

## The academic essay

Essays allow students to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of a topic based on research and reading. The skill of good essay writing is to be able to critically discuss and evaluate ideas within a set word limit. The focus of an essay is usually on developing an argument or analysing ideas rather than on description. The essay is written in paragraphs and has a structure that includes: introduction, body and conclusion.

### **Introduction**

The introduction sets the scene for the whole essay. You should not rewrite the essay question. Instead, the purpose of the introduction is to identify the topic, the position being argued and the main reasons for that position.

The introduction will normally move from more general statements related to the question, to a specific statement of the main idea or argument that will be discussed in the body.

### **Body**

Here you use evidence from scholarly readings to explain and support in detail the reasons for your point of view given in the introduction. The body contains a number of paragraphs that link together to develop a strong argument or discussion of the topic. Generally, a paragraph needs to be at least four to six sentences long. A single sentence does not form a paragraph in an academic essay and bullet points are usually not acceptable.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the conclusion is to summarise and make final evaluative comments on the ideas presented in the essay. It should not contain new ideas or examples. It is crucial to link the conclusion to the essay question.

Adapted from: <http://www.qmu.ac.uk/els/docs/Planning%20and%20writing%20essays.pdf>

The key to writing a good academic essay is having a good plan (for help on planning go [here](#)). Also, see our hand-out on mind mapping for an effective way to plan an academic essay.

Another key to writing a good essay is being able to construct a good paragraph (go [here](#)).

One key to writing a good paragraph is being able to construct a good sentence (go [here](#)).

## Suggested essay writing process

### Choose the question.

If there is a choice of question think carefully about the knowledge you already have and then how easily you will find material and resources on a particular topic.

### Analyse the question carefully.

Look closely at the instructions and identify the key elements of the question. In the following example from an N205 Communication Assignment, the instructions are highlighted:

**Describe your membership** in any group of your own choice eg. family, friends, workplace. **Identify and describe the group processes present and the strategies used** for dealing with those processes, **using relevant literature** to guide your discussion. **Using Gibbs' (1989) reflective cycle** as a tool, **provide a summary of your learning** from this experience.

### Look closely at the marking schedule. How is it weighted?

What parts of the essay are worth the most marks? How many words will you allocate to each section?

### Do the reading.

Start with the recommended reading list for your assignment. Scan or survey chapter headings, summaries, indexes etc to find key information. You will not have time to read everything. Once you find useful material, make notes from it, always recording the name of the article or book, the author, and the date and place of publication.

### Make a writing plan.

Make an outline of the structure of the assignment. Some people write a rough introduction at this stage because it helps them work out what they have to cover; others leave writing the introduction until the end. A good structure is one where the reader is given the information in a way that makes sense to them, where one point builds upon another, without repetition. Mind mapping (see our hand-out on mind mapping) or a list might be useful at this stage.

### Write the first draft.

Don't worry about style or presentation at this stage - just start writing. You are the only one who is going to see this draft. Focus on getting all your information down in the best possible order (based on your plan). Remember that each paragraph should contain one main idea, plus some explanation or expansion, and often an example or evidence to support it.

## Revise and edit your first draft.

If you have enough time, try to leave at least one day between the first and second drafts. When you return to it and read it through (aloud) with a fresh approach you will be able to make necessary changes and find errors more easily. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I actually answered the question and covered all the requirements of the topic?
- Does what I've written make sense?
- Is there a good, logical flow from paragraph to paragraph?
- Do the sentences actually make sense? (Read them aloud)
- Am I using appropriate vocabulary that I understand?
- Do I have a good clear introduction and conclusion?
- Have I referenced my assignment correctly, within the text and in the list of references?

Make the appropriate changes and ensure that your writing shows your understanding of the issues. At this stage it is a good idea to get someone else to read it through and tell you if it is easy to read, makes sense and flows well. Ask for realistic feedback.

## Write a final draft.

Pay attention to spelling and presentation. (Check your course requirements.) If you are using a word processor, and you know that your spelling and grammar aren't perfect, use the spell check and grammar check facilities (but realise they're not always perfect either!) Proofread your work carefully by reading it aloud. Number your pages, do a word count and check that your references are complete.

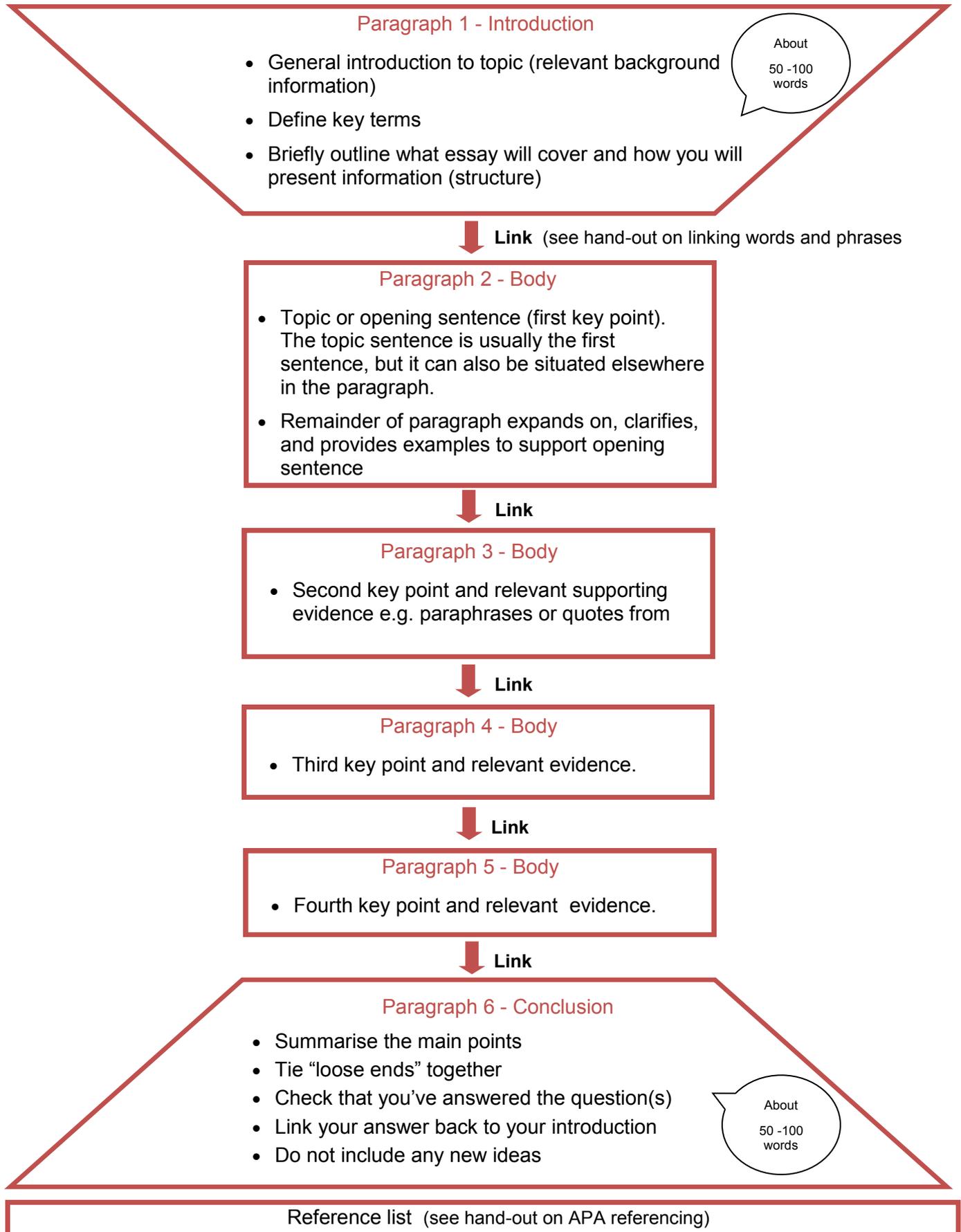
## Read the lecturer's feedback.

When you get your essay or assignment back from your lecturer, read the comments s/he has made carefully. This is a valuable opportunity for learning how to improve your work. If you don't understand the comments or a loss of marks in one area, ask the lecturer to explain.

## Characteristics of a 'good' essay (Adapted from the ETV video "Learning Skills")

- Ideas are clearly expressed
- Stays focused on topic
- Easy to read
- Logical structure
- Introduction indicates intention of essay
- Body develops ideas and demonstrates broad reading
- Correct referencing in body and reference list
- Demonstrates analysis and understanding of topic
- Good presentation
- Conclusion summarises the topic, draws themes together, restates findings and does not contain new material

## Possible essay structure (1000 word essay)



## Essay question instruction words

When you are given your essay question or instructions it is important to understand exactly what you are being asked to do. Following are brief explanations of common instruction words.

**Analyse:** break down the topic into smaller pieces and discuss these in detail.

**Argue:** develop a case or argument to support a particular position or viewpoint.

**Assess/evaluate:** make a judgement about something based on evidence.

**Comment:** give your opinion about something. Discuss and explain the topic.

**Compare:** find similarities. In some cases you also need to mention differences.

**Contrast:** find differences. If you are asked to compare and contrast highlight similarities and differences.

**Criticise:** make a judgement about the value or truth of something. Discuss limitations and good points.

**Define:** Describe the nature of something. For example: 'Define the features which distinguish a networked computer system from a standalone set-up.' **Or,**

State the meaning of something. For example: 'Define the term symbiosis'. **Or,**

Describe the scope of something. For example: 'Define the role of a nurse in private practice.'

**Demonstrate/Illustrate:** give examples to explain or show your understanding of something.

**Describe:** give a detailed account of something.

**Discuss/Consider:** look at different ideas and viewpoints about something.

**List:** state points concisely, in a logical order.

**Examine:** have a close, critical look at something.

**Explain:** Justify something. For example: 'Explain why it is important to wash your hands before handling food'. **Or,**

Make clear by giving detailed information. For example: 'Explain what is meant by aseptic technique'.

**Identify:** select relevant details and discuss these. For example: 'Identify the major features of an ergonomically safe work environment'.

**Justify:** prove, or give reasons/evidence for something. The aim is to convince the reader.

**Review:** critically examine or assess a subject.

**State:** briefly and clearly present the main points.

**Summarise/outline:** find the key points and use these to create an overview of the topic.

**Reference:** Rountree, K. (1991). *Writing for success: A practical guide for New Zealand students*. Auckland, New Zealand: Longman Paul.



For a comprehensive PDF guide to essay writing go [HERE](#)

(<http://www.otago.ac.nz/mofy/otago042510.pdf>)



For information on different types of essays go [HERE](#)

(<http://www.citewrite.qut.edu.au/write/essay.jsp>)



To watch a video that explains the process of essay writing go [HERE](#)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Bkk3PVjDMI>)



To watch a video on how to improve your academic writing go [HERE](#)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgkRoYPLhts>)