# Essay writing

## The purpose of an essay is to demonstrate that you can:

* Extend your knowledge through reading/research.
* Use this knowledge to present clear, plausible arguments.
* Apply academic conventions (e.g. referencing).
* Be concise and focused by adhering to a word count.

## Planning and writing an essay requires a wide range of skills, such as:

* Effective reading
* Critical thinking
* Note-taking
* Writing
* Editing and proof-reading
* Following academic conventions e.g. referencing

This guide aims to describe the overall process of essay writing, however, to develop the individual skills you need, seek advice from the [Skills for Academic Success team (S.A.S.)](https://student.kent.ac.uk/studies/skills-for-academic-success) The S.A.S. team also provide workshops and one-to-one advice for students wishing to develop the skills they need to write good essays. The Royal Literary Fund Fellows also provide guidance on essay writing.

# The essay writing process

## 1.    Prepare a schedule

Use a yearly or monthly time planner to draw up a schedule that allows time to consider the question, research, write and proof-read your answer. Inevitably, the research and writing stages will account for up to 80% of the schedule, but you must allocate enough time to plan and proof-read your work, including checking your references, before submission.

## 2.    Consider the question

You cannot proceed with answering an essay question without fully understanding it (see the [video guide](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/written-assignments) on ‘Considering the Question’, or study guide on ‘Understanding Essay Questions’). Ask yourself: What are you being asked to do? What is the main subject of the question? What aspect of it are you being asked to investigate? Does it set any limitations on the scope of your answer? Does the question ask you to demonstrate key module knowledge on specific theories or processes. Above all, is there an ‘instruction verb’ in the question asking you to ‘discuss’, or ‘justify’, or ‘compare’. Do as the instruction verb tells you; a list of their meanings is at the end of this guide.

## 3.    Conduct your research

**Where to begin** Based on a clear understanding of the question, create a list of all the ideas, theories, processes and examples that you already know something about (from past reading, lectures and seminars) that might relate to the question. Identify those which you know to be particularly relevant and begin your research there.

**Reading** Identify key reading material by surveying book titles, contents pages, introductions, index pages and journal summaries to determine whether the material may contain the information you need. Skim read (fast reading intended purely to get the general gist of the content) marking any chapters, or pages that seem to contain information relevant to the question. Narrow the search further by ‘scanning’ those sections (reading more slowly but not in detail) to pinpoint key paragraphs or sentences that relate directly to the question. You can now read those sections in detail.

**Note-taking** As you read, include in your notes: The bibliographic details of the source, the main points the author is making, key examples or evidence given, and any critical observations you may have (e.g. the author has not examined alternative viewpoints) which later you can use to demonstrate that you have critically evaluated your evidence. Finally, be sure to clearly distinguish between the author’s words and your own (using quotation marks as a minimum) so that you can never confuse the two.

## 4.    Writing (drafting and editing)

**Essay plan**

Before you start writing, group your research material according to themes or different aspects of the question. Identify the key arguments or points that emerge relating to each one, and the evidence that supports them. Now you can jot down a plan which shows: the logical order in which you will address different aspects of the question, the key point that you wish to make about each one, and the evidence you will include to support it.

**Essay structure: Essays comprise three main elements:**

* ‘Introduction’(5%-10% of wordcount) should briefly set the overall scene or context for the question, before introducing the specific topic that will be discussed, or argument that will be made, and the key theories or processes that will be used in that process. Finally, it will set out (signpost) how you will go about answering the question and the order your discussion will take.
* ‘Main body’(80-90% of wordcount) comprises a series of paragraphs - blocks of text several sentences long, each of which: make a key point about a different aspect of the question; elaborates upon and supports that key point with the introduction and analysis of evidence from your research. As each point is made in each paragraph an overall argument in response to the question is built. This can be declared in your introduction, and reiterated in your conclusion, and it is why sometimes it is advisable to write your introduction once you can see how your argument is developing.’’
* ‘Conclusion’ (5%-10% of wordcount) summarises the key points you have made in your essay and reminds the reader of the key evidence you used to support it. It is advisable to draw all these points together to make a final, overall conclusion that directly answers the question.

**Start writing – but where?**

You may begin by writing the main body paragraphs. As you write ask yourself: Is it clear what aspect of the question each paragraph is addressing? Is my reasoning and evidence convincing? Am I answering the question? Have I included the necessary ingredients (evidence, examples and analysis) to support the points I am making? Are the paragraphs (points) in the right order to make clear the progression of discussion and are the sentences within the paragraphs in the right order?

**Drafting (Editing and revising)**

Your first drafts may focus on improving the content and structure of your essay. Once all the important ingredients are there, including your introduction and conclusion, you can focus on improving the flow and clarity of your writing by, for example, improving the linking phrases between paragraphs, ensuring that the first sentence of each paragraph clearly indicates its content, and that the meaning of every sentence is clear.

## 5.    Proof-reading

Mistakes cost marks. Check your essay for spelling but be aware that spellcheck is not fool-proof, and may not spot errors involving ‘to’, ‘two’ and ‘too’, for example. Generally, you should be using the 3rd person (‘this essay will show’, rather than, ‘I will show’) so check this and all other aspects of your grammar and punctuation. Above all, check that your referencing is complete and accurate, and that you have met all presentation requirements relating to, for example, fonts, type-size, line-spacing, and wordcount.

**Final proofreading tips**:

* Read your work aloud – you may detect mistakes (e.g. repetition or overlong sentences) that your eyes do not spot.
* You may find proof-reading a hard copy easier than online, but make sure you accurately transfer corrections onto digital copies.
* Use a ruler to go through your essay line by line to help you focus.

Proof-read more than once, each time focussing on a different element (e.g. referencing, or grammar and punctuation).

See also our study guide on ‘Editing and Proof-reading’.

**Further resources**

**SkillBuilder videos**

On student.kent.ac.uk/sas you can access a range of SkillBuilder [essay writing videos](https://student.kent.ac.uk/studies/written-assignments). They can be viewed individually according to your topic of interest, or as a series taking you step-by-step through the entire essay writing process.

**Assignment Survival Kit**

[ASK](https://form.jotform.com/241064311779355)

This is a useful tool to help you plan the stages of your essay project. It is especially useful if you struggle with time management. If you experience any difficulties using the tool, please email [sas@kent.ac.uk](mailto:sas@kent.ac.uk).

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