

Higher Education Language & Presentation Support

Writing Essays

HELPS (Higher Education Language & Presentation Support)

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Contact us

- What's the purpose of the essay?
- What does it look like? (structure)
- How can you plan for it?

Essays

Why are university students expected to write essays? (Purpose)

- University students are not only required to acquire knowledge and demonstrate their comprehension of what they have learnt but they must also be able to show that they are able to apply that knowledge appropriately within their discipline.
- In order to further progress along the continuum of learning, they must be able to analyse and synthesise information, theories and concepts, and then critically evaluate such information to question its validity, to further develop ideas, to make recommendations, to devise solutions, and to discuss implications.

Critical thinking in essays

Better academic results require deeper analysis. This means drawing on sources, identifying contrasting positions, identifying outcomes and implications and critically commenting on the theory.

The cat sat on the mat

Critical thinking in essays

The cat sat on the mat

- **Fail** The cat sat on the **ground**
- **Fail/ Pass** The cat sat on the **mat**
- **Pass** The cat sat on the mat. The outcome of this was that the mat became flat, **and this indicates that** cats should be kept off mats.
- **Credit** The cat sat on the mat. The outcome of this was that the mat became flat, and this indicates that cats should be kept off mats. **Studies by Smith (1996, p. 7) show that cats sitting on mats have a positive effect on mat compressibility.**
- **D / HD** The cat sat on the mat. The outcome of this was that the mat became flat, and this indicates that cats should be kept off mats. **Studies by Smith (1996, p. 7) show that cats sitting on mats have a positive effect on mat compressibility. In contrast, Brown (1997, p. 34) claims that** cats do not make mats flat. **However, his observation** was based on a study of newborn kittens so this **cannot be judged as reliable**. Therefore, if mats are to be kept in an uncompressed condition, it is preferable that cats not be allowed to sit on them.

Fail vs. D/ HD

Essay Types

- Expository or Explanatory
(informs and explains)
 - A Description of events (history) or a process (science)
 - An Explanation of something (causes-outcomes)
 - Comparison/Contrast eg. Compare theme in poems; compare policies of political parties
- Discussion Essay; Argument Essay
(presents arguments & points of view; supports these views with evidence; compares and contrasts these views; ultimately declares which view is most convincing)

Essay types – what's the purpose?

- The problem with this interpretation is that it focuses not on **explanations** for rising divorce, but on its **effects**. Whilst this may be an interesting area to explore, it is not what is being asked for in this essay topic.

- The second student's interpretation is valid insofar as it focuses on **explanations**. The problem however, is whose explanations will be considered. The student states that he will give a 'critical explanation' based on his own knowledge and experience. This suggests some confusion about the term **critical analysis**. In the context of this essay, the critical analysis required would be of the **reading** that students do in relation to the topic, i.e. the explanations of different sociologists. In other words, the lecturer will be interested not so much in what students personally think are the reasons for divorce; rather they will want to know what students think about what they have read on the subject. This principle is broadly true of many university writing tasks.

- Furthermore, the student intends to 'interview a number of divorced people' for the essay. Whilst in another context this could be an interesting project, primary research of this kind is not normally required in an undergraduate essay, unless specified. This type of research is more likely to come later in a course (say final year or honours), after students have received some training in the discipline's research methods.

- Of the three interpretations, Student **3**'s would be closest to what is required. The student is proposing to comment on the adequacy of a range of sociological explanations for divorce (**critical analysis**) and then to consider what types of social policy would follow on from her explanations (**implications**).

- Unpacking an essay question & understanding what is expected/required in your response is the first, and an exceedingly important, step in your response writing.
- Look at the question:
- In the last 20 years, rates of divorce have risen significantly in Western countries. Critically analyse some of the different explanations given for this phenomenon. In your discussion you should consider what implications these explanations might have for social policy.
- Can you find...
 - the topic
 - the issue
 - the limitation (or scope)
 - the task

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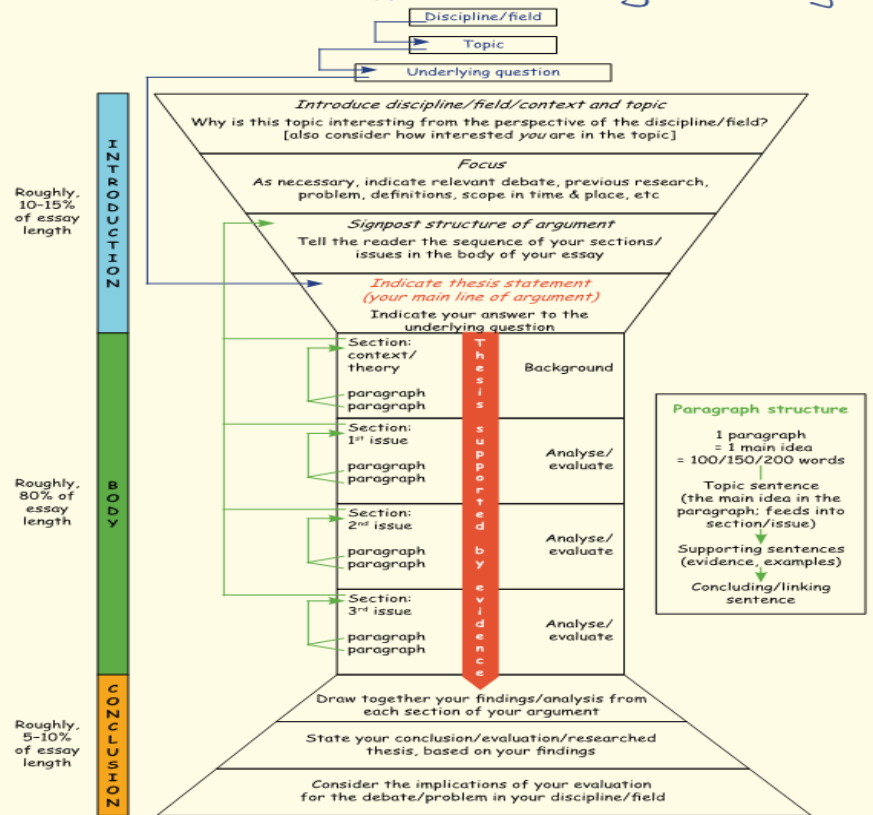
- the topic
- the issue
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Now you are ready to plan.

- Once you have developed a plan, you will have some idea of the types of readings you are looking for. You should always begin with texts included on any reading lists provided in the course. In order to locate materials that will be relevant to your work, you should make use of bibliographic resources such as tables of contents, indexes, introductions, prefaces, titles of articles, etc.

What plan would you create for this question?

How effective structure supports reasoned argument in essays¹



¹ Read the assessment task carefully because a topic or discipline often requires a different structure. And always remember the golden 'creativity rule' — all rules are meant to be broken, it's just that you first need to know them!

Essay structure

- What four elements are essential in an introductory paragraph?
- Orientation to topic:
 - Higher divorce rates in Western Countries
- Issue
 - Analysis or reasons & implications to social policy
- Thesis statement
- Outline

What would you write?

- A major change that has occurred in the Western family is an increased incidence in divorce. Whereas in the past, divorce was a relatively rare occurrence, in recent times it has become quite commonplace. This change is evidenced in census figures. For example thirty years ago in Australia, only one marriage in ten ended in divorce; nowadays the figure is more than one in three (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010: p.45). A consequence of this change has been a substantial increase in the number of single parent families and the attendant problems that this brings (Kilmartin, 1997).

- An important issue for sociologists, and indeed for all of society, is why these changes in marital patterns have occurred. This essay will seek to critically examine a number of sociological explanations for the 'divorce phenomenon' and also consider the social policy implications that each explanation carries with it. It will be argued that the best explanations are to be found within a broad socio-economic framework. It will focus on changes in laws relating to marriage and broad societal changes.

- HELPS website
 - <http://www.ssu.uts.edu.au/helps/resources/writing/essay.html>
- To see how an essay is planned from question to 1st draft:
 - Monash University, 2012, *Language and Learning Online*, Sydney, viewed 23 January 2012, <http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/writing/index.xml>
- Essay Structure: go to page 2 of visual guide to writing at aall.org.au
 - www.aall.org.au/sites/default/files/.../essayWritingVisualGuide.pdf

More on Essay structure

- Weekly workshops
- Drop-in consultations
- Writing clinics
- Conversations@UTS
- Intensive academic English programs
- Self-help learning resources

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