WRITING FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES AT THE IIE
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1. Introduction

Writing for academic purposes is quite different from writing for other purposes and is not a skill that most of us master before we enter a higher education institution. It is a skill that can be learned and the purpose of this style guide is to assist IIE students to develop their academic writing ability.

Developing your academic writing skills includes learning to conform to acceptable conventions with regards to style, tone and presentation while at the same time learning how best, as a first time academic author, to develop presenting your own voice and position.

2. What is Academic Writing?

Writing is something that most people do all the time. For example, we send e-mails or texts, update our Facebook information or, we may write in a diary. In our everyday writing we typically aim to communicate events in our lives to other people. We personally reflect on these events. What we include in our personal writing is our judgements of situations and our thoughts and feelings. We write our personal stories as they enter our minds, and we do not really structure them carefully – they are sometimes a string of freely associated ideas.

Academic writing is very different from personal writing in a number of important ways. Put simply, academic writing is writing that is based on a process of reading and evaluating formal sources of information. Academic writing is your process of taking the academic writing of other people and organising it in a way that you are able to answer a question or suggest a solution or validate a position. Academic writing depends on sources of information that are credible (believable).

Firstly, and probably one of the most important differences between personal or social writing and academic writing is that academic writing is highly structured. Typically, academic writing contains a beginning, a middle and an end. For example, in an essay, an introductory paragraph may present your position on a particular topic, and, alert the reader to how you will structure your argument. The middle, or the body of the essay, will present the reasons for your position. Finally, the end, or the conclusion, will discuss the implications of your position. Consequently, there are certain conventions in terms of structure that you need to follow when writing for higher education purposes. Some of this you may have been taught at school – we will build on that base.
Secondly, the use of and citation (reference) of published works is central to academic writing. In academic writing it is always assumed that you have read what others have said about the topic you are writing about and that you have organised what you can learn from others to either support or counter your own opinion. One of the key differences between academic and personal writing is that in personal writing you will often state your opinion first and then use examples from all sorts of sources – most of them informal – to support your position. In academic writing your first task is to master what others have already said and then form an opinion and present that opinion in the context of what others have already written. Referring to other authors is essential because it demonstrates that you have read the literature on a particular topic, have understood the relevant ideas, and, have integrated these in relation to the assessment task. You need to support your opinions with information that is seen by others to be important enough to be published. Remember that most things that get published in textbooks or academic journals were written by someone that read what had already been written and then formulated their own work. Before this is published, other academics check the source material and the argument and then approve or reject it for publishing. By reading work that has been through this process you are able to find sources that are credible (believable and valid). Most sources used for personal writing have not been checked so carefully and could in fact simply be untrue.

Having read the material for academic writing it has to be referenced properly – not only do you need to show what you have read (so it is clear it is academic writing) but you also then need to give those authors credit and that is what referencing is about.

Thirdly, academic writing is generally about abstract, rather than concrete things. Academic writing is normally about theories, ideas and concepts, rather than material objects. You would, for instance, write about the explanations that exist for why a recession will happen or what influences prices, or, what effective communication is and then you may illustrate your theory with examples. In social writing you would normally just describe the examples from what you observe in your life. Even in more practical subjects like teaching, economics and design involve the discussion of the abstract principles that underlie any practical decisions and actions.

Finally, academic writing follows the rules of punctuation and grammar so that you can minimise the chance of being misunderstood or misinterpreted and so that others can share what you have written. It is written correctly so that, in time, your writing develops to the point where it can be published for the next generation of academic scholars to read.

Academic writing does not involve abbreviations or slang or acronyms (e.g. LOL) and you need to fully write out exactly what you mean. Your writing needs to be more formal, and you cannot use the language that you would use when texting your friend.
3. Why do you need to Develop Good Academic Writing Skills?

The central way that you are assessed at higher education level is through your writing. Your marker needs to be able to understand exactly what you are trying to say and to be persuaded or convinced by your argument. A basic truth of higher levels of study (and probably your work life) is that the more effective you are as a communicator, the more successful you will be as your ability to get others to follow you or accept your opinion is highly dependent on them understanding what you are trying to say or argue.

4. How do you Develop Good Academic Writing Skills?

You are unlikely to succeed academically if you do not develop your academic writing skills. Just as with a musical, sporting or other skill, you need to master the technique and the rules of the activity and then you need to practise.

That means that you need to make the time available to carefully plan and think about your writing. You will not be able to write well academically at the last minute as you will not have enough time to research the topic and present an argument well supported by the things you have read (called the literature). Your assignments then are the ideal space to practise and improve your academic writing. They are designed to provide you with an opportunity to investigate a topic in-depth which will mean that you better understand it and that in turn rewards you with knowledge and skills for being actively involved in your own learning. If you do your assignments well you will find that preparing for examinations is easier as you will have gained real knowledge about your subject through the writing.

5. Referencing and Citing

A reference is like a set of instructions – the information you give a reader so that they can go and access the source you are referring to and read it themselves. This is why references need to have ALL the details of the sources you have used. When you use a source in your writing that you have referenced (provided the directions) that is called a citation. In other words, citing means using the reference by quoting the exact words or paraphrasing the ideas of another person. Do not worry too much about this at this stage – we are just providing these definitions as you are likely to encounter them again.
There are many formal systems for acknowledging the ideas of others in your academic writing. For example, in all Law qualifications, you will be expected to follow legal conventions of referencing. Please check the library website for a guide to referencing in Law modules (http://www.iie.ac.za/IIE%20Library/Pages/default.aspx). The Harvard Style of referencing is predominantly used at The IIE.

The purpose of this Academic Writing Guide is not to familiarise you with this specific format of referencing. For explanations and details of how to conform to all the styles of referencing, please refer to the Intellectual Integrity Policy (IIE 009), the Quick Reference Guide, and various other style guides on the library website http://www.iie.ac.za/IIE%20Library/Pages/default.aspx.

The focus of this Guide is to relate the practices of referencing and citing to your own academic writing.

We all use sources when we communicate – we tell people that we heard something on the radio or from a friend or read it on Facebook. Academic sources of information are different from your own thoughts and feelings, conclusions based on discussions with your friends and family, the opinion of a celebrity, articles in popular magazines or on Facebook/Twitter. Academic sources are different because they are formally presented and they, in turn, contain the sources they used – they will have the references (sources) they consulted so that you can check the quality of the information. Informal sources almost never tell you where they got information from or if they do they do not tell you in a way you can go and check. You can always double check a good quality academic source of information.

Academic sources of information may be divided into two categories. Firstly, primary sources of information refer to such sources as raw data from an experiment, demographic records, historical data (e.g. the transcript of an oral history), or a theorist’s original work. Secondary sources of evidence are sources that are typically based on primary sources of evidence, but have been re-written for a wider audience, usually in the form of a book chapter or a journal article. You will generally use secondary sources of information in your academic writing.

The most important point about referencing and citing in academic writing relates to the nature and purpose of academic sources. What academic sources try to provide you with is theoretical information, critical evaluations of theories and practices, scholarly opinions and findings from empirical research. A scholarly opinion differs from other opinions in that it is a set of conclusions based on research and consideration of what others have written – it is an opinion for which sources (and therefore references) exist.

Sources that are seen as acceptable in academic writing include books, journal articles and published reports because these would all have been through the process of being checked by other peers for their own sources.
5.1. Putting the Ideas of Authors into your own Words

One of the things you would already have heard a great deal about is plagiarism and intellectual integrity. You would have been told that you need to reference the thoughts and ideas of others when you cite their work. Sometimes students feel that the safest way to do this is to directly quote (with a full reference) what the other person wrote or said.

The problem with this is that the original source would not have used the same style or tense or even grammatical conventions and quotes can make the work hard to read. It also does not give your marker any idea whether or not you understood the work you are quoting.

Therefore, if you quote extensively it is taken to mean that you have a low level of understanding of what you read. If you are able to take what you read and rewrite it in your own words so that it fits the flow of your writing you will have shown that you understand the concepts and ideas and will have something that is easier to read. Remember that you must reference the section of your work where you have cited the opinions of other people even if you have not used their words. In academic writing you must always reference the thoughts and writing of others.

The skill here is to change the form in which information is written without changing its meaning. This is a set of skills that certainly gets better with practice. To get you started, it is often a good idea to make use of a good thesaurus and dictionary. What you will be working towards is essentially two forms of communicating the ideas of others in your own words, namely summarising and paraphrasing.

5.1.1. Summarising

The central task involved in summarising is to identify the key features of information and writing an abbreviated (shortened) version of these ideas. Summarising centrally involves the simplification of the ideas of others, and making use of a different sentence structure, or sentence, in order to communicate the same idea.

For example:
“Children spend a very large proportion of their daily lives in school. They go there to learn, not only in a narrow academic sense, but in the widest possible interpretation of the word- about themselves, about being a person within a group of others, about the community in which they live, and about the world around them. Schools provide the setting in which such learning takes place”


Summary 1: Author citation in the body of the sentence:
As Leyden (1985) points out, schools are places for children to learn about life, themselves, other people, as well as academic information.
Summary 2: Author citation in brackets:
Schools are places for children to learn about life, themselves, other people, as well as academic information (Leyden, 1985).

From Bowker, 2007: p.12

From the example above, we can see that summarising can be achieved through:
- Using key words and putting these together in a different way;
- Selecting specific ideas and omitting others;
- Reordering the ideas in your own framework.

5.1.2. Paraphrasing

When you paraphrase, you re-state the ideas in your own words, using different words and phrases. Paraphrasing requires you to construct your own idea of concepts and mentally formulate a picture of these concepts. Paraphrasing is essentially using different words to communicate the central idea. You need to ensure that the phrasing of the idea is sufficiently different not to be a quote but also that you have not changed the meaning of the content – this is not always easy to do and it is best to get someone to check for you that you have kept the meaning and just changed the way it is being expressed.

For example:
“Children spend a very large proportion of their daily lives in school. They go there to learn, not only in a narrow academic sense, but in the widest possible interpretation of the word- about themselves, about being a person within a group of others, about the community in which they live, and about the world around them. Schools provide the setting in which such learning takes place”

From Bowker, 2007, p.12

Paraphrasing:
Schools are fundamental to the development of the child (Leyden, 1985). Schools are fundamental to child development because of the large amount of time children spend at school, and because of the diverse areas that are developed (Leyden, 1985). These diverse areas include the development of the self, the understanding of others, and the wider context in which they exist (Leyden, 1985).

The differences between summarising and paraphrasing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summarising</th>
<th>Paraphrasing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A one or two sentence version – a shorter version</td>
<td>Details are given – may not be shorter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central information is identified</td>
<td>Information in each sentence is included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of a general representation of the ideas</td>
<td>The same order of ideas is retained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2. *When is Paraphrasing not Paraphrasing?*

You will not adequately paraphrase when you:

- Only change a few words in a sentence;
- Only change the tense of the sentence, i.e. change a sentence that is written in the present tense into the past tense;
- Only change the order of some of the words in the sentence;
- Omit part of the sentence.

5.3. *Techniques for Writing Ideas in your own Words*

Some steps for writing the ideas of others in your own words:

1. Write down or cut and paste the passage that you want to write in your own words;
2. Underline the author’s central points;
3. List the key ideas and phrases;
4. Write down alternative words and phrases for the key ideas and phrases;
5. Write the central ideas in your own words;
6. Try to simplify your own words;
7. Use your own words and phrases (points 5 and 6) to restate the central idea, without reviewing the original text.

Bowker, 2007: p.19

Verb list for academic writing:
The list presented below provides synonyms for commonly used words in academic texts (from Bowker, 2007: pp.16–17). You can use this list to assist you with the task of paraphrasing. (You can also use the list to make sense of the academic writing you are reading. You will already have noted from this guide that there are words used in academic writing that are not the ones that are normally used when speaking socially. If you do not understand academic writing of another person start with a thesaurus to find a more common word that means the same thing – the rest then normally falls into place.)

Articulate, comment, mention, maintain, note, point out, say, state, suggest, indicate, refer
Hypothesise, predict, theorise, conceptualise, understand, demonstrate, show, convey, portray, support, substantiate, corroborate, verify, confirm
Investigate, research, experiment, conduct, administer, observe
Acknowledge, assert, claim
Argue, challenge, compare, contradict, contrast, counteract, debate, defend, refute
Comprise, consist, constitute, embody, characterise, define, identify, recognise
Create, construct, develop, generate, produce, evolve, manufacture
Synthesise, coordinate, cooperate, correspond, collaborate, contribute, share
Analyse, examine, evaluate, scrutinise, criticise
Report, record, collect, collate, document, categorise
Differentiate, deviate, distinguish, divide, separate
Access, utilise, deploy, adopt, practise
Strengthen, increase, expand
Accumulate, calculate, maximise, formulate
Relate, connect, link, associate, correlate
Condemn, deny, decline, negate
Affect, influence, transform

Synonyms for "being specific": In particular, in relation to, especially, regarding, more specifically, with respect to, in terms of

Synonyms for "giving an example": For instance, namely, such as, this can be illustrated by

Synonyms for "clarifying": in other words, basically, namely

Synonyms for introducing parallels: Simultaneously, concurrently, at the same time, equally

Synonyms for mentioning a common point: traditionally, commonly, typically, often, conventionally

Synonyms for acknowledging something and moving on to a different point: although, notwithstanding, even though, despite

Synonyms for following a line of reasoning: therefore, subsequently, as a corollary, hence, as a result, as a consequence, accordingly

Bowker, 2007: pp.17–18

6. Stylistic and Technical Presentation

The previous sections concerned the nature of academic writing and how to develop your academic writing skills. The current section addresses how you should present your work. There are many conventions that need to be followed when presenting written academic work. You need to follow these conventions to ensure that you are not unnecessarily penalised.

Please note that you should always follow the instructions given to you in your assessment briefs. However, if there are no specific instructions about the format of the presentation of the work, then the instructions below should be followed. These rules may seem unnecessarily particular (pedantic) but remember that academic writing is a particular style (convention) and that by following rules such as the ones below you are signalling to the reader that you are a member of the “academic writing club” – it is a quick and easy and effective way to signal that you have mastered the rules. It is almost like a secret signal – by using these conventions you are demonstrating that you know what needs to be done.

- All submissions must be typed – as printed text is easier to read and also the printed version can be submitted electronically or checked through a plagiarism detection system or edited for inclusion in a journal or book without being retyped.
- All submissions must be collated and stapled/ bound in a specific order. Individual pages should not be inserted into plastic sleeves. This is so that the submission is easy to read and mark and make comments on.
• Submissions should be printed on one side of the page only. Again, this is to make it easier to read.
• A4 size pages should be used. In the current context this rule is easy to follow as it is quite hard to buy paper of a different size in SA.
• All pages should be numbered so that if they get separated the assignment can be put back together.
• Use 11 or 12-point font size (anything smaller is hard to read and anything bigger looks like you are trying to use up space and makes the reader suspicious about the word length of your assignment).
• Use standard fonts such as Arial, Times New Roman, Calibri, Helvetica or Verdana because these are the formal fonts that most people use for academic writing.
• Use the same font and font size throughout the submission – the only exception will be some of the built-in formats in word-processing packages that may use slightly larger font sizes for headings.
• Margins on each side should be at least 30mm wide – this is again to make it easier to mark the work and in future to bind the material into a book.
• Do not leave large sections of pages blank – this wastes paper and also looks like you are trying to make your assignment look longer than it is.
• Line spacing should be 1.5 spaces between lines (see under Paragraph in MS Word).
• Leave one line open between paragraphs (i.e. strike the Enter button after each paragraph).
• The title page should contain the following information:
  o Specific title of the assignment;
  o Module name and code;
  o Student’s name and student number;
  o Lecturer’s name;
  o Date submitted.
• The Bibliography (reference list/ source list) should be given at the end of the essay, starting on a new page.
• Formatting visual images (pictures and graphs):
  o Any visual material may be used to illustrate key points in your argument and they should appear in the text where they are discussed, and not at the beginning or end of the submission;
  o These visual materials are typically referred to as Figures;
  o Never include a figure that is not directly discussed in the submission;
  o All figures should be referenced. Accordingly, the caption is typed in single line spacing, and must include the source of the figure. In the case of art works one would also include the medium, measurements and collection where the work can be found. For example,
7. Tackling your Assignment/ Writing the Essay

If you have been fortunate you would have learned the basics about writing essays at school. This section assumes that we need to start at the beginning of the process and it should not be skipped even if you did learn to write formal essays at school as there are still things that need to be done differently for higher education academic writing.

This section is designed to assist you with the writing process, understanding the topic and structuring your essay.

7.1. Think about the Topic/ understand the Topic

You will only be able to produce a good essay if you fully understand the topic. Once you feel you have a good understanding of what the topic requires, you can then begin to work on your response. You can try brainstorming ideas, reading on the topic, looking through your module materials in terms of the key words and concepts in the topic. The point is that what you are doing in this stage is familiarising yourself with the question.

It is really important that you do not begin any formal reading or organising until you are sure that you understand what the topic is. This is the most important point at which to get help as you could land up working very hard on the wrong topic because you did not understand it.

Try summarising and paraphrasing the topic in different ways until it makes sense and check what you are about to do with others.

Write statements like the following until you are comfortable with the topic

- To answer this question, I need to compare A and B. In the comparison I need to make an argument about whether A or B is most efficient in terms of saving energy/ changing the way people think.
- This topic wants me to explain how A changed because of B

This topic wants me to try to explain how the theory of B makes a difference to the way that people think about A.
It is impossible to stress enough that if you do not understand the topic (and what answer is required) you will not succeed in the assignment.

Identify the key words in the topic and list them – the verbs (see above) as well as the content words (what the topic is about) and the context words (where the topic is to be applied).

It is essential that you understand essay topics if you are going to be a successful student. You need to stick closely to the topic, and not waste words on irrelevant issues. A simple rule of thumb with essays is that you should answer the question directly. When trying to understand an essay topic, you need to pay attention to three things. These are: the task words, the topic and the focus.

- **Task words**: tells you what to do;
- **Topic**: the general area of the discussion;
- **Focus**: the specific area of discussion.

For example:

- Universities should be run like businesses. Discuss.
  - Task words: discuss
  - Topic: Universities… run like businesses
  - Focus: should

At The IIE, there are a number of task words that are often used. These words are based on your level of study and on Bloom’s taxonomy. When writing your assignments, it is a good idea to refer back to this list in order to ensure that you understand what you are required to do. These task words are:

- **Account for**: to give reasons, explain why something has happened;
- **Analyse**: to break the subject up into its main ideas, and evaluate them;
- **Assess**: to judge the value of a subject critically;
- **Comment on**: to discuss, explain, and give your opinion on the ideas expressed;
- **Compare**: to show the similarities and differences between two or more subjects;
- **Contrast**: to show the differences between two or more subjects;
- **Criticise**: to make your judgement about the views expressed and support your judgement with evidence;
- **Define**: to give the meaning of a concept, distinguishing it from closely-related subjects, sometimes by examples and illustrations;
- **Describe**: to give a detailed account of the characteristics of a subject;
- **Discuss**: to investigate and present the different aspects of a problem or subject and come to some conclusion;
- **Evaluate**: to appraise or estimate the worth of something, to some extent an explained personal opinion;
- **Examine**: to inquire into and consider a problem carefully;
- **Explain**: to account for a subject’s character, causes, results, implications, etc. by clearly stating and interpreting relevant details;
- **Generate**: to propose new ideas or new interpretations of available subjects;
- **Hypothesise**: to propose a supposition which can be used as a basis for testing conclusions;
- **Illustrate**: to explain or clarify a problem using concrete examples, diagrams or figures;
- **Integrate**: to draw together in a logically related way or two or more subjects not previously related;
- **Interpret**: to explain the meaning of something, to make it clear and explicit, and to evaluate it in terms of your own knowledge;
- **Justify**: to provide reasons for your conclusions or for the statement made in the question;
- **Outline**: to give the main features or principles of a subject, leaving out minor details;
- **Relate**: to establish the connection between one thing and another;
- **Review**: to survey and critically examine a subject;
- **State**: to describe the subject in precise terms, or set down an exact meaning;
- **Summarise**: to make a concise account of the main ideas of a subject or argument, omitting explanatory details and examples.

Bowker, 2007: pp.34–35

### 7.2. Research the Topic

You need to gather information on the essay topic. You can start with your Module Guide or textbook and required and recommended readings. Then you can move on to looking for information in the library ([http://www.iie.ac.za/IIE%20Library/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.iie.ac.za/IIE%20Library/Pages/default.aspx)). It is essential that when you are looking in the library for information, that you are looking for information that is directly relevant to the topic. In order to do this, search for the key words in your topic.

Organise your search by keywords and then by the work you have done on trying to understand the topic. You will overwhelm yourself if you keep those keywords too broad – it is hardly ever right to search for “management” but it makes sense to search for “theories of management” and “stress” together if your topic has asked you to consider how applying theories of management can help reduce staff stress.

Remember that searching for information is time-consuming, so you should allocate time accordingly. You should also begin the process knowing exactly what you are trying to do.

Always check if the assignment brief has specified the number of references that are required, and ensure that you conform to these requirements.
Remember that what you will be marked on is what you write. What you read will be taken in to consideration only if it is directly relevant to your topic – reading lots of irrelevant things will add no value to your assignment. Choose your sources carefully and make sure before you spend too much time reading that the information can and will help you to address the topic.

While you are reading there are two important things you need to do so that you can reference and structure properly when writing. First you need to create a full reference for your bibliography – the sooner you do it the better as it will help you to go back to the source later if you need to.

Secondly, you need to keep notes – of the pages and paragraphs that contain the information you want to quote, summarise or paraphrase.

### 7.3. Plan your Essay

Now that you have notes on what the topic requires and on the information that you will use to address the topic, you are in a position to decide on the position that you will adopt, or the argument that you will make in the essay. Thinking about your argument, write down the main points that you will use to support it. Write in full sentences and arrange them in the order that best supports your position. The sentences that you write here will form your essay plan – each sentence will be a paragraph in your essay. Another way to think about writing the argument is to think about the following exercise:

I think X about Y (whatever the topic concerns)

The reasons that I think X are:

1.
2.
3.

Other people may believe F about Y

The reasons that they may think F are:

1.
2.
3.

The reasons that I don’t think that F is appropriate are:

1.
2.
3.

Conclusion.
This may be the structure of the whole essay or even of sections in the essay – the point here is that the process is structured. You are expressing a point of view that you can then provide evidence or back up for with references. It does not matter if this seems too simple – the fact is that a simple structure that is well referenced and supported with good sources is the most compelling structure of all as it is easy to follow. Academic writing may look “complicated” because of the rules associated with it and some of the “snobbish” ways in which words are used BUT good academic writing should not be any harder to understand than a well written textbook. Structure and logic and direct reference to the topic will gain you far more credit than a complicated attempt to appear academic by torturing the structure and argument.

7.4. Write your Essay

Sometimes the actual writing process can be quite difficult. Some new academics feel that the longer the sentences are or the more technical words (especially long ones) that they can include the better their essay will be. This is simply not true. You should write to be understood – that means keeping your structure simple and using the most logical word to express something. It does not mean using the longest or most complex or obscure word to look smart. If your writing is confusing you it will confuse everyone else.

Remember that you will probably not write as clearly as you like the first time around.

7.4.1. The basic structure of the academic essay

The structure of an academic essay may be illustrated as follows:

POSITION STATEMENT (PARAGRAPH 1)
- The main idea of the essay
- Summarises the whole point of the essay
- What you think about the topic
- E.g. Universities should be run like businesses OR Universities should not be run like businesses

FIRST SUPPORTING STATEMENT (PARAGRAPH 2)
- State the first supporting statement
- Sentences developing the supporting statement, e.g. explanation, evidence, examples

SECOND SUPPORTING STATEMENT (PARAGRAPH 3)
- Narrow statement relating to the conclusion of the previous paragraph
- State the second supporting statement
- Sentences developing the supporting statement, e.g. explanation, evidence, examples
THIRD SUPPORTING STATEMENT (PARAGRAPH 4)

- Narrow statement relating to the conclusion of the previous paragraph
- State the third supporting statement
- Sentences developing the supporting statement, e.g. explanation, evidence, examples

CONCLUSION

- Summarising the argument leading to the final broad statement on the implications or significance of your argument

Somewhere to start:
What is important is that you get the ideas down in the first draft. You can always work on the technical formatting and referencing after you think that your argument has taken shape.

If you don’t know where to start – try writing some headings that are relevant to the topic. In the section above this one you have some of these headings already – reasons for believing X (evidence for X); evidence for Y (reasons that other people believe Y).

After doing this, start summarising the information from a single reading under each heading. Then go on to the next reading and summarise it under the headings. You will end up with the headings and support for the concept in the heading from each of the readings.

If you find that one reading has only been used under one or two topics you can reconsider its relevance to the overall topic. It may be very relevant to one topic and you should then keep it but do not include references/ readings/ sources that you have to force to fit your topic.

Remember that any information that you include needs to directly address the topic, so always go back to the topic if you are stuck.

At this point, you may not be able to see how all the information fits together. Don’t worry about this. The connections and integration will emerge once you have collated all the information if you have done the job properly in planning your essay. You need to see the overall picture before you can fully see how information connects together to fully formulate your argument. A good rule of thumb here is that you need to organise the information according to the parts of the topic, and not according to your readings.
7.5. Tips for Writing Sections

7.5.1. Writing your position statement/ introduction

- When writing your introductory paragraph, you may want to ask yourself – who, what, when, where, how and why?
- You need to tell the reader where you will be going, so mention what you will discuss in the rest of the essay.
- By the end of the introduction, you should have narrowed down to the position statement.
- Make sure the position statement is specific.
- Make sure the position statement is clear.
- The position statement should be brief (one or two sentences).
- The position statement should answer the essay question and provide a reason/ explanation for your chosen answer.

7.5.2. Writing paragraphs

- A paragraph should develop one idea (or supporting statement) only.
- The idea should be the topic sentence and the rest of the paragraph should relate to it.
- There should be obvious links between sentences in a single paragraph.
- Paragraphs should be arranged in a logical sequence.
- Paragraphs should link to one another. You can use signposts in this regard.
- Examples of signposts include:
  - More importantly/ Furthermore (to highlight a point);
  - However/ In contrast (to change direction and create a comparison);
  - In addition/ Secondly (to add another point);
  - Similarly/ likewise (to add a similar point);
  - Lastly/ Overall (to summarise).

7.5.3. Writing conclusions

- The conclusion should remind the reader of your central points
- Conclusions should explain the significance of your argument
- Conclusions should not merely be a list of the points that you have made in the essay
- Conclusions should include:
  - A restatement of the position statement;
  - A brief summary of the points made in the essay;
  - A final broad statement of the significance of your argument.
7.5.4. Revise your essay

Look through what you have done and make sure that you have answered the essay topic. You can ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I stuck to the topic?
- Have I left anything essential out?

Remember that you may have to revise your essay many times before you are sure that you have effectively addressed the topic and written a convincing argument. It is often a good idea to leave a bit of time between finishing your draft and revising. This time can allow you to reflect on what you have written and view your draft with fresh eyes.

This is another reason why typing your assignment makes sense – redrafting and moving things around is much easier to do if you are working on a word-processor.

When revising your essays, you can ask yourself the following questions about each part of the essay:

- **Key question:**
  - Have I answered the question posed by the topic?

- **Introduction:**
  - Is my opening statement broad?
  - Is my opening statement interesting?
  - Is my position statement clear?

- **Body:**
  - Does each paragraph have a topic sentence?
  - Is there only one idea per paragraph?
  - Have I fully developed the main idea in each paragraph?

- **Conclusion:**
  - Have I effectively summarised my argument?
  - Have I clearly re-stated my position statement?
  - Does the essay have a sense of completion?

- **Referencing:**
  - Have I referenced all ideas that are not mine?
  - Are quotations accurate?
  - Have I used the correct referencing format?

- **Presentation:**
  - Have I presented my essay in a professional manner?
• Content:
  o Have I answered all the parts of the topic?
  o Do the points that I am making correspond with each other?
  o Have I included any irrelevant information?
  o Can anything be written more clearly?
  o Have I summarised the main ideas?

7.6. Editing your Essay

Once you are satisfied that you have produced a logical and coherent argument, you need to complete the final checking of your essay. This checking process involves going through everything, from examining all the paragraphs to checking individual punctuation marks. To assist you with the editing process, you can think about the following things:

• Ensure that your sentences state what you mean to say;
• Write as simply as possible, don’t over-complicate;
• Make sure that all jargon is explained;
• Avoid clichés;
• Write actively, not passively. For example, rather write Khumalo and Bloggs (2015) conducted the study, instead of the study was conducted by Khumalo and Bloggs (2015);
• Vary the length of your sentences;
• Try not to use too many short or very long sentences;
• Try to write formally, e.g. avoid the use of the first person (e.g. I, we, you).

8. Writing Essays in Examinations

8.1. How Examination Essays differ

Writing an essay under examination conditions is quite different from writing essays for assignments. Typically, in exams, you will not have access to sources and references and you have a very limited amount of time. Your exam markers will know this and will take these facts into account when they are marking your exam essays. Consequently, you may not be expected to comprehensively reference, nor produce an argument that is as well-formulated as assignment essays.

8.2. What do Examiners look for in Essay Exams?

What exam markers are looking for is the following:

• Have you answered the question? Typically, you are awarded marks for specific pieces of information and the depth of your discussion. You cannot be awarded marks if you have not answered the question.
• Have you demonstrated knowledge of the subject area? You need to show that you have understood theories, concepts and the issues presented in the module.
• Have you demonstrated critical thinking skills? You need to show the examiner that you have made connections and comparisons between competing arguments and interpretations. You need to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of theories and concepts.

• Have you produced a logical and organised argument? Your essay needs to still adopt and substantiate a position.

• Have you reflected on the reading in the module? It is easy to tell how a student has read in preparation for an exam. There are large differences between students who have carefully reviewed all the reading material for the module and those who have merely briefly skimmed through some of the readings discussed in class.

• Do you have good writing skills? Essays that are awarded the highest marks in exam essays are those in which the grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. are correct and to students who have good writing skills.

8.3. How can you prepare for essay exams?

There are a number of things that you can do when preparing for exams that involve essay writing. These are:

• Know what will be expected of you in the exam. You need to know what the exam will require of you. You need to know how many essays you will be writing in the exam, how many marks are allocated for each essay, whether or not you will have a choice of essay responses, will you be expected to cover the entire module content, or only certain parts of the module.

• Review your notes. You need to systematically review all the module material. Try to identify key topics and concepts and central theories. Make study notes that can be used to write essays. For example, if you write out a bulleted list of points, make sure that you can write out those points in full sentences.

• Review old exam papers: Past exam papers are available in the library. Use these past papers to test your understanding, practise the kinds of questions you can expect and to understand the basic format of the exam.

8.4. What to do in the actual Exam

There are several techniques that you can use in order to improve your chances of writing good essays in exams. These are:

• Read all the questions first: you are always given reading time in the exam – use it wisely. Mark all the questions that you think that you do well in. Make brief notes next to each question.

• Calculate how much time you can spend on each question: this decision is based on how many marks the question is worth. Once you have made this calculation, you need to keep to this time.

• Write the easiest essay first: You need to respond to these questions first to gather all possible marks and to build your confidence. Thereafter, you can attempt the questions that you think are more difficult.
• **Write a brief essay plan:** note the position statement that you will adopt. Make notes on each point of evidence that you will use. Think about the order in which you will present these points. You need to remember that writing down everything that you can think of will not create an argument. You need to plan quickly and then write. Also remember that the brief notes are not an essay. Use key words and short hand – do not write out all points in full.

• **Write clearly:** if your cursive is not really clear, consider printing. You make the job of the marker more difficult if he/ she struggles to read what you have written.

• **Try to use the wording of the question:** this should be done in your first sentence. For example, if the topic is “Compare Piaget’s and Freud’s theories of development”, you should start with “Piaget’s and Freud’s theories of development have both several aspects in common, but also three notable differences”.

• **Make use of transition and connecting words:** these words assist you in organising your ideas and help the marker to follow what you are trying to argue.

• **Include an introduction and conclusion:** these are typically fairly basic in exams, but they are necessary as they will guide both you and the marker. Try to make them as clear and simple as possible.

• **Re-read the question:** check that you have answered all parts of the question. If you have not answered the question, then you will not be awarded marks.

### 9. Writing short Responses in Examinations

A written short constructed response may be defined as **writing a few sentences to one paragraph in order to answer a question.** Typically, your responses to short-answer questions need to be more focused and constrained than your responses to essay questions. If you are required to answer a series of questions after being given a case study, you should keep the following in mind:

• **Read the questions carefully:** underline key words and phrases, make notes. You should be going through the same process as you would go through for an essay, i.e. differentiating between the task words, topic and focus (see Section 6.2).

• **Briefly plan your response:** make brief notes, go back to the text to support your answer. You need to ensure that you answer the question and not merely write everything that you can think of about the subject.

• **Write the response:** try to use words from the question and state your answer clearly.

• **Add text details:** write your supporting evidence from the text. Your evidence should come from the text/ case study, and, not from your general knowledge.

• **Write a concluding sentence:** to end off your response, relate your response back to the question.

• **Proofread the response:** check for readability, and importantly, make sure that you have answered the question.
10. Developing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking in higher education is NOT about criticising something or focusing only on the negative aspects.

When you are asked to think critically or to critically comment on something you are being asked to look at the idea/ concept from all possible angles. Again this is a skill that you can master if you practise.

It may be helpful for you to think about being critical as conducting an evaluation. What you need to do in order to think critically is to examine both the advantages and disadvantages, or both the pros and cons, the arguments in favour and the arguments against, a particular subject. If you engage with both positive and negative aspects of a particular subject, you are demonstrating critical thought in the academic sense.

Another way to think about academic critical thinking is to think about the concept of refutation (proving that something is wrong). The way to learn to do this is to take a position and detail all the evidence in support of that position. Then set about considering all the evidence that would prove your evidence wrong or weak. In other words – here the critical thinking is about the evidence and not the original position. By challenging the evidence you challenge the support for the position that has been held or presented.

This is called refutation. It is a strategy that can be used when formulating your arguments because it demonstrates that you are aware of the opposing position, you can dismiss these opposing views, thereby strengthening your own position. In simpler terms, it means that you can provide both sides of the debate. If you are able to show both sides of the debate, you demonstrate that you have a balanced view and a lack of bias, therefore, you have conducted a carefully considered evaluation.

11. Getting the most out of Feedback

Receiving feedback on your work is sometimes a very difficult part of being a student because it involves somebody else judging you and you can feel quite vulnerable. If you have worked very hard on something, it is often difficult to hear someone else tell you how your work could be improved. You may feel disappointed, frustrated and confused. It is also true that sometimes the people marking your work are not very good at using feedback you can act on so you may land up feeling judged but not helped.

It can be helpful to think about the following things before reading the feedback that you have received for an essay:

- Being a student is a learning experience. Every individual has unique lessons to learn in a journey of self-discovery.
- Mistakes are not really mistakes. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.
• Receiving constructive criticism creates opportunities for improvement. Think about the fact that feedback helps you to progress and improve.
• Every student comes to the tertiary space with a unique and different set of expectations, cultural background and educational experiences. The mark that you receive symbolises one individual’s judgement that does not consider your personal context.
• The mark that you receive reflects a single piece of work in your entire life. It does not say anything about the other tasks that you have completed and who you are as a person.

The best way to use feedback is to think critically about it – what evidence is there to support the position the lecturer took and what evidence is there not to support it. You should also work out exactly how you could have done better and what you need to do differently next time. Even if the quality of the feedback is not great you can gain a great deal from it by working out how to use it to do better.

12. Language and Grammatical Issues

The majority of students are not writing or studying in their home language and this can be a bit challenging. The reality is that very few English first language speakers are disciplined about the way they speak and write so their written work is often also not aligned with the required standards.

The quality of your language and grammar is part of your strategy to do well – the easier your work is to understand the more likely you are to get a good mark as the marker will be able to see what you have done and why. There are many tools to assist you. One of the most important is the way you write – only use words you know the meaning of and keep your sentences short. That way you and the marker will more easily navigate through what you have written.

It is essential that you make use of the spelling and grammar checks that are available when you have to type out your essays. There are a few useful hints that you may need to consider:
• Always ensure that the spelling and grammar functions are turned on when typing your essay. In MS Word TM, go to Review, click on Language, Set Proofing Language and set to South African English. You can also go to Languages Preferences and set up how you would like to use this checking function, e.g. as you type, or, at the end.
• However, you do still need to proofread as these functions will not pick up all errors; for example, if you have confused there/ their/ they’re.
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