

## ESSAY WRITING BASICS

### Use this sheet to help you:

- Formulate essay questions
- Develop titles for your essays
- Consider the scope of your essays
- Develop thesis statements

### 5 minute self test

Preparing essays at university can be very different to preparing essays at school – and the academic expectations are much higher.

Look at the aspects of essay writing outlined in the dot points above. Which of these do you think require your particular attention?

- How should you begin to write an essay?
- What is the right balance of essay parts?
- How should you narrow the scope of an essay?
- What are the key structure components of a good essay?
- What is a “thesis statement”?

Creative writing can take many forms. However, academic essays are generally written in only one way in English. Learn the structure and you will make life easier. Study the diagram at the end of the Helpsheets carefully. It contains the essential elements of good essay writing. (The finer details are limitless in number.)

## 1. Essay Structure: Get the Balance Right

You probably know that all essays should have an introduction, body and conclusion. Less well-known is that the balance of these elements is crucial. A good rule of thumb is:

Introduction: 10 %

Body: 80 %

Conclusion: 10 %

If you get these elements out of balance you generally have a poor essay. Note: this ratio is true of thesis writing too. (In terms of structure a PhD is a big essay essentially.)

## 2. Where to Start?

If you have been provided with a topic or research question, it's simply a matter of answering all parts of the question. If you haven't been provided with a topic, you'll need one. A topic guides your investigation. But better still if you can refocus your original topic to a research question using direction words this also helps (see **Study and Research Helpsheets: Direction Words**). You may even like to turn your "question" into a statement. This too is an effective way to begin an essay.

For example, if your topic was security and computer crime, you might like to use a research question like: "What are the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry?". This narrows your focus and helps you to plan your essay.

Try adding a different direction word and see how it changes the focus.

### Reformulating the Research Question

What is the difference between the question above and the questions below?:

- "**Contrast** the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry with security issues in other industries".
- "**Outline** the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry".
- "**Distinguish** between the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry and the security issues in other industries".
- "**Evaluate** the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry as distinct from security issues in other industries".
- "**Trace** the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry with security issues in other industries."

... and so on. What is the focus that you want to have?

### 3. Narrowing your Scope Further

You might then begin to spell out for yourself the scope of your research. That is, what you will do and what you won't do. For example, what "other" industries might you look at as well as the e-commerce industry? Can you make comparisons or analogies with other areas? What will you limit your comparisons to? (For example, you might compare e-commerce and traditional commerce security in the sale of household groceries or books).

A good essay will make connections between different areas of knowledge and different disciplines. A bad essay will rehearse something simple and boring. A bad essay will repeat what the lecturer talked about in the lecture, or what the book you used in tutorials discussed. A good essay will go that extra step and do something different. An exceptional essay will educate your reader!

### 4. Don't be too General or too Specific

Make sure your research question or statement is neither too general nor too specific. If it is too general you will not know how to make a plan. You won't know where to start. If it is too specific you may find it hard to find enough resources.

Which question is easier to start work on right away?:

*"The Nature of Computer Crime"*

or:

*"Distinguish between the security issues raised by computer crime in the e-commerce industry and the security issues in traditional industries".*

The second is easier to work on because it is **narrower** in scope.

### 5. Give your Essay an All-Encompassing Title

Now that you have refocused your research question or statement you need to think of a title that captures the whole area of your research. You may decide that a question best captures your topic:

*Can Computer Crime be Prevented in E-Commerce Industries?*

On the other hand you may think of a good statement. The use of colons (:) is good for this purpose.

For example:

*Security and Computer Crime: A Comparison between E-Commerce and Traditional Commerce in the Wholesale Grocery Industry.*

Alternatively a combination of question and statement is often very effective:

*Can Computer Crime be Prevented? A Study of E-Commerce in the Wholesale Grocery Industry.*

NOTE: In titles capitals are often used for all words except prepositions and conjunctions (This is called Maximal Capitalization or Title Case).

## 6. IMPORTANT: Have a Thesis (statement)!

An essay is a waste of time to read if it does not have a thesis. It MUST have one.

This is something that most students have trouble with. A "thesis" means two things, so the word is confusing. It means both: a) a higher degree by research (a Masters or a Ph.D degree), AND b) a personal point of view on a topic that you have argued for. To understand academic requirements, see **Study and Research Helpsheets: Critical Thinking 1, 2 and 3.**

Often the two meanings come together. Someone who writes a MA or a Ph.D must argue for a particular point of view in the thesis. There is a "thesis" (point of view) in their thesis (higher degree)!

Often students are frightened about having their own point of view. However, there is nothing to be worried about. It does not mean that their point of view must be completely original; often they can find references in the library where other people argued for the same idea that the student shares. They can make reference to those writers to support their own views (which happen to be the same). For example, consider the following topic:

Can Computer Crime be Prevented in E-Commerce Industries?

A possible thesis might be:

... that computer crime in this industry can be prevented if companies use the technology of a certain sort (ABC technology, for example).

Another possible thesis might be:

... that computer crime cannot be prevented in this industry because there are no way to control or regulate e-commerce on the internet.

It is easiest to start thinking about a thesis for your essay topic, by using a that phrase. If someone asks you about your thesis you can say: "I will argue that ...".

Look at the topics below and one possible thesis that might be argued for in an essay on those topics.

Topic	A Possible Thesis...
Does privatization stimulate economic growth ?	... that privatization stimulates economic growth by increasing competition in the business sector
The internet privacy war	... that internet privacy is an impossible goal because there are too many hackers and too much to gain.
The impact of information technology on distance education	... that IT will have an enormous impact on DE via on-line delivery of courses, especially in the third world.
Are we running out of internet addresses ?	... that we are not running out of internet address if we use system XY and Z.
The access of developing countries to affordable software	... that the first world has a moral obligation to provide software to developing countries.
Internet addiction	... that internet addiction can be overcome in the future by means of training in schools.
Marketing Today: Basic Functions and Developing Technology	... that marketing today is crucially tied to the future of developing technology such as XYZ technology.
The Death Penalty	... that the Death Penalty should be restored in Australia to avoid a crime future like America's.
Monopolies in the Computer Market: Microsoft	... that monopolies in the computer market are unavoidable as companies like Microsoft have all the power.
International Trade between Australia and New Zealand	... that International Trade between Australia and New Zealand should be encouraged in the education supplies sector.
A comparison of home-based and institution-based aged care in Taiwan	... that institution-based aged care in Taiwan needs to be updated along the same lines as western countries.
Are Marketing and Advertising the Same Thing?	... that Marketing and Advertising are not the same thing because of X, Y and Z.

For examples of differences between topics and theses in various Business and Economics fields, see Robert Yin's book: *Case Study Method*. Sage Publications, 2002.

Now think of a thesis for your essay!

## IN SUMMARY:

- Focus your essay into a question or a statement
- Determine what it will include/exclude.
- Don't be too general or too narrow initially
- Think of a wide topic title
- Think of your thesis
- Make sure you plan your essay with a clear three-part structure.
- Make sure that the essay is well-balanced (see the following page for further details on structuring the essay).
- Ensure that you have a research question or statement to guide your investigation.
- **Finally, don't procrastinate: make a start!**

