

7 Steps to a Killer Essay

Simple Strategies for Taming the Essay Writing Beast



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Step 1:

Understanding the Question

When you write an assignment, it is important that you don't overlook the key features of the question. These include:

- The “**direction**” or “**task**” word/s. This is the VERB in the question that tells you exactly what you need to do. The table overleaf provides some examples of different direction words and their meanings.
- The “**scoping**” word. Scoping words specify the limits of your discussion. They are designed to focus your research and indicate the depth of response required. You shouldn't focus on things outside of the “scope” of the question.
- The “**content**” words. These are the words that identify the subject of the assignment and tell you exactly what you need to write about.

These components are the most crucial aspect of any assignment question, as they determine **what** you should be saying, and **how** you should be saying it! Before you start planning your assignment, you should always highlight these words and ensure you understand what they mean. If in doubt, ask questions!

Here is an example:

High school education in New South Wales has changed dramatically over the last ten years, and these changes have affected a range of identity groups. Discuss this statement with specific reference to TWO identity groups.



Once you have identified the **direction** word and the **scoping** words, and defined the **content** words, it is a good idea to put the question into your own colloquial words. Simplifying will enable you to better understand what it is asking you to do.

Simplified:

Talk about how specific changes to schooling in NSW have impacted two types of students (for example low socio-economic and non-English-speaking background)

Direction Word	
Compare	Show the similarities and differences between two or more items.
Contrast	Present only the differences between two or more items.
Define	Give the definition and expand it with more examples and greater details.
Summarise	Identify and discuss the main points or the highlights of subject. Omit in-depth details.
Evaluate/Critique	Offer your opinion or judgment then back it up with specific facts, details, or reasons.
Analyse	Identify the different parts of something. Discuss each part individually, [and highlight different points of view].
Describe	Give a detailed description of different aspects, qualities, characteristics, parts, or points of view.
Discuss/Tell	Tell about the parts of main points. Expand with specific details.
Explain why	Give reasons. Tell why. Show logical relationships or cause and effect.
Explain how	Give the process, steps, stages, or procedures involved. Explain each.
Illustrate	Give examples. Explain each example with details.
Identify	Identify specific points. Discuss each point individually. Include sufficient detail.

Table 1: Wong, L. 2014. *Essential study skills*. (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning, p.439.

Breaking Down the Question

Your Essay Question:

Content Words (what subject/issues do I need to write about?)

Scoping Words (what are the limits/focus of the question?)

Direction Word (what does this question want me to do?)

Interpretation of Essay Question:

Step 2:

Planning and Scaffolding an Essay

Once you are confident you fully understand your essay question, it is important to plan your essay. Your plan should clearly outline what you want to say in each paragraph of your essay. This will help you stay on track!

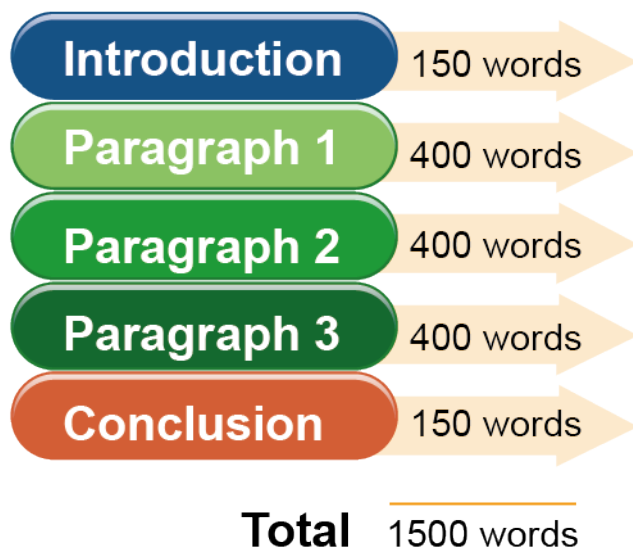
Before You Start:

- Consider the “direction word” in the question, and what it is asking you to do
- Consider the “scope” of the question, and how it will guide your research and response
- Highlight the “content” words of the question, so your plan doesn’t go off topic
- Rewrite the question in your own words to help you understand what it is asking you to do
- List all the aspects of the topic that the question is asking you to cover (e.g. ‘In this essay, I have to include...’)

Planning Strategies:

- Read through all relevant course notes to give yourself a good overview of the essay topic
- Highlight the key points in your readings that are important for your essay
- Write out the key points on a blank page (or on the table provided) and comment on their relevance to your essay topic
- Create a mind map of interesting or relevant ideas that you come across in relation to the essay topic
- Think about the central aim of your essay, and how the evidence you have collected could be used to support and develop your discussion

The Basic Essay Structure



The 10% rule:

When planning your essay, don't forget to think about your word limit, as this will give you an idea about how much you should write about each topic.

As a general rule, the introduction and conclusion of an essay should each take up 10% of the word limit.

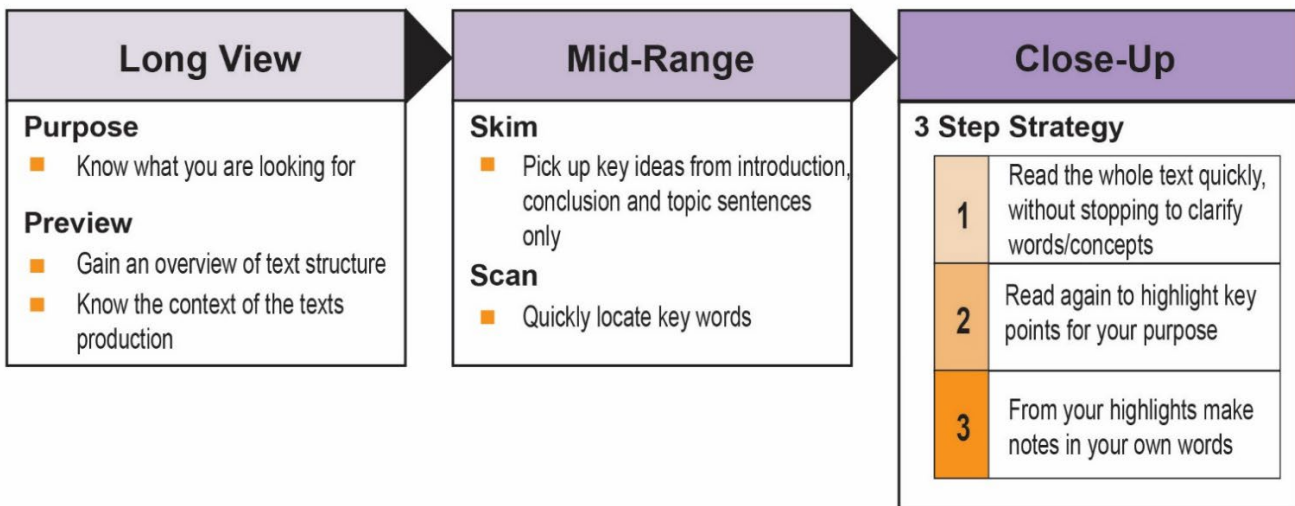
This means: A 1500 word essay allows you to write approximately three 400 word paragraphs, or four 300 word paragraphs – each of which should deal with a separate (but relatable) issue.

Effective Reading

Reading academic materials can be frustrating, because the content and language is often quite complex. For this reason, it's difficult to make sense of this material by attempting to read it once through from beginning to end.

Effective, critical reading involves many steps – but carrying out these steps will ensure you a) don't waste time reading vast amount of material that won't be useful b) have a thorough understanding of the material you **do** need. Ultimately, while it sounds like a long process, effective reading can actually be quicker, and certainly more beneficial, than simply reading an article from start to finish.

The three-part process



What to look for during each stage:

Long View

Preview

- Read titles, prefaces, tables of contents
- Acknowledge time-frames, seminal authors, recurrent themes

These steps are useful for:

- Identifying text types and structure
- Narrowing research
- Selecting appropriate sources of evidence

Mid-Range

Skim

- Headings, bold print, graphics
- First and last sentences of paragraphs

Scan

- Specific information
- Key/relevant topic words

These steps are useful for:

- Eliminating some texts as not so useful
- Getting familiar with a text
- Work out which parts to read, and which not
- Finding information quickly

Close Reading 1

- Relax, stop worrying about it – just enjoy it
- DON'T HIGHLIGHT or UNDERLINE
- You won't understand it all – that's OK!
- You are orientating yourself to this writer's voice and territory
- Notice overall how the material is organised
- (for words you don't understand, circle them and just move on)

Close Reading 2

- Read with **your** purpose in mind:
 - to comprehend all main ideas about a topic
 - **OR** to understand the author's perspective as a whole
 - **OR** to extract key points relevant to your assignment task
- Identify the line of argument (*i.e. what is the sequence of ideas that support the one overall idea?*)
- *Find the meaning of those circled words (if the context has not clarified them by now)*
- **Highlight** key points, make margin notes

Close Reading 3

- Review your highlights and mark-ups to make notes in your own words
- Make dot points:
 - Try to write phrases, not just sentences
 - Put authors' main argument into your own words
 - Relate argument to topic/essay focus
 - Use the **Reading Summary** table (page 3) to summarise your reading and link it to your discussion

Reading:

Summary:

Key ideas:

Relevance to question:

Essay Scaffold

Intro/Thesis	
Body: Topic evidence, link	
Body: Topic evidence, link	
Body: Topic evidence, link	
Conclusion	

Step 3:

Writing an Introduction

The purpose of an introduction is to tell your audience what your essay is about. Your introduction should highlight your understanding of the question and outline how your essay will address key issues. Ultimately, introductions are designed to clarify the topic so that the reader can anticipate what lies ahead in the rest of the essay.

An introduction must always:

- Interpret the question or topic
- Outline what the essay will talk about
- Limit the scope of the essay

What makes an introduction good?

“A good introduction is successful because it allows readers to prepare themselves mentally for the journey they will undergo as they follow your argument through the paper... it enables them to recognize and understand the major points of interest in your argument” (Germov, 2000, p. 184).

Remember:

- You can't write an introduction until you fully understand the question and develop an appropriate, well-structured outline.
- Pay attention to the “direction word” (e.g. discuss, analyse, explain, evaluate) in the essay question. This will tell you what you need to do in your essay.
- Focus on the topic from the first sentence and be sure to maintain that focus. If you deviate by accident, there's a good chance that you won't answer the question. A good way to avoid this is to integrate key words from the question throughout your introduction (and subsequent discussion).
- As a general rule, avoid using in-text references in an introduction. The introduction should convey YOUR understanding of, and approach to, the essay topic.

Structuring an Introduction:

Q. Discuss why Creative Arts should be integrated into other Key Learning Areas (KLA) as part of a holistic approach to education. Your discussion should draw from current research and contemporary theories, and should also explain role of the educator in contributing to this process.

The holistic approach to education and the creative arts are intrinsically intertwined.	ORIENTATION / CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION
Creative arts are outlined in the Australian curriculum as Art, Dance, Music and Drama (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2000).	ADDRESSES QUESTION / KEY CONCEPTS
While all four areas hold their own in the curriculum, when integrated into other learning areas, the benefits of creative arts can positively impact learning outcomes.	THESIS STATEMENT
With a focus relating to the Primary curriculum,	SCOPE STATEMENT
this essay will establish [1] what defines the holistic approach, [2] and outline the benefits of each form of creative arts. [3] It will also explore how educators can facilitate learning through the creative arts, by applying a holistic approach, [4] and what children learn through each strand of the creative arts.	MAP OF RESPONSE

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Reword the question in the first sentence of your introduction and don't be afraid to use the key (content) words from the question throughout your introduction (and indeed your essay). This will show that you are attempting to directly respond to the question and will help keep you on track!

Planning an Introduction

ORIENTATION/CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION	
THESIS	
MAP OF RESPONSE	
SCOPE STATEMENT (What are the limits of your argument?)	

Step 4:

Writing Paragraphs

While there are various formulas you can follow to write a paragraph in your essay, they all require you to do the same thing: elaborate on one key issue that you have highlighted in your introduction. It is important that you only focus on one idea per paragraph, and that these ideas specifically relate to the question. You must make it clear to the reader that you are following the map outlined in your introduction.

Paragraphs should always:

- Commence with a **topic** sentence. The topic sentence signals to the reader what your paragraph is going to be about.
- Contain evidence to validate/support your answer.
- Tie back to the essay question.
- Include the “content” words from the question.

Paragraphs should never:

- Contain more than one key idea.
- Raise an idea that you cannot support with evidence.
- Bring in new information that is not relevant to the topic.

Basic Paragraph Structure

P	Point: Outline the main points/topic of this paragraph
E	Evidence: Support your point with evidence and examples
E	Explanation: Explain how this evidence supports your answer/main point
L	Link: Refer this point back to the topic, integrating key words from the question to reinforce your response



Transition phrases like “Similarly,” “For this reason,” “Therefore,” “However,” and “In the same way that...” are a good way to link points together to create a cohesive argument. Consider the example below:

Example Paragraph

Q: Identify two ways teachers can **support the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students** and explain *why* and *how* these strategies should be implemented.

P1	In order to support the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students , all teachers should undertake professional development to assist with their understanding of culturally appropriate pedagogies.	IDENTIFIES ONE STRATEGY (Professional development in culturally appropriate pedagogies)
E	At present, many teachers feel they are ill-equipped to teach Indigenous students, primarily because they lack knowledge about Aboriginal culture and history (Bennett & Moriarty, 2015; Craven, Yeung, & Han, 2014). For this reason, Lavery, Cain and Hampton (2014) argue that teacher institutes should develop stronger links with Indigenous communities, and that pre-service learning should include partnership programs with such communities.	EVIDENCE (why and how)
E	Ultimately, it is imperative that teachers construct a rich and culturally sensitive repertoire for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.	EXPLANATION
L	Therefore, appropriate professional development through collaboration with Indigenous communities should become mandatory for both beginning and experienced teachers .	LINK

Things to Remember:

- Never have more than one key idea in a paragraph.
- Don't ignore the "direction" word in the essay, as this word tells you what kind of approach you are expected to maintain throughout your discussion.
- Back up, back up, back up! If you can't back up an argument with evidence, don't use it!
- Always link each paragraph to the question – a good way to do this is to integrate key words in the question throughout your essay.

Planning Paragraphs

Topic:

Content words from question:

Direction word:

P.E.E.L PARAGRAPH

P: POINT

E: EVIDENCE

E: EXPLANATION

L: LINK

Step 5:

Writing a Conclusion

The purpose of a conclusion is to summarise the main points of your essay. It is your last opportunity to bring together what you have been saying, and to make your opinion, and your understanding of the topic, very clear to your examiner.

A conclusion should always:

- Highlight the key argument presented in the essay.
- Summarise the answer to the essay question, as signalled in the introduction.
- Refer back to the essay question to show that it has been answered.
- Reinforce the main theme of the essay, which has been established in the introduction.

A conclusion should never:

- Bring in new information or topics that have not been discussed in the body of the essay.
- As a general rule, avoid using in-text references in a conclusion. Like the introduction, the conclusion should confirm YOUR understanding of, and approach to, the essay topic.



- Remember, the purpose of the conclusion is to restate the goal, and reinforce the outcome, of the essay. Having your introduction at hand will enable you to do this more easily. It will help to remind you of the central focus of the essay, and of the key words that you should be integrating into your conclusion to remind to the examiner that you have answered the question!
- It helps to include the key terms from your topic sentences, in the same order that they appear in your essay.
- Remember to include the key words from the question, particularly in the final sentence of your conclusion!

Structuring a Conclusion:

Hypothetical question: *Critically discuss the ways social inclusion and exclusion impact upon your chosen focus social group in education and outline some ways teachers can support the educational needs of those students.*

Significant social exclusion is experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as evidenced by the academic achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peers.	RETURN TO QUESTION/TOPIC
Efforts are being made to reduce this gap , and although such aims are often regarded as unachievable, they highlight a necessary move towards a more inclusive education system.	RESTATE THESIS
[1] Recent changes to the curriculum incorporate both Aboriginal perspective and Aboriginal content to NSW syllabuses. [2] Similarly, several pedagogical frameworks have been developed to facilitate more effective teaching of Indigenous students. While these strategies are still in the developmental process, they articulate	SUMMARY OF IDEAS DISCUSSED (IN ORDER).
a contemporary desire for the education system to support the diverse and complex educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.	STRONG CONCLUDING STATEMENT [restating thesis]

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Planning a Conclusion:

COMPONENT	
Restate thesis/main idea of essay	In conclusion...
Summary of ideas discussed (one idea per paragraph)	This is because...
Concluding sentence (using key words from question)	Therefore...

Step 6:

Referencing

Reasons for Referencing:

- To avoid plagiarism.
- To prove you have researched your topic and understand the existing scholarship.
- To give people the opportunity to find the sources you have used.
- To support your argument.
- To help you fully understand the topic you are writing about.

Paraphrasing:

When you use a source to back up your argument, it's a good idea to "paraphrase". To "paraphrase" means to put something that has already been said into your own words.



- "Paraphrasing" doesn't just mean change a few words in a sentence – it means summarise a point of view.
- You can "paraphrase" multiple people at once, if they are all saying the same thing.

Reference Lists and Bibliographies – The list of what you have read:

At the end of your essay you must include a full, alphabetised list of sources you have used to support your argument. This list is called either a "reference list" or a "bibliography". Check your course outline to see what terminology your coordinator would prefer you to use.

Formatting – How to layout the list of what you have read:

The following link provides useful information on how to format your bibliography and in-text citations, and what information to include for different source types. Another very handy source is the "Pocket Guide to APA Style," which is available from the University of Newcastle Library.

<https://libguides.newcastle.edu.au/apa-7th>

While automatic referencing systems like "Cite this for Me" are handy, they are often inaccurate. If you do choose to use this software, ensure that you still double check all of your references against the official referencing guide.

Step 7:

Editing and Proofreading

When it comes to editing and proofreading, there's no one correct way to do it. However, there are various techniques you can use that will help you to pick up any errors in your writing. When you proofread the final draft of your essay, your goal is to make sure that your ideas connect in a logical way, and that there are no issues with spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure.

Know what you are looking for:

The first rule of thumb is to only look for one type of problem at a time. This will mean you need to proofread your essay multiple times, but it will make it much easier for you to identify any mistakes you may have made in the writing process.

Computer says 'No':

Believe it or not, computers aren't always right! While the features on programmes like Word are handy, they shouldn't be relied upon as the voice of wisdom for all things spelling and grammar. There are two very important things you need to do when using Word as a tool for finding errors in your writing: Firstly, make sure that spell check is set to Australian English (not American). Secondly, double-check the mistakes it finds, particularly with grammar, as they are often inaccurate.



Tips for successful proofreading:

Follow these basic principles, as they will help you to achieve the best results possible in the proofreading process:

- ✓ Give it a rest – Walk away from your assignment for as long as possible before you start proofreading. This will help you *forget* what you have written, which means you have to pay more attention to your final reading of the document.
- ✓ Make a list of all the things you need to look for (e.g. spelling, correct referencing, capitalisation of names) and work through them consecutively.
- ✓ Work from a print out, not the computer screen.
- ✓ Double-check facts, figures, and accuracy of referencing/direct quotes.
- ✓ Read it out loud.
- ✓ Use a ruler, or a sheet of card, to cover up the lines below the one you are reading.

Proofreading Checklist:

Make a list of things you will need to look for when you proofread your essay:

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References

Wong, L. (2015). *Essential study skills* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.