

1—THE PROCESS

There is no ‘magic’ trick to writing a superior essay. However, there are a number of strategies which, if diligently and appropriately applied, will almost guarantee you good marks for your essays. These strategies can be reduced to six basic steps:

Step 1: Make sure you **COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND** what the question is about and what you are expected to do. Your best guide in this are the key terms included in the question itself. These are of two basic kinds: **command terms** (usually verbs, but also nouns that imply action) such as *discuss, evaluate, assess, describe, argue* [verbs], and *comparison, analysis, rebuttal, appraisal, assessment* [nouns], that specify the approach you are to take in answering the question; and **discipline-specific terms** such as *eschatology, Renaissance, Piaget, Kantian*, that “refer to concepts, authors and theories relevant to a particular academic discipline” (Germov, 2000, p. 23). You must know exactly what these key terms are telling you so that your answer is guided by, **and limited to**, those instructions. If you have any doubts, consult your lecturer ASAP, **or have a chat with one of the college tutors (Tutors Den, Upper Library)**.

Step 2: Once you have a clear understanding of the essay question, you should define “the focus and shape of your essay” (Casson, 2006, p. 7). In other words, **DRAW UP AN OUTLINE** for your essay. In doing this you will be **guided primarily by the topic question** (since your essay must address that specific question), **but also by any relevant background knowledge** you might have (from lectures and your own reading). It is also helpful to do some **brainstorming** to identify/assess contributing ideas, and to do a **little preliminary reading** around the topic (in an encyclopaedia or class text) as this helps you to see the wider context. Don’t worry too much about getting your outline ‘exactly right’ at this stage because it can be modified later as you gather and digest your material. The principal purposes of the outline are:

- to help you focus your ideas so they zero in on your topic,
- to arrange your ideas into a suitable sequence (which will then be reflected in the sequence of the essay itself), and to guide you in developing your thesis statement. [A thesis statement is a brief (often one sentence) summary of the main conclusion that your essay reaches about the topic, and often begins as follows: This essay argues that....]
- to identify the key areas for your further research and reading.

Step 3: Guided by your draft outline, **IDENTIFY USEFUL SOURCES** (books, journals, websites) and **GATHER MATERIAL FROM THESE SOURCES**. There is a whole sub-set of strategies to inform and facilitate this process (and I recommend you consult an essay-writing handbook to discover these and other useful strategies), but at a fundamental level you will need to master the following aspects:

- learn **to identify and use key terms** in order to refine your searches, whether in the library catalogues and databases (such as ProQuest) or online.
- once you identify potential sources, **learn to assess their value quickly** by, for example, 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). [Here’s a tip: Books with a comprehensive index are almost always far more useful than books without one. When consulting an index, run your finger down **every item**, rather than just the few you have identified as potentially useful. You will often be agreeably surprised to discover material that might relate to your topic, but which you had not thought of.]
- **devise a practical note-taking method** that will allow you to record your notes neatly and will also facilitate your later return to specific notes and/or to the source from which you took the notes. Some students like to use cue cards for this purpose; others might use a notebook. Use headings or colour-codes to identify particular categories of information. Also, **ensure you record full bibliographical details, including page numbers, of each reference you use**. This will save you hours of time when you come to write up your Reference List or Bibliography, or if you need to return to a specific source to check up on something.

- as you read your material, **do so in a purposeful way**, rather than simply reading in the hope that you might find something useful. **Be constantly assessing and analysing what you read** in order to determine the significance and relevance of the material. **Look for relationships** “between ideas—patterns, contrasts, etc.—and start classifying your notes under different headings” (Casson, 2006, pp. 9-10) relating to the different elements and aspects of your paper. As you explore/assess/analyse your material, you should also be thinking about and **developing your thesis**, which is the central argument of your paper (Casson, 2006, p. 11).

Step 4: It is common for students to begin writing out their answer, at least tentatively, as they gather and analyse material during stage 3. Stage 4, however, is when you will do this in a more direct and controlled way, anticipating your final draft. It is when, guided by your outline and notes and any preliminary writing you may have done, and by your thesis, you **WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT**. Pay particular attention to the following aspects:

- **the appropriateness, flow, and coherence of your ideas.** These must not only be relevant to your topic and to your argument/discussion/thesis, but must also be presented in a coherent and unified way. Make sure each paragraph focuses on and develops a single idea (often called the *topic* of the paragraph) that is obviously linked to the idea(s) of the previous paragraph(s) and anticipates the idea(s) of the following paragraph(s).
- **the correctness of your language.** Ensure that your writing obeys the conventions of grammar, punctuation, and academic style, as well as the conventions of the particular discipline.
- **the accuracy of your language.** Use words that clearly and economically (no padding!) reflect your thoughts.
- **the accuracy and appropriateness of your references.** Ensure you follow the exact format of whichever referencing style you are using. Make sure that you acknowledge all your sources and that you clearly indicate when you are using the actual words from those sources (such quoted excerpts must be enclosed within inverted commas).

Step 5: Put your first draft aside for a while (several hours at least) and then come back to it for **CLOSE AND CAREFUL EDITING**.

- Edit your work with specific purpose. Some students like to edit their work in stages. They might first edit for spelling mistakes (on **NO ACCOUNT** should you rely solely on your spell-checker to handle this task), then they might edit for syntax, then they might edit for the overall flow of the piece and the strength and coherence of the ideas, and finally they might edit for any referencing errors. Whatever method you favour, ensure that you bring real purpose to your editing.
- When using a word-processor, it is generally better to edit your work from the hard copy, and not on-screen.

Step 6: You are now ready for that final step: **WRITING THE FINAL VERSION OF YOUR PAPER**. Do this with extreme care, because you do not want to introduce any new errors or repeat the old ones. Ensure that your paper is set out according to the requirements of your discipline.

2—THE RESULT

Below, adapted from Avondale’s Faculty of Education *Written Assessment Guide* (2010), are the general criteria for an essay that will attract a High Distinction (85% to 100%).¹

Such an essay will:

- display high quality, independent work;
- convey a superior range of highly relevant concepts and information;
- show substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought;
- express ideas fluently and persuasively in accepted academic style and obeying the rules of grammar;
- display superior, consistent and comprehensive coverage of material; and
- display superior documentation that obeys all the conventions of the chosen referencing protocol (APA, MLA, etc.).

1 While it is commendable to aim for the highest possible mark, it is very rare for an essay to attract that perfect score (100%). Nevertheless, keep pressing for it!

References

Casson, L. (2006). *A writer's handbook: Developing writing skills for university students*. (2nd ed.). Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press.

Germov, J. (2000). *Get great marks for your essays* (2nd ed.). Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin.