Aim of this factsheet

To outline all the steps required to submit an effective academic essay, with specific focus on planning, writing and improving.

Steps to success

Understand Initial Research Plan Specific Research Write Improve Final Proofread & Submit

Understand the question and what is required

It is essential that you attend all of your lectures and pay particular attention to the assignment resources section on Blackboard. Before starting you need to understand:

- The module learning outcomes and assessment criteria.
- The link between the assignment and the taught elements of your course.
- What is required – for example, word count, assignment format and submission arrangements.
- The main topic, plus any specific elements and what you are required to do. The key words used in assignment guidelines will help you to decide when to be descriptive, informative, analytical or persuasive. See our Terms and Definitions resources.

If you have any questions either clarify with your lecturer or discuss with your peers.
Initial research

✓ Brainstorm ideas and think about your search strategies.

✓ Access a wide range of resources (lecture notes, books, journals, case studies and websites) to gain an understanding of the whole topic and any related themes.

✓ Look for evidence of any agreements and disagreements between the authors and sources.

✓ Group your research together into a logical order (themes). You may not need everything you have found. It is sometimes more effective to discuss and evidence a few key points in detail, rather than to include lots of points with limited analysis.

✓ Keep your focus on answering the question and your tutor’s assignment guidelines.

As a general rule spend half your available time researching and planning, and then the other half drafting and finalising the essay.

Plan

Successful students plan the structure of their essay alongside managing their time and workload. Useful hints and tips include:

✓ For each theme or section write a list of discussion points with key words.

✓ Complete an outline structure.

✓ Try to assign an approximate word count to each section based on your assignment guidelines, the importance of each of your points and the range of evidence available.

✓ Using the approximate word counts you can then divide your time. Use the online Assignment Survival Kit to help break your work into achievable tasks.

Assistive technology tools

These can help you to improve your work and further develop your academic skills. When planning you may consider:

- MindGenius (available on student PCs) – this mind mapping software can help you to capture ideas, work out a structure for an assignment or represent information in a visual format, which may particularly help you with revision.

For more information on assistive technologies go to our guidance page.
A basic essay has a standard format:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>Set the scene and explain the importance of the overall subject. This may include a brief description and/or definition. Rephrase the question to state what you are going to do: this is the aim of your essay. Tell your reader how you are going to achieve this aim by outlining the themes / arguments /objectives of your essay - a route map of the structure of your essay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% of word count</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MAIN BODY</strong></td>
<td>Break up your essay according to your themes /arguments /objectives (route map). Use sections to separate the ideas – these could be more than one paragraph. Your paragraphs should connect to each other and follow on in a logical order. Link authors depending upon whether they agree or disagree with one another. Your role is to analyse the evidence and reasons offered in support of their position. You can then evaluate their arguments and draw your own conclusions. Use sources and evidence to back up and develop your arguments. Keep referring to the title, learning outcomes and assessment criteria and do not write about irrelevancies or give your personal opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80% of word count</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>Do not introduce any new material. Try not to summarise all the points but illustrate how your separate points build into one main idea or argument. Provide an overall view to answer the essay question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% of word count</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Specific Research

You should now be able to undertake additional research to add evidence to all the discussion points.

- Use your online Subject Guides if you are not familiar with the wide range of academic resources available.
- When researching keep a note of the all the texts used.
- Start your reference list and use RefZone to ensure the correct format.
- If you copy text word for word into your notes then highlight this and keep a note of the page number or specific URL, as this will be needed for your citation and reference list.

An essay is a continuous piece of prose. However we would recommend that you use subheadings for drafting purposes but remember to remove these from your final draft.

Write

You are now ready to write up your research. Present your argument through the texts you have read. Follow your outline structure with separate paragraphs to discuss each main point. Your tutor wants to see the evidence of your research to prove that your work is valid.

Remember that essays are never based upon your opinions.

Cite in the style required by your award. RefZone shows the university approved styles and can help you embed the citations into your work. Pay attention to the detail and be consistent.

Paragraphs should:-

- Include an introductory sentence. What is this paragraph about?
- Contain a focused discussion based on evidence. What is your argument on this?
- Demonstrate how it helps to answer the essay title and supports the aims and objectives.
- Link to the topic in the next paragraph.

You need to develop your academic writing style to ensure that your work is formal, concise, precise and evidence based.

If unsure, please see our online resources or make an appointment to discuss this with one of our expert Tutors.
Improve (this is far more work than just proofreading)

Do not be afraid to take drastic action when improving your first draft. **You may need to repeat this process several times to ensure an effective essay.**

- Does your writing answer the brief or question? Read the question, brief, learning outcomes and assessment criteria again, making sure you know what you are trying to achieve.

- Have you followed your plan and kept within the total word count?

- Use the word count sensibly. If a section is worth 20% of the marks, then it should be approximately 20% of the word count.

- Read through your work to ensure you have not repeated yourself.

- Is your writing too descriptive (concentrating on who, what, when, and where)? To gain higher marks you should focus on questions like why, how and to what extent, to illustrate discussion and analysis.

- Are you being critical and questioning or are you just accepting what has been written? See the resources.

- Have you used too many direct quotes? These will not get high marks so try to paraphrase as many as possible to show understanding.

- Have you used a full range of sources of information (for example, books, journals and websites)?

- Does your essay ‘flow’ from one theme to another in a ‘logical’ way?

- Read the first sentence of each paragraph. You should be able to follow your ideas or argument even without the details of the rest of the paragraph. Does the order of your argument make sense, or are you finding yourself jumping from one thought to another and back again? If this is the case, you need to rethink the structure (De Montfort University, 2017).

- Read your essay aloud: does it sound right? This is the best way of checking that you have used punctuation correctly. If it does not, you may find that it could do with rewriting. See our Punctuation resources.

- Make sure you keep saving your work (do not just save on a USB stick). Do not overwrite a previous draft of your essay as you might delete something which you later decide was useful. Open up a folder for your essay and save your drafts as version 1, version 2 ... until you have the final version and are ready to submit.

- Ensure that quotes are correctly formatted, in the style appropriate to your subject.
Final Proofread

Assistive technology tools

These can help you to improve your work and further develop your academic skills. When proof reading you may consider:

- Text-to-speech software – reads text documents aloud and you are then more likely to hear errors. For example, you may wish to try out the inbuilt tools in Microsoft Word (try ‘Read Aloud’ or ‘Speak’ depending on the version).

For more information on assistive technologies go to our guidance page.

- It is best practice to have a break before proofreading, preferably of at least a day. See the Proofreading resources.

- Try marking your own work against the assessment criteria.

- Read the work out loud. It is much easier to spot mistakes by doing this. Many prefer to print out a copy, others find it useful to use a phone to record the reading and listen back or use text to speak functions within Microsoft Word.

- Remember that a spell check does not recognise if the ‘wrong’ word is used, only if it is spelt incorrectly. For instance, it would not highlight if you used the words ‘no’ or ‘now’ instead of ‘know’ or ‘weather’ instead of ‘whether’.

- Make good use of the built-in thesaurus and synonyms to either find alternative words or to check that the word you have chosen is correct for your context. Lack of clarity and understanding will result in lower marks.

- Check that your work is in the correct format and that you have removed any subheadings and hyperlinks.

- Check that you are referencing consistently. Use RefZone as a guide.

- Save your final draft.

- Make any final changes required and save again.

Submit

- Make sure that you know when, where and how to hand in your work.

- Do not leave it until the last minute if printing, as others will want to do this too.

- Always keep a copy of the essay for yourself.
References / Further reading


Try Searching our Library Catalogue for books which cover essay writing for your specific subject.

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For an appointment or further advice:

**Click:**  [Academic Skills Online Resources](#)

**Call:**  01785 353500

**Email:**  academicskills@staffs.ac.uk

**Visit:**  Skills Space, Thompson Library, Stoke / Blackheath Lane, Stafford / Shrewsbury Hospital

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