

Creation of an essay



As you prepare your essay you may ask 'What is the point?'. There are a number of arguments against having geography students write essays. The most often expressed is that essay writing has no relevance for what geography graduates actually do in the 'real' world. The staff in the Geography Programme are often used by students as referees for job applications, and the first question prospective employers typically ask us is 'Does s/he have good written communication skills?'. During your geography programme you will be given the opportunity to develop a range of these necessary communication skills, of which writing is one of the key ones.

The ability to write clearly, and hence communicate effectively is becoming increasingly important as text-based tools such as the internet, and email become essential tools of our daily life. Without being able to communicate face-to-face, our writing needs to be clear and concise in order to both get our message across and to prevent misunderstandings. In this context essay writing provides a means whereby you are able to develop the skills of effective communication that will be relevant wherever you end up as a graduate.

This guide has two functions: first, to provide advice as to the process of writing an essay; and second to give guidance as to the specific requirements of essay writing in the Geography Programme.

4 Essay Writing and Format Guide

5 Types of Essay

There are a range of essay types, and each of these types requires you to do different things. An important first skill, then, in preparing your essay is to identify what sort of essay you are being asked to write, and what this requires you to do.

In general essays fall along a continuum between those that ask you to describe a particular phenomenon, and those that ask to discuss, analyse, criticize and debate particular issues. At university essays increasingly tend to fall into the latter discussion type. These types of essay require you to go beyond simply repeating what you have been told towards thinking about the information you have found and knitting it into an argument. TIP: If you are not sure what the essay requires you to do, ask the person setting the question about what they want.

Analysing the Question: Answering the Question A key point to remember as you prepare your essay is that no matter how well you write the essay, if you do not actually answer the question you will not do well. This seems an obvious point, but in the heat of the moment it is often neglected. To help you stay on track you can do two simple tasks: first, have a close look at the essay question; second, as you prepare and write your essay continue to look at the question and think if what you are doing matches what the question requires.

Essay Writing and Format Guide 6 It is important to pay close attention to the essay question because the way in which the question is worded often gives clues to the way in which the question is designed to be answered. To help you understand an essay question a simple step is to divide words into those words in a question that frame the topic; whilst command words are those words that actually indicate what needs to be done with the topic. Two examples might be: Discuss and critically (command words) evaluate the processes that are considered to drive plate tectonics (content words).

Critically discuss (command words) the changing structure and geography of the global music industry (content words). Finally, in understanding an essay question it is very useful to have an idea of what is required when certain command words are used. The list below has examples of command words that are commonly used. Account for: Give the reasons for, giving an indication of all relevant circumstances. Very different from 'give an account of' which is asking for a detailed description. Analyse: Study in depth; breaking down data/ information into its constituent parts and identifying in detail the main characteristics and what these mean.

Assess: To 'weigh up' a particular situation; to consider in a balanced way strengths and weaknesses, arguments for and against, the pros and cons of a situation. In conclusion, state your judgement clearly. Comment on: Clearly state your opinion on the material in question and support your views with reference to suitable evidence or explanations. Compare: Look for similarities and differences between; emphasis on similarities but be aware of differences. Essay Writing and Format Guide 7 Contrast: As 'compare' but with emphasis on the differences; again do not ignore points of similarity.

Criticise: Express a balanced judgement about the merit of theories, arguments, opinions or the truth of the material in question. Use evidence from the material to support your views. Define: Set down the precise meaning of a word or phrase, in a clear and concise way. Do not give too many details. Describe: Give a detailed account of something from the material you have. Discuss: Examine and analyse carefully, considering all aspects of an issue, debating reasons for and against, assessing advantages and disadvantages etc. Be thorough and try to reach a balanced conclusion.

Evaluate: Carefully 'weigh up' the matter in hand; assess the value or worth of something commenting on both the advantages and limitations.

Emphasise the views of authorities and to a lesser degree your personal opinion. Explain: To make plain, to interpret, to account for; give reasons why and try to analyse causes. Justify: Make out a case for something or give reasons for decisions or conclusions. Be convincing. Outline: Give the main features or general principles of a subject omitting minor details, and emphasising structure and arrangement.

Relate: Show how 'things' (situations, ideas, facts) are connected to each other; the relationship between them, the extent to which they affect each other. (e. g. causes and effects) Review: Make a survey of a subject; take an overview; reconsider the material, examine it critically and comment on the important points and stages of development. Summarise: Give the main points in condensed form leaving out details and examples. To what extent.. : Here you are expected to make your case/ present your material in the usual way but you remain aware of the fact that you may not be making a 100% case, i. e. here may be other counterbalancing evidence. This requires careful assessment and weighting of your material. Sometimes the question 'describe and explain', 'compare and contrast', 'account for ... and Justify your conclusions' and so on. In this situation you must take care to cover all aspects of the question asked otherwise you will be marked out of only half or perhaps one third of the total. It is therefore essential to understand exactly what the title requires you to do. TIP: Unless otherwise stated make the assumption that every essay question in geography ends with the phrase 'using relevant geographical examples'.

Planning Your Essay The first stage of planning your essay is to have a good idea of what is being asked for in the essay. If you are having trouble figuring out what is required, ask for help from the teaching staff. They would much rather sort a problem out at the beginning rather than have to read, and grade, an essay that is wildly off the mark. Before you begin your research spend a few minutes jotting down your immediate ideas about the topic. You do not have to use these, but they do provide a baseline to which you can return to get a sense of how your own thinking has developed.

Once you have an idea of what the question is asking for, then it is time to begin reading. This is something you should remember throughout your university programme: there is no substitute for reading widely. Reading in this sense refers primarily to academic literature, not simply a newspaper, magazine, or web site. In many cases essay questions will come with recommended readings. A good rule of thumb is to treat the recommended readings as the starting point for what you should read, rather than the limit of what you need to read.

Put another way you should be prepared to extend your reading beyond what is recommended. Lecturers are looking for originality, and moving beyond the Essay Writing and Format Guide 9 recommended readings is a good way of differentiating your essay from those of other students. An easy way of extending your reading is to follow up some of the references that have been made to specific authors which you might have found interesting. This will give you a better sense of how an argument has been constructed, and a feeling for the wider debates that frame particular topics.

It will also help you get a sense that there are almost inevitably debates over how a topic should be approached, and how particular findings can be interpreted. Each piece of work that you read will seek to tell a story, so as you read note down what you think the story being told by each author is; how the author has made that story; and how his story differs from others that you have read. As you do this pay attention as to what resources (tables, figures, maps, references) are being woven together to tell the story, because you may be able to draw on them yourself (with the appropriate referencing! . If you undertake this process as you move through your readings you will accumulate a resource base of ideas and materials that you will be able use to answer the essay question. TIP: A good idea is to quickly go back over the readings that you did early on in your research for a particular essay. You will find that they will make more sense now. Writing Your Essay Reading widely is a critical task in preparing your essay, but all that work will go to lack of reading, a common weakness in undergraduate essays is a poorly developed structure.

An inadequate structure means that it is difficult to assess the ideas Essay 10 and argument being made in an essay, and it gives the impression of a baffled and sloppy writer. To help you develop the structure of the essay, quickly prepare an essay plan that covers the headings of the sections that you want to use, and include under those headings a sentence that articulates the broad point that you want to make in that section. Once you have done this take a step back and consider whether the argument that you want to make follows smoothly through the structure that you have drawn up.

If it doesn't, work through your essay plan until you think it does.

Introduction There is no hard and fast way of introducing your essay, but a clear, concise introduction will immediately create a good impression with the reader. In writing an introduction Pain (2003) identifies a useful strategy that you could use. First, you can set the topic in a wider context by commenting upon its significance to geography or the world in general. Second you can set about showing what you understand by the question. Here you can provide definitions of the key words that you want to use; and your interpretation of the question.

Finally, you can outline your essay, and the various stages that the reader will be led through. **TIP:** It is often a good idea to re-write your introduction after you have finished the essay in order to make sure that it actually reflects what you have done. **The Body of the Essay** Having grabbed the reader with an engaging introduction it is time to articulate your argument. If you prepared an essay plan this is where it will start to pay dividends. As you work through your Essay Writing and Format Guide 11 argument constantly refer back to the essay question to make sure you have not gone off on a tangent.

The body of the essay should be made up of a series of linked paragraphs, and each paragraph should aim to express one key idea. One of the key reasons that students do not get good grades is that they fail to construct a convincing argument in the body of their essay. This can be the result of both a lack of detail, and the absence of academic literature to support the argument being made. A common problem in student essays is a reliance on over-generalised and vague statements that indicate a lack of depth. This is

often caused by the assumption that the marker knows what the writer is trying to say.

As a rule of thumb, then, you should assume that the marker has little knowledge of the idea that you are writing about. When you are writing your sentences make sure that you include relevant details as to what, who, where, why, and when details. Your argument can also be strengthened by using examples and quotes from the academic sources that you have read. Quotes taken from other sources can provide a very good way of situating your own argument within a wider academic context. You need to resist the temptation, however, to use quotes to make your argument for you.

They should be used to support, and expand, on a point that you have already made. Another means of deepening your argument is the careful use of graphs, maps, supporting your argument. You should also remember that whilst the meaning of the graphs, maps, figures or pictures that you might use will be evident to you they will not necessarily be so to the reader. So you need to refer Essay Writing and Format Guide 12 to them in the text, and explain their meaning. Otherwise they risk simply being ornaments that do not add anything to the essay.

Finally, as you prepare the body of your essay it is imperative that that you accurately reference all the ideas and materials that you have used from other people (see the section in this guide on how to reference correctly).

TIP: A failure to include references in your essay may be interpreted as attempt to gain credit for other people's ideas. This is called plagiarism, and is a form of cheating. If you are caught cheating in this way under Massey

University regulations you can be stripped of course credits, and prevented from sitting any exams.

Concluding Just as a good introduction is important so is a conclusion that is concise and clear. The purpose of the conclusion is threefold. First, to look back into the essay and draw out the main points which have been made. Second, since you have been set an essay question the conclusion provides the opportunity for you to answer it, by providing a clearly articulated verdict on it. This should flow logically from the body of our essay. Third, if you want to you can look outside the essay to make some comments about the bigger picture, and to provide some predictions for the future.

TIP: The conclusion is not the place to add new material. If you have the temptation to do this go back, revisit, and rewrite the body of your essay to incorporate this new material. Essay Writing and Format Guide 13 Editing So you think you have finished when you write the last sentence. Think again. Most of the marks that are lost in an essay are because students have only handed in a first draft of their essay. No matter how good you are an essay takes time to polish, so organise your time so as to leave yourself the space to produce a second and third draft. Doing this will significantly improve the quality of the essay.

TIP: As you edit your essay read it aloud. You will be surprised at how effective a tool it is in uncovering small errors, and helping to improve the flow of the essay. Writing Style Correcting simple spelling, and punctuation, errors makes a world of difference to how well your essay will be appreciated. The following section gives you some advice on simple things

that you can do to improve your writing. Spelling You cannot rely on the automatic spell check to correct your spelling for you, since in English there are many words which have the same sound but different spellings.

This produces many mistakes. Among the most common are: " there = there is a lot of poor spelling " their = their house is for sale " affect (verb) = to affect, it affects " effect (noun) = the effect, an effect. Example: ' The policy affected employment in the town, and had a positive effect. ' (There is also a Essay Writing and Format Guide verb to effect', used only in academic writing, which means to achieve, to carry out) " eather (noun) = fine weather " whether (preposition) = to know whether it has succeeded " to = to want, go to town " too = there are too many mistakes, he is stupid too. ?" lead = lead mine, she took the lead " led = I have led a bad life " bare (adjective) = bare minimum " bear (verb) = to bear the cost. Also note also that spell-checkers may not recognise certain specialist words and instead suggest a change to the closest alternative, which may catch the unwary.... e. g. lavatory instead of laboratory, sediment entertainment instead of sediment entrainment " these examples have actually appeared in assignments!

Finally, spelling should follow English rather than American custom.

For example: our' not '-or' "'-re' not '-er' not '-z' in the final syllable (harbour, behaviour, centre, hypothesise, urbanise, industrialisation). Writing numbers Within written text, numbers less than or equal to twelve should be written out. This is also true for larger, round numbers such as twenty, thirty, a hundred, a thousand, and so on. For example ' There are five trains a day, not ' There are 5 trains a day; ' There were about a hundred people', not ' about 100 people'. Never write ' 1000s'. 15 Grammar