Essay writing for postgraduates

Maia Gunn Watkinson
m.gunnwatkinson@unsw.edu.au
The Learning Centre
UNSW Australia
Basic marking criteria of an academic essay

- That you can answer the question.
- That you have knowledge of your topic.
- That you can think critically.
- That you can argue systematically.
- That you can express yourself clearly.
Session outline

The research / writing process
The structure of a postgraduate essay
Integrating research
Expression
The research/writing process

Reading is more important than writing. Roberto Bolaño
The general characteristics of critical thinking

Being knowledgeable
Having understanding of your subject
Recognising and working with patterns
Being sceptical
Being logical (using reasoning)
Using evidence
Being systematic
Being efficient
Being consistent
Being flexible
6 The question

- Some types of university questions:
  - **Definitional, descriptive**
    - Eg: Describe... State the principles...
  - **Question to Answer**
    - Eg: Account for... Explain why ...
  - **Theoretical**
    - Eg: Critically evaluate X’s theory ...
The ‘shape’ of a subject (the field)

- All subjects have a ‘shape’ or ‘field’. The shape includes:
  - The different objects of study within the subject
  - Different approaches to creating knowledge (methods)
  - Key debates / tensions (e.g., essentialism v relativism, structure v agency)
  - Different ‘ideological’ positions
- Try to understand the shape of your subjects.
- Think and reason in the subject’s language
Some myths about academic reading

1. You read academic texts as you would a novel

Fact:

- In a novel you can’t skip bits.
- In academic readings, key information is located in introductions and conclusions. Ask the following questions:
  - What problem is the reading addressing?
  - Why is it a significant problem?
  - What solution is being proposed?
  - How does this help me?
- Often academic readings are ‘modular’ and you can focus on particular modules.
2. If I skip something I will miss important information

Fact: Academic readings are not text books. The point is to find info that is useful for you. Skim or skip irrelevant material.

3. I have to read everything on the reading list

Fact: Reading lists are not text books. They are there to give you a sense of the shape and complexities of your subject.

4. Academic readings have one meaning

Fact: You will find different things depending on what you are looking for.

5. As long as the words pass through my brain it is good

Fact: If you don’t have a clear purpose before you read, the words will be less meaningful.
Some myths about academic reading

6. I need to remember what I have read
   Fact: Memory occurs through multiple, deep exposures. Use your notes to remember. And writing your assignment (what I remember…)

7. I need to be a fast reader
   Fact: Being a strategic reader is much more important.

8. I have to understand everything I read
   Fact: If studying for an exam, perhaps. If producing an assignment, draw on what you do understand.

9. The more sources, the better my mark
   Fact: Having lots of sources looks good, but marks also come from answering the question, structure and critical thinking.

10. First I read, then I write
    Fact: Read throughout the writing process.
The writing process: making notes from your research

Question: how do you make notes?
The writing process: making notes

- **Question:** How do good notes help?
- **Answer:** Good notes:
  - provide you with an excellent record of what you have read and what you thought at the time you read it.
  - help you to clarify your thoughts about what you are reading and the question you are answering. (Only through writing do we discover what we think.)
  - make it very easy to quickly survey all of your research.
  - make the transition from research to writing much smoother.
  - help you to keep your ideas separate from the ideas presented in your sources.
“I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by.” Douglas Adams
The research/writing process

- Understanding the research process:
  - Read the question
  - Formulate a preliminary response
  - Research with response in mind
  - Make notes
  - Generate a plan
  - Write
  - Set aside
  - Make use of a friend
  - Edit
  - Submit
15 An assignment does not exist in isolation

- Be interested
- Do your readings and go to class: the ‘five-fold’ exposure to key ideas approach.
  - Do readings before your lecture.
  - Sit up the front in the lecture, pay attention and take notes.
  - Revise your notes after the lecture – write down questions.
  - Revise readings and notes before your tutorial.
  - Get involved in your tutorial – ask questions.
- Find out how the marker wants you to do the assignment.
The structure of an academic essay

Introduction / body / conclusion
The introduction

**What** are you going to do?

**Why** is it important?

**How** are you going to do it?

- **Orientation**
  - Background or context.
  - You can simply introduce the key terms/concepts from the question.
  - You can expand upon the question and present it as a problem to be tackled.
  - It can be good to say why the issues you are addressing are significant.

- **Thesis**
  - This is your general response to the question (your main argument).
  - Remember to use the language of the question
  - Elaborate if necessary
  - Begin with: “This essay argues that…” or something similar.
  - A thesis might not always be appropriate.

- **Outline**
  - Introduce the stages your essay will move through to establish the thesis.
  - Use language like: “First… Second… Third…” or “To begin… Following this… Finally”
  - Ensure that there is an obvious relationship between outline and thesis.
Other uses of the introduction

Scope
Clarify what will be left out and what will be included.

Definitions
Only define uncontested technical terms if necessary.

Don't define complex terms/concepts.
Avoid dictionary definitions.
Your voice in the introduction

- identify the question or problem and its significance.
- have a clear and nuanced thesis.
- show caution when making your claim
Draft a plan (including a thesis and outline).

Revisit your plan once you have put together a reasonable draft.

Revise both plan and draft. In the process convert your plan into an introduction.

Once your draft has been edited several times ensure that your introduction fits perfectly with it.
Prose is architecture, not interior decoration.
Ernest Hemingway

Paragraphs
The body of the essay: essential points

- Content of paragraph is relevant to the question and thesis
- Topic and concluding sentences (the latter when appropriate) that are consistent with the content of the paragraph
- 1 point per paragraph
  - You may have 1 main point and a number of sub points
- No unnecessary repetition within or between paragraphs
- A logical flow within the paragraph (use transition signals)
- Good relationship and linking between paragraphs (signposting)
- Be careful when using quotations/paraphrases/summaries in topic and concluding sentences (don’t lose your voice)
- Good engagement with the ideas of others (reporting verbs and analysis)
Signposting

• Academic writing is a structured activity.

• Because of this, when writing we are always doing two things:
  1. Making points
  2. Relating points

• What are the instances of signposting?
  • Introductions and conclusions
  • Topic and concluding sentences
  • Transition signals
  • General linking (eg: ‘a similar point was made earlier in the context of…’)
  • Reporting verbs and phrases (eg: ‘Hoang argues that’)

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Some transition signals

However, on the other hand, while, although
Therefore, thus, hence
In conclusion, in sum, altogether, finally
First, second, third
To begin, next, following this, finally
In addition, moreover, furthermore
Indeed, in fact
For example
Specifically, in more detail
Identify the transition signals

[1] As this thesis is not concerned with the narrow perspective I could have chosen to include any number of works. [2] I therefore need to explain why the above works were selected. [3] First, I wanted to present my own position both efficiently and thoroughly and I felt that the above combination of works would best facilitate this. [4] By ‘efficiently’ I mean that I wanted to develop my position using as few words as possible. [5] From this point of view each discussion of each work can be thought of as being a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of my overall position. [6] By ‘thoroughly’ I mean that I wanted to buttress each of my points several times. [7] From this point of view each discussion of each work is not entirely distinct from every other discussion. [8] Clearly ‘efficiently’ and ‘thoroughly’ are in conflict. [9] Unfortunately, this conflict cannot be avoided or resolved because this thesis is concerned with developing a world view rather than defending a specific argument. [10] Altogether I have attempted to strike a balance between ‘efficiently’ and ‘thoroughly’: each chapter and section introduces some new ideas and at the same time reinforces the arguments that have gone before.
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“Now to sum it up,' said Bernard. 'Now to explain to you the meaning of my life. […] If it were possible, I would hand it you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, "Take it. This is my life."

_The Waves_, Virginia Woolf

The conclusion
28 Conclusion... briefly

- **The function of a conclusion:** To remind the reader of what has been argued.

- **Question:** What is the difference between an essay conclusion and introduction?
- **Answer:**
  - In intro the question/problem identification and the thesis are the heroes.
  - In conclusion the summary is the hero.
29 Conclusion: what to include

What you should do in your conclusion:

1. Remind the reader of the question/problem in the first sentence. Or do something similarly general.
2. Summarise your main points.
   - Consider using ‘concluding language’
     - ‘This essay has demonstrated that…’
30 Conclusions: What to avoid

Essay question
Examine the case of “Isabella”, a woman who has been diagnosed with Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety, and prescribed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. Evaluate her diagnosis and prescribed treatment. If appropriate, suggest a new diagnosis and treatment.

Conclusion
[1] This essay has analysed the case of “Isabella”, a woman who had been diagnosed with Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety, and prescribed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. [2] First, the essential details of Isabella’s case were examined. [3] Second, her diagnosis and prescription were evaluated. [4] A new diagnosis was proposed and justified. [5] Lastly, several treatment options including the originally-prescribed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction were discussed.
Conclusions: What to avoid

1. Do not include new information.
2. Do not worry about summarising less important aspects of your essay. Focus on the key arguments.
4. Avoid banal final sentences.
   - ‘But this is just one opinion. There are many more.’
   - ‘Maybe the world will never be perfect, but at least we can try to make it better.’
Question: Discuss to what extent the bush legend remains a representative image of Australian society.

[1] This essay has demonstrated that the social landscape of contemporary Australia is markedly different from that of the nineteenth century, when the bush legend was conceived. [2] It has been noted that the nation has seen steady immigration from a wide range of countries to create a very multicultural society, quite different from the predominantly Anglo-Irish one of the past. [3] It was also discussed that today the majority of Australians live in cities and rely on technology to facilitate their lifestyles, with only a minority of the population carrying on the traditional rural lifestyle. [4] Furthermore, we have seen that the rights of women have progressed towards equality with men since the nineteenth century, and also that the attitude towards and acceptance of homosexuals has improved significantly since the bush legend era when homosexuality was illegal and did not form part of the legend. [5] Even though the “Aussie Battler” character maintains a legacy of the bush legend past, it is clear that most demographic sectors of Australia share little connection with the bush legend. [6] Therefore it can be said that the bush legend only remains a representative image of Australian society to a small extent.
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1 – Introductory sentence. Similar to the thesis (see last sentence).
2 to 4 – Arguments from the strong perspective summarised
5 – Argument from the weak perspective summarised
6 – Restatement of thesis
Engaging with the ideas of others

(and being critical while doing so)
Ways of engaging with others’ work

1. Using others’ work to support a claim
2. Breaking others’ work into parts
3. Comparing others’ work
4. Contrasting others’ work
5. Evaluating others’ work
6. Building on others’ work
7. Synthesising others’ work
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of contribution</th>
<th>How to refer to it</th>
<th>Questions to ask about it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>X found, discovered, revealed, ascertained, notes, points out that</td>
<td>Is this fact universally accepted, accurate (so far as you can tell)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>X describes, identifies, distinguishes, categorises; as X sees it, …</td>
<td>Does X have a particular standpoint which causes him / her to perceive things in this way? Are there alternative perspectives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure of speech</td>
<td>X regards … as; compares … to; suggests that … is like …</td>
<td>Is this an appropriate metaphor or simile? How does it assist my understanding? Do I want to adopt it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>X defines … to mean …</td>
<td>Do other writers have different definition, i.e. attribute different meanings to the same term?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumption</td>
<td>X assumes, postulates, hypothesises, conjectures, takes it for granted that …</td>
<td>Do other writers make this assumption? Is it justified? Do I wish to share it? If I make different assumptions, would I come to different conclusions?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<th>Type of contribution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Proposition</td>
<td>X argues, asserts, contends</td>
<td>How can I test the validity of this proposition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>According to X; X tells us, thinks, suggests, considers, comments</td>
<td>On what grounds (evidence) does X base her opinions? Do other people hold them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value judgement</td>
<td>To X, it should, ought…; to X it is beneficial, harmful …</td>
<td>Do other people share X’s value judgements? Why should I pay attention to them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claim</td>
<td>X claims</td>
<td>What is the authority on which X bases her / his claim?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>X asks/ questions whether</td>
<td>Are these questions relevant? Are there other questions that I ought to be asking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>X infers from this evidence that; shows from his/her analysis that; X demonstrates how; concludes</td>
<td>Is this reasoning sound? Could other conclusions be drawn from the same evidence?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A question of expression: academic writing and style

Make no mistake, I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort. Clarice Lispector
Academic expression

- **Question:** What do we mean when we say that academic writing is formal?
- **Answer:** We mean that it is clear, accurate, efficient, and for the most part emotionally neutral.

- **Full word forms**
  - **Do not write:** It’s, don’t, shouldn’t, quote, ad, e.g., i.e., etc.
  - **Write:** It is, do not, should not, quotation, advertisement, for example, that is, etcetera.

- **Tentative language**
  - **Write:** It could be argued that, perhaps, these findings suggest that, to some extent, it would seem that, somewhat
Avoid tautologies (and redundancies)

Question: What is a tautology?

Entry level tautologies

- An accepted social norm
- The next step moving forward
- Everyone noticed that education is not the same as before and it has changed a lot.
– Clichés

– Do not write: Going forward, at the end of the day, strategic plan

– Sensational / melodramatic / journalistic language

– Do not write: It was absolutely shocking that Berlusconi, who is a terrible crook and a disgusting womaniser, is yet again running for election.

– Write: It is surprising that Berlusconi, whose political career and private life have been very controversial, is yet again running for election.
Colloquial language

- Do not write: All in all, the government’s been pretty hopeless when it comes to sorting out the pokies.
- Write: In sum, the government’s regulation of the poker-machine industry has been inadequate.

Rhetorical questions

- Do not write: We have to ask ourselves: do we really care about people from other countries?
- Write: It could be argued that people from one state do not care about people from other states.
Additional Services and Resources

- Visit the Learning Centre
  - The lower ground floor of the Chancellery building
- Services for students of all academic abilities
  - Individual consultations with a Peer Writing Assistant.
- Workshops
- Conversation classes
- General education subjects (GENY)
- slides will be shared on this page shortly: https://student.unsw.edu.au/pcd
Thank you! ☺
m.gunnwatkinson@unsw.edu.au