



VILNIUS UNIVERSITY
BUSINESS SCHOOL

How to write a good essay?

Methodological tips and guidelines

Second, supplemented and amended, edition

Author prof. dr. Gindrutė Kasnauskienė

Reviewed by assoc. prof. dr. Elzė Rudienė

Editor Danutė Rasimavičienė

Vilnius University Business School

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INTRODUCTION

“Clear, concise thoughts help us live easier lives”

Cicero

In many universities around the world, essays (*essai* in French means “an attempt”) are an integral part of academic written papers relevant in assessing students’ knowledge and skills. An essay is a small-scale polemical work of reasoning that is well structured, consistent and easy-to-read. It is common knowledge that there is no single answer to the questions raised in the essay as the statements and problems under analysis tend to reflect diverse approaches.

An essay genre offers students an opportunity to independently and deeply analyse the field of his/her interest, to demonstrate intellectual initiative, enthusiasm, critical thinking and creativity. When preparing to write an essay, students must read a wide range of literature sources on the chosen topic, and when writing, they should provide clear *arguments* to their approach to the statements presented in the scientific literature or the problems under consideration. They have to examine these problems independently, suggest solutions, determine the directions of future research, initiate a discussion. An essay without arguments (*argumentum* in Latin means “the basis of evidence”) is not an essay, but a piece of writing with a vague purpose.

An essay is not only one of the forms of academic writing, it is also the core of academic writing (Baden, 2012). How does an essay differ from the term papers compulsory to all first cycle students? The academic written papers of both the types:

- (a) have a clear and consistent structure,
- b) shall be written in an academic style,
- c) contain many citations and references to literature sources,
- d) use graphs and tables to illustrate the statements (both in the main part and in the annexes in the term paper, while in essays only in the annexes).

A relatively small essay is a mixture of facts and opinions, in which the most important approach to the problem is the author’s point of view. Essays allow you to express your critical point of view freely, demonstrate creativity, express emotions. On the contrary, the main goal of the term paper is to demonstrate the author’s ability to analyse the research results of other authors (researchers in the field of study), systematise them, examine the facts and, in case of a practical format of a term paper, to analyse secondary and primary data, individual cases. The structure of an essay is more free and the text is cohesive. The scope of a term paper is much larger; it consists of clearly distinguishable obligatory parts of the work (content, summary, list of abbreviations, introduction, theoretical, methodological and analytical parts, conclusions

and recommendations, list of literature and references, annexes). The language of the term paper is formal, not as “colourful” as that of an essay, emotionally neutral.

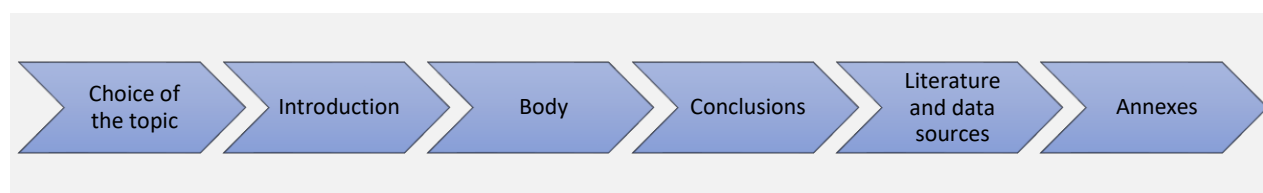
Another question may arise, how is a bachelor’s essay different from a master’s essay? The Dublin descriptors, which present general methodological aspects of student education, reveal the difference in the competencies to be built in bachelor’s, master’s or doctoral students (Joint Quality Group, 2004). Bachelor’s degree essays are usually limited to the examination of a certain main idea or problem, based on strong arguments, and reflect the author’s position on that problem. The scope of a master’s essay is broader: it is necessary to define the standpoint of the problem in the general context and, if possible, to demonstrate one’s personal experience. It is self-explanatory that a master’s student essay must reflect a higher level of critical thinking, originality, the researcher’s independence, and the ability to comprehensively pinpoint the development of the topic. Master’s students should further highlight the links between the concepts and reveal how their insights fill in the knowledge gaps existing in the field.

1. ESSAY WRITING STAGES

Before writing an essay, students need to make sure that the task is well understood and answer the following questions: What are the requirements for this academic paper? What is the scope of the essay and when should it be submitted? What are the criteria for assessing an essay? What issues need to be discussed with the supervisor? An essay, unlike larger-scale academic works, is a work of free composition, i.e. an integral text, ending with an obligatory list of literature and sources and annexes (if necessary) which, by the way, is carefully read by the lecturer. There are several main stages of essay writing: selection of the topic, introduction, body, conclusions, literature and data sources, and annexes (Figure).

Figure

Essay writing stages



Source: compiled by the author

Let’s examine each of these stages separately.

I. Choice of the topic

Usually students choose a topic from the list of topics suggested by the lecturer, however, with the approval of the supervisor (lecturer), the students can also focus on their own, original, well-known or interesting topics. Upon mutual agreement with the lecturer, the selected topic is added to the general list of topics. The American Psychological Association (APA) advises that the title of the topic should be no more than 12 words and should not contain abbreviations.

Once you have selected or been suggested a topic that interests you, follow these steps:

- start your work process from the literature search, find out if there are enough literature sources to write your essay;
- consider what issues and problems related to the essay topic you will focus on;
- find out the most popular, prevailing approach to the topic in question and the chosen topic, what terms, supporting words are used in the analysis of the chosen topic;
- decide what opinion or what thoughts should necessarily be expressed, which ones will be developed, which ones will be just mentioned.

II. Introduction

According to Aristotle, the beginning is more than half of all work. In a short (one or two paragraphs) introductory part, which makes up about 10-15 percent of the total text, you should present the topic of the essay, the problem (problematic question), while at the end of the introduction, you have to formulate the thesis (main idea) related to the subject. Try to briefly name what the work will be about, arouse the reader's interest and formulate an intrigue. Such a "hook" in your work can be a strong, eye-catching statement related to the topic of the essay, a relevant scientific controversy. No detailed information is required in the introduction.

III. The body (the main part)

Although the form of writing an essay is quite free, you should keep in line with the rules mandatory for writing the body, which makes up about 70-80 percent of the total text, as follows:

- Stick to the work plan. Make a note of what shall be written in each part of the work (write the main idea of each part in one sentence).

- When writing an essay, develop the main thesis. Ask yourself dozens of questions and try to answer them. Clearly name and provide arguments to the statements, indicate the reasons for the problem.
- Evaluate the weaknesses and strengths of statements made by other authors, compare the thoughts of different authors, reveal similarities and differences. Decide which thoughts you will ignore, which you will connect, link, develop, illustrate with examples.
- Try to follow the order in which the arguments are presented. It is advisable to start with the second most important, when halfway through the text, to present the weakest ones, and end with the strongest argument that supports your view. Remember to include arguments that disagree with your opinion.
- Disagree with respect.
- An essay is like a hidden dialogue with the reader. Develop the main idea as if the reader of the essay were sitting in front of you and you would present your thoughts to him, basing them on strong arguments, data, quotations, research results. Follow the citation rules.
- In each paragraph, move consistently from general to specific statements as you develop a particular aspect of the main idea. Provide partial conclusions at the end of the paragraph. Make sure that all paragraphs are coherent and related to the previous ones.

IV. Conclusions

- Avoid sudden, unexpected completion of your work. Summarize the main ideas, evaluate how successful you were in proving the main thesis. Repeat the most important arguments made in body (preferably, in other words), emphasise the relevance and importance of the insights presented in the essay. Do not devalue your arguments by saying it is just your opinion.
- Conclusions should summarise the part of the delivery, they should not contain information not discussed in the body.
- Conclude your essay with a few important sentences, a memorable quote, a call to discussion, an action, an interesting turn of thought to influence the readers' beliefs so that they agree with your reasoning. At the end, personal jokes are also allowed, a sense of humour can be demonstrated (if you have any).

- When you have finished writing the body, it is advisable to write the conclusions, as well as the revised introduction. Conclusions should not exceed 10-15 percent of the total volume of the text of the essay.

Check the scope of the work (essays can be short (1000 words, 3-4 pages), but students are usually asked to write about 2000 words, 6-7 pages excluding literature and data sources, and annexes). The specific scope of your essay will be determined by the lecturer.

Do not expect to succeed in writing a good essay straight away. You will have to admit that multiple corrections are inevitable.

V. Literature and data sources

Taking into account the importance of citation, they must be presented in strict accordance with the established procedure (see the following tips for formatting an essay).

VI. Annexes

The information supplementing the body of the essay (numbered tables, figures, diagrams) shall be placed in annexes, while references to annexes are provided in the text.

2. PRINCIPLES OF WRITING A GOOD ESSAY

You will definitely succeed if you follow the general principles of a good essay as specified below.

1. Clear structure

- Make a work plan, write your observations or notes possible. When writing an essay, review the plan on a regular basis and correct it if necessary.
- Make sure you know the direction of your thoughts being developed in the essay, i.e. what conclusions you are aiming at. Link the conclusions to the introductory part.

2. The content shall correspond to the title of the essay

- Do not write down everything you know or have heard about the chosen topic.

- Try to provide support to the main thesis formulated at the beginning of the work.

3. At all the stages of writing, keep the title of the essay in mind

- Never forget to keep to the title of your essay in mind.
- Each paragraph must be associated with the specific aspects of the chosen topic.

4. Bias should be avoided

- Present various opinions and assessments.
- Think about what arguments will support your thoughts (what factors, assumptions your arguments are based on).

5. Demonstrate your in-depth knowledge

- By carefully examining the problem under consideration, prove that you understand it.
- Give priority to scientific publications of highly reputable peer-reviewed journals.
- Critically evaluate the sources of information available online.
- Avoid information presented in textbooks and lectures, other students' written assignments.
- Do not use material unrelated to the topic of the essay.
- Choose the right diagrams.
- Support your statements with appropriate examples.
- Quote accurately but in moderation, avoid long word for word quotes.
- Do not provide a list of individual opinions instead of arguments.

6. More sophisticated methods of analysis and evaluation shall be used

- Divide the material into separate parts to help reveal the essence of the subject under examination.

- Use the correct terms. Define technical terms.
- Evaluate the arguments carefully and critically. Tick which arguments to your mind are most important and justify why.
- Avoid trivial generalisations. Provide original insights.

7. When writing, use the academic language as follows

- Clear sentences. Use appropriate terms.
- Concise sentences. Provide condensed information. Avoid writing in short, simple or complex sentences only. The paragraph should be longer than one sentence and should not exceed one page.
- Understandable concepts. Use understandable words.
- Consistent delivery. Present ideas in a logical order, link sentences and paragraphs smoothly.
- No grammatical errors.
- Avoid jargon and empty phrases and verbs that “boost” the volume of the essay.
- Academic paper shall be written in the third person, not in the second person (“you stated, your statements”, etc.). It is advisable not to write in the first person (“I think, in my opinion”, etc.).
- If you face the problem of the use or misuse of some terms, you can refer to the term banks available on the website of the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language (the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language, 2021).

Reminder: Remember that you have a supervisor who is always ready to help you with all the obstacles you encounter in the essay writing process. Make him/her delighted with your creativity and originality.

3. CITATION

It is important to remember that presenting somebody else's ideas as one's own essentially means stealing intellectual property (Greetham, 2008). The Code of Academic Ethics of Vilnius University (2018) clearly identifies the signs of plagiarism. The danger of plagiarism lies when an essay is written in a hurry, "losing" the authors of the thoughts presented, in other words, not following the rules of citation.

If someone's words, research results, data, models, thoughts are used in the work, it is NECESSARY to provide a reference to the author in the body of your essay. Greetham (2008) points out that citations should be made when presenting:

1. peculiar, unusual thoughts;
2. different than usual approaches to problems, and ways of solving them;
3. information and data from certain sources;
4. a word for word phrase or sentence;
5. the information or opinion that is not known to everyone (for example, a reference to the source is not necessary when writing that Lithuania joined the EU in 2004 or that the COVID-19 pandemic covered the whole world in 2020);
6. If in doubt, to quote or not to quote, you'd better quote!

The quotations used in the essay should comply with the seventh edition (the first was published in 1929) of APA (American Psychological Association) standards which are commonly referred to in the social sciences and widely used all over the world. These standards use the author-date and parenthetical referencing system and shall be observed when preparing all the academic papers at VU Business School (see Kasnauskienė and Paulienė, 2017). The latest version of the APA citation style follows the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2020). Bibliographic references in the text to the cited document are provided as follows:

- The author's name and year of publication are written in brackets, e.g. (Jonaitis, 2020).
- If the citation is quoted verbatim (word for word), the citation should be written in quotation marks and the page number should be indicated, for example (Jonaitis, 2020, p. 58). If this reference was made in the body of the academic paper, it is necessary to include this source in the list of literature and data sources. It should be remembered that all literature and data sources should be used in the work (with appropriate references).

- It can also be written as follows: Jonaitis (2020) argues that “<...> plagiarism is an unforgivable sin” (p. 58) or, according to Jonaitis (2020), “<...> plagiarism is an unforgivable sin” (p.58).
- When referring to the works of several authors, the reference is inserted in alphabetical order with the author’s name, year of publication, and writing the name and year of another author after the semicolon (e.g. Jonaitis, 2020; Petraitienė, 2014).
- When two authors are cited, the word “and” should be written between their surnames (e.g. Jonaitis and Petraitis, 2019).
- When quoting works by three or more authors, the name of the first author and “et al”, as well as the year of publication (e.g. Jonaitis et al., 2019) shall be written.
- When quoting an organisation or institution, its name and year are written (e.g. United Nations, 2019). If the abbreviation of the organisation in question is well known, give the full name of the organisation and its abbreviation in brackets first, and then it is sufficient to indicate only the abbreviation (UN, 2019).
- If authors with the same surnames are cited, the first letter of the name is indicated before each surname (e.g. P. Jonaitis, 2016; S. Jonaitis, 2018).
- When quoting works written by the same author in the same year, a, b, c, etc. are written in small letters next to the year in alphabetical order (e.g. Jonaitis, 2019 a).
- If the document was created by an institution, association or other organization, the full name of the organisation is written in the reference when quoting for the first time, the abbreviated name of the organisation is given in square brackets, later it is sufficient to indicate the abbreviated name of the organisation, e.g. (Vilnius University [VU], 2019), later - (VU, 2019).
- If no author is mentioned in the document, the first words of the title of the book, journal or other document are written in italics, e.g. (*Lithuanian Economic Review*, 2020).
- If the information you cite has already been cited, i.e. when a secondary source of information is cited instead of the original source, the reference shall first contain the data of the original source, followed by the abbreviation “cited from” followed by the data from a secondary source, e.g. (Jonaitis, 2014, cited from Antanaitienė, 2019). It is also possible to cite: According to Jonaitis (2014, cited from Antanaitienė, 2019)...”. Only a secondary source of information is included in the bibliography.
- If there is no date of the publication, “n.d.” is written.
- It is advisable to follow the same procedure when citing an electronic document, i.e. indicate the author and the year.

- Personal communication (interview, e-mail, telephone conversation) is neither cited nor included in the bibliography.

4. FORMATTING

When formatting an essay, try to follow the standards of the 7th edition of APA.

1. Margins

Enter number 2.5 cm everywhere: left, right, top, bottom.

2. Spacing between rows

Process all the text, including the title page and literature sources, in double spacing. No additional spaces are required between paragraphs.

3. Font *Times New Roman*, 12 point.

4. *Align left*.

5. Indent at the beginning of each paragraph 1.27 cm (*Indent left*).

6. Page number – at the top right corner.

7. Title page. It must contain the following elements (see the Annex):

At the top of the page, use double spacing, centre and print the following:

- title of the work (bold, indented 3-4 lines from the top of the page);
- name of the student (s) (leaving one blank line after the title);
- name of the university and its department;
- study programme and year of study;
- scientific degree, name, surname of the supervisor (lecturer);
- date of submission.

The first page number is written at the top right corner.

Then the above mentioned parts of the essay are presented as a single text: introduction, body, conclusions, list of literature and sources, annexes (tables, figures, other text).

Tables and Figures

The titles of tables and figures are written above the table. The full name of the source must be indicated after each table and figure that must be numbered in Arabic numerals. Do not use vertical lines separating columns in tables.

An example of a table.

Table 1*Advanced Dickey - Fuller unit root test*

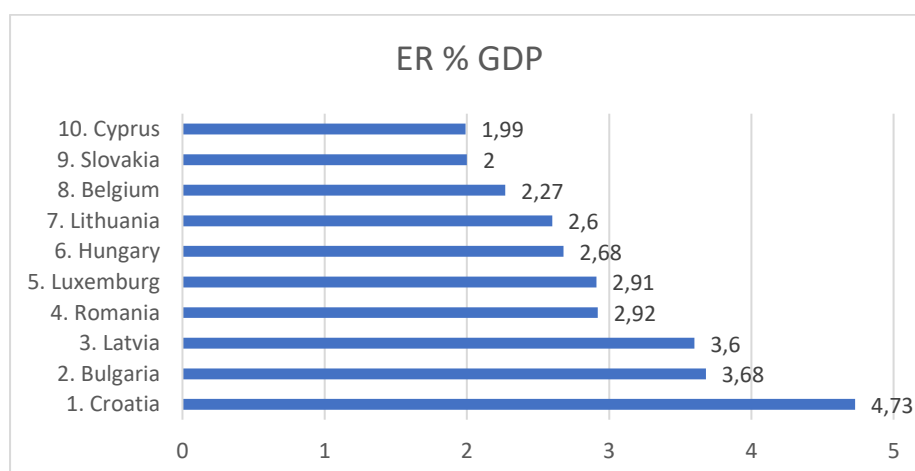
Variable	ADF test level expression		ADF test, the expression of the first differences	
	Number of delays	Calculated t	Number of delays	Calculated t
GDP	8	-0.212	7	-3.929*
REM	4	-2.455	3	-4.318*
GFCF	1	-1.699	0	-4.255*
EXP	1	-1.506	0	-5.243*

Note. * indicates a significance level of 5%, H_0 , that the variable is not stationary - is rejected. For both the level expression and the first differences, the critical value of t is -2.89.

Source: compiled by the author, based on the database of indicators of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, 2020.

When producing figures, it is essential is to choose the exact type so that the information in them is easy to understand. It is advisable to avoid 3D graphics, shadows, special effects. Figures must be numbered.

An example of a figure.

Figure 2*Top ten EU countries with the largest share of emigrant remittances in GDP in 2018*

Source: World Bank, 2020.

5. PROCEDURE FOR PROVIDING LITERATURE AND DATA SOURCES

- “**Literature and data sources**” is highlighted in bold in the centre of the page.
- Sources are not numbered and arranged alphabetically according to the first letter of the author’s surname. If there is no author - according to the first letter of the title.
- It is not allowed to start a list from the name of the author.
- Titles of books and journals are written in italics.
- The latest edition of the APA recommends that the description of electronic resources end with a URL or DOI provided as an Internet address beginning with http or https. The dot is not placed after it. If the source has a DOI, it is advisable to write the DOI instead of the URL. The 6th edition of the APA recommends to write the words “Retrieved from” and then indicate the Internet address with “:”, the 7th edition no longer requires it. You do not need to enter the viewing date.

Other detailed instructions on the procedure for submitting literature and data sources according to VU BS standards can be found in Annex 5 of the document “Methodological guidelines for writing bachelor’s theses and business case research papers for students of Vilnius University Business School” prepared by G. Kasnauskienė and R. Paulienė.

6. ASSESSMENT OF ESSAYS

It is common *to assess* an essay according to the following *criteria*:

- the correspondence between the content and the title of the work;
- clarity of structure;
- the ability to connect thoughts, to connect paragraphs in a coherent way;
- the relevance and robustness of the arguments;
- originality;
- language style;
- the appropriateness and design of the citation.

Students are often involved in the assessment of essays (and this is an excellent practice!), for example, through the *peer review* method. In this case, the lecturer should identify the assessment criteria and the requirements for writing a review in advance. The review consists of the following parts: “1) metrics of the object being reviewed; 2) the structure of the object; 3) the content of the structure; 4) reviewer’s assessment; 5) conclusions” (Bulajeva, 2007, p. 33). The reviewer’s comments based on the arguments should be provided

at the end of the review. They should point out the advantages and disadvantages of the essay. The reviewer is entitled to recommend a score.

Student opposition is also possible. It is like peer review and develops their ability to evaluate and communicate in writing and orally.

After writing the last version of the essay, read it carefully again, correct any stylistic and grammatical errors, evaluate the consistency of the sequence, check that the end of the essay is related to the beginning and that the intended goal has been achieved. Remember to submit the essay to the lecturer at the agreed time. If you have to present the work to the audience according to the educational goals formulated by the lecturer, demonstrate your developed skills and creativity, following the standards of preparation and presentation on the VU BS website.

7. LITERATURE AND DATA SOURCES

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Annex. An example of the title page

1



Title of the topic

Student (s) name, surname

Study programme, year of studies

Scientific degree, name, surname of the supervisor (lecturer)

Submission date