

**Basic Essay Definition:** *an essay is a piece of continuous, flowing, paragraphed text without the use of headings. Good essays need to be carefully structured (see 'essay structure' below) and researched.*

Before you start writing:

### 1<sup>st</sup> – Understand and de-code the essay title

It is important to analyse the question before you start planning your work so that you understand what you are being asked to do and make sure that you answer it. Underline key words and question what each one means. If you need to, clarify the title with your tutor. Example question:

How can a teacher's knowledge of different learning styles help to improve pupil's learning?

(Breakdown = Topic: 'Different learning styles' / Focus: Pupil learning improvement / Instruction or Directive  
Word: How = examine / Limit or Time Period: today (assumed) )

### 2<sup>nd</sup> – Plan your essay

A good plan starts with understanding your task or essay question, how much time you have to write it, the number of words you have to write and what direction you're going to take. A mind map (see 'note-making' study skills sheet) can then help plan your answer after you have done some reading and thinking about the question.

**3<sup>rd</sup> – Researching your essay topic** (see the Library 'Study Skills' *CCG Online* page for key tips). Don't start writing your essay too soon! Research and thinking come first before putting words on the page. Another big mistake is to write an essay at the last minute. You will lose marks if it doesn't flow well, words are spelled wrong or your punctuation is sloppy because you didn't allow time for editing and proofreading.

### Essay Structure:

'Poor structure' is a common comment tutors make on student essays. The structure of your essay comes from your plan and helps you elaborate your argument/s. An essay has three main parts:

#### 1. Introduction

This 'sets the scene' by giving a little background to the topic. It then should state what the essay is going to do and importantly give your argument. It should be no longer than one paragraph, or two maximum.

#### 2. Main body

The main essay body addresses the title and is organised into paragraphs. Each paragraph should deal with a different aspect of the issue, but they should also try and link in some way to those that precede and follow it.

For most paragraphs, the first sentence or two should tell the reader what the paragraph will cover. It may either begin a new point (or topic) or follow on from the last paragraph, but will have a different focus or go into more specific detail. In the last sentence it should be made clear if the point has come to an end or if it continues in the next paragraph. Here is a brief example of flow between two paragraphs:

It is known from hieroglyphs that the Ancient Egyptians believed that cats were sacred. They were also held in high regard, as suggested by their being found mummified and entombed with their owners (Smith, 1969). In addition, cats are portrayed aiding hunters. Therefore, they were both treated as sacred, and were used as intelligent working companions. However, today they are almost entirely owned as pets.

In contrast, dogs have not been regarded as sacred, but they have for centuries been widely used for hunting in Europe. This developed over time and eventually they became domesticated and accepted as pets. Today, they are seen as loyal, loving and protective members of the family, and are widely used as working dogs.

(Taken from the University of Portsmouth study skills website - <https://myport.port.ac.uk/study->

### 3. Conclusion

The conclusion should: (a) remind readers what the essay was meant to do (b) provide an answer to the title and (c) reminds readers how you reached your answer. Don't forget your reference list as well! (Remember to use APA style – see separate library referencing guide).

Academic Writing Style **essential** Tips:

- Write in formal style – avoid common colloquial or spoken language e.g. “stuff”, “really”, “things”, “a bit” and “sort of”. Also avoid contractions such as “isn’t”, “didn’t”, “it’ll”, “couldn’t”. It is better to say “for example” rather than “e.g.” as well.
- Academic work is open-minded and enquiring; as a student you should generally question arguments rather than being too certain. Words like ‘possibly’, ‘probably’, ‘likely’, ‘seems’, ‘may’ and ‘could’ tend to feature in good academic writing instead of ‘should’, ‘ought’ and ‘must’. Don’t be too black and white.
- Be succinct and not too wordy when you write. Readers of your assignments need to understand exactly what you mean, in as few words as possible. When re-reading what you have written, you should always check that you have been as precise and concise as possible.
- Write in an impersonal way. This means avoiding using “I”, “my” or “me” as well as “we”, “our” or “us”. For example, instead of writing “I would argue that ...”, you might write: “It could be argued that ...”.

**Checklist** - Your teacher/tutor wants to see an essay that ...

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|---|--|
| ✓ answers the question                                | ✓ contains relevant information to support your argument |
| ✓ shows you have read widely                          | ✓ uses consistent and accurate referencing               |
| ✓ demonstrates you have evaluated a range of evidence | ✓ conforms to academic style and is easy to read         |
| ✓ proves you understand the question                  | ✓ is well presented                                      |
| ✓ has a clear argument                                | ✓ is grammatically correct                               |
| ✓ is well structured and organised                    | ✓ has been proofread for mistakes.                       |

Any questions? Please ASK us!