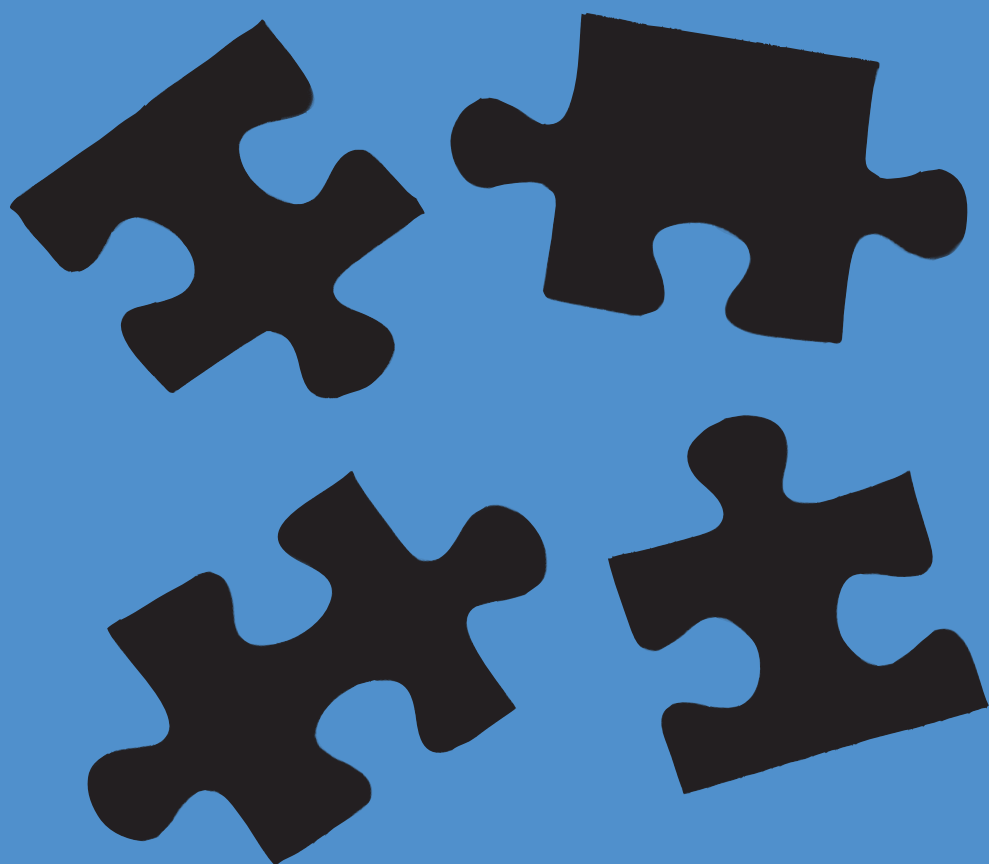


# Essay Writing

A Student's Guide

MunLing Shields



SAGE Study Skills



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Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

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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!

# 1

## 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 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**

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

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