Step 9
Writing the first draft

Very few people are able to write the final version of their assignment straightaway. It is likely that you will need to make some amendments to your first version to make sure your arguments are stated clearly and that you have answered the question.

However, done properly, your first draft should put you well on the way to completing your assignment. Your aim is to produce a concise, coherent and logically structured piece of work.

When putting together your draft there are a few key things to consider:

- Follow the plan you decided on in Steps 3 and 8
- Use a separate paragraph for each idea
- Make sure each paragraph relates to your plan
- Include supporting evidence from a variety of sources to back up your arguments.

Tips for writing your essay

Depending on what type of assignment you have been given you may be required to write it up in different ways. Essays and reports have different purposes and therefore different structures. While essays generally require a discussion of a particular issue/theoretical statement or quote, reports generally focus on a specific problem or case study.

The sections below provide some tips on how you should structure your essay.

Key features of essays and reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An Essay</th>
<th>A report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presents an argument</td>
<td>Presents information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely, if ever, use sub-headings</td>
<td>Always uses numbered headings and sub-headings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links ideas into cohesive paragraphs, rather than breaking them down into a list of bullet points</td>
<td>Uses short, concise paragraphs and bulleted or numbered lists where applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely uses graphics</td>
<td>Uses graphics wherever possible (tables, graphs, illustrations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will only need an abstract if it is very long, or if your tutor asks for one specifically</td>
<td>May need an abstract (sometimes called an executive summary) at the beginning of the report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom makes recommendations</td>
<td>May be followed by recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not usually include additional material in appendices</td>
<td>Will often include appendices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Structuring your essay**

An essay will typically include the following sections:

**Introduction (5-20% of essay length)**

- Gets the readers attention
- States what you are going to do
- Outlines the plan for the following arguments

It is important to make your introduction a clear and limited statement. This is where you should try to grab the reader's attention and make them want to continue reading!

**Body**

- Builds the points of your discussion or argument - one idea per paragraph
- Develops your ideas - you must use research to support the claims you are making
- Structure the paragraphs in the following way:
  - Begin with a topic sentence that introduces the first idea.
  - Use the middle of the paragraph to discuss your support for the idea, give examples/references and analyse these.
  - The last sentence of the paragraph should be used to draw a conclusion for the idea or to transition into the next paragraph.

**Conclusion (5-20% of essay length)**

- Summarize the main points and usually make some sort of judgment about the topic being investigated
- No new ideas should be introduced in the conclusion!
- Refer back to the original question
What you say in your conclusion should match what you said when you introduced the essay: it should re-state (but not repeat) your idea or argument, ideally showing more fully what you have been saying. Remember the conclusion is the last thing the reader looks at, so it needs to leave a good impression! Do not allow a strong essay to fizzle with a weak conclusion. Always end with a definite statement.

Write it right - checklist for writing academic essays

DO...

- **Read your work carefully.**
  Use the spelling and grammar function in your word processor. However, don’t rely on this totally – it is also worth buying a good dictionary/thesaurus and using it.

- **Check that your writing is:**
  - **Clear** - you want to be sure your tutor understands what you say.
  - **Simple** - never make the mistake of thinking that a long word is more impressive than a short one. Never use words unless you are sure you know their meaning.
  - **Well punctuated**: poor punctuation can change the meaning of what you are saying as well as making your assignment difficult to read. If you are unsure about punctuation use one of the guides in the Library.
  - **Well structured**: the paragraphs should be ordered correctly. They should flow one to the next, with linking between the ideas where appropriate.

DON’T...

- **Use overlong sentences.**
  Very long sentences which use a lot of clauses such as ‘and’, ‘but’ or ‘which’ can make it more difficult for your tutor to follow your arguments. Short sentences are clearer and easier to understand.

- **Use slang or informal language.**
  There is nothing wrong with slang or informal language in the right place. We use both in conversation all the time. But language has to be appropriate to the context in which it is used. We have generally used less formal language on this site as that is appropriate. However, in writing your assignment a neutral, formal style is more appropriate. Think about the style of the books and
journals you found while doing your research and try to follow the example of the clearest and best written of these.

- **Use jargon for the sake of it!**
  If it is essential you can use specialist vocabulary, but always choose simple, clear language as much as you can.

- **Use abbreviations** without giving the name in full the first time it is used.

**Tips for tricky situations**

When you come to write up your essay, there are a few common problems you may encounter. The tips below should help with some of the most common of these.

**Writer’s block**

Sometimes you may not be able to decide how to start writing. Don’t sit staring at a blank piece of paper or screen. Just start writing something – even if it is just notes and ideas. You’ll be surprised once you start how the ideas start to flow. You may need to go back and edit what you have done later, but at least you have something down.

**Can’t fill the word limit**

This may be because you do not know enough about the subject. Go back and look at your initial plan and maybe do further research and reading.

One thing you must not do to pad out your words is to repeat yourself, or use long, complicated sentences and phrases, with lots of adjectives. It is obvious to the reader of your essay when you have done that, and these superfluous words will not contribute to you getting a good mark.

**Can’t keep inside the word limit**

If this is a problem, then you may have padded your sentences out too much. Read through and see if you can phrase things more concisely. Or you may be trying to cover too much material. Read through your plan again and try to focus on a narrower range of issues that you can discuss fully, or if more appropriate cover the same range of issues but at a broader level.