

How to write an **A+**

High Distinction

academic essay



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A+

OBJECTIVES

This presentation aims to:

- Define the term “essay” and explore six different popular essay types;
- Discuss the core attributes that most essays are expected to contain;
- Discuss advanced writer tips that distinguish **High Distinction** (Grade **A+**) essays from other essays which score a lower grade;
- Offer examples of each principle that are discussed.

This presentation is most suitable for students who plan to write extended, analytical discussion style essays primarily in the following disciplines: Arts, humanities, social sciences, health sciences, law and business. The advice offered may also be useful for scholars who study other disciplines such as: architecture, music and fine arts.

Situations that may require you to write an essay

- College applications
- Scholarship applications
- Award / prize competitions
- End of term 'finals' (exams)
- Traditional essays: coursework subjects at college level
- Public examinations: *e.g.* GRE, GED, IELTS, SAT, ACT, GMAT, CFA.

What is an essay? Long definitions

“Essays are shorter pieces of writing that often require the student to hone a number of skills such as close reading, analysis, comparison and contrast, persuasion, conciseness, clarity, and exposition. As is evidenced by this list of attributes, there is much to be gained by the student who strives to succeed at essay writing. The purpose of an essay is to encourage students to develop ideas and concepts in their writing with the direction of little more than their own thoughts (it may be helpful to view the essay as the converse of a research paper). Therefore, essays are (by nature) concise and require clarity in purpose and direction. This means that there is no room for the student’s thoughts to wander or stray from his or her purpose; the writing must be deliberate and interesting.” (Purdue University, 2017)

What is an essay?

“An essay is an extended piece of writing that presents and supports a thesis or proposition. The word ‘essay’ derives from the Latin word ‘exagium’, meaning the presentation of a case. When you write an essay you are making a case for the validity of a particular point of view, analysis, interpretation, or set of facts or procedures.

There are many types of essays...argumentative, descriptive, synoptic, analytical, exploratory, review, and so on... but they all have the common objective of presenting and defending a topic and a stance to the reader.

Consequently, essays all rely not only on the validity of the facts they communicate but also on the selection, critical evaluation, organisation, and presentation of these facts.” (Curtin University, 2017)

Essay questions normally have 3 parts

1. **The stated question that you must answer;**

Example: “Compose an essay that evaluates the ethics of performing elective plastic surgery, writing from the viewpoint of a plastic surgeon.”

2. Instructions that guide you to answer the question. Example:

“Your essay should contain 1,000 to 1,200 word excluding references.”

3. Instructions that inform you how the essay will be assessed - *i.e.* how you will receive formal feedback against stated criteria. Example:

“Please refer to the marking rubric shown on the page overleaf.”

Marking rubric: example

| Assessment criteria | Maximum mark | | |
|---|--------------|---|-------------|
| Academic referencing The assessment uses the APA 6th edition style guide correctly: quotations, paraphrasing, citing data, references to concepts and to support arguments. | /20 | Engages with theory The author engages with theoretical principles and literature to conceptualise discussion. | /40 |
| Structure The paper uses a logical structure that aims to write cumulatively to pose a single coherent argument. | /10 | Originality The author cites examples, theoretical principles and literature that is not presented by others on the discussion board. | /10 |
| Argument The author writes in a way that is self-reflective and critical as opposed to posing a narrative discussion. | /20 | Total | /100 |

<http://www.thefreeschool.education/free-diploma.html>

Short and long essay questions

Essay questions are classifiable as ‘short’ or ‘long’ with reference to the number of words and sentences that inform you of “**the stated question that you must answer**”. There is usually no difference in what is required of you in order to answer both question types - **always answer the stated question.**

Example essay questions: short

Short essay questions are limited to one or two sentences of text in **the stated question that you must answer**.

Examples:

“Write an essay that informs the reader whether you support the right of the government to regulate the sale of tobacco”.

“What are the three most important factors that entrepreneurs should consider before they establish a small business? Limit your answers to the creation of an online retail business in the United States since 2000.”

Example essay question: long

Long essay questions contain three or more sentences of text in **the stated question that you must answer**.

Example:

“Write an essay that discusses the economic principle of ‘supply and demand’. Your discussion must explore an example of a good or service that is available in a market where there is perfect competition. Your example may be theoretical or you may discuss a real-life observation. You must include at least one diagram in your answer”.

Unpacking the essay question

Your tutor may instruct you to ‘**unpack**’ your essay question. **Unpacking** the essay question refers to the need to break down the essay question and its instructions into smaller parts so that you can manage your essay writing task. If you do not **unpack** the essay question, you may find it overwhelming to answer longer essay questions. **Unpacking** requires you to focus on two core activities:

1. Identifying the sub-tasks contained in the question.

Longer essay questions may ask you to perform multiple tasks.

2. Identifying the keywords in the question that explain what you must discuss and how you must present your discussion.

Highlight/underline key words

Some scholars find it easier to answer an essay question if they underline and/or **highlight** key words in the questions and do so on printed paper or on a digital page. Key words are usually:

- (a) Nouns, verbs and adjectives in the “**stated question that you must answer**”.
- (b) Advisory words in the “instructions that guide you to answer the question” and “instructions that inform you how the essay will be assessed - *i.e.* how you will receive formal feedback.”

Highlight/underline key words: an example

1. The stated question that you must answer. Example:

“The risks of tobacco smoking are unknown. Evaluate this claim.”

2. Instructions that guide you to answer the question. Example:

Your essay must be 500 to 800 words, excluding references”.

3. Instructions that inform you how the essay will be assessed - *i.e.* how you will receive formal feedback. Example:

Please refer to the marking rubric on page two of this document.

Classifying essay questions

If you do not have much experience writing essays, you may find it useful to refer to the summary table on the following slide that compares the six main essay types.

This table provides context and aims to summarize the core features that distinguish each essay type.

This table is a generalization. Not all essay types in this table always contain these features. You must always unpack your essay question by referring to the **stated question**, the **essay guidelines** and **assessment instructions**.

Classifying essays: two main types

Written under exam conditions:

Associated with: Public exams, end-of-term exams ('finals').

Typical writing conditions:

The essay must be written at a specified time and place and other essay writers are present. Supervising examiners are present and there is a strict time limit (minutes or hours). Essay is usually written by hand.

Assessment conditions:

The examiners do not expect the essay to be 'polished' because it is difficult to write a 'perfectionist' essay under exam conditions.

Not written under exam conditions:

Associated with: Scholarship essays, college applications, prizes/competitions, coursework.

Typical writing conditions:

The essay may be written at home or another place. There is no supervisor present. The time limit is extended (days, weeks, months). Guidelines normally state that the essay must be typed on paper or uploaded as a digital file.

Assessment conditions:

Spelling, grammar, format and content should be of superior quality due to the extended timeframe and relaxed preparation conditions.

Traditional essay: coursework

The following example is a traditional short essay question required for students enrolled in an undergraduate college coursework subject. **The stated question that you must answer:**

“List the 7-step path to making ‘ethical decisions’. List them in their correct progressive order.”

Brigham Young University (2002), *Preparing effective essay questions*,
<https://testing.byu.edu/handbooks/WritingEffectiveEssayQuestions.pdf>

This resource by Brigham Young University is a comprehensive 50-page document that offers detailed instructions about how to write an essay question. For example, pages 47-49 lists 31 common verbs found in essay questions that guide essay writers to prepare **the stated question that you must answer**. This resource is useful for those who are looking for a comprehensive handbook that offers essay writing guidance beyond the succinct introduction contained in this Google Slides presentation.

End-of-term exam essay

“The internet has made possible entirely new forms of social interaction, activities and organizing. Explain”. Visual Communication, Level 2. Bharathiar University, 2010.

University of Manitoba (2017), *Writing essay exams*,

https://umanitoba.ca/student/academiclearning/media/Writing_Essay_Exams_NEW.pdf

The advice in this presentation is useful for exam essays and other essay types.

University of Waterloo (2017), *Exam questions: types, characteristics, and suggestions*,

<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/exams/questions-types-characteristics-suggestions>

This resource offers an extended discussion of how to answer essay questions under exam conditions. Essay questions written for examinations tend to be shorter in length due to the tight time limit imposed and because students normally cannot access scholarly texts. A ‘take home exam’ essay question may require you to compose a long essay and offer citations and a bibliographic list of references.

Public exam essay

“Essay Task: Write a unified, coherent essay about the increasing presence of intelligent machines. In your essay, be sure to:

clearly state your own perspective on the issue and analyze the relationship between your perspective and at least one other perspective develop and support your ideas with reasoning and examples organize your ideas clearly and logically communicate your ideas effectively in standard written English Your perspective may be in full agreement with any of those given, in partial agreement, or completely different.” Source:

ACT organization (2017), *ACT exam*,

<http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/test-preparation/writing-sample-essays.html?page=0&chapter=0>

College applications

College application essays normally ask you to discuss general knowledge and personal issues that are not specific to a subject area or discipline. This is because applicants for all disciplines are required to answer the same question. Example (maximum 650 words limit):

“How are apples and oranges supposed to be compared? Possible answers involve, but are not limited to, statistics, chemistry, physics, linguistics, and philosophy.” University of Chicago (2017)

<https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/apply/essay/past-essay-questions>

Competitions and prizes

Competition essays normally require contestants to write about a topic that is relevant to the mandate of the sponsoring organization or a personal interest of a private sponsor. The Berkeley Prize (2017) is awarded for essays that relate to social art of architecture. Its 2017 guidelines state:

“Each year the Berkeley Prize Committee invites a distinguished professor or scholar in the field of architecture or the related social sciences to write about some aspect of the year's Berkeley Prize topic. These essays serve several purposes:

- They are meant to help focus students' thoughts on the issues surrounding the year's Question.
- They are a model for excellence in writing.
- They exhibit both how defined and how broad the range of possible response to a Question.”

Scholarship applications

Scholarship essays tend to impose similar requirements to those of prizes and competitions as outlined on the previous slides or they may ask you to discuss personal issues. Example of a personal issue essay:

“Human beings have a creative side that tends to shine most when we are truly invested in the world around us. Describe a situation when you responded effectively to a particular need and found yourself at your creative best.” Boston College (2017).

<http://www.bc.edu/admission/undergrad/process/freshman/essays.html>

Basic essay structure: 5 core sections

Most essays include five core section structures as shown in this general guide:

1. **Introduction**: Usually 1 or 2 paragraphs
2. **Background/context**: Usually 1 or 2 paragraphs
3. **Body**: Multiple paragraphs (more than 2)
4. **Conclusion**: Usually 1 or 2 paragraphs
5. **Bibliography of references**: Listed by A to Z in alphabetical order.

This section may include an Annex of attachments, endnotes *etc.*

Most college application essays do not require sections 2 and 5. Some college application essays are so short (*circa* 400 words) that the opening and closing sections comprises one sentence, *i.e.*, introducing and reiterating the core objective.

[Always follow the stated guidelines on a case-by-case basis.](#)

Sentences: part 1

The sentence is the basic building block of an essay.

A sentence must normally contain at least *circa* **ten words** to provide enough context in order to convey meaning that is clear. There is no upper word limit that you must adhere to when you write a sentence. Common-sense suggests that very long sentences are undesirable as they cannot sustain most readers' concentration.

I suggest that you avoid writing sentences that exceed *circa* 20 to 22 words. For example, if your sentence is 35 words long, you should aim to split that passage of text into two shorter sentences.

Sentences: part 2

A sentence in an essay should always aim to achieve at least one clearly stated purpose.

The most common examples of these intentions include:

- **Outline** the structure, objective or scope of your essay
- Offer a **narrative discussion** of context and facts that are relevant to the essay
- Pose an **argument** that is framed in a scholarly fashion
- **Cite evidence** to support your argument
- Explore **theoretical concepts** that aid you to frame your argument
- **Cite scholars** who support your argument
- Discuss an **example** to illustrate an argument
- **Summarize** discussion put forward in the body of the essay in a fresh way.

Sentences: example

Purpose: Citing scholars who support my argument.

Word count: 22 including the in-text citation.

Tytell (2013, p. 138) argues that essay writers can learn how to write an essay by focussing on the techniques used by published scholars.

Reference:

Tytell, J. (2013), *How to write an essay*, 46(1), pp. 138-154.

<https://cup.sites.clemson.edu/scr/articles/scr-46n1-republicletters.pdf>

Accessed 14 February 2017.

Sentences build paragraphs

Sentences are the building blocks of paragraphs. Two or more sentences in sequence in one distinct section of writing construct a paragraph.

Example of a paragraph:

“Each paragraph is a box in which you keep an idea. That idea should be stated clearly in one sentence, the Topic Sentence. The other sentences in the paragraph support that Topic Sentence with examples, statistics, a relevant quotation, or further information. The Topic Sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. The other sentences support that idea with Evidence.”

Slade, J. (2011), *How to write an essay*, New York, USA :Woodgate International,

<http://www.bookmasters.com/woodgateintl/HowtoWriteanEssay.pdf>

Components of the paragraph

The following formula is normally suitable for writing extended essays:

1. Open with a **conceptually framed scholarly argument**;
2. **Define** the claim that you make in the opening sentence in further detail;
3. Offer **evidence** to support your claim;
4. Offer a real-life relevant **example** that supports/illustrates your argument;
5. **Explicitly state** how the example illustrates your theoretical argument;
6. Conclude your argument above, writing in such a way that there is a clear connection to the opening argument statement of your next paragraph.

For shorter essays, some of the steps above may be omitted in some, most or all paragraphs. To achieve word economy, you may be able to merge certain overlapping points into one sentence, such as points 3., 4., 5. and 6.

Sizes of paragraphs

A paragraph should illustrate **one core message** in an explicit manner unless you are instructed otherwise.

There is no maximum number of sentences that you must include in each paragraph.

As a general rule, you should aim to include at least four sentences in the body of each paragraph for essays that are 1,000 words or more. It is difficult to illustrate that you have adequately defended and illustrated a core theoretical message in less than four sentences.

Paragraphs: write cumulatively

The core argument that you discuss in each paragraph collectively builds a grand argument in a **cumulative** fashion. This is why it is important to make sure that the closing sentence and opening sentence of the next paragraph are connected.



You may think of each paragraph as a snowball that keeps rolling. As the smaller snowball rolls through more paragraphs, your grand story continues to build. The big snowball is the completed essay that poses a core argument to your intended audience.

Cumulative argument: example

This flow diagram is an example of an essay that builds a grand argument using a cumulative paragraph writing style. Each individual argument supports the overall argument.

Introduction paragraph: Grand argument - Greek culture exerts strong influence over contemporary Western culture.

Historical context: Influence exists since Ancient times.

Body of essay:

Argument 1: Strong influence of Ancient Greek philosophers in Western Universities (*e.g.* Plato, Aristotle, Homer).

Argument 2: Positive influence of Greek mathematicians in the education system (*e.g.* Pythagoras, Archimedes).

Argument 3: Influence of the Ancient Greek language in the English language and others, *e.g.* paediatrics, chronology.

Conclusion: Three core reasons why Ancient Greek culture remains influential in contemporary Western societies.

Paragraphs build sections

After sentences, paragraphs are the second building block of your essay.

Recall that you should aim to discuss one core theoretical point per paragraph. A plausible extended essay structure is shown in this generic template example:

Introduction: **Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2**

Historical Context: **Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2**

Body of essay:

Argument 1: **Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2**

Argument 2: **Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2**

Argument 3: **Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2**

Conclusion: **Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2**

List of references

Sections build essays

Introduction: Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, *etc.*



Historical Context: Paragraph 1, *etc.*

Body of essay:

Argument 1: Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, *etc.*

Argument 2: Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, *etc.*

Argument 3: Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, *etc.*



Conclusion: Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2, *etc.*

List of references

These five distinct
sections collectively
build your essay.

Don't know how to start writing?

Some scholars find it difficult to start writing and for this reason never complete their essays. This presentation does not discuss library research skills. This is an assumed skill. If you still find it difficult to write an essay, the summary diagram on the next slide may help you. If you have difficulty writing an essay, sometimes the best way forward is to simply start writing sentences that are relevant to **the stated question that you must answer**. You can later use the word document cut-and-paste feature to logically order your **sentences** into meaningful **paragraphs** that build your essay's **sections**.

Step 1: build a simple essay plan

Sometimes people struggle to write an essay because they cannot see the trees for the forest, as the saying goes. One way forward is to keep it simple, and focus first on the **two big questions** shown in this diagram.

This basic two step essay plan is your **forest**: the big picture. Your sections are **trees** that make up this forest.

Introduction section:

Q1: What is my core argument?

Body section:

Q2: Why do I feel this way about my argument?

You must discuss at least two sub-arguments to defend this position. What are these two or more sub-arguments? These arguments make up the bulk of your essay discussion - around 90% of all text will be in this section.



Concluding points

- Always think of your essay as a document that puts forward one logical, coherent scholarly **argument**.
- Always write in such a way that you aim to convince your reader to agree with your opinion, your logic or both.
- Use a digital spelling and grammar check as well as the assistance of a proofreader. It is difficult to score a high grade if your paper is littered with numerous spelling and grammar mistakes.

Example of an academic essay

Jericho, Jay. (2015), *Giving a voice to dyslexic adult students who speak English as a second language*, Sydney, Australia: The Free School Occasional paper series No. 1, June 2015.

Wordcount: 1, 800 excluding references.

Type of essay: Academic postgraduate coursework (Faculty of Education, peer-reviewed).

<http://www.thefreeschool.education/publish-1.html>

Context

This research paper aims to give post-secondary students with dyslexia a “voice” (Fuller *et al.*, 2004, p. 459) in the academic domain. I offer a self-reflexive account of what I am discovering about a learning disability termed “dyslexia” from teaching ‘Hiro’ as a private subject tutor since March 2015.

Related Free School Presentations

The following Free School webpages contain information that may aid you to write better essays:

<http://www.thefreeschool.education/writing-center.html>

<http://www.thefreeschool.education/dissertation-writing.html>

Writing motivation letters for college and scholarship applications:

<http://www.thefreeschool.education/scholarships.html>

The Free School free English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course:

<http://www.thefreeschool.education/free-diploma.html>

<http://chat.thefreeschool.education/forum86.html>

Free School YouTube Presentations

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTFXzId2AjK_QzsYQEq-zfw

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Additional references

Curtin University (2017), *What is an essay?*,
<<http://studyskills.curtin.edu.au/essays/introduction/what-is-an-essay>>.
Accessed 14 February 2017.

Purdue University (2017), *Essay writing*,
<<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/1/>>. Accessed 14 February 2017.

The Berkeley Prize (2017), *Essays and articles on the social art of architecture*,
<<http://www.berkeleyprize.org/endowment/essays-and-articles-on-the-social-art-of-architecture/>>. Accessed 14 February 2017.

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