Essay and Assignment Writing Guide for Master of Engineering Management Students

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This guide focuses on areas of essay and assignment writing considered most pertinent to your assessment tasks. For more information on these and other study skills, please refer to RMIT's Learning Lab and Hart's (1998) publication, *Doing a Literature Review: Refreshing the Social Science Research Imagination*. For individual help, you can also attend RMIT's drop-in services run by the Study and Learning Centre at all of the university's campuses.

Academic writing

Academic assignments at the master's level usually follow a particular writing style and form of language as outlined in the following table.

Writing style & language use	Instructions	Example
Use impersonal language	Avoid personal pronouns (e.g. I, me, mine, you, your/s, we, us, our/s) unless you are specifically asked to include these, such as with reflective assessment tasks.	Instead of writing, "I think that all guns should be banned", you could say, "Strict government control of guns is required".
Use formal language	Avoid slang (e.g. 'cool', 'kids'), idioms (e.g. 'see the light') and phrasal verbs (e.g. 'go ahead').	Instead of writing, "The Government will give schools the go ahead to expel kids who abuse drugs", you could say, "The Government has granted schools the right to expel children who abuse drugs".
Write words in full	Avoid abbreviations (e.g. 'TV') and contractions (e.g. 'doesn't', 'can't').	Instead of writing, "Research doesn't suggest a connection between TV violence and juvenile aggression", you could say, "Research does not suggest a connection between television violence and juvenile aggression".
Use precise reporting verbs	When referring to other people's research use a precise reporting word (e.g. 'claim', 'describe', 'outline', 'suggest', ' identify', 'assert', 'propose', 'recommend', 'refute', 'disagree', 'concur', 'point out', 'confirm', 'demonstrate', 'argue', 'reveal', 'maintain').	Instead of writing, "Franklin (2014) says that his sample was too small to generalise from", you could say, "Franklin (2014) concedes that his sample was too small to generalise from".
Be tentative in your claims	Avoid absolutes (e.g. 'every', 'none', 'all', 'always', 'never', 'proven') and be cautious (e.g. 'the majority/minority', 'most', 'tend/seem/appear to', 'commonly/often',	Instead of writing, "Research proves that all students seek part-time employment", you could write, "Research suggests that the majority of

	'suggest')	students seek part-time employment".
Be objective	Rely on facts and logical reasoning and maintain a neutral, or impartial, stance. Avoid subjective and emotional terms (e.g. 'awful', 'beautiful') and punctuation (e.g.!).	Instead of writing, "Forcing children to work under horrific conditions is a disgusting reflection of global materialism!", you could say, "In reflecting global materialism and by contravening established human rights, enforced child labour is of major ethical concern".
Be concise and specific	Avoid, or be prepared to explain, expressions which are vague, ambiguous or open to interpretation (e.g. 'etc.', 'appropriate', 'sufficient', 'interesting').	Instead of writing, "Teachers should make the classroom friendly and welcoming so that students can engage in classroom activities, discussions, etc." you could say, "Teachers should create an environment in which there are supportive relationships so that students know they are respected and safe from negative social interactions, and encouraged to participate fully in learning".
Use the passive form of sentences	It can be repetitive, irrelevant and/or obvious to identify the 'doer' of an action in a sentence. When the focus of the sentence is on the receiver or results of an action, use the passive voice (e.g. 'It is thought', 'was found', 'were counted', 'is discussed', 'will be interviewed').	Instead of writing, "Scientists classify mercury as a liquid", you could say, "Mercury is classified as a liquid". The first sentence is active, meaning its focus is on scientists and what they do. The second sentence is passive and concentrates on 'mercury' and what is done to it (i.e. classification). It is unnecessary to include who does the action here since it is obvious that scientists are responsible for classifying matter.

Analysing the essay question

An essay question needs careful reading and analysis to ensure you understand what is required before doing detailed research or reading. Misinterpreting the question, and therefore including irrelevant information, is one of the main reasons assignments fail.

The following strategies can be used to understand what you need to do to answer the essay question:

1. Circle the instructional word/s which tell you HOW to write the essay and check their meaning if necessary. Examples include: 'describe', 'explain how', 'compare', 'contrast', 'discuss', 'argue', 'say why', 'evaluate', 'critically analyse', etc. A longer list of instructional words and their meanings can be found on RMIT's Learning Lab .
2. Highlight (in colour) the content words which tell you WHAT the topic is. You may need to check the meaning of key words and phrases in a specialist subject dictionary for technical words, and a quality general dictionary for non-technical terms.
3. Underline any limiting words which RESTRICT and narrow the scope of the topic and task. Limiting words indicate the aspects of the topic to be included and the boundaries of your response.
4. Break the question into sections. Consider how many parts there are to the question requiring a response.
5. Read the rubric and its assessment criteria.
6. Rewrite the question in your own words.
7. Discuss your understanding of the question with your lecturer/tutor or classmates to ensure that you have understood requirements.

Example analysis

Discuss the assertion that it is the business case for valuing diversity that primarily drives organisational policy on inclusion, rather than an ethical regard for the intrinsic value of all human beings. Concentrate on the equality and diversity initiatives of two international corporations to illustrate your viewpoint.

Argument

An argument involves offering reasons to persuade others of the validity or logic of a point of view (Hart 1998). Think about the everyday, informal use of the term 'argument'. You might recall times when you have had an argument with a friend based on a difference of opinion. Whereas there are similarities between an informal argument and a formal academic argument, there are important differences. An academic argument is a scholarly opinion which is supported by expert evidence, rather than emotions. The process of reasoning is formalised, the ideas being proposed and argued are usually more complex, the evidence is researched, and the whole is presented according to academic conventions. In an essay, the main argument of the text is provided by the thesis statement of the introduction (see 'Essay writing' section below). This main argument is supported by a range of related arguments and justifications; hence, the term 'argument' in the academic context represents a process of reasoning.

Irrespective of how logical and complex an argument is and the reasons for its justification, all arguments are open to question and debate. Indeed, it is through challenging academic arguments and making suggestions for improvement or change that progress is made in the various disciplines. Being able to identify the structure, logic and substance of others' arguments is necessary in order for you to justify developing or challenging their work and suggest alternative practice or ways of explanation (Hart 1998).

Critical Analysis/Thinking

Compared with undergraduate courses, a key feature of postgraduate study is the greater depth of critical thinking required. Students are required to read extensively, think across various ideas and points of view and, importantly, critically examine arguments in the course learning materials.

Your lecturers expect you to go beyond mere description of a theory or concept in your assessment tasks. When you are thinking critically, you are analysing (i.e. breaking up information/ideas/concepts into their constituent parts) and evaluating (i.e. making evidence-based judgements about the components of your analysis).

Thinking 'critically' at university is not simply about being sceptical. Rather, higher level thinking and reasoning is required, such as by: comparing and contrasting perspectives; asking questions; identifying bias, flaws or gaps in claims and evidence; challenging ideas and practice; finding credible evidence; being aware of your own values, beliefs and assumptions; and being able to listen others.

Critical analysis/thinking is required for every aspect of your study:

- reading extensively (i.e. beyond the required readings minimum)
- listening (i.e. the ability to listen actively and to reflect upon same)
- note-making
- writing (e.g. constructing your own argument – see previous section)
- presentations
- professional practice (e.g. active participation in problem-solving activities).

Becoming a critical thinker

We think critically on a daily basis, as part of making sense of our experiences and guiding our actions. However, it takes time, practice and conscious effort to develop the deep-level critical thinking skills required in the academic context. The following sets out approaches you may consider for aiding your critical thinking:

Identify barriers

You need to reflect on your learning and what is inhibiting you from thinking critically. Common attitudinal barriers include:

- expecting to be told, rather than thinking for yourself
- unreflectively knowing/assuming what is 'right'
- not thinking about why things happen the way they do
- believing that only experts have the authority to make critical comment
- fear of disrespecting others when challenging their claims.

Recognising and overcoming such barriers is fundamental to enhancing your critical stance.

Be alert to persuasive techniques

All arguments, including those presented in academic texts, attempt to persuade you toward a point of view. An author's contention/s can usually be identified by asking:

- *What is the author expecting me to do or think as a result of this argument?*

The persuasiveness of claims can be evaluated by asking additional questions:

- *Is the language appealing to emotions, rather than logical reasoning?*
- *Is the author being reasonable in their claims and what they expect to happen?*

Evaluate the evidence

A scholarly contention needs to be supported by current, relevant, credible and sufficient evidence. Critical analysis/thinking means questioning the evidence provided by considering:

- if the evidence supports the argument,
- how credible (trustworthy) the evidence is,
- whether enough evidence has been offered,
- if the evidence comes from a variety of sources,
- any missing links between the evidence and the author's contention,
- whether the evidence is current, and
- other available evidence that might challenge the evidence used.

It is useful to notice linking words and phrases which demonstrate causes and effects (e.g. 'due to', 'resulting from', 'therefore', 'accordingly', etc.) to help identify the evidence used to support the argument and the conclusions drawn.

Analyse assumptions and reasoning

Weak or false arguments stem from incorrect assumptions and poor reasoning, and are not well supported by credible evidence. Often assumptions remain unstated or 'hidden' because the writer believes the reader has the same 'common-sense' understanding of words and concepts.

The following questions can help in identifying incorrect assumptions and faulty reasoning:

Has the author used words that might have more than one meaning?

- *Has a context and/or explanation been provided for all key words or terms used?*
- *Have those words been used consistently or is there ambiguity?*

Has the author linked one element or situation in their argument to another?

- *Is the link appropriate?*
- *Is the comparison relevant?*

Does the author apply general principles or personal experience to a specific example?

- *Is the general principle or personal experience relevant to the example?*

Is the argument calling for a particular course of action?

- *What might be the possible consequences of such action?*

Example paragraph demonstrating critical analysis

'Compared to the individual level, less empirical research has directly addressed the relationship between organizational factors and WDB*, pointing out the role of situational variables, such as organizational climate perceptions (Peterson 2002; Spector, Coulter, Stockwell & Matz 2007), ethical climate (Dunn & Schweitzer 2005; Kanten & Er Ulker 2013; Vardi & Weitz 2004), injustice perceptions (Ambrose, Seabright & Schminke 2002; Aquino, Lewis & Bradfield 1999; Berry et al. 2007; Henle 2005; Liao & Rupp 2005), and perceived organizational support (Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt & Barrick, 2004; Ferris, Brown & Heller 2009). Among the contextual determinants of organizational behavior, scholars have also highlighted the importance of organizational culture (OC) in influencing WDB (e.g. Dunn & Schweitzer 2005; van Fleet & Griffin 2006; Vardi & Weitz 2004; but, although they claim that the influences of OC on the presence of deviant behaviors are clear (e.g. Boye & Jones 1997; Kidwell & Martin 2005; O'Boyle, Forsyth & O'Boyle 2011; van Fleet & Griffin 2006), to date, there has been very little empirical research on this topic (Ehrhart & Raver 2014). In fact, most empirical work seems to have ignored this macro-level, contextual predictor, focusing instead on more manageable antecedents such as organizational ethical climate or organizational justice.' (Di Stefano, Scrima & Parry 2017, p. 2).

*Workplace deviant behaviour

Legend

- Identification of gaps in the literature
- Comparisons of foci in the literature
- Wide range of sources utilised

Essay Writing

An essay at postgraduate level needs to be more considered than an essay written as an undergraduate. You should take a critical approach to the task: analyse ideas and points of view, question any assumptions that are made, evaluate the evidence you have gathered, and be aware of other writers' differing perspectives. You need to be specific in your writing and demonstrate an awareness of the complexity that surrounds any argument you make.

An essay is a structured argument supported by evidence from experts in their field. Essays have three major elements: introduction, body and conclusion. The introduction and conclusion each make up 5-10% of the essay word count while the evidence paragraphs (the body) contribute the remainder.

The introduction

An introduction has three main parts. Firstly, it should open broadly by introducing the topic and the context in which that topic is situated. This may include: a summary of the historical background, identifying associated issues (e.g. Why is the topic important? Why should it be investigated? Who/What does it concern?), defining key terms, and/or providing differing perspectives. Secondly, a thesis statement is provided which is a brief outline of your argument or overall position on the topic. Finally, the introduction finishes with a scoping statement, which outlines the key points to be covered in the essay's body to justify your argument. By following these steps, your introduction will open broadly and gradually narrow down to the specific argument and supportive ideas of the essay. See the Appendix for an example introduction paragraph.

The body

The body of the essay comprises a series of connected paragraphs with each containing one main idea, expressed in a topic sentence (usually the first sentence). Each topic sentence relates back to the introduction's thesis and scoping statements to reflect the argument and the key point utilised to justify your position. Next, supporting sentences validate the topic sentence's claim by expanding upon it and providing evidence and/or examples. This evidence is based on your readings and critical analysis/thinking of what the experts in the field contend. Hence, the body paragraphs are where the majority of your referencing of sources will appear. The final sentence of a body paragraph can either link back to the main idea of its topic sentence or link forward to the main idea contained in the next body paragraph. See the Appendix for an example body paragraph.

The conclusion

The conclusion provides a summary of your answer to the essay question. It begins by rephrasing the thesis statement, which is followed by a brief summation of the key points drawn on to justify your overall argument. The conclusion ends by pointing to the significance of your findings or the implications of the issue. For example, you might make a recommendation for change, action or further research or you might make a prediction on the implications of the current state of affairs. Important to note is that the conclusion should not contain any new material (i.e., it should not introduce any new points). See the Appendix for an example conclusion paragraph.

Reading for academic study and writing at Master Level

Reading for study is very different to reading for pleasure. Reading to learn new materials and theories incorporates the goal of realising a product; for example, an essay, report, or analytical evaluation of the research related to your topic of inquiry. Accordingly, you are expected to decipher the grounds of reasoning that guide the research and arguments found in the literature. This implies an analytical approach to your reading (Hart 1998).

You should not underestimate the time implications of reading analytically, which often necessitates several readings of the same text. For instance, when undertaking a literature review, a research student will invariably dedicate between 3 months to 1 year on gathering and reading their source materials. During this time, the reviewer tends to move through several developmental phases as a learner and researcher. It is through ongoing learning and development that the early difficulties associated with understanding and analysing the literature across feasible time frames are overcome (Hart 1998).

Reading analytically moves from the general to particular. This process tends to begin with skimming a text to gain an overview of the arguments and concepts covered. A closer reading of the whole, or pertinent sections, usually follows so as to focus on the detail. When reading an article or treatise, this procedure is often the most efficient and effective. The following table provides key information components of academic texts that you should aim to identify, review and extract when reading analytically (Hart 1998).

Arguments	Concepts	Conclusions	Definitions	Ethics
Events	Evidence	Hypothesis	Interpretations	Justification
Motives	Perspective	Politics	Problem	Question
Standpoint	Styles	Techniques	Theory	Ways of thinking

Referencing

Because all published material is the intellectual property of its author/s, representing other people's ideas or words as your own breaches copyright regulations. Known as 'plagiarism', this act of misrepresentation can have serious repercussions for the continuance of your studies. While you are expected to incorporate the ideas of published experts in your writing, you must ensure that you show your reader where your information comes from. By doing so, you help to uphold the notion of 'academic integrity', considered an essential value in academic and professional environments.

In order to maintain academic integrity, a system of referencing, or citation, is utilised which serves to acknowledge the author/s of the ideas or words that you incorporate in your writing. Anything that you don't reference is assumed to be either your own idea or common knowledge (generally or in your field of study). For example, the fact that Melbourne is the capital of Victoria does not need a reference.

There are a range of referencing styles, and which one you use is often dictated by the predilections of your discipline, university or lecturer. Common to most styles is the need to provide references within and at the end of your document as follows:

1. In-text referencing: Provides minimal detail of your information source, such as the author's surname and year of publication.

2. Reference list: Provides full details of the in-text references so that the information and its source can be readily accessed and verified by the reader of your document.

Despite the various referencing styles tending to include the same information, the way this is formatted differs. For this course you will be using RMIT's version of the Harvard referencing style, guidelines for which can be found on the RMIT Library website.

Because the extent and intricacies of the Harvard referencing system are beyond the scope of this writing guide, it is imperative that you take the time to familiarise yourself with how to acknowledge the ideas and words of others. Although there are efficient software packages available to assist with referencing (e.g. EndNote), these rely on the correct input of relevant details; otherwise, referencing errors will ensue. If you are unfamiliar with how to reference, you will be unable to identify and remedy these mistakes, which can lower your grade for written assignments. Moreover, you run the risk of unintentionally plagiarising which carries far more serious consequences for your further study.

Appendix

Here is a sample introduction, body paragraph (one of several) and conclusion from a 5000 word essay on the topic of Leadership in Education. Review the structure of these paragraphs to consider how the content links across the whole essay.

Introduction

Over the last fifty years, the execution of leadership practices within educational organisations has shifted from being the exclusive concern of principals and senior leaders to being the point of convergence for the participation and involvement of all members of the teaching-learning community (Bush & Glover 2003; Yukl 2008). This change reflects the different leadership models that have emerged in the field of leadership theory. A diachronic review of these approaches illustrates that traditional top-down views of leadership have been rendered inadequate due to their reductionism of leadership as a set of personal characteristics or interpersonal skills deployed by leaders (Bolden et al. 2003; Bush & Glover 2003). In response, various theoretical approaches have been proposed which position both leaders and followers at the core of leadership processes and which outline the important role of teamwork in the achievement of desired organisational goals (Bush & Glover 2003). Drawing on this evidence, this essay argues that team-based leadership has the potential to improve learning outcomes within bilingual schools. To this end, the essay will first introduce the five theoretical dimensions that frame the concept of team-based leadership. Next an overview of bilingual learning contexts is provided to posit

the social complexities that characterise these schools and to evaluate the potential of team-based leadership therein. Finally, recommendations for the implementation of a team-based leadership model in bilingual schools will be made.

Legend

- Introduction of topic, historical context
- Associated issue
- Thesis statement
- Scoping statements

Body paragraph

Recent theoretical approaches to leadership have outlined the importance of collaborative work within educational institutions (Hall 2002; Johnson 2003; Lingard 2003). These approaches are mainly correlated with models of distributed or dispersed leadership, which propose that collaborative work across all levels of a school's community is crucial to enhancing the performance of all its members and, consequently, to the achievement of desired educational purposes (Johnson 2003). Certain other theories based on participative leadership or interpersonal leadership models also acknowledge the importance of teamwork practices for effective leadership within schools (Bolden et al. 2003; Bush & Glover 2003). Furthermore, current understandings of instructional leadership consistently rely on teams and collaborative practices during the process of working towards learning goals (Lingard 2003; Portin & Knapp 2014). Given these leadership styles have converged in recognising the critical role of teamwork to effectively lead in educational institutions, they can be identified as team-based models and differentiated from traditional top-down, or leader-centred, approaches such as the aforementioned trait theory of leadership.

Legend

- Topic sentence
- Supporting sentences
- Concluding sentence (links to the next body paragraph where the student differentiates between team-based and top-down leadership models)

Conclusion

This essay has posited the relevance and importance of team-based forms of leadership for improving learning outcomes within bilingual schools by drawing on the five dimensions of effective leadership identified by Robinson et al. (2008). The various leadership studies carried out within bilingual contexts have evidenced that all five dimensions of effective team-based leadership play a significant role in bilingual education. In particular, setting clear goals (first dimension), planning and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (third

dimension) and ensuring an orderly and learning-supportive environment (fifth dimension), are leadership practices that have the most potential to contribute toward successful educational goals. This is because they allow the participation of all members of the school community (i.e. nominal leaders as well as teachers and learners). Drawing on this discussion, this essay invites all individuals involved in the exertion of leadership within culturally diverse learning environments, such as bilingual schools, to acknowledge the importance of their followers' role in effective leadership. Indeed, team-based practices and collaborative work should be implemented by leaders as part of the school's everyday routine.

Legend

- Rephrase of thesis statement
- Summary of key points
- Recommendations for change

References

Di Stefano, G, Scrima, F & Parry, E 2017, 'The effect of organizational culture on deviant behaviors in the workplace', *Journal of Human Resource Management*, pp.2-22.

Hart, C 1998, *Doing a literature review: Refreshing the social science research imagination,* SAGE, London, UK.