

ESSAY RULES

G A WALKER

There are no specific rules that have to be followed to construct a perfect essay. This will depend on a number of factors including the specific content of the question, available information and research resources as well as the experience and expertise of the writer. It is, nevertheless, possible to begin to try to develop some standard principles or guidelines of best practice that can assist produce a high quality essay product.

The general objective is to produce an essay that is clear and comprehensive. The writer has to be flexible but intelligent and simple but original. The purpose of this note is an attempt to develop some of these ideas in an outline form.

STRUCTURE

The structure of the essay can be considered to consist of the following core components:

(1) Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to identify the core subject matter, the main themes and sub-themes and to explain the structure to follow. Unless the writer has previous experience and his or her own ideas, a separate paragraph could be included dealing with each of these preparatory ideas. Depending upon the length of the introduction and essay, reference might also be made to the importance of the subject matter and difficulties involved although this is usually dealt with further in the development section below.

(2) Development

If the essay is in response to a problem question, the development will generally consist of a restatement of the facts with an identification of all of the key elements organised into an appropriate structure for examination and discussion purposes. The relevant law will be explained and the law applied to the fact pattern constructed.

If the essay is non-problem based, the development could explain the importance of the subject matter (if this has not already been achieved under the introduction). The specific subject matter will then be critically examined and assessed. This essentially involves identifying the difficulties involved and possible solutions available. For this purpose, the main advantages and disadvantages of each issue and option identified could be assessed in turn with an overall conclusion being drawn with regard to the total result or effect created. The objective is to be as analytical as possible through this critical pro (positive) and anti (negative) discussion style.

(3) Conclusions

The conclusions should summarise and review the argument or arguments constructed and then incorporate a suitable close. A closing paragraph or passage may not be necessary if this is a problem or a simple essay based question. In a more theoretical or longer piece, the main subject areas examined may be restated with a summary of the main findings and conclusions. In more substantial pieces, it may be considered appropriate to include a closing final section which opens up the discussion again and anticipates possible future developments in this area.

TEXT

The following points may be considered with regard to the actual writing style adopted or text construction followed:

(1) Relevant detail

The key words or issues to be highlighted are 'relevant detail' (or 'applied relevant detail'). The objective is to provide as much substantive content and detail within the permitted word length that is directly (and possibly indirectly) relevant to the subject matter.

(2) Subject and Length

The subject matter and permitted length should be used to determine the amount of detail required and its relevance within each part. A structured outline should be prepared before writing which attempts to identify all the key elements in the essay. This should be assessed having regard to the permitted length with allocated words being given to each main section. This might consist of introduction 2,000 words followed by 4 key sections of 4,000 words each and then 2,000 for conclusions and closing comment. This provides an immediate guide as to the relevant detail for each section.

Essay Rules

Relevance is assessed, having regard to the specific subject matter and the overall argument to be developed. Most detail must be directly relevant although some more indirect discussion may also be included to develop the analysis or depth of the discussion depending on permitted word length.

(3) Themes

An attempt should be made to identify all of the key themes and sub-themes at the preparatory structure construction stage. Well written essays are always constructed around one or more key themes that are introduced, developed and then reviewed in each of the main parts of the essay. The number and content of the main themes will be determined by the question and subject matter covered. The question may indicate which ideas the examiners wish to be discussed or this may be left to the essay writer to research and develop on their own. More sophisticated essays will also include one or more sub-themes that are also developed through the text and into the final conclusions and recommendations.

The main themes and sub-themes will be identified in the introduction and then re-stated and expanded through the development and conclusion sections. These should be used to construct the overall outline for the essay at the preparatory stage.

(4) Descriptive and Analytical Content

The essay should balance its descriptive and analytical content. Most essays will consist of a substantial amount of basic descriptive material that will provide the factual and legal background to the discussion. Students should not be concerned about including a large amount of such descriptive material as this is essential for any meaningful treatment of any subject.

This must, nevertheless, be balanced against more original analytical content that examines and assesses the main ideas raised by the question within the more core descriptive framework constructive. The amount and content of the analytical work included will depend on the subject matter concerned. Students should in all cases attempt to include as much of their own analysis and opinion as possible as well as the work of other commentators. This is essential to balance the simple repetition of descriptive material from the underlying primary or secondary sources used.

(5) Originality

Students should always attempt to be as insightful and original as possible. This originality can be reflected in the themes and sub-themes identified, the treatment or structure of the subject matter, application of the law or discussion of the facts, analysis produced or final conclusions arrived at. The best essays will attempt to provide originality at all of these levels.

It may be difficult to identify any original aspects initially. In such cases, the objective should be to develop the structure of the essay around the core descriptive material concerned. In so doing, students should look for the main themes and sub-themes and then the difficulties and possible solutions involved. Original observations may arise from the simple process of looking for advantages and disadvantages and conflicts and resolutions.

Where a large number of ideas are identified, care must still be taken with the overall word length. If it is not possible to deal with all of the material or discussion available, the main ideas should be identified and separated. An important initial selection process is then involved. In such a case, marks will be awarded having regard to the intelligence of the selection and the quality of the final results produced.

FOOTNOTES

The following points may be considered with regard to the use of footnotes in an essay.

(1) Primary and Secondary Sources

Students must not be afraid of using footnotes. If they have not used them before, they must begin at the graduate and post-graduate level. The main purpose is to identify the main primary and secondary sources referred to for research or discussion purposes. The examiner will expect the students to have referred to a number of key sources and these should be included within the footnotes and supporting bibliography.

(2) Key Terms

Essay Rules

Key terms used in the essay can either be defined in the text or in the footnotes. Where key terms are explained in the body of the text, an appropriate footnote should still be included to identify the source or to indicate that no separate source is involved and that the definition is being constructed or developed by the candidate directly.

Footnotes can also be used to demonstrate appreciation of other key terms and issues that cannot be raised directly in the text. These may still be indirectly relevant and of value. Footnotes can then be used to identify related subject areas and to refer the reader to useful primary and secondary sources for separate examination. This is commonly used in PhD treatises although its use in shorter essays will depend on permitted word length.

(3) Material Extension

Candidates should attempt to extend the range of primary and secondary material used beyond the minimum core works expected by the examiner. Examiners will always give additional credit for non-referred to and possibly less commonly used or more advanced or difficult footnote references. Developing the range of primary and secondary material used and the discussion of related subject matter through the use of footnotes can add substantial originality to a piece.

(4) Original Research

Candidates should also attempt to make full use of all available research resources. Enormous resources are available especially through the internet or other electronic data systems either tied to local universities or other publicly accessible systems or facilities. Students should make full use of all available services and attempt to incorporate the results of this original research into their text or footnotes and bibliography.

(5) Bibliography

Students should always try to attach a substantial bibliography to their essay. The bibliography should include all core material referred to in undertaking the research and which is either directly or indirectly relevant. Even where this is not specifically relied on in the body of the text, important source material should be referred to in the bibliography. This again adds quality to the final work produced and originality in the research developed.

STYLE

The written style used depends on the candidate's own manners and capability in English. Students are never marked on their style alone and grammatical errors will always be ignored. No marks are awarded for the quality of the English or marks deducted for errors. Students who are using English as a second language are usually advised to request a friend or colleague to review their text before submission. Perfect English is not, however, required.

In developing an original writing style, the following key points may be made:

- (1) Always try to be as professional as possible;
- (2) Be clear – the key objective is to allow the reader to understand your argument and analysis;
- (3) Be simple and direct – the best analysis is often the simplest – avoid attempting to construct unnecessarily complex arguments or discussion which only usually distracts and often annoys the reader or examiner;
- (4) Avoid unnecessary repetition (both within sentences and across the essay as a whole);
- (5) Avoid all conversational or casual language or references.

CONCLUSIONS

Never be afraid of attempting to deal with any subject matter. A quality essay can always be constructed from almost nothing. Respect the basic rules outlined above and it should be possible to produce a piece of work of a high standard.

Try to develop your own personal style over time although try to be professional, direct, clear and simple at all times. Always try to be as original as possible at the same time as provide the examiner with all of the more basic descriptive material and basic argument that is expected.

Try to learn to enjoy the creative process over time. Producing a well structured and well written piece of work can be highly rewarding from a personal as well as academic and professional perspective. **G A WALKER**

ESSAY RULES

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- INTRODUCTION**
1. NOT POSSIBLE CONSTRUCT PERFECT ESSAY BUT
 2. TRY TO DEVELOP STANDARD RULES AND BEST PRACTICE
 3. BE CLEAR BUT COMPREHENSIVE – KEY RELEVANT DETAIL
 4. BE FLEXIBLE BUT INTELLIGENT
 5. BE SIMPLE BUT ORIGINAL

I. STRUCTURE

- (1) **INTRODUCTION**
- (1) IDENTIFY CORE SUBJECT MATTER
 - (2) IDENTIFY MAIN THEMES AND SUB-THEMES
 - (3) IDENTIFY AND EXPLAIN STRUCTURE
- (2) **DEVELOPMENT**
- ESSAY**
- (1) IMPORTANCE SUBJECT **PROBLEM** (1) **FACTS**
 - (2) DIFFICULTIES [ADS AND DISADS] (2) **LAW**
 - (3) SOLUTIONS (3) **APPLICATION**
- (3) **CONCLUSIONS – SUMMARY AND REVIEW AND THEN CLOSE**

II. TEXT

- (1) KEY WORDS ‘RELEVANT DETAIL’ OR ‘APPLIED RELEVANT DETAIL’
- (2) RELEVANCE DETERMINED BY SUBJECT AND DETAIL BY PERMITTED LENGTH
- (3) IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP ALL KEY THEMES AND SUB-THEMES
- (4) BALANCE DESCRIPTIVE [SUBSTANTIAL] AND ANALYTICAL CONTENT
- (5) DEVELOP ORIGINALITY IN THEMES, STRCUTURE, APPLICATION, ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

III. FOOTNOTES ‘DO NOT BE SCARED TO USE’

- (1) DEFINE ALL KEY TERMS
- (2) LIST ALL PRINCIPAL INFORMATION SOURCES [PRIORITISE]
- (3) EXTEND ASSIGNED MATERIALS AND SOURCES [ORIGINALTY]
- (4) USE ORIGINAL RESEARCH [ANY SOURCES]
- (5) INCORPORATE INTO QUALITY BIBLIOGRAPHY

IV. STYLE

- (1) BE PROFESSIONAL
- (2) BE CLEAR
- (3) BE SIMPLE AND DIRECT
- (4) AVOID UNNECESSARY REPITITION
- (5) AVOID CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE

- V. CONCLUSIONS**
1. DO NOT BE SCARED
 2. RESPECT BASIC RULES – NO DIFFICULTY
 3. TRY TO BE AS ORIGINAL AS POSSIBLE
 4. TRY DEVELOP OWN STYLE OVER TIME
 5. TRY LEARN TO ENJOY THE CREATIVE PROCESS

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