How to Write an Essay

When preparing an essay you will probably undertake a number of different activities:

- Analysing the question
- Making an initial plan
- Locating resources
- Reading and noting
- Writing the first draft
- Revising and redrafting

You may find that you move backwards and forwards among these activities.

**Step 1 Analyse the Question**

Analysing the question enables you to keep your essay on the topic by identifying the important parts of the essay question. There are three main parts to an essay question which you need to identify:

- **Task words** - such as ‘analyse’, ‘discuss’, ‘compare’
- **Information words** - this part of the question describes what content you will focus on in the essay
- **Limit words** - there are two kinds of limits in essay questions
  a. a limit to the question eg. confining the essay to a particular place, time or group
  b. a limit set on the length and time for the essay

When analysing a question first identify the task word or words. For example, if you were set the question:

*Discuss the impact of either television or the internet on children and teenagers in Australia.*  (1000 words, due 22nd May)

The **task** word is ‘discuss’ which here means ‘consider and interpret’

The **information** words can then be identified by asking ‘discuss what’? to which the response is ‘the impact’

The **limit** words are:
1. children and young people in Australia’
2. 1000 words due 22nd May

**Step 2 Make an Initial Plan**

Once you have analysed the question you can make an initial plan for your essay. This enables you to begin to clarify the point of view you will argue and to identify more accurately the kind of information and resources you will need. You make an initial plan by plotting your question analysis onto the three essay stages. For the example essay question above, your plan might look as follows:

**Introduction**
(Approximately 10% of the total word length specified for the assignment)

- Write a sentence to summarise your argument. You will add more later but this will be the start. *Eg. Technology has made both a positive and a negative impact on the children and young people of Australia.*

**Body**
Approximately 80% of the total length

- Write 3 or 4 key points that will support your argument. They will become your topic sentences. Add one or two examples for each topic from your reading (don’t forget to keep the references)
Conclusion
Approximately 10% of total length

- The conclusion restates your main argument. *Eg On the one hand it is obvious technology has had negative effects on the health of children and young people in Australia but there have also been positive effects such as the impact of the development of fine motor skills.*

Step 3 Reading and Note Taking

When you are reading and noting to prepare for an essay, it is important to do this selectively. This means that you only read and note information and ideas that are relevant to your essay. When you are taking notes remember to record all the relevant bibliographic information about the items you are noting.

Step 4 Write the First Draft

When you are ready to begin drafting your essay, go back to your initial plan. Do you need to change it?

Next write the body of the essay. Each main idea that you want to communicate becomes a paragraph in your essay. Use the first sentence of each paragraph (the topic sentence) to state clearly the main point you want to make in that paragraph. Other sentences in the paragraph then expand on this topic sentence by giving evidence to support it, explaining it more fully and/or giving examples.

When you have finished drafting the body write the introduction. The introduction may contain:

- a brief background to the topic
- a statement of your point of view in response to the topic
- a preview or outline of how you will present and support this point of view in your essay
- the definition of important terms

Finally write the conclusion. The conclusion may include:

- a summary of the arguments presented in the body and how these relate to the essay question
- a restatement of the main point of view presented in the introduction in response to the topic
- the implications of this view or what might happen as a result

Step 5 Revising and Redrafting

When revising your essay you might consider whether:

- you have clearly and explicitly answered the essay question
- all ideas are properly referenced and the reference list follows an accepted referencing system
- you have checked the spelling, grammar and punctuation

Essay writing enables you to develop and extend your thinking about the ideas in your courses. So improving your essay writing technique will help you not only to express those ideas more clearly but also to develop and clarify your thinking about those ideas.

A Checklist on Basic Steps in Writing an Essay

- Analyse the question and define key terms
- Establish your argument/point of view
- Research the topic
- Takes notes from your readings
- Write your plan and organise your ideas
- Write your first draft to include your introduction, body and conclusion
- Set aside the drafts for a day or two then re-read and make changes OR
- Have someone else read the easy
- Do a final edit
- Complete you reference and bibliography
- Completed – hand it in