**CityU—Basics for Essay Writing**

**Warning: Always check with your course professor to see what specific requirements she or he has with regard to essays. If they differ from these guidelines, follow the guidelines from your professor! There is no single, correct way to write an academic essay.**

**All essays have three parts:**

1. A **beginning**—the introduction to the topic/theme/issue, and all that is required to introduce the topic. You start off with giving some background to the topic—presenting the big, overall picture. The beginning is also where you include your main message—your thesis statement or the research question you want to explore—and this usually is one or two sentences. This is your particular focus, your narrowing-down from the big picture. In the beginning, you also give your readers a bit of a ‘roadmap’ to them how you are going to proceed in the essay.
2. A **middle**—the story/topic/theme/issue itself, with all the details and data
3. An **end**—the conclusion. You can summarize what you found or demonstrated and you re-visit your thesis statement or research question, showing that you have supported or answered it. You also offer your conclusions, suggestions, recommendations, wisdom—what you have learned—and show us how your topic/issue/question fits into the bigger overall picture.

So, overall, you start with a big-sky view, narrow down to your specific topic, give all the information about your topic, and then come back to connecting with the big-sky view in your conclusion.

**There are four, additional considerations in essay writing:**

1. **Discover your subject**—you need to know, deeply and intimately, what your subject/topic/issue/question is. It is usually not as obvious as you initially think. *More student essays are deficient for this reason than for any other*. One of the ways you can discover your subject is to begin with some preliminary writing, what we call “pre-writing.” This is exploratory writing where the aim is simply to figure out your subject. Here, you just write to explore ideas. You don’t worry about grammar or paragraphs or ‘good’ writing or any writing mechanics. You just keep writing as a means of exploring. The act of writing (whether on a computer or with a pen) is a very powerful technology that will assist your thinking; it works like magic to clarify thinking. You will be able to reduce your subject to a basic, fundamental thesis statement or research question. *Avoid choosing a subject that is too big; narrow down to one specific.* Having topics that are too big is a common problem. Your thesis statement or research question will consist of one sentence—either a declarative sentence (what you suspect to be true—your thesis statement) or a question (your research question); either one is fine. Even if you essay is three hundred pages long, your thesis statement or research question will be one, single sentence. *This is the most important sentence in your essay!* Once you have clarified your thinking and have developed your thesis statement or research question, you are ready to make an outline for your essay.
2. **Know your audience**—you need to know and think about who will be reading your essay. If it is done for a class assignment for your professor, then be sure you understand what your professor wants! Find out the specific requirements; if you are not sure, ask your professor! Think about your professor’s personality and what will work for that professor *but* always be true to yourself and your convictions—never compromise these! If your essay is for a friend, lover, parent, employer, then obviously you will write differently based on your awareness of those individuals. But always: think about who will be reading your work and what that person will expect, and what will satisfy that person.
3. **Search for specifics**—you need details to make your essay or story come alive. If it is a story, you need good, descriptive details. If it is a research essay, you need to do the literature search and find all the information (the specifics) that will support your thesis or answer your research question. You need to become an expert in your topic! You need to do all the homework and research to be able to answer your research question or defend your thesis with authority, so that no one will question your authority.
4. **Develop an overall plan­**—this is where you develop an outline—a plan, a structure—for your essay. *Always start with an outline. Not doing so will cause you problems as you write!* This is the ‘skeleton’ of your essay; the writing puts the flesh on the skeleton. As you write the essay, you may discover the outline doesn’t quite work or need to be modified. This happens occasionally and it is okay! Revise your outline/plan/structure and then resume writing. Often, especially in a large essay (20+ pages), you are constantly alternating between writing the essay and revising the outline.

**A basic research essay outline (for a 12-page, double-spaced essay) Note: we have templates you can use that are already formatted and have suggested headings. Go here:** [**https://cityuresearchproject.weebly.com/template.html**](https://cityuresearchproject.weebly.com/template.html)

1. **Introduction** (1-2 pages)
   1. Background information—the big picture of your topic. Sometimes a brief story can serve to introduce the overall topic. (1 page)
   2. This leads to explaining in some detail what your topic or issue/problem is; as well, be sure to explain why this topic or issue/problem is significant or important.
   3. Your thesis statement/research question—you narrow down your overall topic to one, specific issue. One *clear* sentence, set within one paragraph (1/2 page at most)
   4. Roadmap for the reader—a brief (one paragraph) outline of how you will proceed (“In this essay, first I will …. Then I will …. I will then …. Finally, I will ….”)
2. **Theoretical Framework**—here you outline the theories you are using; also known as being part of a “literature review.” You review all the relevant scholarship on your topic; you want to demonstrate your expertise on the topic. (3-4 pages)
   1. First theory—description and outline of this theory and all those scholars who contributed to it. Break down into several paragraphs, using however many are necessary to demonstrate you have a good understanding of the theory and all who have contributed to it and its variations. Don’t use too many quotations (average one per 1.5 pages); learn to paraphrase (yeah, it is hard, but it is good practice)
   2. Second theory
   3. Third theory
3. **Analysis or Research Findings**—In this section, you analyze your particular topic, demonstrating what findings exist related to your topic. As well, *you show how the theories you outline above can explain what is going on*. This can also be part of your literature review. You previously offered the theories. Now you look at examples in the literature or your own experiences and analyze them using the theories to explain what is happening. Show how the findings support or do not support the theory/theories. (2-4 pages)
   1. First situation/finding
   2. Second situation/finding
   3. Third situation/finding
   4. Etc.
4. **Discussion**—this is where you analyze and discuss your findings and what they mean. This is a really important part of the essay. (2-4 pages)
   1. Offer analysis of the data/findings—what do you think they mean? Use other scholars’ work to support your ideas. Consider alternative interpretations. There can be (and often is!) more than one interpretation of a finding
   2. What are the implications? What do these findings mean in terms of practice or outcomes? How will this knowledge and understanding be applied? What benefits or potential problems are there? How might we have to make changes to accommodate this new understanding?
   3. What are your recommendations on the basis of your findings. What recommendations would you make for students, teachers, administrators, government policy makers? You might want to outline a teaching strategy (pedagogy) or program of study (curriculum) as part of your recommendations.
5. **Conclusion**—Here, you re-visit/state your thesis or question. You summarize what you have found and the implications. You re-connect to the big-sky picture, showing how your findings relate to the bigger picture (1-2 pages)

**Warning!**

Those are the basics for a 10-12 page essay. A bit of a formula that can earn you a good mark, possibly even an “A.” But likely never an “A+”. For that, you need integrity, passion for your topic and inquiry, and the ink must flow from your veins. The formula for that? There isn’t one. But two things you will need, the *sine qua non*: burning, phosphoric intensity and practice, practice, practice.

**Revise and Re-write!**

Don’t plan on writing just one draft. Here’s what you should do:

1. Mind mapping or brainstorming—coming up with a topic
   1. Just come up with ideas
   2. Don’t worry about ordering
   3. Create a mind map if you wish to find connections
   4. Can just start ‘stream of consciousness’ writing to help you discover your subject. Just start writing and don’t stop.
2. Collect scholarly sources for reference material.
3. Create an outline. Use [Microsoft Word outline](https://support.office.com/en-ca/article/Create-an-outline-87e44e0d-ecba-4ec1-b1c9-b9fa46a230fc) feature. This will help later in creating sections with their headings
4. Start writing your first draft. Don’t worry too much at this point about grammar and syntax. Create sections with headings.
5. Once you have finished your first draft, give yourself a break (a few hours or a day or two if you have the time).
6. Come back and read over your essay and revise it to correct grammar and polish sentence structures.
7. Write up your reference list. You can use a Reference Manager like [Mendeley](http://www.mendeley.com/) or [Zotero](https://www.zotero.org/) or [RefWorks](https://www.refworks.com/) to help. You can find tutorials online in YouTube. In the ECC 510 course, you will learn how to use Mendeley.
8. Final *out-loud* reading (that will help catch grammar and syntax errors) and revising.

**Microsoft Word Tips**

* Create a title page if you want, with title of essay, course number, professor name, and date.
* Put name and brief/shortened title in header so it appears on every page.
* Use the headings feature of Word to automatically format your headings according to [APA requirements](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/16/). You can use either [numbered](http://shaunakelly.com/word/numbering/numbering20072010.html) or plain headings. You will likely only ever use one, two, or possibly three levels of headings. Pay attention to whether words should have first letters capitalized: it depends on the APA heading level. See the link above.
* Indent the first lines of your paragraphs, except for the first paragraph after a heading and the first paragraph after a block quotation. In both cases, no indent. To indent, use your TAB key or else [set up our paragraphs for automatic indenting](http://www.wikihow.com/Indent-the-First-Line-of-Every-Paragraph-in-Microsoft-Word) (APA requires 0.5 inches or 1.27 cms).
* Block quotations (40 words or more) are indented 0.5 inches on left (optional to indent on right side, as well). Double spaced, just like the rest of the essay.
* Make sure you have spell check and grammar check turned on! Pay attention to the red (spelling) or green (grammar) squiggly lines when they show up. Download [Grammarly](https://www.grammarly.com/) to help with spelling and grammar; it’s free, and ou can use it with both Microsoft Word and your email.
* Your **reference list** should be double spaced with no extra spaces between each reference. Use a ‘[hanging indent](http://word.tips.net/T000267_Creating_a_Hanging_Indent.html)’ to indent second and third lines of a reference.
* You can use a Reference Manager like [Mendeley](http://www.mendeley.com/) or [Zotero](https://www.zotero.org/) or [RefWorks](https://www.refworks.com/) to help. You can find tutorials online in YouTube. Also, the database entries for every article will offer you an APA reference that you can copy.
* See below for a properly formatted reference list.
* Include a [page break](https://support.office.com/en-us/article/Insert-a-page-break-7613ff46-96e5-4e46-9491-40d7d410a043?ui=en-US&rs=en-001&ad=US#bm1) at the end of your essay, before your reference list

**References [sample APA-style examples]**

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