

How to write an essay

The Academic World The ‘academic world’ and the ‘real world’ are not the same.

Levin (2004) explains that the ‘academic world’ and the ‘real world’ are not the same, and students need to learn the differences between these worlds.

The real world is where we experience our lives – we live and work, raise children, play or watch sport, spend time with family and friends and interact with the natural world. A lot of what we know about the real world is from our experiences.

The academic world on the other hand is one of theories, explanations, ideas and critiques. We can’t experience them the same way as we experience the real world, through seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. In the academic world we learn from what is spoken, or more often written, about the world. This means that in the academic world you learn at second hand, from what other people have written, rather than from your own experience.

Levin (2004, p 5) argues that: “The culture of higher education in the Western world is very much a culture of the written world”.

Critical thinking

Students often have trouble understanding what we mean by “critical thinking”. It is worthwhile spending some time exploring ideas around critical thinking, and the difference between description and analysis or critical thinking. We have found the following exercises to be very helpful.

Exercise: Critical thinking

1. Show your students a standard bottle of water – or show the picture of a bottle of water, and ask them to describe this. When describing they should just tell you what they see –

- it is a clear plastic bottle
- the label says it is ‘spring’ water
- it has a white cap
- etc

2. Ask your students to think critically about this bottle of water. You might need to ask them the question “So what? This is a bottle of water, what else do we know about bottled water?” The students should be able to come up with things that might include:

- It costs \$4 for a bottle of water this size from the supermarket

- Plastic bottles like this are a problem in landfill
- At home we drink bottled water because our tap water tastes bad
- Bottled water isn't any better than the water that comes from our taps
- We don't take bottled water when we go country because then we drink from the spring.

Why do we need critical thinking?

Students often ask why they need to develop critical thinking and why they need to demonstrate it in an essay. Most jobs require people to be able to think critically, and essay writing is one way that the university can see that students are developing critical thinking. In many jobs people are required to write reports that will guide the action of others – for example in nursing, and critical thinking is required to do this.

PREPARING TO WRITE AN ESSAY

Unpacking the essay question Work with the student to analyse and decipher the question. What does the lecturer want in the essay? Even if you think that the lecturer has set a silly question, it is what the student must answer.

Help the student unpack the question.

Unpacking the essay question

Usually the essay question will have some direction words that give clues about what is wanted in the essay (Rolls & Wignell 2013). These words may be “describe”, “explain”, “argue”, “discuss”, “critique” etc.

Describe: Write about the facts, process or event. Write in a systematic order, and emphasise the most important points. You are not expected to explain or interpret.

Explain: You will need to analyse, not simply describe or summarise. You need to focus on the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of a particular issue, to clarify reasons, causes and effects.

Argue: If you are asked to argue, you need to systematically support or reject a point of view by presenting evidence. You also need to show that you are aware of the opposing point of view.

Discuss: You present a point of view. This will include both description and interpretation. Your opinion should be supported by argument and evidence from other writings.

Critique: A critique is where you identify and discuss both the positive and negative aspects of a topic. Compare and contrast: Find the similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events or interpretations.

Brainstorm or mind map

It is always good to start with what the student already knows about the essay topic. A good way to record this is in a brainstorm or mind map. The following two brainstorms show a student's developing thinking about an essay topic:

Using personal reflection, write a 1000 word essay on how rising food prices are impacting on people's diets.

Brainstorm 2

was completed after the student had spent time researching the topic. The student was able to find references for the ideas on Brainstorm 1, and add additional aspects from his/her researching reading. Academic essay structure

While the essay structure provided by Rolls & Wignell (2013) may appear overly prescriptive, it does provide an excellent framework for a student who is beginning essay writing, or a student who has difficulty structuring an essay.

This structure can be expanded to accommodate answers to even quite complex essay questions. If your student has completed a brainstorm and taxonomy for the essay question, you can work with them to decide on the order of their paragraphs, and put them into the essay structure framework.

A word on academic language Universities have differing requirements relating to whether students can use the first person "I" "we" in their essays. Generally the policy at Charles Darwin University is that students write in third person and do not use "I" in their academic essays unless they are asked for a personal reflection. Ask the student to check what form of writing their lecturer expects.

Writing a thesis statement

A thesis statement is the most important sentence in the introduction of an essay because it clearly states what the essay will be about. There are many ways of creating a thesis statement, but for beginning or struggling essay writers turning the essay question into a statement is probably the most straight-forward.

In addition to stating what your essay will be about, the thesis statement is used to restrict the scope of the essay and signal the writer's position. There are no wrong examples, although the essays will be significantly different.

Creating a thesis statement from the essay question

The following examples based on the work of Rolls & Wignell (2013) show that there is no one right way to create a thesis statement. What is important, is that the thesis statement signals what the essay will be about.

Essay Question 1

What is meant by the term globalisation?

Discuss the effects of globalisation on at least one of the following:

- Trade
- Business
- Consumerism
- International relations
- **The arts Thesis statement 1a**

This essay will discuss the positive and negative effects of globalisation in relation to consumerism, trade and business.

Thesis statement 1b

This essay begins by defining what is meant by globalisation, and then discusses the positive effects of globalisation on the arts in Australia.

Essay Question 2

Despite its negative health effects the tobacco industry remains an important part of the economy of many nations.

Discuss the economic effects of the tobacco industry in relation to at least one of the following levels of industry:

- Primary level (farmers)
- Secondary level (small business)
- Tertiary level (Government revenue)

Thesis statement 2a

This essay will show that the economic benefits of the tobacco industry are beneficial to the global economy at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of the industry.

Thesis statement 2b

Despite its negative health effects the tobacco industry remains an important part of the Australian economy.

This essay will discuss how the Federal Government tax regime on the industry currently brings in more money than is spent on tobacco related illnesses to identify which of the thesis statements restrict the scope, and which signals the writer's position.

Writing an introduction

An introduction should include the following:

Background information This is usually made up of one or two sentences to introduce the topic and give background information.

Thesis statement

This introduces the main topic or argument on which the essay is based.

Outline

The outline lets the reader know what the essay covers, and how it is organised.

Scope

This section is only needed if the focus of the essay is narrowed. It lets the reader know the focus of the essay. Rolls & Wignell (2013, p 58) provide a very clear example of this framework in the following example:

INTRODUCTION

In the past two years the threat of cane toads to the Top-End of Australia has become an increasing reality. Their numbers continue to steadily increase in Kakadu National Park and they are causing damage to this pristine environment.

Thesis Statement

This essay will discuss the effects of cane toads on the environment of Kakadu National Park and show that they will cause permanent damage to the environment.

Outline

This will be seen, firstly by discussing the characteristics of cane toads and then, examining their predicted long term effects on the animals of Kakadu and the tourist industry.

Scope

Because there is data available only on the effects of cane toads on goanna, frogs and crocodiles, these are the only animals that will be discussed.

Writing a paragraph

The following paragraphs have been adapted from Rolls and Wignell (2013, p 63).

Topic sentence Adults should read to infants. Smith and Brown (2010) explain that this helps them to read at a later stage because it helps them to see the association between words on the page and language.

Supporting Sentences with Evidence

It should also help infants to view books and reading as a positive experience because ‘story-time’ is usually a cosy, one-to-one experience between a parent and child.

Topic sentence & link sentence

Another reason that global warming is a major concern is its effect on habitats.

Supporting Sentences with Evidence

This will occur as melting ice caps increase water levels around the globe. Low-lying countries will be the most seriously affected. A study by CSIRO (1999) had projected that by 2020 a number of Pacific Island countries will need to be evacuated. As human habitats will be affected, so too will be the habitats for plants and animals.

Essay: Using a personal reflection, write a 1000 word essay on how rising food prices are impacting people’s diets

Thesis:

This clearly states what your main argument of the paper is. All the rest of your information will be used to make this argument. In a 1000 word essay a thesis will be focused on one or two specific things. Doing this will help to guide your essay and keep your argument succinct and within the word limit

INTRODUCTION

Fruit is an important part of a healthy diet. However Jones (2010 p, 12) states that people are eating less fruit because it is becoming more expensive. This paper will argue that one way of

combating the rising price of fruit is for local council's to plant more fruit trees in local parks and public areas. Firstly, the paper will identify key terms in the literature around food prices. Secondly, the paper will focus on fruit, and examine its role in healthy diets and evaluate recent consumption of fruit. Finally I will use my personal reflection of the current situation in my home town to explore a possible response.

Sign Post/ Road Map: This section clearly shows the reader what evidence you are going to use and how you are going to present the evidence to support your thesis. In a 1000 word essay you might use 2-4 main pieces of evidence. And you say I will firstly ... and secondly ... and finally ...

BODY

The rise of food prices in the last five years is indisputable. Jones (2010) makes it clear that across Australia the price of food has increased more than people's wages have increased which makes it difficult for people to access food the way they did five years ago. Doolan (2012) highlights that fresh food, in particular fruit, has been the most effected. She claims that the price of nonperishable items such as flour and sugar have increased by only 5% while the price of fruit and vegetables have increased by 20% (Doolan 2012, p 4). This kind of price rise is what food theorists such as Manhood (2011) call a "perishable price hike", which is when the price of fresh food like fruit and vegetables increases further than the price of non-perishable items According to some authors (Leah & Cameron, 2011) the perishable price hike we are currently experiencing in Australia has to do with what they call the "diminishing farmer population".

This means that as farmers get old and retire, they are not being replaced by younger ones and therefore there are fewer farmers growing food in the country (Leah & Cameron, 2011). Because there is less food grown, Australia is forced to purchase food grown overseas which is more expensive and therefore raises the price of food that we see on the shelves. Perishable items such as fruit and vegetables require refrigerated transport, unlike sugar and wheat, and the costs associated with refrigerated transport are much higher (Leah & Cameron, 2011).

Topic sentence The evidence that supports the topic sentences Concluding sentence, see how it links to the topics sentence of the next paragraph These are paragraphs that define key terms as stated in the introduction 15 Current fresh fruit consumption trends suggest that this perishable price hike is having a negative impact on health. One report, based on interviews with 500 people, states that on average people are eating half as much fruit as they were 5 years ago (Mike, 2009). In addition, in another study (Jones, 2010) it was reported that shops are selling half as much fruit as they were 5 years ago.

These two reports clearly demonstrate that people are eating much less fruit than they were five years ago before the perishable price hike started. Health experts (Dan 2012, and Bee 2013) indicate that this drop in consumption of fruit will have negative impacts on the community. They claim that fruit is a great way to access essential vitamins and minerals (Dan, 2012) and

that if people are not getting these vitamins and minerals then the health impacts could be devastating. Bee (2013) states that in the last five years more people have become severely debilitated by even the common cold because of a lack of vitamin C in their diet.

She goes on to say that the food people are buying, like flour and sugar, does not have the vitamin C that people need to stay healthy. Paragraph introducing fruit as part of the discussion as stated in the introduction. Notice how it also is linked to the end of the previous paragraph. Paragraph that examines the role of fruit in the diet and evaluate what is being said in the literature about the current consumption habits of fruit – just as it said it would in the introduction.

16 Murray (2013) says that more economic development is needed so that people can have access to the money they need to buy the food to keep them healthy. But the health experts suggest that this will not be a solution. Bee (2013) says people need a regular reliable source of food, and that we cannot rely on imported fruit and vegetables to provide perishable goods. If the source of food is the problem, then I would like to discuss my experience of growing up in regional NSW as a possible solution. In my home town there were many fruit trees planted in the parks and along the streets. They were was planted during WWII as people feared there would be food shortages as a result of the War. There are many different types of fruits - oranges, lemons, cherries, apples and pears. There is enough of a variety of fruits that there is always something in season. Our family will often walk down to the park to get our fruit, especially since fruit in the shops is so expensive. I wouldn't say that people are eating as much fruit as they were five years ago, because there are not enough trees in the town to supply everyone, but people do have enough fruit to get by. Notice how this paragraph evaluates the literature and also leads the discussion into the next paragraph and topic in the essay.

Here the writer is using a personal reflection. The writer firstly describes in and then analyses their reflection relation to the topic and argument of the essay. 17 I also think it is nice in my town, that when you harvest fruit from a tree, you get the chance to talk to someone. Smith (2004) says that talking to people in your community has positive health benefits because people feel a sense of community. So I think that the fruit trees in our town are not just good for our diets, but for community health as well. I think that if the rest of Australia followed my town's fruit tree planting example, then people would have a way of accessing fruit without having to buy it.

Conclusion

Because of the “diminishing farmer population”, Australia is currently experiencing a rise in the cost of food in particular a “perishable price hike”. The evidence suggests that as a result of this people are not eating as much fruit as they were five years ago. This change in how much fruit people are eating is having a negative impact on health as people are now being severely affected by things like the common cold. Some authors say economic development is needed to give

people more money but others say this won't work and the source of food needs to change. I have suggested that planting fruit trees in parks and along the streets will change the source of food and give people a greater access to fruit and help reverse the negative health impacts we are seeing as a result of the perishable price hike.