

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.

ESSAY WRITING

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

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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!