

Writing Essays: Some Guidelines

An essay¹ – literally ‘to attempt’, ‘to try’ – is a piece of writing that identifies a question or problem and proposes an answer to such. It does not merely ‘examine’ and/ or ‘consider’ and/or ‘discuss’ and/or ‘explore’ something. Rather, it offers a specific argument and makes particular claims.

Below are some general guidelines about writing essays, prepared as a teaching resource for my theological students. Maybe it is of some help to other students too. You may freely share and/or adapt the material, with attribution. The material may not be used for commercial purposes.

Guidelines

1. Analyse the question, carefully noting key words and phrases. The question may not be asking what you thought it was, or what you wish it were.
2. Research enough to know what the actual issues are. Your essay needs to show evidence of new learning. Simply writing from your own experience or previous opinions is not adequate. This means that you will need to become conversant with relevant literature. This means visiting libraries and consulting books and journal articles. It may also mean seeking advice from your lecturer or tutor about good resources. (Many of these may already be in the Unit Manual.) On the matter of using online material, use these sparingly and critically. While the Internet can be wonderful for accessing some primary e-texts and for reading some discussions on such, most sites (including Wikipedia and ChatGPT) are not sources of reputable and acceptable research. In short, be discerning about the literature you finally choose to engage with. As a general rule, Level 2 essays should use no less than 4 major

¹ The word ‘essay’ has its origins in Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais* (Paris: Simon Millanges, 1580). See also Francis Bacon, *Essayes: Religious Meditations. Places of Perswasion and Disswasion. Seene and Allowed* (London: Humfrey Hooper, 1597).

resources; at Level 3, aim for a minimum of 6 major resources; and, at Level 9, a minimum of 7 major resources should be consulted.

3. Establish a thesis or point of view. Remember that an essay is not an opportunity to say everything you know about a topic but rather to *make an argument that engages the question being asked*.

4. Plan your structure and organise your ideas. You should use subheadings in your essay to make the structure clearer to readers, and to you. Here is a basic example of an essay structure:

I. *Introduction*. The Introduction should: (i) name the PROBLEM your essay is concerned with; (ii) state what your THESIS is; i.e., what your answer to the problem is; and (iii) indicate how you are going to go about making your argument (i.e., what is your METHODOLOGY). A well-written thesis statement will help guide the direction and structure of your argument. Thesis statements are usually provisional and become more concise as you work on additional drafts of the essay. The Introduction is also where you can briefly define any key terms you will use and explain how you are using them. Also, consider whether to include a bridging paragraph that provides some reasons you will make the argument you are proposing. The Introduction may comprise 2–3 paragraphs.

II. *Body*. This is where you make your principal arguments (and respond to potential counterarguments) and develop your central ideas. Here, subheadings can be especially helpful. Every paragraph should develop one main idea that serves your thesis statement. What doesn't serve your thesis statement should be deleted. A typical paragraph contains:

- i. a topic sentence that states the main or controlling idea;
- ii. some supporting sentences to explain and/or develop your main point;
- iii. supporting evidence from your research;
- iv. analysis and interpretation of the supporting research, noting any areas of particular significance for your specific argument;

- v. a concluding sentence or two that restates your point and provides some transition to the following paragraph or section.

III. *Conclusion/s and constructive observations.* This is where you restate your thesis, summarise your principal arguments/ideas, and offer some kind of final broad statement about the implications of your argument and/or trajectories for future thinking. This is not the place to introduce entirely new material into your essay. The Conclusion may comprise 2–3 paragraphs.

5. Re-read, edit, and rewrite. ‘The only kind of writing is rewriting’.² Once you’ve written your first draft, leave it for a while, and then read it ‘cold’. (Consider asking a friend, preferably one who knows what an essay and good grammar looks like, to read it through for you.) Many improvements come readily after a break, and with fresh eyes. This is why the best essays are written over many months rather than over a few hours. Ask yourself:

- i. Does my argument answer the question?
- ii. Does the overall structure of the essay serve that argument well?
- iii. Do each section and each paragraph of the essay relate to what comes before and after?
- iv. Is it clear that each of my examples and quotes supports my argument, or are they a distraction or filler? Excessive quotations are more likely to hinder rather than serve your essay. Ask yourself: would this part of the essay be more effective if I put this argument in my own words?
- v. Have I represented the counterarguments fairly? Arguments are not won by caricaturing opposing positions or by offering sweeping and/or substantiated claims. It is better to make and support a modest claim than to declare an unsupported statement, no matter how ‘orthodox’ it may sound.
- vi. Could I have written this sentence and this paragraph more clearly?
- vii. Is my use of tenses consistent?
- viii. Is my punctuation correct throughout?

² Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast: The Restored Edition*, ed. Seán Hemingway (New York: Scribner, 2010), 102.

- ix. Have I fully referenced all of my sources? It is essential to identify when quoting someone else's work, even if it is only a part sentence. It is also important to acknowledge in a reference where you have paraphrased or taken ideas from others, even when a direct citation is absent. Failure to properly identify your sources is considered plagiarism.³
- x. Are the quotations accurate and properly introduced?
- xi. Have I properly referred to authors' names? In academic writing, it is usual to refer to other writers either by their *given name and surname* or by their *surname only*, but not by their given name only. For example, 'Catherine Keller' or 'Keller', but not just 'Catherine'.
- xii. Is my use of language gender-inclusive? It is Whitley College policy that gender-inclusive language regarding human persons is to be used both in teaching and in student submissions. You may choose to use or avoid particular pronouns for 'God'. Assessment Tasks that do not use inclusive language will be marked down.

6. *Footnotes and Bibliography*. These should follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition (2017). Some sample citations are available online:

https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html.

7. Before you submit your essay, work through the Assignment Checklist below.

³ Plagiarism is defined as: 'Submitting work that is not your own without acknowledging, citing or referencing the original source of the work. ... It doesn't matter whether you do this accidentally or on purpose, whether you change the words to make them your own or simply copy and paste. When you are using another person's thoughts and ideas, you must reference the source material'. TEQSA, 'What Is Academic Integrity?', accessed 15 January 2023, <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/students/understanding-academic-integrity/what-academic-integrity>.

Assignment Checklist

BEFORE you submit your work, ask:

1. Did I IDENTIFY which assignment is being undertaken?
2. Have I ANSWERED the question/s being asked?
3. Is my answer COHERENT? Does each paragraph and section contribute to the entire argument? Does each paragraph engage with a single idea? Have I provided a clear introduction stating the paper's general direction, and a conclusion that brings my argument to a fitting end, tying up the loose threads and identifying those areas that might still be explored?
4. Does my USE OF SOURCES serve my argument? Did I use and/or represent the argument of my sources fairly? Have I used the best and/or most appropriate sources for this topic? Have I been judicious in my use of quotations?
5. Is there enough of MY VOICE in this essay? Have I simply been a collator of the ideas of others, or have I ventured the risk of being a theologian?⁴
6. Are LONG CITATIONS (i.e., those over 100 words) presented as a separate paragraph, indented without outer quotation marks?
7. Are all citations, including the bibliography, presented according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*? (This includes ensuring that all subsequent footnotes appear in their shortened form.)
8. Is the WORD COUNT within 10% (including footnotes but excluding bibliography) of the number stipulated in the assessment task?
9. Have I carefully PROOFREAD – and/or had proofread – the essay, double checking for spelling, sense, punctuation, and grammar? Is my writing clear and unconvoluted? Do every sentence, paragraph, and section say exactly what I want them to say?
10. Did I use the originality tool in Turnitin (or some other resource) to check for PLAGIARISM?

⁴ See Douglas John Hall, 'Bound and Free: On Being a Christian Theologian'. *Theology Today* 59, no. 3 (2002): 421–27.

And AFTER you submit your work, ask:

1. How was I assisted in my learning and formation through this assessment?
2. What changes of perspective, personal challenge, extension of knowledge, and/or growth took place in me while I undertook this work?
3. How did this take place?
4. How might my learnings here inform and be informed by my learning in other areas?
5. How will I celebrate this achievement?

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