



Essay Writing *Guide*

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Essay Writing

This essay writing guide helps explain the process of composing a piece of writing on a particular topic. It is intended as a guide and template to help you understand what an essay involves and how to strengthen your essay structure and develop your essay writing process. This guide is to be used alongside your unit outline and instruction from your lecturers.

Developing good essay writing skills is essential in any academic course. The process of writing an essay involves a number of steps. These can be done in a linear order, however it is usual to repeat parts of the process as you go.

1. Analyse the Question

A good essay must answer the question. It is therefore important to put careful thought and time into examining the question before writing the essay. Essay questions usually have three fundamental parts:

- Instruction words: these describe what you are actually supposed to do: e.g. analyse, explain, identify, compare, evaluate, discuss.
- Content words: these indicate what the topic is about.
- Limiting words: these specifically define and narrow down the content of the essay to a specific area.

2. Identify key ideas and/or topics to research

Drawing from your analysis in the first stage, identify the areas you need to research, and search terms you can use in the library catalogue and online databases.

3. Reading and Research

The next stage involves locating evidence and material relevant to your topic.

- You could look at the library catalogue and collection, your lecture notes and handouts, Course Reserve books, bibliographies and online databases.

- Take notes as you read, recording all bibliographic details correctly. It is important to distinguish between your own thoughts and those from your sources. Make sure all page numbers from material you use are recorded accurately so that you can refer back to it easily.

4. Develop a thesis statement and formulate your argument

From your research you can develop your argument and thesis statement. Consider:

- Does the thesis statement answer the question?
- What is needed to persuade the reader of your opinion?
- Is the argument logical and can you explain yourself?
- What evidence will you use? E.g. examples, definitions of key terms, compare/contrast, give context, evaluate, look at case studies etc.

5. Write an essay plan

This is a visual organisation of ideas for your essay and helps you to develop a structure that will assist you in further research and writing.

- Divide the essay into introduction, body and conclusion.
- Indicate the topics within the body and evidence to support the argument.
- Indicate how the word count could be divided up among the different sections.

- Begin with a provisional plan which can be updated and revised as you progress.

6. Write a draft

The purpose of the initial essay draft is to work out for yourself what you know or understand about the topic and how you want to argue your thesis statement. It should help you identify areas that need strengthening, aspects to leave out or develop further. Aim for:

- Clear introduction with your thesis statement.
- Body paragraphs that build on each other and flow together.
- Conclusion that re-states the thesis and draws everything together.

7. Research, rewrite & revise

You may need to do further research before you rewrite and revise your first draft to ensure paragraphs flow together, your thesis is clear, supported and summarized, and your arguments are logical. At this stage you can:

- Go over your draft and identify information 'gaps.'
- Find sources and examples to supplement specific arguments.
- Delete unnecessary information.
- Work on clean transitions between paragraphs.
- Ask a friend to read your work and give you some feedback.

8. Edit and proofread

It is a good idea to take a break before finally proofreading your work. At this point you are focusing on the finer details and can:

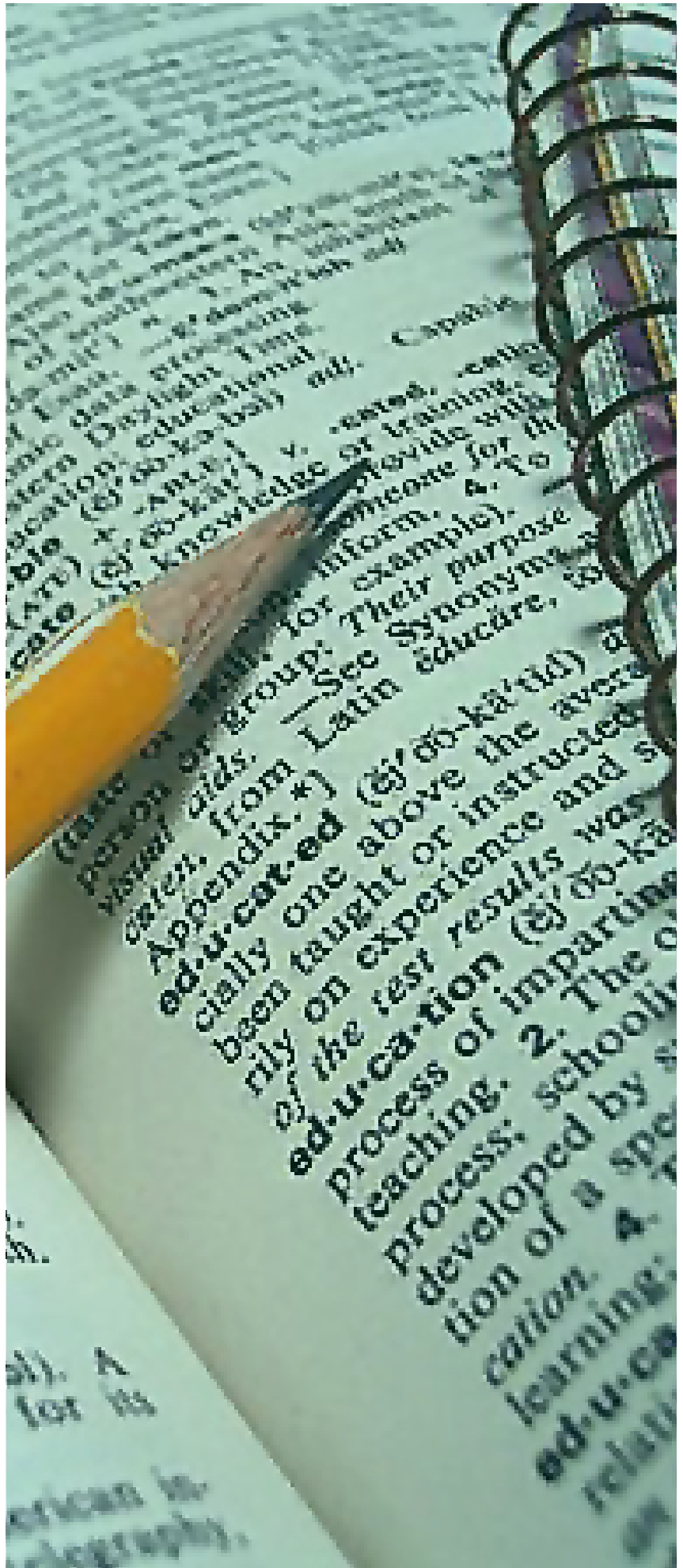
- Confirm that referencing is accurate and consistent.
- Check spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- Finalise formatting.

9. Submit essay

- Attach cover sheet.
- Record word count.
- Ensure pages are numbered.
- Ensure bibliography is attached and correct.
- Save and back-up a soft copy.

10. Take a break

- Tidy up your notes and consolidate soft files.
- Even if you have another assignment to do, make sure you have a break before you begin writing again.



Essay Structure, Plans and Editing

A well-written essay should present a logical argument in clear, concise language. Take the time to plan your essay and edit it thoroughly making sure that it is well structured. This means that it needs a clear introduction, body paragraphs that flow together, and a succinct conclusion that reaffirms your thesis statement.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction you should map out clearly how the question will be answered. It is important to be specific enough, but not put too much detail into the introduction. Generally introductions take up approximately 10% of the overall word count.

Elements of a good introduction are:

An Opening Sentence

The opening sentence introduces the topic. It should grab the reader's attention in order to motivate the reader to continue.

Background Information on the Topic

The introduction should include information that is important to your argument and which needs to be presented to the reader in the opening paragraph. This serves as a basis for your thesis statement and objectives.

A Thesis Statement

The thesis statement states and defines the main point the author is making in the essay. It is important that the thesis statement is clear and concise because the line of argument in the body of the essay is developed from the thesis statement.

BODY

The body of the essay is the main part where the question is answered and the argument is developed through using evidence. It may consist of few or many paragraphs depending on your task.

Paragraphs

Each paragraph should be devoted to one general idea or argument. Just as the whole essay is divided into introduction, body and conclusion, each paragraph mirrors this structure with a topic sentence, an explanation and a concluding sentence (or sentences).

Topic Sentence

The topic sentence states the main argument which is the key point of the paragraph. It includes the specific topic of the paragraph and is usually placed toward the start of the paragraph.

Explanation and Evidence

This part of the paragraph illustrates and justifies the key point by elaborating and giving specific examples. It supports the argument through evidence such as facts, logic, research, relevant examples and authoritative quotations. The body of the paragraph should also analyse the evidence and comment on its significance, implications or impact.

Concluding Sentences

The concluding sentences of each paragraph summarise the evidence given and shows why it supports the main thesis statement. The concluding sentences can also indicate how the material will be covered in the following paragraph.

Linking Paragraphs

It is important to create a logical flow of ideas throughout the essay. The introduction, body and conclusion need to flow together to create a cohesive piece of writing. One way of achieving this is to link one paragraph to the next one by pointing towards the ideas that will be presented in the following paragraph and using transition words such as: however, for example, similarly, firstly, consequently, finally.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the conclusion is to round off the essay appropriately and clearly answer the essay question and reaffirm the thesis. The conclusion should contain approximately 10% of the word count and should not introduce new information or ideas.

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY PLAN

An essay plan is a way to visually organise your ideas for the essay. After analysing and researching the topic you have to:

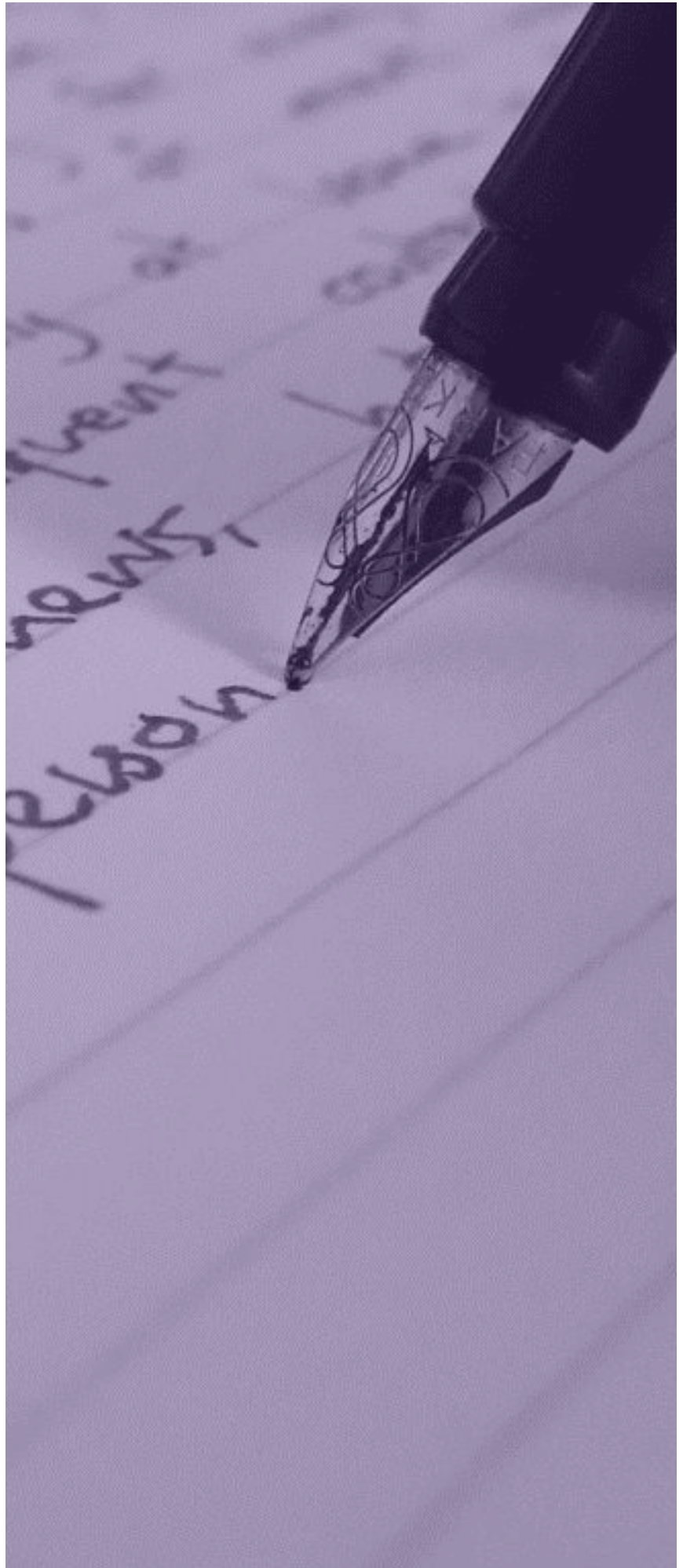
- decide on information that you want to include in your answer,
- choose examples and evidence which will support your argument,
- decide on an order of points which creates a logical line of argument,
- Write these ideas down in point form.

This is your essay plan and is followed by writing a first draft.

EDITING AND PROOF READING

Editing is a necessary component of academic writing and can help to greatly improve your finished essay. If it is possible, put your essay aside for a day or two before you edit so that you can consider your argument and edit with a fresh perspective. Try reading your work out loud or ask someone else to read it to you and take note of any feedback from previous assignments. Editing should be done systematically and cover a number of different areas. Here are some questions to consider when editing:

- Have you answered the question as directly and concisely as possible?
- Does the essay have a clear introduction, body and conclusion?
- Do the paragraphs deal with one main point and are they arranged in a logical order?
- Is your argument clear and is it well supported with evidence?
- Do you use scholarly, academic sources and are they paraphrased more than they are directly quoted?
- Do your sentences flow together and are your transition signals clear?
- Is your grammar, punctuation and spelling correct?
- Is your referencing consistent and accurate?



Referencing and Plagiarism

Plagiarism refers to the practice of using other people's thoughts, words or ideas and giving the impression that they are your own by not providing the reference information about the source. If you do this, you will fail the essay in which you plagiarised and perhaps your entire degree. It is therefore important to make absolutely sure that it is very clear to the reader which thoughts are yours and which belong to another person.

Using citations strengthens your writing; it gives your writing authority because the information from the source backs up your argument. It also means that the reader can read more about the topic in the source you cite.

When to Cite

When writing essays you have to make sure that most of the words are your own and that the citing of sources is used strategically to back up your argument or to stress important points. You must cite:

- When you use factual materials, data or information found in a source.
- When you use others' ideas, claims, interpretations, lines of argument, terms, concepts, and theories.
- When you quote verbatim, summarise or paraphrase material from another source.

Guideline for Using Sources

- Quote only what is really important and be concise.
- When you rewrite something into your own words, it must really be in your own words, it is not enough simply to change one or two words in a sentence.
- If a quotation is more than three lines, it has to be indented rather than embedded.

- Don't reproduce too many long stretches. Select key points and link them with a summary.
- Be clear where the quotation begins and ends by announcing it and commenting on it.
- Read widely and appropriately. Don't pad your list of references, they should be the fruit of your genuine reading.

Get into the habit of writing down your sources as you read and take notes. Having to find this information at a later date, when you may have forgotten exactly where you got some of your information from, might mean that you cannot use the citation.

There are a few ways to use material belonging to another person. You can use a verbatim quotation where you copy exactly word for word what the author has written. Summarising and paraphrasing are other ways to incorporate another person's work into your writing without using their exact words. Correct referencing is needed in all of these cases.

Verbatim Quotations

A majority of the words in an essay must your own, however sometimes it is useful to quote verbatim. All quotations require referencing and need to be fitted smoothly into your writing. For example:

Fiedler contends that Slaughterhouse Five is "less about Dresden than about [...] failure to come to terms with it" (p.11).

Only quote verbatim if:

- If it cannot be expressed any better,
- If it represents a phenomenon that is discussed very strikingly,
- If it is so important that it is subject to further analysis,
- If it is an important claim and the reader will need to know what exactly the source has said.

Summary

A summary is a shorter version of the original source. Only the important points of the source are included, which means that details and supporting examples are left out. A good summary should usually be about a third as long as the original source, have the same meaning as the original, and include a complete bibliographical reference to the original source. In order to summarize:

- Read the passage carefully.
- Underline the main ideas and delete most details and examples.
- Rewrite the main ideas in complete sentences using your own words instead of the original.
- Identify and correctly cite the original source.

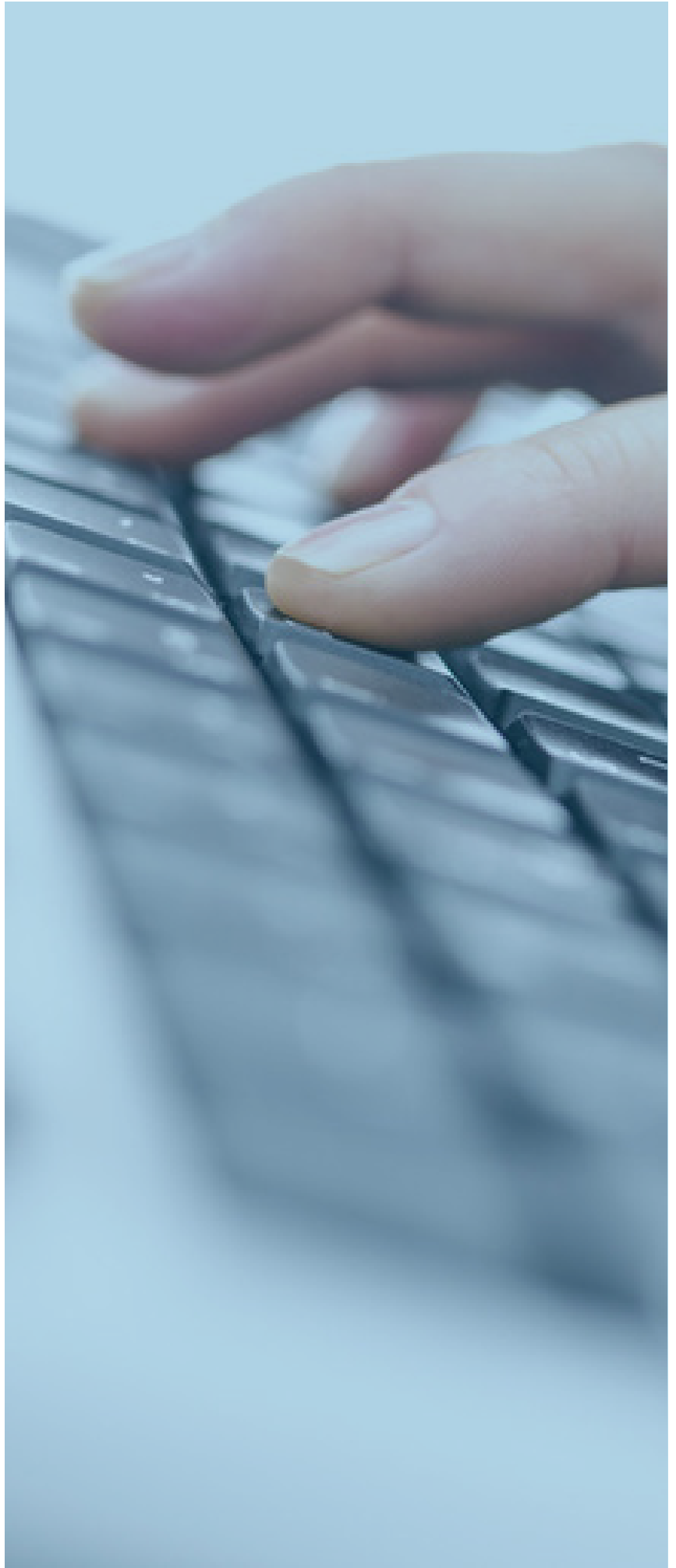
Paraphrase

A paraphrase contains all the information in the original source written in your own words. Details and supporting examples must be included. The paraphrase has the same meaning as the original. However, it must be different enough from the original to be considered your own writing and it should include a correct citation to the original source. For example:

It has been argued that Slaughterhouse Five is about the inability of society to accept what happened to Dresden (Fielder, p. 11)

To paraphrase:

- Read the passage carefully.
- Substitute synonyms, break up long sentences and rearrange words and sentences to make the writing your own.
- Make sure that the resulting paraphrase is worded very differently from the original, yet means the same thing as the original.
- No more than three consecutive words in the paraphrase can be identical to the original.
- Identify and correctly cite the original source.



Helpful Resources

Beazley, M. & Marr G.

The Writers Handbook.

Albert Park, Victoria: Phoenix Education, 1996.

Cottrell, S.

The Study Skills Handbook

4th ed. Palgrave Study Skills. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Crider, S.

The Office of Assertion: An Art of Rhetoric for the Academic Essay.

Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2005.

Godfrey, J.

Reading and Making Notes.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Godwin, J.

Planning Your Essay.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Graff, G. & Birkenstein, C.

They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing.

New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Harvey, G.

Writing with Sources.

Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008.

Mabbett, I. W.

Writing History Essays: A Student's Guide.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Pears, R. & Shields, G. J.

Cite Them Right: The Essential Referencing Guide.

10th Revised and Expanded ed. Palgrave Study Skills. London: Palgrave, 2016.

Shiach, D.

How to Write Essays.

Oxford: How To Books, 2009.

Soles, D.

The Essentials of Academic Writing.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

Strunk, William.

The Elements of Style.

New York: Longman, 2000.

Thomas, G.

Doing Research.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Vaughn, L.

Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Young, T.

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.



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