



# Purpose & process

Essays are used to develop thinking and construct arguments. They communicate your experience of reading widely and analysing discourse on an particular topic or issue. Lecturers use essays to assess your understanding of a topic **and** your ability to think about it critically. Essays are not an invitation to simply ‘restate’ information covered in a course, but an opportunity to explore a particular question in greater depth than might be dealt with in lectures and tutorials, and to relate specific theories, issues or texts to a specific context. An essay is essentially an argument in response to a question, and a platform for you to develop and articulate your own ideas.

To make serious progress in developing an essay, you need to read widely and critically - constantly asking questions and re-assessing your position in relation to the essay prompt. It is a dynamic process, where you move back and forth between various steps. The process of writing an essay is usually not very sequential, but does involve these steps:

- analysing a question
- researching the topic
- taking a position on the question
- planning the discussion
- drafting and redrafting
- editing the final draft.

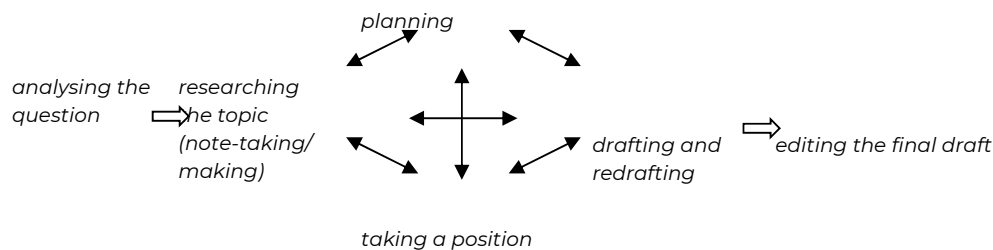
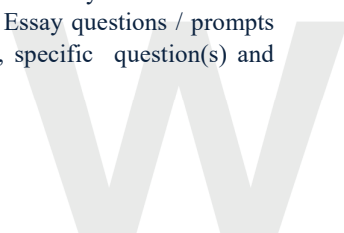


Figure 1: The dynamic nature of essay writing

## ANALYSING THE QUESTION

The first step in the essay writing process is always making sure you fully understand what the essay question means and is asking you do. Making any misinterpretations here will likely result in an essay that fails to meet expectations. To analyse the essay question, you need to identify the key words. Essay questions / prompts often include various elements: a statement or quote to orient you to the topic, specific question(s) and instructions to limit the scope of discussion and guide your response.



### Example: Essay Question (Philosophy)

JS Mill argued that capital punishment can sometimes be justified on utilitarian grounds. Jonathon Glover argues that utilitarian considerations do not justify capital punishment.

*Orientation to topic*

Carefully state the essential elements of both arguments, highlighting the relevant points of similarity and difference between them.

*Instructions*

Can utilitarian considerations justify capital punishment in your view? Why/why not?

*Questions  
(you are expected to decide whether you agree/ disagree/ or partly agree)*

### Example: Essay Question (Education)

The age-old *nature-nurture* controversy about the underlying causes of the course of development continues today, with some theorists attributing the course of development to genetic influences while others believe that the complex forces of the environment are responsible.

*Orientation to topic*

Discuss the evidence for each of these positions and indicate how this debate will influence your work.

*Instruction*

It helps to identify the key concepts in the essay prompt. In the example from Education above, the key concepts are **nature** (genetic influences), **nurture** (environmental factors), and **course of development**.

The next important step is to consider how the key concepts relate to each other, and to the overall themes of your subject/course. The Education example is from a subject on child development, so it would be useful to consider how those key concepts influence a child's development. For example:

- What is the nature/nurture debate?
- Which authors think nature is more influential on child development than their environment? Who thinks the opposite?
- What does this have to do with teaching?

General questions like these are a good starting point for reading and note-making, and may also help you map out the structure of your essay's first draft.

Essay questions/prompts nearly always contain at least one instructional word (a word that tells you what your essay must do). Instructional words are terms such as *discuss*, *identify*, *compare*, *evaluate*. You need to recognize, understand and follow the instructional word, because if you don't do exactly what it tells you to do, your essay won't be answering the question clearly, and may receive a poor mark. Your marker is looking for a discussion, an analysis, an explanation or a judgement. To help ensure you understand the meaning of instructional words, see the summary of instructional words at the end.

To get clear in your own mind what is being asked, it helps to rephrase the question. Look for synonyms of instructional words used in your essay question. For example:

***Discuss** the problems associated with determining what information should be produced by the accounting system.*



This might be rephrased as:

*Why is it sometimes difficult to decide what information should be produced by an accounting system?*

Rephrasing the essay question can also help you write the introduction to your first draft, ensuring it clearly and immediately addresses the question – this help ensure that you keep a focus on the question as you draft your essay. When rephrasing, be very careful not to change the meaning of the question, or you may end up not answering the question that was asked. If in real doubt, check your understanding of what the question means with your lecturer.

## REPHRASING AN ESSAY QUESTION

This second year accounting and finance essay question has three instructional words. Identify and rewrite them, to clarify what the essay question involves.

*Identify the key concepts and practical constraints pertaining to the determination and usefulness of product costs for decision making purposes. Evaluate the adequacy, for decision making purposes, of product costs calculated under the Variable Costing (VC) and Activity Based Costing (ABC) methods, with respect to these concepts and constraints. Also by reference to these two matters (that is, key concepts and practical constraints), identify any scope for elaboration of ABC to improve its decision-usefulness.*

**What are the three instructional words?**

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**Rewrite / rephrase the essay question.**

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## READING THE TOPIC: BIG PICTURE

The process of identifying key concepts in your essay question and formulating questions around them prepares you to review your lecture notes and course readings in a more focused way. Try to develop a ‘big picture’ of the topic in general: the issues, texts, theorists and sub-topics involved in the topic. If you don’t see ‘the big picture’ you may misunderstand the topic you are researching, or have too narrow a view of it.

To develop a ‘big picture’ view of your topic, refer to introductory lectures and textbooks. Introductory texts tend to outline the main theorists, texts, issues, subtopics etc of a topic. The ‘nature/nurture debate’ in Education for example would be introduced in a course textbook and in lecture notes, and the main theorists in the debate, what evidence supports their various views, and what important issues surround this debate (such as implications for teaching and course design). By looking at introductory texts you will also be able to establish a reading list to use as the starting point for more detailed research.

It also helps to brainstorm what you already know about the topic, and to break the topic down into sub-topics. You may also find it useful to consider the possibilities in answering the question. What answers are possible?



## MAKING NOTES

As you read and make notes for your essay, it is most efficient to have specific questions in mind. Clanchy and Ballard (1981) point out how notes form the raw material from which you develop and shape an argument. So your reading and note-making should be constantly focused on finding relevant, useful and specific information on the topic. You need to be always thinking about the question, formulating your answer or argument as you read, and determining what evidence will help you defend your points.

Furthermore, as implied by the term ‘note-making’, reading for your essay is not a passive process – you should simply accept and repeat the arguments of ‘experts’, you need to constantly assess their arguments, and the validity of their claims. You may find it useful to organise your notes into a system, categorising them into relevant sub-topics. This active process should result in notes which make it easier to determine the position that your essay will adopt, and to map out an initial essay plan.

Good notes also include accurate bibliographic details such as author, title, publisher, page number etc. When copying the exact words of the text, you must remember to note the page number of the quote (and put it in inverted commas to remind you that what you’ve written is in the writer’s words) so that you can reference that quote correctly if you use it in the final draft of your essay. When paraphrasing an author’s ideas you should also note page numbers for correct referencing. Careful attention to these bibliographic details at the early stage of your reading, thinking and writing will save you having to check references and page numbers later, and it helps you avoid plagiarising the sources (using the words and ideas of others as if they are your own words and ideas).

## TAKING A POSITION

The essay writing process is dynamic - you can move back and forth between the various steps involved. At some point though, you should begin to feel a position you can legitimately take in regard to the question, and articulate it briefly in writing as soon as it is clear to you. One or two sentences spelling out your position in answer to the question should be drafted before you begin to write the rest of your essay.

## PLANNING YOUR ESSAY

Once you have articulated your position you should be able to map out a plan for your whole essay, organising your argument, and noting what evidence supports which point, and making connections between your various points. Not all students develop a detailed plan of their essays - some make a fully worked-through plan, complete with sub-topics and the connections between the topics, others work effectively with just a series of headings to guide them.

## DRAFTING AND REDRAFTING

Once you have constructed some kind of plan for your essay, the next step is to write the first draft. You may then find that you need to redraft the essay several times to refine your structure, argument and use of evidence. Re-drafting is an important craft of good writing, where you notice gaps in reading and logic, and strengthen the argument or evidence. Keep the scope and the word limit of the essay in mind though, or you may run out of time to finish your essay.

## EDITING THE FINAL DRAFT

The final stage in the process of writing an essay is editing the final draft. Many students forget to leave time for this, but it is important, as it minimises embarrassing spelling mistakes and awkward grammar, and gives you a final chance to identify any problems in the logic of your argument – and to check that have actually answered all parts of the question.



## INSTRUCTIONAL WORDS

<b>Analyse</b>	Break up a whole into its parts, and identify their nature, proportion, function, relationship, etc.
<b>Comment</b>	Make observations, interpretations.
<b>Compare and contrast</b>	Find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events, interpretations, etc.
<b>Critically analyse</b>	Examine the topic or argument in terms of its relative strengths and weaknesses.
<b>Criticise</b>	Express your judgements about the correctness or merit of factors being considered; discuss both strong and weak points, and provide evidence to support your points.
<b>Define</b>	Provide concise, clear, authoritative meanings, briefly explaining the boundaries or limitations of the definition, so it is clear how the thing differs from other things.
<b>Describe</b>	Recall facts, processes or events, paint a word picture of the thing, without explaining or interpreting it.
<b>Diagram</b>	Present a drawing, chart, plan or graphic representation in your answer. Diagrams included in your writing should always be labelled and briefly explained or described.
<b>Discuss</b>	Consider various points of view, and present your own interpretation, based on carefully chosen and authoritative evidence.
<b>Enumerate</b>	Provide a list or outline, and recount, one by one, but concisely, the points required.
<b>Evaluate</b>	Present a judgement of an issue by stressing both strengths and advantages, and weaknesses and limitations. The emphasis is on assessing the value, worth or relevance of the matter under scrutiny.
<b>Explain</b>	Give reasons why something occurs, or describe how it works. The aim is to clarify causes and effects, or to detail processes involved.
<b>Illustrate</b>	Give examples to help explain something; presenting a figure, picture, diagram or scenario.
<b>Interpret</b>	Give your own judgement of a situation or event.
<b>List</b>	Give an itemised series or tabulation; be concise.
<b>Outline</b>	Give the main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting details. Present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.
<b>Prove</b>	Confirm or verify, establish something with certainty, citing experimental evidence, or reasoning logically.
<b>Relate</b>	Emphasise connections and associations between things.
<b>Review</b>	Re-examine, analyse and comment briefly on the major points of an issue or situation.
<b>State</b>	Give a clear sentence expressing the main point or claim, without the details or examples.
<b>Summarise</b>	Give a short account of the main points; omit details.
<b>Trace</b>	Give the development, process or history of a thing, event or idea, by proceeding from the latest to the earliest evidence.

This list adapted from Bate, D (1979) *Essay Method and English Expression*, HarcourtBrace Jovanovich Group, Sydney.

