



Guide to Essay Writing

Study Development Factsheet

There are several stages involved in creating an effective essay at university. This factsheet provides a step-by-step guide to writing better essays. For each stage, we have explained why it is important, and then outlined the key things that you need to do.

Stage 1: Analyse the question

This stage ensures you answer the question(s) fully.

- Identify important subject words in the title.
 - Identify instruction words and decide what you need to do.
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Stage 2: Check the assessment guidelines

This stage is important to ensure you fulfil the assessment criteria and meet the learning objectives.

- Read the assessment guidelines thoroughly.
 - Check you understand the learning objectives.
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Stage 3: Make a rough plan

This stage helps you to identify relevant research topics and limit unnecessary reading.

- Brainstorm: write down your ideas and identify what you need to research.
 - Mind-map your initial ideas: try to identify links, common themes and a possible order.
 - Use reading lists to look for clues and select the most relevant sources.
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Stage 4: Read/research and make notes

This improves your understanding and ensures you provide reliable, academic evidence for your ideas.

- Start with an overview of each book or article: look at the table of contents, the abstract, the subheadings.
 - Think of your key questions: have them in front of you as you read, to keep you focussed.
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- Write down the answers as you find them, keeping a clear record of sources and page numbers.
- Write a short summary of what each source says before moving on to the next one.

Stage 5: Plan the structure of your essay

A good plan keeps you on track and highlights how much weight (how many words) to give each topic.

- Draw a mind-map or spider diagram.
- Use colour and images to connect ideas.
- Identify an appropriate / logical order.
- Draw up a list of points and subpoints.
- Divide up your word count: allow 10% each for the introduction and the conclusion, and decide how much to spend on each of your points and subpoints.

Stage 6: Draft the body of your text

This stage enables you to present and develop your argument.

- Write a paragraph for each idea:
 - Introduce the idea.
 - Explain the idea.
 - Give supporting evidence.
 - Use [signposting words and phrases](#) to move from one paragraph to the next.

Stage 7: Edit and check and against your plan

This stage ensures your points answer the question and are presented in a logical order.

- Think Big – Have you followed your plan?
- Think Medium – Does each paragraph stick to one point?
- Think Small – Does each sentence make sense?



Stage 8: Write the introduction and conclusion

The introduction needs to make a good first impression and present your argument. The conclusion clearly states the position you have

arrived at.

- The introduction should state the position you are taking (your ‘thesis statement’) and give an outline of your structure.
- The conclusion should sum up key points and implications, and clarify the ‘message’ that you want the reader to remember.

Stage 9: Proofread

Good spelling, grammar and punctuation make your ideas clearer, and stop you losing marks.

- Read your work aloud, paying particular attention to commas (short pauses) and full stops (longer pauses). Avoid contractions: write ‘do not’ for ‘don’t’.
- [Accessibility tools such as Microsoft Editor and Read&Write](#) are available through your YSJ account. Such software goes beyond spellchecking to include read aloud and immersive reader modes that intuitively help you to revise and improve your work.

Stage 10: Referencing

It is important that you acknowledge the sources of the ideas that you have used, to avoid plagiarism.

- Go to [the Library’s referencing page](#) for guides specific to your course’s referencing style.
- List all your sources in alphabetical order by surname of author in the reference list.

Support: Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1 to 1 and small group tutorials.

- Join a tutorial or workshop on the [Study Development tutorial and workshop webpage](#) or search ‘YSJ study development tutorials.’
- Access our Study Success resources on the [Study Success webpage](#) or search ‘YSJ study success.’