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SECTION 1: HOW TO CONSTRUCT AN ESSAY

This Essay Guide is designed to help you plan and construct a standard essay in the School of Political Science and International Studies. You may be asked to do other assessment pieces by your course coordinator that might require different types of preparation than the ones outlined here. In all cases, follow the advice of your course coordinator as to the exact type of assessment that is being requested of you.

Planning

Before you start writing your essay it is really important that you take the time to plan your essay.

There are seven major steps to planning good essays:

1. Choosing an Essay Topic
2. Understanding the Task
3. Making an Argument
4. Outlining or Planning the Essay
5. Reading
6. Taking Notes
7. Writing and Revising

1. Choosing an Essay Topic

You should choose a topic early in the semester and begin working on it with the intention of producing more than one draft. A common mistake is to prepare essays in a frantic, last-minute rush. Effective time management is essential to successful tertiary study. Therefore, you must consider the work required in all your courses and plan accordingly, especially when you have multiple essay deadlines that fall around the same time.

2. Understanding the task

The most common problem in undergraduate essays is not doing precisely what the assignment asks you to do. Please pay close attention to the assessment as described in the Electronic Course Profile.

Once you understand what your task is you should break it down into its component parts. This enables you to decide what material is relevant. Suppose, for example, the following question was asked: ‘Is a two-party system necessary for the existence of representative democracy?’ A careful analysis of the question might suggest that a suitable answer could focus on components such as:

- the nature of representative democracy
- the role of political parties in representative democracy
- features of representative democracy strengthened by the role of political parties
- the idea that representative democracy is neither dependent on, nor weakened by, a two-party system; and a conclusion setting out your evaluation of these points.

Some of the components of an essay topic may not come to mind immediately. When thinking about a topic refer to lecture notes, your course textbook or related reading material to get a better idea of the
topic(s) at hand. However, do not cite lectures in your assignment and make sure you read more widely than the required textbook.

3. Making an Argument

One of the most common mistakes made when writing an essay is failure to make a main argument. A main argument is a response to the essay question combined with a justification for your answer. This should guide how the essay is structured.

In order to explain why you are making your argument in a particular way, you need to demonstrate that you have researched the topic. This requires use of academic sources. You are expected to demonstrate understanding of the issue or subject by drawing upon ideas, theories, research findings and related information that supports your argument. This requires an analytical, not a descriptive approach, so it is not sufficient to simply reproduce relevant information or repeat other people’s arguments. Nor is it appropriate to answer an essay question with broad generalisations (for example ‘democracy is desirable’) for which no supporting evidence or reasoning is provided. Remember that a scholarly argument or claim cannot merely be asserted. It must be substantiated by evidence and supported by authoritative sources. It is also important to acknowledge alternative viewpoints.

Be critical in your approach to the topic: In courses dealing with politics you are expected to be critical in the sense of determining whether or not the evidence available justifies the conclusions that are drawn from it; in courses dealing with political ideas, you are expected to question the assumptions involved in the material. Being critical also implies identifying gaps in others’ arguments or the evidence they use and postulating alternative explanations or interpretations. Being critical might also involve examining the limitations of your own views or addressing counterarguments that arise in relation to the argument presented in your essay.

4. Outlining or Planning Your Essay

Once you have analysed the question, you should organize the ideas into an outline. The outline should ensure that the essay has a logical structure. It also facilitates the preparation of the essay by guiding your reading, note taking and writing. There is more than one way to write an outline. One is to do a diagrammatic/brain map approach, putting boxes on the page for each component (eg introduction, one paragraph per key point you want to make in the essay, conclusion), and adding dot points for each point you want to make in each component. Another is to do a linear, narrative plan in which you use headings for the introduction, each paragraph, and the conclusion and put dot points under each heading for what you plan to write in that component.

It is important at this stage to keep in mind the stipulated word limit (see the section on Word Count on page 8 of this Guide) and any other requirements set by the Course Coordinator. It may help to assign an approximate number of words for each section of your outline. By recognising the points that are central and those that are peripheral to your argument and by allocating appropriate word-lengths, your outline will provide a useful guide for how much reading and writing are required.

Be prepared to revise your argument and your essay outline. In the course of reading widely it may become evident that your initial argument or outline is incomplete or inadequate in some way. Revise it as new information and perspectives come to your attention.
5. Reading

A good essay requires wide reading. Reading widely will help you develop the breadth of knowledge necessary to evaluate ideas and arguments put by others. However, mere quantity is not enough; you should choose your material intelligently and be selective.

When you start your reading, it will be most useful to get a general idea about what the book or the article is about to determine whether you want to draw on it in your essay or not. Therefore, when you are starting out, you might want to read the introduction and conclusion of a chapter or an article to get an overall sense of its approach. You can also use a book’s index, or the sub-headings within chapters, to identify relevant information. As you narrow down your topic, you can then focus more on the details and on the paragraphs, quotations or ideas most relevant to your argument.

It is usually best to read from the general to the specific. Begin by reading the relevant sections of introductory texts, and then move on to more detailed publications or specialised journal articles. Individual courses and assignments may require different amounts of reading. Note that it is normally impossible to write a convincing essay based upon a limited number of sources.

**Drawing on Academic Sources:** Most Course Coordinators issue reading lists to help students choose relevant material. These are the best place to start researching an essay topic. Further references may be compiled by using bibliographies in books and journal articles.

A good quality essay makes effective use of academic sources, such as books, chapters in edited volumes and peer reviewed journal articles. Textbooks are useful as they enable you to provide a broader context or to illustrate the relevance of the essay question. However, they typically provide only short references to academic debates and literatures and do not explain the various theories or competing perspectives in-depth. To give your essay greater analytical strength, you will need to go beyond the textbook and required readings, and demonstrate that you have read other relevant academic sources and are able to engage with theoretical perspectives and concepts in an intelligent way. Essays that provide evidence of in-depth/critical engagement with the academic literature (scholarly books, chapters in edited volumes and journal articles) are more likely to result in sound, critical and engaging analysis.

**Different types of sources:** Primary sources are documents created during the time in question by those who experienced the events. These may include newspapers, government reports, diaries, memoirs, United Nations reports, or reports by non-government organisations. Primary sources are written by the person who experienced the event, and therefore often contain biases, eg when a government justifies its policy position in the face of criticism. They tend not to be academic sources. They can be useful if your essay requires you to look at the attitudes of people directly involved in an event. Secondary sources are those in which people analyse the event in question. They can be scholarly (eg a scholarly journal article, a book or a textbook) or non-scholarly (eg a newspaper article).

**Internet sources:** You can use scholarly journals and texts which are available online. However, you should be wary of relying on other internet sources. Do not use google - use the University library resources or google scholar at http://scholar.google.com. Where you do use material taken from the internet, you should take particular care to check that it has been compiled by a dependable institutional source or by a reputable scholar. Remember that the purpose of researching an essay is to gather evidence pertinent to an argument and to demonstrate to the marker that you understand the different schools of thought or different contributions applicable to the topic.

*Do not use these sources* in writing an essay:
online user-updated encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia
blogs, newsgroups, email lists
partisan, personal or anonymous websites.

It is always preferable to find the same information from a more reputable source. If you can, then use the reputable source as your reference. If you cannot, then it is best not to rely upon the information at all.

Newspapers and News Periodicals: These sources must be used cautiously, as they are not scholarly. They may provide you with facts, commentaries and occasional insight, but do not expect them to provide a coherent analytical framework. The Library has subscriptions to many national and international daily and weekly newspapers. Most are available online through Factiva.

Parliamentary and Government Records: Each Australian parliament records debates in Hansard. The federal parliament Hansard, as well as text of bills and other parliamentary information, can be found at: www.aph.gov.au.

6. Taking Notes

As you start taking notes, work with reference to your essay outline. There are many ways of writing down information from your sources. You may use a different set of notes for each of the sections of your essay outline. The major advantage of this system is that when you write your essay, each section of the outline can be dealt with in turn, without having to leaf through pages of disorganised notes.

Always write down the exact reference, including page number, for the information you write down in your notes. Always use quotation marks if it is a direct quotation, or paraphrase immediately into your own words, so as to avoid unintentional plagiarism. Using the arguments, ideas or words of another author, without acknowledging these via a citation or reference, is plagiarism. Plagiarism is a major violation of University rules and expectations.

Once you have finished your reading and taking notes, it is often useful to take a step back and think again about what you want to argue in the essay. Sometimes it helps to get some distance from the reading and your notes by taking a walk or waiting until the next day to revise the structure and argument of your essay or argument.

7. Writing and Revising

The essay should be in a coherent and logical prose that is cogently (convincingly and effectively) argued, carefully documented, and well written. The structure of the essay typically has three parts: an introduction, the body of the essay, and a conclusion.

- The introduction should introduce the topic to be discussed, state clearly your argument, and outline the points you will cover in the essay to make that argument – in the same order in which they will appear in the essay.
- The body of the essay is where the bulk of the argument is made. The body consists of a series of major paragraphs that are introduced with topic sentences, and developed in a logical sequence. Each paragraph should consist of one main idea. Introduce the main idea with a topic sentence, then provide evidence through data, examples, and the work of key scholars to support your idea. Reference all ideas or quotes that are not your own.
- The conclusion should restate briefly the key argument. You should show how your analysis – and your own distinctive approach – has allowed you to draw conclusions about the topic. Most often
the conclusion should be written in your own ‘voice’ and you generally should not include quotations from other authors in this section. Do not introduce new ideas at this stage.

There are two ways to get started when beginning the writing process. Either you can begin by writing your introduction first, or you can start with the body of the essay. Writing the introduction first may help to clarify the central argument of the essay, but remember that, like an essay plan, the introduction will often need to be revised as the essay progresses. The introduction can be the most difficult and time-consuming part of the essay to write. Some writers prefer to commence with the body of the essay, moulding the points from their outline into a structured argument. Once you have established the structure of the essay, this can serve as a guide for the introduction. Whichever method you use, the body of the essay must be consistent with the introduction and conclusion.

A very common failing is to write only one draft. If you wish to get the best possible mark on a university essay, you should allow sufficient time to write **more than one draft**. The aim of a first draft is to get the ideas mapped out on paper. One way of thinking about the first draft is as an ‘expansion’ of the essay outline. The aim of writing second (and subsequent) drafts is to refine your argument and to achieve the best possible wording. Expression can be corrected when writing subsequent drafts. When you are writing subsequent drafts you should also be focused on the cohesiveness of the essay. One way to revise a draft of your essay is to read it as if you were the marker. What are the shortcomings in the argument, writing, sequence, and so on? Revise the draft to overcome these deficiencies. Try to achieve an elegant writing style that you would enjoy reading.

Don’t forget to give your paper a title; something that gives a brief and interesting ‘snapshot’ of your topic and argument.

In accordance with policies in regards to Student Integrity and Misconduct you should not lend your original work to others for any reason unless directed to by your Course Coordinator (for instance, if one of the tasks is a peer review). Nor should you collude with other people, including but not limited to fellow students, when completing your assessment work unless directed by your Course Coordinator (for instance, if you are undertaking a group essay).

**Writing Conventions**

*Avoiding Bias:* Bias refers to prejudices, preconceptions or predispositions that distort your capacity to examine and assess material in a dispassionate manner. It may be found in any of the following practices:
- ignoring or suppressing contradictory data or alternative views;
- using only writers who agree with your own viewpoint;
- presenting dogmatic views or opinions that are not supported by evidence or argument.

The best way to avoid bias is to draw upon a broad range of sources and evaluate the arguments and assertions contained within them critically. It is also important to acknowledge the existence of alternative arguments and evidence to demonstrate the depth of your understanding to the marker. Readers will usually be expecting an essay to be explicit about different intellectual approaches to any particular theme.

*Elegance of writing:* Markers are always disappointed to read essays that display a considerable amount of research but are presented in an inelegant style. Lack of clarity in exposition is often a symptom of confused thinking. Here are some suggestions to improve your writing.
• **Role Models**: Pay attention to the style used in the articles and chapters that you read in researching your essay. Model your own writing style on the work of authors who you enjoy reading.

• **Grammar**: Inaccurate grammar and spelling distract the reader’s attention from your ideas.

• **Dot points**: Do not submit an essay written in point form or with a series of one-sentence paragraphs. Write in complete sentences, with a verb.

• **Use active voice**, and avoid passive voice - it leads to long, complicated sentences. Compare the following: ‘The bill giving the right to vote to women was passed by Parliament’; and ‘Parliament passed the bill giving women the right to vote’. The second example uses active voice and is clear and straightforward.

• **Use the first person**. It is acceptable in the School for you to write in the first person. Rather than writing: ‘In this essay it will be argued that...’, try the alternative: ‘In this essay I argue that...’.

• **Quotations**: You should only use a quotation when the author’s own words are critical to make the point you want to make. Otherwise, paraphrase the idea in your own words, remembering to give proper credit to the author. Quotations of **more than 40 words** should be presented as a ‘block quote’; that is, they should be indented on both sides with single spacing in the text and presented without quotation marks. Always include the correct citation. Including the page number(s) for the quotation is essential.

Quotations must use the exact words and punctuation of the original text. If you want to omit some words from the middle of a quotation, indicate the omitted words with ellipses (...). If you want to add words or clarify comments, you must include them in square brackets [ ]. For example, the quotation ‘Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few’ could be shortened or clarified respectively as:

“Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed ... to so few.”

“Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many [people] to so few.”

• **Gender-neutral language**: Avoid inappropriate gender-specific language, including gender-specific terms for groups of people or the characterisation of groups as male or female. The use of ‘he’, ‘him’, or ‘his’ as the default pronoun should not occur; do not use ‘man’ to mean humanity in general. Nor should you use female pronouns when referring to inanimate objects, for instance referring to a boat as she.

• **Non-racist language**: Terms that are discriminatory or prejudicial to ethnic or racial groups are unacceptable in academic writing. When referring to Australia’s Indigenous peoples, the terms “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” should be used. (“Aboriginal people” or “Torres Strait Islander people” is appropriate if referring specifically to either group of people.) It is also acceptable to use the terms “Indigenous peoples” or “First Nations peoples” as alternatives to this formulation. ‘Non-English speaking background’ is used to denote someone whose cultural background is derived from a non-English-speaking tradition or whose first language is not English. Please use the full ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Intersex and Queer Community’ when referring to this community. It is also suitable to use the acronym - LGBTIQ.

• **Cliches and jargon**: Avoid words and phrases that suffer from overuse. Clichés impede clear perception, feeling and thought. Phrases such as: ‘the moment of truth’, ‘history tells us’ and ‘at this point in time’ should be avoided.
• **Contractions, colloquialisms and slang:** Avoid contractions, slang and colloquial expressions. A contraction is a shortened form of a word or expression common in spoken English but should be avoided in formal written expression like essays. For instance use it is rather than it’s and is not rather than isn’t. A ‘colloquialism’ is a word or expression appropriate to a conversational level of usage, but is not suited to academic composition. Slang is a form of colloquialism where ordinary words have been given a special meaning; for example, words such as ‘cool’.

• **Numbers:** Spell out the numbers one to nine and spell out even hundreds, thousands and millions. Use Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) for other numbers. Percentages are expressed as figures followed by ‘per cent’ even if the number is less than 10 (‘%’ should be used only in charts, tables, graphs and footnotes). Always write out a number or year if it begins a sentence. Do not use an apostrophe if referring to a decade – for example, 1990s (not 1990’s).

• **Acronyms:** An acronym is a word formed from the first (or first few) letters of a series of words. For example, AJPS is an acronym for the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. Acronyms should be in parentheses at the first reference, following the spelled-out full form. In later references the letters are sufficient:

**Word Count and Word Limit Penalty**

Students are expected to write to the word limit set by the Course Coordinator. All words used in the text of your essay (including title, quotations, block quotations, in-text citations, tables, figures, headings) count as part of the word limit. Words used in the reference list, whether listed as a separate reference list at the end or in footnotes if you are using the footnoting system, do not count toward the word limit. You should use your word processing system to check your word count, without the reference list, prior to submitting your assessment.

**Essays and research reports are given a +10% leeway on the word count (unless the word count already stipulates a range). If an essay or research report is over this leeway limit, it will attract a 10 percentage point penalty.**

Students should note:
- The Author-date in-text referencing system will count toward the word limit;
- The Footnote referencing system will not count toward the word limit.

**Presentation**

Essays should be typed, use double or 1 ½ line spacing, have a margin of 2.5cm on all four sides of the page, use Times New Roman 12 point, or a similarly clear font and size, and should number all pages.
Which referencing system should you use?

The School requires that you use one of the two referencing systems set out in this Guide – either the author-date in-text referencing system as outlined in this Guide, or the footnote referencing system as outlined in this Guide. Use one of these two styles consistently and accurately.

Students should note:

- The Author-date in-text referencing system will count toward the word limit;
- The Footnote Referencing System will not count toward the word limit.

Style 1: Author-date in-text referencing system

The citation in an author-date system consists of the last name of an author and the year of publication of the work, followed by the page numbers. Under this system, terms such as ibid. and op. cit. are not used. As a general rule, citations must include individual page numbers.

You will find variants of this referencing system in scholarly publications, including the Harvard system and the Chicago author-date system (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

To avoid confusion, please use the author-date in-text referencing system as outlined in this Guide.

Simple in-text citations with an identified author:

- Australia’s political culture has been characterised as consisting of compliant subjects rather than active citizens who genuinely participate in the country’s civic life (Smith 2001: 27).

- Jacobs initially advanced this idea (2002: 6), and it was later developed in the United States (Brown 2005: 92).

- Ruling classes ‘do not justify their power solely by de facto possession of it, but try to find a moral and legal basis for it’ (Mosca 1939: 70).

More complicated instances of in-text citation:

- When more than one study is cited, in which case you separate the items with semi-colons, eg (Abato 2005: 34; North 2004: 256-260).

- When there are two works by the same author, in which case you separate each year by a comma, eg (Habermas 2000: 180-185, 2001).

- When the same author has two or more sources with the same year, in which case you give the first one a lower case ‘a’, the second one a lower case ‘b’, etc, eg (Vromen 2003a: 156-160, 2003b: 29-32).

- When there are two or three named authors, you put in both or all three names in the in-text citation, eg (Miragliaotta, Errington and Barry 2013: 145).
When there are four or more named authors, you write the first author’s name and then put ‘et al’ after it, meaning ‘and others’, eg (Crenshaw et al 1995:345).

When an author’s name is already listed in the sentence that includes the in-text citation, you do not need to repeat the author’s name in the in-text citation, eg Friedrich insists that ‘constitutionalism, both in England and abroad, was at the outset not at all democratic’ (1937: 31).

When an author cites another author, you need to acknowledge this in the citation, eg A central question of politics has been formulated as ‘who gets what, when and how?’ (Lasswell 1936, cited in Dunleavy and O’Leary 1987: 18).

Where an author is not named, you need to work out the institutional author, eg (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014: 3), or (The Economist 2006: 12).

Where you are citing a reprint of an old book, you need to put both the original publication date and the reprint date in the in-text citation, eg (Austen [1813] 2003: 57).

When you are citing a chapter in an edited book, make sure you cite the author of that chapter, and not the editors of the book, in the in-text citation.

When you are citing legislation, you follow the Title Year (Jurisdiction) format, eg The University is governed by the University of Queensland Act 1998 (Qld), which requires ...

When you are citing UN documents, you name the UN Department and year the document was agreed to in the in-text citation, eg (UNSC 2011: 3).

When using the author-date in-text citation system, footnotes are not used for citations, but can be used sparingly to expand on points in the text. Notes should be numbered consecutively and placed at the bottom of the page as footnotes. The corresponding note number in the text should be typed as a superscript.

Reference List/Bibliography

A reference list (also called a bibliography) of all the sources cited in the essay must be included at the end of your essay. The reference list should provide an accurate, alphabetically ordered by surname, and complete account of the sources you have cited in the essay. The reference list should not separate categories, eg books listed separately from journal articles. We have separated them here only to teach you how to list different sources. Where there are multiple sources by the same author in the same year, use the same lower case letter after the date you used in your in-text citation to differentiate between the sources.

Book


Multi-authored book

Singleton, Gwynneth; Don Aitkin; Brian Jinks and John Warhurst 2006 Australian Political Institutions, 8th ed. Melbourne: Longman.
**Edited Book**


Ivan Hare and James Weinstein eds. 2009 *Extreme Speech and Democracy* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Chapter in an Edited Book**


**Scholarly Journal Article**


**Newspaper and magazine where the author is named, and the source is hardcopy**


**Newspaper and magazine where the author is not named and the source is hardcopy**


**Newspaper and magazine where the author is named, and the source is online**


**Newspaper and magazine where the author is not named, and the source is online**


**Online source that is only available online, not in hardcopy**


**Government Report with named author**

Manning, Ben and Roberta Ryan 2004 Youth and Citizenship: A Report for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme Canberra: Department of Family and Community Services.

**Government Report with institutional author**

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) 2005 Annual Report 2004-2005 Canberra: AGPS.

**United Nations Document**


**Translated Work**


**Reprints of older Work**


**Book Review**


**Unpublished Work**

Style 2: Footnote referencing system

There are multiple footnote referencing systems in use in scholarly publications. To avoid confusion, please use the footnote referencing system as outlined in this Guide, which is drawn from the Chicago notes referencing system.

The reference in a footnote referencing system uses superscript numbers, and footnotes are numbered consecutively through the essay. Each time a reference is needed, a superscript number appears, which links to a footnote at the bottom of the page in which the reference is placed. It looks like this. The number usually appears at the end of the sentence, after any quotation marks, and after the full stop. Do not put a space in-between the full-stop and the number. The footnote itself lists the author’s name in the order of first name and then surname.

When a footnote repeats a reference that has already appeared in a previous footnote, you need to create a sensible, brief version of the reference that appeared previously to identify which one you are referring to, but you do not need to repeat all of the reference material. As a general rule, citations must include individual page numbers.

When using this footnote referencing system, you must also provide a bibliography/reference list at the end of the essay. This is because the actual footnotes cite the actual page or page range that you are citing, and in the reference list you put the whole page range of the journal article or the book chapter. Also, in the footnotes if a book has four or more authors you use ‘et al’, and in the reference list you write the names of all the authors out in full.

Examples of footnotes

Books with one, two or three authors


Books with four or more authors


Edited book


Chapter in an Edited Book


Scholarly journal article


Scholarly journal article that is available online with a doi


Newspaper and magazine article where the author is named, and the source is hard copy


Newspaper and magazine article where the author is not named and the source is hard copy


Newspaper and magazine article that you accessed online


Material sourced online that is only available online


Government Report with named author


Government Report with institutional author


United Nations Document


Translated book

**Book review**


**Unpublished Work**


**Re-citing items that have already appeared in an earlier footnote**

23. Singleton et al., *Australian Political Institutions*, 60.
32. Stolberg and Pear, “Wary Centrists.”
33. Bush, “President’s Address.”
34. Manning and Ryan, *Youth and Citizenship*, 103.
39. Kirchner, review of *Australia’s Money Mandarin*, 569.

**Reference List/Bibliography**

When using the footnote referencing style, you still need to provide a reference list at the end of the essay. This is because the items as they appear in the reference list contain the full source information, eg the page range of book chapters and journal articles and not only the page/s that you cited in the footnote.

The formatting for the reference list is different from the formatting you used in the footnotes. So please pay particular attention to the formatting in the reference list. For example, you include all your items in the reference list in alphabetical order with the surname listed first, then the first name (which is the opposite of the order you used in the footnotes themselves), and you do not use brackets around the publishers, place of publication and year.
Please use the following format in the reference list:


