Essay Writing and Editing

Below is a 7-point plan to develop your essay writing skills. These tips can apply to all subject disciplines but you should also be aware of any subject-specific requirements and/or expectations that are stated in your course/module handbooks.

1. **Think about, and deconstruct, the essay title**

   Ask yourself: what am I being asked to write about? (i.e. what’s the topic), and, equally as important, how am I being asked to write about it? Start by identifying key words and phrases in the title, including ‘instructional’ terms such as ‘compare and contrast’, ‘discuss’, ‘critically analyse’, etc.

   Try breaking the title down into short questions, then brainstorm your ideas around these questions to get yourself thinking about the scope and breadth of the essay. Ask yourself: what are the issues that I need to consider in order to demonstrate that I have interpreted, and responded to, the question correctly? Remember not to include these questions in your essay as it is academically inappropriate.

2. **Actively research, read, take notes**

   If you’ve taken the time to think about the essay title (as above), you'll start your research and reading with thoughts in mind that will direct you to answering the question. In other words, you’ll be engaged in active research targeted to the requirements of the essay - a more effective strategy than trying to read everything you come across that might be vaguely relevant to the topic. Staggering away from the library with a mountain of books/papers to read, without thinking clearly about what the essay title is asking, may form useful weight-lifting practice but does not result in a good essay!

   When gathering information related to your essay make notes in your own words. These notes will form the basis of your essay. However, make sure that any theories or ideas you have paraphrased are correctly referenced; failure to do so in your final essay will be interpreted by your tutor as plagiarism. Start building your
bibliography at this stage - don’t leave it until the end and rush through it as an afterthought as the quality of it can count towards your overall grade.

3. Planning

An academic essay contains four main sections: an introduction, main body, conclusion and a bibliography. Based on your background reading, lecture and research notes and your own thoughts, draft a structural plan for your essay.

Pay particular attention to the main body by identifying a logical order in which you are going to present your arguments, and which sub-points belong to which part of your argument. Having a well-structured plan will help you enormously in producing a cohesive essay and will also allow you to write your essay in stages since it will clearly map out the direction you should proceed in once you are ready to continue. If you find it difficult writing the introduction first, start with the main body; many people find it easier to write the main body followed by the introduction. The conclusion should come last as you will need to tailor it to the ideas or arguments you have presented in the main body of your essay.

4. Writing

Based on your essay plan, start writing the first part of your essay; it is very unlikely that, if you have planned your time well, you will type the entire essay in one go. Most people find it easier to tackle their main points step-by-step; look at one of your main ideas/arguments and pull together all the information you have on this particular point. This strategy will give you a greater sense of progression as you will see the essay taking shape day-by-day and the whole task will then look far less daunting. Once you have developed your arguments in the main body, go over the individual sections and make sure they are well linked. Use ‘sign-posts’ to help the reader follow your arguments; these are phrases such as ‘Contrary to Brown (2004), or ‘having explored …, this essay will now look at …’ or ‘apart from …, another major criticism is …’

At each stage of your essay development refer back to the title and check that
you are answering the question correctly and have not veered off track; ensure there is a coherent, logical argument/structure developing.

5. Drafting

Never hand in the first draft of an essay! Once you have a complete first draft set it aside for a day or two, if you can. This way, you will be able to create further drafts with ‘refreshed’ mind, eyes, clearer ideas and perspective and renewed energy. Managing your time well is vital for this; start building an extra couple of days into your completion time schedule.

Go over the first draft and check that you have answered the question. If it helps, look at each paragraph and ask ‘does it answer the question?’ If the answer is ‘no’ then rewrite or delete it; if you are not sure then ask ‘how does it answer the question?’ Look at the structure and logic; the order of some paragraphs may need to change so your essay flows better. Set the essay aside again for a day or two before producing the final draft.

Avoid perfectionism, it is perceived! (i.e. in your mind). When you return to your essay draft make sure that: you have answered the question; your sentences make sense and the structure is logical; the language you have used is clear and concise and subject-specific vocabulary or ‘jargon’ is being used correctly. Once you are clear your essay meets these criteria move on to the next step

6. Editing the final draft

Once you are satisfied with the content and structure check your essay through again to look closely at the following:

- **referencing**: make sure you have correctly referenced theories and that all the references that appear in the body of your essay are listed in the bibliography;
- **bibliography**: your bibliography should be listed in alphabetical order by author **surname**, never first name. Make sure each bibliographical entry is set out correctly following standard scholarly conventions and incorporating any school/departmental requirements; don't just invent your own system!
• **grammar**: avoid writing in the first person i.e. I, we, you. Use ‘this essay/report’, and the passive voice ‘this theory was proposed by Jones (1976)’. Re-read your essay carefully and out loud to ensure your grammar is correct and that your sentence structure makes sense; reading aloud can also help you to spot typos and spelling and punctuation errors;

• **spelling**: poor spelling can be confusing and/or irritating to the reader (your tutor!). Make sure you use the spell-check in Word *carefully* and read your work through. If you know your spelling is weak, use a dictionary to double-check or get someone to look at it for you;

• **punctuation**: badly, punctuated work can be difficult to read. That last sentence was an example of how *not* to punctuate! Know the difference between a comma and a semi-colon; be aware that commas used in the wrong place can sometimes change the meaning/interpretation of a sentence;

• **presentation**: use a standard font (e.g. Arial) in 12 point and at least 1.5 line spacing. Be aware of any specific departmental requirements outlined in your course/module handbooks and follow them *exactly*. Ensure margins are uniform (2.5 cm), pages are numbered and the essay title is at the top of the paper.

Make sure you keep a copy/back-up of the final version of your essay that you hand in. You may want to keep all of the drafts you have made so order them sequentially as you are saving them.

7. **Learn from feedback**

    Never *react* to grades or comments personally; use them to *learn* how you can do better next time. Read the comments your tutors write about your essays *carefully* and make sure you understand them; they will give you valuable insights into how you can improve your work.

    If you don’t understand the comments, contact your tutor and ask him/her to explain them to you or go and pick up your work in person. Make sure you know *exactly* what it is you don’t understand and, therefore, what it is you want to ask about before the meeting.