

# **Essay Writing Handbook for Humanities and Social Sciences Students**

Specifically prepared for undergraduate  
students of Southern University College  
Johor Bahru, Malaysia

# How to Write a Good Academic Essay or Report

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## **A Brief Preface**

This handbook is written in an easy-to-read-and-use manner. It is intended to help undergraduate students, and to a good extent research students, to meet the standards required of academic writing. The handbook presents a generally acceptable approach of writing in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. Though the format used in business subjects could be somewhat different, the approach has a strong relevance and can therefore be applied with some adjustments. It is our hope that students will find the handbook a useful tool-kit for general reference in handling their essay assignment and academic report writing.

# **1. Academic Essay Writing**

## **1.1 What is a Good Academic Essay or Report?**

A good essay in any academic discipline is a product of hard work. One cannot expect to produce a good essay in just a couple of days, three hours a day. Even brilliant and well established writers have admitted that their good writing did not come naturally. They have achieved quality writing through lots of reading, consultation and refinement.

### **1.1.1 What are the expectations of lecturers?**

The role of lecturers is to evaluate students' writing and come out with a judgement by grading it. Normally, a lecturer's expectations of a good piece of work include the following characteristics:

- a. The essay is written with purpose, that is, with clear objectives.
- b. Presentation is organized and logical, supplemented with headings and subheadings. There is a coherent and consistent flow in arguments.
- c. Relevant materials are used.
- d. Evidence of understanding of certain concepts or theories related to the topic of the essay.
- e. Some critical thinking is demonstrated.
- f. Expression is precise and to the point.
- g. References are complete and accurate.
- h. Careful checking and proofreading is done before submission.

An essay completed in a rush shows weaknesses that are easily detectable and does not deserve a good grade.

## **1.2 How to Start and Organize?**

There are basically three stages, namely planning stage, writing stage and editing stage.

### **1.2.1 Planning stage**

- a. Initial strategy
  - Start early and select a topic that you have best confidence in writing it well.
  - Think carefully about the purpose (i.e. whether to demonstrate your ability to evaluate secondary sources, or to think critically or creatively, or to report on a field/laboratory work and present results, or to provide general information on a particular topic etc).
  - Ask what the lecturer expects from you, and how you can do a good job. Unless you are told to describe a topic, stay away from descriptive work because it is normally

not appreciated. You should go beyond descriptive information by doing evaluation, explanation of events or phenomena that justifies a better essay quality.

- Write down your plan in point form, including questions you wish to address.

b. Data collection

Writing an academic essay requires you to know and understand your sources. Unless you really need to conduct a survey to get a first-hand or primary source, the data you have to gather can be from books, journals, newspapers, magazines, census reports, department of statistics etc. They all provide basic and detailed information to help writers to substantiate their arguments. Otherwise the ideas presented in the essay may be deemed as unreliable or not trustworthy. The more you search for data, the better you are in a position to write a good essay.

It is therefore important that students, immediately after admission, familiarize themselves with the library search system. The system is an indispensable tool that is worth investing in time to learn from the librarians, friends or by self-learning.

Types of Sources

A large number of sources can be used to write an essay. Primary sources are those you collect yourself through field study (including participation, questionnaire and observation surveys) or laboratory work. Secondary sources are taken from published or unpublished materials in the form of hardcopies available largely in libraries. Authors who have reflected on specific subjects write these materials. Tertiary sources provide syntheses of previous research as general information for students' basic understanding of selected topics. Textbooks and much of Internet webpages or CD-ROMs belong to the tertiary sources.

c. Essay questions

Asking questions is an important skill that helps you to collect appropriate data and to focus. You need to have a focus otherwise you may submit an essay with no central or controllable ideas. But meaningful questions can only be addressed after you have spent time thinking through the topic, and preferably read some relevant material. Another way to get meaningful questions is through group discussion on a common broad topic. By questioning issues related to the broad topic, the discussion group should work out a set of sub-questions to allow each individual to work on as an essay topic.

The six-question formula: What? Where? When? Why? How? and Who? can be used in asking questions, though not all six are needed each time, as it depends on the nature and purpose of the essay. The premise is that the scope must be manageable to allow you to complete your writing within a specific time period. To give an example, assume that you are asked to write an essay of 2,000 words on the economic activities of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. Hence, it is possible to address questions such as:

1. What is the estimated number of Bangladeshi migrant workers and their occupational types in Malaysia? (supporting question)  
(You have to source statistical data published by government departments, especially Department of Statistics. Other alternatives sources could be taken from newspapers/official reports etc. Your own observations are helpful but they can be biased or inconclusive).
2. Why are Bangladeshi migrant workers here in Malaysia? (key question)  
An analytical framework is needed as you have to explain the poverty and huge labour surplus back in Bangladesh, while in Malaysia, the economic development has reached a stage where locals can afford to shy away from 3D (difficult, dirty, dangerous) and low pay jobs. Other factors may include the national immigrant policy etc.
3. How have the Bangladeshi workers adapted to local Malaysia society? (supporting question)  
(Secondary sources plus personal observations. You are not expected to conduct surveys/interviews for a short essay or term paper. If you do, you will definitely earn a better grade for such extra effort).

(You need not take all three questions, so long as you have enough material to cover the length required – maps, tables, charts can also be included. It is up to you whether you want to include the questions in your essay's introduction part).

### 1.2.2 Writing stage

When expressing or expanding your ideas in writing, keep the objectives in focus. You must be selective and must not put in materials that are not relevant. To verify whether materials are relevant or not, you can align your answer to the questions asked. For example, if a question goes like, "Analyze the economic role of the Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia", do not discuss too much the presence and activities of other migrant workers in Malaysia. Focus on the role of the Bangladeshi workers with appropriate points right from the start.

#### a. Writing an introduction

Readers including professors are impressed if your introduction is well written. The first one or two sentences, for instance, should draw the attention of the reader to the topic chosen by you or provided by your professor. The introduction as a whole should provide background information relating to your essay's topic, which can be something you have read or known about the subject matter. With a background, you should then tell the reader your essay focus, and how you want to go about it. The introduction does not normally exceed one page.

#### b. Update your thoughts

Your plan prepared earlier in point form during the planning stage may now need to be updated. In fact you might already have jotted down new points. Examine if you

can reorganize the points so that they appear more logical in supporting your essay presentation or arguments. New sub-headings may now be added or modified.

c. Writing the main body of essay

Use your updated plan to write from section to section. If you have problems with one section, move on to another. When you have finished the other section, you may find that you have better ideas to handle the skipped section because your mind has been on it for a much longer time.

d. Using illustrations

Maps, charts and tables serve to support or expand your arguments in the text. They look good and are an integral component of an essay, in particular in social sciences as they help to explain your ideas more clearly. However, use them wisely because an overuse of illustrations can be counter-productive and represent a nuisance to readers. Do not place the illustrations at the back of the essay as appendices. Insert them in the main body of text immediately after you have discussed them. Appendices are for long and very detailed illustrations, which are not essential to the essay's central argument.

All illustrations must have the following:

- i. A **title** which should appear **at the top or bottom** of the illustration. Maps, charts, photos should be numbered consecutively as Figure 1, Figure 2 etc. Tables are to be numbered consecutively as Table 1, Table 2 etc.
- ii. The **title** must be precise and reflect the specific content of the illustration (e.g. a location map showing the Pulau Tioman resort island in Johor state where a tourism study is carried out, may be named as "Pulau Tioman Resort Island, Johor").
- iii. All maps must show :
  - the **scale** (for topographic maps, in S.I. units indicating the horizontal and vertical scale as well as the vertical exaggeration where available)
  - the **legend** (use acceptable or international symbols).
  - the **northline**.
  - proper **labeling** for easy reference by readers.
  - the **source** of information (whether from a book/journal or from your own fieldwork).

### 1.2.3 Editing stage

Editing serves more than checking grammatical mistakes or spelling errors. It is essential because the first draft is seldom a good final product. There is always room for improvement in terms of organization, documentation and expression. A

checklist is recommended to identify possible faulty areas as shown below (see Northey and Knight, 2001, p. 65):

- a. Is the objective clear in the introduction?
- b. Are all the sections relevant to the topic?
- c. Have I provided adequate data to support my central argument?
- d. Are there awkward expressions or incomplete sentences?
- e. Are the headings and subheadings meaningful?
- f. Are the tables and graphs appropriately used?
- g. Have I cited all the important sources in the text as well as in the reference list?
- h. Do my conclusions draw out the key points and reflect the argument in the text?
- i. Have I done a spelling check and inserted the page number?

### **1.3 Creative and Critical Thinking**

You wonder how you may incorporate elements of creative and critical thinking in an essay assignment that is so highly regarded these days. Indeed, there are different levels of creative and critical thinking and ways to incorporate one or more of the elements as long as you think hard enough and consolidate your knowledge on the essay topic. Aim at a level you are comfortable with and work towards it.

#### **1.3.1 What is creative and critical thinking in geography?**

According to Tilbury (1997), being able to see the relationship of two issues in a phenomenon is already basic creative thinking. In studying environmental change, for instance, the relationship between the environment and development problems can be an essay topic that requires creative thinking. Furthering from this, we can explore a large number of issues that development problems can lead to environmental degradation such as climatic change, deforestation, desertification, depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, drought, over-population, poverty, urban decay etc. In brief, it is a study of relationship between people and place, their interdependence, and the causes and consequences as a result of their interaction and activities (Huckle, 1997). To understand well such a relationship, critical thinking is required in the interpretation and analysis of relevant data to any of such issue selected for study.

#### **1.3.2 Five key components of creative and critical thinking may be considered (see Fisher, 2011; Lau, 2011; Wong, 2000)**

- a. Being imaginative and self-expressive with original ideas.
- b. Able to recognize and evaluate assumptions.
- c. Able to see connections between phenomena and develop idea progression.
- d. Divergent thinking (e.g. exploring alternatives to replace set ideas and practices).
- e. Deductive reasoning, able to compare different ideas and put up an integrative conclusion.



There are of course many more. Applying the thinking skills in your essay writing needs more reading of the relevant materials and practice.

## 1.4 Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a kind of stealing (Northey and Knight, 2001, p. 10; Mlynarczyk and Haber, 1998, p. 268). While some have always been tempted to copy the work of others, without due acknowledgement, the extent of plagiarism has become more serious in recent years with the downloading of Internet material. However, be warned that such downloading is now easily detectable and the University is prepared to take serious steps to identify and prevent such behaviour.

Nevertheless, most students may not know what plagiarism is until they walk into the campus. In the past they may have plagiarized unintentionally by not knowing how to give credit to other people's work in the proper way. For those of you who did know about plagiarism, you should not worry that your essay appeared weaker by acknowledging the work of others. It is actually more impressive when you show correct evidence of wide reading in the preparation of your essay.

Remember the old saying, "copying from one person is plagiarism ...copying from many (with suitable acknowledgement) is scholarship"! Extensive reading and deep thinking will definitely help you write a good piece of work.

### 1.4.1 How to avoid plagiarism

- a. Proper paraphrasing: To avoid being accused of plagiarism, you can include the author's original work in quotation marks, do a proper paraphrasing by summarizing an author's idea in your own words or using mostly your own words but keeping a few key words of the author. Do the same for materials that you download from the Internet sources. You must acknowledge the author (individual or organization) in the text itself, adopting, for example, one of the following methods:

- **Word for word quotation:**

SarDesai's (2013, p.310) observation is that despite "its size, Singapore's economic standing, technological superiority, excellent management abilities, and political stability have thrust upon it a leadership role among the countries of the ASEAN and the Pacific".

- **Paraphrasing:**

SarDesai (2013, p.310) argues that Singapore is able to play a leadership role in the ASEAN region thanks to its economic, technological and management progress, and political stability.

- **Borrowing an idea from SarDesai's work mentioned above:**

Physical size of a country is not a critical factor in determining its leadership

role if it can manage well its economic and technological development, and maintain political stability (SarDesai, 2013, p.310)

Source in full to be added in the list of references:

SarDesai, D. R. 2013. *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Westview Press, Boulder (USA).

b. Noting authors and their work

While you read up for material for your essay, you must add to your notes, for books, the author's name, year of publication, title, publisher, and city where it is published, and the library call number. At the side of each piece of your notes, jot down also the page number of the book/article where you have taken the information. Page number is very important if you wish to use word for word quotation (within inverted commas). The library call number allows you to check the source again easily.

e. Working together

Students are often encouraged to work together in groups. It is important that the main coordinator allocates each individual participant a specific task during the preparation stage to ensure no sleeping partners. However, all participants must have a full picture and responsibility on the overall content of the work to be submitted. This may mean cross-checking of other group members' contribution, observations etc. where necessary.

## 2. Referencing of Sources

### 2.1 Common Problems

It is common to find students who have submitted essays with the following mistakes:

#### 2.1.1 A table or chart without a source

You may have prepared a table, for example, from a Yearbook of Statistics.

Insert the source such as:

Source: Department of Statistics, 1999. Tables 2.3 and 2.4, pp. 46-48.

(However, the full reference must be listed in the list of references. For example, Department of Statistics, 2012. *Statistical Highlights*. Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore)

#### 2.1.2 Tables or charts are cut from a book or journal article and pasted in the essay text without adaptation or adjustment (i.e. the table no., title and source remain unchanged)

Appropriate method: Unless you find the original source quoted by the book or article, you can quote the author of the book/article that you read as your source by citing, for example:

Source: Adjusted from Tan, Beng Huat 2012. Table 4, p. 25.

(The full reference must be included in the reference list).

- 2.1.3 Repeating sources as they are in the publication read by students It is often found that a sentence or paragraph runs with some authors' names with year of publication but these authors and their publications are not seen in the reference list.

For example:

"These claims have been criticized by a number of Australian economists (see Troy, 2010; McLouglin, 2012; Liew *et al.*, 2015)" is written by a student. But his reference list does not show these publications.

Appropriate method: It is almost certain that this student has not read all the works of Troy, 2010; McLouglin, 2012; Liew *et al.*, 2015. Finding the original sources is a preferred way but practically unnecessary for an essay of 1500 or 2000 words. Hence, you can quote the author of the book/article you have read as your source for that piece of information.

- 2.1.4 Quoting an edited book as the source

An edited book may have 10 to 15 chapters, and so 10 to 15 authors. It is not correct to use the book editor's name because he/she may not be responsible for the idea or statement you quote.

Appropriate method: Use the chapter author where you have taken the data as source. Example of quoting the source of chapter author is shown in Section 2.3 below.

- 2.1.5 No headings and sub-headings.

Headings and sub-headings are important for essay writers to organize themselves and more significantly make reading easier for lecturers.

## **2.2 Citing Sources in the Text**

- 2.2.1 Acknowledging authors

Place only the family name or surname of the author plus the year of publication at the end of the sentence or paragraph where his idea is used (e.g. Thompson, 1990).

- 2.2.2 Acknowledging government ministries, departments etc

Place the name of the ministry or department plus the year of publication at the bottom of tables, figures, maps, photos (e.g. Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur, 2016).

### 2.2.3 Word for word quotations

Provided you do not overuse them, quotations serve two very good purposes. First, because they are usually well thought out and well expressed statements, they can add value to your essay content. Second, they can help students from being accused of plagiarism. But quotations need to be selected with care and you must be certain that they actually add substance to your discussion. Of course, the source must be acknowledged in the text itself.

If the quotation is short, say less than 30 words, you can insert it within the paragraph where you want it to appear. For example, Beauregard and Haila (2000, p. 23) argue that “peripherization has accelerated even as concentration continues, new immigrant communities proliferate, and landscapes of consumption invade once thriving production sites.”

Where quotation is long, it should appear in a subsequent new paragraph with a small indent as follows:

Foremost among these changes has been the dispersion of manufacturing industries to low-labour cost locations, and the increasing control of trade and investments by TNCs. It is this trend which has witnessed the establishment of Fordist production-line systems in the NICs, whereas smaller-scale, more specialised and responsive, or so-called flexible systems of both production and accumulation have become more typical of advanced industrial nations (Potter *et al.*, 1999, p. 91).

(Note: You can use single spacing, as against the usual requirement of providing 1.5 or double spacing for the general text)

### 2.2.4 Sources in tables, figures, maps, photos

Place the name of author or department plus the year of publication at the end of the sentence or paragraph where their idea is used (e.g. Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur, 2016). Page number should be added for word for word quotations (e.g. Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur, 2016, p. 45)

### 2.2.5 Newspaper articles

Place the name of author plus the date of publication at the end of the sentence or paragraph where his idea is used (e.g. Krisnan, 6 August 1999). More details should be provided including the name of that newspaper in the reference list.

### 2.2.6 Internet data

Author (individual or organization or institution) and year of publication (e.g. United Nations, 1992), details to be provided in the reference list.

## 2.3 Preparing a Reference List

There are a dozen or more formats used by publishers in the English language academic world, with the Harvard system being one of the most popular. The crux of each format is that it should cover comprehensively the essential information required for readers' search. For example, for books, the information should include five components, namely all authors' names, year of publication, title, publisher and city where it is published.

Citing names has a cultural difference between the Anglo-American style and Asian style. Asian authors, especially Chinese and Japanese whose given names are not prefixed as John or Samuel, do not usually like abbreviations such as T. A. or W. used for their given names. Use full given names for Asian names although cumbersome.

Unless you are already familiar with a particular acceptable format, you are advised to use the following recommended format:

### 2.3.1 Books

Lewis, W. A. 1955. *A Theory of Economic Growth*. Allen and Unwin, London.

Abrams, C., Kobe, S. and Koenigsberger, O. 1963. *Growth and Urban Renewal in Singapore*. Report prepared for the Government of Singapore. United Nations Programme of Technical Assistance, New York.

(The use of the phrase *et al.* is permissible in the text when there are three or more authors (e.g. Gopinathan *et al.*, 2009), but not in the list of references where the names of **ALL** authors should be given.)

### 2.3.2 Book chapters

Saravanamuttu, Johan and Ooi, Kee Beng. 2010. Malaysia. In Rodolfo, C. S.; Thomson, E. and Hong, M. (eds). *Southeast Asia in a New Era: Ten Countries, One Region in ASEAN*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. Pp. 113-131.

(Use lower case for chapter title except place names, but title case and italics for book title. Use “hanging” or “Paragraph” from the **Word Format** Menu to get an indent for second line and the rest.)

### 2.3.3 Book in a series

Bunge, W. 1985. *Theoretical Geography*. Lund Studies in Geography 1. Gleerup, Lund.

### 2.3.4 Journal articles

Bristow, M. R. 2000. Early town planning in British South East Asia: 1910-1939. *Planning Perspectives*, 15 (2), 139-160.

(journal name in italics, followed by Volume 15, no. 2 and pages 139 to 160)

#### 2.3.5 Proceedings papers

Hartlen, J. 1985. Pressure berms, soil replacement and lightweight fills. Proceedings of the Symposium on *Slurry Walls for Underground Transportation Facilities*. Report No. FHWA-TS-80-221, US Department of Transportation. Pp. 383-408. (Italics for title of the conference or symposium or workshop)

#### 2.3.6 Magazine reports

Tiglao, R. 1997. 'What tiger?' *Far Eastern Review*, 23 October, p. 22.

#### 2.3.7 Newspaper articles

- New Straits Times. 2012. 'The youngsters of Malaysia today', 18 August, p. 24.  
**Or** (if there is an author)
- Saleh Mohammad 2015. 'Tourists are happy with what they see in Kuantan', *New Straits Times*, 25 June, p. 5.

#### 2.3.8 Internet data or source

Author (individual or organization or institution) 2015. Title in lower case, followed by, e.g. <http://www.worldbank.org>, accessed 12 July 2015.

(Important to note the date of retrieval because the webpages content is constantly updated, and may not be retraceable after sometime).

#### 2.3.9 Unpublished materials

Lim, Eng Seng. 1990. The public and recreational spaces in Singapore. Unpublished academic exercise submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

#### 2.3.10 Others

- If several items by the same author(s) and from the same year are cited, a, b, c, etc. should be added to the year of publication (e.g. 2008a; 2008b; etc.). Journal titles should not be abbreviated. If in exceptional circumstances abbreviations are used, they should be listed at the beginning of the references.
- Where a non-English language source is cited, the original title can be added but it must be translated into English.

### 3. Endnotes, Abbreviations, Acknowledgements

#### 3.1 Endnotes/footnotes

Except for Chinese language or history publications, endnotes are currently preferred to footnotes in most social sciences writings. But keep the number of endnotes to a reasonable minimum. Your word processing software automatically numbers endnotes/footnotes consecutively.

### 3.2 Abbreviations

Abbreviations such as UNESCO, UDA, FELDA should only be used independently after the full name has appeared for the first time in the text, followed by the abbreviation within brackets [e.g. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)]. When there are 10 or more abbreviations, add a page entitled 'List of Abbreviations' in your essay submission.

### 3.3 Acknowledgements

Where you wish to express your gratitude to some institutions or individuals who have assisted you in the process of preparing your essay, you may do so by adding a footnote under the first page in the Introduction page or a page by itself entitled 'Acknowledgements'.

### 3.4 Others

#### 3.4.1 Numbers

All numbers under 10 should be spelt out except where attaching to a unit of quantity (e.g. 10 km, 3 kg), or where the context makes this awkward (e.g. use full forms at the beginning of a sentence).

#### 3.4.2 Use *italics* for emphasis very sparingly.

#### 3.4.3 Headings

When various levels of heading and subheading are used, indicate the level of heading by using a hierarchy of font sizes (e.g. size 14 in bold and upper case for main headings, size 12 in bold and title case for subheadings, and, if really necessary, use size 12 in regular and title case for a lower level of subheading). Avoid using more than three levels of heading and subheading in the essay or in each section of the essay. Font 12 is the usual font size used in essay text that should be in double-spacing for the lecturer to provide feedback.

## 4. References Consulted

- Fisher, Alec 2011. *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Huckle, J. 1997. Towards a critical geography. In Tilbury, D. and Williams, M. (eds). *Teaching and Learning Geography*. Routledge, London. Pp. 241-252.
- Lau, Joe Y. F. 2011 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). *An Introduction to Critical Thinking and Creativity: Think More, Think Better*. Wiley, Hoboken.
- Mlynarczyk, R. and Haber, S. B. 1998 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). *In Our Own Words: A Guide with Readings for Student Writers*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Northey, M. and Knight, D. B. 2001. *Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Research and Writing*. Oxford University Press, Don Mills (Ontario).

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- Wong, Tai-Chee 2000. Assessing thinking skills in geography teaching and learning. In Ho, Soo Guang (ed). *Effective Thinking and Learning Strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Singapore Chinese Teachers' Union, Singapore. Pp. 83-98.

Draft by Professor Wong Tai-Chee, 05 Apr 2017.