



STUDENT DEVELOPMENT OFFICE + **SKILLS EMPLOYABILITY**

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

WRITING SKILLS 2: WRITING YOUR ESSAY



WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

1. Understanding the practical aspects of writing an essay
2. Using structure to answer the question
3. Developing your argument
4. Engaging with sources



WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

- How to structure an essay: developing critical arguments
- How to incorporate evidence and demonstrate evaluation and critical thinking
- Improving your writing skills
- Using essay feedback effectively

THE BASICS...

- Make sure you know
 - when the essay is due: make sure you know the essay deadline well in advance
 - what is the word count: check whether the bibliography, tables and graphs count. There is a penalty for going over the word count!
- Take a close look at the course handbook for information on any additional requirements:
 - are there specific editing requirements, should you include titles or not, is there a preferred referencing style?
 - If you have any doubts, ask your course tutor.

ACADEMIC WRITING

A well written essay:

- Successfully conveys the point you wish to make
- Does justice to your argumentation
- Keeps the marker interested and engaged
 - good signposting
 - clear writing
 - well articulated flow of argumentation

STRUCTURING YOUR ESSAY

- *"Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've just told them." - Aristotle*
- An essay structure helps the reader navigate the essay and supports a clear line of argument throughout
- It is composed of three distinct sections:
 - **Introduction:** outlines what you are going to say, signposts the direction of your writing, can define the concepts involved
 - **Main body** of an essay: divided into paragraphs, it outlines your arguments and evidence
 - **Conclusion:** Speaks to the introduction and wraps up your essay with the statement of your main thesis

THE INTRODUCTION

- What does an introduction do?
 - It presents the question and the main themes
 - How can you show this is interesting question/a question worth asking;?
 - How you can situate the question in the context of an academic debate or empirical puzzle?
 - It presents how you will go about answering the question
 - Draft an essay plan and include some information about each section in the body of the text: "the essay will first cover In the second section, this essay presents....And in a final section, the essay addresses...."
 - It hints at or summarises your concluding argument

MAIN BODY

- The **main body** of your essay should build your argument, step by step.
 - Always back up your argument(s) with evidence – do not just cite others. Why are they right or wrong? Provide examples.
 - Do not let facts ‘speak for themselves’. Explain why a given event, set of events or state of affairs either supports your argument or not.
 - If you have formulated explicit hypotheses, make sure that you state clearly how a given piece of evidence supports or contradicts a particular hypothesis.
 - Do not forget to consider competing explanations/arguments or contradictory evidence.
 - Do not claim too much

PARAGRAPHS

- Paragraph layout: each paragraph should contain the main argument you want to make **and** the references and examples that you want to include:
 - 1. main point
 - 2. evidence to support it
 - 3. explain how the evidence illustrates the point you are making
- Paragraphs should build on each other as the essay progresses:
 - Make sure arguments flow from each other
 - Use link words and terms between paragraphs such as "furthermore", "Following from the previous point", "In contrast", "from a different perspective"

A STRONG CONCLUSION

- A conclusion:
 - Summarises the points made in essay
 - Answers the essay question
 - Should not introduce new evidence
- To develop a strong conclusion, consider the further implications of your argument.
 - Try and highlight how your argument is pertinent/relevant beyond the immediate essay question.
 - For instance, what general arguments or state of 'received knowledge' does it build support for or call into question? Does your argument suggest avenues for further research?

IMPROVING YOUR WRITTEN STYLE

- Your essay is not a blogpost or an opinion column
 - Avoid “to me, this seems ...”; instead use “from this perspective” or “the evidence presented strongly suggests that...”
- You should refer and discuss an existing body of knowledge that relates to the question, recognising counter-arguments or providing examples if relevant
- Beware of a one-sided argument: acknowledge that there may be counter-arguments or counter-examples. Recognising this reinforces your argument because it shows that you have properly engaged with the topic.
- The points and arguments you make should flow from one to another

STYLE AND GRAMMAR

- Choose nuance (this is not a blogpost)
 - Very little is true or obvious in social sciences! Avoid using "obviously" or "of course"
- Beware of over claiming
- Clarity:
 - Formal but simple language: no jargon and avoid colloquial terms
 - Active voice
 - Beware of using overly long sentences
 - Don't overuse "I" **but** you can use it avoid excessive use of passive voice.
 - "This essay will show that...", "I start by presenting...", "I have argued that" or "this essay has presented arguments in favour and against..."
- Work on links between paragraphs
 - "building on previous paragraph", "nevertheless", "however", "in contrast to the previous point"

EDITING AND PROOF READING

- Editing is more than just spelling and grammar: assess flow of essay, pick up on gaps/unclear points and critically engage with your own work.
- Put essay aside the essay for 24 hours before editing again/read your essay aloud (helps to identify sentences that are too long, too complicated and too repetitive)
- Pay attention to whether your claims are backed up by evidence, should be nuanced or should be stated more clearly
 - Think: what is my main point in this paragraph? Is it clearly presented? Is it well evidenced?
- Support services for proofreading:
 - Non-native speakers: EUSA Peer Proofreading (<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/proofreading>)
 - Disability services: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/student-disability-service>

INCORPORATING EVIDENCE & DEMONSTRATING CRITICAL THINKING

- In academia being 'critical' means analysing and evaluating ideas, assumptions, perspectives, evidence and arguments.
- 'An essay is not a blogpost' or an opinion column: your arguments and point of view should derive from a careful **evaluation** of the material
- Discuss material/evidence by comparing, presenting counter-arguments or by describing how different examples would substantiate or refute an idea or claim

CRITICAL THINKING CHECKLIST

- When you develop your ideas and arguments:
 - Check through course material and further readings to find out whether counter arguments exist (highlights argumentation better) or whether further evidence exists (adds depth to argumentation)
 - Acknowledge and engage with counter arguments to the point you are making
 - Look through the different materials to illustrate arguments and counter-arguments (theoretical counter arguments; different case studies that prove or disprove arguments)
 - **Think about why an argument or evidence could be controversial or lead to tensions**

USING SOURCES

- Pay attention to **who** published the material: is it an academic/peer reviewed source, a newspaper column, published by partisan organisation, etc...
- Think about **when** the evidence was published (referencing statistics from 1990s in relation to current issue may weaken your argument)
- Think about **why** this was published: to add to academic body of knowledge (academic publications), to comment on current affairs, as a response to another article, to provide data on specific issue, to present an opinion, to set an agenda, etc.

EXERCISE: ENGAGING CRITICALLY WITH SOURCES

Journal
Third World Quarterly
Volume 39, 2018 - Issue 5

1,075 Views
6 CrossRef citations to date
11 Altmetric

Listen
Articles

The slow violence of corporate social responsibility: the case of mining in Peru

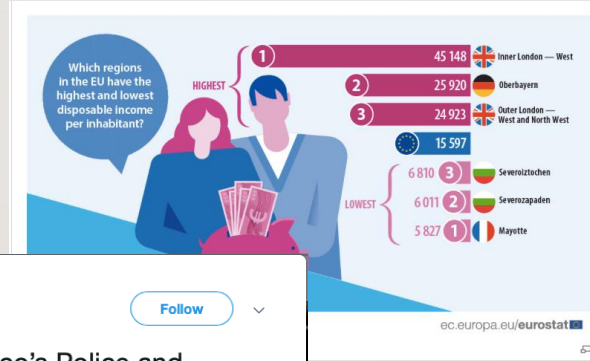
Jonathan Kishen Gamu & Peter Dauvergne

Pages 959-975 | Received 31 Jul 2017, Accepted 22 Jan 2018, Published online: 08 Feb 2018

Download citation | <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1432349>

Full Article | Figures & data | References | Citations | Metrics | Reprints & Permissions

Abstract



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Sadly, it looks like Mexico's Police and Military are unable to stop the Caravan heading to the Southern Border of the United States. Criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. I have alerted Border Patrol and Military National Emery. Must ch

5:37 AM - 22 Oct 2018

34,402 Retweets 133,846 Likes

39K 34K 134K

Guardian by readers

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"They broke my mental shackles': could magic mushrooms be the answer to depression?"

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15 August 2019

DOING OUR DUTY

Matt Kiloyne

In your groups:

- Choose one of the 5 sources and discuss:
 - **Who** published it?
 - **Why** did they publish it?
 - **When** did they publish it?
- Think about the value of the source?
- What are its strengths and limitations?

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

- Read over the comments... whatever the grade!
 - Look at both the cover sheet and the in-text comments
 - Ask for clarity if there is anything you don't understand
- Overcoming initial disappointment
 - Remember the bigger picture: in the context of your degree programme, the essay is a both grade AND an exercise that aims to improve your skills overall

Appendix 5: Cover Sheet (Feedback Form)

PCW Student Cover Sheet (Feedback Sheet)
**Indicated fields MUST be completed by student.*

*Exam number	
*Course	
*Essay title	
*Word Count	
Marker's name	

NOTE: marks are reviewed by another member of staff prior to being returned to students

This section is for office use.

Initial Mark	
Word count penalties	
Lateness penalties	
Adjusted Mark	

Overview

Aspect of performance	+		Avg		-
Argument and comprehension (analysis, interpretation, logicity, evaluation, use of comparison, anticipating counter-arguments, coherent argument?)					
Quality of research (breadth of reading, accuracy in facts, representation of authors' views, covering key issues?)					
Presentation and style (writing skills, structure and organisation of the text, clarity of argument, precision, grammar/spelling, quality of referencing?)					

Advice to student

Main strength[s] of the essay	
Main weakness(es) of the essay	
This and future essays could be improved by...	

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Remember to sign up for our other skills sessions!



GROUP EXERCISES – LINKS

- The Guardian - <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/jun/10/magic-mushrooms-treatment-depression-aztecs-psilocybin-mental-health-medicine>
- Adam Smith Institute - <https://www.adamsmith.org/research/doing-our-duty>
- Euro Stat graph – [link here](#)
- Journal article - Kishen Gamu J. & Dauvergne P., 'The slow violence of corporate social responsibility: the case of mining in Peru' in *Third World Quarterly* volume 39 issue 5 (2018): 959-975 – available via Discover Ed

GROUP EXERCISE: FURTHER INFORMATION

- The article on **Corporate Social Responsibility and Mining in Peru** is the only peer review academic source; it has been published in an academic journal which means that it will have been evaluated and peer reviewed by fellow academics. This is a guarantee of methodological and research standards in the specific field covered by the journal in question.
- The summary of the report "**Doing your duty**" is from the Adam Smith Institute, a think tank that has a policy agenda in favour of liberal, free market ideas and policies; acknowledge this in your critique of the source and/or provide a counter-argument from a different source. This is not a peer reviewed, academic source.
- The tweet from **Donald Trump** is not an academic source or an official government source.
- The **graph from Eurostat** is official data that can be considered reliable and used as evidence to support an argument.
- The **Guardian** news article refers to academic studies but is not an academic source. You may want to go to the original academic source cited in the article if you want to use the substance of the research to support your argument; alternatively, the article can be used as an example of how scientific evidence is picked up in the media, for instance.