



Durham  
University



Skills:

Essay Writing

# Essay Writing

## Planning

### Why are you being asked to write an essay?

An essay is the best way for your tutor to assess not only your understanding of a subject, but also to evaluate your research and writing skills. For you, an essay is a fantastic opportunity to delve deeper into a particular subject and develop skills that you will use throughout the rest of your life. For your tutor, your work will also demonstrate to them where you may need extra help or support to make your essays even better for future exams or coursework.

### Understand what's being asked of you.

This may seem obvious but so many people receive poor marks for their essays simply because the text doesn't actually reflect or answer what's being asked in the essay title! This is a fundamental error and one that's easy to avoid. Take the time to consider the title you have been given and break it down into its key elements. Here is an example of how to do this:

This is the key to the essay – how? What did he do and *how* was he able to do this? What factors enabled him to do this and *how* did he use them to his advantage?

This seems obvious but this is who the essay wants you to address. It doesn't say 'The Nazi party' so although it will be natural and appropriate to discuss the party in relation to this question – focus on Hitler as an individual and as leader of the Nazi party.

**How was Hitler able to rise to power so successfully between 1928 and 1933?**

The rise to power is what you must specifically focus on, don't get side-tracked by the many other aspects of Hitler's activities. How did he go from the leader of a relatively small party in 1928 to Chancellor in 1933?

This is really giving you a clue. You're not being asked to evaluate how successful a rise it was – but to focus on how it was made possible.

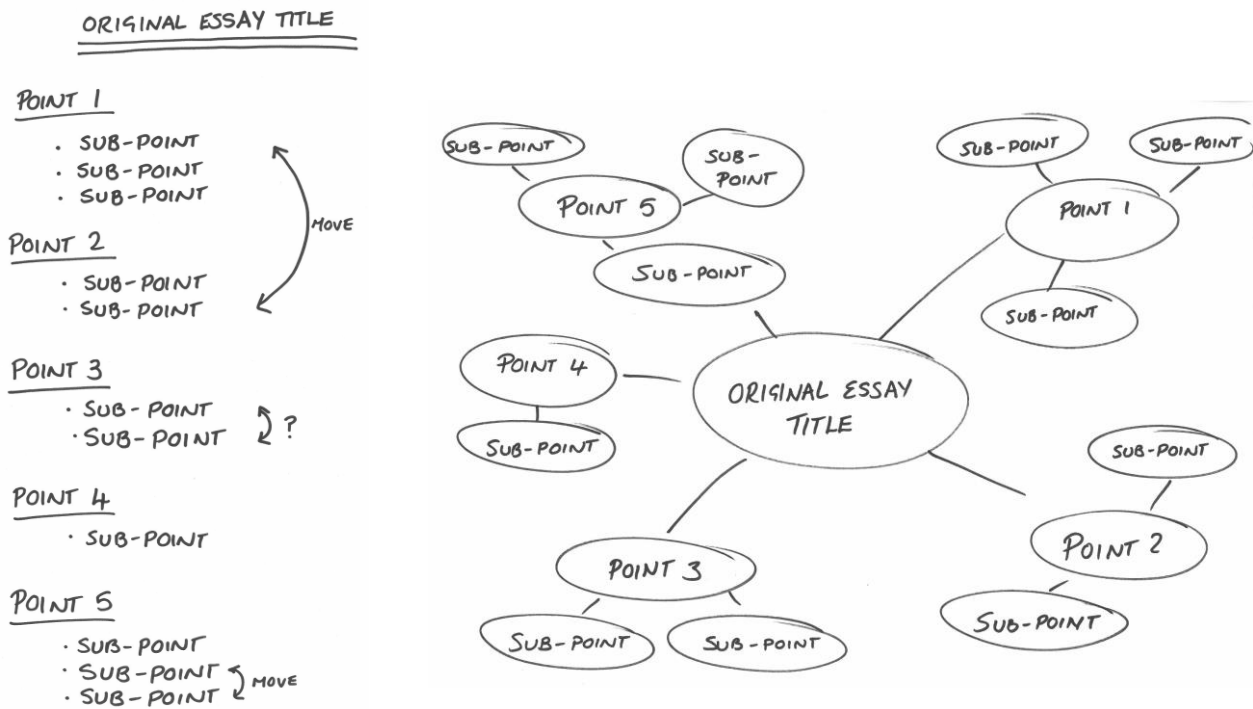
These dates represent exactly what period you must discuss. Although it may be appropriate to include a brief insight into what came before in perhaps an introductory paragraph – your essay must focus on this period.

### Structure.

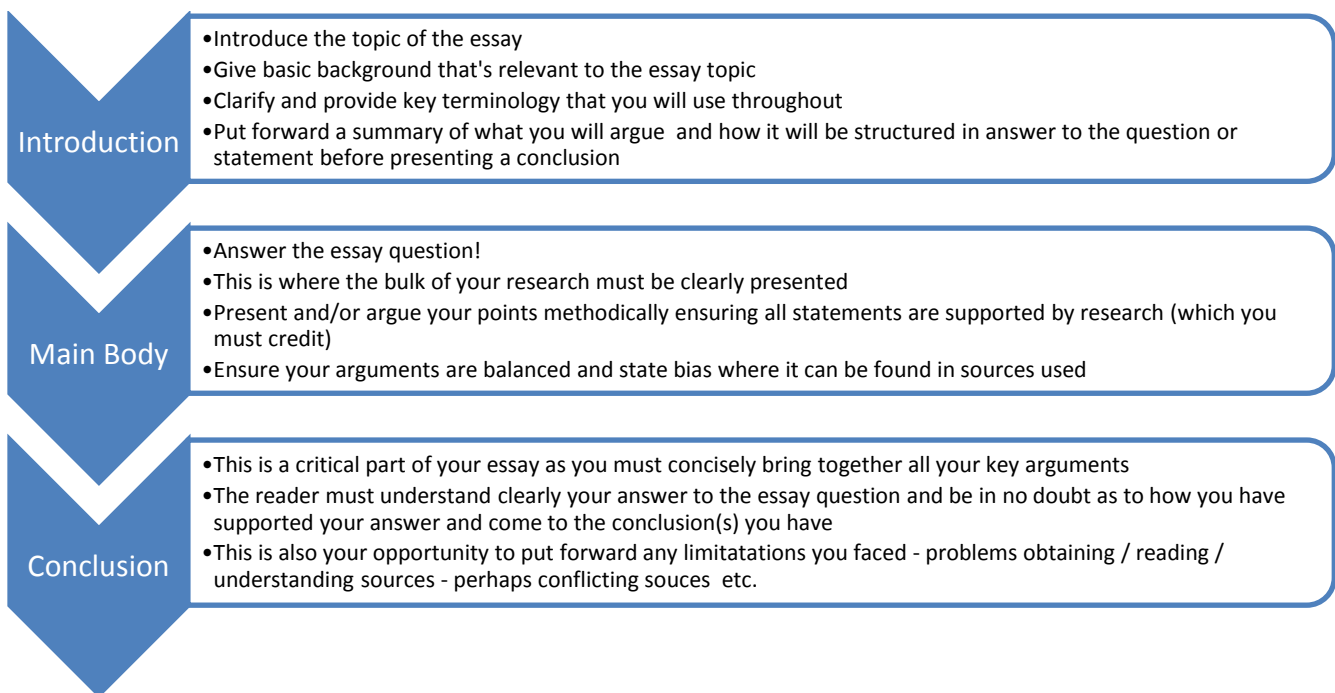
It is now important to now take the time to plan a basic structure for your essay. Some people find it better to plan a very detailed structure and others a simpler one. The important thing is to remain flexible as your structure may change as you research further and find additional points to consider. However you want to

do it is fine but it is much easier to start with at least a rough plan to help guide your research than to have no plan, otherwise both your research and writing will lack focus which will then waste valuable writing time.

One way of doing this may be to build on the example given above and further break down the elements of the question into sub-questions. Some people like to make lists of these sub questions and place them into an order that seems logical whereas others may like to use spider diagrams to further develop particular points that will become key paragraphs and arguments.



A basic structure of an essay is often as follows:



It may be appropriate at the end of the essay to suggest other questions that have arisen during your research and the writing of the essay as this could demonstrate deeper understanding of the topic.

## Writing your essay

If you have understood the question and have planned your essay well, then the writing part of the essay will take you time, but should not be too stressful. The most important factor in this will be effective research and use of sources (see further resources at the end of this document). Just remember: answer the question! Make every paragraph useful and meaningful – the first sentence should introduce the point you wish to discuss and the last should offer a conclusion to the paragraph and potentially lead in to the next (if you have got your structure right. Do not be afraid to work on your structure throughout, it will often change as your research develops.



## Style

Writing essays and projects at A-level is great preparation for writing at University or potentially in the workplace if you need to write reports. Academic writing is different from most of the writing you encounter in your day to day life such as in magazines, newspapers, social media or between friends. The key thing to remember is that academic writing is a *formal* style of writing and there are particular ways in which your information should be presented. Academic writing is different from the way in which you speak to people; here are some tips:

- Avoid using slang words or colloquiums. This may seem obvious as we take many words and phrases for granted and use them as part of our daily vocabulary but they are not appropriate for formal writing. Examples include OK, okay, yeah, awesome, dead hard, pretty difficult etc.
- It is important not to use contractions such as they're / it's / you're – you must take the time to write out these words in their entirety – they are / it is / you are.
- Always write complete sentences and use paragraphs where appropriate. A paragraph can be any length but generally contains information relating to a different point than has been discussed in the text before; paragraphs are there to help you structure your essay and make what you write clear to the reader.
- Unless within a project, you are asked to write 'reflectively' (where you are being asked about what you've learnt or a personal experience), avoid using the words I / we / you. This is suitable for more informal writing but not for formal or academic pieces of work.

### **For example:**

*I looked at the work of Brown and I thought the arguments he made weren't very clear.*

### **Could be:**

*The work of Brown was considered but the arguments presented seemed to lack clarity.*



- Write cautiously. Unless you are absolutely sure of a point you are making or of a definition you are providing, use phrases such as seemed to be / is likely to be / may have / appeared to. This is appropriate in the example given above where the arguments made 'seemed to' lack clarity – the arguments may lack clarity to you as the writer of the essay but that is subjective; it is your interpretation of the arguments.

The key thing to remember with formal academic writing is that it should feel impersonal as it is the presentation of a clear, concise, objective and thorough piece of research.

**Finally, check your spelling and grammar.** Then check it again or ask a friend or parent to check your work. Do not rely on spell checker. Not leaving enough time to do this or thinking that it doesn't really matter is one of the most common mistakes – do not fall into this trap as you may lose critical marks unnecessarily.



## Referencing

It is absolutely vital that you become familiar with how to reference your work correctly and appropriately for the following reasons:

- Accurate and complete referencing shows the depth and understanding of your research.
- To suggest that somebody else's ideas and work are yours, whether intentionally or not, is considered plagiarism (copying) for which the consequences can be serious.
- Correct referencing allows the reader to locate the original source and explore it in more detail.

Referencing methods are different between particular subjects, particularly at university level. How the reference is written is also different depending on whether you have referenced a book, article, webpage, personal communication or edited volume, Always check your exam body guidelines to see if they have a preferred method of referencing. If you have no clear guidance, the most important thing is to ensure your referencing is consistent. Two of the most popular methods of referencing are the Harvard System and numerical referencing.

**An example of Harvard referencing is below:**

**It has been argued that the fire, although devastating, occurred at a fortuitous time in the history of London (Adam, 1989).**

If you had directly quoted from a book written by Adam, you would include the page numbers. If you had already mentioned Adam's name in the text (e.g. Adam argues that the fire...), you would exclude his name from the brackets but include the publication date.

Then at the end of your essay, this reference would look like this in the list:

**Adam, D.C., 1989. *The Great Fire*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.**

This includes the author name, initials, date of publication, book title, edition number, where it was printed and the publisher name.

There are more details as to how to accurately reference on our webpages, take a look here:  
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/using/finding/refs/>

**An example of numerical referencing is below:**

**It has been argued that the fire, although devastating, occurred at a fortuitous time in the history of London (1).**

If you had directly quoted from a book written by Adam, you would include the page numbers (e.g. p23).

Then at the end of your essay, this reference would look like this in the list:

**Adam, D.C. *The Great Fire*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1989.**

This includes family name, initial(s), title of book, place of publication, publisher and year. Note the year is placed at the end of this reference, unlike in the Harvard System.

**One last piece of advice regarding referencing – NEVER leave it all until the end! Write down the page numbers of quotes etc. as you go or you will spend more time looking for them at the end than it took you to write the essay.**

## What's the difference between a bad, average, good or excellent essay?

All marking systems are different depending on the subject and what's being asked of you but as a general rule, here are some things to consider.

Poor Essay	Average Essay	Good Essay	Excellent Essay
<p><i>Doesn't attempt to answer the question. Inappropriate style of writing.</i></p> <p><i>Poor structure where introduction fails to set the scene and conclusion doesn't bring together points raised.</i></p> <p><i>Poor spelling and grammar throughout.</i></p> <p><i>Used limited, inappropriate or no sources.</i></p> <p><i>Presented no coherent arguments.</i></p> <p><i>Statements not supported by sources.</i></p> <p><i>No reference list.</i></p>	<p><i>Made some attempts to answer the question but lacked coherence.</i></p> <p><i>Structure could be improved for clarity.</i></p> <p><i>Introduction limited in scope but conclusion brings together some points raised.</i></p> <p><i>Numerous spelling and grammar mistakes.</i></p> <p><i>Limited use of sources with some attempt at referencing but some missing.</i></p>	<p><i>Answered the question in a coherent manner with arguments supported by appropriate sources.</i></p> <p><i>Good analysis of sources consulted.</i></p> <p><i>Writing style appropriate and logical structure.</i></p> <p><i>Limited or no spelling and grammar mistakes.</i></p> <p><i>Good attempt at referencing with good number and range of sources consulted.</i></p>	<p><i>Answers the question throughout the essay and very well summarised in conclusion.</i></p> <p><i>Appropriate and excellent writing style throughout – clear and concise with no spelling or grammatical mistakes.</i></p> <p><i>Logical structure with coherent narrative throughout.</i></p> <p><i>Excellent breadth of sources consulted and well analysed and considered – used appropriately to form and support arguments.</i></p> <p><i>Referenced correctly throughout with complete, consistent list.</i></p>

### In summary, remember:

- Understand what's being asked of you. (Who, what, where, when and how).
- Plan your essay or project for more efficient researching and writing.
- Use an appropriate writing style.
- Check for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Referencing is critical – don't leave it until the end.

# Further Resources:

## Skills You Need's essay planning and writing guides:

- <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/essay-planning.html>
- <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/essay-writing.html>

## Essay plan template for exams (still useful for non-exam essays):

<http://www.thestudygurus.com/files/products/ESK/%5BTSG%5D%20Essay%20Plan%20Template.pdf>

## Tips on analysing essay questions:

<http://teaching.shu.ac.uk/ds/english/essayguide/interpret/analysing.htm>

## Harvard College's Writing Center's Writing Resources:

<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/resources>

- This also includes how to use topic sentences and signposting: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/topic-sentences-and-signposting>
- Advice on essay structure: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure>
- And a guide to using resources: <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

## Durham University's advice on referencing and citations:

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/using/finding/refs/>

## Durham University Library Guide to writing citations and bibliographies:

[http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/library/using/Bibliography\\_2014.docx](http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/library/using/Bibliography_2014.docx)

## Leeds University Referencing Guide:

<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-referencing>

## De Montfort University's guide to academic writing style (also has useful links to other areas of essay writing):

<http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Support/Heat/index.php?page=488>

## Cite This For Me (online bibliography generator – there is a charge to continue using this, but it is very useful for showing you how to make your own references and bibliographies):

<https://www.citethisforme.com/>

## Oxford Royal Academy has a number of articles on essay writing; here's a few:

- How to write better essays: 6 practical tips: <https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/tips-techniques-essay-writer.html>
- How to Write Essays that Answer the Question: <https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/how-to-answer-essay-questions.html>
- How to Write Dazzlingly Brilliant Essays: <https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/how-to-write-brilliant-essays.html>