

Learning Development Service  
Queen's University, Belfast



## Essay Writing: The Essentials

Tips to help you write effectively

This guide is designed to offer non-subject specific guidance to help you develop your writing skills and essay-writing technique. While you should always follow the specific guidance of your module tutor in relation to assignments, particularly in terms of structure and formatting, the information contained here should help raise your awareness of ways in which you can develop your academic writing over the course of your degree or programme of study.

Students can get the most out of this guide by arranging an appointment with a Learning Development Tutor for help in identifying key areas for improvement along with personalized guidance and support. Telephone 028 9097 3618 or email [lds@qub.ac.uk](mailto:lds@qub.ac.uk) to book an appointment.

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## Essay Writing Overview

This section provides an overview of the steps required to write an essay and further detail on each step can be found later in the guide (at the correspondingly numbered section).

Take time to **understand the question**.

Employ critical reading and note-taking skills.

An essay needs an introduction, conclusion, and a main body consisting of individual **paragraphs** that fully elaborate on each point.

### Essay Structure

$$\begin{aligned} &= \\ &\text{Introduction (approx. 10\% of wordcount)} \\ &+ \\ &\text{(Main body paragraph)} \\ &\text{x the number of key points} \\ &+ \\ &\text{Conclusion (approx. 10\% of wordcount)} \end{aligned}$$

Think about **signposting** your essay and adding connecting words or phrases between and within paragraphs in order to make your writing flow well.

Ensure that your essay is a piece of **critical writing** and uses the **appropriate terminology**.

If you are having issues with the **word count** or suffering from **writer's block** take corrective steps.

Double check the **referencing system** you have used and ensure it is the correct format according to the referencing system used in your school.

Finally, re-read and **edit your essay**. Consider **academic and formatting conventions**, and **punctuation**.

## Understanding the Question

Taking the time and effort to carefully analyse and understand the question will ensure that your piece of work directly responds to the requirements.

Identify:

1. The subject matter or topic.
2. The specific focus.
3. The specific aspect – what is the point of view expressed on the subject matter? This is often articulated with phrases ending in 'of', such as 'the importance of'.
3. The instruction/question word – what does it mean and what does it require you to do as the writer? See the table on p. 4 for question words and their meanings.
4. The viewpoint to be argued – is it the same as your own point of view on the subject?

For example, if the question is "Discuss the impact of social media on the student experience at Queen's"; then, using the steps above, we can identify the different parts of the question as follows:

1. Social media.
2. Impact on Queen's students' experience.
3. "The impact of" – the question invites a discussion of the effects felt by the students because of social media.
4. "Discuss" requires you to give your own thoughts on the topic and support your opinion or conclusion.
5. Is there a significant impact on Queen's students? What are you going to argue?

You may find it helpful to draw a box around the question word, underline the focus and circle the viewpoint to draw attention to these key component parts.

Tip: Keep the question in front of you as you research, read and write to keep you focussed.

## Understanding the Instruction Word

Instruction Word	Definition – what you are expected to do
Account [give an]	Describe
Account for	Give reasons for
Analyse	Give an organised answer looking at all aspects
Apply	Put a theory into operation
Assess	Decide on value/importance
Brief account [give a]	Describe in a concise way
Comment on	Give your opinion
Compare [with]	Discuss similarities; draw conclusions on common areas
Compile	Make up (a list/plan/outline)
Consider	Describe/give your views on subject
Contrast	Discuss differences/draw own view
Criticise	Point out weak/strong points i.e. balanced answer
Define	Give the meaning of a term, concisely
Demonstrate	Show by example/evidence
Describe	Narrative on process/appearance/operation/sequence
Devise	Make up
Discuss	Give your own thoughts and support your opinion or conclusion
Evaluate	Decide on merit of situation/argument
Exemplify	Show by giving examples
Expand	Give more information
Explain	Give reason for – say why
Explain how	Describe how something works
Identify	Pinpoint/list
Illustrate	Give examples
Indicate	Point out, but not in great detail
Justify	Support the argument for...
List	Make an organised list, e.g. events
Outline	Describe basic factors
Plan	Think how to organise something
Report	Make an account on process, event
Review	Write report – give facts and views on facts
Show	Demonstrate with supporting evidence
Specify	Give details of something
State	Give a clear account of...
Summarise	Briefly give an account
Trace	Provide brief chronology of events/process
Work out	Find a solution, e.g. as in a maths problem

McMillan, K. and Weyers, J. (2011) *How to write essays & assignments*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Pearson. p. 33.

Tip: These steps and this table are also useful in understanding the questions posed in exams.

## Critical Reading and Note-Taking

Follow these steps to help you read and make notes for your essay:

- Take time to **understand the question**: think critically about the requirements. Ask yourself why you are being required to write it, the tutor's expectations and what you need to cover. Note down in bullet-point form your thoughts and ideas in response to the question and its key terms. List all of the topics/issues that you think you will need to cover in the essay and record your initial ideas.
- Create a **reading list composed of relevant material** that relates to your specific essay question.

Begin by searching in the readings listed in your module guide. List material that is **definitely relevant** and **possibly relevant** in separate columns. Then go to the library and collect the 'definitely relevant' material. While there, browse through and check the indexes of the 'possibly relevant' material, discarding any readings that do not look fully relevant and adding to the 'definitely relevant' those readings that will be useful to you in answering the question. Review the list and cut it down if it is too long and overwhelming. If it is a manageable list, and you feel that you could comfortably do a few additional readings, search QDiscover for a few of these. But keep the list relevant and manageable!

Tip: Make an appointment with your subject librarian for guidance on using the library and searching for relevant reading material.

- Employ **critical reading skills**. Identify and evaluate current evidence. Why are certain arguments successful? What evidence do they use? What are the strengths/weaknesses? Why are other arguments less convincing? See pp. 7-8 for further detail on this skill. You may find the 'critical notes' sheet below useful in encouraging critical reading and note-taking skills.
- Make **focussed, relevant notes**.

As you read through the items on your reading list, add relevant points, quotations and information under the headings you created while brainstorming. As you develop a firmer idea of the topic and how best to answer the question while reading, you may find it necessary to add in a couple of sections that you had not thought of during the initial stage, or, indeed, to remove some.



- You should now have several quite full bullet-points that contain notes, ideas, quotations and references to your wider reading. These form the skeleton that will ultimately be fleshed out to form the paragraphs that will make up your essay.

Tip: It's easier and more efficient to do your in-text referencing and reference list as you go along.

- Identify **your own perspective** on the topic; imagine that you are a lawyer arguing a case. As you read, you will be aware of multiple views on the issue and it is often difficult to decide the 'best' but your role is to weigh up the evidence and identify what is currently the most convincing. You need to have a clear sense of your own point of view and substantial reasons for it.
- Consider the need to **persuade the reader** with a well-structured, logical argument. Think about the best way to present the argument to allow the reader to follow the various points. Clearly link each argument to the one before so that it builds towards the conclusion (see information on 'Signposting', pp. 12-14). You want to show your active engagement with the topic and other writers' work on it.
- **Engage in debate.** Demonstrate that you have weighed up the various theories and are attentive to the strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints. Your argument needs to move from simply description to analysis and evaluation. See below for further detail on critical writing, pp. 15-19.
- Re-read the question and read back through your paragraphs to **check that you've fully answered the question and that all of your points are relevant**. Add in any information and analysis that you feel still needs to be included and cut any irrelevant material. If you've exceeded the word count, you may need to cut material that is not absolutely essential (see p. 20 for further information on 'Word Count Issues').

# Critical Reading Skills

Instead of accepting things at 'face value', you need to look for the evidence and reasoning behind the claims made by other writers.

## Ask yourself before you begin reading:

- What do I want to find out?
- What do I need to read to get the information I need?
- What is my point of view? Why do I think this?

## Ask questions of the writing:

- What, in basic terms, is the author's argument?
- Is it effectively evidenced?
- What are the limitations or flaws in the evidence?
- What examples would prove the opposite theory?
- Can the theory be disproved or is it too general?
- Is this convincing? Why/why not?
- What are the implications?
- What are the alternatives?

The 'Critical Notes' sheet on the next page can be used to make notes when reading: it helps you to focus in on the author's argument, reasoning, and how it links to other readings. Photocopy this page multiple times if you think it would be helpful.

## Form your own opinion:

- Which parts of the author's argument do I want to use/reflect on in my essay?
- How does this fit in with my own theory?
- How does it fit with the opposite theory?
- How does it fit with other relevant theories I have come across?
- Is my own theory still valid? If so, why?
- Am I surprised? If so, why?
- Do I agree? If so, why? Why not?



Author(s)/Source	
Title	
Website	
Date	Access Date
Publisher or Journal	Place
Volume	Issue Number
Author's position/theoretical position	
Essential background information	
Overall argument or hypothesis	
Conclusion	
Supporting reasons 1.  2.  3.  4.	5.  6.  7.  8.
Strengths of the line of reasoning and supporting evidence	
Flaws in the argument and gaps or other weaknesses in the argument and supporting evidence	
How does this Compare/Contrast other readings	

## Writing Introductions...

The introduction and conclusion should each be approximately 10% of your total word count

As it is the first thing your examiner will read, the introductory paragraph should demonstrate several things:

- ✓ You understand the question and the complexities of its key words and/or phrases.
- ✓ You can clearly apply those terms to the subject matter of the essay (i.e. the chosen author, text, theory, timeframe, etc...).
- ✓ You can summarise your argument clearly and anticipate the main points of your answer.
- ✓ That your essay/argument is worth the read.

Here are some helpful ways to introduce the reader to your answer:

**Definitions:** Identify the key words in the question and define them. Use dictionaries and (peer-reviewed) encyclopaedias. This shows the examiner that you fully understand exactly what you are being asked to write about.

**General Facts and Figures:** By drawing upon a striking fact/quotation that addresses the question quite broadly, you can convincingly illustrate your 'take' on the answer. Use facts/quotations that link directly to the key words and phrases. Being imaginative and adventurous with an opening quotation/fact can grab your reader's attention. You should be sure, however, to keep it brief and relevant.

**Signposting:** Give your reader a concise summary of the major topics that will be covered in the body of your essay. Quite simply, devote one/two sentence(s) to each paragraph in your main answer. Mapping out your answer in this way will mark your intentions clearly from the outset – examiners don't like surprises. See pp. 12-14 for further information on 'Signposting'.

**Conclusive Statement:** By finishing the introduction with a conclusive statement you can 'set up' your conclusion using rhetorical questions and anticipatory comments. This will make your essay read coherently by mirroring the beginning and end of your answer. This is important because your examiner wants to see that your answer demonstrates a coherent progression of ideas.

Tip: Just because your introduction occurs at the beginning of your essay, don't feel that you need to complete it first. Redrafting it *after* the main body and conclusions are finished will help with the coherence and 'flow' of your answer.

## ...and Conclusions

Your conclusion is the last opportunity to impress your reader/examiner. It should tie together the most important aspects/complexities of your argument, demonstrating that, through your answer, you have developed a more sophisticated understanding of the question.

Here are some elements of an effective conclusion:

- ✓ Summarise – **do not repeat** – the important aspects of your answer/argument (these should have been anticipated in your introduction).
- ✓ Refer back to – **do not repeat** – the question and show that it has, and how it has, been answered.
- ✓ Resolve your argument into a conclusive 'ending'. This doesn't have to solve all (or any) of the complexities of your argument, but it should balance/evaluate the points that you have made.
- ✓ Gesture towards further work/research that could be undertaken to improve the specific academic field in question. For example, if you have any ideas or issues in relation to the **central issues** that you would like to mention, but that it was not possible or relevant to discuss in depth in the essay, and which still have or could have some relevance, you could include these.

This basic mini-example demonstrates how your conclusion can mirror your introduction without the repetition of phrases or the introduction of new material:

The student experience has been transformed due to the prevalence of social media, which can be defined as "websites and applications which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" (OED, 2012). Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have changed the way that students interact with each other and share information, and also how they spend their time. Thus, it has been suggested that interaction through such sites has replaced 'traditional' modes of meeting and sharing (Gallagher, 2011). This change has been read as having both positive and negative effects on the student experience. On one hand, social media creates vibrant online communities and allows students with similar interests to communicate (Donaghy, 2011). Yet, social media can also be understood as contributing to alienation within the student body and fostering anti-social behaviour, including bullying (McGrath, 2010). This essay will consider the impact of social media on the student experience at Queen's University, Belfast by reflecting on the results of a student-wide survey and current research on the area. Major issues that emerged from the survey include X, Y, Z....

In conclusion, the popularity of various social media sites has caused a decisive change in the student experience. By facilitating communication between students online, such sites have altered how students interact with one another and these changes have been diversely interpreted as both positive and negative. This essay has argued that students at Queen's widely use such networks and consider them to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on their student experience. Although certain disadvantages have been illustrated, the sense of identity, involvement, and participation that such social media networks foster and encourage has, overall, brought students closer together. A more nuanced understanding of social media's impact could be achieved by surveying past students who studied at Queen's who did not have access to such media and/or by comparing Queen's online social network culture to those in other universities.

## Paragraphing Principles

Paragraphs give your writing structure: each paragraph should cover one idea or aspect of an idea so that every new paragraph marks a pause in the writing and signals a progression in your argument. Well-defined paragraphs that focus on a particular idea improve the flow of your essay and make the central argument clear for the reader.

Like the essay itself, paragraphs have an **internal structure** of an introduction, main body and conclusion. A paragraph should include:

- An opening topic sentence to express your main point. It may be useful to use 'connecting words' (such as: however, furthermore) or signposting sentences (another point to consider is...) – see pp. 12-14.
- Supporting sentences to develop and support the main point, give back up points, give examples, provide relevant quotations, comment on the evidence, show the implications, outline opposing theories etc.
- A concluding sentence to show the significance of the point made, comment on how it answers the question and link these ideas to the next paragraph.

Paragraphs have **no specific length**: in academic writing they frequently develop complex ideas and therefore generally run from half to one full double-line spaced A4 page in length. If your paragraphs seem short, check whether some of the surrounding paragraphs actually develop the same point. If your paragraphs are too long, check whether the idea would be better explained with more paragraphs.

Take care to **format your paragraphs** in the same way throughout your work: indent the first line of all new paragraphs, except the first (introduction) paragraph of the essay, with the TAB key. Do not skip a line between paragraphs.

## Signposting

Signposting means using phrases and words to guide the reader through the content of your essay.

There are two main types of signposting:

- **Major Signposts** - introductions, conclusions and outlining main arguments/the direction of the argument in paragraphs /opening phrases.
- **Linking words and short phrases** - connecting words help guide the reader through the argument by linking ideas, sentences and paragraphs.



## Linking words and short phrases

- **To develop an argument:** therefore, consequently, for this reason, it follows that, in view of this, moreover, indeed, in addition, in short
- **To redirect an argument:** however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, it has also been suggested that, it could be argued that
- **To add more ideas:** again, furthermore, in addition, moreover, additionally
- **To compare or contrast ideas:** alternatively, contrastingly, conversely, whereas
- **To give results:** as a consequence, as a result, hence, therefore, thus
- **To prove something:** evidently, for this reason, because, inevitably
- **To show exceptions:** however, nevertheless, yet, in spite of
- **To repeat or refer back to something:** as has been mentioned/noted, As previously discussed, to reiterate
- **To emphasise something:** definitely, obviously, inevitably, undeniably
- **To give an example:** for instance, in this case, in particular, notably, by way of illustration, such as
- **To show the order of things:** previously, following this, initially, subsequently, finally, firstly, secondly, thirdly
- **To show that you will include something later:** this will be discussed in detail later/below
- **To show that something will not be discussed:** this issue falls outside the scope/remit of this essay
- **To conclude:** in conclusion, finally, as has been noted/shown/revealed, in brief, in short, consequently, in other words, to summarise, accordingly, therefore

# Major Signposts

## Signposting in introductions

- This essay will [first] outline/examine/address/argue/demonstrate/focus on ... and will [then] ascertain/establish/clarify/show/judge/prove ... Next, it closely examines ... in relation to ... Finally, it focuses on ... and how this affects ...
- To understand the role of ..., this essay provides a discussion of ...
- This essay seeks to investigate/evaluate/illustrate/discuss the impact of ... in relation to ...
- The aim of this study is to ... / The purpose of this essay is to ... /This essay argues that ...
- The major issue that needs to be addressed is ... /The main questions addressed in this paper are ...
- This essay critically examines ...
- This essay is organised in the following way: ...
- The essay is divided into...main parts: part one will ... part two ...

It is often helpful to quantify what the essay will do. For example, 'this essay will address three aspects ...'

Then use connecting words like 'firstly', 'secondly', 'thirdly/finally,' through the essay to signpost the different points.

You may also signpost how the essay will do these things. For example, 'this essay will, by describing/reviewing/evaluating...attempt to demonstrate that ...'

## Signposting in the main body of an essay

### Introducing a new idea

- One aspect which illustrates ... can be identified as ...
- The current debate about ... identifies an interesting viewpoint on ...
- The first/next/final section provides a general discussion of ...

### Linking or developing a new idea

- Having established ..., this essay will now/next consider ...
- Building on from the idea that ..., this section illustrates that ...
- To further understand the role of ... this section explores the idea that ...
- Another line of thought on ... demonstrates that ...
- In addition to/As well as X, Y must be/should be/needs to be established ...



- X is one/an important/the key issue that has to be considered. Another/A second/ of equal importance is ...
- This idea/theory had been extended/developed by ...

**Introducing a contrasting view**

- However, another angle on this debate suggests that ...
- In contrast to evidence which presents the view that ... an alternative perspective illustrates that ...
- However, not all research shows that ... Some evidence agrees that ...
- This conflicts/contrasts with/is contrary to the view held by ..., who argues that ...

**Summing up a paragraph/section**

- The evidence highlights that ...
- It is clear that ...
- The strength of such an approach is that ...

**Signposting in conclusions**

- Clearly, this essay has revealed that the main factors which impact upon ... are ...
- From the above, it is clear that ...
- Several conclusions emerge from this analysis ...
- The evidence presented has shown that ...
- This essay has focussed on three factors affecting ...
- It has been established that ...

## Critical Writing

Critical writing needs to persuade the reader of your point of view on the topic. It should be a well-reasoned argument which leads to a clear conclusion. To help convince the reader you need to present a set of reasons, in a convincing and logical order. You need to back up your arguments with evidence from a variety of reliable academic sources.

### Description - Analysis - Evaluation

To ensure analytical writing, you need to show progression from **description** (What? When? Who? Where?) to **analysis** (Why? How? What if? So what?) and finally, move towards **evaluation** (What next? Why is this significant? How does this answer the question?)

Finding the balance between descriptive and analytical writing is essential to good writing practice at university level. All writing includes some description but examiners want to see evidence of deeper, critical thinking on the topic.

The table below identifies the differences between description and analysis:

Descriptive Writing...	Critical Analytical Writing...
states what happened	identifies the significance
states what something is like	evaluates strengths and weaknesses
gives the story so far	weighs one piece of information against another
states the order in which things happened	makes reasoned judgements
says how to do something	argues a case according to the evidence
explains what a theory says	shows why something is relevant or suitable
explains how something works	indicates why something will work (best)
notes the method used	identifies whether something is appropriate or suitable
says when something occurred	identifies why the timing is of importance
states the different components	weighs up the importance of component parts
states opinions	gives reasons for selecting each option
lists details	evaluates the relevance of links between pieces of information
lists in any order	structures information in order of importance
states the links between items	shows the relevance of links between pieces of information
gives information	draws conclusions

## Critical Writing Terminology

To provide evidence for your claims, it is usually necessary to refer to other sources. You should use critical skills to make links between different authors' opinions on the topic and to synthesise the various ideas into a coherent argument. Some of the phrases below may be useful in linking ideas.

### To introduce someone's ideas:

Bloggs suggests/argues/states/proposes/emphasises/believes that ...

Bloggs draws attention to ...

describes X as ...

describes how ...

indicates that ...

refers to ...

takes the stance that ...

According to Bloggs ...

As stated/suggested/argued by Bloggs, ...

There is a view/theory/argument that ...

It has been suggested/argued/proposed that ...

One view/theory/suggestion/argument/proposal is that ...

One view, expressed by Bloggs, is that ...

### Introducing questions, problems and limitations (theory)

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether ...

A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that ...

One of the limitations with this explanation is that it does not explain why ...

One criticism of much of the literature on X is that ...

The key problem with this explanation is that ...

The existing accounts fail to resolve the contradiction between X and Y ...

However, there is an inconsistency with this argument ...

Smith's argument relies too heavily on qualitative analysis of ...

It seems that Jones' understanding of the X framework is questionable because ...

Smith's interpretation overlooks much of the historical research ...

One major criticism of Smith's work is that ...

Many writers have challenged Jones' claim on the grounds that ...

X's analysis does not take account of ... nor does he examine ...

## Introducing questions, problems, weaknesses, disadvantages and limitations (method/practice)

Another problem with this approach is that it fails to take X into account ...

Perhaps the most serious disadvantage of this method is that ...

Difficulties arise, however, when an attempt is made to implement the policy ...

Nevertheless, the strategy has not escaped criticism from governments, agencies and academics...

One major drawback of this approach is that ...

The main limitation of X, however, is ...

However, this method of analysis has a number of limitations ...

However, approaches of this kind carry with them various well known limitations ...

All the studies reviewed so far, however, suffer from the fact that ...

However, there are limits to how far the idea of/concept of X can be taken ...

However, such explanations tend to overlook the fact that ...

However, one of the problems with the instrument the researchers used to measure X was

...

## Identifying a study's weakness

The main weakness of the study is the failure to address how ...

The study fails to consider the differing categories...

The research does not take into account pre-existing ... such as ...

The author offers no explanation for the distinction between X and Y ...

Smith makes no attempt to differentiate between various different types of X ...

Jones fails to fully acknowledge the significance of ...

The paper would appear to be over ambitious in its claims ...

The author overlooks the fact that X contributes to Y ...

However, what Smith fails to do is to draw a distinction between ...

Another weakness is that we are given no explanation of how ...

No attempt was made to quantify the association between X and Y ...

## Offering constructive suggestions

Bloggs' paper	would have been	somewhat more	interesting	if he/she had	used ...
His/her conclusions	might have been	more	useful	if the author had	considered ...
The study		much more	original		adopted ...
The findings		far more	persuasive		discussed ...
			convincing		demonstrated ...
			insightful		

A better study would examine a large, randomly selected sample of X with ...

A much more systematic study would identify how X interacts with other variables that are believed to be linked to ...

## Highlighting inadequacies of previous studies

Most studies in the field of X have only focussed on ...

Most studies in X have only been carried out in a small number of areas.

The problem with much published research on this issue is its generality ...

The experimental data are rather controversial, and there is no general agreement about ...

Such expositions are unsatisfactory because they ...

However, few writers have been able to draw on any structured research into the opinions and attitudes of ...

The research to date has tended to focus on X rather than Y.

The existing accounts fail to resolve the contradiction between X and Y.

Researchers have not treated X in much detail.

Previous studies of X have not dealt with ...

However, these studies used non-validated methods to measure ...

Half of the studies evaluated failed to specify whether ...

However, much of the research up to now has been descriptive in nature ...

Although extensive research has been carried out on X, no single study exists which adequately covers ...

However, these results were based upon data from over X years ago and it is unclear if these differences still persist.

## Introducing other people's criticisms

However, Jones points out that ...

Many analysts now argue that the strategy of X has not been successful. Smith, for example, argues that ...

The X theory has been / vigorously / strongly challenged in recent years by a number of writers ...

Bloggs' analysis has been criticised by a number of writers. Jones, for example, points out that ...

Smith's meta-analysis has been subjected to considerable criticism.

The most important of these criticisms is that Smith failed to note that ...

Jones is probably the best known critic of the X theory. He argues that ...

The latter point has been critiqued by Jones ...

Critics have also argued that not only do social surveys provide an inaccurate measure of X, but the ...

Critics question the ability of X theory to provide ...

More recent arguments against X have been summarised by Smith and Jones ...

Jones is critical of the conclusions that Smith draws from his findings.

## Introducing an idea/theory that agrees with or has built on another:

This is supported by/in line with the view held by Smith ...

Smith accepts/supports/agrees with/concurs with ...

A similar view is held by/stance is taken by Smith ...

This concept/idea/theory has been extended/developed/taken further/built upon by Smith ...

## Introducing an idea/theory that disagrees/contrasts with another:

This conflicts/contrasts with/is contrary to the view held by Smith that ...

This is not accepted/has been challenged by Smith, who instead argues that ...

Smith, on the other hand/however/in contrast, suggests that ...

An alternative view/suggestion is that ...

The opposite/a conflicting view is expressed by Smith; he asserts that ...

The University of Manchester (2011) *Being critical*. Available at:

[www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/critical.htm](http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/critical.htm). (Accessed: 17 January 2013).

Be sure to provide references for the material you cite directly,  
paraphrase and/or refer to.  
See p. 26-27 for further detail on 'referencing'.



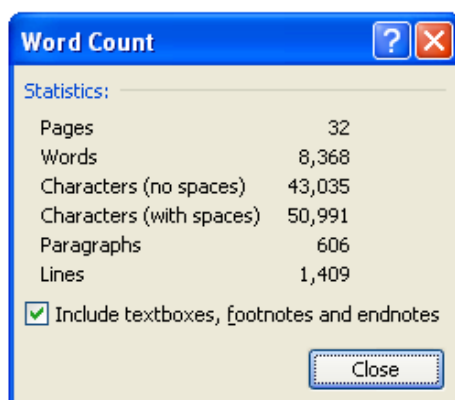
## Word Count Issues

Generally, you should aim to reach the word count set for an essay. By reaching the word limit, you are ensuring that you have developed your argument as fully as possible within the words permitted.

If you need to **increase your words**, look over your work and consider whether you need to further develop the ideas. Have you expanded on each point? Can you provide more evidence of critical thinking? Could you introduce a new, relevant point?

If you need to **decrease your words**, consider whether you have over-elaborated any points. Does every point you make directly answer the question? Have you included irrelevant material? Have you used too many examples to illustrate the same thing? Can you make your writing style more concise and less 'wordy'? Take care to cut out redundant words and phrases.

Check how much flexibility your School allows with the word count and note the penalties incurred for going under/over.



## Overcoming Writer's Block

Below are some tips and ideas for overcoming writer's block:

- Is more research needed? If you feel that you do not have enough information to form a relevant and coherent response to the question, you may need to return to the research stage and do some more reading.
- If you're stuck on a particular section of your essay or assignment, it can sometimes be helpful to move on to work on another section and then return to it at a later stage.
- Take a break from writing your draft and do something else that's productive: such as editing or checking that your references are formatted correctly.
- Create a timetable for the writing task with small writing targets so you get a motivating sense of achievement as these are accomplished.
- Write by hand for a while if staring at the computer screen has become demoralising (but return to keyboard use as soon as the block has passed, as this speeds-up the writing process).
- Find a new writing location if necessary.
- Change your approach to writing. Rather than writing continuously and coherently, try listing key points instead. Then order these and flesh out with connecting words and phrases, sign-posting, relevant references and quotations and any additional information (as suggested in 'Critical Reading and Note-Taking', pp. 5-6).
- Try to write in short bursts to get back into the habit of writing if procrastination is the problem. Francesco Cirillo's Pomodoro Technique, a productivity booster, might help:
  1. Select a task to be accomplished (a paragraph, for example).
  2. Set the Pomodoro to 25 minutes (the Pomodoro is a kitchen timer).
  3. Work on the task until the timer rings.
  4. Then put a check on your sheet of paper.
  5. Take a short break (around five minutes).
  6. Every four Pomodoros take a longer break.



For further information on this technique, visit:

[www.pomodoratechnique.com/download/pdf/Pomodoro-Cheat-Sheet.pdf](http://www.pomodoratechnique.com/download/pdf/Pomodoro-Cheat-Sheet.pdf).

## Referencing

When writing a piece of work, it is essential that detailed and precise information on all the sources you have consulted is included in your writing and also in the reference list at the end of your essay. Referencing is essential to successful research.

### Why do you need to reference?

- To **validate and support your argument**. Referencing shows understanding of the subject and the work of others on it.
- To **add authenticity** to your argument, distinguish your ideas from previous work, and show your new contribution to the subject.
- To help the reader **find and consult the original source** independently.
- To **improve your writing skills**, particularly critical writing by acknowledging/assessing/citing different points of view (see pp. 15-20).
- To show that you have **read widely and in depth**.
- To **avoid plagiarism**, by acknowledging all your sources.
- To help you **get better marks**.

### What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is generally defined as presenting someone else's work and ideas as your own. It is a form of cheating or 'academic theft.' This is a serious offence and disciplinary action will be taken by the University. To avoid plagiarism, be sure to give credit to the original authors by citing and referencing all your sources. You must do this if you are citing a source directly and also if you are re-wording or paraphrasing someone else's work. To make this process easier, **do the references as you go along**. This avoids having to locate materials again and breaks up the process of formatting your references.

## What referencing system should I use?

The referencing systems used vary across the different Schools of the University. To find out which system you are expected to use, consult your module handbook, ask your module convener or tutor, check the School website or contact your School office.

With every system, it is vital to **be consistent with the formatting**. Pay close attention to the punctuation used and ensure that all similar sources are identically formatted.

## Where can I get more information?

The Learning Development Service provides detailed information and guidance on referencing online through **Cite<sup>2</sup>Write** (developed by Tim Crawford from LDS):  
<http://www.qub.ac.uk/cite2write/>

The site helps you to master the basic rules and conventions of referencing. It includes detailed information on Harvard, Vancouver, MHRA, and OSCOLA.

You can also make a **1-1 appointment** to discuss any referencing system used at Queen's by contacting the Learning Development Service.



cite<sup>2</sup>  
write

click to enter

## Editing

It is essential to leave enough time for this stage of the writing process: editing your essay ensures that it is coherent and presentable.

Editing has two stages: reviewing and proof-reading.

### Reviewing

This step involves seeing the essay as a coherent whole and assessing whether it reads as a polished, clear piece.

- Can the reader follow your thinking?
- Are the paragraphs correctly formatted?
- Can you summarise the key point of each paragraph and why it is relevant to your essay title? If not remove or rewrite it.
- Is your language confident? *'This essay will ...it argues...'*
- Have you signposted your argument in the introduction? In addition, have you used connecting phrases and words in the main body?
- Is it properly referenced (using the system your School requires)?

### Proof-reading

Now take a closer look at the spelling, grammar, punctuation, missing words, misused words, and the referencing format.

- **Leave some time** after finishing your draft before proof-reading; it is easier to be critical about your work if it is not fresh in your mind.
- **Print it off** as it is difficult to closely read your work on-screen.
- **Read your work aloud.** It helps catch mistakes like small errors of expression and punctuation. Take time to ensure that every sentence and paragraph makes sense. You may need to read it over several times to catch all the errors. Each reading could be focussed on a different possible error and could use a particular technique that helps you to catch that mistake.
- For instance, use a blank sheet of paper to **cover up the lines** below the one you're reading. This technique keeps you from skipping ahead of possible mistakes.

- It might also be helpful to **use the search function** to find likely mistakes. Search for 'it', for example, if you confuse 'its' and 'it's'; or quotation marks if you tend to forget to include closing ones etc.
- You can **get Adobe to read your essay aloud**: convert the word document into a pdf, then in Adobe Reader go to view, then read out loud, and activate read out loud. A robotic voice will then read your work aloud for you! As it reads your essay, follow it on the page and make notes of any required changes.
- Be aware of your **punctuation**. Punctuate your reading; take the appropriate length of pauses for commas and full stops etc. to help you notice any issues. Double check the punctuation rules to make sure you know how to use commas, apostrophes, colons and semi-colons. See pp. 28-30 for a guide to punctuation.
- Use the **spelling check** in Word. Remember that the spelling checker won't catch mistakes with homonyms (e.g., "they're," "their," "there") or certain typos (like "he" for "the").
- Use a **dictionary** to double check unfamiliar word meanings and to ensure you are using them in the correct context.



- The **grammar check** tool in Microsoft Word can help to prevent some grammatical errors.
  - Carefully check your **referencing**, and follow the preferred style of your School. Ensure that the various types of sources are **consistently formatted**.
- **Ask a friend** to read through your work and offer to read over their work in return. Fresh eyes will often be able to spot additional mistakes.
  - Use **previous feedback** to learn where you made mistakes before and to ensure they are corrected.



## Conventions of Academic Writing

Academic writing has a particular style and conventions.

Generally, you should:

- Keep your writing **formal**. Avoid emotive language and slang.
- **Avoid contractions**: can't/don't/wouldn't should be written as cannot/do not/ would not.
- **Avoid rhetorical questions**. Generally, you should not directly address the reader with a question. Instead, you could rephrase it: 'the question arises whether ...'
- Keep the **tenses consistent**.
- **Do not use pronouns like I, We or You** (unless you are doing reflective writing). Keep the language impersonal: refer to what 'the essay' will do, rather than what you will do.
- **Avoid sweeping generalisations**. Be specific and always provide references where needed. Your language should be attentive to the fact that the issues you discuss may be subjects of academic debate.
- **Write small numbers out in words**, but larger numbers in figures: five years; 5,000 years.
- **Avoid over-reliance on quotations**. Do not copy large chunks of text: use either a few relevant sentences in quotation form or paraphrase, crediting the author by providing a reference. Quotations should be used in support of your argument and not instead of writing.
- **Academic writing should be objective (emotionally neutral)**. Most academic writing requires you to stand back and analyse dispassionately, as an objective onlooker.

Tip: Try to mirror the style of other peer-reviewed writings in your discipline.

## Formatting Conventions

Before you submit your work, double-check that it is presented in an appropriate format. Remember that first impressions count!

Always follow the **specific guidelines given by your School**.

Generally, you should:

- Use a **standard font** in a **readable font size** (such as Times New Roman, 12).
- Use **double line spacing** and include **adequate margins**.
- Print your essay on **one side of the page only**.
- Ensure that your **paragraphs are appropriately sized** and that they are **formatted consistently**. Indent all new paragraphs, except the first (introduction) paragraph of the essay, using the TAB key. Do not skip a line between paragraphs.
- **Quotations** should be relevant to your argument and used judiciously in your text. Excessive use of quotations can disrupt the flow of your writing and prevent the reader from following the logic of your reasoning. Short direct quotations, up to two or three lines in your assignment, can be set in quotation marks (single or double – be consistent) and included in the body of your text. Longer quotations should be entered as a separate paragraph and indented from the main text. Quotation marks are not used in this case.
- For **abbreviations**, it is good practice to give the full details and put the abbreviated form in brackets the first time you mention it, and then subsequent mentions can just use the abbreviation. For example, first reference: National Health Service (NHS), and subsequently just use NHS.
- Include the **essay title** at the beginning of the essay (top of the first page in bold).
- **Number the pages** of the essay (go to 'insert' and the 'page number' option in Word).
- Include your **School's cover sheet**, if required.

Information Services provides a helpful guide to using Word (as well as other Microsoft Office programs): go to your Queens Online home page, then look in the folder **IT and Library Guide** in the 'University Documents' box.

Or follow this link to directly access the PDF guide to Word:  
<http://bit.ly/XrNy8q>

## Punctuation

Taking the time to check over your punctuation will ensure that the examiner can understand your sentences and follow your arguments; it will also improve the examiner's impression of your essay.

Keep your punctuation simple and clear. Below is a reference table to double-check that you have used appropriate punctuation:

Punctuation:	Usage:	Example(s):
<b>Apostrophe</b> ,	a. Possession (singular and <b>plural</b> ).  b. Contraction.	a. Queen's University / <b>Students'</b> Union  b. Don't go/ I'm thirsty / It's your round Contractions generally should not be used in academic writing.
<b>Brackets / parenthesis</b>  a. [Square brackets]  b. (Round Brackets)	a. For adding your own words inside a quotation.  b. To set apart explanatory information.	a. "The [Mc Clay] library officially opened in 2009."  b. Library fines can (and do) get out of control.
<b>CAPITAL LETTERS</b>	a. To start sentences.  b. To name places / people / acts of parliament / organisations	a. I like cake. It makes me happy.  b. <b>Malone Road, Belfast/ Tom Selleck / The Good Friday Agreement / National Health Service</b>
<b>Colon</b> :	a. Leads from one clause (full sentence) to another where the second clause acts as an explanation of the first.  b. Introduces a list.	a. The tutor said my work was careless: I don't pay enough attention to punctuation.  b. I went to the shop for several things: a sandwich, a paper and a strawberry yogurt.

	c. Introduces a quotation, diagram or picture.	c. According to Bob Dylan: "Money doesn't talk, it swears."  ..., as the diagram (below) reveals:
Comma ,	a. Separates words in a list (replaces and/or). b. Joins parts of a sentence (used with a connecting word such as because/or/and/but/so). c. To represent missing words. d. To mark an interruption within the sentence. e. Marks introductory clauses and <b>adverbs</b> .	a. I'll have bacon, egg, sausage, beans and toast. b. I intended to finish my coursework on Monday, but I have not read the required books. c. In Italy people speak Italian and in France, French. d. Getting ready to go out, generally speaking, is the highlight of my week. We had a problem, to put it mildly. e. <b>Arguably</b> , my results could improve.
Dash —	Marks an aside/addition <i>without</i> using a comma or colon.	Wikipedia is – quite understandably – frowned upon by University tutors.
Elipsis ...	Marks words omitted from a quotation.	According to Bob Dylan: "Money [...] swears".
Exclamation Mark !	Indicates shock, forcefulness or surprise.	Avoid using exclamation marks in academic writing!
Full Stop .	a. Marks the end of a sentence. b. Marks an abbreviation.	a. They called last orders at the bar. b. Prof. / Alc. % / Uni. / P. (Initial – used in some referencing systems)
Hyphen –	a. Joins a single letter or <b>prefix</b> to a word. b. Joins numbers and fractions.	a. X-ray / <b>semi</b> -conscious b. I only use two-thirds of my brain.

	c. Compound adjectives to describe nouns.	c. Accident-prone (noun+adjective) man; custom-built (noun+participle) car; bad-tempered (adjective + participle) child; nineteenth-century (adjective+noun) art.
<i>Italics</i>	a. Adds emphasis or contrast to text, distinguishing certain key words or phrases.  b. Distinguishes book, film or journal titles.	a. Irish weather is wet and windy but it rains in Belfast <i>all</i> the time.  b. <i>Hamlet</i> is a masterpiece but I love reading <i>Harry Potter</i> .
Question Mark ?	Ends sentences that ask a direct question.	Can I use a dictionary?  Generally, you should not directly address the reader with a question in academic writing.
a. 'Inverted Commas'  b. "Quotation Marks"	a. Single quotation marks (or inverted commas) mark exact words printed in a text.  b. Double quotation marks place a quotation within a quotation.  Double check the quotation mark conventions in the referencing system you use!	a. 'This is a direct quotation.'  b. 'This is a "quotation within" a quotation.'  It is vital to be consistent about when you use the two types.
Semicolon ;	a. Separates two or more clauses (full sentences) of equal importance. It implies a relationship between them.  b. Separates listed items, especially if it is a complicated list.	a. They won the battle; the other side won the war.  b. There were people from Belfast, Co. Antrim; Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh; Cookstown, Co. Tyrone; and Newcastle, Co. Down.

