

How to Write an Academic Essay

At university most of the essays you write are to show you have understood the material presented in lectures and the reading you have done. These types of essays are not descriptive but are better called **argumentative**. Imagine you are in a court of law where you have to present factual information and evidence to convince a judge and jury of a point of view—this is what an argumentative essay does.

The essay topic

Look carefully at the essay topic—you are not asked to write on everything in the unit, just one particular aspect. Underline any key words—this must be the focus of your essay—keep coming back to this topic as you write.

Reading

Choose your reading very carefully—what you read already indicates to a lecturer whether you have paid attention and understood the unit. The lecturer has selected books and articles that he or she considers important for this unit and listed them in the bibliography—these are the best authors for you to read. If you read material not on a unit bibliography, you take a risk that you are reading a single, isolated point of view rather than the general consensus of scholarship. The University library has the type of academic books you need; local libraries do not usually have books with specific academic value. Read for information and constantly check you have understood what you read.

The web is a major trap for students. Lots of information is available but only a small part of this is of any value for university work. At university you are expected to be reading the works of the major scholars in the field—you will find this in books and **peer reviewed journal articles**. **Never use Wikipedia as a reference.**

Writing

When you have read sufficient to have understood the major issues for your topic, then **close** your books and write down three or four major points about the essay topic. If you can do this clearly then you are ready to start writing. If this is not clear, you have not really understood the reading and so you are not yet ready to write.

Begin to write your essay with the three or four major points as headings. **With the books closed** write what you recall and understand about the importance of these points for your essay topic. Imagine you have to give a talk to explain these points to someone who does not know anything. These points will be informative and they will explain some aspect of the essay topic. Writing with the books closed will ensure that you have understood the material, can focus your argument clearly, and use your own words—all of this is important as it demonstrates to your lecturer that you have understood the material.

An academic essay will contain real **facts** and **information** and **evidence** to support these facts. Much of this evidence you will find by your research and you must note this scholarship in a footnote to support your findings. Every page of your essay will have four or five footnotes as evidence to support your argument. In a biblical essay you will also need to give many references to the biblical text to support any statement you make e.g. *The healing of the blind man (John 9:1-18) indicates the truth of Jesus' claim to be the light of the world (John 8:12).*

A statement made without supporting evidence is useless—keep in mind that you are writing an argument—facts and evidence.

At this point you have perhaps three or four paragraphs of information on the topic making 3 or 4 separate points. This is the first stage of your essay.

Stage 2

Now you need to develop each of these three or four major points. You probably need to open your books and read again to gather specific information on these points. Still try not to just copy from the text but to gather the ideas and write them in your own words—with a footnote to the reference material. Keep your focus on the essay topic and don't be side tracked by other points that do not directly touch on the essay topic.

Now you probably have a skeleton of your essay—three or four major headings, with three or four paragraphs about each of the headings. At this stage it is important to make sure your essay is logical and that each point is connected into a whole argument. Once again imagine you are giving a talk to convince someone about the topic. See if you can present your argument without reading your essay—if you can, then it is probably clear.

Stage 3

Now you are ready to write your introduction and conclusion. These are related. An **introduction** sets out to explain in a brief manner your understanding of the topic and its importance and how you are going to discuss it. You will probably describe the three or four headings that you will use to develop your argument. A **conclusion** summarises what you have done and how what you have written addresses the topic of the essay.

First Draft

Your essay now has its final shape. Now you make sure you have it correctly presented. Check the Style guide (<http://www.acu.edu.au/Library/get/referencing/>) for to ensure that all footnotes and your bibliography are accurate. This should be 100% correct. Check the word length—if it is too long, see if you have unnecessary words, or if you have repeated the same idea. You are aiming at clarity, not long sentences or fancy language—clear, precise and to the point. Shorter is usually better than longer. If it is much shorter than expected, have you really got sufficient information? More reading may be needed.

Use the Spell check in your word processing program.

Complete the official Australian Catholic University cover page, which contains the unit code and title, the lecturer's name (check the spelling), the exact essay topic that you have chosen, your name, a declaration of originality, and so on.

(In a longer essay (10,000 words or more) a table of contents is needed, but not usually the case in undergraduate essays.)

Final Draft

Read your essay aloud to make sure you have written using complete sentences. Give your essay to someone else to read and check. It is not a good idea to have your lecturer to be the first person to read your essay—another pair of eyes can pick up grammar and spelling errors. Make any corrections you or your reader pick up.

Completed Essay

Make sure you save a copy of the essay on your computer. Print it out. Staple the top left corner (with the cover sheet on the front) and submit it.