

14 Hard-Earned Tips For Writing A Good University Essay

1. **Ask Yourself.** Before you read ANYTHING, read the title of the essay and jot down some thoughts. What's it about? Are there any words that are ambiguous or need defining? Is this about your opinion or someone else's or an analysis of all positions? If you don't do this, you'll read one book and agree with that one, then another one that takes the opposite view and you'll find you agree with that one too! Before you know it, you don't know what **you** think any more. By outlining stuff first you can target research to support your position. If the overwhelming evidence contradicts you, then you either have to defend yourself or change your position, but at least you HAVE a position!
2. **Structure.** All essays have the same general structure: say what you're going to say, say it, then say what you've said, but they don't have to be written in that order. If you want the introduction to outline your arguments, write the arguments first, draw your conclusion, THEN write the introduction, showing the path the essay will take. Your professors won't know that's what you've done, and with practice you'll quickly learn how to do it until you can do it first (for exams).
3. **Using the Library.** Your professors will have given you book lists. Primary reading sources are not optional. Those you HAVE to read. Secondary reading sources are another matter. Check if they have an index or a contents page. If not, put them away as you do not have time to read them all the way through to find out if they *might* have something relevant. If you get time later and you're scrabbling for something to read (unlikely, I know), look at them then. Quickly skim read through the sections in the books relevant to your essay while you're in the library. Some will be so brief you can grab the references and quote then and there. Others you will need to pour over for a while. Take those, leave the rest and don't forget to return them when you're done, others will need them!
4. **Using the Library 2** Library staff are not there to do your research for you, so don't ask. There are courses run at the library if you're unused to using the Dewey system (or whatever cataloguing system they use) and you can ask the staff when the next one will be run. Library staff are there to collect and shelve books, check to see if something is in stock, arrange inter-library loans (if needed), monitor user behaviour, support teaching staff, run training for staff and students and a wealth of other things, but not do your work for you. Research is a necessary skill both at university and in the outside world where you will often be given tasks you haven't got a clue about and will have to research and teach yourself before you can even begin. Attend any courses the library or university/college is running, ask older students for some tips and then explore and practice. Simply choose a topic, use the computers to find books that might have the subject, use encyclopaedias to find out what the subject might come under to aid your search. Learn!
5. **References** If you quote anyone then show it's a quote and put a reference at the end. If you use someone's argument – e.g. 'as Tom Smith suggested (Smith, 1992) we can address...' then you put the reference link right by the section referring to the person's work. Word 2010 includes 'insert citation' under References and you can add a bibliography (everything you referenced) or works cited (only the stuff you specifically refer to in text) at the end according to various standard conventions for layout and formatting. I can tell you that when those of us who had to write large scale works before Office 2007 saw that, there was a lot of swearing, mostly because we wished they'd done it sooner and saved us a lot of time. My Ph.D. had over 250 bibliographic references and I've no idea how many in text references and the whole lot had to be done according to the

standard by hand. It was tedious, it was annoying, it was necessary. You have no excuse! The result of the insertion above, all done by MS Word, is below (and made up, in case you were wondering) and once you set up your citations you can insert over and over again with no more effort whatsoever on your part.

Bibliography

Smith, T. (1992). The Key to Reading. In S. Snodgrass, *Books About Books* (pp. 57-73). New York: US Publishing House.

6. **Argument.** All essays in the arts and social sciences are about argument. If there's no argument (that is a series of premises leading to a conclusion), it's not a good essay. 'Discuss' means look at examples and counter-examples and usually asks you to decide which is more convincing, 'analyse the difference between' requires you state the advantages and disadvantages of each side and at the conclusion you summarise the key elements, 'compare and contrast' requires you demonstrate full understanding of the pros and cons of each side. More commonly, you'll get a question that asks something along the following lines: To what extent do you think... or How far does X succeed in... or one of the above with the added 'which do you think...?' on the end. These are asking for YOUR OPINION and that means you need to offer a position and defend it. Do it!
7. **Grades.** I've taught in the US and the UK (University of Durham UK and University of Michigan US) and there is less difference between the two grade systems than you might think. In sum it goes like this:
 - a. 3rd Class Degree/D grade essay – You've attended some lectures but you've read nothing/not understood what you've read and you're incredibly confused.
 - b. 2:2/C grade essay – You've attended lectures, you show some extra reading, but you're still a bit confused on key points and you didn't answer the question.
 - c. 2:1/B grade essay – You've attended lectures and tutorials, you've read the stuff, you understand it, you're competent and you answered the question.
 - d. 1st/A and A* grade essays – You've attended everything, read the lot, understood it all, answered the question AND you can relate what you've learned to the wider body of knowledge within the subject, so you get the bigger picture and have demonstrated that with a flowing and convincing argument.
8. **Getting to the top.** As you can see, getting from a 2:1/B to a 1st/A/A* is quite the jump, which is why many fail. You have to REALLY know your stuff and be prepared to take a risk, offering a connection you were not taught and defending it successfully. Unless you feel really confident of your stuff you might not want to take that risk in exams, but in practice essays you can. Just remember you MUST DEFEND YOUR POSITION! If you can't defend it, don't touch it.
9. **Length.** Your university professors used to be students too, you know (as hard as that may be to believe!) and we know all the tricks. If we say we want 6 sides of A4 then that does NOT mean 6 sides of 18 pt font with a 4cm margin all round and double spacing. It means 6 sides, 1.5 line spacing, 12 point font (Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri), standard margins. Less than that and the chances are you haven't answered the question fully. More than that and you're probably waffling. If we say we just want 1 A4 side outlining an idea then that's the same margins, line spacing and

font size as above. Please don't try and con us, because we are many things but stupid is not one of them. We don't like marking any more than you like writing the essays, but if we're to help you learn the subject and get an idea of how well you're doing we don't have any choice.

10. **Jokes. Avoid!** They rarely translate and what you may think is hilarious we may see as silly and pointless. That said, I did put two jokes in my Ph.D. and one of my examiners (the late and much lamented Murray MacBeath from the University of Stirling) made a point in my Viva to say thank you and that he had much enjoyed them, but these were so cerebral and so relevant to the text they were more a wry aside (in a footnote) than an out and out joke. Unless it specifically addresses a point you are trying to make that can't be made better any other way, don't even think about it!
11. **The Basics 1.** Spelling and grammar are not optional extras. In many subjects accurate use of language is the key to a good essay. I remember hearing of one student essay that made the rounds of a philosophy dept. where the student referred to the 'phallicy of Freudian understanding'. The irony of the spelling error was not lost on the lecturers who shared the essay with a number of colleagues in need of a good laugh. Language is the only tool you have here. Its accurate use means the difference between a good grade and becoming a laughing stock. Don't just run a spellcheck and accept everything it throws at you, the results can be disastrous. See here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OonDPGwAyfQ> for a brilliant spoof of the extremes, and here: <http://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~norman/Jokes-file/StudentBloopers.htm> for a collection of errors that will have many of you on the floor laughing. For the sake of a few minutes extra work it's a no-brainer.
12. **The Basics 2.** Proof-reading. There's a trick for this. If you read your essay from beginning to end you will miss a load of errors for one simple reason: your brain knows what you MEANT to say and will insert/correct/delete as appropriate to give you that result. Instead, read it backwards, last sentence, then the next to last and so on. Yes, it will take you a lot longer and it will be more boring than you thought possible, but you will spot 99% of errors immediately. Mark them as you find them then go through and correct them all once you've finished.
13. **The Basics 3.** Each new idea needs a new paragraph. If you're struggling with basic grammar, find out if the university offers free classes to help you. In the UK we've become quite remiss when it comes to teaching grammar and I find many struggle with possessive S (where does the apostrophe go?), homonyms such as their/there/they're, two/to/too, etc., how and when to use paragraphs and so on. If you weren't taught it, how can you know it? There's no shame here unless you realise you have a problem and don't set about fixing it. So fix it.
14. **The Key.** Check you've answered the question. The difference between a 2:2/C and a 2:1/B is whether or not you've answered the question. If you do it nowhere else, make sure you specifically ask the question again in the conclusion and ANSWER IT! The whole essay should be leading to this so it should be easy. If you still don't know the answer, your essay still needs work. The answer should flow from the end of the essay like water downstream. When it doesn't it means there's a blockage somewhere upstream, find it and fix it.

Good Luck!