School of Political Science & International Studies

ESSAY GUIDE

Table of Contents

This Essay Guide is designed to help you plan, write, and format a standard essay in the School of Political Science and International Studies (POLSIS). Please note that this guide only applies to essays and that you may be asked to do other types of assessment that require a different approach to preparation. **In all cases, seek and follow the advice of your Course Coordinator – they are paid to speak to students!**

Planning your Essay

Before you start writing, it is important that you first plan your essay.

There are seven major steps to planning good essays:

1. Choosing an Essay Topic
2. Understanding the Task
3. Developing an Argument
4. Doing Academic Research
5. Reading
6. Creating an Essay Outline
7. Taking Notes

1. Choosing an Essay Topic

Effective time management is essential to successful tertiary study. You must consider the workload that is required in all your courses and plan accordingly, especially when you have multiple assessment deadlines that overlap. Therefore, you should choose an essay question/topic early in the semester and begin working on it with the intention of producing more than one draft. If you leave your essay until the last minute and prepare it in a frantic rush, then the quality of your work will suffer.

2. Understanding the Task

The most common problem in undergraduate essays is that students do not follow the instructions. Once you understand what your task is, you need to break it down into its component parts. Start by highlighting the **directive words** – e.g. is, can, how, discuss, analyze, compare – and then in a different colour highlight the **content words**, e.g. state, politics, peace. Then you can think about what the essay question is asking you to do.

Suppose, for example, the following question was asked: 'Is a two-party system necessary for the existence of representative democracy?' The form of this question can be rewritten as:

Is X necessary for Y?

This means that you need to research:

*   the nature of Y (representative democracy)
*   the relationship between X (a two-party system) and Y (representative democracy)

At this stage the best starting point will usually be revisiting lecture notes/recordings and reading relevant

texts from course lists. (But note that lecture notes/recordings should not be cited in your essay.)

3. Developing an Argument

Once you have a good sense of what the essay question is asking you to do, you can start thinking about what your argument will entail. One of the most common mistakes that students make is **failing to advance an argument**, also known as the **thesis** of your essay. This should be a direct response to the essay question and usually it will also provide the primary justification for your answer. For example:

> I will argue that a two-party system is only one possible outcome of representative democracy, hence it is not necessary for its existence.

You are expected to demonstrate your understanding of your chosen topic by drawing upon **scholarly and reliable** evidence, theories, and research findings (see below at 4). This means that you need to be careful about which sources or information you use. It also means that, rather than simply reproducing relevant information or repeating other people's arguments, you need to critically assess their importance and implications for your argument. This requires an **analytical, evidence-based approach that exceeds mere description**. You should be aiming to convince a sceptical reader by weighing the evidence in a clear and balanced manner.

Doing this will help you to avoid one of the most common mistakes that students make – they only include evidence for one viewpoint. A well-rounded discussion will weigh competing perspectives and counterarguments before coming to an overall conclusion.

4. Conducting Academic Research

One of the distinguishing features of university writing is its fussiness about what counts as a reliable source. If you report that the unemployment rate is 4 per cent, for example, then your reader is entitled to ask: says who? The best guide regarding this fact would be the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Almost as good is the Reserve Bank of Australia. A newspaper article is down the list, while what you heard in the pub is at the bottom.

When it comes to academic knowledge, authority comes from what is known as '**peer review**'. The claims in a book that is published by Oxford University Press are guaranteed by that institution's processes of peer review – sending the draft manuscript for review by experts in the field who then assess its credibility, correct errors, and suggest changes. Something similar can be said for an article published in the journal *Review of International Studies*. But there are no such guarantees for most claims that circulate online. **Scholarship** is attuned to this fact and works with an implicit hierarchy:

1. Books from university presses and high-quality journals
2. Other academic books and journals
3. Textbooks
4. Non-academic books and texts, including newspapers

You should focus on (1) and avoid (4). The UQ library provides you with numerous tools to streamline your academic research. First, you can refine your results to only include sources that have been peer-reviewed. Second, you can use the UQ database library to access various global repositories that host a large number of politics and international relations journals, including the *Social Science Database, Sage Journals, JSTOR, Project MUSE, Taylor and Francis,* and *Wiley Online.*

Most courses provide students with reading lists and **academics can recommend the best journals in the**

field. But you can also use common sense. For example, if you are taking a course in Political Science, then don't rely on a journal titled *Global Hip Hop Studies*. The best essays will provide evidence of in-depth engagement with the scholarly literature, which will only result from sustained reading. In other words, there are no shortcuts – writing good essays means reading a lot before you start writing.

More on Types of Sources

Primary Sources: These sources are documents that were created during the period under study and therefore constitute a 'first-hand' account or evidence that an event actually happened. Primary sources may include speeches, interviews, government reports, United Nations treaties, statistical data, books, and newspapers (but see below for newspapers as poor secondary sources).

Secondary Sources: These are usually commentary or scholarship that provides accounts of the events disclosed in first-hand sources.

Newspapers and News Periodicals: Newspapers can constitute either primary or secondary sources. However, they must be used cautiously as they are not scholarly and often promote a specific viewpoint rather than a balanced critical analysis. While newspapers can be useful repositories for facts, commentaries and current affairs, they do not provide a coherent analytical framework. The UQ Database Library has subscriptions to many national and international daily and weekly newspapers, most of which can be accessed via *Factiva*. In short, you should not use newspapers for secondary sources. But they are brilliant when used as primary sources.

For example, you might claim that 'The victory of Donald Trump in 2024 was treated with joy by *The Australian*' and then reference articles in that paper following his election victory in November 2024. Here *The Australian* is being used as a **primary source** – as evidence of something that happened in November 2024. But if you write 'Trump's return to power has been good for the global economy' and then reference articles from *The Australian*, then you are using that publication as a source of authoritative knowledge about the world, i.e. as a **secondary source**. But newspapers are not peer reviewed and not written by academics as academics. This is why they are given the ranking of (4) in the list above.

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 [Home – Parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au)](#). The Queensland parliament *Hansard* can be found at [Record of Proceedings (Hansard) - Queensland Parliament](#). The searchability of these databases has come a long way, so a quick search will often deliver the perfect primary-source quotation for your essay.

Internet Sources: You can access a wide range of scholarly journals and e-books online via the UQ library or by using [Google Scholar](#). However, you should be wary of relying on other internet sources as their reputability cannot be as easily established as peer-reviewed scholarly literature. Google Scholar also allows you to see who has cited a source. This is a quick way to discover how a field has developed since a seminal text.

In situations where you have to discuss a contemporary issue/topic, publications from think-tanks (such as the Lowy Institute or Australian Strategic Policy Institute) are a good way of obtaining critical analyses of current events and bridging the gap associated with books and journal articles, which are usually out of date as soon as they are published. However, reliance on these types of sources as secondary sources should normally be minimal and limited to this purpose.

DO NOT use these sources in an academic essay because they belong in group (4):

- Online user-updated encyclopedias such as *Wikipedia*
- Online dictionaries such as *Britannica*

- General information websites such as *History.com* and *E-International Relations*
- Blogs, newsgroups, email lists, personal or anonymous websites
- Lecture slides and other course content

5. Reading

A good essay requires wide reading. This will help you develop the breadth of knowledge necessary to evaluate ideas and arguments advanced by others. However, mere quantity is not enough: you should focus on high-quality academic sources from group (1).

It is usually best to read from the general to the specific. Begin by reading overviews of the field or introductions to the topic and then move on to more detailed treatments. Please note that while individual courses and assignments may require different amounts of reading, it is not possible to write a convincing essay by only using a limited number of sources. If you are doing a BA, then you can think of yourself as a professional reader!

6. Creating an Essay Outline

Once you have analysed the question and completed your preliminary reading, you need to organize your ideas into an outline. This is to 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/mapping approach, putting boxes on the page for each component (e.g. 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. Referring back to the above example, each body paragraph may be assigned a heading that addresses a specific component of the essay question (i.e. the nature of representative democracy, the role of political parties in representative democracy etc).

It is also important at this stage to keep in mind the **word limit** and any other requirements set by the Course Coordinator. An effective way of keeping track of your word count is to assign an approximate number of words for each section of your outline. By identifying 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 is required for each section.

7. Taking Notes

Once you have created a basic essay outline, you can start filling it out with relevant information. The most effective way to do this is to take notes for each section 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 disorganized notes or to return to the books/articles and start again!

Always record the exact reference (including page number) for the information you write down in your notes. This is especially important when you use an author's words in the form of a direct quote.

Once you have finished your reading and notes, it is useful to take a step back and think again about what you

want to argue in the essay. Sometimes it helps to get distance from your reading and notes by waiting until the next day to revise the structure and argument of your essay or argument. (This is why it is so important to start the essay planning process early since it takes time for your ideas to consolidate.)

Building Your Essay Structure

Writing Your First Draft

As soon as you have incorporated your arguments into your essay outline, you are ready to write the first draft of your essay. Your essay should be written in **coherent and logical prose** that is carefully argued.

The structure of an essay typically comprises three parts: an introduction, the body of the essay (often comprising more than one section), and a conclusion.

Introduction: The introduction should do three things:

i)   introduce the topic to be discussed (usually only 1-2 sentences for a 2 000w essay)
ii)   clearly state the central argument (the essay's thesis)
iii)   outline the structure of your essay (the steps through which the argument progresses).

The Body: The body of the essay is where you will make the key points that comprise your argument. Body paragraphs usually start with a topic sentence that summarises the point of the paragraph and are typically 100-150w long.

The body may be broken into sections. For example, your essay might have a theory section and then a cases/examples section. Each section may be given its own sub-introduction and sub-conclusion. These are like guideposts for the reader and the longer the essay the more important they become. It is always a good idea to ask the person who will be marking your essay if they think it needs these elements.

Conclusion: The conclusion should briefly restate your key arguments and demonstrate how your analysis has enabled you to establish your thesis. Do not introduce new ideas at this stage of the essay!

Formatting and Revising your Draft

One mistake that students make is to write only one draft. To get the best possible mark for a university essay, you should allow yourself sufficient time to write **more than one draft**.

The aim of a first draft is to get your ideas mapped out on paper. Therefore, you need to think of it as an 'expansion' of the essay outline, rather than as a final product. The aim of writing subsequent drafts is to refine your argument and to achieve the best possible wording. The ideas are difficult: the writing should not make them more so. The gold standard is to read the essay aloud to yourself.

Presentation

Another important aspect of the writing process is to ensure that your essay is presented as effectively as possible. 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 include page numbers. Using justify to distribute the text evenly between the margins will give your document a polished look.

Paragraphs: Your essay should be divided into paragraphs that are between 100-150 words (although your introduction and conclusion can be shorter). Avoid having either lengthy sections or short 1-2 sentence

paragraphs. You should aim to address one key point per paragraph in your essay body before moving on to the next one paragraph.

Sub-Headings: Unless you are directly discouraged by your Course Coordinator, you should consider using sub-headings in your essay to help orient the reader to the essay's structure. You should also use headings sparingly (i.e. not after every paragraph; 800 words per section is a reasonable minimum for a 2 000 word essay).

Grammar: As George Orwell insisted, bad writing is bad thinking. To study a Bachelor of Arts is to be a professional writer for several years of your life, so you may as well work at your writing. The first step is to purchase a style guide (e.g. Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*) and learn the meaning of writing terminology such as 'passive voice', 'subordinate clause', and 'dangling modifier'.

Writing Conventions

Avoiding Bias

Bias refers to prejudices, preconceptions, or predispositions that distort your capacity to examine and assess material in a dispassionate manner. Bias occurs when you ignore and/or suppress contradictory data or evidence or present dogmatic views or opinions.

The best way to avoid bias is to draw upon a broad range of sources and evidence and then critically evaluate the arguments and assertions that they advance. One of the key elements that markers look for when assessing the depth of a student's knowledge is their ability to provide a balanced analysis that acknowledges the existence of alternative arguments and evidence.

Writing Style

Your discussion may be well researched and still fail to convey your meaning effectively if your style is flawed. The person marking your essay will likely interpret a lack of clarity as a lack of comprehension. Therefore, it is important that your response is articulated clearly. Here are some suggestions to improve your writing:

Role Models: Pay attention to the style used in the articles and chapters that you read when researching your essay. Model your own writing style on the work of authors whom you enjoy reading.

The First Person: For POLSIS essays, you may write in the first person. Hence, rather than writing: 'In this essay it will be argued that...' you could write 'In this essay I will argue that ...'.

Quotations: Quotations allow you to display the author's actual vocabulary, which is usually crucial when explaining a key concept. Quotations of **more than 40 words** should be presented as a 'block quote': indented on both sides and presented without quotation marks. Including the page number(s) for the quotation is essential. Quotations must use the exact wording and punctuation of the original text. If you want to omit words from the quotation, then indicate the omitted words with ellipses (…). If you want to add words or clarify comments, then you must include them in square brackets [like this].

For example:

> There are two primary theories that explain state expansion… One is the reductionist theory. The other is the culture theory. These theories are flawed because they presuppose the accuracy of [John] Mannheim's sociology of states, which subsequent research has shown to be empirically flawed (Buendia, 2020, p. 121).

Gender-neutral language: Avoid inappropriately gender-specific language. Groups of people should not be characterised as either male or female but rather be referred to as 'they/them.' The use of 'he', 'him', or 'his' as the default pronoun should not occur, while humanity in general should not be referred to as 'man/mankind.' Nor should you use female pronouns when referring to inanimate objects, for instance referring to a boat as she. If an individual uses gender-neutral pronouns, that person should also be referred to as 'they/them.'

Non-discriminatory language: Terms that are discriminatory or prejudicial to ethnic or racial groups are unacceptable in academic writing unless you are directly quoting to adduce evidence. 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. 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. Statements such as: 'the moment of truth', 'history tells us' and 'at the end of the day' should be avoided. It is also important to refrain from using language that is unnecessarily verbose, which often has the unintended effect of obscuring your argument. Equally, slang and colloquialisms should be avoided.

Numbers: Spell out the numbers wherever possible and use Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) for statistical information. Percentages are expressed as figures followed by 'per cent', e.g. 5 per cent ('%' should be used only in charts, tables, graphs and footnotes).

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*. When you refer to a term for the first time, you need to write out the full title, followed by the acronym in parentheses: for example, the United Nations (UN). In subsequent references, it is sufficient just to use the acronym (UN).

SECTION 2: REFERENCING

Which referencing system should you use?

For POLSIS assessments, you have the option of using either the **author-date style** referencing system (APA 7), or the **footnote** referencing system (Chicago).

Please note that:

- The Author-date style referencing system **will** count toward the word limit
- The Footnote referencing system **will not** count toward the word limit (but substantive content will count, i.e. comments in the notes such as 'Brown's discussion is interesting because it…')

The APA 7 referencing style guide can be accessed here:
https://guides.library.uq.edu.au/referencing/apa7

The Chicago footnote referencing style guide can be accessed here:
https://guides.library.uq.edu.au/referencing/chicago17-footnotes-bibliography

Once you have chosen a referencing system, you need to familiarize yourself with the formatting conventions for the different types of sources that you will use (books, book chapters, journal articles and so on). Be consistent in how you cite these sources and make sure that all of your citations are complete. Use page numbers wherever possible – you are trying to demonstrate to your reader that if they want to check your claims then they can use your references to do so, easily. Hence, a reference that only gives the publication but not the page number hardly helps!

Reference when:
- you quote an author's words
- refer directly to their material
- use their ideas to support your argument
- indicate a broad literature
- make factual claims about the world, e.g. growth rates, UN resolutions, the meaning of citizenship

If you are citing a particular scholar/political theorist whose work is quoted by a scholar in another textbook, make sure that you acknowledge this (i.e. Hobbes 1651, cited in Devetak, George & Percy 2017, p. 54). But this is always less impressive evidence than going to the original and reading and citing that source yourself. In the age of fast internet, there are few excuses for relying on somebody else to do your reading for you when you are trying to persuade the reader that you are both reliable and knowledgeable.

You should also consider using referencing software such as Endnote to keep track of your references. For further information, see here: https://web.library.uq.edu.au/research-tools-techniques/endnote-referencing-software

Reference List

You need to include a list of all of the sources that you have cited at the end of your essay. Your reference list must be correctly formatted and be alphabetically ordered by surname. Sources should not be divided into separate categories (e.g. books listed separately from journal articles). Reference lists are **not included in the overall word count**. The most common mistake that students make is failing to follow the detailed formatting conventions of a referencing system in their reference list.

Unless explicitly requested by your Course Coordinator, you should include a reference list rather than a bibliography. A bibliography refers to all sources that were consulted but not necessarily cited in the essay, whereas a reference list only includes sources that were cited. If you list 15 sources in the reference list but only cite 5 in your essay, the marker will assume that you have only read 5 sources. Please note that you are required to include a reference list even if you elect to use the Chicago (footnote) referencing system, although the formatting requirements will differ slightly.

Number of References: One of the most commonly asked questions from students is how many sources they should include in order to demonstrate that they have done sufficient research for their essay. There is no 'magic number' of references that can guarantee you a high mark since there are multiple criteria that students need to meet for their assessments. However, a useful rule of thumb is to ensure that they amount to 1/100 of your overall word count. In other words, if your essay is 1,000 words, then 10 sources will generally constitute a satisfactory amount, while you should aim for around 15 sources for a 1,500 word essay. Your Course Coordinator may stipulate different expectations.

SECTION 3: PENALTIES AND ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

Word Count and Word Limit Penalty

Writing to word length specifications is a skill and students are expected to write to the set limit. All words used in the text of your essay (including the title, quotations, block quotations, in-text citations, tables, figures and headings) count as part of the word limit (the reference list and citational footnotes do not count).

Essays are usually given a +10% leeway on the word count before a penalty is applied. For example, if your essay is 1 500 words, then you may write up to 1 650 before attracting a penalty. If your essay exceeds the upper limit, it will attract a penalty of 10 percentage points. (E.g. if your essay is worth 40 marks, you will lose 4 marks from whatever grade you are awarded.)

Late Penalty

If you submit your essay after the due date and time without an approved extension, then you will lose **10 percentage points for every calendar day** (including weekends) that your essay is late, and after 7 days your essay will receive a mark of 0. Therefore, it is essential that you manage your time to ensure that you meet all of your assessment deadlines. Each 24-hour block is recorded from the time the submission is due.

If there are extenuating circumstances that will prevent you from submitting your essay on time, you need to apply for an extension **before** the due date. For more information on what constitutes acceptable grounds for seeking an extension, click here.

Plagiarism and GenAI (Generative Artificial Intelligence)

UQ takes academic misconduct seriously. Penalties can range from having to resubmit an assessment and/or automatically failing the course (for lower offences) to being suspended or expelled from your degree (for serious/repeated academic misconduct).

Academic misconduct includes (but is not limited to):

(a) plagiarising the work of another person and presenting that work as if it is the student's own work, without appropriate acknowledgement;

(b) colluding with other students on individual assessment items;

(c) fabricating data or inventing references;

(d) bringing unauthorised material into an examination without the permission of the supervisor or leaving the material with the examination supervisor immediately on entering an examination;

(e) submitting the same work or recycling work without prior permission of the Course Coordinator;

(f) violating policies and procedures and rules governing administration of examinations;

(g) violating any policies and procedures and rules relating to academic conduct of a course or program.

Using the arguments, ideas or words of another author without acknowledging them via a citation or reference constitutes plagiarism. You will lose marks (in addition to risking being cited for academic

misconduct) if you leave large tracts of text unreferenced and consequently fail to acknowledge where you got your ideas from.

GenAI is an exciting but flawed technology. The University and the School are monitoring this new technology and its potential, and policy at both levels is changing frequently. In addition, policy differs from course to course. Accordingly, you must **read each course profile individually** to discover the GenAI policy and whether its use is required, optional, or constitutes misconduct for a given piece of assessment. If you are uncertain, please contact your Course Coordinator.

Collusion/Contract Cheating

You should not lend your original work to others for any reason unless directed to do so by your Course Coordinator. Nor should you collude with other people, including but not limited to fellow students, when completing your assessment work unless so directed by your Course Coordinator (for instance, if you are undertaking a group essay).

The term 'contract cheating' covers both paid and unpaid agreements made by a student with a third party to complete assessments for them. Any students that are found to have engaged in contract cheating will face severe academic penalties.

Click here for more information on what plagiarism and academic misconduct entails.

SECTION 4: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you have any additional questions about an assessment task, please contact your tutor and/or Course Coordinator. It is a part of an academic's job to help students with these issues.

There are also a range of services that students can access to help them with challenges (academic and non-academic) that arise during university study. These include:

POLSIS Student Support: https://polsis.uq.edu.au/student-support

Student Services: https://my.uq.edu.au/student-support