

Essay Improvement

This is a summary of some of the most common areas for improvement in essays. All students should go through this sheet and consider how they are going to develop their work. This will help you in the structure and planning of your essay, as well as in writing model answers to exam questions. You may wish to make notes on which parts of this feedback sheet are most applicable to your own work; nobody is perfect!

What is an essay?

This may seem an obvious question. However, many students are often confused or have never had explained to them what an essay actually is. An essay is not a report, nor is it simply meant to state your opinion. An essay should be a structured argument. This term argument may be something you have heard lecturers use before. An argument is not a fight! An argument in this case is a piece of writing using a logical structure to investigate a question and develop an evidence-based response.

Area 1: Structure & Planning

Essay structure is something which can almost always be improved. Your essay should follow a train of thought that is clear and straightforward in the way it answers the question. Many students find it most helpful to write a detailed plan. The **use of a plan** can also assist you in planning your reading early on, as well as in identifying how and where you can use references to support your overall argument. A summary of the plan can then form the basis of your introduction. See the following example plan for an imaginary essay topic:

Essay title: Hills are dangerous and should be banned to the public. Discuss.

Introduction: In my essay I will investigate 1, 2, 3 & 4. I will argue that although hills may be dangerous places, the majority of visitors are well prepared to visit them.

- 1) Where does the idea that hills are dangerous come from? Indicate a few sources (e.g. reports of accidents)
- 2) Does this idea have a substantial backing? Identify key thinkers and sources of published work (e.g. Government – Office for national statistics, Organisations that manage public access to hills, hillwalking societies' publications, academic work on laws that allow access to the countryside etc.)
- 3) Present an example for discussion in order to illustrate two points: one, that hills could be understood to be naturally dangerous places, resulting in a lot of injuries each year (refer back to government statistics) but this could be down to foolhardiness of visitors, two, that well equipped visitors do find hills to be dangerous places, but with correct safety equipment they experience less severe injuries.
 - Example: "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water. Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill came tumbling after"
 - Details of example from detailed report: Jack had run off up the hill with no preparation, while Jill had ensured she had good boots and a walking stick, waterproof clothing and a safety helmet. Jack's accident resulted in a 'broken crown'

which required a trip to hospital, while Jill only suffered minor damage to knee and ankle.

- 4) Present further evidence that common safety equipment for hill walking is well known, advertised, and widely available (make reference to evidence from hillwalker's publications, Organisations that manage public access to hills).

Conclusion: Although in the example both walkers experience an accident, it is clear that the natural 'danger' of hills is well known and prepared for by the majority of visitors. These visitors rarely experience severe accidents (present references from government statistics, hillwalking societies), as they are well prepared with safety equipment, however this does restrict safe enjoyment of hillwalking to those people in contact with hillwalking societies who can afford safety equipment.

So how did I develop this plan? If you look at my introduction text you will notice that I have already written down my answer or argument in a short sentence; this is often called a 'thesis statement'. A thesis statement is a short way of stating what your opinion is, or where your argument is heading in the essay. The best essays will be very clear in identifying their thesis statement and it would usually appear in both your introduction and your conclusion. To decide on what your thesis statement will be, you will need to collect your notes and resources on the essay topic from lectures, seminars, your reading, and any other relevant learning activities. You should group this material together in themes that you think are important to the question; you might even consider using it to make multiple essay plans with slightly different thesis statements. Here are some alternative thesis statements I might have developed for the above essay title:

Thesis B Hills are not dangerous places when compared with urban environments where the majority of the population live; but they may pose risks due to being unfamiliar.

Thesis C Hills are dangerous places, but the resourcing of adequate emergency services such as first aid centres and search and rescue operations is sufficient to mitigate the risk to the public.

Thesis D Whether hills are dangerous or not, the regulation of public access to the natural environment is an infringement of people's rights to leisure.

Some essay titles will contain multiple important topics or premises that you need to work from. This title contains two: the **assertion** that hills are dangerous places, and the **inference** that there should be some form of regulation of public risk. An assertion is a statement of fact, that may be supported or disputed with the use of evidence. An inference is a statement or proposition that can be arrived at through a process of reasoning (or argument) that brings together related evidence-based assertions. In my alternative thesis statements you will see I intend to use different evidence to respond to the assertion, and to logically evaluate the inference in the essay title's statement. You may find that some of your essay titles will include multiple assertions, or will use a citation to a specific reading or source as a way of directing you towards specific evidence.

In my proposed plan, I order my points from the general (discussion of the danger of hills) to the specific (a worked example). This model is a common deductive structure for a logical argument, which aims to provide a strong argument or 'proof'. In deductive logic, this structure would mean every step in the argument has to have indisputable evidence that is directly related to the

conclusion. However, most essays in the humanities simply do not have many sources of indisputable evidence. This is because it is often possible to dispute the direct relationships between facts. For example, I could probably destabilise the logic of most responses to the above question by challenging how the author defines a 'hill' as opposed to a 'mountain' or another landscape feature. It is unlikely that the sources of evidence all specify this clearly.

Instead of a deductive structure, most essays in the humanities rely on an inductive structure. In an inductive structure it is only necessary that the author convince the reader that the conclusion is **likely** based on the evidence given. An inductive structure gives you more scope to use examples, provided you can convince the reader that those examples are relevant to the argument, and representative of the sorts of challenges the argument faces.

If you look carefully at my example plan, you will see that the argument is a bit weak in places, it relies only on one example to persuade the reader of its point. This would suggest that the essay needs to present references from other sources to indicate that the example given is representative of a more general state of affairs. Additionally, the essay needs to discuss the example in greater detail and perhaps support it with further evidence.

It is much easier to identify the logical weaknesses in an essay from a plan than it is when you write the essay in full without preparation. It is also easier to make sure you will fit within the word limit and to keep to the point in your essay, instead of accidentally becoming distracted from the essay question and elaborating on topics that are not helpful to your argument. To work up your essay from your plan, you need to expand on your plan to structure each point into one or more paragraphs. Each paragraph should include at least one sentence that identifies the topic of the paragraph, several sentences that outline your statements or claims, evidence to support these, and transitional sentences that explain the connection between your different paragraphs.

Area 2: Using referencing as evidence to support your claims

Referencing is the key to supporting your argument and to avoiding plagiarism (which is a fancy word for cheating!). If you make a claim in your essay, you need to show evidence for it (like in the example above). Claims are statements about truth. The way you write the claim emphasises its generalisability. A very general claim is one which indicates something is always true, or is true in a wide range of situations. This is called a 'big' claim. A 'small' claim is one that specifies a more particular or limited situation where it is true. The bigger the claim, the more evidence (references, or sometimes research data) you have to show for it.

Here are some examples of claims, and the amount of support needed for them:

Unicorns are real.	Enormous claim. Requires lots of support. References to papers written by eminent experts (not Disney's website) that report sightings, evidence of presence.
Unicorns are believed to be real by many people.	Large Claim. Requires substantial evidence that indicates presence of belief, such as community activities focussed on unicorns, not just what people say they believe.
Children act as though they believe unicorns to be real.	Small claim. Requires a few references to studies that show this is common behaviour in the specified group.

Children seem to act as though they believe unicorns to be real.

Everyday claim. Can be made with reference to personal experience only with no need for further evidence.

Everyday claims are the easiest to make, but are often the least helpful in getting your point across in an essay. Small claims might include statements such as ‘in my opinion’. The difficulty with these claims is that without sufficient supporting evidence they add little to the argument of your essay. Making claims is something you need to be careful about in terms of the language you use in your work. You want to ensure you mostly only use small claims as these are easy to support, but sometimes large claims are necessary. You can plan how to support your claims by making an essay plan like the one discussed above.

Including or not including page numbers.

Plagiarism. There is a lot of information available on the VLE already about plagiarism, so I won’t go into it here. Just remember that plagiarism can mean cheating because you have copied another student (or something online), or it can mean cheating because you haven’t explained where you got your information from (which textbooks, which articles, what websites). When students get told about how many references to use, that is because you are expected to be reading academic books and textbooks throughout your course. This is why we provide reading lists for you to follow up. When you exhaust the recommended reading provided by your lecturer you should explore further in the same topic area on your own initiative. This helps you learn all sorts of independent study skills. You didn’t think all your time outside lectures at university was for socialising, did you?

Area 3: Using examples

Examples are a great way of substantiating minor and everyday claims or illustrating points in your essay. Your examples might be academic work, or they might be examples from case studies or primary data (such as publicly available documents). Look at how I use an example (with references) to strengthen this claim:

Hill walking as a pastime, though rarely newsworthy, has recently become the subject of public attention due to media coverage of several high-profile accidents (BBC 2019; Guardian 2019), especially that of Jack Doe who suffered severe brain trauma following an accident hillwalking in Snowdonia (BBC Wales 2019;2020).

This example serves to both support my claim that hillwalking is currently relevant, and is related to the broader essay’s argument on the general safety of hillwalking. But it doesn’t add much to my answer. It just tells the reader that I think the question is worth investigating. It’s a good idea when you use examples to consider how much they really help you answer the question being asked. Although it can feel safe to include examples from your lectures or other course materials and readings, this ‘showing off’ your attentiveness and reading actually doesn’t gain you many marks.

Another challenge with examples is that they can take up quite a lot of the word count in your essay, as they require a lot of descriptive writing. You get more value out of your analytical writing, where you are applying an idea or explaining its limitations, so it’s better for you to choose an example you can use in multiple ways to get more ‘value’ out of it. In this document I keep returning to the “Jack

and Jill” example because it means I can make multiple points about essay writing in a topic-neutral way.

You might choose a specific example or case study to talk about in your essay because you are familiar with the case yourself, or because it has already been the subject of multiple research studies. Alternatively you might compare two case studies because they have relevant comparable features, such as below:

Rates of injury among hillwalkers visiting Snowdonia in Wales are substantially lower than those visiting the Lake District in North West England (Snowdonia Mountain Rescue 2018; Lake District Mountain Rescue 2019). In this next part of the essay I propose that as the landscape features are similar, it is the variation in investment in tourist facilities, in conjunction with the demographics of visitors that can account for the different levels of accidents among hillwalkers. This indicates the possibility that a broader range of interventions could have substantial effect rather than imposing an outright ban on visitors.

In this example you will note the essay takes a different turn, in line with thesis C proposed earlier. The essay proposes to use locally gathered statistical information to compare two different geographical areas as related case studies. These case studies offer value to the essay because they demonstrate other possible facts of relevance that the author could bring into the essay to expand the scope of the argument. In the example this shifts the discussion from a focus on natural risks and personal responsibility, to include considerations of local governance, marketing behaviour and investment patterns.

Area 4: Developing your argument

Some students will get their essays back with “you need to develop your points further” or “the relevance was unclear”. This is closely related to the essay structure. However, I remember when I was a student having trouble understanding what ‘develop your point’ actually meant. When you are answering the question, you need to show how the point you are making is answering that question, or contributing to your argument as a whole. To use the Jack and Jill example again:

		Contemporary discussions on hills and hill walking rarely refer to hills as dangerous places or objects for everyday walkers. [However, government statistics show a high proportion of serious accidents occurring on hills throughout the UK each year. In 2018 there were 269 incidents that required the use of an air ambulance, and over 1000 minor incidents that required hospital admission (ONS 2019).] [It could be said, then, that the dangerous aspect of hills is widely unrecognised by the public and hillwalking communities.] [In this essay, I will discuss the example of Jack and Jill as two walkers who experienced accidents in order to illustrate why this disinterest by the public is justifiable.] [Further, that the case presents hills as places where danger can be controlled with only a small amount of knowledge and preparation, and access need not be restricted to the public.]
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As you can see in this example, the point needs to be explained. Providing evidence is just the beginning. This is what is meant by ‘development’. Here, the paragraph shows 1) the reason the author has made the point (what they meant by it), 2) how the point is linked to the overall structure

and aims of the essay, as well as whether the author agrees or disagrees with the point, and 3) how this addresses the essay question.

Area 5: English, Grammar and Terminology

The level and quality of English grammar essays can often be significantly improved, and this point applies equally to native speakers and those for whom English is a second language.

Simple mistakes and typographical errors are a common mistake which can easily be avoided using a basic spelling and grammar check available with most software.

There are common grammatical mistakes which are often not picked up by software. Overall you need to work to improve your grammar both with and without the help of such software – it is unlikely to be available in an exam situation. Common mistakes such as the use of there/their/they're, its/it's and the general incorrect use of apostrophes (e.g. employee's denotes ownership, employees indicates a plural). A good way of improving your grammar is by practice!

Be careful when using synonyms, as often they have subtle differences of meaning which can result in you making unfortunate mistakes in essays. These two sentences do not have the same meaning, although every word changed is a synonym. The second sentence is really difficult to understand, even though it has no specific grammatical error! The worst culprit in this example is 'classified' because it means both 'categorized into a variety of groups', and 'restricted information'.

Research and theory can be classified according to different philosophical paradigms
Investigation and principle can be secret according to unlike moral standards

The best way to **expand your vocabulary** in order to express yourself more correctly and clearly in essays is to read more high quality written work on a regular basis. Often you will find it helpful to do so with a good quality dictionary to hand.