

# The Centre for Classics & Archaeology

[cca-info@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:cca-info@unimelb.edu.au) <http://www.cca.unimelb.edu.au>

## How to Write Essays and Answer Test Questions

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### Key Components of Essays

#### Critical thinking

At tertiary level it is not sufficient to undertake research on a topic and to reproduce, summarize, report or describe WHAT others have found. Instead, you are expected to adopt an analytical, evaluative approach to your reading and to learning. WHY has the author come to this conclusion? HOW conclusive, valid, logical, practical, important is this research, methodology, conclusion?

#### Developing your own 'voice'...

Many students write essays which merely summarize what others have said. These essays will not receive high marks because they are like a catalogue of the opinions of others. As a result of the critical thinking you have engaged in you must develop your own thesis, or point of view based on your reading.

#### Extensive research

At tertiary level you will be expected to read more widely and thoroughly in your preparation for an essay. Also, the reading material will be more complex and demanding. The reading may be in the form of journal articles, as well as books. For an essay of 2000 to 3000 words, it is reasonable to expect a student to read eight to ten sources. That number should be considered a minimum.

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## Argumentative Writing

(most of your essays will be like this!) To write an argumentative essay, you need to have an opinion about the subject. This is not simply your own personal subjective opinion, but a point of view based on your own ideas and what others have said about the subject. In fact, you should try not to be too highly subjective in your written response to art works - instead try to adopt a critical approach. (Note critical does not necessarily mean negative).

This type of essay requires you to present a well argued case for your point of view. You need to develop a perspective and then back it up with evidence to support your case. The evidence may take the form of primary sources (e.g. actual documents from the period in question - letters, treatises, etc), secondary sources (e.g. books and articles written by authors about the subject), and visual material (e.g. reproductions of works of art or better still, examining actual art works in galleries or in situ).

For example, the question: "Mannerist art is concerned with cultivating the ideals of stylishness and grace at the expense of any interest in the subject of the work itself", requires you to express an opinion about the issue based on your readings and your examination of visual material related to the topic.

You may argue that:

Mannerist art is indeed concerned with frivolity and superficial style at the expense of serious subject matter

OR that the supposed frivolity of Mannerist art actually points to more serious political and social concerns

OR you might argue that while stylishness was an important concern in Mannerist art, so too was the subject matter

In other words, there is no one right answer to this question. Your lecturer/tutor is interested to find out what opinion YOU have developed as a result of your reading and thinking about the issue. This is not a descriptive task. It is not good enough to just write all you know about the subject, then merely add your opinion at the end.

Ask yourself, "what do I need to know to answer this question?" This topic is asking you to evaluate the various positions art historians have taken on the style of art known as "Mannerism" and the strengths and limitations of each approach.

An appropriate way to structure such an essay is to state your thesis, or argument, clearly in your introduction so that your reader knows what your position is. In your introduction you should also present to your reader an outline of the arguments that will be presented in your essay. Your arguments for and against, or advantages or disadvantages of focussing on content versus process, should form the body of your essay. Each paragraph should deal with a particular point which should then be elaborated with explanations and examples. Your concluding paragraph should sum up your major arguments and present your informed opinion of the issue based on the arguments and evidence you have presented.

## Getting Started

One of the hardest things for many people is getting started on an assignment. You feel appropriately guilty, you know you should have started work by now, but you still keep putting it off.

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You'll probably have a number of assignments and essays, and very often these come due at a similar time. As soon as you are given assessment requirements, write the due dates in ink in your student diary and work out a preliminary timetable for completing them.

Do not forget to include social activities, and other commitments such as sporting, family or cultural events in your plan as these will need to be worked around. No one expects you not to have a life!

Be realistic about how long an essay or assignment will take to research and write.

Keep in mind that there will be a heavy demand on library books for your topic just before the assignment is due. Early research will save you missing out and the trouble of having to search out books from libraries all over Melbourne and suburbs. (although these 'other' libraries are often great resources).

Allow about a month from research to writing up.

At tertiary level, most of the assessment of your learning will be in the form of writing tasks. You all know how to write essays as you have written many of them during your secondary education, yet many students still find essay writing a daunting task.

## Writing Your Essay

### Step 1 – Answering the Question

A common problem with tertiary level essays is that students fail to answer the question set, or answer only part of it. It is not satisfactory to simply write all you know about a topic. In most of your VCE WORK you write according to very specific criteria. However at tertiary level there are no specific criteria and the writing topics may be quite unstructured and open to interpretation. How then do you know what to write?

The first place to start in trying to work out what you are required to do, is to analyze the question. Sometimes it can be very useful to go through the following process with friends who are writing essays at the same time. Working with friends has the advantage of providing a number of different ways of looking at a topic. You can bounce ideas off each other and gain new perspectives on a question. Although remember of course, that you should avoid at all costs the trap of writing exactly the same thing as another person writing on the topic (see the section on Plagiarism'). This shouldn't be a problem, however, if you are engaging critically with the topic and developing different; independent opinions about it.

#### Analyse the question

Put the question into your own words. If you can do this then you are well on the way to understanding it. If there are several parts to the question then separate and number them. Underline key words. Check their meanings in a dictionary, but also look for a broader view of what they mean in your reading or from lectures.

Think about ways to limit the topic. It is not always possible to do this but sometimes it is essential. For example, a topic dealing with baroque art is very broad. Which artists in particular will you be dealing with? Will you look at both painting, sculpture or architecture or all three? Which social, political or critical aspects of the period known as the baroque will enhance your discussion and help you to argue your point?

The question will help you come to some understanding of how to structure your essay. Are there several parts to the question which each require a section? Are you being asked to compare and contrast?

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Make sure you are covering all aspects of the question and are not leaving anything out.

## Brainstorm

The next step is to make an ideas map. Place a sheet of paper sideways. Now write down everything you can think of about the topic. Write down questions you need to answer in order to answer the set question major arguments any evidence you're aware of to support those arguments words you need to define. If you put your paper sideways then you have sufficient room to show links between issues with arrows, and to highlight or underline important points. Why is this an important step?

You have the beginnings of a plan - at a time when you are "in control" of your topic. You are close to your question and therefore are less likely to miss parts of it. You have a focus for your reading. Instead of a relatively aimless meander through the set reading, you have some specific questions to answer.

Also... once you have completed these steps, you will have a real sense of having started work - which is a great feeling!

## Step 2 – Research The Topic

Have the key criteria of the question in front of you at all times - this will help to keep you focussed.

Study your reading list for clues about which issues you need to cover. Begin with general reading first: lecture notes are usually the best place to start. Then move to more general text books on your reading list beginning with broader texts to help you understand your topic in context. Lastly, read journal articles on specific aspects of your topic.

In practice, you may have to grab material as it becomes available in the library but keep in mind the rule of reading from the general to the specific.

If you have defined and limited your topic, the more you read, the more focussed your ideas will become. As a result of your brainstorming process you should know exactly what it is that you hope to learn from your reading. How does your reading reinforce, contradict or suggest alterations to your original ideas? Continuously evaluate your reading material in terms of its relevance to the question.

## Make good notes

Be selective; don't copy out screeds of material. Excessive note-taking is often a substitute for thinking. Look for the main points of an article. What is the writer's main contention, or idea? What evidence or examples are used to support that idea? What conclusion does the writer reach? If possible make notes in point form, in your own words. Taking notes in your own words is the best way of ensuring that you understand the material you, are using. Also, it removes the temptation to inadvertently plagiarize by using the writers exact words.

## A Word about Photocopying

Although it is handy to be able to photocopy material, photocopying does not equal reading. You may have copied an article, but you still need to read and process it.

Another problem with using photocopied material is that the information is still in the writer's original words, and it becomes very tempting to simply use those words instead of paraphrasing in your own words. If you do need to use photocopies, make sure that instead of just underlining large chunks, you annotate the margins with your own comments about what you have read and how it may fit into your essay.

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It is useful to "tag" all of your notes in this way. Note how a particular point will fit into your essay, useful definitions, advantages or disadvantages, causes and effects, evidence or examples to illustrate a point whatever

When taking notes, don't forget to note publication details and page numbers of information you think you will use. If you are going to use a direct quote, then copy it EXACTLY.

Know when to stop researching! Make sure that the amount of time you spend reading and note-taking relates to the amount of time you spend writing. You need to allow enough time to produce a well argued, coherent and well edited document. After all, it is your essay or assignment which will be marked, not your attendance in the library.

## Step 3 - Planning

Time to organize your material. It is a good idea to keep all of your material for an assignment, notes, plans, drafts, photocopies and the topic, together in one folder

Have another look at your ideas map. Your direction and tentative conclusions should be getting clearer. You now have evidence to support your arguments.

You need to develop your ideas logically. This might be in their order of importance, chronological order, arguments for, arguments against... There are many possible structures, but you DO need a logical, ordered framework.

By now you should have your major and minor arguments, together with supporting evidence and examples, sorted out. It is at this planning stage that the structure, or framework, of your assignment is built up.

Remember, at tertiary level you are required to do more than simply present content! You are expected to develop a carefully sequenced argument which leads to a logical conclusion.

## Step 4 – The First Draft

Many people find it difficult to switch from reading to writing, and they indulge in endless procrastination techniques. Very few people can write a good essay in one draft. You need to allow time for redrafting and editing.

Your first draft is for yourself. Just write freely and get the content down. Don't aim for perfection; you can fix up the style, clarity, expression and spelling, later. If you are still stuck, consider that you can't improve what you haven't yet written.

Don't get bogged down with any one section. It is generally easier to write the introduction towards the end when you can link it with your conclusion. It is a good idea however, to map out your conclusion in point form before you begin to write - then you know where you are heading.

You may find it easier to write the middle sections first. If you become stuck on any section move on to another part of the essay.

Use your notes like a jigsaw. If you've tagged your notes you know which pages are useful for which section. Don't forget to cross out pages you've used to avoid using material twice.

## The Structure

Paragraphs are an important part of the structure of your writing. They are the framework on which your ideas are built. Each paragraph requires a topic sentence which is usually the first sentence in the paragraph. A good topic sentence contains only one idea and lets the reader know what the paragraph will be about. Other sentences elaborate the topic sentence by giving supporting details, facts, statistics and quotations. Every sentence must be clearly related to the main idea and it is important that these other sentences actually DO support the main point. It usually takes several sentences to make and substantiate a main point. The relative length of a paragraph is determined by the complexity and importance of the paragraph's main point. The concluding sentence of a paragraph is usually quite brief. Its main function is to draw the information to a logical conclusion and link it to the next paragraph.

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Each paragraph must have a clearly defined idea and must be recognizable as the next logical step in the development of an argument. The separate parts of the essay should relate logically to one another. This process of connecting your ideas together into a coordinated sequence of linked paragraphs represents a vitally important aspect of essay writing. It is key to your ability to communicate ideas effectively and concisely.

Introductory and concluding paragraphs have special requirements.

## The Introduction

An introduction is usually 5% to 10% of the length of the paper, and can comprise several paragraphs. Your reader gains his or her first impression of your paper from this section so a good introduction is vital. It may be necessary to first include some brief background information to provide a focus for your topic; however do not "pad" your introduction with extraneous material. The introduction should focus a reader's attention on the central theme of an essay. It should clarify how you intend to interpret or limit the question and give a clear, but brief, overview of the issues to be covered and the order in which they will be covered. You also need to define key terms in the question.

Remember: Writing an essay is not like writing a mystery story. Your reader should not have to read several pages before finding out your argument about the thesis presented in the question. The introduction should be directly related to the question.

## The Conclusion

A conclusion should bring together different sections of the essay. The assertions you made in your introductory paragraph have now been fully developed and substantiated, so you can bring together all of the strands of explanation, refer back to the topic and end on a well-reasoned, logical note.

Your conclusion should not contain any new material that has not already been alluded to in the body of the essay. Never finish with a quotation; this may indicate that you have been working towards someone else's conclusion!

However, don't simply repeat yourself. A conclusion which merely summarizes is repetitive and reduces the impact of your paper.

## Step 5 – Have a Break

Congratulations! You have finished a first draft. Now have a break so that you can distance yourself from what you have written. If you are well organized and can leave it for a day or so before returning to it, so much the better. If the essay is due tomorrow then probably the best you can do is to watch TV for an hour or so, as even better, go outside and take a walk as some form of physical activity will replenish you after all the time you have spent in front of a computer. After a break you will then be able to re-read it with fresh eyes and you won't be blind to its errors. You will read what you have actually written, rather than what you meant to write or thought you have written. You may even find that you have thought of some new idea to incorporate in the work.

## Step 6 – Edit Your Work

It is important to allow time for this process. You need to edit for structure, expression and spelling and correct referencing.

Your VCE assessment was marked according to specific criteria which was generally related to content. At tertiary level, on the other hand, you are expected to be able to speak properly, write grammatically correct sentences and coherent paragraphs, and write in an appropriate style. Otherwise your work creates a poor impression; such errors can seriously detract from your paper and reduce your mark.

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## Editing for structure

Read through your first draft. Ask yourself at the end of each paragraph - what is the main point of this paragraph? Then write a one sentence summary of that paragraph. If, after this exercise, you have a number of paragraphs which seem to be about the same point, then your essay may be getting very repetitive. An alternative is to go through and underline each of your topic sentences.

Then you can decide:

Does each paragraph have one main idea?

Is it clearly stated in a topic sentence?

Are all of the sentences in the paragraph relevant to the main idea?

Do the paragraphs flow on logically?

Is the connection between one point and another, clear?

Is your argument consistent? Is any one section too long?

## Editing for expression and spelling

You are expected to edit your work for errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling. Are the sentences complete? Do they make complete sense?

If you have difficulty writing grammatically correct sentences then read your work aloud, or have a friend read it to you. Sometimes you can hear that a sentence is incomplete or does not make sense. There is probably no better test of legibility than reading your work aloud!

Avoid using too many long, complicated references. Many students mistakenly believe that they should use complex language structures and vocabulary to make their writing more sophisticated. Try to write simply and clearly as simplicity in writing is generally a sign of clarity of thought.

Learn to check all of your pronouns. Is it clear what your *its*, *they*, *those*, *he* or *she* refer to? Is your writing repetitive? Check that you have used a variety of sentence constructions and that you are not over using particular words or phrases.

## Check your punctuation.

Punctuation is important as it indicates separate ideas in a sentence.

Check your spelling. Don't rely totally on a computer spell check; computers don't help with similarly spelled words in different contexts, for example *quite* and *quiet*, and *were* and *where*, *differs* and *defers*. Also, don't be tempted to substitute words from a thesaurus, if you are not really sure of their meaning or appropriateness for the context.

## Edit for appropriate academic style

Academic writing should not be pompous or difficult to read, but it should be clear and as objective as possible. Avoid using slang, e.g. *kids*, emotionally charged words, e.g. *outrageous* or a familiar chatty tone. Also, avoid cliches like *the plague*! Your writing should be clear, concise, unambiguous and accurate.

It is difficult to edit on a computer screen as you can only see a small section of your paper at a time. It is much easier to print your essay, and then to annotate and edit a hard copy. If you generously space the paragraphs on your draft copy, then you will have room to add extra information or to write new topic sentences or linking phrases.

Finally ... the ability to write and communicate well is a skill that will be required throughout your university and professional life. If you know that you have problems with spelling, grammar and expression, then it is best to address them as soon as possible in the year. Ask a literate friend, or a Learning Skills Unit Adviser, to look at your essay draft before you submit the essay. This can be a useful learning exercise to help identify particular writing problems.

The Learning Skills Unit (<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/index.html>) also has great deal of helpful information and tips to ease your transition.