



Writing a critical essay

In an essay at university level you are never just ‘writing all you know’ about a subject, or simply ‘describing’ something. You are being set a specific problem to think about in the light of the course learning objectives. Your task is to argue a case in relation to the question posed in the title. An essay has an argument– a point of view or thesis that it is designed to prove. Everything you say in the essay should be relevant to the argument or thesis.

As Andrew Northedge (1990) writes, ‘arguing’ in an essay is not at all the same thing as ‘having an argument’ in everyday terms. When you hear two people ‘arguing’ in normal life, there is often a hint of anger, emotion, irrationality and generalization. Your argument in an essay should aim at the opposite of these: you must be objective, precise and logical.

Analysis in an essay involves identifying and critically evaluating assumptions. You must also support your case with evidence. In order to make sure you do this in the most effective and efficient way, clarify the following points with your lecturer before you launch into essay preparation:

- The number of sources to be used
- The citation or documentation procedures required
- The length and format of the completed paper.

The writing process itself can be divided into three stages:

- Pre-writing – ie preparing to write
- Writing – ie composing a working draft
- Post-writing – ie revising, editing and proofreading

Pre-writing

Prepare to reserve up to one-third of the time allotted for pre-writing activities.

Pre-writing involves:

- Narrowing the focus
- Developing a research question
- Researching
- Note-taking
- Documenting sources
- Organizing an outline

Narrowing the focus

If your lecturer has not provided you with a specific issue or aspect to investigate, your first task is to narrow the topic and isolate an important problem or a major controversy on which to focus your attention.

Here's how:

- Do some preliminary reading to list some potential issues for consideration
- Brainstorm issues and exchange ideas with fellow students
- Use diagrammatic techniques to reveal connections between ideas
- Discuss your choice of focus with your professor.

This is a crucial stage of the process because the issue, aspect or feature that you select will provide the focus for your investigation. The research question that emerges from your preliminary reading and brainstorming is the beginning of your thesis, argument or point of view. The answer to the question will form your thesis, argument or point of view.

Developing a research question

Try to formulate a single, challenging question that demands analysis and argument – a question that can be stated precisely and succinctly in just one sentence. If possible, discuss the question with your professor. Knowing the research question or purpose of your essay enables the next stage of your research to be more focused and directed.

Researching and documenting sources

Use a variety of source materials, books, current journals and credible internet sites. Analyse the material to reveal a wide range of interpretations and information. Evaluate all your sources carefully for authenticity and reliability.

The evidence that you unearth in your research will fall into two broad categories:

1. Factual information or data
2. Ideas, judgements, inferences, theories and opinions

Part of your task as a researcher is to determine whether a piece of evidence is an established fact or a personal opinion.

Here are a few tips to help you do this:

Read critically: do not accept ideas and opinions blindly.
Be sceptical: read between the lines and beyond the print.
Question continuously as you read and examine carefully the arguments and hypotheses of the authors. Raise your own challenging questions.
Be objective: a controversial topic has two sides to the argument. Always consider both perspectives and approaches before presenting your own opinion.

Ask your lecturer whether you are expected to use professional or only peer-reviewed journals.

Note taking

There are four main types of notes:

1. Direct quotations (directly quoting someone else's words)
2. Paraphrasing information and ideas (putting the author's ideas into your own words)
3. Summarizing information and ideas
4. Personal insights, comments, and questions.

The information presented in the first three bullet points above must be documented and acknowledged in your essay.

Documenting sources

Although many methods of documenting reports are currently in practice (Guffey & Nagle, 2007) we will discuss only one: the APA (American Psychological Association) method.

The APA recommends that in-text citations (ie quotations or references to others' ideas) of fewer than 40 words should be made in the following style:

According to some OB theorists, "Invaluable as the deskill/enskill debates is for our understanding, it cannot help but gloss over the actual behavioural processes that surround technological change and organizational development" (Bratton, Callinan, Forshaw, & Sawchuk, 2007, p.439).

In this example, the authors' names are provided inside the parentheses at the end of the sentence. Note that the period (or full stop) comes after the parentheses. When you quote work by three to five authors, subsequent references can use the first named author, followed by 'et al.' The reference above would therefore be abbreviated to read '(Bratton et al., 2007, p.439)' in subsequent appearances.

An alternative approach is to include the author's name in a 'signal' phrase in your sentence.

This is particularly useful if you wish to indicate the authority of the source.

“Gender,” noted sociologist Judy Wajcman argues, “is woven into the very fabric of bureaucratic hierarchy and authority relations” (1998, p. 47).

At the end of your essay you should include a page entitled ‘References’ giving full details of all the works you have referred to in this manner. The conventions for referring to different types of resources are as follows:

Resource type	
Book – individual author(s)	Bratton, J. & Gold, J. (2007). Human resource management: Theory and Practice (4th ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Book – corporate author(s)	Wood Gundy Ltd. (1974). The Canadian Money Market, Revised. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
Article in an academic journal	Charlwood, A. (2002). Why do non-union employees want to unionize? British Journal of Industrial Relations 40 (3), 463-491.
Article in a newspaper	Lewis, D. (2003). Women mentors on the rise. The Globe and Mail. 12 February 12, C8.
Internet	Tillman, H. N. (1998). Evaluating quality on the net. [Online]. Available: http://www.hopetillman.com/findqual.html .