

# — HOW CAN I GET — A BETTER MARK FOR MY ESSAY?

Strategies for Maximising Your Success  
Student Academic Skills  
University of Otago



[sas@otago.ac.nz](mailto:sas@otago.ac.nz) | 03 479 8801



University  
of Otago  
ŌTĀKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA

Student Academic Skills

**This booklet is an introduction to some of the skills and strategies that will help you successfully complete your studies at Otago.**

Based on an original booklet developed by Carol Hunter for Student Academic Skills at the University of Otago.

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## What is an “Essay”?

There is no precise definition of an essay and no prescription for what an essay should look like in terms of structure or content. However, an academic essay does involve research, analysis of source material, careful thought, and the development of your “argument” into a logically structured piece of writing, with appropriate references.

You may hear an essay described as an “argument”, but this does not necessarily mean that you must defend one point of view over another (although it might well involve that). You can argue, for example, that dental decay is a pathway of infection, that tourism brings both benefits and costs to island nations, or that Chaucer had a major influence on the English language. So an argument might be factual and non-contentious, but nevertheless will involve a well-thought out and researched line of reasoning. Mostly, that line of reasoning will be based on your research of scholarly material, but at times might involve reflective writing or personal experience.

## Why essays are important

Essays play a pivotal role in helping students to build knowledge. After writing an essay, you will almost certainly understand a topic at a deeper level than previously. As well, the process of filtering and sifting, interpreting and analysing information, helps to develop your research skills, critical thinking, and writing abilities.

## Features of a “good” essay

Lecturers' opinions vary to some extent on what they look for when marking essays, but the best essays have qualities in common. Some of these qualities are quite abstract, such as enthusiasm for the topic that comes through in the writing, while others, concerned with structure and technique, are more concrete and explicit. In your essay, aim to:

- Correctly interpret the essay question or topic, and answer it fully.
- Put forward a well-thought-out argument and line of reasoning, rather than merely reproducing information from source material.
- Treat the topic in sufficient depth, with evidence of thorough research.

- Demonstrate understanding of key principles, theories, and concepts, and build these into the discussion.
- Maintain focus, keeping your discussion relevant to the question.
- Produce a cohesive discussion that is logically structured.
- Express ideas clearly, avoiding clumsy or awkward phrasing.
- Check that there are no errors in your spelling, grammar, and vocabulary.
- Provide appropriate references in the required referencing style.
- Keep to the word limit (don't be substantially under or over).
- Show interest and enthusiasm for the topic.

## Answering the question

It's absolutely essential that you take time to really think about what the essay question means. You certainly won't be asked to write down everything you can find out about a topic in the broadest possible sense; rather there will be a certain scope to cover, with limits and boundaries implied in the way the question has been worded. To establish the right focus, it's a good idea to underline the key words and to rearrange the question in your own words, perhaps in a couple of different ways. Also, consider how the topic should be dealt with. For example, if the instruction is to compare and contrast Theory Y with Theory X, you would need to do more than just describe the two theories—the main focus would be on drawing out their similarities and differences. Similarly, if the instruction is to assess or explore, and your response is restricted to a summary or outline, you have missed the point of the assignment.

## Getting started on your research

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Read over lecture and tutorial notes                 | What have you covered in the course so far that is relevant to the essay question? Identify the key theories, principles, or concepts the essay must address.  |
| Start looking for suitable readings                  | Scan through your reading list checking for books or journal articles related to your topic.   |
| Extend your search                                   | Check reference lists in the back of your set readings for other relevant publications. You could also look for other work by key authors in the Library's on-line catalogues or on Google Scholar. Consider what other sources might be useful (e.g., reports from government or other organisations, newspapers, etc).           |
| Talk to others                                       | Share ideas with other students working on the same topic. You're not competing against each other and discussing your essay with your peers can provide very useful feedback.   |
| Develop an essay plan                                | Once you have enough information to get started, begin working on an essay plan. As you progress in your research material, flesh out your plan until you feel you've done enough. Refine your plan before you start writing to make sure that you introduce your points in a logical order and to avoid repetitions and overlaps. |
| Know how to find information quickly and effectively | Make it a priority to take a Library tour and find out the name of your subject librarian. See: <a href="http://otago.libguides.com/liaison">http://otago.libguides.com/liaison</a>  |

## Planning an essay framework

Before starting to write the essay, shape your notes and ideas into a framework of the points you want to include, and arrange these in the most logical order. Planning your essay before you start writing has a number of advantages:

- Helps to decide on what to include and what to discard.
- Lets you work out the best arrangement for a good flow to your discussion.
- You will immediately be able to spot where there might be overlaps or repetition so will prompt you to re-think how these problems can be avoided.
- Gives you a clear direction for your research: what other sort of information you might need to support and expand your points.
- Helps you to “get into” an assignment, especially when you have a mountain of notes that you’re not sure what to do with.
- Makes it easier to put ideas on paper—once you have a plan you can readily develop it into sentences and paragraphs.

## How is an essay structured?

Different subjects have different requirements for structure. In very broad terms, essay writing styles can be seen as “traditional” and “non-traditional”.

| <b><i>Traditional essay</i></b>   | <b><i>Non-traditional essay</i></b>   |
|---|---|
| <p>Follows a “continuous narrative”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ideas are broken up into paragraphs: a single idea is presented and developed in each paragraph;</li><li>• no sub-headings;</li><li>• no bullet points;</li><li>• limited use of diagrams &amp; tables;</li><li>• sources are included, properly cited and referenced.</li></ul> | <p>Might be similar to a report format:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• can include sub-headings to unite a cluster of related paragraphs;</li><li>• might include some bullet points;</li><li>• can include diagrams &amp; tables;</li><li>• is likely to include sources, properly cited and referenced</li></ul> |

Whichever structure you adopt should be in line with your course instructions, or the advice of your tutor or lecturer. Longer essays, say 3,000 or more words, are normally divided into at least some sections for the benefit of both writer and reader.

Regardless of overall structure, an essay should have a clearly defined introduction, discussion, and conclusion. These sections usually contain the following:

## **INTRODUCTION**

- Provides a brief context to the essay question.
- Gives a succinct summary (a couple of sentences) of your argument. Outlines how the essay will develop.
- Is concise, no more than 1/10th overall word count.

## **DISCUSSION**

- Consists of a series of paragraphs that develop your argument and lead towards your conclusion. (Refer to the next section on paragraph development.)
- Some departments require that essays be divided into sections with appropriate headings, so check your course material or ask your tutor as to which style is required.

## **CONCLUSION**

- Ties up the main points of your discussion.
- Sums up in a sentence or two a clear and unambiguous answer to the essay question.
- Gives a sense of finality to the essay, drawing it to a close.
- Is concise, no more than 1/10th overall word count.

The basic structural unit of an essay is the paragraph. Develop your paragraphs as outlined below:

- Each paragraph should focus on one central idea.
- Introduce the central idea in the first sentence of the paragraph.
- Then expand the idea with further explanation, evidence, or example as appropriate.
- When the focus shifts from the main point of the paragraph, or a new angle is introduced, begin a new paragraph.
- A concluding sentence is sometimes appropriate but don't strive to finish every paragraph with a conclusion.
- A good length for paragraphs in a university essay is between 80-150 words. Avoid short, choppy paragraphs or long rambling ones. If a paragraph is longer than, say, 220 words the main point is likely to be blurred or lost entirely to the detriment of readability and flow.

## Linking

While paragraphs deal with one idea at a time, those ideas should link into a unified whole. Use plenty of “signpost” words and phrases. Signposts are useful devices to show how one concept relates to another, to provide a bridge between similar ideas, to introduce a new point into the discussion, or to create emphasis.

The following are just some examples:

### ***To add to a point already made; or to introduce a new point***

also; moreover; further; furthermore; again; in addition; following this; subsequently; consequently; similarly; correspondingly; in the same way; in regard to

### ***To reinforce a point, or state it in a different way***

in other words; that is to say; to put it (more) simply; with this in mind; in view of this

### ***To indicate stages in a process***

first; second; third; to begin with; next; following this; another; in addition; concurrently; simultaneously; meanwhile; moreover; subsequently; consequently

### ***To explain; to introduce an example***

for example; for instance; namely; an example of this is; as in the following examples; such as

### ***To show cause and effect***

therefore; accordingly; as a result; from this it can be seen that; it is evident; because of this; thus; hence; for this reason; owing to; this suggests that

### ***To show concession***

admittedly; after all; all the same; at any rate; granted; however; in any case; in spite of; it is true that; nevertheless

### ***To show conditions***

in this event; in these circumstances; provided that; in spite of; nonetheless; nevertheless; at the same time; even if; unless; otherwise; although; despite

### ***To compare/contrast***

in contrast; in comparison; on the one hand; on the other hand; here again; in the same way; conversely; on the contrary; alternatively; although; neither ... nor; however; despite; otherwise

### ***To add emphasis, show conviction***

after all; at least; evidently; certainly; conceivably; conclusively; doubtless; no doubt; surely; undoubtedly; unfortunately

### ***To sum up; to conclude***

therefore; my conclusion is; in short; in conclusion; to conclude; in all; on the whole; to summarise; to sum up; in brief; altogether

## **Essay checklist**

Have you:

- Correctly interpreted the essay question?
- Presented your own, well-thought-out argument, and line of reasoning, and not just reproduced information from lectures or readings?
- Looked at the topic in sufficient depth, with evidence of thorough research? Do you show that you understand key principles, theories, and concepts, and where appropriate have built these into your discussion?
- Maintained focus in your essay, keeping discussion relevant to the question, and not gone off on tangents?
- Provided a clear introduction that does a good job of setting out the topic and leading the reader into what's coming?
- Checked your discussion forms a cohesive piece of writing, i.e., it

“hangs together” as a whole, is logically structured, and addresses each key point in turn, and in order of importance?

- Provided a conclusion that sums up your key points and provides a succinct and logical end point for your essay?
- Checked that your written expression is clear and free of clumsy or awkward phrasing, unnecessary wordiness, and errors in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary?
- Provided a reference list in the required referencing/citation style?
- Kept to the word limit (without being substantially under or over)?
- Managed to put across a sense of enthusiasm and interest in the topic?

## Feedback

You'll receive a grade and a marking sheet or other feedback on your essay from the tutor or lecturer who marked it. If you have difficulty in understanding their comments or relating them to your own writing, ask for clarification. Most lecturers have open office hours for student consultations so don't hesitate to make the most of these opportunities to discuss your work. Remember, a grade relates just to that one essay, not to you as a person; do not feel discouraged if you don't get the mark you were hoping for, rather use it as a learning opportunity and you will do better next time.

If you'd like to discuss ways to improve your writing style or essay structure, you are welcome to make an appointment to meet with one of our Student Academic Skills staff.

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### **Related Resources**

Student Learning Development runs essay writing workshops, and can offer one-to-one appointments with one of our staff. Come into the centre to book an appointment or send us an email at [sas@otago.ac.nz](mailto:sas@otago.ac.nz)

For additional material on academic writing and language, check out our resources online at <https://www.otago.ac.nz/educational-design-innovation/students/digital>