

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

Everybody knows how to write an essay – don't they? Yet, many third-level students find themselves staring at a blank screen and a blinking cursor for the longest time, as they struggle to write even the most basic introductory sentence to their topic.

Sound familiar? Well, you're not alone. Help is at hand and by following just a few easy steps, you will also become much more comfortable with the essay writing process in a very short time.

Where do I start?

A very natural inclination, when you are first handed an assignment title, is to begin writing immediately. However, what if we were to tell you that this is, in fact, the fifth step you should be taking, and not the first? Have a look at the step-by-step guide below, which should be followed as soon as you receive your assignment, and see if you can see why we recommend them:

1. Choose Your Topic

This may seem like an obvious choice, but you really do need to choose your topic carefully. Think about **how much you already know** about each of the options given to you, and just as importantly, **which of those topics interests you most?** If you choose a topic simply because it appears to be the easiest or the most straightforward option, this will show in your writing: a writer who is just going through the motions is immediately obvious to the reader. The opposite is also true, and **a writer who is genuinely interested in their topic will immediately convey that to their reader.** Also, researching your chosen topic is not as much hard work if you choose wisely!

2. Think About It

Time spent thinking about an assignment topic is NOT time wasted. Nor, for that matter, is any time spent talking about, or debating, these topics. **Discussing different matters**

with classmates and friends helps to clarify our own thinking. This, in turn, helps us to form a particular line of argument and to create a framework upon which we can base our research.

Brainstorming is also a very effective means of getting whatever is in your head down on paper. This will free up some headspace when you feel you're overwhelmed with information and cannot decide where to go with a topic.

TOP TIP

Freewriting will help you get it out of your head and down on paper. It can be edited, proofread and organised at a later stage. Every student should free-write for thirty minutes a day!

3. Research

Use all resources available to you. Your lecturers will have given you a **reading list**, and make sure you actually use it! These texts are specifically chosen to help you with your coursework and you'll gain some valuable insights into the topic that are sure to make writing your assignment easier. Familiarise yourself with the course content as listed on **Canvas** and, also, make full use of the various **resources available through the Boole library** here in UCC.

TOP TIP

Read widely and be mindful of the guidelines you are given by lecturers and tutors on various texts. E.g. 'essential' reading is just that, and it is not optional! Try to incorporate texts that are not on the recommended reading lists as well.

4. Plan/ Structure

Planning your essay is vital and will help you to feel more in control of your assignment as it begins to take shape. Again, this is not time wasted, so do not skip this step! Use a mind map, bullet points, spider diagram or any other form of planning tool you wish. Doing this will:

- Help organise and **prepare a coherent argument.**

- Enables you to **design a logical structure** for your work, and it provides you with an end point before you start writing.
- Make the process of essay writing far easier; if you are trying to structure and write your essay at the same time it can be quite difficult and confusing.
- Will help you to **stay on track and stick to the point**.

TOP TIP

Write out your essay plan and keep it near you as you write.

Your plan should **include an outline of each of the paragraphs in your essay and key ideas/ topics/ themes you wish to address**. You will always have the basic structure of an essay in any written assignment: an introduction, a conclusion and a number of body paragraphs.

Once you have settled on your central claim (argument) and you have written down which main points you need to discuss in order to justify your position, you will find it much easier to maintain a clear focus throughout the essay.

TOP TIP

A 2000-word essay may be broken down as follows:

250-word introduction

250-word conclusion

4x 300-400-word paragraphs

5. Write

Now you are finally ready to write! **Each one of your main body paragraphs should focus on one point relevant to the one central claim/argument** which you will have identified as you planned your assignment. **Each of these main body paragraphs should introduce its central idea, and this should then be developed fully**, using plenty of literature references as well as details, definitions, illustrations, comparisons and contrasts where appropriate.

6. Revising, Editing and Proofreading

The first draft of an essay should never be the one that is submitted for marking. Yes, this means that you need to begin your assignments well in advance of the deadlines.

TOP TIP

Ideally, you should leave a day or two between finishing a draft and revising it, just so you are looking at it with fresh eyes and a clear perspective.

So, what do we do when we are revising our assignment drafts? We look at:

1. **Main argument** - is it clearly stated in the introduction?
2. **Structure of the assignment** - is it logical and balanced?
3. **Content** - is what you have discussed in the essay keeping with the title of the paper? Is the content covering all the points that you mentioned in your introduction?
4. Is all the **information discussed in the paper relevant**?
5. **Clarity** - are all the main points clearly linked to the overall argument?
6. **Consistency** - in tenses, referencing, etc.
7. **Economy of word use** - are there overly-complex sentences that could be cut out? Are there too many descriptive words?

TOP TIP

Where possible, you might also get a friend to read over your paper before you submit it, to check for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.

You might find it helpful to read the text aloud to yourself.

Your ear will most likely pick up what tired eyes often miss, and you will be more alert to the clarity and flow of your assignment as it will sound to another, less familiar reader.

You can also enable text to speech in your Microsoft Word Document (see the useful links below).

Useful Links

- UCC Library, 'Assignment Essentials: Steps 1-5', Available at: <https://lib-guides.ucc.ie/assignmentessentials/step1>
- Purdue University, Online Writing Lab, Available at: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/724/>
- Using English for Academic Purposes For Students in Higher Education, Available at: <http://www.uefap.net/>
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 'The Writing Process', Available at: <https://writingprocess.mit.edu/>
- Guide to Grammar, 'Getting Started: Overcoming Writer's Block', Available at: <http://guidetogrammar.org/grammar/composition/brainstorm.htm>
- Skills You Need, 'Develop The Skills You Need for Life', Available at: <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/>
- University of Birmingham, 'ASC resources', Available at: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/asc/ASCresources.aspx>
- University of Sheffield Academic Skills Centre, 'Study Skills Online', Available at: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301/study-skills>
- University of Nottingham, 'Study Resources', Available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/support/support-for-your-studies/academic-support/study-resources/index.aspx>
- University of Leicester, Student Learning Development, 'Develop your Writing', Available at: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/all-resources/writing>
- Tutorials4view, 'How to add Text to Speech option to Word (voice) - Tutorial', Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFznmOKQ44>

Other Relevant PDFs

- Unpacking the Question
- Essay Planning & Structuring
- Introductions
- Conclusions
- Paragraph Structure
- Sentence Structure
- Punctuation
- Editing
- Proofreading
- Grammar
- How to Build an Academic Argument
- Evidence & Incorporating Research
- Paraphrasing