

Essay writing competition – how to guide

For some of you, writing an essay is a regular part of your subject assessment. For others, report writing may be more common. The University of Exeter hosts frequent competitions for pre-university students on our Discover University website – [exeter.ac.uk/discoveruniversity](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/discoveruniversity). We have put together some useful hints and tips below for those submitting essays as part of our competitions.

Most degree subjects include essays as part of your course so being able to write an effective essay is a very useful skill. While essay requirements may vary between subjects, there are several key features that are relevant to most.

1. Essays must argue towards a conclusion, no matter what subject it is in. The main part of the essay should examine the evidence, but then head towards a conclusion.
2. Essays are always based on evidence. This could be a range of different types of evidence, depending on your subject. You should critically discuss the ideas and thoughts found within the sources you use and include what you think about them.
3. Essays should show an awareness of what other people have written about the subject.
4. You should ensure that the structure of your essay is logical and makes it easy for the reader to follow your argument.

Research

When you have chosen your essay topic the first step is to do some wider reading around the subject to look for information that will help to inform your essay. You can come up with an idea or question and use your research to challenge this hypothesis. Remember to reflect on and evaluate the sources you are using. You should question whether the information is accurate and appropriate and whether it has come from a credible and reputable place. Make a note of any sources you use as you go along, including page numbers.

Plan

When you have done your research, decided on your argument, and reached a conclusion, it is important to plan your essay so that you make the most effective use of the word count. You do not want to miss out important information. The word count will be there for a reason, so you should try to stick to it. Sketch out what you are going to put in each paragraph, and make sure it is always relevant to the question you are answering.



Introduction and Conclusion

Your introduction and conclusion are key to framing your essay. The introduction provides some useful background and sets out the overall subject of the essay. It should highlight key concepts and give an overall picture of the broad structure of the essay. It also sets out your argument. The conclusion answers the question posed in the title. It is very important that your conclusion matches the argument you have been making throughout your essay. In a conclusion you can also indicate whether there were any limitations / restrictions to your discussion or highlight potential further areas for investigation. For example, it may highlight the potential for further work in this area, including themes or concepts that require further research.

Structure

It is important that your essay is structured in a logical way, so that it is easy for your teachers and examiners to follow. In each paragraph discuss one main idea, and make sure you are always referring back to the question. Start with your most important point in the first paragraph. The general method of construction of a paragraph is:

1. Start with an opening sentence.
2. Introduce your main idea.
3. Provide evidence.
4. Critically evaluate the evidence.
5. Summarise the point.

Be critical

Be critical of the sources you are using. Are they truly relevant to your argument? Be critical of your own writing: are you answering the question? Do you have a coherent structure and argument? Are you analysing your source material, or are you simply providing a narrative?

Referencing

A vital part of writing an essay is referencing. You must clearly state the sources of information you are using in your own work. If you do not attribute the ideas of others, you could be accused of plagiarism. Whether you are using a direct quotation, paraphrasing or rewriting in your own words, you must attribute it to the original author. Different subjects use different forms of referencing. You can find out more about how to reference here: libguides.exeter.ac.uk/referencing. At the end of your essay you should have a bibliography, listing every source you have consulted or used.

Good luck!



Essay writing is another form of communication. Try to write simply and clearly – you’ll make life easier for yourself, and for your reader! Read as much as you can before you start writing: you’ll find that the more you know about your chosen topic, the easier it is to write about it.

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