by H.S. Pyper: www.jiscpas.ac.uk/images/bin/student_plagiarism_advice.pdf (accessed 21 May 2009).

More books on plagiarism are to be found in Chapter 7.

7 Citing Information

chapter themes

- Referencing correctly: the Harvard System.
- Compiling the reference list and bibliography.
- Incorporating the information from references.

The last chapter looked at ways to make information your own in your essay by paraphrasing and summarising texts and quoting correctly. In this chapter we go into specific ways to tell the reader who and what the sources of your information are. In doing this, you make it clear that your evidence can be traced and verified.

Referencing

There are a number of styles of referencing which are followed by different disciplines for different reasons. This book will not discuss all those in use: you must find out what convention your course and university uses or prefers from the university library and also from course handbooks. The method most commonly used in UK universities is the Harvard System (or 'Harvard Convention') for citing references and compiling the bibliography, and this is

the method we will look at in some detail here. If you are required to use other systems, refer to the texts recommended in 'Reflection and Review'.

Why reference?

From the last chapter you should now be aware of the pitfalls of plagiarism and why it must be avoided. Paraphrasing, summarising and quoting are important as these will show you have understood the information and can use it for your own purposes, but you are still required to inform the reader where you got the original information from, and exactly what you have taken – whether this is ideas and information only, or the exact words.

This is part of academic culture – respect for and acknowledgement of intellectual property. There is actually very little completely 'new' knowledge out there but there is a lot of added-on knowledge, namely insights from and developments of existing knowledge. You are encouraged while at university to explore this existing knowledge and develop your own insights. Referencing nudges you towards doing this in your essays by requiring you to give the sources of your evidence so the reader can judge whether it is credible and reliable. Referencing therefore performs several functions. It shows that:

- you have undertaken the research for the essay. It is not based on non-expert opinion, assumptions or hearsay;
- your arguments are sound because you have used relevant and valid evidence from reliable sources to reach your conclusions;
- you know how to use the ideas from authorities to support your own ideas;
- you give credit where it is due by acknowledging your sources;
- you are part of the academic community and are sharing your sources with other researchers who may want to know more details.

What to reference?

A question that is often asked is how much to acknowledge. Information that is common knowledge does not require formal acknowledgement. Generally, facts can be termed common knowledge if the following apply.

- One does not have to be a specialist in the field to know them. For example, everyone knows that water boils at 100 °C and that the earth revolves round the sun. However, if you state that on Planet X water boils at 50 °C, or that some people still maintain that the sun revolves round the earth, then you should probably inform the reader where exactly you got this information.

- One can easily find them because there are many sources. An example is the population of the UK. Specialist statistical tables and data should be acknowledged as the reader may want to know where you got such facts and how current they are.
- One can find them in a common reference source like a dictionary. However, references should be given for dictionary definitions that are direct quotes.

Sometimes students plagiarise unknowingly because they believe that it is only printed material that has to be acknowledged. That is not so – information from the internet, other electronic sources, videos, television, and even lecture notes, should be acknowledged.

In short, whenever you use the ideas or work of others in an essay, you should give clear references. In general, an essay which looks over-referenced is a 'safer bet' than one which is under-referenced, or worse, not referenced at all.

The Harvard System

The Harvard System (Author-date system) is the most common convention for referencing academic work in the UK. The British Standard system (Numeric system) is often preferred in the Humanities. Some disciplines use referencing conventions such as APA (American Psychological Association), MLA (Modern Language Association), IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), MRHA (Modern Humanities Research Association) and Vancouver (or Uniform Requirement system, used in medical and scientific texts). Make sure you know which convention is preferred in each of your modules. The Harvard system is discussed in some detail in this chapter as it is the system recommended by most university libraries and programmes in the UK. If your course uses other systems please refer to your course handbooks or books on that particular citation (see also 'Reflection and Review').

The Harvard System has these features.

- It puts referencing information within the text – this is known as in-text referencing or in-text citation. The information given here is the author's surname, the year of publication (hence the 'author-date' system) and (for direct quotes only) the page number.
- More detailed information about the source of every reference must appear in the Bibliography or Reference section at the end of the text.

In Chapter 4, you were advised to note the author, date, title and publisher of every source of information you used when taking notes. You will need all this to reference it in the text and to compile the bibliography. You will also

probably need more than this for writing the bibliography, but if you do have this basic information it will be easy enough to get the rest from an online library catalogue or website, for example.

Make sure you know which part of the writer's name is the surname. This can be problematic with writers from different cultures. For example, in the Chinese name Chen Guodan, Chen is the surname and Guodan the given name or first name, although it is not written first. To complicate things further, some Chinese writers may reverse this order to make things 'easier' for westerners, and so this name becomes Guodan Chen. It is understandable that Chinese students may also find western names problematic, and may end up with references such as Ruth, P. instead of Parker, R. in their bibliographies.

Different sources may offer slightly different advice on the use of punctuation marks such as commas (,) and stops(.) and the use or non-use of brackets (...), and this may prove confusing. You should consult your university library website for more specific details of your own university's requirements. Any bibliography you are given on your course will also give you a specific model to follow. Variations at this level of detail are largely a matter of preference, and as long as you are consistent and follow the broad conventions, you should have nothing to worry about.

Where and how in the text

When you cite a reference in your essay, you are telling the reader where the information came from and signalling that all the details can be found in the bibliography. This information appears in your text in different ways, depending on the source and how much information it gives you.

When a single author is cited

- You can mention the writer's name and date as part of your text, that is, in your paraphrase or summary itself: *Buzan (2003) maintains that mind maps make use of both hemispheres of the brain*, or, *Mind maps, which Buzan (2003) claims make use of both hemispheres of the brain, are a useful tool for planning*.
- You can mention the source in brackets at the end of the part of the sentence giving the summary or paraphrase: *Mind maps make use of both hemispheres of the brain (Buzan 2003)*.
- When quoting words or short phrases, the source should appear in your text as above, with the inclusion of appropriate inverted commas: *Buzan (2003:56) makes a distinction between the storage 'capacity' of our brain and its 'efficiency', both of which can be increased with a mind map*. Where longer excerpts are quoted, they should be set out as detailed in Chapter 6.

When there are two or more authors

- If the source has two authors, both names should be cited: *Brown and White (2005) argue ….*
- If there are more than two authors, then the term 'et al.', meaning 'and others', must be used after the first name in the list of authors. So something from a work by Green, Brown and White would be introduced as follows: *Green et al. (2001) suggest ….* Note that the verb after 'et al.' is plural.

Where there are several sources for your reference

- Sometimes you may find that a number of different writers have said the same thing. The most direct and least complicated way to show this is to summarise the information and then list the authors in brackets: (*Green 2001, White 2003*).

Where there is no author or date

- If your evidence is to be seen as credible, an author and/or date are important. You can use 'anon' (short for 'anonymous') instead of an author's name and 'n.d.' instead of a date, but the reader might not accept this evidence. Some exceptions to this are dealt with below.
- In the case of online sources, cite the website URL: http://www.uclan.ac.uk.

Where no authors are mentioned but the publication is that of a recognised organisation

- For the first reference, the name of the organisation should be used instead of that of an author, together with any standard abbreviation: *the World Trade Organisation (WTO) 2005 offers evidence* …. Any subsequent references will then use the abbreviation only: *WTO 2005….*

Where no authors are mentioned, as with dictionaries and CD-ROMs

- Give the full title and year of the publication: *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2006*.

If no authors are mentioned, as with newspaper or magazine articles

- State the full name of the newspaper (etc) and the exact date and page*: The Guardian, 15 May 2008, p. 12*.

If the book is a compilation This covers chapters written by different authors and put together by an editor.

- Cite the author who contributed the chapter you are referring to. This is usually not the same as the person whose name appears on the cover and spine of the book (the editor). Information on both the author and editor will go into the bibliography or reference section.

If you did not read the information in the original publication

- Writers refer to each other, and sometimes you may want to use something which the writer of the book you are reading has taken from another source. If you are unable to read the original source, then you must cite both writers to show how you got the evidence. You can do this either directly: *Black (1998), cited in White (2004) claims that ...*; or indirectly: ... *(Black 1998, as cited in White 2004)*.

Tables and diagrams

- Tables and diagrams which are used in their entirety should be treated as if they were quotes, and so page numbers should be included in addition to the other basic information. If these have been modified or adapted for your purposes, this should be clearly stated: *Adapted from: (source information).*

As previously mentioned, there are variations to the above. For example, a variation of *(Brown 1996)* is *(Brown, 1996)*, with a comma between the name and the year. Similarly, page numbers are sometimes indicated by a colon (:) instead of *p* or *page* as in *(Brown 1996: 35)*. As long as you are consistent, most tutors will accept these variations.

The reference list/bibliography

The references you use in your text will not by themselves give your readers enough information: there may be several hundred writers called Brown who published books in 2007, for example. Before your essay can be handed in as complete it will therefore need a final section, which is a list of all the references you made in your essay, giving your readers all the details they need.

Although you will not need to compile this until you have finished writing your essay, knowing what details you will need is important at the pre-writing stage, so if you note them down as you read you will not need to panic later. The Harvard System requires you to use a standard style for this.

The Reference List (sometimes abbreviated to ‘References’) is essentially what the name implies: a list of all the references you have cited in your essay. It gives the essential details of the sources you cited so that any reader

can check the accuracy of your information and your take on it. *All* academic essays must have a reference list.

The Bibliography represents a broader concept. It also contains all the references, but in addition may contain other sources which you consulted but did not actually cite. It is useful because it shows the related resources you consulted to learn about the topic. Although bibliographies are to be found in dissertations and academic books and articles, it is usually not really necessary for undergraduates to compile a bibliography – a reference list will give the tutor enough information. As always, however, you should make sure you know the precise requirements of your course.

Normally, single spacing is used in the reference section (even if the essay brief tells you to use double spacing), and the section must be aligned to the left rather than fully justified. Note that a full stop or period in a reference entry does not indicate the end of a sentence, and that sometimes a comma can have the same function of separating information.

Both the reference list and the bibliography must be arranged in alphabetical order according to the surname of the author. Different amounts of information will be required for different entries, depending on the type of publication, but the essentials here are the author, the year of publication, the title and publisher information. Failure to include all of these may lead to your essay being penalised.

- **Author's name:** this is the author's surname or last name, plus an initial (or their full initials). It is very unusual to write given names in full.
- **Year of publication:** this is the year in which the book or article was published, and among other things this information will give your reader a chance to see whether you have relied too heavily on dated sources. The year of publication is usually enclosed in brackets, but sometimes brackets are not used. To find this, you need to look at the page with small print right at the front of the book – usually before the contents page(s). If a book has appeared in more than one edition, you must use the date of the edition you have consulted.
- **Title:** you must write the title of the work in full. Sometimes titles are set differently from the rest of the entry: they may be underlined, **emboldened** or (quite commonly) *italicized*.
- **Publisher:** details of the publisher for our purposes should comprise both the name of the publisher *and* the place of publication, with the place of publication coming first. The name of the publisher can usually be found on the front and/or back cover of a book. However, the place of publication may be harder to find: again, you should look at the page with the small print. If you find more than one place listed ('London, New York, Singapore ... '), choose the first one, and write the name of the city rather than the country. There is usually a colon between the place of publication and the name of the publisher, sometimes with a space after it, sometimes without. Publisher details are sometimes enclosed in brackets.

So far we have covered the essentials for *all* the sources you may consult. But there can be many variations in these sources, and so the rest of this section sets out the main conventions for indicating these, covering both the main printed and electronic sources in the order of books, journals and newspapers. Showing that you can manage this level of detail is likely to impress your tutor. As you look at the examples below, you should note the sequence of information and the use of punctuation and spacing, and also realise that italics for titles (used here) are not mandatory. In each case, the convention is stated, and this is then followed by an example.

- **Books (printed)**

  Books are available in print or electronic form; some may have several editions, others only one; there might be several authors; and they may consist of collections of chapters written by different authors, in which case there will also be one or more editor(s).

  - **One author, first edition**: Author (Date) *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

    Cottrell, S. (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

  - **Two or more authors, not first edition**: Authors (Date) *Title* (Edition). Place of publication: Publisher.

    Swales, J.M. and Feak, C.B. (2007) *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (2nd edn). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

  - **Edited books**: Editor(s) (ed./eds) (Date) *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

    Khoo, R. (ed.) (1994) *LSP: Problems and Prospects*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

  - **Chapters in edited books**: Chapter author(s) (Date) Title of chapter. 'In:' Name of editor(s) (ed./eds) *Title of book*. Place of publication: Publisher. Pages:

    Kay, H.L. (1994) Genre: The View from the classroom. In: Khoo, R. (ed.) *LSP: Problems and Prospects*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre. Pages 63–79.

- **Books (electronic)**

  With e-books, in addition to the information you give for printed works, you must also include the medium (electronic), the website address, and the date you accessed it. The latter is important, as websites may change from day to day.

    Author (Date) *Title* '[e-book]'. Place of publication: Publisher, website address '[accessed (date)]'.

    Samuelson, B. (2007) *Great Apes: Morphology and Behaviour* [e-book]. London: Macay's Books, http://www.macaysbooks.com/id3456.htm [accessed 23 April 2008].

- **Journals (printed)**

  When you cite an article in a journal, you need to write the reference as you would for a chapter in a book. However, instead of publisher information, you should provide information on the journal, issue and volume.

  Author(s) (Date) Title of article. *Title of Journal*. Volume number (issue). Pages:

  Miller, G., Tybur, J. and Jordan, B. (2007) Ovulatory effects on tip earning by lap dancers: economic evidence for human estrus? *Evolution and Human Behaviour* 28 (2): 275–281.

- **Same author, different publications in the same year**

  If you cite articles by an author published at different times of the same year, these can be distinguished by a (lower case) letter, starting with a, after the date:

  Author(s), (Date a) Title of article. *Title of Journal*. Volume number (issue). Pages:
  Author(s), (Date b) Title of article. *Title of Journal*. Volume number (issue). Pages:
  Halliday, M.A.K., (1983a) Linguistics in Theory and Practice. *Waiyu Jiaoxue yu Yanjin* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research). 56. pp. 24–32.
  Halliday, M.A.K., (1983b) On the Transition from Child Tongue to Mother Tongue. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 3. pp. 201–215.

  It is unlikely you will find any authors who publish more than one book in the same year, but if you do it may be difficult to determine which of these came out first. In such cases, you will have to indicate which work you are referring to *within* your essay, and your in-text reference should follow these examples:

  Jones (2003): The Thinking Guide argues that ...
  Jones (2003): Writing at University explains ...

- **Journals (electronic)**

  Articles that have been accessed online should be referenced with the same elements as articles in printed journals. However, as with anything accessed online, you must include the medium, the website address and the date this was accessed:

  Author (Date) Title of article. *Title of Journal* '(online)'. Volume number (issue). Page numbers. Website address '[accessed (date)]':

  Mulcare, C.A., Weale, M.E., Jones, A.L., Connell, B., Zeitlyn, D., Tarekegn, A., Swallow, D.M., Bradman, N., Thomas, M.G. (2004) The T allele of a single-nucleotide polymorphism 13.9 kb upstream of the lactase gene (LCT) (C-13.9kbT) does not predict or cause the lactase-persistence phenotype in

Africans [online] *American Journal of Human Genetics*. 74 (6):1102–10. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B8JDD-4RDBM6R4&_user=122875&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&view=c&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=122875&md5=f85d162ed16781a31d3e3b433b8e4102 [accessed 20 October 2008]

- **Newspapers (printed)**

  Newspaper citations should have the following elements if possible: Author (Date) Title of article. *Name of newspaper*. Date of article. Page number(s).

  Weaver, M. (2008) 'Drunk' pilot arrested at Heathrow. *The Guardian*. 20 October 2008. Page 2.

  If no author is given, 'anon' should be used.

This guide has been designed to provide you with a good start, and an understanding of how to compile a reference list or bibliography. If you get information from sources not mentioned here, ask your tutor or a university librarian or go online to find out what information you will need to include. Further reading is also suggested at the end of this chapter.

In-text citations: the use of reporting verbs

When you cite sources in your essay, you will usually have to insert an appropriate phrase or verb into the sentence which contains the information from your source. The resulting sentence will therefore have two parts: the source and the information, linked together by what is called a reporting verb: source + reporting verb + information.

In order to incorporate quotes, paraphrases and summaries into your text you will need to use a variety of reporting verbs. The most obvious ones and those most commonly used by many students are 'said' and 'stated', but if these are the only ones you use in your essay it will be rather boring to read and also not very informative. These words are quite neutral in meaning, and when you use them you are simply passing on information without giving any indication about what you think. Although you are presenting others' ideas, your own voice should be heard. Using reporting verbs meaningfully shows that it is *you* who are putting the argument together – in other words, that you are writing critically.

The rest of this section will examine these reporting verbs in some detail, looking at the grammatical patterns they follow, the meaning of the verbs, and how they can help build your argument. Finally we will look at the verb tenses which can be employed.

Ways to incorporate information from references

There are three main ways to incorporate information from references: using verbs like *argue*, usually followed by *that*; using verbs like *discuss*, followed by a noun or part of a sentence which acts as a noun; and by using the passive voice.

1 *Tan and Liang (2004) suggest there may be several causes ...*
Walker (2001(a)) concludes that 'there is simply no evidence to support ...'

Other verbs in this category include: *state, agree, claim, argue, maintain, point out, note, hypothesise, assert*, etc.

2 *Bartlett and Myers (1999) discuss a number of cases in which ...*
Gardiner et al. (2000) examine how these irregularities affect ...

Other verbs in this category include: *refute, cite, summarise, investigate, focus on, analyse*, etc.

3 *It has been pointed out by several writers that even very large companies can ... (Baier 1997, Fotheringay and Walsh 2003, Carter-Wills 2004)*

This is the passive voice, and here it is used with what is called the 'dummy *it*'. This gives the impression that it is the argument which is important rather than the writer(s). This structure is commonly used if there are two or more different sources, and in such cases these are given in brackets at the end of the sentence.

Choosing the reporting verb

activity 7.1

Pause for Reflection

Consider these statements:

A *The suspect pointed out that he had been at home at the time of the crime.*
B *The suspect swore that he had been at home at the time of the crime.*
C *The suspect claimed that he had been at home at the time of the crime.*
D *The suspect stated that he had been at home at the time of the crime.*
E *The suspect proved that he had been at home at the time of the crime.*

These all report what the suspect said, but in quite different ways. Which one(s):

1 are simply a neutral report of what the suspect said?
2 indicate the extent to which the writer believes the suspect?
3 evaluate how strongly the suspect wants others to believe him?

Answers

1 Simply a neutral report of what the suspect said: A, D.
2 Indicate the extent to which the writer believes the suspect: C, E.
3 Evaluate how strongly the suspect wants others to believe him: B.

Were your responses the same as the answers above? Was it difficult to decide? Were there overlaps? Try to consider the reasons for your responses. Reporting verbs can be very telling and their correct use will give information about the author (the source), the writer (of the reference, you), and your interpretation of the topic under discussion (your voice).

Reporting verbs therefore should not be used arbitrarily. They always introduce what you are reporting, but your choice of verb can reflect how strongly the author's beliefs have been voiced, and your opinion of them. Some reporting verbs are less objective than others. When you choose to use more subjective verbs, you are wanting your voice to be heard more strongly.

Less objective verbs (like *claim, assume, assert*) tell the reader something about your own position in general, or about your views on what a writer is saying. These words will tend to be somewhat evaluative of the source: they tell the reader that you are making some kind of judgement about it. If you do not mean to be evaluative, you should avoid them and use more objective verbs:

> *Trickey (2003) claims that a natural approach to PMS amounts to some sort of hormone modulation.*

The use of *claim* here suggests you think that the writer has not really proved his point to your satisfaction.

Objective verbs fall into three broad categories: (1) those which say what the source actually *did*; (2) those which report what the source *said* or *wrote*; and (3) verbs which indicate the source's *opinion* or *beliefs*.

1 Verbs that are used to report what the source *did* will not convey any sense of evaluation. This category includes *observe, determine, analyse, find, describe, identify, conclude*, and *prove*:

> *A review by Linde et al. (1987) identified two-thirds of trials as being methodologically weak.*

Here you are simply reporting what you believe is a fact.

The last verb in the list (*'prove'*) is sometimes used incorrectly in essays. 'Proving' something involves rigorous tests such as an experiment in a laboratory to show that water boils at 100°C at sea level, and if something has been proved then it is always true. It is a word which should be used with caution outside fields such as the hard sciences. For example, an essay on Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs cannot *prove* that a need for self-actualisation motivates people – it can only *argue* that it does, or *demonstrate* that it does for some people.

2 Verbs that are used to report what the source *stated* vary from those which simply introduce a paraphrase of what the source said, such as *state, say*, or *point out*, to those which suggest that the source wanted to highlight the importance of a point, such as *maintain, emphasise* or *stress*:

Ernst et al. (2006) state that policy makers need evidence on safety and efficacy.

This simply re-states what the authors wrote.

Ernst et al. (2006) maintain that this evidence should include data from controlled clinical trials or systematic reviews of such studies.

This suggests that the authors wanted to draw special attention to this idea, perhaps because it has been ignored or challenged.

3 Verbs which indicate the source's *opinion* or *beliefs* vary according to the strength of their convictions. These include *suggest, claim, believe, question, propose, argue, agree* and *assert*:

McCrae and Costa (1989) suggest that ...

This implies that the authors are tentative: they are proposing one possible explanation (or whatever), and they know it is untested.

McCrae and Costa (1989) question whether ...

Here you are saying that the authors have some doubts about a particular line of reasoning, etc.

McCrae and Costa (1989) believe that ...

Here the idea is that the authors have gathered enough evidence to be convinced themselves, but know that it is not conclusive.

McCrae and Costa (1989) assert that ...

An interpretation of this could be, 'This is what they say, but they don't have any evidence'.

McCrae and Costa (1989) argue that ...

By choosing *argue*, you are telling your reader that the source has given evidence for the claims made.

The final note in this section on the use of reporting verbs has to do with the word *mention*. It should not be used as a reporting verb in essays, because if a source simply *mentions* something, it is not important, and therefore not worth including in your essay.

Brown (2004) mentions the clinical trial as the gold standard of clinical research.

This is not a key point in Brown's argument.

Brown (2004) describes the clinical trial as the gold standard of clinical research.

Brown thinks it is important that readers should believe this idea.

Verb tenses

You may have noticed from the examples above that a citation can be written in the present (*suggest*) or past tense (*demonstrated*). Both are acceptable, but they are generally used for different purposes. The present tense is used mainly to report information which is not based on empirical sources; when reporting on experiments and surveys, the past tense tends to be used. The logic – if there is one – is that views and arguments are still there in books and articles, and so 'Rubrov and Beech argue …' suggests that this is a view we still have to take into account. If you cite an experiment or survey, on the other hand, then you are reporting on something which happened at a particular time, and the conclusions drawn from it may no longer hold true. The main point is that you should be consistent with your choice of tense in any particular instance:

Johns (2007) claims that women are better drivers than men.

This implies that Johns may advance supporting arguments, but these are not based on fact.

Thomas et al. (2004) found that women had fewer road accidents than men.

Here you are saying that Thomas and his associates collected empirical evidence or looked at the statistics in published sources.

A final point to make here is that there are alternatives to using reporting verbs to introduce citations. Here are two examples:

According to Glaser and Niko (1971), most instances of domestic violence are …
Glaser and Niko's (1971) argument/suggestion/assertion is that …

Being able to use several ways to cite references will make your essay more interesting to read, and is also likely to impress your tutor. Reporting verbs can give information about your take on the citation, and very importantly, the writer's take. The appropriate use of a reporting verb shows how well you have understood what you read and how critical your reading has been.

chapter summary

This chapter on the Harvard System for presenting information in the text focused on:

- The reasons for using a reference convention.
- Referencing information in-text.
- Compiling the reference list or bibliography.
- Incorporating information using appropriate reporting verbs and tenses.

reflection and review

Practice

1 Collect samples of bibliographies for your course. Review them according to the information in this chapter. Is there a standard? What are the acceptable variations?

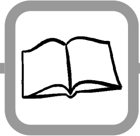
Remember, you do not have to keep in your head everything there is to know about how to reference. Have this chapter to hand, or a comprehensive online guide or one from your library, and refer to these when you compile the bibliography for an essay. Be consistent in your use of punctuation and formatting (for example, are all titles in a normal font, bold, italic, or underlined?).

2 Most citations will use verbs to incorporate the source into the text. There are numerous reporting verbs and, depending on the discipline you are studying, some may be more often used than others. When you read a journal article in your discipline, pay attention to how the numerous references are cited and which verbs are used, and try to understand why.

Software for referencing

Referencing software packages, such as Reference Manager, Endnote and Inflight Referencer, are designed for keeping track of citations and compiling a

bibliography, and are available to purchase online. Your university library may also have a licence for their use. Being able to use one of these packages is an advantage, but it is not really essential for writing an undergraduate essay. They are more useful when you have to write a dissertation or an extended essay.



further reading

If you want to learn more reporting verbs to use in your essay, go to 'Referring to the Literature' at www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk (accessed 21 May 2009).

The section on how to use the Harvard System is not definitive. There are guides on referencing on most university websites, and the University of Wolverhampton has a very comprehensive one called Harvard Style Referencing at http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level5.asp?UserType=6&Level5=500 (accessed 22 May 2009).

Lipson, C. (2006) *Cite Right: A Quick Guide to Citation Styles – MLA, APA, Chicago, the Sciences, Professions and More.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. This offers guidance on other citation systems.

Neville, C. (2007) *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. This is a comprehensive guide to referencing.

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2005) *Cite Them Right: The Essential Guide to Referencing and Plagiarism*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Pear Tree Books. This gives many examples on the use of the Harvard system.

Paragraphing: the Introduction and Conclusion

chapter themes

- Different approaches to writing.
- What structuring an essay and a paragraph involves.
- Structuring the Introduction.
- Structuring the Conclusion.

In this chapter, we will move from *pre-writing* considerations to *writing* considerations. Although some of these considerations will overlap, from this chapter on, we shall discuss the actual process of building up your essay from the plan you have made and the notes you have taken. This continues from the preliminary planning discussed in Chapter 3. You have now come a long way from reading your essay assignments and choosing a question. You should have a thorough analysis of the question, a preliminary plan of the essay and a rough structure, notes you have made from various sources, some quotable quotes, and perhaps even bits of paraphrasing and summary.

The draft

When composing or writing, we talk about drafts and drafting. A draft is a piece of unfinished writing, whatever its stage of completion. In practice,

most of us will draft and re-draft several times before we submit the final essay. In the process of re-drafting we may be revising and editing as well. Drafting begins when you fill out the preliminary structure using the notes from the research you have done.

Drafting is a creative process and creative processes are often frustrating and long drawn out, as any artist, chef, architect or writer will tell you. You have the plan in your head or in your notes, and the information is all there and neatly organised in your notebook – but writing the essay to your satisfaction and the satisfaction of the reader requires some knowledge of ways to structure information, and it also requires patience and practice.

In order to produce a well-structured, organised essay you will have to make sure that you have a clear, central argument and that you can use your notes to provide the evidence to support it. Some people will choose to write a draft directly from their plan and notes. Others will write down the main idea for each paragraph first, fleshing it out paragraph by paragraph. Whichever way you prefer, some revision will be necessary when you have completed your first draft. The implications of different approaches are considered in this chapter. Chapters 8 and 9 together provide you with some concrete guidelines for structuring the Introduction, Body and Conclusion of your essay.

You may want to read these chapters before you start writing, or prefer to use them when you revise a first draft. It does not matter as long as you understand that structuring is key to making sense when writing.

Writing the first draft

In Chapter 3, you worked out a preliminary plan of the essay in diagrammatic and note form, after a thorough analysis of the question. It is now that you will start to reap the benefits of the work you have put in – the plan you made will act as a guide for organising your ideas, your summaries and paraphrases. This book advocates a systematic approach to writing, because that is an informed approach. Yet the same system may not suit everybody, and different writers may use different approaches. Not everybody is naturally inclined to take the systematic route.

Crème and Lea (2003: 76–80) mention four approaches to writing. My own take on the four approaches is featured below. Which have you used most often? Does your approach reflect your preferred learning style at all? Do you use different approaches depending on the circumstances? Have you got a different approach altogether? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches and of your approach?

activity 8.1

Different approaches to writing: reflection

Try to work out which of the following approaches you use.

1 **The straight-into-it approach:** this approach is very common – its followers will read around the topic and start writing with only a vague idea of how it is all going to work out. They want to do things in a hurry or may be over-confident. They may consider pre-writing and especially planning and note-making unnecessary or a chore, and want to start writing as soon as they think they know what they will say. If this is your approach, your essay will need careful revision as your ideas may be lost without a proper structure.

2 **The jigsaw approach:** followers will find lots of information from many sources on the subject. They may or may not have a plan, although those who do will have at least narrowed down their research. They are excited by information, and may spend too much time acquiring things that may turn out not to be relevant to the question. When they try to fit the notes and information together they may find some bits which do not fit at all. They may nevertheless try to fit them into the essay just because they have done all that work. Careful revision is important in order to focus on answering the question.

3 **The wait-and-see approach:** people who follow this approach may appear to be brilliant because they do not seem to be 'working', but manage to get an essay done anyway. In fact, they develop a structure mentally by thinking about the question and reading around it. They may be thinking about their plan when they are doing something completely unrelated to the task: the housework, gardening or cooking. They do not like to make notes on paper; they have them in their heads. They then sit down and put their thoughts together, and a structure appears as if by magic. Do not be deceived by the followers of this approach – they are able to keep notes to a minimum, but they work just as hard as people who make notes on paper. Only a lucky few are able to work like this (especially when there is more than one essay deadline). If this is your preferred approach and you have a track record of success, well done. However, revision is important to make sure that the essay has not deviated from the question and that the references have been cited accurately and in the right places.

4 **The building approach:** this approach is safer than the others. It is a logical, systematic step-by-step approach. It is very good in theory and also in

practice. Followers will have a plan with as much detail as possible to start with as they will have analysed the task thoroughly. Their plan may be represented in diagrammatic or tabular form, or as a set of headings and subheadings. Gaps in their information are filled in as they read around the plan, making notes conscientiously and purposefully. Eventually their plan is completed with all the gaps filled, and writing proceeds from this structure. At every stage there is a hard copy of the products of the pre-writing process. This approach may seem time-consuming but can actually save time by cutting down on the need for major revision.

You may find you use a mixture of these approaches, and it can be argued that the 'best' way may be different for different people operating under different circumstances. However, it is important that you are consciously aware of your approach, and it has already been suggested that you always start with a thorough analysis of the question, followed by a plan, no matter how rudimentary or vague, and in whatever form you prefer. This initial plan is crucial to getting anywhere at all: it might not be very much, but it will provide a starting point. Remember that whatever your approach, revision is crucial.

However you may choose to approach your essay, bear in mind that the academic essay has to have a proper structure in order for it to answer the question. As you saw before, all essays have some features in common, yet different types of essay also differ from one another in important ways. An academic essay is an argument, organised into the broad divisions of: Introduction, Body and Conclusion. In the main, the conclusion to the argument is stated both in the Introduction and Conclusion of the essay, and the evidence is given in the Body.

The building blocks of any essay are the paragraphs, and these are made up of sentences, which in turn are made up of words. All these elements must be designed so that they can do the job they are supposed to be doing in your essay.

Paragraph structure

If paragraphs are the building blocks of the essay, it is important that they are designed to support this in the best way possible. But what constitutes a paragraph? What should it look like? What does it do? What it is supposed to do will affect what it looks like. If it does not look like a paragraph, it is not doing what it is supposed to do!

You may be surprised at being asked to consider something as basic as what a paragraph looks like. However, many student essays do appear poorly organised and read badly because the paragraphing has not been well

thought out. Some essays are just a big block of solid text with no breaks or paragraphs at all. Some look like text in newspapers and magazines, with almost every sentence set off as a paragraph. Others have blocks of text broken up in odd ways, leaving the reader to wonder whether paragraphing was intended or not (see below).

How and where do we indicate the end and beginning of sentences and paragraphs in an academic essay written in English? We will begin with the basics of layout and what makes a paragraph. Skip this part if you have never had any problems with paragraph layout, but do read it carefully if your essay feedback has said that your paragraphing is poor.

What a paragraph looks like: layout

The section on 'paragraph structure' above has three paragraphs. They are aligned to the left. Some students justify their text, which is fine if your tutor accepts it, but it must never be centred (I have actually seen an essay laid out like this!). Paragraphs in an essay should be separated by a blank line: a return twice on your computer. These paragraphs are made up of sentences and the end of each sentence is signalled by a full stop or period (.) and there is a space between the end of one sentence and the beginning of another – usually of one or two spaces; two is considered good practice in essay writing. The next sentence then begins with a capital letter.

example 8.1

Paragraphs do not look like this:

You may be surprised at being asked to consider something as basic as what a paragraph looks like.

However, many student essays do appear poorly organised and read badly because the paragraphing has not been well thought out.

Some essays are just a big block of solid text with no breaks or paragraphs at all.

Some look like text in newspapers and magazines, with almost every sentence set off as a paragraph.

Others have blocks of text broken up in odd ways, leaving the reader to wonder whether paragraphing was intended or not.

These sentences do not look as if they belong in the same paragraph, nor do they look like a series of paragraphs. If they belong together then they should follow each other without any line breaks, as in the original. If several paragraphs are intended they should be separated by a blank line. A paragraph is a unit which is superordinate to a sentence, so if each sentence is also a paragraph, then paragraphs are completely superfluous. When writing, you should organise your ideas or points and write in paragraphs, not in discrete sentences. Presenting information discretely is often the result of a surface approach to reading and writing, when facts are accumulated and noted in bullet points and put into essays without reference to their relationship and relevance to each other or to the argument.

Some students indent their paragraphs using the tab function, as well as indicating them with the blank line between. It is unnecessary to do both – although if this is done consistently throughout the essay, a tutor may accept it.

A question that is sometimes asked is how many sentences a paragraph should have. The number of sentences that make up a paragraph is the number which adequately supports the *one* main idea in each paragraph. In general, you should aim for three or more sentences per paragraph in an academic essay (see below). The longer the essay is, the longer your paragraphs are likely to be, as each main idea should have sufficient explanations, evidence and examples to support it.

What a paragraph does

Writing an essay involves connecting ideas together. Ideas are grouped into paragraphs, each with the specific purpose of building up the whole essay by linking the ideas into an argument. When you read a text critically you are assessing how an argument is built up, that is, whether it is strong, sufficient and supported by evidence. When you write an essay for your tutors, who are going to read it critically, you must build your essay so that it stands up to close scrutiny: you have to make your paragraphs work hard for you, in other words. A good paragraph contributes to the main argument of your essay by:

- showing clearly in the topic sentence that it is developing or supporting the argument;
- using sufficient evidence, reasons, or examples;
- making logical sense, or being coherent.

How a paragraph is constructed

Like most logical, linear representations, paragraphs must have a beginning, middle and end.

- The main idea is usually expressed in a single sentence – the 'topic sentence' or 'theme'. This topic sentence often appears at the beginning of the paragraph, as the first or second sentence. In some writing, the topic sentence appears at the end of the paragraph, while in some it is both at the beginning and the end, so the topic is restated (although the exact words will not be repeated). The topic sentence in a paragraph is actually what in an argument is termed the 'conclusion', or the main point of the paragraph;
- The sentence(s) at the *end* of the paragraph will often return to the idea in the topic sentence, to show how it has been developed, and/or link it to the idea in the following paragraph.
- The sentence(s) in the *middle* will expand on or modify the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. There has to be at least one of these in a paragraph. In academic essays, it is considered poor style to have too many two- or three-sentence paragraphs. In contrast, in some journalistic writing, it is not uncommon to use very short two- or three-sentence paragraphs. Journalists write in the full knowledge that many readers will simply glance quickly at articles in order to get the gist. However, essay writers have to write with the understanding that their work will be read critically and carefully.

  These sentences are said to be 'in the middle' not so much in the physical sense, but in the sense that they are not themselves the main points, but support the main idea, which might be at the beginning or the end.

The role of paragraphs is therefore to build up the central argument of the essay. They do this by presenting the evidence or reasons for the argument in a series of manageable and self-contained mini-arguments. The main ideas in each paragraph are thus linked by a common thread to build up a logical, coherent line of reasoning through the essay as a whole, by explaining in more detail, comparing and contrasting, evaluating, and so on.

The organisation of information in a paragraph, like the overall structure of an essay, is from the general to the specific: the general information is contained in the topic sentence, and the specifics are expansions or examples of this. To consolidate your understanding of paragraph structure, try the Activity below.

activity 8.2

Understanding paragraph structure

Write verb(s) in the blanks to test your understanding of paragraph structure. The verbs explain the purpose(s) or function(s) of each statement. The statements together explain how a paragraph may be structured and the

reasons for structuring it that way. Check your answers in 'Reflection and Review'.

Sample Paragraph Plan/Structure

1 Start with the topic sentence
- to .... the main idea.

2 Explain or define any abstract, key or problematic terms
- to .... the topic sentence.

3 Show evidence
- to .... the main idea or argument in the topic sentence.

4 Comment on the evidence
- to .... how it supports or develops the main idea. If appropriate, mention other evidence (such as examples, studies, experiments, interpretations, background, etc.) to widen the discussion.

5 End with a concluding sentence
- to .... the consequences or implications
- to .... the development of the argument
- to .... to the idea in the topic sentence
- to .... to the main idea in the next paragraph
- (in the first and last paragraphs of an essay or section) to .... the link with the title or section heading.

activity 8.3

Analysing a paragraph

The paragraph below is from an essay on the question: '*To what extent is the randomised clinical trial an appropriate tool for research in physiotherapy?*' Look at each sentence and identify its function within the paragraph. Then check your answers with those in 'Reflection and Review'.

> The randomised controlled clinical trial (RCT) is currently widely accepted as the gold standard for treatment evaluation (Girling et al. 2003). In this type of trial, patients are randomly allocated into groups, which are then given either the new treatment or a placebo. This technique of randomisation is used to avoid misleading information due to either observer bias or if the

(Continued)

different groups are not comparable (Hellman 1979). The first clinical trial using a random process to assign treatments was conducted by the British Medical Council and was published in 1948 (Hróbjartsson et al. 1998). The trial compared bed rest with or without streptomycin in the treatment of tuberculosis. Since then the RCT has been involved in the development of numerous treatments for a wide range of conditions. In fact, in some countries, drugs cannot be licensed for use without extensive evidence provided in the form of data from RCTs (Jadad and Enkin 2007; Allmark and Mason 2006). Although this clearly demonstrates the extent to which the RCT has become the benchmark for the evaluation of medical treatments, it is particularly effective in physical therapy.

The Introduction and Conclusion

The general paragraph structure or plan can be modified for any paragraph in the essay, depending on what you want it to do. The Introduction and Conclusion sections of an essay may contain one or a couple of paragraphs depending on the length of the essay. These sections have special functions and therefore the paragraph(s) which make them up are also special.

The Introduction begins an essay: its main function is to give a preview. It enables the reader to follow the essay easily. The Conclusion ends an essay: its main function is to give a review of the discussion, or to wrap up the essay. Introductions and Conclusions have much in common whatever the essay type, because of these specialised functions. If you launch straight into your essay without a proper Introduction or end an essay abruptly, the feedback that you get may state that your essay lacks a proper structure.

Students often ask how long an Introduction or Conclusion should be. In a longish essay (2,000 or more words), they may contain one or more paragraphs each; in a short essay (about 600 words), one paragraph for each will suffice. A general guideline often given is that each of these sections should be around 10 per cent of the length of the essay, or 200 words and 60 words respectively. However, this is only a very rough guide and Introductions may be longer than Conclusions.

The function of the Introduction

Look at these examples of Introductions written for two short (600 words) essays. The questions are from those in Chapter 2. Refer to the diagrammatic

representation of your A-List analyses (see Figure 2.2). Note the essay type – Exploratory or Judgement. Do you agree with the analysis of the functions of the sentences that make up the Introductions?

example 8.2

A Judgement essay: Introduction

'*Financial rewards are the best form of motivation in the work place*'. *Discuss.*

Motivation involves stimulating the interest of people and giving them a reason to do particular tasks well [*an explanation of motivation*]. A motivated work force is vital if an organisation is to run efficiently and effectively. Productivity, staff morale and staff retention are directly linked to staff motivation [*why it is important in the workplace*]. This may take the form of extra holidays, extra pay or better working conditions [*some forms of motivation – not all financial ones*]. This essay will examine if financial rewards such as pay rises and bonuses are the best form of motivation [*tells reader the point of the essay – will answer the question*]. (74 words)

example 8.3

An Exploratory essay: Introduction

Explain motivation with reference to the workplace.

Motivation is all about stimulating the interest of people and giving them a reason to do particular tasks well [*an explanation of motivation*]. In the workplace it is important that staff are motivated in order to carry out their jobs efficiently and effectively [*importance in the workplace*]. Work must be meaningful to employees to make this happen [*indicates how staff might be motivated*]. This essay will explore some concepts of motivation at work and the corresponding methods for motivating staff [*tells the reader how the essay is going to do this – the argument*]. (67 words)

The essays required were short (about 600 words), and the Introductions therefore have to be concise. Longer and more demanding essays will require a more comprehensive background and perhaps some definitions.

Introductions in general have the following common features:

- They contain a general statement about the issue being discussed. Short definitions can be used to focus.
- They show an understanding of the question and what it entails by using and explaining key words in the question. If the aim is to consider the issues and then make a stand this is stated here. Where a stand is to be defended, it is expressed here.
- They tell the reader how the question is to be answered; in other words, what the central argument is. Using key words shows that you know where the emphases should be. However, you should avoid listing what you are going to do in every paragraph in the Body of the essay (‘*first I will X*’, ‘*next I will Y*’, ‘*then …’*, ‘*finally*…)’.

Some tutors in subjects like literature may disagree with the idea that your Introduction should tell the reader what your essay will do, and will argue that the reader should be able to work out the argument on reading the essay. However, many writing tutors (like me) will recommend this way of informing the reader about the intentions of the essay. An Introduction that summarises your plan by giving an overview of how you have understood the question, thereby demonstrating to the reader that you have structured an argument, will make this clear and be helpful to the reader.

The function of the Conclusion

The examples that follow are the Conclusions to the essays whose Introductions were discussed in the previous section.

example 8.4

A Judgement essay: Conclusion

Financial rewards are the best form of motivation in the workplace. Discuss.

This essay has examined the use of financial rewards and other ways to motivate staff at work. It is clear that financial rewards have a great effect on staff

morale and overall productivity [*an interim conclusion to the argument*]. However, other forms of motivation should also be considered in relation to different types of work, different employee expectations and different workplace objectives [*a reservation from evidence found*]. Financial rewards should therefore work in tandem with other forms of motivation for best results [*the conclusion to the argument – the answer to the question and your point of view*]. (71 words)

example 8.5

An Exploratory essay: Conclusion

Explain motivation with reference to the workplace.

This essay has explained some concepts of motivation at work and their effects. Different approaches can be used, according to the circumstances [*has answered the question*]. Managers must be sensitive to the expectations of and the demands on their staff. They should be trained to use a variety of techniques for creatively motivating their staff, leading to better working conditions and greater productivity [*shows the significance of understanding mtivation in the workplace*]. (60 words)

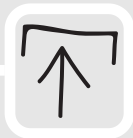
In general, Conclusions end essays by asserting that what was promised in the Introduction has been delivered, and the question has been answered meaningfully. Therefore:

- they remind the reader that the question has been interpreted and answered correctly by summing up the argument and how it was developed;
- they refer to the key words and show how the writer has addressed their implications;
- they point the reader towards the significance and importance of connected issues;
- in Judgement essays, the stand taken is justified in a summary of the main evidence – in other words, it confirms your thesis, statement or argument;
- they may make suggestions or recommendations where relevant.

In Chapter 9 we look at building up the Body of the essay.

chapter summary

- When drafting, work from a structure that has been based on a careful analysis of the essay question.
- Broadly speaking, an essay can be organised into: Introduction, Body and Conclusion.
- Paragraphs in these sections should be structured to develop the argument of the essay.
- Introductions and Conclusions to essays have specific functions and are structured to fulfil these functions.



reflection and review

Answers to activities

1 Activity 8.2

Understanding paragraph structure

1 Start with the topic sentence

- to *introduce/express/present/explain* the main idea.

2 Explain or define any abstract, key or problematic terms

- to *clarify/expand/develop* the topic sentence.

3 Show evidence

- to *support* the main idea or argument in the topic sentence.

4 Comment on the evidence

- to *show/illustrate* how it supports or develops the main idea. If appropriate, mention other evidence (such as examples, studies, experiments, interpretations, background, etc.) to widen the discussion.

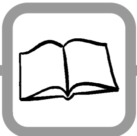
5 End with a concluding sentence

- to *explain/indicate* the consequences or implications
- to *show/highlight* the development of the argument
- to *refer/link/relate back* to the idea in the topic sentence

- to *refer/link/point forward* to the main idea in the next paragraph
- (in the first and last paragraphs of an essay or section) to *reiterate/show/confirm* the link with the title or section heading.

2 Activity 8.3

The randomised controlled clinical trial (RCT) is currently widely accepted as the gold standard for treatment evaluation (Girling et al. 2003) [*topic sentence*]. In this type of trial, patients are randomly allocated into groups, which are then given either the new treatment or a placebo [*to explain trial*]. This technique of randomisation is used to avoid misleading information due to either observer bias or if the different groups are not comparable (Hellman 1979) [*to explain the use of randomisation*]. The first clinical trial using a random process to assign treatments was conducted by the British Medical Council and was published in 1948 (Hróbjartsson et al. 1998) [*to give some background of the trial's first use*]. The trial compared bed rest with or without streptomycin in the treatment of tuberculosis [*to explain what was done in this trial*]. Since then the RCT has been involved in the development of numerous treatments for a wide range of conditions. In fact, in some countries, drugs cannot be licensed for use without extensive evidence provided in the form of data from RCTs (Jadad and Enkin 2007; Allmark and Mason 2006) [*further evidence to support topic sentence*]. Although this clearly demonstrates the extent to which the RCT has become the benchmark for the evaluation of medical treatments, it is particularly effective in physical therapy [*to link to the question and the next paragraph*].



further reading

Williams, K. (1995) *Writing Essays*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University (Chapter 5).

9

Paragraphing: the Body of the Essay

chapter themes

- The relationship between structure, function and argument.
- The different functions that different paragraphs of the Body of an essay may have to fulfil.
- How these functions are realised in the organisation and language used.
- How an Exploratory and a Judgement essay may be put together.

This chapter continues the theme of writing with a more focused discussion on drafting the Body of the essay. You have set the scene for your reader and declared your intentions in the Introduction. Now you have to put the meat in the pie: all the relevant information you have gathered for answering the essay question has to be presented here in an orderly, considered way in order to support the argument in your essay.

Structuring the Body of the essay

Just as the Introduction and the Conclusion paragraphs are structured to fulfil their functions, the Body of the essay must be structured to fulfil its main function: to provide evidence for your argument.

Structure, function and argument

An academic essay is an argument – it seeks to persuade the reader of the point it is making (the Conclusion) and it does this by giving evidence. This evidence is provided in the Body of your essay, which thus may have to do one or several things such as those listed below.

- Narrate or tell a story: for example, describe a sequence of events or historical developments.
- Describe observations: for example, symptoms of illnesses.
- Describe a process: outline the stages which make up a process, for example the process of ageing or making stainless steel.
- Define: give a concise definition, for example of the term *democracy*.
- Explain and then expand on descriptions.
- Compare and contrast: show how two or more concepts, things or events (etc.) are similar to and different from each other – groups and teams, for example.
- Explain cause and effect: describe why something happened, or how one event influenced another, as in a chain reaction.
- Analyse critically: in addition to the above, discuss the significance of something, explain the possibilities, find connections and links, make observations, and so on.
- Argue critically: this is also called argumentation, and involves considering various viewpoints or arguments.
- Evaluate: going even deeper into the topic to make judgements about value and importance from the critical analysis you have presented.

In order to present a logical argument it will be necessary to construct the paragraphs in the Body of the essay using a variety of functions. As discussed in earlier chapters, the type of essay which you arrived at after a thorough analysis of the question tells you how you should go about constructing the argument. The paragraphs that build up the Body of your essay will therefore have different roles to play depending on what you want each one to do in order to build up all the evidence you need. Before you can evaluate a viewpoint, you may have to describe, explain, compare, and so on. Different paragraphs in your essay may have different functions as a result, but they should all work towards the Conclusion.

Structuring an essay therefore involves organising your writing into paragraphs to fit into the Introduction, Body and Conclusion. It also involves organising the paragraphs logically, and always in order to build up the evidence in the Body. The sentences within a paragraph also have to be well structured so they can fulfil the particular function of the paragraph. Structuring thus involves

considering both form and function, and these are determined by the overall argument.

How to structure two types of essay

Chapter 3 introduced the structuring process with a focus on planning different essays. Before proceeding to the next section, which revisits structuring, you may want to review the summaries contained in that chapter showing what different types of essay expect you to do.

The argument of the essay is central to its structure. Judgement and Exploratory essays are structured differently because their lines of reasoning or arguments are different. Two questions for analysis were offered in 'Reflection and Review' in Chapter 2. We will use them again here to illustrate how the two different types of essay can be structured.

The Judgement essay

The question '*Mind-mapping is a far better method of note-making than other methods*'. *Do you agree?* demands a Judgement essay structured around a viewpoint.

The structure of your essay will depend on your stand, or whether you agree or disagree with the statement, and how strongly. In broad terms, there are five possibilities:

1 Yes, I agree 100 per cent (you will need indisputable evidence for this stand, and it may not really be advisable to take such a stand on this topic).
2 Yes, I agree that it seems to be a good way but not perhaps 'far better' (I am a fan but I can see some shortcomings as well).
3 No, I disagree; I don't think it is good at all (as in No. 1).
4 No, I disagree that it is 'far better'; other methods have a lot of strengths that it does not have (I am not a fan but I can see some merits).
5 I want to assess the methods first before I make up my mind.

Depending on your stand, you would structure the essay with a different slant. Stands 1 and 3 are not advisable in academic writing – you would need incontrovertible evidence to support them. Judgement essays should consider issues objectively and while you may absolutely loathe mind-mapping, you should be able to discuss what it can offer to different people with different learning preferences. Although stands 2, 4 and 5 are different, and the Introductions and Conclusions will be different, these essays will have a very similar structure. The following is an example.

example 9.1

An overall structure

'*Mind-mapping is a far better method of note-making than other methods*'. *Do you agree?*

Introduction: why make notes? Different methods (including mind-mapping); what is my conclusion (if any) and argument (that is, what am I going to show in this essay)?

Body 1: explain mind-mapping – give some background, describe what it is, say why it is claimed to be better.

Body 2: describe/explain other methods.

Body 3: outline the strengths and limitations of mind-mapping and compare with those of other methods.

Conclusion: restate the conclusion of the argument (if stated in the Introduction), and say why it is a valid one on the basis of the evidence presented. Or justify the conclusion you have reached by summarising the evidence to support it.

Note that if you take stand 5, you should state this in the Conclusion only. The range and depth of information in the paragraphs in the Body will depend on the length of the essay required; there may therefore be more than three parts in the Body, and each part can have any number of paragraphs.

As you can see, the function of the Judgement essay is mainly to analyse critically and evaluate relevant information in order to reach the conclusion you want. In order to fulfil this main function, the paragraphs in the Body may have to contain definitions, descriptions, explanations, comparisons and contrasts, and so on.

The Exploratory essay

The argument of an Exploratory essay is more difficult to construct – it does not involve taking a stand and justifying a viewpoint, and the line of reasoning you want to develop may be rather elusive. This is why an Exploratory essay may end up being 'too descriptive'. Sometimes you must choose the conclusion you want to reach by thinking about the question and how you can make your essay more purposeful and analytical.

The title of the Exploratory essay you analysed in Chapter 2 was: '*Compare and contrast the usefulness of linear notes and diagrammatic notes for study at university*'.

So what is your main purpose in writing this essay? It is to describe two different ways of note-making and explain their usefulness. Would you simply do this – state their usefulness – and leave it at that? Or would you simply provide a factual description of the two methods? And is the point of the essay to show you have done your homework? If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, the resulting essay will probably be rather weak – it would be mainly descriptive and would not have an argument. The main function of your essay is to compare and contrast, but why bother to do this? You must have a point to make and you have to declare it.

An argument has to be constructed, and that can only be done after a careful analysis of the question. The Auditing stage in question analysis is very important in order to construct the argument. To show that you have considered all the important aspects, you should try to argue towards a logical, meaningful conclusion. It might be that notes from the Auditing stage may be more or less useful depending on the purpose and circumstances, your learning preferences, and so on. However, an Exploratory essay should show that you have opinions and can analyse critically to reach a sensible conclusion. You may only be able to express that conclusion fully when you have presented all the evidence. Asking questions is the first step towards gathering relevant evidence.

example 9.2

An overall structure

'*Compare and contrast the usefulness of linear notes and diagrammatic notes for study at university*'.

Introduction: why make notes? Summarise main types and characteristics of linear notes and diagrammatic notes; uses for university study: reading, listening, exam revision. Individual preferences for using either type? How essay will be developed to explore the question.

Body 1: describe linear notes, characteristics: suitable for what purposes? Strengths, weaknesses; explain how they are useful/not useful for different study purposes/learning preferences.

Body 2: as above but for diagrammatic notes.

Body 3: summarise above by outlining similarities and differences.

Conclusion: what I have considered, how was my argument developed – what is the logical conclusion? Any recommendations for best practice? Advice to students with strong individual preferences?

As with the previous example, the depth of information given in the paragraphs in Body 1, 2 and 3 will depend on the length of the essay.

This is of course just one way to structure the Body of this essay. You could pick one aspect and compare and contrast it for both methods before discussing another aspect. For example, you could compare and contrast what the two methods involve, then move on to the strengths and then weaknesses of the two methods, and so on. However you develop your line of reasoning, you should present the facts in a logical way and use critical analysis to compare the methods.

Paragraph functions and realisations

To recapitulate, the overall structure of an essay depends on the argument. It is made up of paragraphs to support the argument by clarifying the position, describing, explaining, comparing, analysing, and so on. Each paragraph fulfils specific functions and all of these work towards the conclusion of the argument.

The reader can only tell what your paragraphs are doing from the way you organise the information and the language you use in them. If you assume it is a given that the very first paragraph in your essay is the Introduction and the last is the Conclusion, you may be surprised if the feedback says that your essay does not have a proper Introduction or Conclusion. It is not the physical location of a paragraph that determines its function – it is the way you put it together. Similarly, if you do not design the paragraphs in the Body of your essay to do what they are supposed to do, this important part of your essay may simply come across as a confusing collection of facts.

What follows is a brief guide to presenting information in paragraphs according to what you want them to do, and I have chosen five paragraph functions (two under Descriptions) which are quite common in essays. 'Language considerations' here are quick reminders of the language to use when writing a paragraph to fulfil a particular function, and these are discussed in more detail in Chapters 10 and 11.

Description: definitions

Definitions are short, concise descriptions which very often stand at the beginning of a discussion of something. They are mostly used in introductions or in description paragraphs to introduce the topic you are going to describe (see Example 9.3 below). Although definitions are easily recognisable, writing them accurately requires some skill and knowledge. Would you consider the following to be definitions?

> A recipe is a set of instructions and ingredients that TV cooks like Jamie Oliver provide to help us cook their dishes.
> A teacher is someone who teaches.
> A courgette is a vegetable.

None of them is a definition in the true sense. The first is an illustration rather than a definition; the second is simply an obvious statement about the meaning of the word 'teacher'; in the third case 'is a vegetable' could describe 101 other things.

Definitions are structured specifically to describe something in a concise way, and consist of three parts: the subject of the definition, the class it belongs to, and its specific characteristics. Here are some examples:

> A recipe *(subject)* is a list of ingredients and instructions *(class)* for cooking a particular dish. *(specific characteristics)*
> A teacher *(subject)* is a person *(class)* whose job it is to provide instruction in a particular subject. *(specific characteristics)*
> A courgette *(subject)* is a marrow *(class)* which is completely edible – seeds, skin and all. *(specific characteristics)*

The more you know about the thing or concept you are defining, the better you will be able to capture what makes it different from other things by specifying its class and characteristics. In academic writing, students sometimes use definitions from dictionaries and textbooks to kill two birds with one stone: they show they have consulted the authorities, and they also have a readymade definition. This is perfectly all right as long as you follow the rules of citation. However, you should remember that dictionaries define words in their everyday sense, and for a definition of any term which is used in a special sense in a particular subject you will need to consult a publication on that subject. You should also avoid using definitions which you do not understand or cannot expand on or explain.

A definition is a very short description and thus would rarely stand alone as a paragraph. It needs to be fleshed out by expanding on or explaining it in more detail in the paragraph.

Language considerations: a definition is written using the verb tense appropriate to its role in the text. If the definition is one that is universally accepted, or is true in the current context, it is written in the present tense (as in the examples above). If the definition relates to what was true in the past, it should be written in the past tense:

> In ancient China, a teacher was a wise, learned person who commanded great respect.

Description: being purposeful to be meaningful

Description is a very common function in academic writing. Depending on what you are describing and why, descriptions will be organised differently. When structuring and writing descriptions, try to put yourself in the reader's shoes. Remember the academic convention of moving from the general to the specific and organise your description by considering such questions as those below. Your description will make better sense as you will not just write down everything you know about your subject but will instead have considered why you chose to arrange it in a particular way.

- What needs to be known first before the reader can understand and appreciate the other parts?
- Should I mention the most important factor first?
- Will it help if I mention the uses of what I am describing?
- Are there any terms to define?
- Are the facts better presented chronologically?
- Would it be more logical to build up the whole picture from the parts?
- Would sequencing according to stages be a good structure?

Think of describing a computer, for example – depending on who you are describing it to and why, you will need to include different information and to arrange the information differently. You would not write the same description for someone who has never used one but wants to know something about it as you would for someone who is going to buy you one for your birthday.

Essays which demand descriptions of processes are very common. In this type of description, logical progression is an important consideration, as is the judicious use of words that indicate sequence – for example, *first*, *next*, *finally*.

Writing descriptions is very much part of all essays, but you may also be required to look critically at what you have described. By asking questions you take the deep approach to writing, and this is an important step towards writing critically. You will not just present factual information with no particular focus, but will organise the information to support your argument.

Language considerations: you should generally use the past tense to describe events that occurred in the past, and use connecting words (or 'connectives') to show the sequence (*first*, …, *finally*) or logical progression (*as well as*, *furthermore*, …). However, descriptions can be written in the present tense (sometimes called the 'timeless present') if the description applies both to the past and the present.

example 9.3

A descriptive paragraph (with a definition)

All democratic countries have their own voting or electoral systems. An electoral system is a legal system which allows people to choose representatives by casting votes. The electoral system in the United States is a fairly complex one. A presidential candidate is first nominated for each party. To do this, a primary election takes place in most states. In the states that do not hold primaries, a party caucus chooses the candidate. Primaries involve registered voters voting for a candidate from their party from a selection of people who have announced their intention to run. Whoever gets the most votes in a state wins the state, and whoever wins the most states is then officially chosen at a party convention as the presidential candidate for that party. (Watts 2002)

This description of the electoral system in the USA is a paragraph summarising information from a book for an essay that must answer the question: '*Explain the electoral system of the USA*'. In this paragraph, the topic sentence or the 'claim/conclusion' is the third sentence. The first two sentences explain the concept of an 'electoral system' briefly and incorporate a definition. The other sentences in the paragraph offer support for the claim.

Cause and effect: explanation

Academic essays often require you to give the reasons why certain things happen(ed), or state what leads (or led) to the circumstances, situations, events and ideas you are dealing with. Cause and effect is a relationship that is very much explored in explanations. In order to give a clear explanation, you have to organise the information in such a way that it will make logical sense to the

reader. An essay requiring you to explain a situation will often be realised as a sequence of causes and their effects, and may extend over several paragraphs. When explaining cause and effect you have to consider among other things:

- what background must be given;
- what the context is;
- what needs to be explained first;
- how far back you need to go;
- the possibility that in the cause/effect chain, an effect can become a cause in the next link;
- short- and long-term effects;
- the implications and limitations.

One result or effect may have several causes; one cause may result in many outcomes or effects, both immediate and long term. In addition, an effect could become the cause of another chain of events. Your preliminary plan could be used to display this kind of cause and effect chain. When writing cause and effect paragraphs, you need to distinguish between whether you are considering the effect or the cause as the main topic(s), and also distinguish between examples and effects. This often needs quite a bit of care and thought.

Language considerations: expressions of cause and effect can include: '*the main reason/cause was …*'; '*this resulted in …*'; '*as a result*'; '*consequently*'. These are used to carry meaning through in a logical way. The past tense is used if events are over, but when commenting on them further the present tense must be used.

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans at full force, causing widespread damage.

Hurricane effects of such proportions are rarely seen.

When writing statements of cause and effect, it is important not to overstate things – this is part of being critical. Using the right modal verb (such as *will*, *can*, *may*, *might*, etc.) tells the reader that you have considered the degree of certainty. For example, *can* indicates a possible effect, whereas *will* suggests inevitability.

Dropping a lighted cigarette on dry forest ground can result in untold damage.

Drinking 10 pints of beer will result in a positive reading on a breathalyser.

Academic writers in general are extremely careful when choosing words to examine evidence critically. Phrases like '*one explanation might be …*', '*these results suggest that …*', '*it could be argued that …*', and so on can show that you are writing critically and objectively.

In Chapter 5, you were encouraged to examine the claims made by the sources you draw on in your essay. By the same token, you must also make sure that your own claims will stand up to the same sort of critical scrutiny.

example 9.4

A cause and effect paragraph

The most frequently cited example of dietary adaptation on a molecular level is lactase persistence in adulthood. Lactase (lactase phlorizin hydrolase) is the enzyme that catalyses the breakdown of lactose, the sugar in milk, to glucose and galactose. In humans and most mammals it is normally only expressed in infancy and early childhood [*the use of 'normally' here limits the claim by indicating that there are exceptions*]. However, if milk is consumed with insufficient levels of the enzyme present [*the cause*], such as in adults who do not have lactase persistence in adulthood, unpleasant bloating, cramps and stomach upset occur [*the effect*][1] (Hollox et al. 2001). Individuals from many European, Middle Eastern and some African human populations continue to express the enzyme throughout adulthood, which results [*a further cause with the following effect*][2] in them having the ability to digest milk and milk products (Mulcare et al. 2004) [*the effect*]. It has been suggested [*the use of 'suggest' shows that this is only part of the explanation*] (Cavalli-Sforza 1973; Hollox et al. 2001; Enattah et al. 2002; Poulter et al. 2003) that for cattle keeping populations, adults with lactase persistence had a selective advantage over those that did not have lactase expressed in adulthood, based on additional nutrition from dairy products (Enattah et al. 2002).

In this paragraph on the cause and effect of lactose intolerance, '*if* X *(then)* Y' indicates that X is a cause and Y is the effect.[1] The word '*results*'[2] indicates that what follows is the effect and what precedes it is the cause.

Comparison and contrast

In many essay questions, the instruction word 'compare' may require you to consider both the similarities and the differences, or simply explore the differences. A clearer instruction for this function is 'compare and contrast'. If you have any doubts about what is required, ask the originator of the question.

Example 9.2 showed a possible overall structure for a 'compare and contrast' essay. The example below illustrates how this function is realised in a paragraph.

Language considerations: connectives include expressions such as *however*, *(al)though*, *in contrast*, *similarly*; verb tenses are as for descriptions.

example 9.5

A compare and contrast paragraph

Rheumatoid and osteoarthritis both result in painful joints for the patient. However, the two conditions result from different causes, which produce different clinical pictures. Rheumatoid arthritis is an inflammatory disease, which is more commonly found in men and often begins between the ages of 20 and 55. On the other hand, osteoarthritis is a degenerative disease and is found with equal incidence in men and women. It is found in nearly all people over the age of 60, but is also sometimes found in younger patients who have had repetitive physical jobs or have exercised excessively. Both conditions can produce a feeling of early morning stiffness, though with rheumatoid arthritis this usually lasts for more than 15 minutes. In contrast, patients with osteoarthritis usually find the stiffness wears off in less than 15 minutes, although they do feel worse at the end of the day.

In this comparison of the symptoms of rheumatoid and osteoarthritis, similarities are indicated by the use of '*both*' and differences by the use of '*However*', '*on the other hand*', '*though*', '*in contrast*' and '*although*'.

Analysis/Critical analysis

It has been stressed that it is a mistake to think that Exploratory essays do nothing but present facts. You have to construct an argument around the facts and build up towards a Conclusion. In the process of constructing this argument, you will have analysed an issue and decided how you could present it logically. You may decide you need to define, describe, compare, contrast, explain, and so on. So how do you continue with this good practice as you actually write the essay and ensure that your analysis is critical rather than purely descriptive?

Critical analysis involves distancing yourself from a set of facts or a writer's argument in order to look at them and weigh them up objectively. (How to read critically was discussed in Chapter 5.) To reiterate, the considerations include:

- Are there any other angles to consider?
- How does this set compare with other facts?
- Are there inconsistencies?
- Are there flaws in the evidence or the conclusion?
- Have any assumptions been made?
- Have any statistics been gathered properly?
- Are the statistics interpreted accurately?
- Is there evidence against the conclusion?
- How does this weaken the description or explanation?

Writing critically follows from critical reading and thinking. In Exploratory essays, you will often have to follow up or intersperse your description or explanation with an assessment based on critical reading.

Language considerations: connectives to show differences are used, and phrases such as: '*it can be argued that …*'; '*this ignores the point that …*'; '*the disadvantages of this are …*'; '*this is weakened by the fact that …*'; '*this begs the question …*'. The present tense is used in a critical analysis of theory or research; for other critical analyses (such as historical events), the past tense is used for the events themselves, but comment on these is in the present tense.

example 9.6

A critical analytical paragraph

Perhaps the biggest flaw in Wenke's reasoning is the fact that he overlooks the ability of humans to interpret what they read, see, hear, etc., to extract deeper meanings from the surface appearances of words. The example he uses is the first conversation between Sergeant X and Esme. Although it is true that on the surface the dialogue is nothing special, the fact that the reader can see through this and understand that the encounter is actually quite significant, shows that words do not need to be overtly expressive in order to be significant.

In this shortened example (the details and explanations have been left out), a text has been analysed and the author's reasoning is questioned by the student writer. Expressions such as '*the biggest flaw*', '*overlooks*', and '*although it is true*' followed by '*do not need*' indicate the student's attempt at critical analysis.

Evaluation

You can only evaluate something if you have looked at it in a critical way. You must know enough to draw conclusions about its worth, importance and significance. If you are required to critically evaluate a theory, say, you would probably have to move from description, explanation, comparison and contrast, through a critical analysis, before you are able to evaluate it.

Evaluations are based on benchmarks or criteria against which comparisons can be made. Additionally, the purpose for which something is designed or the way it is used, and so on, must also be taken into consideration.

For example, if you were asked to evaluate a revolutionary new type of chair, you might compare it with a conventional chair to evaluate it for comfort and functionality. At the same time, however, issues such as who the chair is for, its looks, price, materials, size, colour, and even weight may all be important factors to consider in your evaluation.

Language considerations: the use of language to show criticality has been discussed in other 'Language considerations' sections above and is relevant here. Evaluative phrases like '*the advantages/disadvantages*', '*positive/negative effects*', '*the strengths/weaknesses of*', etc. are also used.

example 9.7

An evaluation paragraph

It seems that although Random Controlled Trials (RCT) are considered the 'best of all research designs' and 'the most powerful tool in modern clinical research' (Jadad and Enkin 2007: 8), they are by no means a panacea to answer all health care questions. There are situations, particularly in physical therapy, in which RCTs are not feasible, necessary, appropriate or sufficient to help solve important problems. Since the advent of evidence-based medicine, the power of RCTs, particularly as they feed into official health care guidelines, has been enormous. It would appear that physiotherapy poses a challenge to the RCT, as it must be adapted to analyse complex interactions between patient, practitioner and intervention. The RCT is a powerful tool for assessing the safety and efficacy of a particular intervention, but any tool is only effective when used for the appropriate task. As Jadad and Enkin (2007: 10) point out, we must 'learn not only how to carry out scientifically sound and morally ethical RCTs, but why and when to do them'.

RCT as a tool for assessment is evaluated by showing its strengths and weaknesses and its limitations. Notice the use of un-emotive expressions '*it seems…*', '*it would appear…*' to express distancing and restraint.

Two essay examples

We now examine how these functions can be put together to build a complete essay, looking first at an Exploratory and then a Judgement essay. Both are Year 1 essays, with a length guide of 600 words. They are also both in the same Area – Maslow's theory of motivation – and Aspect – namely the workplace. However, the instruction words and hence the Angles are different, leading to different essay types and different structures.

You do not need to know anything about Maslow's theory of motivation in order to understand these essays. They are self-explanatory and examples of good, clear student writing which can be understood by non-specialists and recognised by tutors as being written by students who have understood both the essay question and the topic and can communicate this in their own style and language. The comments included are to help you follow the structure of the paragraphs in the essays.

example 9.8

An Exploratory essay

Explain Maslow's theory of motivation and how it can be applied in the workplace.

Maslow (1987) argued that motivation is a drive to fulfil needs. Some needs are more basic than others, and together they can thus be seen as a hierarchy. An individual will try to fulfil basic needs first, and until these are satisfied, will not attend to or be motivated towards higher level needs. Motivation in the workplace is important for employers. To achieve business goals, they have to gain and maintain the commitment of staff. Maslow's theory can be applied in the workplace to get the best out of employees [*introduction: shows understanding of the question, explains briefly Maslow's theory and the importance of motivation in the workplace. States what the writer will do in the essay.*]. This essay will explain Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' theory and show how managers may

be able to use it to motivate their staff [*this shows the line of reasoning to be taken by the argument*].

Maslow theorised that there are five levels of human need; basic needs must be satisfied before higher-level needs are pursued [*topic sentence*]. The most basic needs are *physiological* – to satisfy hunger and thirst, and to avoid exhaustion. The next level concerns physical and psychological *safety*. Once these two needs are satisfied, an individual will seek a sense of *belonging* – companionship, being accepted as part of a group. The need for *esteem*, or the desire for respect and recognition, including self-respect, follows. Finally, at the highest level, people seek *self-actualisation*, i.e. achieving one's full potential, or making the most of one's talents [*logical ordering and explanation of the five levels mentioned in the topic sentence*].

Most workplaces in the UK meet the first two basic needs [*topic sentence connecting content to the last paragraph; shows common knowledge*]. Employers fulfil physiological needs indirectly by paying a 'living wage' – enough for food and shelter. In most countries, they are also compelled by legislation to fulfil the next level of need by ensuring that workplaces are safe. These aspects may be taken more or less for granted, but if they are not in place, workers would not aspire further [*expanding the topic sentence by explaining the first two basic needs*].

To satisfy the next need level – the sense of belonging – employers need to look towards team building [*topic sentence linking to the last paragraph*]. Work for most people is a social activity: colleagues help each other, do some things out of 'team spirit', form personal relationships, and so on. Socialisation and a sense of belonging may simply happen, but employers can go further to foster them [*shows critical assessment*]. Serious commitment to team working and effective internal communication, for example, are likely to enable and motivate people to do better because they know how their work fits in with that of others [*explaining and expanding the topic sentence: sense of belonging*].

Employers can raise the esteem of employees by the use of a formalised appraisal system which rewards and recognises achievement by pay rises and promotions [*topic sentence – the next level* '*esteem*']. They may also make staff feel important by offering status symbols – Bennett (1997: 107) suggests the examples of 'large expensive company cars [and] wall-to-wall carpeting' as benefits and rewards [*further example of how to demonstrate esteem*]. Obviously, people doing different jobs look for different ways of gaining esteem and acknowledgement [*shows critical assessment*].

Self-actualisation is the highest level of need [*topic sentence*], and not everybody may see this as something attainable through work. Yet it certainly can be [*shows critical assessment*] when a job offers the freedom to create and innovate, and people may take great pride in their sales figures, welcome challenging assignments, and so on, as a way to personal growth.

(Continued)

Buchanan and Huczynski argue that 'a need is not an effective motivator until those lower in the hierarchy are ... satisfied' (1991: 74). At the same time, *satisfied* needs will not be strong motivators. Self-actualisation is the exception to this – one experience of this, Maslow argued, simply whets the appetite for more [*clarifying and explaining self-actualisation*, *using quotes and arguments from experts*].

People may be driven by different needs at any particular time of their lives. It is important for managers to take time to get to know what will best motivate each of their employees in order to exploit the potential for motivation [*summary and critical assessment*]. Although Maslow's original intention was not to help employers motivate their staff, his work does provide a basis for developing schemes which are generally likely to gain commitment from staff. Maslow's theory helps employers understand how people can be motivated to work for the organisation by providing them with the environment and opportunities to fulfil their own needs [*conclusion: reminds the reader that the question has been addressed and points towards significance*].

(658 words)

References [*bibliography of references cited in the essay using the Harvard system*]

Bennett, R. (1997) *Organisational Behaviour*. London: Pitman Publishing.

Buchanan, D. and Huczynski, A. (1997) *Organizational Behaviour: An Introductory Text* (3rd edn). London: Prentice Hall.

Maslow, A. (1987) *Motivation and Personality*. (3rd edn). New York: Harper & Row.

The function of this essay is to explain, and the paragraphs mainly fulfil this function, with the use of description and cause and effect. The essay shows that the writer has read and analysed sources and has tried to comment on the strengths and limitations of the theory.

example 9.9

A Judgement essay

'*Maslow's theory of motivation cannot fully explain what motivates people in work contexts*'. *Discuss this claim*.

The basic premise of Maslow's theory of motivation is that people seek to fulfil certain needs (Maslow 1987) [*topic sentence summarising Maslow's theory*]. These needs, he argues, form a hierarchy in the sense that certain needs have to be met first before other needs can be fulfilled. Starting from the most basic level the hierarchy of needs is as follows: **Physiological** – to satisfy hunger and thirst, and avoid exhaustion; **Safety** – to avoid real or imagined danger; **Social** – to have relationships and a sense of belonging; **Esteem** – to have self-respect and the respect of others; **Self-actualisation** – to achieve one's full potential [*explaining the five levels*]. This essay will discuss how Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' can explain some aspects of motivation in work contexts. It will also consider some limitations, both in the theory itself, and in the way it is often understood and applied [*tells the reader how you will reach a conclusion – this is the argument*].

In the UK workplace most employees are assured by law of a minimum wage and health and safety issues are in place. In addition, jobs may be seen to be generally secure when there is a contract [*examples of first two needs being fulfilled*]. The satisfaction of these needs enables employers to motivate their employees to perform better [*prepares the reader for explanation of other levels*] by such strategies as organising social occasions like office parties and sports events to encourage a sense of belonging, having 'employee of the month' schemes and so on to demonstrate appreciation, and 'empowering' staff or giving challenging assignments to allow them to achieve their potential [*explaining the next three levels*, *giving the evidence*]. The widespread and continued use of such schemes is based on claims of success, and this does indeed suggest that motivation can at least work in the way that Maslow argued at these three levels [*topic sentence*, *the conclusion for the argument of the paragraph*, *some critical assessment*].

Maslow's theory has been very influential, and it has at times been misunderstood as a rigid description, and (ab)used as a prescription for developing a committed workforce [*topic sentence*, *some critical assessment*]. Yet needs can be fulfilled in the 'wrong' sequence, as when a designer may put self-actualisation *before* physiological needs by working 30 hours without a break to get a bit of software right. Likewise, an appraisal system is in part designed to motivate by raising the esteem of the employee in the eyes of a line manager, but some may place greater value on the respect they gain from peers by 'standing up to the system'. It should also be noted that higher level needs may be better met *outside* work settings. A manager may refuse a promotion to a new location, for example, because it takes him away from the garden he is passionate about [*criticism of some aspects: the order of the needs and the two higher levels (self-esteem and self-actualisation)*].

These are criticisms of the way Maslow's work has been used or interpreted rather than of the theory itself [*topic sentence*, *critical assessment*]. Yet it does

(Continued)

have a major weakness. The title of his book, '*Motivation and Personality*', seems to claim that it applies universally. Yet Buchanan and Huczynski offer evidence to suggest that it is shaped by 'American middle-class values' (1997: 77) [*support for 'weakness' of theory*].

This leads to questions about motivation in different cultures. Maslow cannot explain the motivational power of Japanese traditions such as jobs for life, which (indirectly) fulfil only physiological needs, or promotions based mainly on seniority, which suggests that self-actualisation plays a marginal role, at least in the workplace. In addition, in some highly collectivist cultures, individual attempts to innovate and be creative may be condemned as deviant (Hofstede 1991) [*criticism: Maslow's theory does not work everywhere*].

No theory can explain everything, and Maslow's theory can only explain motivation in the workplace to a certain extent [*topic sentence – this is the conclusion of the argument*]. Maslow's work is valuable in that it has had a significant influence on employers, which has generally tended to make workplaces more 'people-friendly', and thus serve as a useful corrective to approaches such as 'scientific management' (Taylor 1911). It has also prompted considerable debate and research on the important topic of how to motivate employees in the workplace [*summarising: support for the conclusion that the theory is limited but nevertheless of value*].

(619 words)

References [*bibliography of references cited in the essay using the Harvard system*]

Buchanan, D. and Huczynski, A. (1997) *Organizational Behaviour: An Introductory Text* (3rd edn). London: Prentice Hall.
Hofstede, G. (1991) *Cultures and Organisations*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.
Maslow, A. (1987) *Motivation and Personality* (3rd edn). New York: Harper & Row.
Taylor, F. (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Harper.

This essay presents evidence to suggest there are both weaknesses and strengths in Maslow's theory. In order to reach a conclusion the writer explains the theory, analyses its applications in the workplace, and points out the shortcomings. This is an evaluative piece of writing with a standpoint supported by evidence.

chapter summary

This chapter demonstrates the importance of the following considerations when structuring and drafting the essay:

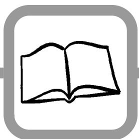
- Essays are organised into the broad structure of: Introduction, Body, Conclusion.
- A structure based on careful analysis of the essay question is crucial to answering that question successfully.
- The structure is built up of paragraphs with specific functions, all contributing to developing the argument of the essay.
- All university essays demand a critical approach to writing, manifested by asking the right questions, considering the possible answers, and being able to use the appropriate structure and language.

reflection and review

Practice

1 Refer to the essay questions you collected from different modules (Chapter 1, 'Reflection and Review'). Practise structuring different categories of essays and then use these as resources for exam revision (see Chapter 12).

2 If possible find a couple of essays in your subject for which you have received good marks. Analyse these according to the advice in this chapter. Comment on the introduction, conclusion, paragraphs, argument, clarity and flow. If the essay marks were not brilliant, what were the shortcomings?



further reading

Improve your knowledge and use of language to express functions and to indicate criticality in your writing by visiting a phrasebank such as that maintained by John Morley of the University of Manchester (www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk (accessed 28 May 2009)). All the links are relevant and useful, and 'General Functions' and 'Being Critical' are especially so for the topic of this chapter.

10

Making it Flow

chapter themes

- Why and when do you revise and edit?
- How can you make your writing read smoothly and make better sense?

When you complete the first draft of your essay, you have come a long way and reached a significant stage. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on considerations for making what you have written look and read like an academic essay, by revising and editing. You may consider doing this as you are drafting, or might wait until you have finished a complete draft and are therefore able to give this work your full attention. Remember that the stages are not linear – as you draft your essay, you may also be revising and editing what you have written as you go along. Similarly, as you revise, you may see gaps in the information, and will then need to revisit pre-writing considerations.

Revising and editing

Although revising and editing may run in tandem, it can be helpful to look at the two processes as separate. Revision is part of the drafting and re-drafting process, while editing puts more focus on getting the grammar and style right, and is an essential final stage in the writing process.

When editing you need to get down to the nitty-gritty, and in order to understand how to avoid grammatical errors, we will need to know some grammatical terminology. Some of this will be explained here, but if there are terms you are not quite clear about then take time to consult the Concise Grammar Glossary at the end of the book and the suggested further reading at the end of this chapter.

Revising

To revise literally means to 'see again' or to look again at an existing situation from a new perspective. It is advisable to revise what you have written after you have left it for a while or at least overnight. You should also be aware that if you revise after every little bit of writing, you will not be able to see the whole picture and your revisions may then be premature.

You start revision at a global level when you:

- reconsider your overall argument;
- review the evidence;
- refine the organisation and structure.

You can then move on to revise at the level of the paragraph and the sentence in order to:

- make sure that paragraphs are logically structured, cohesive and coherent;
- check that the Introduction and Conclusion fulfil their roles (save this for when you are completely satisfied with the shape of your essay and the flow of the argument);
- review the style and language by checking your paragraphs and sentences to see if they read smoothly and logically.

Revising requires you to stand outside your essay and see it through the eyes of the intended reader. The danger with reading your own work is that when you look at what you yourself have written you will see the logic and meaning you intended to express and not the meaning conveyed by the actual words themselves. You should try to read your own work using the same critical reading and thinking skills you use when you are reading other writers. Some people find that it helps them to stand back if they read their work aloud, either to themselves or to others. When you read aloud, you may also get a better feel for the flow and sense. This applies especially to those people who prefer the auditory learning style.

Looking at your essay like this means you may have to make changes, and perhaps even re-draft certain sections. This is the price you may have to pay

when you are writing to learn – but better this than not gaining the higher mark that you could have got and perhaps deserved.

Revising can be messy and confusing. Do not delete your old drafts just in case you decide that one of them was in fact the best! You will be less likely to get bogged down in revision if you had a good plan to start off with and you are clear about why and how this plan now has to be revised.

It is advisable to do a first revision of anything longer than a paragraph or page on hard copy as you cannot see the overall structure of a longer essay so well on the computer screen.

Editing

Editing is also called proofreading. You may be editing as you write, especially if the spellchecker and grammar checker indicate that editing is necessary. However, a complete check should also be done when you are happy with your draft and do not intend to revise any more.

As this is the last stage in the writing process, editing tends to be neglected, which is a pity. Editing involves:

- going through the text to look for clumsy sentences, repetitions, redundancies, fragmented or incomplete sentences and ambiguity;
- using the spellchecker wisely – note that it does not consider meaning, and a word may be used wrongly even if it has been spelt right;
- checking the use of punctuation;
- checking for grammar mistakes – note the grammar checker is also not completely reliable;
- double checking your references and reference list to make sure they are complete and consistent.

We will look at some of these in more detail in the next chapter.

Do make sure that your essay is within the word limit, but do not fall prey to padding it out just to get it up to the right number of words. If your essay does fall short of the word limit it could be that you have not done enough research or gone into sufficient depth. If it is too long, you should check for wordiness and try to identify anything which is irrelevant.

As mentioned, revising and editing may be done during the drafting stage, but it is important that you do not let any focus on the technicalities distract you or undermine your confidence during the creative process.

The remaining sections of this chapter examine aspects of flow, style and language in some detail. These are considerations to be borne in mind both when writing and when revising and editing.

Making the connections clear and smooth

Making the connections clear is important in effective written communication – but how do you actually do it? How do you make it easy for the reader to follow your reasoning or train of thought? A requirement of academic writing is that it should flow smoothly: information should bind together and make sense in a clear and connected way. In order for your writing to communicate it must be both cohesive and coherent.

Cohesion means ‘sticking together’ and in essay writing this is achieved through the use of connective words and signalling devices in and between sentences, paragraphs, and even chapters, which link and connect ideas.

Coherence refers to how a piece of text makes sense overall. Coherence is also a feature of visual images, design and art. It concerns organisation, structure and meaning; for example, in the case of an essay, how it has been put together to answer the question. A good structure is crucial in any kind of university writing as it enables the reader to follow your reasoning or argument: thus a well structured text is also a coherent text.

Put simply, in writing, cohesion refers to the way sentences and paragraphs flow on from one to another and coherence refers to how the ideas connect to make sense. Cohesion can be easily detected in a text, whereas coherence is more difficult to agree upon if you are not the intended reader and are not familiar with the subject matter or the expectations of the intended reader. Although cohesion and coherence are often mentioned together, they are not the same thing. A text can actually be cohesive (that is, linked well) but at the same time incoherent (so it does not make sense).

Here is an example: *Writing is hard work because Mary is not doing any cleaning today, which makes it difficult for flowers to grow.*

Whichever way you look at it, this sentence simply does not make sense, even though it is well joined up or cohesive, as is shown in the use of connectives ‘because’ and ‘which’.

On the other hand, an exchange may seem completely unconnected but will still be coherent or make sense to those involved. We can all think of situations in which the following conversation would work without any problems:

A: *Do you think she’s signed the contract yet?*

B: *It’s only five past three!*

Imagine a meeting which starts at three o’clock, at which a contract is to be signed. If both A and B know this, then B’s message is probably something

like: 'It's unlikely – there'll probably be a few things to discuss before they get round to signing'. Remember that this is a conversation, however, and this sort of 'understood meaning' will not work in an essay!

Strategies for smooth connections

In Chapters 8 and 9 you saw that a paragraph conveys meaning logically by having a topic sentence, with other sentences containing the evidence to support that topic sentence, and ultimately all of this contributes to the argument of your essay. In this section, we will look at some of the ways in which you can make the writing flow better in your paragraphs. When a text is cohesive, the sense comes through better – it becomes more coherent to the reader.

Moving from known to new information

This method for achieving flow by moving from known information to new information is useful at the levels of the sentence, paragraph, essay, and even the chapter in a book.

At the level of the essay As has already been discussed, at the level of a whole essay, the Introduction starts the argument by using the words in the question, explaining them, and so on. This is the 'known' – the words have been provided by the tutor, your reader. What follows is the 'new' – how you are going to use this known information as a basis for developing the essay, and it is new because readers will not know this until they read it. The ideas that follow on in the Body of the essay are then 'known' in a general sense in that they have already been mentioned or implied in the Introduction. Specifically, the first paragraph in the Body will be the first piece of evidence, and so the essay progresses, ending with the Conclusion, which summarises the 'known' – namely the argument of the essay. The analyses of two types of essay in Chapter 9 illustrate this idea (see pages 158–62).

The last sentence of a paragraph (the concluding sentence) is connected to the first sentence of the next paragraph and so on, thus always moving from known to new information between paragraphs. Paragraphs are therefore made up of sentences which when linked will make sense within the paragraph and between paragraphs.

At the paragraph and sentence level At the paragraph and sentence level, there are several ways to link information in this way. Here are two paragraphs taken from Buzan (1993: 66).

example 10.1

Paragraph 1

Having confirmed the unrivalled accuracy of the brain as a receiving, holding and recalling mechanism, Haber carried out a second experiment to check the brain's ability to recognize at speed. In this experiment one slide was shown every second.

Paragraph 2

The results were identical, indicating that not only does the brain have an extraordinary capacity to imprint and recall, but that it can do so, with no loss of accuracy, at incredibly high speeds.

Table 10.1 Analysing the flow of information

Text	*Analysis*
Paragraph 1	
Having confirmed the unrivalled accuracy of the brain as a receiving, holding and recalling mechanism, Haber	this refers back to the previous paragraph, and is therefore **known**
carried out a second experiment to check the brain's ability to recognize at speed.	this is the **new** information in the first sentence
In this experiment	the reader now knows about the second experiment from the preceding sentence
one slide was shown every second	this is **new** detail about the experiment
Paragraph 2	
The results	'The results' are clearly those of the second experiment, and thus relate to **known** information
were identical,	even though the word 'identical' suggests something which is already known, they could have been different, and this is therefore **new** information
indicating that not only does the brain have an extraordinary capacity to imprint and recall, but	this is **known** information again, a restatement of what was said in Paragraph 1
that it can do so, with no loss of accuracy, at incredibly high speeds.	this is **new** – the reader does not know this from Paragraph 1

Note that Paragraph 2 contains only one sentence. This does the work of a paragraph because of the complexity of the sentence.

We will use these two paragraphs and other examples to illustrate some of the techniques used to move from known to new information within sentences and paragraphs.

- **Using pronouns and repetitions**
  Pronouns are words like '*it*', '*they*' and '*this*', which refer back to nouns or noun phrases in a text. Using pronouns and repeating nouns are basic ways to create cohesion in a text. In Paragraph 1 above, the noun '*brain*' is used twice to maintain the subject and avoid ambiguity: if '*its*' were used instead of '*the brain's*', the reader might think the last part of the sentence was about '*a … mechanism*'. Where there is no danger of ambiguity, then it is preferable to use a pronoun, and so '*it*' is used instead of '*brain*' in Paragraph 2.
- **Using summary words**
  Summarising known information briefly enables you to use language economically while developing cohesion. Instead of repeating the same words in the next sentence to refer to known information, you can summarise a phrase or idea using '*this*' or '*these*' (reference words) followed by a word or words which summarise the idea in the last sentence.

  In Paragraph 1, '*this*' followed by the known word '*experiment*' is used to refer to the second experiment. '*The*' can be used instead of '*this*' when the information has been mentioned previously: for example, '*the unrivalled accuracy of the brain*' in Paragraph 1 summarises the information already given.

  In addition to acting as cohesive devices in the same way as pronouns and repetition, some summary words can be used to give added meaning.

example 10.2

Using summary words to give added meaning

1 *Some of the liquid may evaporate. This* <u>*probability*</u> *can be prevented by working at low temperatures.*

2 *Some of the liquid may evaporate. This* <u>*risk*</u> *…*

3 *Some of the liquid may evaporate. This* <u>*problem*</u> *…*

In these three examples, the words underlined summarise the first sentence (the evaporation of the liquid), but also contribute additional information.

- The summary word in No 1 is chosen in preference to '*possibility*', and indicates that there is a greater likelihood of evaporation than '*possibility*' would indicate.
- In No 2, where '*risk*' is used for the evaporating action, there is the added meaning of danger (of contamination or fire, for example) if it happens.
- In No 3, the use of '*problem*' suggests that evaporation is undesirable for other reasons. There is no indication of danger, but it might be a nuisance if it happens.

Where no summary word is used (as in '*This can be prevented* ...'), 'this' refers purely to the evaporation of the liquid in the first sentence and has no significant implications.

- **Using words with similar meaning**
A synonym is a word which has a similar meaning to another word. Using a synonym instead of the same word again avoids repetition. The first sentence of a paragraph about Buzan's book, for example, might have as its grammatical subject '*Buzan's book* ...', while the second sentence could replace that with '*This work* ...'.

There is something similar in Example 10.1: the brain is first described as '*a receiving, holding and recalling mechanism*', and this idea is repeated or echoed in Paragraph 2 in the phrase '*capacity to imprint and recall*'. Note that the adjectives in Paragraph 1 have become part of a noun phrase in Paragraph 2 so that they fit into the grammatical structure of the sentence. This is a paraphrasing skill.

- **Using the passive voice**
Here is part of Paragraph 1 from Example 10.1 again:

Haber carried out [active voice] *a second experiment to check the brain's ability to recognize at speed. In this experiment one slide was shown* [passive voice] *every second*.

The first sentence is written in the active voice, with Haber as the grammatical subject. That is because Haber is known information, and the sentence is about him. The new information in this sentence relates to the experiment, but in the second sentence this is now known information. The second sentence is thus about the experiment rather than Haber, and having 'Haber' as the grammatical subject ('*In this experiment he showed* ...') would be a break in the flow of meaning. Yet it is difficult to think of a way of writing this in a straightforward way with 'this experiment' as the grammatical subject: perhaps the only way would be something like '*This experiment involved slides being shown* ...'. The passive voice is preferable here.

The passive voice is common in academic writing whenever the flow of meaning has to focus on what is being done rather than on who is doing it, for example in descriptions of processes, procedures and systems.

- **Using 'having' clauses**
  '*Having confirmed …*' in Paragraph 1 of Example 10.1 relates to something which has been done previously, even if it has not already been discussed in the text. More importantly, it also shows how this relates to or affects what comes next in the text – in this case, conducting another experiment.

Moving from known to new information to connect ideas smoothly and coherently is one way of maintaining flow. We will now turn to others.

Using similar grammatical patterns

Consider this example:

It is recommended that:

- *a full review of safety procedures should be undertaken;*
- *a written Health and Safety policy should be drawn up;*
- *courses on working safely with hazardous chemicals should be compulsory for all staff;*
- *…*

Each of the bullet points here follows the same grammatical pattern, and they are referred to in grammar books as 'parallel structures'. In this case, they *have* to follow the same pattern, because grammatically they are governed by the first part of the sentence ('It is recommended that …'). But even when that is not the case, the use of parallel structures can make a text cohesive because this signals that the ideas expressed each time the structure is used belong together or have the same status:

It is difficult to find fault with this evidence: the questionnaire was well designed, a very large sample was used, and a rigorous analysis of the results was undertaken.

The three structures following the colon (:) all use the passive voice and the past tense, and this clearly signals that all three structures have the same function in the sentence – that is, they stand as reasons why it is difficult to find fault with the evidence. It also makes for a smooth read, as this rather clumsy alternative shows:

It is difficult to find fault with this evidence: the researchers designed the questionnaire well, a very large sample was used, and what characterises the analysis of the results is its rigour.

All the examples above contain lists, and this is the main purpose for which parallel structures are used. Outside of academic writing, they are used for bulleted lists in reports (as in the first example) and numbered lists in sets of instructions.

Using connecting words

This aspect of cohesion was discussed in Chapter 9 with reference to the relationship between function and structure. Connecting words are words and phrases such as '*additionally*', '*although*', '*moreover*', and so on, and they are also known as connectives, (sentence) connectors, linking words and transition words. They are used to link sentences and paragraphs and to show the relationship between the ideas expressed. They signal clearly in a sentence how the parts relate to each other. Some are used when describing or explaining; others are commonly used in arguing a case.

Connectives are important in that they not only clarify meaning, but may also shape the way the reader interprets something. For example, the two sentences below have no connective between them – what do you think the relationship is?

The whole class failed the test. Brian was their teacher.

You can interpret this as meaning that the class failed *because* Brian was their teacher, or *even though* Brian was their teacher. The two different interpretations carry different implications about Brian: in the first case, he does not usually do a proper job at all; in the second, he is an excellent teacher.

You can also interpret the example as deliberate ambiguity on the part of the speaker or writer – without a connective, the intended meaning is not clear. Academic writing should never allow multiple interpretations or misinterpretations in this way, and one of the main ways to avoid this is by the judicious use of connectives. One thing you may find as you edit your work is that a sentence or paragraph which strikes you as perhaps 'not quite right' in some way suddenly becomes clear just because you insert a connective like '*on the other hand*' or '*likewise*'.

Connectives are used either to show the link between sentences or even whole paragraphs, or they may join parts of a sentence. The table below lists some connectives for linking different sentences and their functions, and shows how they are used. Please note that this is not a definitive list.

Table 10.2 Connectives used for showing links between complete sentences

Connectives	*Function*	*Example*
furthermore, in addition to, moreover, equally important	To add on	The drug was safe and had no side effects. *Moreover,* it could be made cheaply.
however, despite this, in spite of this, nevertheless	To show exception	The drug was safe and had no side effects. *Nevertheless,* it would have to be licensed by the government.
as a result, therefore, consequently, hence, thus	To show cause and effect	The drug was safe and had no side effects. *Consequently* it was decided to mass produce it.
in other words, that is	To clarify	The drug was safe and had no side effects. *In other words,* it could be used by people allergic to aspirin.
however, on the other hand, meanwhile, in contrast, by comparison	To contrast	The drug was safe and had no side effects. *On the other hand,* it was rather unpalatable.
for instance, for example, as a case in point, take the case of	To exemplify	On the other hand, it was rather unpalatable. *For instance*, some patients who took it threw up violently.
indeed, in fact	To strengthen	For instance, some patients who took it threw up violently. *Indeed,* a few said even the smell made them retch.
first, second, third..., next, simultaneously, concurrently, finally	To show sequence	Researchers are looking for ways to make it palatable. *First*, they hope to disguise its smell. *Second*, ...
in brief, on the whole, in conclusion	To summarise/ conclude	*In brief*, unless some way of making it palatable is found, it will be difficult to sell.

Connectives which are used within sentences to link a main idea (main clause) and a dependent idea (subordinate clause) which is introduced by the connective, and whose meaning depends on the connective, include *although, even though*, *because*, *since*, *while* and *whereas*.

> *Although* the drug was effective (subordinate clause), it did not sell well (main clause).

or

> *Despite being* effective, (subordinate clause) the drug did not sell well (main clause).

The table below shows some connectives for linking within a sentence and their functions. Knowing how to use different connectives and being able to change sentence constructions accordingly are extremely useful skills: they allow you to express the precise meaning you want in a variety of ways.

Table 10.3 Dependent connectives joining two parts of a sentence into one

	Connectives	
Function	*(used with clauses)*	*(used with noun phrases)*
To add on	*and*	*in addition to*
To show exception	*although, (even) though*	*despite, in spite of*
To show cause and effect	*because, since*	*because of, as a result of, due to*
To contrast	*while, whereas*	*unlike*

Connectives are therefore important devices for creating flow or cohesion in the text. However, overusing them can result in a rather unnatural style.

An extreme example that I have seen many times is when students overuse sequential connectives. For example: *To improve my essay writing, first I have to use more formal words. Secondly, I have to connect my ideas clearly. Thirdly... Sixthly … Finally…* This could be a result of linear thinking and an over-reliance on lists.

Try to use a range of the various strategies mentioned in this chapter to make your sentences flow smoothly. Students who read widely develop more confidence in using different strategies to achieve cohesion and coherence. Careful editing will show up any overuse of connectives.

Developing general cohesion strategies

The best way to develop general strategies for improving cohesion in your writing is to learn by raising your awareness of how 'proper' writers use these strategies. When you are reading for your course, choose one page and read a few paragraphs. Focus not on what they say, but on the language used to create flow. For example, underline the connectives, note the use of pronouns, repetitions, summary words, synonyms, sentence construction, and so on.

To start you off, here are two paragraphs from a first-year student essay. If you prefer to begin with a less dense or complex text than those in your textbooks, use this to see how another student has used cohesion strategies.

activity 10.1

Developing cohesion strategies

Paragraph 1

Women appear to be left out of this picture, despite the fact that they of course played just as big a part in frontier life. Women not only did their share of the work on the farms, but tended the house as well, looking after members of the household, cooking, sewing and so on. A woman's life on the frontier was not that much easier than a man's.

Paragraph 2

Perhaps more shockingly, Native Americans appear only peripherally in Turner's hypothesis. From his statements, it would seem as if North America was almost uninhabited when the first European settlers arrived, with the natives portrayed as savages who had to be 'civilized'. Not only does this raise the question of which people were in fact savages, but it also covers up the fact that the first settlers, finding they had to build an existence with very little knowledge of the foreign land, learnt a lot from the natives as well. From them, they learned not only about the country itself but also the techniques to survive in it. In fact, during the American Revolution of 1775, the colonists used mainly guerrilla-style tactics of warfare learnt from the natives instead of the traditional European-style methods of pitched battles favoured by the British.

You may have come up with something like this analysis:

Paragraph 1: The topic is stated in part of the first sentence and is echoed in the last sentence: they (women) played just as big a part in frontier life/a woman's life on the frontier was not much easier than a man's. The first sentence starts from the known ('*this picture*' – one which must have been drawn in the preceding paragraph). Sentence 2 is the evidence.

Paragraph 2: The paragraph starts with '*Perhaps more shockingly*', which suggests that the information in Paragraph 1 about women in Turner's thesis is already shocking (known – new). Note the use of connectives ('*not only.... but/but also*', '*as well*', '*in fact*') to show relationships. The topic sentence is '*Perhaps more shockingly*, *Native Americans* ...'; the following sentences give evidence to support the idea that this was a shocking omission in the writer's view.

The next chapter continues with the editing process.

chapter summary

This chapter has focused on ways to make your essay look and read better.

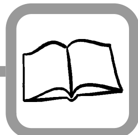
- Revising the structure and content if necessary.
- Editing so it reads more smoothly.
- Using strategies to create flow such as: moving from known to new information; writing in parallel structures; using connectives judiciously.

reflection and review

Practice

1 The best way to develop general strategies to improve cohesion in your writing is to learn from the professionals. Raise your awareness of how good academic writers link their ideas. When you are reading your recommended texts, you could stop reading for content from time to time and focus on a few paragraphs to analyse the language and style. Check their use of cohesive devices – underline the connectives, note the use of pronouns, repetitions, summary words, synonyms, sentence construction and so on.

2 Do the same when you edit your own work. Try to read your essay as though you were seeing it for the first time, as though you were a different person. After careful editing ask a course mate to give feedback on the 'before' and 'after' versions.



further reading

Please refer to Chapter 11 for a list of further reading on grammar and style.

11
The Finishing Touches

chapter themes

- Writing in a more formal style.
- Editing for grammar, punctuation, spelling.
- Presentation.

Chapter 10 looked at how to make your essay read smoothly by linking ideas and creating logical flow. These are important considerations when drafting, revising and editing. This chapter continues with other considerations to ensure that your essay ends up as a convincing piece of work. Editing mainly involves the correction of surface errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling and has to do with the concept of formality in academic writing. It is an essential finishing touch if you wish to submit a polished piece of work.

For most of us, it is not the most exciting job to pore over what we have spent a great deal of time and effort writing to check that sentences are complete, spot spelling mistakes with '*-ie-*' instead of '*-ei-*', change a comma to a semi-colon, and so on. But it is important in the same way as dressing smartly for a job interview is important: you are showing whether or not you care. Sloppy writing with basic grammar, spelling or punctuation errors will give tutors the impression that you are not concerned about the way you write, or that you do not know how to write in the first place.

This chapter examines important aspects of formality, and explains some aspects of grammar, spelling and punctuation which, in my experience, are the main pitfalls for student writers. It cannot cover everything, of course. But you should find that, as you engage intensively with academic language both in your reading and your writing, you will start to express yourself better and more accurately.

Formal and informal style and language

Students sometimes write just as they speak. Speech is normally more informally structured than writing, and within writing there is a continuum from very personal and informal writing to very formal. Essays (with the exception of the Reflective essay discussed in Chapter 3) are towards the formal end of that continuum.

We begin by putting formality and informality in academic writing in perspective and comparing some of the types of academic text that fall into these two categories. Here is a summary of the main differences.

Table 11.1 Differences between informal and formal academic writing

	Informal academic writing	*Formal academic writing*
Type of writing	Reflective journals, reports based on experience, narratives and anecdotes in reports and case study analyses.	Academic essays, research reports, literature reviews, critiques, dissertations, case study analyses.
Focus	The 'self' and personal experience.	Research and analysis, supported by evidence, objective conclusions.
Use of pronouns	The personal pronouns *I* and *we* (first person) are used often. This makes the style personal and familiar. *You* (second person) should generally be avoided (see also Readership/ expectations).	The pronoun *it* (third person) is often used to show objectivity and distancing. Research incorporates what others say.
Choice of voice	The active voice is used with personal pronouns, e.g., *When we observed each others' presentation we could see…*	The passive voice is used to make generalisations and to objectify the action, e.g., *Presentations were observed to …* This avoids the need for personal pronouns.
Direct/indirect statements	The event is reported and described directly, e.g., *Students got lower marks when they worked in jobs for more than 20 hours a week*.	Conclusions are reached in a tentative, indirect way to show limitations, e.g., *It can be seen from the research that students are more likely to get lower marks …*

(Continued)

Table 11.1 (Continued)

	Informal academic writing	*Formal academic writing*
Readership/ expectations	The reader is interested in your experience, but does not necessarily know it – writing must be clear and structured when describing and explaining. Avoid *you* as this addresses the reader directly, e.g., *You must have had this experience before* (same for formal academic writing).	The reader is interested in what you have to say about your argument or research, and knows something about it. Writing is distanced, i.e., objective rather than subjective. Generally, you should avoid *I* and *we* (as in *I think ... In my opinion*), but the conclusion to an essay could have *In this essay I have argued ...*

From this table, you can see that it is quite possible to express the same idea at different levels of formality in order to make it appropriate to the type of writing and its purpose. Most academic essays are more formal than informal, but different disciplines, courses and tutors may have different expectations: some will tolerate a certain amount of informality, others very little. For example, in most scientific essays very little informality is allowed in student writing. You should not bring attention to yourself when discussing scientific experiments and research.

On the other hand, for most writing, especially when you have to be critical, you cannot write without a 'voice'. The stand you take is *yours*, and your views and identity will inevitably come through. You must be balanced, but you cannot be entirely neutral – indeed this would be unnatural and undesirable. For example, you may have been advised that you should never use '*I*' in academic writing, but there is a growing recognition that this is quite acceptable for appropriate parts of the essay (usually in the Introduction and the Conclusion).

A further important point about formal language is that it has to do with precision, and not with 'sounding grand'. '*A thing that tells you what the weather's going to be like*' may be an acceptable definition of a barometer in everyday conversation. But *thing* is a very vague word, and the description on the whole is a rather casual way of telling someone what a barometer does. '*An instrument for measuring atmospheric pressure used for predicting changes in weather*' certainly sounds more formal, but more importantly, it says exactly what a barometer is and what it does.

Adopting a more formal style will help you avoid feedback on your essays like 'vague' or 'over-generalised'. This point is taken up in more detail below to show how you can express your views precisely and keep some distance by using the grammatical features and sentence constructions which we associate with formality.

Ways of adopting a formal style

You can show formality in your writing by considering:

1. using the 'dummy *it*' and the impersonal *one*;
2. generally, focusing on the issue under discussion and not on the writer;
3. choosing formal verbs instead of phrasal verbs;
4. using the passive voice;
5. using more precise language;
6. avoiding some categories of words;
7. other aspects of a more formal style.

1 Using the 'dummy *it*' and the impersonal *one* '*It can be considered that …*' is quite different from both '*I consider that …*' and '*You (will/should) consider that …*' The third person pronoun *it* is used in this way in academic writing because it allows you to use a modal verb like *can*, *might*, *could* (etc.) to talk about something in a balanced, impersonal way. The focus of this kind of writing is not the writer or the reader, so you should avoid both *I* and *you*. Rather, the focus is on what you have to say on the subject under discussion, and a good way to show this is to use *it* instead. *It* here does not refer to a 'thing' (such as 'book' or 'deadline'), or to something in the text. Instead, it is simply a device for beginning a possible line of reasoning or viewpoint, and so the grammar books call it the 'dummy *it*'.

You can do exactly the same thing by using the impersonal pronoun *one*: '*one might suggest that …*'. *One* here is not you or your reader – it is anybody. Note that *you* (as in '*you could argue that …*') is informal, and therefore less suitable in essays.

2 Focusing on the issue under discussion and not on the writer Most sentences in academic writing could be reorganised in a variety of ways without changing their basic meaning, but such changes can give a different focus or slant. One way to do this is to think of different grammatical subjects. Consider these examples:

1. ***I** think that Ivanic et al.* (2000) make a good case for the need for clarity in writing student feedback.
2. ***Ivanic et al.*** (2000) make a good case for the need for clarity in writing student feedback.
3. ***Clarity in writing student feedback*** is paramount (Ivanic et al., 2000).

The grammatical subjects of these sentences (in bold in the examples) tell a reader what the sentence is about. In Example 1, this is you, the writer; in the second example, the focus is on the authority you are citing ('*Ivanic et al.*'); and in Example 3, it is the idea or topic you are discussing.

As I have said, in the Body of the essay you are presenting evidence, and you should generally avoid making yourself the focus. But when should you focus on the authority, and when on the topic? Both are acceptable, but there are differences and these have an impact on the flow of your argument.

If the authority is your focus (as in Example 2), you are evaluating what this particular authority says and you could go on to expand or qualify this evaluation. Example 2 could therefore be followed by a sentence starting with '*Moreover, they also point out that …*', or one starting with '*Nevertheless, they do not …*'.

Making the idea or topic the subject of your sentence (Example 3) tells the reader clearly that this is *your* opinion, and the authority you cite simply offers a confirmation for what you think. It would therefore be very odd to write '*Clarity in writing student feedback is paramount (Ivanic et al., 2000). However/moreover, they …*'.

3 Choosing formal verbs instead of phrasal verbs Spoken English (including lectures) and informal written English use 'phrasal verbs' (or 'multi-word verbs') such as '*look into*', '*come up with*', or '*put up with*'. There are a great many of these. In academic writing single-word verbs are preferred. Instead of the phrasal verbs mentioned, it is more acceptable to say '*investigate/consider*', '*develop/find*' and '*tolerate*', for example. An important reason for this is that these verbs tend to have more precise meanings.

activity 11.1

Formal and informal verbs

Try to match the informal phrasal verb with the more formal verb. Check your answers in the 'Reflection and Review' section.

to keep up	to determine
to go down	to eliminate
to make up	to decrease
to figure out	to maintain
to get rid of	to constitute

4 Using the passive voice We used the 'dummy *it*' in a sentence in the passive voice above ('*it* can be considered …').

The passive voice is also widely used in academic writing when you do not want to focus on the person doing something (either yourself or somebody else), but on what was done or the action. In a description of a chemistry experiment, for example, you will be interested in what happens and who it is that carries out the experiment is completely irrelevant. The description would thus follow the first example below, rather than the second:

When the chemicals were mixed, there was an explosion.

When I/John/the tutor mixed the chemicals, there was an explosion.

Grammatically, the passive voice always allows you to mention the doer or cause of the event or action you are describing by inserting '*by X*'. It is not common to do this if 'X' is human, as we have already said, but it is quite useful if 'X' is a process or some other non-human agent, as is illustrated in the next example:

The explosion was caused by the heat generated/the reaction of the two chemicals.

This use of the passive voice is a common way of describing the stages in a process and also of describing cause and effect.

5 Using words with precise meaning Students who are new to academic essay writing may know that they are required to use a particular style but may not fully understand why, and thus they may be tempted to use 'grander-sounding', or rather obscure words, in an essay. I have known students who consult a thesaurus just to find a more important-sounding word to use. Yet there is nothing wrong with using common words as long as their meaning is exactly what you intend. There is also nothing wrong with consulting a thesaurus – but only if you need to use a different word to vary your writing and if it fits your purpose exactly.

However, every discipline will use specialist terms which are either not in everyday use outside that discipline or are used with a different meaning from their everyday sense. Learning such terms – and using them – is all part of learning the subject. They have clearly defined meanings within the subject and that is what is important: not how impressive the word sounds, but how precisely it expresses the required meaning. So for example, if you are writing an essay for your health module you would say '*Rheumatoid arthritis is an auto-immune disease which causes chronic inflammation of the joints*' instead of '*Rheumatoid arthritis is a disease where the joints of the body become painful because they are attacked by the body itself because it thinks that there is an infection when there is none*'.

You should therefore beware of pompous or obscure words that do not have the intended meaning, do not match the sentence construction, or are not easily understood. Your reader will not appreciate having to guess your meaning when a more common word is perfectly adequate. Using obscure synonyms (perhaps found in a dictionary, but not properly checked) is sometimes the result of trying to paraphrase without a real understanding of the original text.

The other extreme – using very informal language – should also be avoided. This is not because academics will look down on everyday language as 'common', but because what works well in everyday conversation may lack the precision an academic essay requires. For example the word *get* is often over-used – we can *get* almost anything: angry, a cold, rich, home, a shock, a degree, and so on. Similarly, the repetition of a comparative adjective is imprecise because it adds nothing to the meaning of what is said: what does 'better and better' say that is not present in the single word 'better'?

activity 11.2

More formal language

Can you think of more formal, precise ways to express the following? Some possibilities are given in the 'Reflection and Review' section.

1 This is a *really* important stage in the process.
2 There has been *lots of* interest in the procedure.
3 No decision was made because we *couldn't get* enough information
4 Computer software is *getting easier and easier* to use.

If in doubt, it is better to err on the formal side – academic essays should not sound too informal. Consult a thesaurus if you find yourself at a loss as this will give you a number of suggestions. If you are still unsure which to choose, check in a dictionary and find an alternative which has the exact meaning you want and which is not an obscure word (a good thesaurus will tell you this).

6 Avoiding some categories of words In addition to steering clear of informal language in general, there are four specific categories of expression that should be avoided (unless you are writing a linguistics essay on these topics):

slang, colloquialisms, jargon and taboo words. **Slang** is often associated with group membership and is used by members to distinguish or dissociate themselves from other social groups. **Colloquialisms** are more widespread – they are slang words that have been 'promoted', as it were, and are more widely used outside a subculture. Most slang words become dated after a time, to be replaced by others. Slang expressions which endure become colloquialisms.

Words like *trollied*, *slashed*, *sloshed*, *off your face/trolley*, *plastered*, *pissed* are all informal spoken language: namely adjectives to describe the state of being very drunk. Some of these will eventually be forgotten or replaced by other words in time, but some may remain in the local vernacular and become colloquialisms. The words to use in your essay to describe the condition are simply *drunk*, *intoxicated* or *inebriated*.

Jargon is specialist language, used by specialists in a particular subject or profession. Unless it is the jargon of your subject, you should avoid it.

Outsiders who use such language may sound pedantic, officious or pretentious. It may also be incomprehensible to most people and users may come across as show-offs. The jargon that most permeates student essays is perhaps 'officialese' or 'management-speak': over-formal words originating from the civil service, politics, or business and industry. Expressions from this category can come briefly into widespread use and are then known as 'buzz words'. Yet once these are taken out of their particular context and used indiscriminately, they can become meaningless. For example, what do you think '*meaningful engagement within non-constraining parameters*' means?

Taboo words are too vulgar, crude or explicit to be accepted in polite conversation and are taboo in essays as well. If words are deemed offensive in spoken language they definitely have no place in a formal essay.

7 Other aspects of a more formal style Here are some more ways to make your writing style more formal:

- In general, contractions ('*couldn't*', '*they'll*', '*it's*', etc.) should not be used in formal academic writing.
- Try not to over-use expressions such as '*etc.*' and '*and so on*'.
- Putting the adverb at the beginning or end of a sentence is rather informal and more common in speech. It is best put next to the verb in formal writing:

  Actually, very little experience is needed. (informal)
  Very little experience is needed, actually. (informal)
  Very little experience is actually needed. (more formal)

- Never use more words than you need to say what you want. 'Padding' an essay may result in a lower mark. These two examples have more or less the same meaning, but the second is shorter, and thus clearer and more direct:

There have been some instances when the procedure has not been as successful as the doctors had been led to hope.

Sometimes the procedure has been less successful.

- Do not ask too many direct questions in your essay (for example, '*Why has this been allowed to happen?*', '*What can we learn from this?*'). These can easily be changed into statements ('*This situation came about because ...*' and '*The lessons to be learnt from this...*').

In general, whether you use more formal or informal style depends on what the purpose of the academic writing task is. In some textbooks and works such as self-help or guide books (like this one) and class handouts, writers may use both formal and informal style. The point to bear in mind is that when writing an essay, you are always discussing an academic topic with your reader (your tutor) and not talking about it with a friend.

Editing

Editing was introduced briefly in the last chapter as the final stage in the essay writing process. To edit well you need an eye for detail – the ability to focus on the nitty-gritty aspects of the words on the page, including word endings, double versus single letters within words, punctuation, and so on. You also need to feel confident about your grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation. If you are confident, skim this section to find what interests you. If you are not confident at all, and your essay feedback has included comments like 'poorly expressed', 'spelling!!!' and so on, read the section carefully. It will raise your awareness of the pitfalls. Using the relevant books recommended in 'Reflection and Review' will help to develop this awareness further. This section focuses on the mistakes which in my experience occur most frequently in student essays, dealing in turn with grammar, spelling and punctuation.

activity 11.3

Editing task

Here is a little editing exercise to check how well you can spot grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes. If you want to see how well your computer checkers work, key in the text first. If not, just try to spot the errors.

1 First, key in the text below on your computer but disable all the checkers. Next, correct the errors you spot.
2 Now, enable the checkers again. Grammatical and some punctuation errors will be indicated by a wriggly green line, spelling errors by a red line. Did you get a clean version? Or did you miss some errors?
3 Finally, check your version with the one in the 'Reflection and Review' section. Did your checkers miss anything?

A parents' complain

I didn't realize the traffic would be so compleatly stationery on that urbane motorway. It put an all together different complexion on the hole situation. Once we'd driven passed the lorrys, we preceded to the accomodation office but we managed to loose our way. The morale of this storey is Tim should definately of taken the advise of the german principle who excepted his application form with all it's problems. He said that when he recieved it he should arrive early to sieze the chance to get a head of the queue, but he seemed loathe to set off that morning. That always a good idea. He was getting truely flustered so I pulled up by the curb and he got out. I made sure I payed and displayed and joint him. It was alright in the end and we went our seperate ways – untill christmas ...

(adapted from an anonymous handout)

The purpose of this activity was to raise your awareness of how careful you must be in order to edit minor mistakes, especially spelling mistakes. It is not a matter of you not knowing sometimes, but the tricks that your eyes can play on you! If you found all the mistakes in the activity – congratulations – you are a keen editor and a good speller! If you checked in a dictionary in cases of doubt, you are to be doubly congratulated!

Common problems with grammar

This section will offer a very brief discussion only, focusing on some common mistakes found in student essays and how you can edit them. You are advised to refer to a grammar book if you want to know how the English language really works, if you think you have serious problems with grammar, or if you are going to be a language teacher. If you are completely confident about your grammar, please skip this section. Its purpose is to provide enough information for any student to be able to edit their written work better. Grammar terminology is also explained in the Concise Grammar Glossary.

By all means edit using the spelling and grammar checkers on your word-processor – but remember that these are by no means perfect, and are sometimes even wrong. You should also be sure that you enable the 'English (UK)' options. What follows are some of the more common mistakes made by student writers:

- fragments;
- run-on sentences;
- overloading;
- subject–verb agreement;
- singular, plural and uncountable nouns;
- dangling participles.

Fragments, or incomplete sentences, are a common problem in student essays. When we write as we speak, we can easily make this mistake. In formal writing, every sentence must be complete, so that it makes sense on its own:

> *Extrinsic motivation comes from external sources*. (complete sentence) *Such as money*, *rewards and trophies*. (fragment)

The fragment above could be incorporated into the complete sentence which it expands:

> *Extrinsic motivation comes from external sources such as money*, *rewards and trophies*.

Alternatively, the fragment could be changed into another complete sentence:

> *These include money*, *rewards and trophies*.

A **'run-on sentence'** is two complete sentences joined together incorrectly by a comma instead of a full stop:

> *The students did not read the instructions*, *they made many mistakes*. (run-on sentence)

This can be corrected in a variety of ways:

> *The students did not read the instructions*. *They made many mistakes*. (re-written as two separate sentences)
>
> *The students did not read the instructions; they made many mistakes*. (the parts of the sentence are separated by a semi-colon)

The students did not read the instructions and made many mistakes. (re-written using the connective '*and*')

The students made many mistakes because they did not read the instructions. (re-written using the connective '*because*' to show cause and effect)

Overloading: this is where a sentence becomes overloaded with too many ideas.

In academic writing you should always follow the rules of punctuation and grammar, especially as the reader of your writing, unlike a friend, is likely to be very different from you and may not know what you are referring to if you are not clear and do not use the conventions of grammar and spelling which are supposed to be universally known in English-speaking cultures, to maintain clarity and avoid ambiguity in expression.

There are no mistakes in grammar, word-choice or spelling in this example, but it is simply too overcrowded for the meaning to come through clearly. Ask yourself if passages like this could be broken up into more than one sentence.

Subject–verb agreement: Verbs have to 'agree' with their subjects, so you cannot write '*the cat sit on the mat*' or '*essays is difficult to write*'. These may seem obvious and trivial oversights, but they can be a problem in longer and more complicated sentences. Then there can be confusion about which noun (or noun phrase) the verb is attached to, as in these examples.

- *The types of weather discussed so far in this paper, although causing considerable damage, <u>is</u> mild compared to tropical storms*. What noun is the subject of this sentence? The grammatical subject is not the singular nouns '*weather*', '*paper*' or '*damage*', but the noun phrase '*types of weather*'. This is plural and therefore the verb should be '*are*'.
- *He is one of those people who <u>likes</u> to finish other people's sentences*. The sentence can be broken up into two parts:
  - *He is one of those people*. *Those people like to finish other people's sentences*. '*Who*' refers to '*those people*', which is a plural noun, and therefore the verb to be used should agree with it.
  - *He is one of those people who <u>like</u> to finish other people's sentences*.
    The spelling and grammar checkers may not pick out these mistakes.

Singular, plural and uncountable nouns: to avoid errors in subject–verb agreement, you must know the singular and plural forms of nouns. This is not a problem when plurals are made by adding '*-s*' or '*-es*'. However, words of Latin and Greek origin do not follow this pattern.

Table 11.2 Plurals of words derived from Latin and Greek

Singular form	*Plural form*
curriculum	curricula
memorandum	memoranda
thesis	theses
phenomenon	phenomena
datum	data
medium	media

Note: the plurals *data* and *media* are sometimes used as singular forms

Uncountable nouns are nouns which do not have a plural, such as '*evidence*', '*research*', '*information*', '*music*', or '*luggage*'. To talk about these as something plural, you will have to insert a countable noun to get '*items/pieces of luggage*', and so on.

Dangling participles: a 'participle' is an adjective or adjective phrase ending in '*–ing*' or '*–ed*', such as '*the couple living at number ten*' or '*a couple admired by everybody*'. Misunderstandings occur when the antecedent, the noun to which the participle refers, is not clear in the sentence. These mistakes are then referred to as dangling, or unattached, participles. Dangling and misplaced participles are participles put in the wrong place, usually next to the wrong noun:

- *Barking excitedly, Simon took his dog for a walk*. Simon might well be excited – but would that make him bark? The intended antecedent is obviously '*his dog*', but grammatically it is '*Simon*'. To make its meaning clear, the sentence could be re-written as:

  The dog barked excitedly when Simon took it for a walk.

- *Locked in fierce embrace, the audience cheered on the wrestlers*. Who were locked in fierce embrace? The sentence says '*the audience*', but the sense says '*the wrestlers*'. There are two ways to make the sentence clear and correct:

  Locked in fierce embrace, the wrestlers were cheered on by the audience.

  The wrestlers, locked in fierce embrace, were cheered on by the audience.

Common problems with punctuation

Punctuation is important for conveying meaning and sense (coherence) as well as showing connections (cohesion), largely by signalling how words fit together in units. In many cases, it fulfils the same sort of function that pauses fulfil in spoken language.

activity 11.4

Punctuation and meaning

To start, see if you can spot the differences in meaning or emphasis between these pairs of examples:

1.a What do you mean? You owe me £5!

1.b What! Do you mean you owe me £5?

2.a The students, who had revised for their exam, got good marks.

2.b The students who had revised for their exam got good marks.

Check if you spotted the differences correctly in 'Reflection and Review'. Here you can see how important punctuation is for conveying meaning when writing.

We will not go into much depth about the use of punctuation. As with grammar, if you want to read up on it, there are many reference books and dictionaries you can consult (see 'Reflection and Review' again). The careful use of punctuation can make your essay look more sophisticated and polished. You will come across as being in control of your ideas, expressing them by using different sentence structures with different punctuation – and good punctuation signals that you are doing exactly what your tutors are looking for – conveying your meaning precisely!

The punctuation marks discussed here are those that are often misused in essays: the comma (,), the semi-colon (;), the colon (:) and the apostrophe (').

The comma (,) The comma is used to indicate a break in a sentence to make things clearer. In general, if the two parts of the sentence are joined with a conjunction and are short, there is no need for a comma:

The books belong to the library and should be returned.

When the sentence is long and more complex, a break makes it clearer:

I rang him at the hotel where he usually stayed when he came into town on business, and gave him a full explanation of all the decisions that had been taken.

A comma is always used if a sentence is introduced by an '*-ing*' or '*-ed*' participle and the second part is the main idea, as in the examples below where the participle is underlined and the main idea is in square brackets:

> *Deciding that swine flu would soon become pandemic*, *[the government spent thousands of pounds issuing information leaflets to every household].*
>
> *Determined to clear his name*, *[he sued for libel].*

Several linking words and phrases should always be followed by a comma if they appear at the beginning of a sentence. These include '*however*', '*on the other hand*', '*nevertheless*' and '*in other words*'.

> *However*, *this turned out not to be the case.*

Verbs should not usually be separated from their subjects (therefore a comma is unnecessary) unless there is a long modifier after the subject (where a comma helps):

> *The tests will run for the next two weeks.*
>
> *The tests carried out by the specially assembled team of forensic experts*, *will run for the next two weeks.*

The comma is the 'weakest' way of indicating a pause, and one rough test you can use is to say a sentence out loud and note where you make a short pause. Try it with the preceding sentence. Did you pause at the comma? You can also use this test to identify the *over*use of commas: if a slight pause for each comma you have inserted makes the sentence sound jerky and unnatural, you should consider deleting some of them.

The semi-colon (;) The semi-colon is a stronger pause mark than the comma, somewhere between a comma and a full stop. Its function is to join stretches of text which could stand as grammatically separate sentences, but which are very closely linked in function or meaning. It is particularly useful in any form of writing characterised by long sentences, as it allows a skilful writer to help the reader by breaking down a sentence into sections and then (through commas) into sub-sections. Many writers misuse, under-use or omit this punctuation mark, using the comma instead.

When connectives such as '*however*' and '*for example*' are used to separate two parts of a sentence that make sense on their own, they are preceded by a semi-colon:

> *She had planned to return the book to the library; however*, *it was too far for her to walk there.*

A full stop may also be used:

She had planned to return the book to the library. However, it was too far for her to walk there.

When joining two complete sentences, a semi-colon can be used instead of a connecting word or phrase:

The students did not read the instructions; they made many mistakes.

The colon (:) In an essay, the colon is used to introduce lists, some quotations, and 'explanations' of or comments on the first part of a sentence.

The writing process consists of the stages of: pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing. (listing)

Consider J. F. Kennedy's words: 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country'. (quotation)

To put it in a very succinct way: prevention is better than cure. (the second part is an elaboration/explanation of the first part)

We are not advocating that all police officers should be armed: that would be an over-reaction. (comment on first part)

The colon is more often used with bullet points in a set of instructions or a list of recommendations and suggestions. Bullet points however are not recommended in an essay.

The apostrophe (') The apostrophe is very often misused and causes considerable problems. It is used for two purposes:

1. To indicate possession, as in: '*the cat's whiskers*'. When the noun is plural, or if it is a noun which ends with an '-s', it is put after the '-s' ('*the cats' whiskers*', '*the Robinsons' house*').
2. To indicate that two words have been joined up, one of which is not written out in full, such as *I'll*, *it's*, *don't*, *they're*, and so on.

There are three main ways in which the apostrophe is often misused: confusing the apostrophe '-'*s*' with the plural '-*s*', and confusing '*it's*' and '*its*' and '*who's*' and '*whose*'. In this example, all the misuses are underlined:

'*Fresh cucumber's and tomato's for sale*' *is sometimes seen on sign's outside the grocer's or on market stall's.*

One example which deserves special mention is the confusion of '*it's*' and '*its*'. '*It's*' is the shortened form of '*it is*', while '*its*' is the possessive form of the pronoun '*it*':

It's a really big house, with its own swimming pool.

This is an understandable mistake, as we have just seen that the apostrophe '*-'s*' is used with nouns to indicate possession. When in doubt remember that it is not advisable to use any shortened forms in academic writing – so forget using '*it's*' altogether in your essays. If '*it's*' not a shortened form then it must be spelt '*its*'.

A second source of error is the confusion of '*who's*' and '*whose*'. '*Who's*' is the shortened form of '*who is/has*', while '*whose*' is the possessive adjective for '*who*':

Who's this little girl?

Who's been eating my porridge?

The bears, whose house Goldilocks had entered, were sunning themselves in the garden.

The apostrophe is not used for collective dates – *the 1980s and the early 90s* – or for abbreviations that are pluralised: *MEQs* (Module Evaluation Questionnaires), *FAQs* (Frequently Asked Questions).

Most punctuation errors can be identified and corrected if you take the time to edit. Check particularly that you have closed speech marks at the end of a quote, and that any brackets are also closed at the end.

By now you will have seen that punctuation and grammar are closely linked to meaning. Making mistakes in these areas can therefore cause ambiguity and prevent your intended meaning from coming through clearly.

Common problems with spelling

English spelling is a nightmare of inconsistencies. Words are not spelt as they are pronounced (unlike German, for example). The five vowel letters *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* – both singly and in apparently random combinations – have to represent the 20 vowel sounds of standard British English. To make matters worse, there is no obvious logic at all in using '*gh*' as in *cough* and *though*, the '*w*' in *wrong*, the '*k*' in *knight*, and so on.

There are some general points to make about spelling which you should note.

- For the reader who notices them, spelling or typing mistakes will usually be just an annoyance which makes a bad impression, but they can also affect meaning. Consider the following (culled from newspaper reports):
  - Uninformed police officers lined the route of the demonstration.
  - At last 150 people have been killed in an earthquake in Chile.

- You may not be able to work out how to spell a word from its sound or by using your common sense. However, you may be better able to guess intelligently if you know the meaning of the word and its roots. Many English words are derived from Latin and Greek. Your spelling will also improve if you read a lot, as words do get imprinted on your brain when you see them often. And you can of course use dictionaries and computer spellcheckers to help.
- As you saw in the editing activity the spellchecker can help, but it cannot do your thinking for you. It is by no means infallible, and I have had both grammar and spelling mistakes not identified, as well as non-mistakes being flagged up as errors.

When using a spellchecker, there are three main things to bear in mind. First of all, make sure you are using the English (UK) version when checking – if you have it on English (US), then it will tell you that 'centre' is wrong, and so on.

The second important point is that you should make sure you go through your essay to look at what has been underlined as one of the very last things to do, just before you print it out. Do this even if you have checked your spelling after writing each part of the essay. Remember that spelling mistakes and typing errors can also creep in as you re-draft and revise.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you should remember that the spellchecker does not recognise sense or meaning in a sentence. It can pick up typing mistakes which result in the wrong spelling of a word (such as '*worj*' or '*wrod*' for '*word*') but it will ignore typing mistakes which result in the wrong word for your sentence (like '*ward*', '*work*' or '*cord*' for '*word*'). How many spelling errors in the editing task did the spellchecker miss? They are the ones which are spelt correctly but used incorrectly, as in '*urbane*' ('*urban*'), '*hole*' ('*whole*') and '*principle*' ('*principal*').

This means you will still have to know the differences between commonly confused words and spot them when you have inadvertently used them in an essay – pairs of words like '*loose*' and '*lose*', '*stationary*' and '*stationery*', '*practice*' and '*practise*', and '*principle*' and '*principal*'. These pairs are confusing because they sound similar when spoken but are spelt differently, and they may be different parts of speech or mean different things. Here are the differences, with their part of speech in brackets:

loose (adjective): not tight	*lose* (verb): mislay
stationary (adjective): not moving	*stationery* (noun): writing material
practice (noun): the doing of something	*practise* (verb): doing something repeatedly/frequently

(Note that in American English both the noun and the verb are spelt '*practice*').

principle (noun): general rule	*principal* (noun): head of an educational institution *principal* (adj.): first in order of importance.

activity 11.5

Commonly confused words

Here are some words which are often confused. Do you know the difference? Check your answers in the 'Reflection and Review' section.

access	excess	complement		compliment
affect	effect	discrete		discreet
alter	altar	personal		personnel
birth	berth	moral		morale
canvas	canvass	precede		proceed
can not	cannot	they're	their	there

There are many spelling pitfalls when writing in English. When in doubt, consult a reliable dictionary. The spellchecker cannot be relied on completely, but when it does flag up what it considers to be mistakes (by displaying a wriggly red line), right-click your mouse to bring up alternative spellings, and consider these carefully. Then edit your essay to get rid of all these red lines before you hand it in.

To conclude this section on editing, think back to Chapter 1. We may all be guilty of using funny spelling or slang and colloquialisms, omitting punctuation and throwing grammar to the winds at one time or another. But what works in an email to a friend will not work in an essay for your tutor. Your friend knows you, and in many cases also knows at least the background to what you are talking about; your tutor wants to find out if you know what you are talking about, and so different standards will apply. Those standards which apply for academic English – your essays – are also those which require you to express your ideas and arguments in the most precise and transparent way possible, and that means correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Presenting your completed essay

By now your essay should be almost ready to be submitted and you will hopefully be feeling relieved and proud that you have done your best. At this point you will be ready to consider appearances.

Presentation and appearance are important considerations when handing in a piece of writing; you have worked hard to get this far, so you should not let yourself down by submitting a sloppy-looking piece of work. Having said that, no marks will be given for looks alone, so do not go overboard either.

Presentation takes into account considerations such as the following:

- Following instructions for submission, such as those for the title page: should it have the full question, your name and student ID, department, course, tutor, date, number of words, and so on?
- Line spacing: single, one and a half, double?
- Font and font size: Times Roman, Tahoma, 12, 14?
- Formatting: aligned left, justified?
- Paragraph spacing: is this done correctly?
- Other requirements: Essay to be enclosed in a folder? Proper acknowledgement of time and date of submission? Pages stapled/not stapled together? Feedback form to be included? Bibliography and/or reference list required?

Each course may differ in some respects, so read your handbook and instructions carefully. Important general considerations have to do with neatness or visual impression, consistency, and with not giving your tutor unnecessary work, but there are others as well. What follows is a list of key ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’.

Neatness and visual impression

- Do not use ‘fancy’ fonts.
- Do not submit an essay which is crumpled or creased, or is covered in coffee stains or has hand-written amendments on it.

Consistency

- Use the same font and font size throughout.
- Do not change the line spacing or justification (unless quoting longer excerpts).
- Pay attention to minor details and be consistent: do you have ‘eg’ or ‘e.g.’? Have you used **bold** or *italics* for emphasis?

Making it easy for the tutor

- Have a footer with your name, the course code and title and brief assignment details, and remember to insert page numbers. The tutor may have a great many essays to mark, so try to make things easy for him/her in case pages from different essays have to be sorted out.
- Do not staple pages together, or put each individual page in a transparent envelope: tutors may have to photocopy some samples for an external examiner, and they will not appreciate breaking their thumbnails to remove staples. Either use a paperclip, or put all the pages in one plastic folder.

Other considerations

- Make sure you submit your essay by the deadline: some universities or departments are very strict about this; 12.05 is not the same as 'twelve noon', and you may be penalised if you are just a few minutes late.
- Follow the instructions for how to submit: to the tutor him/herself, in a box, or must it be given to the Department Office?

This is all 'picky' advice. But you should bear in mind that your essay will have only one chance to make a good first impression.

chapter summary

This chapter focused on the final stage of writing: editing. In particular, the finer points of making your essay look academic were discussed. Grammar, punctuation and spelling conventions must be strictly followed in an academic essay.

reflection and review

Answers to activities

1 Activity 11.1

Formal and informal verbs

Match the informal phrasal verb with the more formal verb – answers:

to keep up	to maintain
to go down	to decrease

to make up — to constitute
to figure out — to determine
to get rid of — to eliminate

2 Activity 11.2

More formal language

A more formal way to express the following – some possible answers:

1 This is a *really* important stage in the process.
This is a *crucially*/an *extremely* important stage in the process.

2 There has been *lots of* interest in the procedure.
There has been *considerable* interest in the procedure.

3 No decision was made because we *couldn't get* enough information.
No decision was made because we *were unable to obtain* enough information.

4 Computer software is *getting easier and easier* to use.
Computer software is *becoming increasingly user-friendly*.

3 Activity 11.3

Editing task

The corrected words are underlined in this version:

A <u>parent's</u> <u>complaint</u>

I didn't realize the traffic would be so <u>completely</u> <u>stationary</u> on that <u>urban</u> motorway. It put an <u>altogether</u> different complexion on the <u>whole</u> situation. Once we'd driven <u>past</u> the <u>lorries</u>, we <u>proceeded</u> to the <u>accommodation</u> office but we managed to <u>lose</u> our way. The <u>moral</u> of this <u>story</u> is Tim should <u>definitely</u> <u>have</u> taken the <u>advice</u> of the <u>German</u> <u>principal</u> who <u>accepted</u> his application form with all <u>its</u> problems. He said that when he <u>received</u> it he should arrive early to <u>seize</u> the chance to get <u>ahead</u> of the queue, but he seemed <u>loath</u> to set off that morning. <u>That's</u> always a good idea. He was getting <u>truly</u> flustered so I pulled up <u>at</u> the <u>kerb</u> and he got out. I made sure I <u>paid</u> and displayed and <u>joined</u> him. It was <u>all</u> <u>right</u> in the end and we went our <u>separate</u> ways – <u>until</u> <u>Christmas</u> ...

4 Activity 11.4

Punctuation and meaning

1.a What do you mean? You owe me £5! = *a surprised question – you disagree with whatever has been said – followed by an assertion.*

(Continued)

1.b What! Do you mean you owe me £5? = *an exclamation of surprise followed by a request for clarification*.

2.a The students, who had revised for their exam, got good marks. = *All the students had revised, and all got good marks*.

2.b The students who had revised for their exam got good marks. = *The ones who had not revised did not get good marks*.

Examples 1.a and b are obviously spoken language, so if you were writing a play this would be an important difference. Examples 2.a and b are written language.

5 Activity 11.5

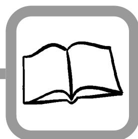
Commonly confused words

There are other meanings to these words, of course, so if you are unsure of the range of meanings they have do consult a dictionary.

access (n): way into a place	excess (adj): too much
affect (vb): cause a reaction	effect (n): result, outcome
alter (vb): change	altar (n): raised block in a place of worship
birth (n): act of producing young	berth (n): place to sleep in a ship
canvas (n): a type of strong cloth	canvass (vb): seek votes, opinions
can not (vb + negative): equivalent of 'can choose not to'*	cannot (negative vb): the negative of '*can*', always written as one word
complement (vb): complete	compliment (n): expression of praise
discrete (adj): separate	discreet (adj): prudent, tactful
personal (adj): private, individual	personnel (n): staff
moral (adj): able to tell right from wrong	morale (n): state of mind
precede (vb): go before	procede (vb): move forward
they're (pronoun + vb): the shortened form of '*they are*'	their (adj): belonging to them
	there (adv): (in/to) that place

* As in 'You can *not* follow the advice of course, but you will have to suffer the consequences'.

Note that the distinctions between '*they're*', '*their*' and '*there*' are very basic, and making mistakes when using them in writing will give a bad impression to the reader.



further reading and references

Useful online resource for learning and improving academic vocabulary

The Academic Word List Highlighter (AWL) (www.**nottingham**.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/**awl**highlighter.htm) was created by A. Coxhead, Victoria University, Wellingon, New Zealand. This core academic vocabulary may be used by writers in many different subject areas. Learning vocabulary from the AWL will help you improve your understanding of academic texts. It will also help you write assignments in an academic style.

Books

You would probably not want to read most of these books from cover to cover, but apart from consulting them when you need to, they can make for quite interesting reading in small doses. It is suggested you use them in your library first before deciding whether you want to buy them. Whether you like a particular grammar book or not is sometimes down to whether your learning style matches up with the way it is written!

Grammar
Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006) *Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide*. Cambridge: CUP.
Downing, A. and Locke, P. (2006) *English Grammar: A University Course* (2nd edn). Oxford: Routledge.
Leech, G., Cruickshank, B. and Ivanic, R. (2001) *An A–Z of English Grammar and Usage*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
Sinclair, C. (2007) *Grammar: A Friendly Approach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Stott, R. and Chapman, P. (eds) (2001) *Grammar and Writing*. Harlow: Longman.

Style
Gowers, E. (1986) *The Complete Plain Words* (revised edition by Greenbaum, S. and Whitcut, J.). London: HMSO.
Stott, R. and Avery, S. (eds) (2001) *Writing with Style*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
Strunk, W. and White, E.B. (2000) *The Elements of Style* (4th edn). New York: Longman.

Punctuation and Spelling
Cook, V.J. (2005) *Accomodating Brocolli in the Cemetary, or, Why Can't Anybody Spell?* London: Profile.
Truss, L. (2003) *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. London: Profile.

Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

Peck, J. and Coyle, M. (2005) *The Student's Guide to Writing: Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling* (2nd edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Dictionaries

If you have taken on board the advice given to learn to use language precisely, you will realise that having easy access to a good dictionary and thesaurus will do far more than help you when you are unsure about spelling. Your university library may subscribe to online resources. There are also many affordable dictionaries available, including those from Cambridge, Collins Cobuild, Longman and of course Oxford, such as these two:

The Compact Oxford Dictionary for University and College Students; and *The Compact Oxford Thesaurus for University and College Students*.

12

Writing Exam Essays

chapter themes

- The rationale for assessing essays under exam conditions.
- Exam essay demands.
- Before, during, and after exam considerations.

In addition to the essay writing skills which you can now show, writing essays under exam conditions will make other demands. These are mostly determined by the circumstances under which exams are held. This last chapter links what you have learnt – the known (essay writing skills) – to the additional skills you require in an exam situation – the new. It is not so much about 'how' to write an essay (you know that already!) as about how to make sure you write a really good exam essay – every time.

Exam essays *vs* coursework essays

Exams have been said to be unfair: they are timed and thus arguably may discriminate against the good student who is thoughtful and thorough, and prefers to approach learning in a considered way. However, in life we will encounter many situations where we will have to think and act

quickly. Exams are part of academic life, a rite of passage: if you pass, you can tell the world that you have gone through the rings of fire and can meet the challenges. Exams can show how you cope in stressful conditions that other ways of assessing may not. In addition, unlike other written assignments, the output of an exam is guaranteed to be the candidates' alone. In this respect, it can be seen as being fairer than other forms of assessment.

Exams test a range of topics that have been covered over a period of time and, among other things, reveal your ability to:

- demonstrate what you know in a timed situation;
- prepare yourself to perform in a stressful situation;
- cope under pressure;
- remember important factual information;
- link relevant learnt information;
- get to the bottom line, leaving out less important parts;
- adapt to different circumstances. For example, if you are a 'night person', are you able to think and write at 9 a.m.? If you are a 'day person', are you able to perform well in an evening exam?
- write quickly and still be legible.

Coursework does not demand these skills to the same extent but:

- good time management will still be essential in order to complete coursework by the deadline;
- it can be very stressful trying to meet deadlines if you have other commitments and responsibilities such as a job or family;
- if you have several assignments to juggle you will probably be feeling under pressure;
- you have to manage the information you get from your research;
- you have to exhibit greater in-depth knowledge.

Both coursework essays and exam essays test whether you:

- understand what the question wants you to do;
- are able to apply and synthesise knowledge;
- understand key concepts and theories;
- can construct a logical argument;
- have the necessary analytical and critical abilities.

Coursework and exam essays are therefore equally challenging in their own ways, and have to be approached systematically but differently. No matter how well you are able to write when you are at your own desk and

have all day, you must also be prepared for writing an essay under exam conditions.

The rest of this chapter discusses what you can do to optimise your performance before, during and after an exam.

Approaching exams

Before the exam: preparation

Most advice for taking exams starts with techniques for exam revision. I would argue that you should be thinking about exams from the very start of a course, when they are just a distant cause for concern in your student handbooks. The good news is that your pre-exam preparation is really a matter of common sense and organisation, and ties in very much with being prepared for studying at university in general.

Managing and organising the subject content for exams You can get the subject content of what is to be examined from your lectures and handouts, reading the recommended texts, and the reading you did for coursework essays and perhaps past exam papers. The key to managing this information so that it does not get lost in piles of loose paper is to start off on the right foot. Here are some suggestions (which you might already be following):

- assign a file for each module;
- file all the important information, including the module handbook, assessment information, essay questions, etc.;
- file all the subject content matter by topic;
- have a section for essay questions and plans, and include past exam essay questions if you can get hold of these;
- collect samples of good essays if possible.

This file will also be useful for other assignments, including coursework essays, and could be an extension of the *Writing Information File* suggested in Chapter 1. Make sure your notes are comprehensive, legible and comprehensible. Every so often try to refresh your memory by skimming through them – you will be surprised at how much you forget, and how just skimming through past notes can periodically kick-start your memory. Fill in any information gaps by comparing notes with course mates.

To make this skimming a more interactive activity, write short notes on your old notes – you could also be pleasantly surprised at how much you have been learning without consciously ‘studying’ the subject. As the semester progresses

you will find that things get clearer and make better sense. You begin to see your subject in a more holistic way.

Just as essay questions are designed with learning objectives and outcomes in mind, tutors will not choose exam topics and questions arbitrarily. Questions for coursework essays and those in lecture handouts will give you an indication of what you might expect in the exam. You could also analyse past exam papers to find out the topics and questions that crop up more often than others. Focus particularly on the topics – the questions may not be exactly the same, but knowing the key topics will give you an invaluable foundation.

Very importantly, do not miss lectures. Listening to the lecturers who will be setting the exam will give you an idea of their 'favourites' – namely those topics and subjects for which they have a passion and which they believe to be of significance. Talk to your course mates and exchange views and information.

If you can prepare for the exam in this way, by the end of the module you should have a good idea of the topics and questions that are high on the agenda and the resources you need to consult in order to revise for the exam.

Revising for the exam You will probably find lots of useful information, guidelines and help on things like techniques for revision, dealing with stress as you revise and during the exam, problems with procrastination, motivation, coping with other commitments, and so on, from the Student Services Unit of your university, online university websites and study skills books. The following list focuses specifically on preparing to write an exam essay.

So how and what should you revise?

- Plan your revision by working backwards from when the exam will take place to get a clear idea of when you should realistically start revising.
- Remember to factor in all your other study commitments: deadlines for essays, reports, presentations and so on, for *all* your subjects.
- Plan to revise in small spurts rather than forcing yourself to stay at it for hours.
- Clear your head at regular intervals of anything to do with exams so that when you come back to revising again, your mind is clear and fresh. Work hard, but make an effort to set aside some time for rest and recreation.
- Use the files of notes you have created throughout the semester or year for the module you are revising.
- Choose to revise carefully those areas which you have identified as being of importance. Focus on questions in these areas. If you do not have any past questions, write out some questions of your own – work with course mates who are doing the same exam.
- Divide up the questions and meet to discuss each person's plan for how to answer questions. Fill in any gaps in your information or refine plans.

- Consider how you like to learn. You may find that mind maps or spider diagrams are very useful for planning exam answers during revision. These can enable you to see the whole picture and plan the answer of a question or look at the important aspects of a topic in a holistic way. Linear representations require a lot of reading, and you have to try to remember discrete bits of information. You may not see where you are really going; or worse, by the time you reach the end of a set of bullet points, you may have forgotten the beginning or lost concentration. Whatever you do, however, you should use the method that works best for *you*.
- If you like mind maps, make these attractive and colourful, and you can even decorate your walls with them: visual images can get imprinted on your mind if you see them regularly.
- Whatever method you use, do not clutter up your revision notes with too much information. Use headings and key words to stimulate your memory – do not try to plan and then memorise whole essays. These will probably not answer the exam question exactly, and your answer may thus stray from the point.
- Finally, make sure you find out the format of the exam if possible. It is good if you can know in advance what to expect. For example, how long is it? How many essay questions will there be? What is the weighting of each question? Will you have a choice of questions, and if so, how many will there be to choose from? If you have not been told these things, you should ask your tutor.

Revising on your own can be a lonely business so try to revise with like-minded friends and course mates. Plan group discussions and meetings, but make sure you do not get distracted or sidetracked at these meeting. Take care of yourself and each other, with time for eating healthy meals and socialising after such meetings. And try to stay clear of people who will want to use these meetings for a chat.

Before the exam: a quick reference for planning and structuring an exam essay

This is a very quick reference for planning, structuring and writing an exam essay, so refer to it before the exam to refresh your mind. Everything here has been discussed in detail in the rest of the book.

Introduction

- Address the question: specify how you have understood it, and provide definitions and background information if necessary.
- Identify the type of essay required so you can plan: Judgement or Exploratory?
- Set limits to your essay as obviously you will not have the time to go into a lot of detail.

- Indicate the direction you will take: make sure your line of reasoning is clear, but without going into too much detail.
- Remember that the Introduction can influence the way the marker reads the whole essay, and also bear in mind the adage that you only have one chance to make a good first impression.

Body

- You will only have a short time to answer what could be a very probing question, and so you may not be able to cover all the main points. If that is so, it is a good idea to list them all but to say that you will pick four or five main points to consider in some depth. Do not waste your time on too many examples or expansions for each point.
- Develop the argument logically depending on the type of essay you are writing. Whether you are writing about a process, explaining, comparing, evaluating, etc., the supporting evidence must be clear and accurate. Cite your sources where necessary, even if these are only from your textbook.
- Demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of what an academic essay entails by using more formal language and style.
- Use quotations if appropriate – if you can do this it will impress a marker. However, you should avoid using quotes for the sake of it; the key word here is '*appropriate*'. In addition, you must know the source of your quote.

Conclusion

- Do not end an essay without a good conclusion; this is the last thing the tutor reads before deciding what mark to give you.
- Tie together the various strands of your argument, but do not repeat information just for the sake of it.
- Relate your argument to the question, and show that you have answered it.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the broader issues raised. Show that you can answer the question 'so what?'

When editing, check that your sentences and paragraphs make sense and flow smoothly. A bibliography is not required at the end of an exam essay.

During the exam

If you have prepared well there is no need to dread the day of the exam.

The evening or morning before the exam, you should put together all the things you will need to take with you: the essentials here are several pens

(so that it is not a disaster if one runs out), a watch, perhaps a drink, and anything that you may need personally for your own comfort. Remember that you are not allowed to have things like mobiles, notes or printed matter in the exam venue. Those notes you have prepared specifically for the exam may be worth taking along if you will have a last chance to glance through them on the bus, for example.

Get to the exam hall in good time but not too early, so that there is no risk of meeting those students who will be nervously pacing the grounds and muttering aloud to themselves. You should also avoid any discussions of topics or questions at this stage; that could sow seeds of doubt and confusion in your head, which is the last thing you want.

Keep calm and breathe deeply before you start reading the paper. This is when you will need to exercise all your essay writing skills – but speeded up for the exam.

- Read the instructions carefully. Some exams will allow time for reading before you are allowed to write. If that is the case, then use this time properly. In particular, you should double-check the instructions: make sure you are certain of the total number of questions to be answered, from which sections, and whether you have a choice.
- Budget the time you will spend on each question carefully. If some time for reading is not factored in, allow yourself sufficient time (10–15 minutes) to read the questions and then note and think about those you want to answer.
- Divide up your time for writing into equal parts to answer all the questions if they have the same weighting. If not, more time should be allocated for those questions which are worth more.
- For each answer, allow some time for analysing the question, planning, writing and editing. You may not have any time to revise your answer at the end, so your plan should be quite comprehensive: the skeleton of a draft. Do not worry if you cannot make a firm decision on the questions you will answer when you first read the exam paper.
- When you have been instructed to begin, make quick plans of those questions you have chosen. Jot down anything you can remember that is relevant to the answers. If you do not do this immediately, you might forget these details when you come to answer that question.
- Answer the question you know best first.
- Leave some blank space at the end of each answer. You may want to put in some other information that you had forgotten when you read through your answer. If you use symbols such as # or * in the relevant part of the answer, you can add this information at the end.
- Do not allow yourself to go over the time you have allocated by too much. It is not good sense to spend most of your time answering two questions out of four,

for example, as you will not get a high mark. Attempt all the questions to show that you have a broad knowledge of the subject, even though you may be unsure of some of the answers.
- A good introduction to an incomplete answer can be worth some marks. This tells the marker that you did know how to go about answering the question, even though you ran out of time.
- Include any relevant quotes and cite important references if you can. Showing that you can remember quotes – even key terms and phrases – from seminal texts and the recommended textbook, gives a good impression.
- Make sure your writing is legible, and if you can, spend some time reading through your answers at the end to edit and correct any inaccuracies. Do not waste your time by neatly deleting mistakes with liquid paper – no marks are given for neatness.
- If you have to write in an exam booklet of (say) 12 pages, remember that you do not have to limit yourself to three pages for each of your four answers; you can always ask an invigilator for extra sheets.
- Finally, before your paper is collected in, make sure that you have clearly crossed out any notes you made purely for your own guidance so that the marker does not mistake these for part of your answer.

If you can write an essay, you can write an exam essay. Granted you have to do everything at speed and rely on your memory more, but if you are well prepared the essay should flow. In these days, when the computer is used for most writing assignments, having to use pen and paper could be the worst ordeal of all. If that is a problem, do some writing on paper a few days in advance to give your fingers some practice at writing at speed, and to check that your handwriting is at least legible. Depending on the year of university study you are at, exam essays can be anything from 20 to 60 minutes long. Consider how much you can write in the time given and be realistic about this. Talk to your tutors to clarify their expectations about the number of words, but do not waste time counting them in the exam.

After the exam

As you have doubtless realised, good preparation is crucial for exam success. If you prepare well exams will be less of an ordeal. They are not set in order to catch students off guard to fail them: there are no surprises or trick questions, only ill-prepared candidates. Have confidence in yourself.

Exercising your writing skills to demonstrate the relevant knowledge you have will enable you to produce a well-constructed essay answer in the time available.

So, after the exam you head to the nearest place to de-stress – right? Yes, by all means do that. You will probably need to. But you can and should learn from exams. It is not a matter of '*Well that's over and done with, thank goodness*!' You can learn from the experience. Once your nerves have settled down, spend a little time on reflection. Analyse your performance in the exam honestly by asking yourself some reflective questions.

- Could/should I have prepared better or differently?
- How did I perform in the exam?
- What did I do well, and why?
- What could I have done better, and why?
- What have I learnt from this experience that I can bring to my next exam?
- What mark do I expect from the exam?

Giving yourself a mark is a good way to gauge if you are in tune with expectations. When you get your actual result, compare it with your mark. If the result is significantly lower than you thought it would be, you may have underestimated these expectations; if it is much higher, you may have underestimated your own ability. Reflect on the accuracy of your own assessment and talk to your tutors if you do not understand the mark they gave you – they should be able to tell you specifically where you did badly or well. Finally, try to reflect again on your preparation and performance in the light of your result.

chapter summary

This chapter on writing exam essays has shown how you can perform better in exams and learn from them by:

- Preparing well before the exams.
- Revising effectively.
- Approaching the exam tasks in a systematic way.
- Exercising the essay writing skills you have learnt.
- Reflecting on your performance and taking the necessary actions to improve.

reflection and review

1 File any information regarding exams for all your modules, including specific instructions and exam papers as well as general exam regulations.
2 Do a personal SWOT analysis for your exams. Work on your Weaknesses and any external Threats; take confidence and motivation from your personal Strengths and external Opportunities (those that will help you pass exams and also what will await you when you do!).

Table 12.1 Personal SWOT analysis for exam preparation and performance

Strengths which will enable me to do well in exams	**Weaknesses** that might prevent me from doing well in exams
Opportunities that may help me perform better in exams, or that await me on passing these exams	**Threats** that may prevent me from doing well in exams

further reading

Every university website will have a section to advise students on how to deal with exams and exam stress. There are also books which provide more detail and examples such as:

Cottrell, S. (2007) *The Exam Skills Handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
Tracy, E. (2006) *The Student's Guide to Exam Success* (2nd edn). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Conclusion

If you have worked your way through this book, and if it has given you some new insights, prompted you to think and reflect on your approach to essays and to make resolutions about how to set about it next time, then it has at least in part fulfilled its purpose. I hope you now feel more comfortable about essays and can approach assignments with greater confidence. Yet for you, it will only have truly fulfilled its purpose if you actually *perform* better – both in the sense that you feel you are now able to do yourself justice in your essays and get more out of them, and in the sense that you get more positive feedback and better marks.

I will conclude, therefore, with some brief observations on what I believe are the general characteristics of good performers in any field.

Good performers are always learning. They keep up with their learning by critically examining what others do and they reflect on what they themselves have done, identifying areas for improvement. They actively seek feedback, but do not simply accept what others say at face value. Above all, they take a questioning approach because they want to *understand*: 'Why does this work for some people, but not for me?' 'What did I do differently this time, and how did it affect the outcome?' 'What is the thinking behind this piece of advice?' And so on. They are convinced that they can only master the 'how' by developing a fuller understanding of the 'why'.

They know that doing something really well is difficult and there are no short cuts. They also believe that if was not difficult, it would not really be worth doing. They rise to the challenge by approaching the task in hand purposefully and systematically, using all their resources and prioritising by setting short- and long-term goals. They are able to focus, but they do that by shutting out distractions and not by wishing away complexities. They see the big picture, but at the same time have an eye for detail; they draw on their experience, but also innovate and experiment; they strive for perfection, but still meet the deadline.

This echoes an underlying theme of this book: writing is in itself a form of learning (and I feel I have a better understanding of writing than I did when I started planning this book). You need to know why you write essays before you can learn how best to write them. Tutors design essay assignments as a challenge – but one that they know their students can rise to and from which they can learn, not only about the subject but also about themselves as learners and about the learning process.

If you are now using the deep approach to learning and writing that I have advocated throughout the book, you are well on the way to becoming a good essay writer and learner.

Concise Grammar Glossary

This glossary is for those who are unsure of some of the grammatical terminology I have had to use. If you feel you have serious problems with writing in a grammatically correct way, you should work with one of the grammar books mentioned in the 'Reflection and Review' section of Chapter 11.

Grammatical term	*Explanation*	*Examples*
active/passive	In active sentences,the subject is the doer or actor – the person or thing that does what is described by the verb.	**Active:** Fleming (subject/doer) discovered (verb) penicillin accidentally.
	However, if we do not want to focus on the doer, we can change the verb to the passive form.	**Passive:** Penicillin was discovered accidentally (by Fleming). The subject of this sentence is now *penicillin*, and the 'actor' *(Fleming)* can be omitted.
adjective	Adjectives are attached to nouns to describe or modify them.	
	They can be inserted immediately before the noun, or be part of a statement about the noun using verbs like *be.*	An important discovery ... This discovery was/was said to be/was seen as important.
adverb	Adverbs are attached to verbs to describe how, when, where (etc.) things are done.	He worked hard. He has been working hard recently. He works here.
	They can also modify adjectives.	This was a very important discovery.
agreement	The subject of a sentence and its verb must agree with each other in number (namely singular or plural).	**Singular:** The result was ... **Plural:** The results were ...

(Continued)

Grammatical term	*Explanation*	*Examples*
clause/sentence (see also compound and complex sentence below)	A clause is a group of words which contains a verb. It is called a *dependent* clause if it does not make sense by itself. A sentence is a group of words which contains a verb and which does make sense on its own. Any sentence can be made longer by combining it with other sentences, or with one or more clauses which are dependent on it.	**Clause (dependent):** because he wanted a promotion. **Sentence:** He worked hard. **Sentence + sentence:** He worked hard and (he) got a promotion. (compound sentence) **Sentence + dependent clause:** He worked hard because he wanted a promotion. (complex sentence)
complex sentence	A complex sentence is one which is made by joining a sentence with one or more dependent clauses. This type of sentence always contains a *main clause* (which would make sense by itself).	He worked hard to provide for his family (main clause) who depended on him entirely for their needs. (dependent clause)
compound sentence	A compound sentence is one which is made by joining two or more sentences with a conjunction.	He worked hard but (conjunction) he did not earn much money.
conjunction	A conjunction is a word which joins other words or clauses.	chalk and cheese small but deadly I'm tired, so I'm going home.
dangling participle	A participle is the '-ing' or '-ed' form of the verb, and when it is used to form a clause, it must relate to the subject or the main clause. A dangling participle does not relate to this subject. (See also 'Dangling participles' in Chapter 11.)	**Correct:** Having failed the test, she had to repeat her second year. **Dangling:** Having failed the test, her tutor said she would have to repeat her second year. (This implies that her tutor had failed the test!)
noun (countable *vs* uncountable)	Countable nouns have plural forms because they can be counted. Uncountable nouns do not have plural forms, and cannot be counted. Some nouns have both forms, sometimes with quite different meanings.	**Countable:** bag(s), song(s), chair(s), garment(s) **Uncountable:** luggage, music, furniture, clothing **Both:** man (= 'mankind' *or* 'a male person'); glass (= 'the material used for windows') *or* 'something to drink from' *or* (in plural form) 'an aid for people with poor eyesight'.

Grammatical term	*Explanation*	*Examples*
object	In a sentence, the object is what the subject acts upon by carrying out the action described in the verb.	The man (subject) kicked (verb) the tin can (object). The tutor (subject) marked (verb) the essay (object).
passive	*see* active/passive.	
person: first, second, third	These refer to differences in choice of personal pronouns: 1st person = I, we 2nd person = you 3rd person = he, she, it, one, they In formal, academic writing, you are advised to minimise the use of the first and second person.	The verb must agree with the person of its subject: **First person:** I am, we are **Second person:** you are **Third person:** he, she, it is; they are
possessive (form)	This shows ownership or the relationship/connectedness between things. It is shown in nouns by attaching '-'s' or 's'', or by the use of a possessive pronoun.	The government's critics ... The boys' fathers ... My, their, your, his, her, its, our, one's.
pronoun	A pronoun is a word which is used instead of a noun to avoid excessive repetition. There are several types of pronouns: personal, relative and demonstrative (also possessive – as above).	**Personal:** I, you, they (etc.). When John won the lottery, he bought a motorbike. **Relative:** who, which, that, (etc.). The man who won the lottery bought a motorbike. **Demonstrative:** this, that, these, those. He bought a motorbike. That was his dream.
sentence	*see* clause/sentence.	
subject	The subject of a sentence is what that sentence is *about*. It always has a verb which it 'governs'. A subject can be a noun, a pronoun or a phrase.	**Noun subject:** Jenny won the lottery. **Pronoun subject:** She won the lottery. **Phrase subject:** The thought of winning drove her on.
synonym	A synonym is a word with a similar meaning to another word. Synonyms rarely have *exactly* the same meaning or use – they differ, for example, in their level of formality.	Location is a formal term which means more or less the same as place. Objective (adjective) means much the same as dispassionate or impersonal.

(Continued)

Grammatical term	*Explanation*	*Examples*
tense	This is the form of a verb which shows the time of action. It has been argued that there are only two tenses in English – the present and the past. All other verb forms are derivatives of these two forms.	**Present tense:** They argue every day. **Past tense:** They argued very heatedly last night. **Other forms:** They have always argued.
topic sentence	The topic sentence in a paragraph is the sentence which defines the topic of the paragraph. It can be found at any point in the paragraph.	See also Chapter 8, 'How a paragraph is constructed'.
verb	A verb is a word which describes an action or state. All sentences must have at least one verb, but compound and complex sentences have more than one. *See* subject, object.	**Action:** The government has responded by ... The analysis was conducted according to ... **State:** The findings suggest that ... **Simple sentence:** The findings are inconclusive. **Complex/compound sentence:** The government has responded by criticising the opposition for ...

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NOTE

This list adds on to those references indicated (at the end of chapters) under Further Reading in the section 'Reflection and Review'. Texts cited in the examples from actual student work are not reflected in my Bibliography.

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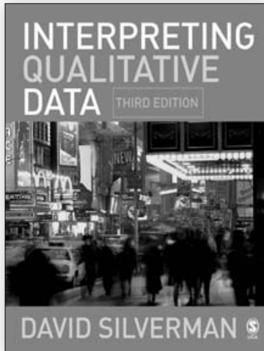

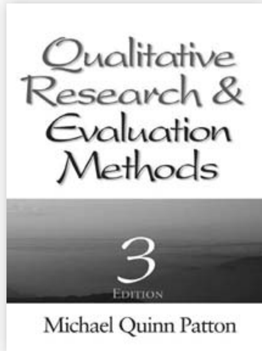

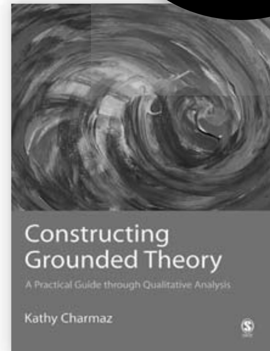

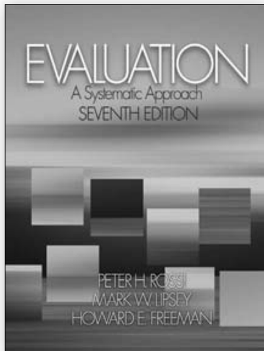

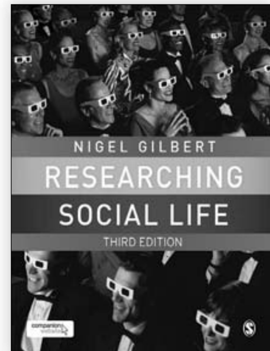

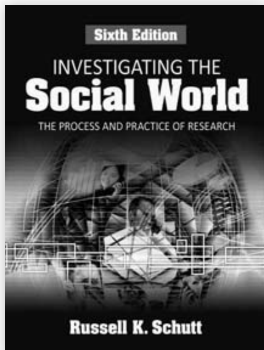

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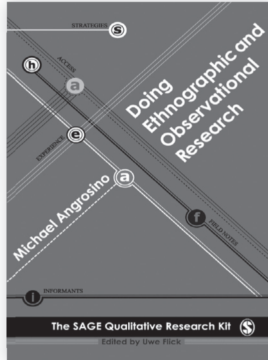

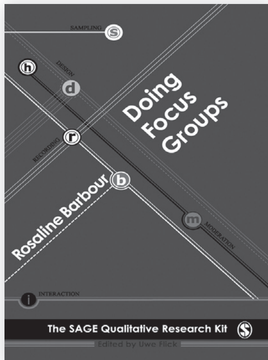

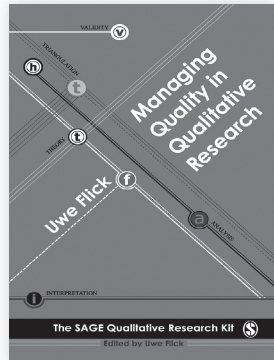

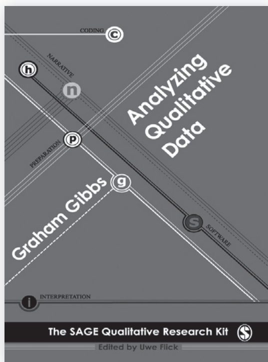

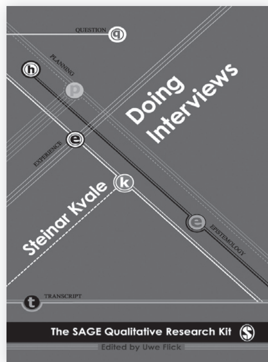

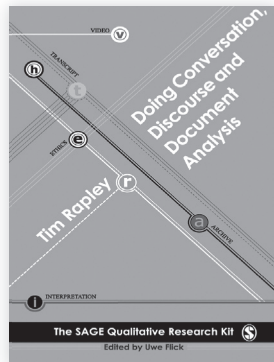

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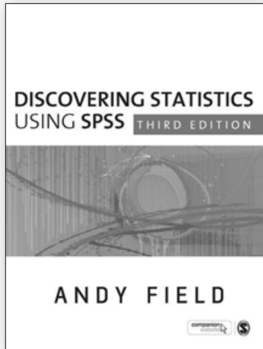

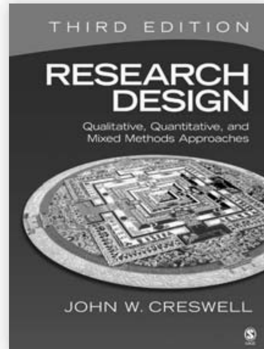

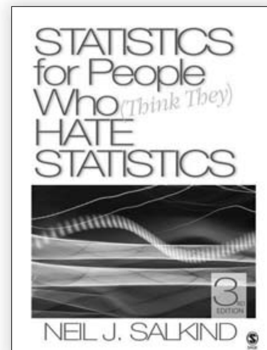

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