



## ASSIGNMENT COVER PAGE

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Assignment Title: Many first-year university students claim that the high-school essay does not prepare them to write the university essay. From your research, briefly outline how such students can be motivated to master the writing of the university essay, and then describe an essay-writing process that they might follow with success.

Due Date: 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2014Date of Submission: 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2014

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Agree Date: 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2014

### Abstract

Many university students, especially first-year students, find the writing of the university essay a challenging task, claiming they received inadequate preparation at high school. This paper has argued that these students can begin to overcome their essay-writing difficulties when they understand the essential difference between the university and high-school essays, a difference that is directly linked to the fundamental purpose of the university itself, which is to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own. When students see the value of and personally identify with that purpose, they will be more motivated to apply genuine effort to master the writing of the university essay because it is the premier measure of a student's capacity for critical and independent thinking. The paper concluded with a step-by-step essay-writing process that students might follow with success, together with the criteria against which the university essay is assessed.

### Author's Note

This essay-writing model has been prepared as a guide for students who may not yet have written a college essay, or who are unsure how to go about writing a university-style essay and how to set it out. The model is based on the APA format. Please understand that there are alternative formats in use at Avondale, such as Turabian and MLA. Consult your lecturer about his or her preferred format for your essays. The use of headings within an essay (as in this model) is not common to all essays, and you should consult with your lecturer about whether headings are required or not, and how they should be formatted if they are required. If you do use headings, be careful that you use them for their intended purpose which is to help your readers navigate your text. Do not use them as a means to impose structure on your essay; the flow and structure of your essay should be obvious without the headings.

An essay-writing process first-year students might follow with success.

First-year university students frequently experience difficulty in the writing of essays, sometimes claiming they received inadequate preparation in high school. While not addressing the claim specifically, this essay begins by identifying the essential difference between university and high-school essays, a difference that is directly linked to the fundamental purpose of the university to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own. The essay argues that when students better understand and identify with this purpose, they will be more inclined to apply genuine effort to master the challenge of writing the university essay because it is the university essay that is the premier measure of a student's capacity for critical and independent thinking. The paper goes on to describe the essay-writing process and then lists the criteria by which the university essay is assessed.

### The Difference between the University and High-school Essays

One of the first things that university students, especially first-year students, need to settle in their thinking – and here they can be guided by their lecturers – is how the university essay differs from the high-school essay. They will discover that the two essay types are similar in format (introduction–body–conclusion), but that they differ substantially in scope and intensity. Where high-school essays tend to follow set guidelines, such as the 5-paragraphs/3-references model, the university essay has greater scope to include as many paragraphs and references as are necessary to develop and defend the thesis of the essay. Intensity is related to scope and refers to the degree of cognitive effort required when researching, reflecting on, and writing the essay. There is a clear expectation by universities that this effort will be at the highest levels, an expectation that is linked to the purpose of the university itself: to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own. This is echoed by London University's Kevin Sharpe (2009) who argued that the role of higher education is to “develop ... [students'] critical faculties and sharpen their expositional and argumentative skills” (para. 6).

This enabling role of the university is of conspicuous value because the capacity for independent, reasoned and critical thinking is arguably the single most important capacity that students can employ to reach their full potential; it is the catalyst for their long-term success. If students see the value of this capacity for their own lives, they are more likely to become motivated to secure it (Center on Education Policy, 2012) and to put in the mental effort to do so. As the newly motivated first-year student engages with the academic culture of university life, he or she will develop these important skills and will realise that the best way to demonstrate his or her growing confidence as an independent, critical thinker, is through the university essay.

The next, and final, section presents guidelines that first-year students might follow with success as they plan, research, reflect on, and write their first university essay.

**Comment [I1]:** The introduction begins by identifying the focus of the essay and providing essential context. It then lists the main sections/points the essay will cover, doing so in the order that these will appear in the paper.

**Comment [I2]:** This is the thesis statement.

**Comment [I3]:** You may or may not be required to use headings in your paper. Check with your lecturer. If you do use headings, use them sparingly. This is a **Level 1 Heading**. It comes at the start of a new section. It is centred and is in **Bold Type** and all the principal words begin with a capital. The purpose of headings is to facilitate the reading of your paper; they must NOT be used to impose structure on an essay. The structure and flow of your essay should be obvious without headings.

**Comment [I4]:** This word had been added to the original quote for purposes of clarity. It is preceded by an ellipsis (...) to indicate that some words which were in the original quote have been left out. Note that the direct quote from Sharpe is within double quotation marks (“...”).

**Comment [I5]:** This direct quote is taken from an electronic version of *The Times Higher Education* supplement. No page numbers are recorded, and so the paragraph number is given instead. Note the abbreviation for ‘paragraph’.

**An Essay-Writing Process for the University Essay**

**Comment [16]:** This is another Level 1 Heading.

The different essay-writing guides list various steps in the process, but essentially these can be distilled into four major stages: attending to preliminaries, planning the essay, researching the topic, and writing the essay.

**Stage 1: Attending to Preliminaries**

**Comment [17]:** This heading is Level 2. It is left justified and is in **Bold Type** and all the principal words begin with a capital.

Attending to preliminaries begins as soon as you receive your course outlines and know what assignments are due and when they are due. First, make a diary-list of these tasks and their due dates for all subjects. This will help you to manage your time efficiently. Generally you will need to work on more than one essay at a time, so it pays to be prepared. Second, if you have a choice of essay topics, carry out a quick survey of each topic by consulting a textbook or other recommended reading or a credible web-source, so you are able to make an informed choice about which topic to choose (Germov, 2000, p. 21). Third, when you have chosen your topic, draw up a tentative list of possible sources by checking the library catalogues and databases.

**Stage 2: Planning the Essay**

When you are ready to begin your essay your first task is to make sure that you fully understand what the question is about and what you are expected to do. Be guided by the key terms in the question itself. These are of two types: process terms (*describe, suggest, etc.*) that specify the approach you are to take in answering the question; and content terms (*essay-writing, first-year students, etc.*) which tell you what to focus on in the essay (Smith, 2002, p. 47). You must know exactly what these key terms are telling you so that your answer is guided by, and limited to, those instructions.

**The outline.** Your next step is to draw up an outline. This will help you define “the focus and shape of your essay” (Casson, 2006, p. 7). Be guided by the topic question (since your essay must address that specific question), and also by any relevant background knowledge you might have gained from lectures or your preliminary reading. This is the time to do some brainstorming to identify/assess contributing ideas. Brainstorming is not undirected thinking as is often thought; rather, it emerges from what you already know about the topic through your reading. Use this to focus your brainstorming around the “ideas, issues, theories, arguments and evidence you are [already] aware of” (Germov, 2000, p. 28). The key purposes of the outline are to help you focus your ideas so they zero in on your topic, to arrange them in a suitable sequence, to guide you in developing your tentative thesis – if one is required, and it usually is – and to identify areas for further research. Don’t worry about getting your outline exactly right at this stage because it can be modified later as you gather and reflect on your material.

**Comment [18]:** This heading is Level 3. It opens the paragraph, and is included within the paragraph. It is in **Bold Type**. Only the first word begins with a capital (and also any proper nouns if there are any).

**Comment [19]:** This is a direct quote from Casson, and is within double quotation marks (“...”).

**Comment [10]:** The word ‘already’ was not in the original Germov quote, and so it is placed within square brackets to indicate that it has been added here.

### Stage 3: Researching the Topic

In stage three you begin your research in earnest. Guided by the outline, identify and access potential sources (books, journals and credible websites, some of which will already be on your tentative list of sources) and gather specific information that will help you expand your outline and shape it around your thesis. What you will look for in these sources is academic credibility and relevance to your topic and thesis. There is a whole sub-set of strategies to inform this process, but at a basic level you will need to do the following. One, familiarise yourself with the features of search portals such as *Primo Search* so that you can conduct refined searches efficiently.

Two, when you have identified potential sources, quickly assess their relevance to your topic by considering the abstract (if there is one), the table of contents, headings, the first and last paragraphs in particular sections or chapters, and the index (again, if there is one).

When you make your final selection of sources and begin to dig deeper into them, do so in a purposeful way by constantly evaluating the material to determine how it will contribute to your argument. Do not read every word, but learn to identify content that is relevant to your thesis by quickly scanning the signposts such as section headings, the first and last sentences of major paragraphs, summaries and conclusions. Read relevant content carefully, take notes, and move on. Lastly, use a practical note-taking method that will allow you to record your notes neatly and facilitate your later return to specific notes and their sources. Use headings (Germov, 2000, p. 72) or colour-codes to identify different categories of information. Ensure you record full bibliographical details of each reference you use.

### Stage 4: Writing the Essay

While it is common for students to begin writing their answer, at least tentatively, during stage three, it is in stage four that you will do this in a more controlled way and, guided by your outline and notes, complete your first draft. Pay particular attention to the relevance, flow, and coherence of your ideas. Each paragraph will *develop a single idea* (known as the topic of the paragraph) and there should be a logical flow of ideas from paragraph to paragraph. Ensure that your writing obeys the conventions of grammar, punctuation, academic style, and referencing, as well as the conventions of the specific discipline. Also, and this is important, your lecturer wants to hear *your* voice in the essay, not the voices of your sources. Your sources provide evidence for your argument — they do not provide the argument. Finally, if you are required to write an abstract for your essay, it is best to do so after you have written your first draft because only then will you have all the information necessary to write the abstract.

**The importance of careful editing.** When you have written your first draft put it aside for several hours and then come back to it for a close and careful editing. Make sure you cover

**Comment [I11]:** Your friendly Library staff will be happy to help you with this.

all important aspects: spelling and punctuation; appropriate word usage and expression; sentence and paragraph structure; the strength, coherence, relevance and completeness of your argument; word count; formatting; and referencing. When you are satisfied that your essay is as well-focused and error-free as you can make it, write your final draft and submit it.

**Criteria by which a high-quality essay is measured.** Will your completed essay attract a top grade? Yes, if it meets the following criteria:

- it displays high quality, independent work;
- it includes highly relevant concepts and information;
- it shows significant depth, fullness, and clarity of thought;
- it expresses ideas fluently and persuasively in accepted academic style;
- it exhibits superior, consistent and comprehensive coverage of the material;
- and it obeys all the conventions of the chosen referencing protocol (adapted from Avondale’s Faculty of Education “Written Assignment Guide,” 2010).

### Conclusion

Many university students, especially first-year students, find the writing of the university essay a challenging task. This paper has argued that these students will be better able to meet that challenge if they understand the essential difference between university and high-school essays, a difference that is directly linked to the fundamental purpose of the university to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own. When students better understand and identify with that purpose, they will be more inclined to apply genuine effort to master the challenge of writing the university essay. The paper concluded with a step-by-step essay-writing process that students might follow with success, together with the criteria against which the university essay is assessed.

**Comment [I12]:** The conclusion, in a sense, is an echo of your introduction and summarises the most significant aspects of your argument. Do not introduce any new details. However, if appropriate, you might briefly suggest the wider implications of the issues raised in your paper, or predict trends (Greetham, 2001, pp. 198-199). Generally, this is more relevant for research-type essays.

**Comment [I13]:** This is the thesis of the paper. It appears in an expanded format here because, unlike the thesis of the introduction, it includes more detail drawn from the essay.

## References

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