

## 5

## Research Essays



## developmental objectives

By applying the strategies, doing the exercises and following the procedural steps in this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize the unsettled meanings attached to the term 'essay'.
- Appreciate the meaning of academic argument in the context of research essay writing, and be able to distinguish ideas from opinions.
- Identify strategies for dealing with topics, compiling an introduction, building an argument, marshalling evidence, avoiding faulty reasoning and strengthening argument, working up a conclusion, and ensuring unity and coherence in your research essay.

This chapter provides a detailed focus on the research essay, which is a common form of assessment in taught classes, as well as notoriously challenging to do well.

### 'Essays' and their synonyms

It is helpful to be aware of the unsettled meanings surrounding the term 'essay'. Sometimes a **literature review** – reviewing the literature and developing an argument in the process of the review – is referred to as a research essay.

Or, alternatively, a 'literature review' can take the form of a research essay – the development of a line of argument strongly supported by reference to the literature.

A **position paper** usually takes the form of a research essay in that a position is adopted and developed by way of argument. However, with a position paper the argument often turns on what *should* be done, so that the argument itself becomes an instrument of change in some context or other (for example, government policy, legal or education reform). But this type of 'should' argument also frequently occurs in what is termed a research essay. It may be that there is no difference between a position paper and a research essay in graduate study, but do clarify this if needs be.

The **exploratory essay** is similar to a problem-solving exercise in that the approach tends to conform more to the type of approach laid out under → 'Business reports' in Chapter 9 than to development of a formal argument. Some shorter essays, though, explore a topic as an analytical exercise in which no firm conclusion need be reached. Or you may be asked to produce a **synoptic essay**, which usually involves providing a comprehensive overview of a subject or topic, drawing attention to key problems, concerns or issues, and, perhaps, assessing these before presenting a conclusion.

Essays can also be structured along various lines, such as the following, which may or may not be acceptable (you would need to ask):

1. Introduction.
2. Discussion of the 'pros' – points in favour of a question.
3. Discussion of the 'cons' – points that can be marshalled against a question.
4. A summary of the writer's own conclusions with supporting evidence (the most demanding part to write).

Given the variable understandings of the term 'essay' you may need to clarify expectations with your lecturer. Strategies for dealing with a short essay are now discussed before proceeding to full discussion of the research essay as formal argument.

### The short essay

Short essays, of say from 600 to 1,500 words, can be difficult, particularly if you are expected to read widely in the literature. This puts great pressure on you in terms of selection – what to include for discussion and what to leave out. First, confirm: (1) whether you are expected to deal with the topic precisely as set; or (2) whether it is permissible to narrow the topic in some way as, for example, if you were to address topic concerns in the context of a particular country, event or situation, or even focus in greater depth on some aspect of the topic.

In the case of (1), it is likely that a broad topic has been designed to test your understanding of what might be significant to discuss and in how much detail (perhaps, for example, certain key issues), with what you select to discuss being a consideration during assessment. Having identified what you want to cover in the essay, then think about the following:

- Main ideas you want to bring forward to develop your discussion.
- The best order in which to arrange these ideas.
- Building paragraphs around these main ideas (see → 'Effective paragraph development' in Chapter 4).

Perhaps you will do the above after writing a first, rough draft.

If (2) applies, you will need to confirm with your lecturer that your revised topic will be acceptable.

Short essays do evidence argument, as do theses, reports, other types of academic writing, and what is often called the 'research essay', as now discussed.

## The research essay as formal argument

The research essay is characteristically an *argument*, a term that has a special meaning in the academic context.

### Decoding the meaning of 'argument'

Argument is a type of academic writing, and, while argument will be the dominant discourse when you write your research essay, this does not mean that you will not be engaged in other discourse activities. Describing, explaining and informing will all have a place in the process of developing your argument.



#### key points

The amount of description or explaining you do, the amount of detail you include, should be controlled by what is needed to ensure your argument is strong.

An argument can be thought of as an **appeal to reason** in which you develop a position, sometimes called a point of view or thesis, on a topic or question. Taking a position involves the exploration of *issues*, though there can be confusion as to what is meant by this term 'issue':

An *issue* is a topic that sparks controversy within a community of speakers, readers, and writers. More specifically, an issue is a topic that creates a tension in the community, a discontent or dissatisfaction with the status quo. (Kaufer et al., 1989: 3, original emphasis)

Formal argument, then, is concerned with seminal issues, or sets of related issues, to do with the what, why and how of your research.

Your objective will be to convince your reader, even one unsympathetic to your position, that the position you develop in your essay is indeed **reasonable**. For your argument to be reasonable it needs to be a strong argument. A strong argument depends on the **quality of your ideas**, which, in turn, depends on the **quality of the evidence** you include to support those ideas, and the quality of your reasoning. Note that it is not necessarily a matter of whether the argument is true or false, right or wrong (the exception is the use of formal proofs), but whether it is strong or weak. All these observations are expanded on in the following discussions.

### Distinguishing ideas from opinions

Lecturers do want to know what you think, but they do not want your opinions. We all have opinions about a multitude of things, and, in expressing them in everyday conversation, we do not need to substantiate these opinions. Unlike an opinion, an idea does need to be backed up by solid evidence, and that is the essential difference between the two.

### Basic criteria applied in assessing essays

When assessing essays, lecturers will apply at least these basic criteria, and possibly others (Clanchy and Ballard, 1997: 4–8). It is expected that your essay:

- Will be clearly focused on the set topic and will deal fully with its central concerns.
- Will be the result of wide and critical reading.
- Will present a reasoned argument.
- Will be competently presented.

Each of these criteria is now explored in turn.

### Topics (or questions)

You may be setting up your own topic or question, have been given a specific topic or question to work on, or have selected one from a list provided by your lecturer.

## Setting up a topic

If you have been given explicit instructions on how to focus and develop a topic or question of your choice, follow these. Otherwise, consider these questions, because you need to be realistic in setting up a topic, presumably in an area that genuinely interests you:

- What is the word length of your essay?
- How much time do you have available for the essay?
- What is the scope of the literature in the topic area that interests you (too little or too much literature may leave you struggling in different ways)?

The real danger is in setting up a topic that is over-ambitious. A topic that is too broad will mean sacrificing in-depth analysis to mere coverage, allowing little opportunity for interesting and subtle insights to emerge.



### key points

Consider whether your topic will allow you to engage in in-depth analysis for a longer essay.

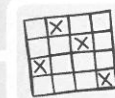
A useful starting point is to reflect on the nature of topics as set up by your lecturers. Such topics are usually designed to throw you into controversy, to force you to engage the issues with a view to taking a position and developing it into an argument. You are likely to be addressing a range of issues in your essay, although a single major issue is also a possibility. Take care to consider whether the issues or controversies that interest you relate back to course objectives by revisiting your 'Course Guide' (if you have been given one). Browse through lecture and tutorial notes to determine the types of issues being raised by lecturers. Consider also, for example, whether your topic is expected to engage theory, if theory is an important focus of your particular course.

As a last piece of advice: write out your topic in some detail so that you can have it approved by your lecturer before you begin your research. The more refined it is the more able your lecturer will be to assess its viability in terms of length and time available for research and writing.

## Analysing a given topic

Recall the above criterion for assessment: that your essay 'will be clearly focused on the set topic and will deal fully with its central concerns'. Interpretation of

the topic is the first point at which the writing of an essay can go wrong, as it is all too easy to rush into the reading (see also → 'Ensuring task-focused information' in Chapter 2). If you do not gather the best information to fully address your topic, then it will be impossible to write a great essay.



## exercise: analysing topics

As already mentioned, most essay topics are designed to force you to engage the issues as you read, and to evaluate different points of view presented in the literature (see → 'Treating information critically' in Chapter 2). So bear this in mind as you apply the following Subject/Angle/Process (SAP) method to analysis of your topic. A sample topic is used to illustrate how to go about analysing your own:

### Sample topic

If the arms control enterprise is a child of the Cold War, what use is it now? Should it give way to more radical disarmament efforts or is the arms control disarmament enterprise now irrelevant? Your discussion should take account of theoretical debates of current interest.

### Step 1: the subject

Ask yourself: *what* am I being asked to investigate?

With the sample topic it is simple: 'arms control'. But identifying the true subject of a topic is not always easy, as topics can be complex and have several parts to them. If you are uncertain about precisely what you should be investigating, get together with fellow students and brainstorm the topic and/or consult your lecturer – do not proceed to research if you are uncertain.

### Step 2: the angle

Now ask yourself: *why* am I being asked to investigate this subject matter?

At this point you want to ensure that you will deal *fully* with the central concerns of the topic, all of them. If you were a student in this discipline, you would be able to produce a more refined set of questions than that now offered, though this set adequately illustrates the all-important brainstorming process:

What is meant by arms control? Does it need to be defined or not? (Definitely yes, if there is no settled agreement on its meaning in your discipline.) Is arms control a child of the Cold War – yes or no? Now move to the central concerns of the topic:

(Continued)

What does the 'disarmament enterprise' consist in? (Do you know precisely what is meant by this phrase?) To what extent does arms control remain relevant – a lot, reasonably so, only minimally or what? In what precise ways does it remain relevant, or not? Are there security measures other than arms control that need to be taken into account post Cold War? What are these?

Evaluate the literature and ask yourself: what is my position on all this? (Take care to identify the **issues**, the points debated by scholars, and to gather evidence to support the position you will be taking in building your argument.)

Information providing answers to questions of this type would need to be gathered to deal effectively with the sample topic. By skimming (see → 'Managing your reading load' in Chapter 2), you should be able to avoid wasting time on reading material not directly relevant to your topic.



### key points

Brainstorm your topic to generate a set of questions that can be used to control your reading and ensure you acquire the best and right information.

#### Step 3: the process

Ask yourself: *how* should I conduct my investigation?

The sample topic contains a clear directive on process: 'Your discussion should take account of theoretical debates of current interest', meaning whatever else you do, you *must* apply the theory in your research essay. Apart from specific process directions of this type, other commonly used directional words and phrases are: 'Discuss', 'Explore this comment', 'Analyse ...', 'Examine carefully', 'Evaluate this claim', 'To what extent ...', 'Critically review ...', 'Compare and contrast ...', or 'Do you agree?'. Directions of this type always imply the need for argument. Engage the issues, and develop your own position using solid evidence as support when building your argument.

## Compiling an introduction

As the introduction serves only to orient your reader to your discussion, keep it short and to the point, something in the order of a page or so for a 3,000-word essay. Short it may be, but the introduction does have an important function in the research essay, as with all academic genres.