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# WRITING UNIVERSITY ESSAYS

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As an undergraduate student at university, you will probably be expected to do some writing in most of your courses. Even if the course doesn't require you to submit a paper, it may require you to write an essay examination. Therefore, an important part of learning at university includes becoming familiar with the structure of an essay as well as achieving the level of competence in writing expected by university professors. Writing skills are emphasized in assignments at university because writing is an essential tool for communication in the working world; these assignments help you to develop the critical thinking and writing skills that will be important even after graduation.

Some students believe that writing ability is evaluated only in courses within English departments. This isn't true at the University of Guelph, where all faculty are directed by Senate to grade not only the content of the assignment but also "the student's ability to use correctly and effectively the language appropriate to the assignment." What this means is that no matter how well-chosen your topic, how well-researched your information, how innovative your ideas, or how brilliant your understanding of the material, your grade will suffer if you cannot convey all that to a reader through a well-organized, clearly written paper. Writing is an expression of your thoughts. If your writing isn't clear, a professor will assume that your thinking wasn't clear on that topic either.

Written assignments in university can vary in **length** from a one-page essay question on an examination to a 20- or 30-page research paper. They can also vary in the **level of analysis** as well as in the **amount and type of research** required. You may be asked simply to describe a process or event, or to analyze or evaluate how and why that process or event occurs. Some assignments will require you to read and discuss a single work assigned to you, while others will require you to conduct some kind of library research to find out about your topic and to bring together in your paper information from a variety of sources. This is called **secondary research**, and requires you to learn to properly acknowledge your research sources when you write. (See other handouts in the Fastfacts series: [Using Quotations in your Essay](#), [APA Referencing Style](#), [MLA Referencing Style](#), [CBE Referencing Style](#), and [Chicago Referencing Style](#).)

**Primary research** occurs when you yourself make some observations on an experiment, survey or study, as is expected in science lab courses as well as in some social science and humanities research courses. But even those papers produced from primary research will usually involve the use of some kind of secondary research to discuss how your results compare to those of experts in the field.

## What Is an Essay?

The term essay is used broadly for many different kinds of papers. Essentially, an essay is a written document which discusses, explains, analyzes, interprets or evaluates a topic in an organized and coherent manner. The terminology used to refer to an assignment and the requirements for length, level of analysis, and amount of research vary not only between disciplines but also between courses within a discipline. Following are some examples of terminology which may be used in various disciplines.

*In an introductory English literature course, you may be asked to write a **literary essay or literary analysis** which interprets a poem, short story or novel, and which uses only that piece of work and your own ideas as your sources. In more advanced English courses you may also be using the published opinions of other critics to support and expand your interpretation.*

*An assignment which asks you to do some library research to write about a topic may be referred to as an **essay**, a **paper**, a **research essay**, a **research paper**, a **term assignment**, or a **term paper**. The terminology is not necessarily consistent: a term paper may tend to be a longer paper written in advanced courses, but not necessarily. You may be assigned a specific topic or asked to choose your own from subjects relevant to the course; the assignment will require you to read up on a specific topic, using either books or journal articles, and to integrate those sources to inform or persuade a reader.*

*An assignment requiring a **literature review or research review** may be asking you to choose a specific topic and then to read journal articles written by experts about their own research. In this kind of paper you will be summarizing and comparing the results of research conducted on that topic. In some advanced courses you may also be required to do some critical evaluation of the kind and quality of research being*

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done. The term 'literature,' as it is used in this assignment, refers to published research material rather than English literature or fiction. (See the Fastfacts handout [Writing a Literature Review](#).)

Although the word **report** may occasionally be used for many of the assignments described above, it is most often used to describe a **lab report** or **research report** written in science, psychology, sociology, or business courses to report primary research (see the Fastfacts handout [Writing Lab and Research Reports](#)).

A **book report** or **book review** is usually a summary of your critical opinion of one or more books, possibly supported by research into what other critics have said.

Overall, the message here is not to worry about what the assignment is called, but instead to concentrate your efforts on reading and understanding every detail of what is asked of you in the assignment description. Some professors may include details about not only the length and due date, but also the number and kind of research sources to use, the kind of information to include, and even the method of organization to follow. Pay close attention to those instructions, because they are the professor's guidelines to you about what he/she will be looking for in evaluating the paper. Therefore, when you receive an assignment, the first and most useful thing you can do is to **read the assignment instructions carefully** and make sure you understand what is required before proceeding. Check with the professor if you are uncertain about any of the requirements.

## The Structure of an Essay

In general, written assignments require you to include **introductory paragraph(s)** and **concluding paragraph(s)** as well as a **body** containing any number of supporting paragraphs. Some longer essays may require the use of headings for introduction and conclusion as well as for categories within the body, whereas shorter essays may not.

In the **introduction**, you should begin with the general issue and narrow down to the specifics of the problem you are discussing in your paper. Think of it as an inverted triangle. You should use the introduction to provide background information about the broad subject, identify the relevant problem or issue, and take the reader step by step to an understanding of why the specific focus of this paper is relevant to that subject. An introduction usually ends with some sort of statement of your focus (e.g., a focal statement, thesis statement, purpose statement, or hypothesis). This statement tells the reader specifically what point

you are going to make or prove in your essay, and, if possible, how you are going to go about doing that. You might therefore suggest the method of organization you will be using in your paper, but not actually provide the information about the points.

In the **body**, you are providing information and arguments that should follow logically from the point expressed in your focal statement and should support it consistently throughout the paper. The body is made up of a series of paragraphs: packages of information, each beginning with a topic sentence that identifies the topic of the paragraph in the same way that the focal statement for the essay defines the specific topic of the essay. This topic sentence also provides a link not only to the previous paragraph but also to the focal statement of the essay, identifying how this information contributes to the stand you've taken. The topic of the paragraph is then developed with sentences which may provide examples, details, evidence or analogies. A broader concluding sentence for the paragraph may also be provided to tie the information together and remind the reader of how it relates to the focus of the essay.

The **conclusion**, unlike the introduction, moves from specific to general. It often begins with a restatement of the focal statement, summarizes the main points of the supporting paragraphs, and ends with a broader conclusion about how the topic relates to the general issue described in the introduction. The general rule is that no new information should be brought into the conclusion: everything in the conclusion should logically follow from the information provided to the reader in the paper. Just as in a detective story you don't want to find out in the last scene that the crime was committed by a character you hadn't met, in an essay a reader doesn't want to be introduced in the conclusion to a major piece of information or evidence which wasn't discussed in the body of the paper.

## Writing Takes Practice

If all this information seems new or complicated, don't worry. Remember that practice will help you to improve your writing. And try following the guidelines contained in the Fastfacts handout [Improving Your Writing](#).

## Additional Relevant Fastfacts

- [Improving Your Style](#)
- [Plagiarism and Academic Integrity](#)

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## Need Advice or More Information?

[Writing Services](#), located in the Learning Commons on the 1st floor of the Library, is the best source on campus and online for advice and information on writing issues.

- Peer Helpers from a variety of disciplines offer individual writing assistance to first-year students and ESL students. And all University of Guelph students – undergraduate and graduate – are entitled to three free individual writing consultations per semester with our professional staff. Appointments are recommended.
- Visit the [Learning Commons](#) home page to find out about all our writing programs and services, or e-mail questions to [writing@uoguelph.ca](mailto:writing@uoguelph.ca).
- Fastfacts handouts (like this one) provide information on a range of learning, writing, and academic computing issues and are free to registered students. The complete range of Fastfacts is available on the [Learning Commons](#) website.
- More detailed information on writing university papers can be found in our Learning Commons publications, available for purchase at the Learning Commons reception desk or the campus bookstore.
- Workshops, seminars, and short courses on learning, studying and writing topics are offered regularly each semester. Please contact the Learning Commons for details.

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