

# Essay writing tips for undergraduates

Milan Ilnyckyj

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## Abstract

Suggestions on how to succeed in academic undergraduate essay-writing, written by a PhD student and three-time teaching assistant

## 1 Two top tips

Even if you don't read another word of this document, please consider doing two things to improve your academic writing. First, make sure you **read a draft of your paper aloud** to yourself. Rework awkward, vague, and confusing sentences; replace jargon with ordinary vocabulary; and cut out unneeded words and stale or mixed metaphors. Second, **have somebody else read over your work** and provide suggestions about style and content. You don't need to take all of their advice, but advice from another person is valuable for identifying where your writing is weakest.

## 2 The heap of sixty papers

To you, your essay probably consists of a Microsoft Word file that you have prepared on the basis of a certain degree of reading and thinking about the assigned topic. To the teaching assistant who will be grading it, it is just another printout on a frightening pile that needs to be dealt with in the midst of personal, academic, and financial responsibilities.

It may seem worrisome that your essay will be just one in a heap, destined to be evaluated in comparison with those of your classmates and to the knowledge of your TA. It is certainly logically possible that this arrangement could encourage bad writing habits, such as dumbing down your argument to deal with a distracted reader.

Fortunately, the conditions under which a TA will read your essay are much like those in which everything else you ever write will be read, from reports written for your future employer to love letters written to your future spouse. This means the skills required to write these papers are generally applicable in life. Especially with dealing with an inattentive reader who isn't especially interested in your thoughts, a special effort must be made to put forward an argument that will lead the reader along while rewarding their attention. In every case, the reader will have other demands on their time and other things on their mind.

Your purpose is to convey something convincing and scholarly under those conditions. Your two real tasks are to develop an argument and then to convey it in as clear a way as possible.

### 3 Your argument

As an undergraduate, the papers you write will generally result from a fairly specific prompt provided by your instructor. You will be called upon to answer some sort of question, usually on the basis of the readings and other components of the course you have been taking.

When presented with this question, it is a good idea to consider the types of ways in which it could be answered. For a question that asks you to agree or disagree with a claim, you can obviously make both of those choices. It is often possible (and wise) to go further than this by analyzing the content of the question itself. If the question contains a piece of jargon (like ‘state failure’ or ‘currency war’), you can quite legitimately raise questions about what the term means, whether different thinkers are using it in the same way, and whether it even makes sense.

One exercise you can try is to begin with your essay prompt and try to map out as many possible ways of answering the question as possible. In the middle of a blank piece of paper, write the prompt. Around it, write as many possible arguments as you can think of. If you can think of several variants of one argument or another, draw branching lines out to some of these sub-arguments. List pieces of logic, support from scholarly sources, and empirical evidence underneath these arguments if you like.

At this point, you should decide whether you know enough to formulate your argument, or whether you should do more research. Make sure you have completed all reading specifically assigned on the topic, especially if it is mentioned in the essay prompt. Be sure you understand what all the terms in the prompt mean, including within the special context of your scholarly discipline. Once you are clear on what you are being asked about, decide whether you feel sufficiently knowledgeable to choose one possible response as the most convincing and begin to justify and defend that choice.

If you don’t feel like you know enough to choose — or to defend your choice — begin by looking back over any assigned readings, course textbooks, and the like. Make use of general reference sources like dictionaries and encyclopedias to look up any unfamiliar terms and gain some insight into the context in which the terms are used. Search for related terms in academic search engines like Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>) or influential publications related to your field. Consider consulting with someone who is knowledgeable in the field. Librarians are often exceptionally knowledgeable and usually eager to assist students who are conducting research. They can point you toward credible scholarly resources that will refine your thinking and improve your ability to defend your argument.

You need to know yourself in order to decide whether the research you have performed is adequate. It may be that your personality and essay-writing strategies cause you to excessively over-research the topic, developing far more material than you can actually use in your essay or using research as a way to avoid writing. Alternatively, you may know yourself to be dangerously likely to wing it and construct a flimsy argument based on a

limited understanding of the material being considered. You are ready to write when you have a clear answer that you could express to an interested reader, when you feel confident that you can pick out the most convincing answer from a set of possibilities, and when you can begin to see the structure that you will use to make your argument known.

There is a good chance that most of the total time you spend on your paper will be devoted to the tasks that are required before you can sit down to write your first real draft — namely, on organizing your thoughts and your sources and on crafting a convincing argument with a clear structure.

## 4 Clarity

In an ideal world, the degree to which your argument is convincing could be entirely divorced from the fluency with which you express it. It may be that each of your logical arguments links together brilliantly and that your overall conclusions are bolstered by empirical evidence and become unanswerable as a result, even if they are presented in a confusing, clunky, and chaotic manner.

In reality, the full strength of your arguments can only be marshalled if you deliver them clearly to the mind of your reader. Doing this effectively begins before you set down the first word of your draft essay. It comes from having thought about the topic and done an appropriate measure of research, formulated an argument to defend, and thought about how to do so most convincingly. It is often wise to prepare an outline for your essay which states your key claim, lays out the distinct lines of argumentation with which you will defend the claim, and lists the pieces of evidence that you will use in support of your argument.

Once you have turned this outline into a draft essay, the best investment of time you can make is to **read the document aloud to yourself**. Don't just drone through it as quickly as possible. Rather, read each sentence the way you would if giving a presentation in front of a group. Consider whether what you are saying seems natural, in terms of how it is phrased. Are your sentences excessively long or convoluted? Do you make overly frequent use of colons and semicolons? Is any of the terminology likely to be vague or confusing? Do you use any technical jargon that can be avoided? For each sentence, you should be thinking about ways in which you can make your thoughts as clear and simple as possible. This process can be profitably repeated. Ideally, set your essay aside for a full day before you give it the final going-over. This way, you are much more likely to catch errors and make small improvements when you come back to edit the final document.

Make sure you keep your tenses consistent — do not switch around erratically between them. The words 'amongst' and 'amidst' are not necessary in modern English. Remove clauses and sentences that contain no information or only extremely obvious information, like "in the opinion of this scholar", "it can therefore be concluded that", "the introduction of the book introduces the author's argument", and "throughout American history, the constitution has been regarded as important". It is especially bad to use a sentence without content as the opening for your paper, or for any paragraph or sub-section within it. Your first sentence should probably summarize the argument you are about to make, or else say

something highly interesting that relates to the subject matter.

There is a misconception that using simple language and sentence structures implies impoverished thinking. There can certainly be a temptation to evade the challenges of clear writing by turning out impenetrable blocks of prose that are difficult for anyone else to comprehend or evaluate. This temptation can be overcome, however, and the process of forcing yourself to be as clear and convincing as possible can help you uncover necessary adjustments to your own thinking — producing a stronger final document, and stronger understanding of the subject matter on your part.

The last thing you should do is use complex sentence structures to try to conceal how you don't know what you are talking about, or over-reach with your vocabulary and misuse complex terms that you do not yet understand. Being economical with your words is an important part of clarity. As a general rule, if a sentence can make do without a word, you are best off cutting out the word.

**Having somebody else read your draft** and provide comments on style and content is a prudent idea and good use of time. One of the biggest challenges in writing well is properly taking into account how readers do not know everything that you do, and do not approach the subject with the same assumptions.<sup>1</sup> Getting advice from a friend, family member, or classmate can be very valuable for strengthening your argument and improving its clarity.

## 5 Conclusions

Writing is a form of your personal power. It can affect nearly everything that you try to do in life. If you can express clear and convincing arguments, you will be able to rally people to your cause, win the support of those with authority, deal with the objections of critics, and change how people think and behave. If you cannot express your arguments clearly — or you fail to support them with credible and convincing evidence — you risk being ignored, trod upon, or taken for a fool.

While they certainly have quirks that distinguish them from love letters and business reports, undergraduate essays adopt the basic structure of a piece of writing in which you seek to convince the reader of something. Your paper is succeeding if the person reading it sees how your ideas link together, how they engage comprehensibly with the related thoughts of others, and how they are in line with what is known to be true about the world. When you write a convincing essay, you are bringing the reader along on an intellectual journey. If you can succeed in doing that skilfully with your TA, your essay is likely to be favourably graded. More importantly, it will mean that you have succeeded in developing a compelling answer to the question presented to you: that you have marshalled your own thinking and the available evidence, producing a convincing account on the subject at hand.

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed explanation of this phenomenon, see chapter 3 of Steven Pinker's book *The Sense of Style*.

## 6 More resources

At many universities, free access is provided to the excellent *Oxford English Dictionary*, an ambitious 100-year-plus effort to trace every usage of every word in English. If there are any words in your essay topic that are unfamiliar or seem open to contestation, this is a useful resource: <http://www.oed.com/>

For those wishing to better understand the evolution of English and of language generally, Guy Deutscher's *The Unfolding of Language* is a fascinating and informative book. To get many of the same ideas much more quickly, consider listening to Stephen Fry's excellent 30-minute podcast on language: <http://fry.positive-dedicated.net/fry-podcast2-episodes-03.mp3>

For improving your writing generally, the style guide for *The Economist* magazine is a good resource, available both as a printed book and online at: <http://www.economist.com/styleguide/introduction>

More technical than the style guide, but a classic resource on writing, is Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*, available in virtually all libraries.

Another strong reference for improving your writing is Steven Pinker's book *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*.

Finally, George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" is widely available online and includes six rules that definitely have the potential to help you improve your writing:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

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