

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO WRITING SOCIAL SCIENCE ESSAYS

Writing essays is one of the ways in which we are required to communicate our knowledge and understanding of the things we learn. It is an important skill in Social Science.

Getting Started

- Read the question/task carefully. Make sure that you understand what you are required to do. If it is a **seen topic** make sure you listen carefully in class on the day it is issued and ask questions of your teacher if you are still unclear.
- Underline the key words. These key words often give you a clear direction as to the approach you should follow. Key terms that commonly appear in geography essays include:

Analyse:	Recognise similarities/differences, to make deductions, consider the relevant importance of, draw inferences from, to draw conclusion from.
Assess:	Determine the value or worth of something.
Compare:	Identify the similarities.
Contrast:	Identify the differences.
Criticise:	Give judgements about the merit of theories or opinions or about the truth of facts, and back your judgement by a discussion of the evidence.
Describe:	Give a detailed and graphic account.
Discuss:	Outline the various opinions on the subject, giving reasons for and against these opinions.
Evaluate:	Assess the reliability of information, to determine viewpoints, assess the validity/worth of conclusions that have been reached.
Examine:	Break the subject into parts and analyse each one.
Explain:	Give the reasons, interpret and to make plain.
Illustrate:	Use a figure, diagram, example or even a description to explain or clarify, thus giving a visual impression.
Justify:	Support a conclusion or hypothesis by making reference to available evidence/resources and providing a reasoned argument. Provide sound reasons or evidence to support this.
Outline:	Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor detail.
Synthesise:	Draw information from a variety of sources, put this information together into a coherent whole to form an argument or prove/disprove a hypothesis.

These key words can be placed in two categories:

Describing: describe, illustrate, outline. With essays such as these, you are asked to find the main and supporting ideas and write them down in logical order giving examples where necessary.

Analysing: analyse, assess, compare, contrast, criticise, discuss, evaluate, examine, explain, justify, synthesise. With essays that have these key words in their topic, you will be expected to do more than present information. You will need to look critically at the topic and present an argument of your own.

Doing the Preparation/Research

The information on which your essay is to be based can be obtained from a number of sources – textbooks, class notes, reference books, internet, videos, CD ROM etc.

Your preparation is as vital for an essay as it is for any report or assignment.

If the topic is given before the essay writing day, order your information into a logical sequence and structure (see Planning and Writing the Essay). Remember very few of us are able to write an essay before an exam and reproduce that essay in that same form on the day of the essay exam. Most of us will however benefit from writing a practice essay as a way of organising our thoughts prior to the exam.

If the essay topic is unseen it is unwise to prepare an essay prior to the exam as your anticipated response is more than likely not to match the set topic. Instead you should prepare for an essay by collecting and organising information and recording this information in a logical way that you will remember.

Planning and Writing the Essay

Always plan your essay, even if only briefly. A plan helps give your essay structure, recall information and avoid repetition. It should include a list of the points you wish to discuss in an essay. Even within a one hour exam period, you should be able to spend the first 5-10 minutes writing up your essay plan prior to writing the essay.

Essays typically have three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

Introductions have these three parts, not necessarily in this order:

- Introduces or defines the question or hypothesis, including key words
- Introduces the reader to the main areas or topics which will be included
- Indicates the answer to the question or the response to the hypothesis

Body of essay has:

- paragraphs
- valid generalisations (topic sentences) which introduce the reader to the topic and its relation to the question or hypothesis; will use key words
- summary sentence at the end of the paragraph; clarifies the main point or argument contained in the paragraph
- links (where logical) to the topic in the next paragraph

Conclusions have three parts, not necessarily in this order:

- restates the question or hypothesis, including key words
- restates the main areas or topics which were included
- finally states the answer to the question or response to the hypothesis

Ways to open the introductory paragraph

- The current debate regarding ...
- There are both advantages and disadvantages in ...
- Every society has different views on whether or not ...
- It is often argued that ...
- The complex issue of ...
- Start by stating your answer e.g. While some geographers may differ, it seems that the solution to is ...
- Start by setting the time and place e.g. Australia will experience another cyclone during the summer of 2010 ...

Ways to sum up in your concluding paragraph

- There are many reasons ...
- The weight of evidence would seem to suggest that ...
- It can be seen ...
- It could be suggested that ...
- Thus, in summary ...
- Considering all options, it would seem ...

Ways to link paragraphs

The first and last sentence in the paragraph should contain the essential reason for the inclusion of that paragraph. The first and last sentence in a paragraph can serve as a link between paragraphs, using words like:

above all
following this
afterwards
consequently
meanwhile
obviously
therefore
provided
it might be thought
of course
on the other hand
even if
in fact
firstly, secondly...
accordingly
otherwise
as a result
even though

in conclusion
nevertheless
to sum up
for example
at the same time
finally
indeed
nonetheless
similarly
curiously enough
for instance
since this is so
hence
in short
instead
in summary
likewise
certainly

for this reason
in particular
more specifically
still
on the contrary
clearly
in order that
not surprisingly
admittedly
while this is so
although
even if
in addition
moreover
only then
however
it might be thought

Ways to refer to graphics (maps, tables, photographs, diagrams etc)

Unlike many other subjects, geographers commonly find it necessary to include graphics within an essay. Graphics should serve a clear purpose within the essay and follow conventions e.g. a map should have a scale, north indicator etc. Graphics typically will be placed within the essay (not at the end) and must be referred to in the text:

- As seen in Diagram A, ...
- Diagram A shows ...
- According to figures in Table A, ...
- Map C shows where ...
- In contrast to the photograph (page 2), Extract D indicates ...

Ways to avoid writing 'I think that' or 'One could suggest that'

- It could be suggested that ...
- The facts indicate that ...
- Most experts agree ...
- Analysis of the data indicates ...
- Popular opinion does not support ...
- Primary sources imply ...
- With some exceptions, popular opinion indicates ...
- This evidence supports the idea that ...

Do's and Don'ts of writing Social Science essays

- Always plan your essay
- Always stick to the question. Do not just write down everything you know about the topic – be selective. Irrelevant information only detracts from your essay.
- Answer all parts of the question. The failure to answer even one part could affect the quality of your essay.
- Keep in mind the required length of the essay but don't spend valuable time checking on your word length whilst writing. If you are well prepared you should be able to write to the set length easily.
- Use diagrams, sketch maps and quotations wherever appropriate.
- Don't include references to yourself in essays e.g. 'I think ...'
- Avoid value judgements, e.g. 'All sawmillers are environmental vandals'; 'The Brazilian Government does nothing to prevent the slaughter of innocent Indians'.
- Avoid abbreviations unless you have used the full name first and included the abbreviation with this e.g. Antarctic Treaty Organisation (ATO).
- Avoid numbering of points (or using dots, dashes, asterisks etc).
- Resist underlining of text for emphasis.

- **If you are required to analyse, evaluate, and justify etc, be certain to do this throughout the essay and not just in your concluding paragraph.**
- Try not to hyphenate words that do not fit onto a line.
- When using quotations, they should always be surrounded with inverted commas.
- Use capital letters only where they are required by the conventions of writing e.g. names of people, places etc. Do not capitalise a word just because you think it seems important.
- Always read over your completed essay to check for errors.
- If you have time, try to number your pages.

Ways to improve your written presentation

- Use loose sheets of A4 paper. Even in exams, try to present your work attractively by writing on one side of the paper.
- Attach loose sheets together in correct order with a single staple in the top left-hand corner.
- Clearly identify which topic you are responding to on the first page of your essay e.g. Topic 3
- Write your response in the one colour pen (blue/black).
- Provide a wide margin so that comments can be written.
- Attach the task/criteria sheet to the front of your essay.
- Number your pages if time permits.