Essay writing

1. The process: the multi-faceted nature of essay writing

Overview
The first unit in this module on essay writing focuses on the processes involved in writing an essay. The main steps in the essay writing process are:

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

As ‘redrafting’ implies, the process of writing an essay is not necessarily sequential. If you have engaged with your topic, and constantly assess your position in regards to the question and your readings, it is unlikely that you will simply progress from one step to the next. It is far more likely that as a consequence of your reading you will need to reassess your position and modify it. We can view the essay writing process as a dynamic one in which you move back and forth between the various steps involved.

What is the role of the essay?
Broadly speaking, lecturers and tutors use essay writing as an assessment tool to scrutinise and evaluate your understanding of subject content. This is not to say that essays are a vehicle for ‘resaying’ everything taught in the course. Essays are also an opportunity for you to learn and to explore in greater depth some aspect of your course – theories, issues, texts, etc. - and in some cases relate these aspects to a particular context. Furthermore, as an essay is essentially an argument (your response to the question after close and well considered research into a topic), it is also a platform for you to articulate your ideas.

In discussing the role of the academic essay, we also need to consider the institutional context (the university), and your audience (who reads your
The elements influence the style and tone of your writing. University writing is formal and typically objective: this means everyday language and slang as well as unsubstantiated opinion is unsuitable in the context of an academic essay. Furthermore, essays are written for tutors and lecturers to assess: in other words they are written for an audience that is familiar with the conventions and practices of the discipline. Thus, you must write your essay in a formal, objective style, following the referencing and other conventions of the discipline you are studying.

**Analysing the question**

Understanding what the essay question means and what it is asking you to do are important steps in the essay writing process. Making an error here will mean your essay will probably fail to meet your lecturer’s expectations, so a careful analysis of the question is necessary.

Essay questions are often multi-dimensional and can include a range of elements: they can contain a statement of fact to orientate the student to the topic, a question (or several questions), instructions to the student, and guidelines as to the scope of the essay (Webb, 1991). For example:

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<tr>
<th>Example Essay Question (Philosophy)</th>
<th>Orientation to topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>JS Mill argued that capital punishment can sometimes be justified on utilitarian grounds. Jonathon Glover argues that utilitarian considerations do not justify capital punishment.</td>
<td>Instructions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carefully state the essential elements of both arguments, highlighting the relevant points of similarity and difference between them.</td>
<td>Questions (agree?/partly agree/disagree)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can utilitarian considerations justify capital punishment in your view? Why/why not?</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Example Essay Question (Education)</th>
<th>Orientation to topic</th>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss the evidence for each of these positions and indicate how this debate will influence your work</td>
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From these above examples you can see that it is important that you analyse the various elements within the essay question and not just the ‘question(s)’ within the overall essay question.

A useful starting point for analysing the overall assignment is to identify the key concepts contained in the essay question. In the above example question from education these key concepts are nature (genetic influences), nurture (environmental factors), and course of development. Another important task is to establish a relationship between the key concepts, and to think about the key concepts in terms of the overall themes of your course/subject. The Education example is from a subject on child development, so it would be useful for the student to ask questions about the identified key concepts in terms of what influences they have on a child’s development. For example:
What is the nature/nurture debate?
Is nature more influential?
Is the environment more influential?
Who are the main proponents of each view?
What does this have to do with teaching?

These general questions are the starting point for your reading and note-making. For some essays these questions may also act as a map for the first draft of your essay's structure.

Essay questions nearly always contain at least one instructional word: that is, a word that tells you what your essay must do. Instructional words are terms such as discuss, identify, compare, evaluate. It is very important that you carry out the task/job implied by the instructional word in the essay question. If you don't do this, your essay probably won't answer the question clearly enough and the essay may fail, or receive a poor mark. Your marker will be looking for the discussion, the analysis, or the explanation that was asked for in the question. Note: to help you make sure you understand the meaning of instructional words, we've provided a one-page summary of instructional words at the end of this unit.

If you aren't sure what is required, it may help to rephrase the question to ensure your understanding. One way of clarifying what an essay question involves is to find synonyms for the instructional word(s). For example:

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

This can be rephrased as:

What are the problems associated with determining what information should be produced by the accounting system.

Likewise a quote followed by: Discuss this statement in regards to.. can be rephrased as: Evaluate, or assess the validity of this statement, or even how valid is this statement? (Woodward-Kron 1997: p. 19).

Rephrasing the essay question is one way to make sure you understand what it is you are required to do. This rephrasing can be used to help write your first draft of the introduction. Writing a draft introduction that clearly provides an answer to the question first can help to ensure that your essay does answer the question, and that you maintain a focus on the question as you draft the body of your essay.

When rephrasing, be very careful that you keep the original meaning of the question; otherwise you may end up with an essay that doesn't answer the question. If you are in real doubt about the meaning of an essay question, check you understanding of what it means with the lecturer concerned. Don't force yourself to work on an essay when you're uncertain about just what question you're answering!

Task 1.1 Rephrasing an essay question

In the following second year accounting and finance essay question, there are three instructional words. Identify the instructional words, then rewrite them as in the above examples in order to clarify what the essay question involves. See KEY at end of unit for a possible answer.

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.
Researching the topic: looking at the big picture

The process of identifying the key concepts in your essay question and formulating questions around those key concepts will prepare you to review your lecture notes and course readings in a more focussed 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 have a concept of ‘the big picture’ it is quite likely that your understanding of the topic you are researching will be confused, and that you view your topic in isolation rather than as an aspect of a broader area.

To develop the ‘big picture’ understanding of your topic you can refer to introductory materials such as lecture notes and introductory textbooks. Introductory texts are likely to outline the main theorists, texts, issues, subtopics etc which are part of your topic. If we take the example of the nature/nurture debate from the education essay, it is likely that by looking at the course textbook and lecture notes, you would be able to determine who the main theorists in the debate are, what evidence is available to support different views, what the important issues surrounding this debate are (such as the implications for teaching and course design), and to identify what the sub-topics are. 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.

At this stage it is also worthwhile brainstorming 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?

Researching the topic: Note-taking/making

The detailed research for your essay, that is your reading and note-taking/making, will be much more efficient and critical if you read with specific questions in mind. As Clanchy and Ballard point out (1981), your notes form the raw material on which you must set your mind to work to develop and shape an argument. Therefore, your reading, note-taking and note-making should be constantly focussed on finding relevant, useful and specific information on the topic. During and after your reading and note-making you need to be thinking about the question, formulating your answer or argument and determining what evidence you are going to present in defence of your argument.

Furthermore, as implied by the term ‘note-making’, reading for your essay is not a passive process in which you accept and note down the arguments of ‘experts’, rather it is a process in which you constantly assess arguments, and their validity. You may find it useful to organise these notes into some kind of system, such as categorising your notes into relevant sub-topics. This active process of note-taking/making should result in notes which make it easier to determine the position your essay will adopt and to map out an initial essay plan. NOTE: A pro-forma for taking notes is provided at the end of this unit.

Good notes should 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 or taking notes in your own words, you should also remember to note page numbers for correct referencing. Careful attention to these bibliographic details at this stage of your work will save you having to check references and page...
numbers at a later stage. It will also help you avoid plagiarising the sources. Plagiarism is the use of the words and ideas of others as if they are your own words and ideas. This is considered a very serious academic crime that can be avoided by always referencing other people’s words and/or ideas.

Taking a position on the question
At the beginning of this unit we pointed out that the essay writing process is a dynamic one, in which you can move back and forth between the various steps involved. At some point, you should begin to clearly see what position you can legitimately take in regard to the essay question. Before you begin to write, you will need to go over your notes, and refer back to the question to carefully clarify the position you’re taking. You should articulate this position (or answer to the question) briefly in writing, in one or two sentences, before you begin to write.

Planning your essay
Once you have articulated your position you should be able to map out a plan for your essay, organise your argument and evidence, and establish connections between your points. Not all students, however, will develop a detailed plan of their essay. While some students work effectively with a fully worked-through essay plan, complete with sub-topics and the connections between the topics identified, others may work effectively with just a series of headings guiding them.

Drafting and Redrafting
Once you have constructed your essay plan, the next step is to then write the first draft of your essay. After you have done this, you may find that you need to redraft the essay a number of times to refine your structure, argument and use of evidence. This is an important process and represents the craft of writing well. In the process of drafting your essay, you may find that you have done insufficient reading in a particular area, and that you need to do more reading to strengthen the argument or evidence in a section of your essay. However, keep the scope of the essay and the word limit in mind, otherwise you may end up having not enough time to write your essay.

For further assistance with this stage in the essay writing process please refer to the next unit in this module, The Argument, which looks in detail at how to develop an argument and structure an essay. The third unit, The Mechanics of Essay Writing, discusses academic style and how to present evidence.

Editing the final draft
The final stage in the process of writing an essay is editing the final draft and this stage is a significant one. Despite this, many students skip this stage due to time pressures. Thorough editing not only helps to minimise embarrassing spelling mistakes and awkward grammar, it also provides you with an opportunity to identify any breakdown in logic in your argument. Most importantly, you can confirm if you have really fulfilled the requirements of the essay question and answered all parts of the question. For a more detailed discussion of editing, see the module Editing your work.

References


Appendix I: Key

1.1 rephrasing an essay question

What are the key concepts and practical constraints pertaining to the determination and usefulness of product costs for decision making purposes? How adequate, for decision making purposes, are product costs calculated under the Variable Costing (VC) and Activity Based Costing (ABC) methods. Also by reference to these two matters (that is, key concepts and practical constraints), what scope is there for elaboration of ABC to improve its decision-usefulness?

NOTE: This is only one possible rephrasing of the essay question.

INSTRUCTIONAL WORDS

Analyse
Separate or break up of whole into its parts so that you may discover their nature, proportion, function, relationship, etc.

Comment
Make critical observations, even if they are fairly open-ended. Your texts, learning guide, lecture and notes should provide sufficient guidelines and your own common sense should prevail.

Compare
Find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events, interpretations, etc. Ensure you understand exactly what you are being asked to compare.

Contrast
The remarks on compare apply equally to contrast. The difference is that you should concentrate on dissimilarities.

Critically analyse
Examine the topic or argument in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.

Criticise
Student insights are expected and arguments must be justified. Express your judgements regarding the correctness or merit of the factors being considered. Discuss both strong and weak points and give the results of your own analysis.

Define
Provide concise, clear, authoritative meanings. In such statements, details are not necessarily required, but briefly cite the boundaries or limitations of the definition. Remember the ‘class’ to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in that class.

Describe
Recall facts, processes or events. You are not asked to explain or interpret. Try to provide a thorough description, emphasising the most important points.

Diagram
Present a drawing, chart, plan or graphic representation in your answer. Generally, you are also expected to label the diagram and a brief explanation or description may be required.

Discuss
Present a point of view. This is likely to need both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen and authoritative evidence.
Enumerate
Provide a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one, but concisely, the points required.

Evaluate
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.

Explain
Your main focus should be on the ‘why’ of a particular issue, or on the ‘how’ with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes and effects. You are being tested on your capacity to think critically, to exercise perception and discernment.

Illustrate
This asks for an explanation; you may clarify your answer to a problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram or concrete example.

Interpret
Explain the meaning of something and give your own judgement of a situation.

List
Give an itemised series or tabulation; such answers should be concise.

Outline
This asks for an organised description. Give the main points and essential supplementary materials, but omit minor details. Present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Prove
To confirm or verify. You should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence, or by logical reasoning.

Relate
When showing relationships, your answer should emphasise connection and associations in a descriptive manner.

Review
Re-examine, analyse and comment briefly (in an organised sequence) on the major points of an issue.

State
Express the high points in brief and clear narrative form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, may be omitted.

Summarise
Provide a brief statement or an account covering the main points; omit details.

Trace
Give the development, process or history of a thing, event or idea, especially by proceeding from the latest to the earliest evidence.

### Appendix II: Proforma for note-taking

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Notes, Quotes &amp; Content</th>
<th>Editorial or reactions, confusions, ideas, insights, cross-ref's</th>
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