Guide to Essay Writing

There are many ways of writing essays, depending on the purpose of the essay as well as the individual style of the writer. The major difference between a scientific essay (whether in the social or natural sciences) and a piece of creative writing is that the aim is not to entertain but to present an argument and communicate information to support it with the least possibility of misunderstanding. This should be your aim.

Basic Procedures

Allow at least three weeks for writing your essay. Plan to finish writing it several days before the due date to allow time for checking and revision. There are three main phases to the process so allow roughly a week for each.

Phase 1: Planning

1. Check the formal requirements of the particular essay (due date, length, format, referencing procedures, etc.)

2. Work out a timetable for research and writing, i.e., set aside regular times in between other commitments.

3. Analyse the topic in terms of what it asks you to do. If necessary, note key words such as assess, compare, relate, etc. (for an amplification of such terms refer to Deciphering The Code Words at the end of this document).

4. Plan your preliminary (or orientation) reading. Ask yourself, “What areas must be covered to answer this question properly”, “What sources are likely to be most useful?”

5. Plan the broad structure of the essay. Pose three or four subsidiary questions to guide your research. This will help you know what to look for. As you read, you will develop an essay plan that will use these subsidiary questions as starting points for sections of the essay.
Phase 2: Research

1. Survey any material which looks promising (e.g., use index, table of contents, chapter headings). Skim-read sections which seem relevant, looking for the central ideas from paragraph to paragraph.

2. Keep the essay topic and your preliminary plan in front of you as you read. Keep testing what you read: “Is this relevant to the question?” “How will it help to answer it?” The important thing is to keep the topic at the forefront of your thinking.

3. Take notes only of clearly relevant and useful material. Always begin by writing out the full name and title of the book or article, with place and year published following the pattern you will use in your list of references. As you read jot down the page numbers in the margin of your notes, to facilitate any referencing that may be necessary.

4. When you have exhausted the relevant sources, reconsider your preliminary plan and modify it to form the framework of your answer.

5. Edit your material in the light of this framework. This is a vital step. Be critically selective. Retain only those ideas and details which contribute directly to your argument. Discard the rest, however fascinating it may seem. The more you gather, the more you will have to discard; yet the broader your research, the surer you will be of having selected the most pertinent and useful material.

Phase 3: Writing

1. Assemble your selected material in logical sequence, according to your modified essay plan. Each main heading or sub-question should produce a block of related points, examples, evidence and footnote references.

2. Write a first draft. Take each block in turn and identify the main ideas or statements essential to your argument. Construct your paragraphs around each of these dominating ideas.
3. Each paragraph should be a cohesive, integrated unit of between four to eight sentences. Avoid extremes of excessive length or shortness, unless for special emphasis. An effective paragraph will usually contain one central idea or statement, with explanation or elaboration leading to a summation or judgment, and with a clear link to the next paragraph.

4. Write clearly and simply. Always ask, “Am I communicating effectively enough?” Make sure that your paragraphs flow naturally and form a logical sequence. Your essay must be well organised as well as being clearly structured.

5. Revise this draft, after leaving it for a day or two. Read it aloud, or get someone to read it to you. First, listen critically for a coherent and convincing argument. You may see ways to improve it, perhaps by rearranging the sequence of main points. Then, listen critically for clear communication. Be ruthless with any repetitions, irrelevant details, ambiguous or unclear statements, and clumsy or long-winded statements. A good rule of thumb here is, “When in doubt (if it fails to convince) cut it out.” Check the length by forcing yourself to count the words. If it is over the limit, consider how to shorten it. Do not amputate whole sections, since this will wreck the logic of your argument. “Boil down” wherever possible by combining paragraphs or cutting extraneous details.

6. Add notes and list of references. Check the whole draft for spelling, punctuation and grammatical sentence construction.

7. Type out the final version as neatly as you can. Remember to leave ample room in the margins for marker’s comments (3 cm each side).

8. Last, but very important, carefully proof-read the whole essay.

**Structuring your essay**

Start with an introduction. This could include a definition of the topic, or it might refer to the more general field of sociology from which this topic is drawn. Alternatively, you
might paraphrase very briefly the main line of argument in your essay. Whatever its form, the introduction is a very important part of your essay, since it forms the basis of first impressions. For this reason it should be crafted with care.

The main part of the essay should progress fluently through your argument. This is where organisation and structure are important. The essay should be divided into paragraphs, incorporating headings where appropriate to highlight the structure of the essay.

The essay should finish with a conclusion. This will sum up your argument, so that the reader knows exactly what line of argument you have adopted. Avoid introducing a totally new idea or argument in the conclusion. Avoid excluding important sections of your work by concluding on a minor point from the essay. Avoid using a quotation which is a conclusion from someone else who has written on the same topic. Remember, your conclusion should conclude your essay and give it a sense of unity and completeness.

A list of references should be included after the essay. In it, list all books or articles to which you have referred. See the accompanying guide for the details of presenting a list of references.

**Presentation of Your Essay**

If you have access to a word-processor or typewriter, a typed essay will be greatly appreciated. If you have to write your essay by hand, however, be assured that you won’t be marked down for this. If you do have to write your essay by hand, though, you need to ensure that it is written legibly.

You should use a separate title page with your name, workshop number, tutor’s name and essay topic on this page. Leave a wide margin for marker’s comments (3 cm on each side). Write or print on only one side of each sheet. Staple your pages together. Put your name on every page so if one becomes loose, it will not get lost. It is a good idea to photocopy your essay before you hand it in so you retain a hard copy.
**Acknowledging Sources**

Almost all scholarly writing, although containing original work, builds on information obtained from other writers. To prove that the sources of this information are of good repute references are given to all works which have been used as sources of information or inspiration. In addition, this enables the reader to refer to the original work if s/he should wish to do so. Sociology students are expected to write their essays in a scholarly manner from the beginning. Any books or articles to which you refer in the course of composing your essay should be included in the list of references, and appropriate referencing should be included in the body of the essay. Failure to do so results in plagiarism.

**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism has been defined as using words or ideas of others and deliberately presenting them as your own. It is one of the most serious offences that can be committed in scholarly work. A book or essay is the intellectual property of its author, and if you use some part of the author’s work, you must acknowledge this in an appropriate way. Very few students knowingly commit plagiarism, but sometimes, whether through carelessness or inadequate note-taking procedures, students end up presenting the words or ideas of others as their own. When you write your essay you must acknowledge every borrowing. It is not enough to include a list of sources that you have consulted. By means of end-notes or references in the text, you must give the page numbers and published source of your borrowings, whether these are the exact words of the sources or your paraphrase. In this way you will show the reader exactly what you have taken from which of the listed works and enable the reader to distinguish between these borrowings and your own ideas. If you are in doubt as to what constitutes plagiarism in a particular case, consult your tutor. Be warned that instances of plagiarism will be dealt with severely.
**Deciphering the Code Words**

While the most common key words in sociology essay topics are what, how and why, here are a list of eleven other frequently used key words with accompanying examples of essay topics.

**Summarise.** Sum up; give the main points briefly. *Summarise Weber’s argument for an interpretive sociology.*

**Evaluate.** Give the good points and the bad ones; appraise; give an opinion regarding the value of, talk over the advantages and limitations. *Evaluate the contribution of Durkheim to sociology.*

**Contrast.** Bring out the points of difference. *Contrast the theories proposed by Mead and Cooley on the development of the self.*

**Explain.** Make clear; interpret; make plain; discuss why something happened; tell the meaning of. *Explain the rise and subsequent decline of functionalism within twentieth-century sociology.*

**Describe.** Give an account of; tell about; give a word picture of. *Describe G.H. Mead’s theory of interaction using his understanding of gesture, symbol, mind, role-taking and self.*

**Define.** Give the meaning of a word or concept; place it in the class to which it belongs and set it off from other items in the same class. *Define the concepts “power elite” and “sociological imagination”.*

**Compare.** Bring out points of similarity and points of difference. *Compare the changes in Maori and Pakeha families since the World War II.*

**Discuss.** Talk over; consider from various points of view; present the different sides of. *Discuss the advantages and limitations of using official crime statistics as a measure of the real rate of criminal offending.*

**Critically discuss.** State your opinion of the correctness or merits of an item or issue; criticism may approve or disapprove. *Critically discuss how the state has attempted to redress inequalities in New Zealand through its social policies.*

**Trace.** Follow the course of; follow the trail of; give a description of progress. *Trace the development of ethnic relations in New Zealand.*

**Illustrate.** Use a concrete example to clarify a point. *How is the concept of role used in sociological analysis? Illustrate your answer by describing the roles in one of the following institutions: families, universities, hospitals, factories.*