

Module 4:

Planning and Writing an Essay

Aims of this module:

- To describe common types of university essays: Descriptive, Explanatory and Persuasive/Analytical
- To identify the parts of an essay question and the corresponding choices a writer must make based on the question

What is an essay?

There are many different purposes for writing at university and these different purposes result in different types of written texts, including case studies, literary criticisms, seminar and tutorial papers, literature reviews and so on. Each one might be referred to as "an essay" and yet each one is obviously different. Some have a clearly defined and well-known structure which you can see at a glance, such as case studies. However, many essay writing tasks do not have a clearly defined structure, and so you may need to create your own structure.

An essay is generally defined as a written text which presents a particular position or perspective on a phenomenon. This position is called a **thesis statement**. Essays usually involve some degree of analysis, evaluation or argumentation to support the thesis.

Types of essays

Essays can be divided into the following general types according to their purpose; many essays involve more than one type.

| <u>ESSAY TYPES</u> | | <u>PURPOSE</u> |
|--|------------------------------|---|
| FACTUAL how things are | DESCRIPTIVE | offers information in a particular area |
| | EXPLANATORY | offers explanation on why things happen |
| PERSUASIVE ANALYTICAL how things should be perceived | EVALUATIVE/ ARGUMENTATIVE | presents and justifies a value judgement about certain material |

(adapted from Martin J R & P Peters (1985) "On the analysis of exposition" in Hasan R (Ed) Discourse on Discourse. ALAA Occasional Papers No 7 p88)

Exercise 1

Classify the 3 texts below as Descriptive, Explanatory or Evaluative / Argumentative.

TEXT 1

With millions of computers and users around the world, the internet is a fertile environment for malicious viruses and criminal activity. The very nature of the internet creates opportunities for crime. Firstly, there is the capacity for the internet to be used anonymously. An individual can easily create false user names and fake identities on the internet, which makes it easy for a criminal to mask their true name and details. Secondly, the transitory nature of data records such as ISP logs, means that information on the internet can disappear or be erased. This makes it easier for criminals to create a false trail or hide their tracks.

TEXT 2

The current laws and methods of policing the internet are inadequate and do not reflect the severity of internet crimes. Even if offenders are caught, the law is currently unable to penalize and punish offenders in an appropriate manner. For example, a 20 year old Australian man was convicted of trying to sell 56,000 credit cards, yet he was only given a \$2000 fine and he was given a one year suspended prison sentence (ABC 2009). According to the Australian Institute of Criminology (2011), there are many obstacles for law enforcement authorities in trying to prosecute internet crime, especially since digital data can be erased and criminals can easily hide their tracks. There is clearly a need for “new laws to develop and move in step with the enormous technological changes that have occurred in recent decades” (Cowdery 2005, p. v).

TEXT 3

Malware is short for “malicious software”, which means computer programs that are designed to interfere with normal computing operations. Malware includes computer viruses, worms, Trojan horses, spyware, botnets and any other unwanted software or program. For example, in the “Storm Worm” virus of 2007, hackers sent emails to thousands of people about violent storms in Europe. When users clicked on the attachment, a Trojan virus was activated, infecting the user’s computer and sending the virus by e-mail to thousands more computers.

Understanding the essay question

The first step in writing an essay is to understand the essay question. You need to do this before you start your research and reading for the essay. It is important that you have a clear idea of what kind of essay you need to write (descriptive, explanatory, persuasive / analytical).

There can be several parts to an essay question. Not all parts are present in every question.

Parts of an essay question

| Purpose | Description |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Orientation | Background information or a quote to orient you to the topic of the assignment or essay. |
| Proposition | A statement that you need to respond to by agreeing or disagreeing with it or by critiquing it. |
| Instruction / Question | <p>This informs you about what you have to do. There is either an instruction word or a question.</p> <p>Instruction words: e.g. discuss, compare and contrast, evaluate, explain.</p> <p>Questions: Sometimes the instruction is not stated but implied in a question: e.g. What is the importance of research into the linguistic capabilities of apes? "What is the importance?" has the same meaning as "Explain the importance."</p> |
| Scope | This part tells you what you have to cover (how many examples, case studies, topics). |

See the appendix at the end of this module for a list of key words in an essay question and what they mean.

Breaking down the parts of an essay question

Here is an example of an essay question that has been broken down into its parts. Each part of the question implies choices that the writer must make in order to write the essay.

ESSAY QUESTION 1 (SOCIAL WORK)

"What is the process of reconciliation? It is manifestly a worthy objective, but it is not completely clear who is to be reconciled to whom" (Reynolds 1996, p.183).

What benefits, if any, does Reconciliation bring to Aboriginal Communities?

Analyse the debate with reference to one or more of the following areas: Arts; sport; law; politics; economics, health and welfare; education; social areas.

Here is the essay question broken into parts:

| Section of the essay question | Purpose | Choices the writer must make |
|--|---------------------------|--|
| "What is the process of reconciliation? It is manifestly a worthy objective, but it is not completely clear who is to be reconciled to whom" (Reynolds 1996, p.183). | Orientation / Proposition | Acknowledge the fact or opinion in the quotation. |
| What benefits, if any, does Reconciliation bring to Aboriginal Communities? | Question | State the thesis or central position which will be argued in the essay. Decide if there are benefits and if so, what benefits there are. |
| Analyse the debate. | Instruction | Select relevant evidence to confirm thesis and evidence to argue against. |
| with reference to one or more of the following areas: Arts; sport; law; politics; economics, health and welfare; education; social areas. | Scope | Choose one or more areas of scope such as sport or education. |

This essay is analytical/persuasive as the writer must make a judgement about reconciliation and its benefits.

Exercise 2

Identify the parts of the essay question below and write the parts in the table. Note the choices the writer must make in order to answer this question effectively.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ESSAY

Consider the statement: "The consequences of malware for the individual, society and the economy are extremely serious. Even in those cases where offenders are apprehended, the penalties currently imposed do not adequately reflect the gravity of the crime."

Briefly discuss the statement above, either agreeing or disagreeing with it. Draw on information from articles and readings in this course to support your argument.

| Section of the essay question | Purpose | Choices the writer must make |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Orientation / Proposition | |
| | Question | |
| | Instruction | |
| | Scope | |

What type of essay is this? (descriptive, explanatory, analytical /persuasive)

This type of initial planning can be useful as it can direct your reading and research. Make sure you understand key words in the essay question and key concepts covered in your course. When you start your reading, you can read with a purpose in mind: to develop a thesis and support your arguments with evidence and examples

This workshop is focused on writing. So if you would like more help on how to read and research for essays, consider attending these Learning Centre workshops:

- Critical reading
- Summarising, paraphrasing and using evidence
- Planning an assignment.

Fisher Library also runs courses on research skills and using databases to find information for your essays.

Answers

Exercise 1

Text 1 is explanatory. It explains why the internet is an environment for criminal activity. Text 2 is evaluative/argumentative. It argues for stronger laws to prosecute internet criminals.

Text 3 is descriptive. It describes different kinds of malware.

Exercise 2

This is an evaluative/argumentative essay because the writer has to make a judgement about whether penalties for cybercrime are harsh enough.

| Section of the essay question | Purpose | Choices the writer must make |
|---|---------------------------|--|
| Consider the statement: “The consequences of malware for the individual, society and the economy are extremely serious. Even in those cases where offenders are apprehended, the penalties currently imposed do not adequately reflect the gravity of the crime.” | Orientation / Proposition | Briefly outline and evaluate the consequences of malware and the penalties for malware. Do they reflect the gravity of the crime or not? State the thesis or position that will be argued. |
| - | Question | - |
| Briefly discuss the statement above, either agreeing or disagreeing with it. | Instruction | Agree or disagree with the statement. |
| Draw on information from articles and readings in this course to support your argument. | Scope | What arguments and readings can support the writer’s point of view? A series of arguments must be developed with evidence for each argument. |

Table of essay instruction words

| | |
|---|---|
| Account: Account for Take into account Give an account of | State the reasons for something Consider; think about; include an analysis of Describe or recount the steps |
| Analyse | Divide something into abstract parts or features, describe and evaluate them |
| Assess | Evaluate according to criteria and make a judgement about; describe strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages. |
| Clarify | Make clear or identify the main issues |
| Comment | Present your views and judgements about a topic, using supporting evidence, examples and reasons |
| Compare | Analyse two or more things and describe the similarities or commonalities between them |
| Contrast | Analyse two or more things and describe the differences between them |
| Critically analyse / examine | Examine the features or parts of something and show their strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages, unanswered questions etc. |
| Critique | Give an evaluation or judgement of something after analysing it; question, extend, renovate or challenge the ideas presented |
| Define | Describe something; present a definition with each term explained in the context of your essay |
| Describe | Present specific information about the features and characteristics of something. |
| Discuss | Present two or more different points of view about a topic, or present different theories, reasons or understandings of something, such as strengths and weaknesses, pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages. A discussion usually finishes with a "position" or judgement on the best point of view. (Be aware that sometimes lecturers use the word "discuss" when they mean "explain" or "state".) |
| Demonstrate | Show that something is true or valid by giving examples or evidence |
| Develop | Create or invent your own idea, theory, concept, model etc. using a reasoned and logical process |
| Devise | Create your own idea, theory, concept, model etc. |
| Examine | Look at in detail |
| Explain | State how or why something happened or happens; an explanation usually involves cause and effect, reasons or consequences |
| Explore | Examine a topic or issue and identify different ideas, theories, concepts, factors etc. related to the issue |
| Evaluate | Make a judgement about something by using criteria. Criteria are ideal or desirable standards, qualities or characteristics. |
| Identify | Locate, point out and describe |
| Illustrate | Give examples to describe, explain or interpret something |
| Interpret | State in other words; use examples or evidence to explain a theory or model |
| Investigate | Examine in detail; find out about |
| Justify | Explain your reasons or rationale for something using evidence and examples for support |
| Outline | Describe in overview without too much detail |
| Propose | Make a suggestion or recommendation based on evidence |
| Prove | Solve a problem; give evidence for something based on facts; give logical and research-based reasons for something |
| Reflect | Think about an issue or problem and make observations; these may be personal and show your opinions |
| Relate | Show the connections between different things |
| Recommend | Propose a course of action based on reasons and evidence |
| Review | Make a summary of a large amount of information, showing the main points, similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses |
| Show | Give examples or evidence to support a point or idea |
| State | Present ideas in a factual and summarised form |
| Summarise | Condense the main ideas to a shorter list of points expressed in other words (paraphrased) |
| To what extent | Make a judgement about the amount, quantity or limits of something; state whether something is accurate, partly accurate or inaccurate; support your ideas with evidence and examples; similar to evaluate |