

# Essays – everything you ever wanted to know but were afraid to ask

Student Ambassador Tess (studying Classics and English Literature, MA Hons) takes a deep dive into how to approach writing essays.

I think writing essays and academic papers are probably one of the more daunting tasks you'll have to take on as a university student. I've spent the last three years trying to figure out a formula that works for both aspects of my degree, and honestly, sometimes I still am not sure if I've cracked it. That being said, I do have two tricks of the trade to keep in mind when writing an essay:

## Break your question down into its essential parts

Once you write a few essays, you start to realise that all essay questions have a similar structure. There are only so many ways the examiners can ask you 'To what extent' and once you recognise certain buzzwords, it becomes much easier to formulate a plan of attack. Here are some examples:



'To what extent...', 'How far...', 'What...' and 'Evaluate ...' often signify questions that ask you to discuss whether you agree with a certain point of view on a debated topic within the subject. The best way to approach these questions is to

pick a stance and then find opposing arguments that you can dismantle to show a bit more academic sophistication.

In comparison, 'Describe...', 'Illustrate...', 'How...' and 'Explain...' are usually questions that require a more holistic approach to a topic, in which you have to discuss as many facets of the topics as possible in relation to the question (word limit permitting).

Another aspect of the question to look out for are certain key phrases you can use throughout your essay to signal-post to the reader throughout your essay that you are still addressing the question. Constantly linking your essay back to the question in your essay also helps you to stay on topic as a writer.

Here's an example of a question and how you can break it down:

*'What is depicted on the Parthenon Frieze?'*

This question seems relatively simple, but it is one of the most debated topics within Classical Greek archaeology. The use of 'What' indicates that you have to pick an academic stance and justify why you think this is the most likely hypothesis using both primary and secondary sources. You should then pick one or two opposing perspective to evaluate, in order to demonstrate why your chosen interpretation is still the best. Additionally, you should always round a point off with a: 'therefore, as (evidence) demonstrates, (point) is what is depicted on the Parthenon frieze.' That way you are able to double check as you are editing if your points are properly explained to allow such a statement at the end and your examiner will also be able to pick up quickly if you are doing so because you have used words from the question itself, such as 'depicted.'

**Reference well from the start**

Referencing is simultaneously the easiest way to secure and lose marks in an essay. I had so many instances in first year where I lost a significant number of points for poor referencing that had me kicking myself, mainly because it would have potentially pushed me up a grade boundary. The one thing I cannot stand when reading feedback is finding out that I didn't get full marks on a section that is so clearly set out by the subject area. The School uses a variation of the Harvard system and every citation form is listed out in the Essay Guidelines. There is literally *no* reason besides carelessness for someone to not score fully on this section (I promise I speak from experience).



The best way to ensure you follow the guidelines to a tee is to reference properly from the start. Even when I am reading and taking notes on my computer, I will reference quotes and points in the correct format from the beginning. This ensures that when I write my essay and use said quotes from my notes, I can rest assured that the referencing is already done and dusted. Additionally, if you start building your bibliography at the start, it means that you have one less thing to worry about in your editing stage of your essay. It's so much easier to remove any additional sources you ended up not using than scrambling to find a source you forgot to note down during your research stage.

Easy. Right? Don't worry, there's lots of help both in the School and the University with writing essays and other assignments. Look out for Peer Support Groups – SHCA has ArchPals and UoE HCA Peer Support – and Societies running sessions on writing and studying, and the Institute for Academic Development offers workshops and online resources on all aspects of learning.

# Approaching the dissertation

Dissertation. A big word, and often a scary one. Alfie, a Student Ambassador, looks at ways to make it slightly less intimidating.

Perhaps the culmination of your time at university and exceptional (circumstances notwithstanding), also the longest piece of academic writing you will have created to date. Sounds like a lot – and let's not mince words, it is a big task and not one to be taken lightly. However, with the right preparation, forethought, and enthusiasm, it is as enjoyable a project as any other. It should represent the sum of your passions and interests that you have cultivated over your time studying, or perhaps afford you a chance to further explore areas you have not yet had the chance to investigate. Simply put, it is a fantastic opportunity to hit your stride as an aspiring academic, or to cap off your university experience.

When it comes to the dissertation, it is never too early to start planning. I'm not suggesting that you should be coming out of your first year lectures and taking an abundance of notes on potential topics and sources to use, rather if something grabs you early on, maybe it could be something worth considering for the future. If a particular topic, method, or concept catches your eye, take notes! Remember it for later, and by the time that third year rolls around and the question is being asked, you'll have some ideas for what

you've got planned.

It is worth bearing in mind that third year is an optimal time to start your planning, especially over the summer break. At this point in your studies you will have likely covered a great deal of content and – hopefully – will have found something you enjoy writing about. If this is the case, take notes from any courses you have around the subject area and try to explore them. Consolidate reading lists, discuss material with suitable academics, and read around the subject if you have time. Naturally, this isn't something that you need to have done by the first day of fourth year, but it's something worth preparing if you have the time to spare. In addition, try to identify an appropriate member of academic staff to act as your dissertation supervisor – someone who is ideally familiar with the topic, so that you can discuss ideas accordingly.

Writing the dissertation is a separate beast and surprisingly manageable if you like to break things down into sections. A dissertation will often have a literature review that examines contemporary academic thought on a topic and is not too dissimilar from discussions of readings done for seminars. This is often a large portion of your dissertation, so be sure you're comfortable doing the reading to follow through. Other key chapters are your introduction where you'll outline your subject, structure, and points for consideration, and your discussion, where you can make a deep dive into the content, highlighting your own ideas and opinions, as supported by or in opposition to existing thought. Be sure to give ample time for the writing of all this, as it can seem quite demanding, but rest assured that you'll be able to intersperse this with meetings with your supervisor who can discuss your progress.

When it comes down to it, the dissertation is quite a big process, but one to (hopefully) be enjoyed. The freedom to pursue your own academic interests and supplement your own research with the aid of university professionals is a great

opportunity to develop your own researching capability, perseverance, and self-motivation, all desirable and transferable skills for postgraduate study and beyond. While it is a big challenge, it is one that you're not undertaking alone, as all other undergraduates will be in the same boat as you. So don't worry, do your best, and remember to engage with the stuff you're passionate about – it's all plain sailing from there.

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## Essay writing

Everything you ever wanted to know about essays but were afraid to ask by Student Ambassador Constance.

Essay writing, love it or hate it, it is the metric by which we students are measured. Figuring out your 'style' is something of a journey and will inevitably include some painful marks to grow as a writer. However, there are some tips I can offer, distilled from my four years of successes and failures, to help demystify the approach to essay writing.

Picking a topic – Don't go for the obvious and easy. This can be hard, especially if you are pressed for time. But the reality is a lot of people are going to go for the obvious and easy, especially if you are in a big course. It will only make it harder for you to stand out amidst the fifty other people who picked the same question.

Picking a topic Part 2 – Pick a topic you like. If you like a subject more, chances are you are going to try harder and, dare I say, enjoy the process of researching more. Better yet, if you have the opportunity to pick a question, go for it. It is a perfect opportunity to focus on what *you* enjoy.

Research – Get your ducks in a row. Do not cut corners, I repeat, do not cut corners. This is when you want to be organized and systematic. Make sure you are clear when you take notes and have noted who said what. I still get cold sweats thinking about running to the library at 3 am because I could not figure out which book I had taken a quote from.

Research – Be one with the source. If you are using primary sources, it is best to have a direct quotation so that you ensure you have not lost any of the original source's meaning, especially if it is literary in nature.

Writing – (When you can) Take bite size pieces. Inevitably, there will be a time where you write an essay in a day. Afterwards, you will feel groggy, gross and your brain's IQ will have depreciated to the value of a guinea pig until you have had a full 8 hours of rest. Some people can function perfectly under these circumstances – if you are one of them, Godspeed my friend – but most are not. My best essays were slow burners where I took time to make a really pretty and detailed outline and only wrote a maximum of 500-1000 words per day.

Editing – Take some time and then go for it. Essays are like boyfriends or girlfriends; sometimes you just need a little space. Give yourself a day or two to avoid your essay and then go to a printer, print that baby out, grab a pen and read it aloud. Yep, read it like it is the Queen's Speech and cringe at the sound of your own voice. It the most useful tip a lecturer from first year gave me, and by far the most surefire way to catch grammar mistakes.

Submit – Get the receipts. Chances are you will be submitting your essay online via Turnitin. For all that is good and holy, no matter how tired you may be, check your email to make sure you got a receipt confirming your submission. Nothing is worse than losing marks for an essay you thought you submitted on time.

What is perhaps the most important thing is not to be dismayed if you do not get the mark you want. Read the feedback and take it to heart when you go to write the next one.