

Study Skills Tips

Student Counselling Service

Essay Writing Strategies

There are several types of written work; essays, reports, projects, assignments which depend on the purpose. For instance, writing up a lab report or a practical is different from writing a critical essay. Your first task is to understand for what purpose you have been asked to write the paper.

The first thing you need to check is your Course Handbook. Your Handbook may have a section about essay writing for your course. Secondly, build on your word processing skills and learn to use all the features on your word processing software such as spell checking, grammar checking, thesaurus, downloadable specialist dictionaries, concept structuring software, etc. Your word processing package can make essay writing much more flexible.

If you are writing a critical essay the following steps might prove useful. But remember flexibility is important so constantly monitor and evaluate the strategies and approach you have chosen.

1. Scheduling

Determine date of submission and work backwards to the present, remembering things usually take longer than you expect! Generate a list of writing tasks involved, such as selecting a topic, writing a thesis statement or research question, initial research, creating an outline, research, first draft, revising, second draft, references, proof reading, final draft.

Estimate how much time each task may take and assign it a deadline. You may have to revise your schedule once you have clarified your topic. You will get better at estimating the time required for each task as you become more familiar with the library and your own writing style.

2. Understanding the question.

If you have been given a specific topic, find out as many details as possible such as who will be reading the paper, what is the specific purpose, how long should it be, what type of content is expected. If you have a choice in topic, start by generating ideas. Ensure the topic is feasible (given time limits and resources), of interest to you and appropriate (check out the idea with your tutor). Keep an "ideas" file for future reference, ask your lecturer, check journal articles, brainstorm or use free writing. Create a thesis statement or question, similar to a news headline using key words that makes an assertion or describes an action. Be as specific as possible.

3. Do initial research

Try to get an overview of the subject that may help you to determine the structure of your paper. Scan the relevant literature to see how much material is available, always keeping in mind your thesis statement/research question so you do not get sidetracked.

4. Create an Outline.

Using the key words in your thesis statement try to make a skeletal outline or a mind map. As you gather more information this can become more detailed. Keep in mind both content and structure of the essay. Take into account the length of the paper. Try to write a sentence or paragraph per heading. Keep room for additional ideas. Essay papers usually have an introduction, the main body, and conclusions section. As you begin to write, an outline keeps you on track.

5. Doing the research

You are looking for information to answer your question and evidence to support your argument. One suggestion is to use index cards, putting one idea per card.

Read the information critically, evaluating the relevance and validity. Take summary notes. Possible sources include books, journal articles, correspondence, radio, TV, notes. Copy all information carefully, noting when the ideas are your own or the author's, especially quotations; keep track of page numbers. Be selective. Students often go overboard on researching, never getting around to writing. Ask yourself is this relevant to my question/statement? Use source cards that record relevant information such as author, title, and year of publication, city of publication and publisher. It's hard to backtrack at a later date when you are under pressure to get the paper written. Check what type of referencing your department uses; this can differ.

6. Writing the First Draft

Gather your notes and outline; start writing!! This step is to help you clarify your own thinking on the subject and to create flow. This is not for keeps so just write as if you were talking or explaining the subject to someone.

Try to write one idea per paragraph. Be concise and use logical transitions although you can always reorganise the order at a later date. Remember you are trying to create a coherent argument or approach. Put the draft aside for a day or two and then rewrite.

7. Revising Your Draft

Reread the draft first, preferably out loud. Cut out any unnecessary words or paragraphs that don't fit the purpose. Rearrange so that the argument flows logically. Let a friend read the paper and critique it. Be critical, looking at words and phrases: use an active not passive voice, check grammar and spelling, avoid vagueness. Once you are sure you have covered your topic and the argument is coherent, then check your presentation: preferably typewritten with proper spacing and margins, quality paper, binder or folder as if it was a sales job.

8. Proofread. Make copies. Submit!

9. Feedback.

When you get your paper back read any comments and ask for comments to be explained. Examine how you can improve for your next writing assignment.

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