

Hammering  
the prose.  
An academic  
guide to writing  
essays



Once you have researched and planned your essay, it is time to start writing. An essay presents an opportunity for you to develop and express your ideas and opinions on a topic of interest to you.

It is important to remember that an academic essay should communicate your ideas with clarity and precision and represent a balanced approach to your chosen subject.

## Contents

1	What is an essay?	3
2	Quality versus quantity	6
3	A ‘well researched original piece of work’	7
	3.1 Referencing	7
4	General advice	7
5	Writing the first draft	8
	5.1 Constructing an argument	8
	5.2 The paragraph structure	9
	5.3 Linking ideas — keeping your essay coherent	10
	5.4 Academic writing	15
	5.4.1 Quality academic writing	15
	5.4.2 Abbreviations	15
	5.4.3 Voice: active or passive	16
	5.4.4 Tenses: past, present or future	16
	5.4.5 Sentences	16
	5.4.6 Paragraphs	16
6	The second draft	17
	6.1 Editing tips	17
	6.2 Strategies for proof-reading	18
	6.3 A time management issue	19
7	Writer’s block	20

# 1. What is an essay?

You may be familiar with essays from previous study, but it is worth reminding yourself what is expected. Different subject disciplines may emphasise different features, but broadly speaking essays should:

- Be a piece of continuous writing
- Have **clear paragraphs** – you may find the use of sub-headings helpful
- Have a clear line of thought. This should involve the **development of an ‘argument’** in response to a central question or proposition
- Contain supplementary ‘evidence’ or examples that you are required to analyse and which support or contradict perspectives on the material
- Contain a conclusion which pulls together the threads of your essay
- Be clearly written so that your ideas and knowledge are communicated to the reader. This entails using language effectively and constructing good sentences
- Contain relevant information to ensure that you answer the question which has been set
- Avoid plagiarism (using others’ ideas and words as if they were your own) by including **citations, references** and a **bibliography**

## Writing an essay is about:

- Developing your thinking and evolving your understanding and knowledge of a subject – this does not necessarily happen in a linear, neat and tidy way
- Organising your thoughts, while gathering information and writing
- Organising the structure of the written product
- Being aware of and developing expertise in the construction of well written English for academic purposes – remember the writing style will vary according to the subject you are studying and the ‘rules’ of writing for that discipline

## The writing process can be divided into discrete elements that you have to manage:

- Searching across a variety of sources for information (see the academic skills guides *Making the case* and *Navigating the page* for more help on research)
- Drawing together information in order to ‘shape’ or ‘re-shape’ it in line with your essay title or thesis statement (see the academic skills guide *Posing the question* on planning your essay)
- Drafting and editing your thoughts
- Proof-reading and eliminating errors

Just stop and think about two aspects of how you organise your essay writing. First, how you organise your writing, and secondly, how you organise your thoughts:

Thinking about how you organise yourself while writing may change the way you go about the whole writing process:

	YES or NO	COMMENTS
1 I always have a framework for my essay before I start writing.		Some people need the whole picture before they start writing. You should have a plan before you start writing. This will give you a good framework to work from. If, however, you are a mixture of 1 and 5 think about developing a little more of 2. You don't want to get stuck at this phase, so get writing.
2 I just start writing and then the ideas start to flow.		You may just need a hint of an idea and then the writing process kick-starts you and the ideas start to flow. If you do this, let your writing flow until you get some ideas, but you must stop early on and get a plan that gives your work a structure otherwise it could just ramble. Think about joining this with 4.
3 I can't start writing until I have all the information.		See 1 and 2 above – be careful you don't drop into method 5 below.
4 Once I have a plan I can read and start writing the parts I know.		This can help take the pressure off you having to have the whole thing in your head. However, make sure you know where in your structure the parts you are writing will fit.
5 I just can't get started and keep reading and reading.		See 1,2,4. Read the section on Writer's Block below.
6 I am happy to go back and edit as I am writing or edit in one go at the end.		This is good – do edit. This is also 'time out'. All good writers edit, poor writers do not. It is your preference if you edit during or at the end of your essay, but do not let the editing process distract you from your writing. Think about how you do this now and if you think it is effective.
7 I rarely edit my work because it takes me so long to write it, and I don't have time.		Do try and incorporate editing as part of your writing process. It is 'time out' to let you think about what you have written – you may want to move a section or perfect your writing style. See the section on Proof-reading.

Thinking about how you organise your thoughts and how you structure your writing may change the way you manage the writing product itself.

	YES or NO	COMMENTS
1 I'm never sure of the style I need to write in.		Check with your supervisor, as they may stipulate a style. If not, as you read you will begin to realise the style for your subject area. <b>Generally</b> however, you need to write objectively (not using 'I') and any claims you make must be supported by evidence from research or text books that refer to research.
2 My supervisor says that my writing doesn't 'flow' properly.		You need to understand how paragraphs work. See sections on paragraph structure below. Each paragraph develops an idea and each of the ideas should flow together to produce an 'argument' for your text.
3 My spelling is awful and it can give me a mental block when I am writing.		Quite a few people have problems with spelling, however using a word processor will allow you to spot most of your errors – make sure you use this. You may also ask a friend to quickly read your essay for spelling errors that may have been missed. This is part of the proof-reading process that you should do at the end of your work.
4 My sentences can be very long (or too short), but I don't know how to change that.		There is a danger that inexperienced writers produce long sentences when they would do better with several shorter ones. Read your work out loud according to your punctuation. If you pause and there is no comma or full stop check to see what is needed.
5 My essays are returned with comments on my grammar.		Improving your grammar comes with practice. Word processors can also pick up strange grammatical structures (although not all mistakes), so check it out, but you may decide to keep a structure if you feel it is right – the grammar checker is not particularly good for academic English.

## 2. Quality versus quantity

Spending a long time writing essays and writing a lot of pages does **not** equal better marks. Improving your writing techniques, strategies and style will help you to gain better marks.

### Low marks

- Does not answer the question or consistently address the hypothesis posed
- Does not demonstrate understanding of the objectives for the essay
- Is overly descriptive
- Simply restates, even in your own words, what you have read in a book or heard in a lecture
- Lacks analysis
- Does not assert points effectively and has poor reasoning
- Takes only one point of view
- Has weak structure and organisation
- Has poor paragraph structure
- Has weak sentence construction, paying little heed to formal grammar and punctuation rules
- Lacks reflection
- Has insufficient supporting evidence

### Good marks

- Answers the question
- Develops a clear and sound argument
- Provides supporting evidence for arguments made
- Shows appropriate selection of information, theories and issues
- Shows relationships between different and sometimes conflicting information, theories and issues
- Demonstrates understanding of the subject by synthesising (pulling together) other people's ideas and views
- Can use evidence and relevant examples
- Shows you can develop alternative explanations or proposals
- Shows reflection and thought
- Draws conclusions without simply repeating what has gone before
- Is well structured and has given consideration to 'the reader'
- Is written with well-constructed sentences and paragraphs
- Selects appropriate quotations to back up ideas
- Uses referencing systems with accuracy

You could use this as a checklist when drafting your work to make sure that you have met as many of the criteria for good marks as possible.

## 3. A ‘well-researched original piece of work’

You will be expected to produce a ‘well-researched original piece of work’. Originality does not mean that nobody has thought of your idea before. Originality means that you have:

- Thought about the subject
- Researched it well
- Made the subject matter your own

If all your arguments are presented in a concise, well-reasoned way, then the assignment will be on the way to a good mark, whether your ideas reflect those of your supervisor or not.

Do not be afraid to suggest new ways of looking at ideas, but always support your insight with reasoned argument.

### 3.1 Referencing

Make sure that you indicate which are your original thoughts and which are the ideas or quotations of others through proper referencing of your material in footnotes. It is important to check that you have included all the references you need and have not left any sources unattributed. Full referencing makes your argument more convincing as the reader can see the reliability of your supporting evidence. You will also avoid the possibility of plagiarism. If you are unsure about plagiarism or how to reference, see the academic skills guide *Acknowledging knowledge* on referencing your work.

## 4. General advice

### Keep writing

The most important thing to do at this stage is to write. So, get busy writing. Write in your own words except when you are using carefully selected quotations. But the main thing at this stage is to write something down.

- If you write in longhand, get words on paper
- If you use a computer, get words on the screen

On a computer, keep saving to disk or memory stick at 5-10 minute intervals, and make a back-up at least once a day. If you have trouble composing your assignment with pen or computer, then try dictating it onto a digital recorder, and copying it out later.

### The inner critic

Writing and editing are different jobs, and need to be kept separate. Each of us has an inner critic who is ready to damn our efforts. Fend off your inner critic for now. The role of the inner critic will come into play when the first draft is finished. If you start criticising your work too soon, then there will not be a first draft to work on.

### Distractions

All sorts of stray thoughts will emerge to try to distract you from writing. List all these ‘must-do’ tasks on a notepad so they can be dealt with later.

### Breaks

You need to take regular breaks. If you are working at a computer, you need to rest your eyes and hands every hour or so. Try not to take a break when you have just finished a brilliant paragraph or section; write the first sentence of the next paragraph so it is easy to get back into the flow when you return after your well-earned break.

## 5. Writing the first draft

After analysing the question, collecting and organising information, and making an essay plan or outline:

- Write a thesis statement
- Develop an argument that can link together your ideas across paragraphs
- Develop the evidence that you have found stating who says what
- Be objective in your presentation of arguments
- Come to your own conclusion by evaluating the evidence you present
- Edit and re-draft until you are satisfied
- Proof-read your work

### 5.1 Constructing an argument

Every essay question or hypothesis will require an argument or statement of position, so when writing an essay it is essential to **construct a coherent and logical argument**. An argument is a particular stand on an issue or question. It is important to decide your overall argument from the start and then refine it as you write the essay. It is difficult and very time-consuming to change your argument once you have written a large portion of an essay.

This section will advise you on how best to write an effective argument. Each point you make (topic) and supporting evidence (topic development) should be **critically argued** in relation to your claim (thesis statement).

#### **Thesis statement:**

In order to develop an argument, you will need to carefully write your thesis statement (i.e. the subject you are going to discuss, or answer to a question). The thesis statement is vital. It is the point from which you develop your supporting arguments and evidence. As such, make sure that the thesis statement contains points that you are able to develop rather than broad statements that lead to generalisations which are not possible to substantiate.

#### **Topic:**

The topic (i.e. the point you wish to make) of each of your supporting paragraphs will act as mini-thesis statements at the paragraph level. They help to focus your discussion. To do this you need to evaluate and criticise what you read in relation to your thesis statement.

#### **Topic development:**

Supporting evidence shows that you are looking at the evidence, or findings of other researchers, in support of your thesis statement. You need to show that you are looking at this information fairly and with a critical eye. Any conclusions you come to are due to the evidence you discuss.

When writing an essay, the thesis statement will appear in your introduction and conclusion. Each topic is usually in a separate paragraph, supported by the evidence for that topic.

Go back to an essay you have completed, or one you are working on now and work through the next activity:

	YES or NO	WHAT TO DO IF 'NO'
The claim I am making is clear from the thesis statement and I can easily argue from that point.		
I know where to get the evidence in support of my claim, e.g. 'agreed' facts, statistics, expert opinion (remember this is not 'fact').		
Some evidence is hard to acquire in order to support a point well.		If you really cannot get the evidence, you may need to rephrase your thesis statement to avoid having to discuss this point.
I am not sure if I have enough evidence to support my claim.		
From the evidence I present, I am unable to come to my own position on the claim I have made.		There may not be enough evidence 'out there' to come to a conclusion. If you think this, then say so and indicate how the research could develop. If you think the information is out there, you will have to look further. If you are having real difficulties, then go back and re-assess your thesis statement.

### What makes a strong argument?

An argument is strong if it convinces the reader that the conclusion is correct. An argument is weak if there are gaps or bad connections between the topics of each section or paragraph, which undermines their link to the conclusion.

A strong argument is:

- **Supported:** The evidence is convincing and objective, and it supports the claims made in the essay
- **Balanced:** The argument considers different perspectives, and comes to a reasonable conclusion based on those perspectives
- **Logical:** The argument is clearly and consistently reasoned. An argument that contains errors of logic is weak

### 5.2 The paragraph structure

Written work comprises a grouping of paragraphs. These paragraphs are linked coherently so that the document you write hangs together and develops a line of argument.

As you write each section of your assignment, and even as you write each paragraph, try to structure it like this:

- Introduce the key idea or topic of the paragraph
- Explain the idea
- Give evidence in support of your point
- Comment on the evidence and how it proves your point
- Reference the relevant opinions of academics
- Describe the relevance of this paragraph to your assignment
- Link this paragraph to the next

### 5.3 Linking ideas – keeping your essay coherent

Paragraphs must be linked together for an essay to have a coherent structure. Indeed, coherence must exist between and within paragraphs if they are to make sense to the reader. Very often topics in paragraphs are linked using similar words or concepts, although as a writer you should avoid too much repetition of vocabulary and information. Repetitiveness without development can make a poor essay. Just imagine you are weaving old ideas from previous paragraphs into new information so you keep the reader (and you) on track.

#### Using signal words to link your arguments

Signal words help the reader through the text and prepare for what is to come. They act as signposts that keep the reader on track. Without signal words, a text is quite difficult to read and can sound very stilted. So, if you are stating a new idea or giving an example in a paragraph, it is a good idea to use signal words.

The signal words you use are determined by the kind of essay you are going to write. Will you: compare and contrast, discuss cause and effect, describe something, highlight a problem area, or list things sequentially as in a process? You will know what to do once you have developed the different parts of your hypothesis. Complete the following tables with examples from your essays.

Signal words for listing or making successive points:

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE – COMPLETE THE EMPTY SPACES YOURSELF
Numbers	There are three reasons for... (make sure you discuss three!)
First	The first is...
Second	The second is...

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE – COMPLETE THE EMPTY SPACES YOURSELF
A major development	
The most important development/idea/ concept	
To begin with	
Next	
Later	
Furthermore	
In addition	
Afterwards	

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE – COMPLETE THE EMPTY SPACES YOURSELF
Finally	
In conclusion	

Signal words for compare and contrast:

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE – COMPLETE THE EMPTY SPACES YOURSELF
<b>Comparison</b>	
Similarly	The other robot was <i>similarly</i> affected.
Likewise	
In the same way	<i>In the same way</i> , the more advanced robot was unable to fulfil a series of parallel tasks.
In comparison	
<b>Contrast</b>	
While	He remained calm <i>while</i> his colleague lost his temper.

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE – COMPLETE THE EMPTY SPACES YOURSELF
But	
However	Bill remained calm, <i>however</i> , his colleague did not.
In contrast	<i>In contrast</i> to his colleague, Bill remained calm.
Even though	
On the other hand	
In comparison	
Not only... but also	

Signal words for cause and effect:

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE – COMPLETE THE EMPTY SPACES YOURSELF
As a consequence	<i>As a consequence of the operation, the patient was in constant pain.</i>
Because	
Consequently	The patient was in constant pain and <i>consequently</i> had to undergo further medical procedures.
As a result of	
Due to	<i>Due to a serious vehicle breakdown, the crew were unable to film at all that day.</i>
Therefore	The vehicle bringing the equipment broke down. <i>Therefore</i> , the crew were unable to continue.
The reason for...	
If... then...	
... with the result that...	

Signal words for discussing problems and solutions:

SIGNAL WORD(S)	AN EXAMPLE
The dilemma facing...	
The problem facing	
A major difficulty with	
A resolution to this problem is...	

Next time you read a text, make a note of how the writer uses these signal words. Then look at some essays you have written. How well do you signal to the reader what is to come? Also, note how the thesis statement(s) in texts are developed and how ideas and similar words appear throughout the text, keeping them closely woven together.

### 5.4 Academic writing

Whatever subject you are studying, your assignments and essays will require you to ‘write academically’ using a clear, objective or balanced academic style. Effective writing is clear and interesting. Here are six tips to help you achieve this:

#### 5.4.1 Quality academic writing

Try to make your writing:

- Clear: Avoid unnecessary detail
- Simple: Use direct language. Avoid vague and complicated sentences
- Objective: Do not state subjective opinion. Support your conclusions with evidence. Avoid assumptions and unproven statements such as ‘Everybody knows that...’
- Logical: Present the information in a logical sequence. Divide the text into sections with clear headings
- Precise: Avoid vague and ambiguous statements

#### 5.4.2 Abbreviations

Use standard abbreviations when you can. Define other abbreviations the first time you use them.

#### 5.4.3 Voice: active or passive

Sentences can be written or spoken in the active or passive voice. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence is the one doing the action to something or someone, for example, 'I am writing an essay on the computer'. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is acted upon (i.e. a third party is doing the action), for example, 'The computer is being used for writing an essay'.

The passive voice is useful:

- when it is not important who performed the action
- when you do not know who performed it or want to be deliberately ambiguous
- when you want to be formal
- when you are describing aims, objectives or theories
- when you are describing events or procedures

However, there are many cases when an active verb is much clearer than a passive one and can more firmly indicate the source or agent of an action. Use of active verbs can also create a more dynamic style as it is less wordy and more direct. Think about the point you wish to make and the tone or style of your essay when making your choices, and aim for a variety of sentence structures.

#### 5.4.4 Tenses: past, present or future

- Write in the past tense when you are stating facts or writing about general principles in the past (i.e. prior conditions), describing past events, procedures carried out or theories you think are no longer relevant or current. For example, 'The essay was being written'.
- Write in the present tense when you are stating current facts or writing about general principles, your own conclusions or the theories of others that you think still hold true. For example, 'The essay is being written'.
- Write in the future tense when you are expressing assumptions or speculation about the future after a situation has been analysed and considered in the light of evidence. For example, 'The essay will be written'.

Always ask yourself what tense you want to use in each sentence:

- the past indicates something that is finished or redundant
- the present indicates that something is happening now or still holds true
- the future indicates something that is yet to be determined in the future

You will need to be careful that you make shifts in tense clearly and consistently.

#### 5.4.5 Sentences

Help your readers by varying the length of your sentences. Sentences should not be overly long. If you cannot read sentences out without gasping for breath, then this is probably a good indication that you need to split them up into smaller sentences. Short sentences can also have a more dramatic impact on your style and keep the reader progressing through your essay.

#### 5.4.6 Paragraphs

Break your text up into paragraphs. Overly long paragraphs can diminish focus on the point you want to make and cause the reader to either lose interest or be unable to sort out the information you are presenting. In general, do not have more than one point that you wish to discuss for each paragraph.

**N.B. Remember when writing your essay to refer frequently to your essay plan/outline as this will keep you on track** (see the academic skills guide *Posing the question* on planning your essay).

Here is a very basic example of an outline as a reminder:

**Introduction: context, hypothesis, structure**

Context: Include a definition and explanation of terms and outline of the scope of your essay – what are the basic questions and issues being addressed? what topics will you examine and why? what will not be discussed and why?

Hypothesis: What position will you take?

Structure: Outline the basic structure of your essay

**Body of Essay: overview and examples**

Overview: General consideration or presentation of the background of the issues raised by the question and your angle or position on this question

Examples: What you consider to be the most relevant areas of discussion to make your point, but take into account opposing views and dissenting evidence

For each section/paragraph:

- What point do you want to make?
- Outline and discussion of the point
- Evidence to support what you are saying
- Link back to argument

**Conclusion: answer, argument, implications and significance**

Answer: Include a decisive and clear answer to any question set

Argument: A statement of your argument

Implications and Significance: What are the implications of your argument

All parts should make reference to the examples discussed.

## 6. The second draft

Once you have a first draft, you should think about **editing** and **proof-reading**, which are two **essential** aspects of the writing process.

### 6.1 Editing tips

When you have finished your first draft and left it alone for a day or two, you need to start editing. Many people find it helps to print out the first draft and mark it up in a different coloured pen, as you can choose the alterations you would like to make without losing sight of the original text. Also, it is easier to switch between pages as you check the draft.

Read the question again, and then read your essay through. Look for seven things:

#### **Sense**

Does it make the points you wanted to make? Are they clearly signposted?

#### **Content**

Do the examples and references support your ideas?

#### **Structure**

Does the essay move forward in a logical fashion, or does it need better structuring and/or sign-posting? Are you keeping to one topic per paragraph?

#### **Style**

Is it interesting? At the same time is it written in suitably academic language?

#### **Language and writing**

Are the sentences clear and concise? Are there instances of repetition? Is there any material which is not directly relevant to the point you want to make? Is there a good mixture of:

- short and long sentences
- simple and complex phrases
- active and passive verbs

#### **Spelling**

Check it even when you have run your text through a spell-checker. Spell-checkers do not tell you if you have put the wrong word entirely (e.g. from instead of form). If you know you have trouble with spelling, try to get a friend to read it through.

#### **References**

Double check that you have given references for every authority you quote, and that they are in the correct format for your course. See the academic skills guide *Acknowledging knowledge* for more detail.

When you are happy that you have marked up all the changes that you need, go back to the computer and edit the document. It is a good idea to spell-check it at this stage. Print it out, and repeat the process.

### **6.2 Strategies for proof-reading**

Many students are so pleased to have finished an essay that they cannot face this **essential** aspect of writing. If you find you have left your essay to the last minute, then you will have little time to proof-read and you will probably lose marks.

Proof-reading is different from editing in that it is all about spotting your typos, minor errors or poor sentence constructions.

- Every time you notice a mistake, note it down so you can check if it crops up again in another place in your essay.
- Be aware that spell checkers have their limitations. They will not pick out a 'wrong' word, for example, using 'their' for 'there'.
- You can set up your word processor to correct your frequent spelling errors. In Microsoft Word you can go to *Tools/AutoCorrect* on the top menu bar and fill in your frequent spelling errors with the correct spelling. As such, every time you spell that way in future, it will correct it for you.
- Be aware of the limitations of grammar checkers. They can be helpful for flagging up problems, but equally they can try to correct perfectly good English because they cannot recognise a sentence construction.
- It may help to focus on a particular type of error in turn, for example, if you repeatedly misspell certain words, you could do an individual search to find them. Use the 'find and replace' function in your word processor (control f) to search out and correct repeated errors.

- Check that you have not mistyped dates, references to sources or numerical supporting evidence by referring back to your notes.
- Look for unnecessary duplication of words, e.g. 'It is is a cold day', or omission of a word, e.g. 'It a cold day'.
- Search for repetition of vocabulary within a sentence or paragraph. Use a thesaurus to vary any repeated words.
- Check capitalisation and that proper nouns and abbreviations are punctuated correctly.
- Verify your use of commas and full stops.

A good way to make sure that you have commas and full stops in the correct place is to read out sentences. A comma or full stop indicates a pause in the sentence structure. For example, read out the following sentence pausing where there is a comma or full stop:

'Judaism and Christianity, share much of a heritage, there has been a good deal of interest in this phenomenon, lately with examination of, both the common heritage, as well as the elements unique to each religion there has, however, been no systematic attempt to present findings relative to both Jewish and Christian tradition, to a broad audience of scholars.'

If something sounds wrong when read aloud, there is a chance you need to check your grammar. The sentence should read:

'Judaism and Christianity share much of a heritage. There has been a good deal of interest in this phenomenon lately with examination of both the common heritage, as well as the elements unique to each religion. There has, however, been no systematic attempt to present findings relative to both Jewish and Christian tradition to a broad audience of scholars.'

- Check you have not used abbreviated language, e.g. didn't or can't.
- Ensure that you have filled in any gaps you may have left when writing.
- Check that your references are complete and accurate, with reference to your notes.
- Check the spelling of any specialist terminology used in the essay.
- Glance over your essay without reading the words to check that all the paragraphs and subheadings are aligned and formatted similarly.
- If you get bored then put your work away and do something else for a short period, otherwise you will read without really taking it in.

### 6.3 A time management issue

If you are going to check your work properly, you should ensure that you build in time to do it, and that you think about this when you are organising your overall essay time.

The time it takes to proof-read will vary according to:

- The length of your essay
- The complexity of the essay structure – essays will take different lengths of time to proof-read based on the number of chapters and sub-sections involved
- Your own ability to see your own errors

It is a good idea to leave at least one day between finishing your essay and reading through it for errors. The longer you can leave it the better, because creating some distance between the writing and the proof-reading stage will enable you to see what is on the page, rather than what you think you wrote. Remember everyone is different, so what works for your friend does not necessarily work for you.

## 7. Writer's block

We are all aware of the 'blank page' syndrome or writer's block. See if any of these apply to you:

	YES or NO	SUGGESTIONS
1 Do you sit for periods gazing at a blank page or screen unable to get going?		Do not feel you have to start from the beginning. Free yourself up by allowing yourself to start writing at any point in your essay – just think of it as writing down what you know at this point in time. You will find that as soon as you start writing, the ideas will start to flow.
2 Do you find that you have 'lost your way' when it comes to getting your thoughts onto paper?		Did you write a plan? Writing a plan and breaking the essay down into smaller sections makes it more manageable. Start with the sections you understand best. With a word processor you just cut and paste the bits you have written and re-arrange them.
3 Do you find yourself procrastinating and finding anything to do rather than get started with your essay?		This is often because you feel you are not 'ready' to start writing and that you need to read some more. Make sure you have read sufficiently and then give yourself a cut off point and say that from this date I will start writing whatever. Given adequate preparation, you will be surprised what you can write.

If you answered 'yes' to most of these you probably suffer from writer's block.

The most common cause is that you try to start writing your essay before you are clear about what you want to say. To overcome this:

- Make sure you know what the 'big picture' is, that is, work out a map of what you want to cover in your essay on a large piece of paper
- Make sure you are properly organised before you start writing
- Get all your notes for different sections of your essay clipped together and go through these, highlighting in colour the important features
- Some people like to use flow charts or diagrams to keep them on track while they are writing

- Try putting some sub-headings (in a different colour from your usual text) on the page to get you started, and some bullet points to help you think about the main points you want to put in the different sections or paragraphs

Here are some suggestions in case you get stuck:

#### **Re-read**

- your opening paragraph, which is the key point of your assignment
- your notes
- your mind-map and
- your index cards

#### **Talk**

- describe to a friend what you want to have in your assignment
- record it on a digital recorder and copy it out later
- if you cannot get anyone to listen to you, dictate your assignment as if you were talking to a friend

#### **Move Around**

- move around the room while you organise your ideas for writing
- move to a different place to do your writing, perhaps a different part of the library

If you still cannot get re-started, do not worry. Writer's block affects all researchers at some point. Take what you have done so far to your supervisor and they will be able to help you.