



Guide to Essay Writing

Introduction

Writing an essay is an opportunity to learn your material and to show what you know. It is an opportunity to read more widely around a subject area, extend your knowledge and reflect upon what you have learned. This may seem a daunting task but there are practical steps which you can take to help you through this process. This guide will take you through these steps and help you on your way to producing a good essay.

Planning the process

Start Early

■ Select and Understand the Question

1. Brainstorm the questions to decide exactly what each means. This will help you to determine which question you will be able to answer best. Underline keywords within the question but consider all of the words within it as these will indicate what is required. Other techniques such as mind mapping or question matrix may be used here. Think about what you know. How many cases/arguments could you make now?
2. Use the results to help break the question into mini points. Decide on the case you want to make. Separate out individual arguments to make your case and ensure you have evidence to support each argument. Acknowledge and deal with known opposing arguments. You may want to revisit and revise this plan in the light of your essay research.

■ **Plan of action:** Think about the following questions: What do I need to do now? What do I know? Who do I need to talk to? What do I need to read? How will I find these things? When will I do these things?)

■ **Create a folder:** elaborate or basic, electronic or paper. It could even be an old A4 envelope. Write your

selected question in full across the folder. Record and keep any notes, thoughts or information which you gather in this folder. Ensure you keep a note of the source of that information with the appropriate set of notes. You will need these details to compile your bibliography at the end of the essay. This guards against plagiarism (defined by De Montfort University student regulations as "The significant use by a student of other people's work and the submission of it as though it were his or her own").

■ **Collecting the information:** Do your research and make notes including the source of the information. You may need to use:

1. **Lecture notes** (are a potential starting point but remember that lecturers do not like to see their lecture notes repeated).
2. **Books**
3. **Journal articles**
4. **Internet:** be aware of where the information is coming from and by what authority claims are made. Note how up to date it is.
5. **Other sources**

■ When making notes from different sources and for different/separate issues relating to your essay's argument, you may wish to use separate sheets of paper. (These could be of different colours or simply written in different coloured ink). This may help you to structure your essay once you have finished the general research stage.

■ Decide on an **essay structure/order of argument**. To do this you may sift through your notes, separating different themes/debates. Place them in a variety of orders until you have decided on the most appropriate. Remember each paragraph should focus on one big idea.

■ **As a rough guide the essay will comprise:**

1. **Introduction (write this last):** sets the agenda for the essay, says how you are going to answer the question.) – 05%
 2. **Body:** contains your arguments – 80%
 3. **Conclusion:** draws material together and re-states your line of argument – 15%
 4. It may be helpful to attach an appropriate word count to each section to help you to keep within the set word count boundaries.
- Within each paragraph introduce and define one big idea and offer an argument for this in relation to the question. Offer and discuss supporting evidence and any opposing arguments. Acknowledge any quoted evidence both in the text and in the bibliography. Ensure you relate this idea/argument to the question.
- When writing your essay remember this is a **communication process**. Explain to the reader what you want them to understand. Also bear in mind the context of writing the essay. This includes the essay question and the learning outcomes of the particular module to which it relates. Avoid an informal style.
- **Draft, revise and redraft:** Let your first draft of the essay flow, do not worry about gaps, repetition or more formal terms or language. These can all be added later. Get something down on paper. Once you have a shell to play with you can re-arrange, change, amend and add, provided it is within the word and time limit and answers the question. You may wish to leave a time gap between the first draft and revision(s). This will allow time for your brain to subconsciously “mull over” the matter and fill in the gaps. When revising, fill in the gaps, add the academic terms and cut out any repetition.
- **Presentation:** Make the work the best you can, make sure you have answered the question, supported your arguments with evidence and dealt with any opposing arguments. Present the work in a professional manner, abide by any regulations about font size and spacing, footnotes, bibliography etc set out by the department.
- **Set timed deadlines for each part of the essay writing process.** This will help to avoid a mad rush at the end.

Finding Out More:

Library services: Books regarding study skills (including essay writing) can be found at shelf mark 378.170281 within De Montfort University Libraries (WY 20.7 at Charles Frears Library).

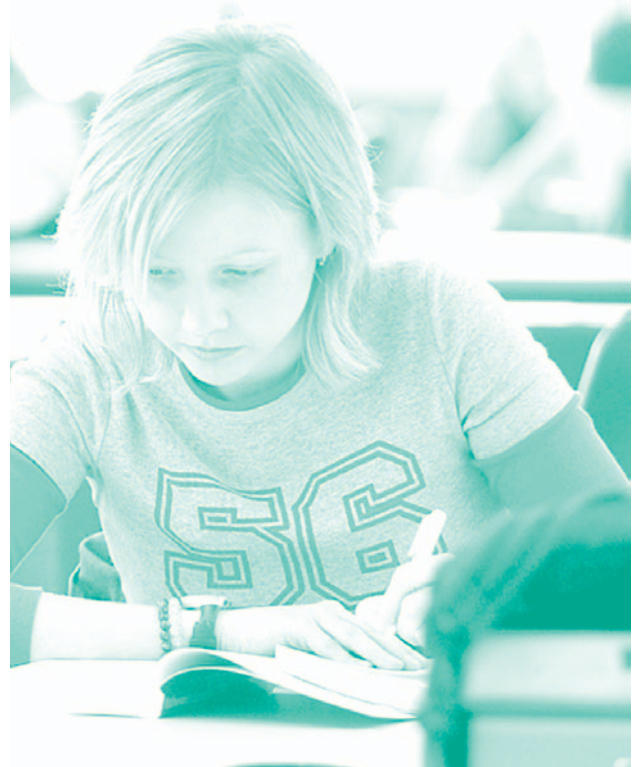
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Burns, T and Sinfield, S (2003) *Essential study skills, the complete guide to success @ university*, London, Sage Publications

Drew, S and Bingham, R. (1997) *The student skills guide*, Aldershot, Gower



www.library.dmu.ac.uk

Available in large print and screen .pdf. Publication No 23063.

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