

Essay Writing – The Essentials

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This paper provides a condensed overview of the most important features of social science essay writing. Its aim is to cut through the noise, and focus on the most essential (and important) elements of essay writing. Read it carefully, and use it as a check-list once you have completed your essay.

Be aware: The purpose of writing essays in the social and political sciences is not so much to just demonstrate your knowledge. Rather, it is about applying this knowledge, using it to make a well-informed, well-reasoned, independently-reflected argument that is based on verified (and verifiable) evidence.

What's in an Essay?

The main focus of an academic essay, article or book is to answer a research or essay question. Therefore, make sure you have read the essay question carefully, think about what aspects of the topic you need to address, and organize the essay accordingly. Your essay should have three parts:

1. Introduction

- Provide context to the question. Be specific (not 'since the dawn of time, social scientists have been arguing...', but 'one of the key debates in the study of revolutions revolves around...', ideally providing references to the key authors of said debate).
- It is almost always a good idea to formulate an argument – an arguable statement – in relation to the essay question (e.g. if the question is 'Evaluate Weber and Marx's accounts of capitalism', an argument could be 'I am going to argue that Weber is most insightful on X, but Marx is important for Y'). This builds a nice critical element into your essay, your own take on things, going beyond merely describing what others have written.
- Essay plan: Tell the reader about the points you are going to cover, and the order in which you are going to do this (e.g. 'First, the essay looks at..., second... third...' etc.). Think of it as a roadmap to the essay.
- Define key concepts as necessary for understanding. Do not use general dictionaries, as they often contain notions that social scientists try to challenge. Use definitions from the readings, and from sociological dictionaries.
- Length: Intro should be about, and no more than, 10 per cent of the overall word count.

2. Main Part / Body

- The structure of the main part is informed by the research/essay question: What points do you need to include in order to address this question? What sub-questions are there to the big question? Concentrate on the *'need-to-knows'* rather than the *'nice-to-knows'*.
- The order in which you arrange these points depends on what makes the most convincing line of argument. This depends on the essay question, but as a rule of thumb you want to build up your argument, from the basics to the more elaborate points, from the weaker to the stronger, from what contradicts your argument to what supports it.
- The different points should be addressed in appropriate depth. Make sure you explain not just what something is, but also how it works, and use examples and illustration.
- There should be a coherent thread running through the essay and connecting the various points to one another and the overall argument. Indicate these connections in strategic places with appropriate signposting.
- Excellent essays often raise counter-arguments to the argument presented, and then provide arguments against those counter-arguments. Think about why and how someone might disagree about what you are saying, and how you would respond to them.

- Use peer-reviewed academic sources and present evidence for the points you make, using references, reliable statistics, examples etc. Any opinion you express should be built on reliable evidence and good reasoning.

3. Conclusion

- What, finally, is your answer to the question? Bring the various strings of the essay together, summarize them briefly in the context of the essay question, and round off by summarising your argument. It is usually a good idea to have a differentiated conclusion, in which you e.g. agree with a statement to a certain extent or under specific circumstances (and explain which and why), but disagree with some other aspects of it, rather than making undifferentiated black-or-white statements. You can also contextualise your argument with your ideas from the introduction. It is normally not a good idea to introduce new material in the conclusion. You are wrapping up here, and rounding off, not starting new discussions.
- Conclusion should be about, and no longer than, 10 per cent of the overall word count.

B. Notes on Writing Style

- Find the right balance between formal and informal. Avoid being too informal and conversational on the one hand. But also don't use overly convoluted and complicated language, as it makes your writing inaccessible, and can lead to a lack of clarity. You may at times encounter academic writing that seems deliberately obscure or overcomplicated, but those are not examples you should try to emulate.
- Clarity and specificity should indeed be a top priority. Are the words you are using expressing what you want to express? Is it clear who specifically is doing what or saying what? Pay attention to this when proofreading the essay. Could someone understand this differently? Avoid ambiguities.
- Key concepts should be clearly defined and used throughout the essay in the way you defined them. Choose the definitions that are most useful for your discussion.
- Avoid hyperbole (don't do 'shocking statistics' or 'dire consequences' etc.).

C. Notes on the Writing Process

- Proofreading: When you are first writing, don't think of it as the final product, but treat it as a first draft. Go through several drafts until you are happy with it. At a minimum, proofread the entire essay once or twice. Don't be perfectionist when you start out, as you can always come back and improve on whatever you've written.
- Small steps: Focussing on the small, concrete steps of your writing process rather than constantly thinking of the big task at hand will help you feel in control.
- Procrastination: Feeling overwhelmed, as well as being too perfectionist, are among the leading causes for procrastination. The two previous points should therefore help you address this issue as well. Don't be too harsh on yourself when you do procrastinate – [almost everyone does it](#).
- Over the years, keep addressing areas you want to improve on, and keep looking for information. Search online, for example 'how to cite a book chapter in Harvard Sage', 'developing an argument', [using quotations](#), 'memory techniques', 'how to read with speed', 'understanding procrastination', or [what does peer-reviewed mean](#)'. There is plenty of information, and some seriously good advice out there. See what works for you.
- These are good skills to have in any situation (except maybe in a zombie apocalypse), and will make the studying process easier over time, and hopefully also, fun!

