

WRITING SKILLS GUIDE



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HOW TO... Develop your Writing Skills

Essay Questions

Sometimes it can be hard to work out what is required of you from an essay question. You need to be clear about what you need to do before you start. Here's some guidance on what different instructions in an essay question mean:

Instruction	What you are expected to do
Criticise	Judge the merit of a work, person, statement – points for and against
Describe	Give a description in words so that the reader can form an idea
Discuss	Write about all aspects of the question, considering all views and interpretations - points for and against
Evaluate	Balance the evidence for and against, then give your opinion based on the evidence
Illustrate	Include a diagram or an example
Outline	Include the main points only – cover what, where, when, how, why and who

Sentences

A sentence should always make complete sense and have a clear meaning. This will ensure your reader understands what you are writing.

Any sentence must have at least one verb – a doing word – and at least one subject – him, a person's name, a thing (noun) such as tree, car etc.

There are 3 types of sentences:

- ❖ **Simple sentence** – which contains one subject and one verb e.g., Linda walked home.
- ❖ **Compound sentence** – which contains 2 or more simple sentences joined together with “and”, “but”, “or” e.g., Linda walked home and had her dinner.
- ❖ **Complex sentence** – which is made up of 2 or more ideas, each containing a verb and linked with words such as “because”, “as”, “when”, “which”, “although” e.g., Linda walked home, although she was tired, because she needed exercise.



Linking phrases

A well-written essay will flow – i.e., one point/idea will link to the next. One technique for achieving this is to use words and phrases to link points.

Here are a few examples of linking words and phrases:

In addition,	In the first place	Evidence to support this
Moreover	An illustration of this	Furthermore
It could be argued	However,	On the other hand,
Nevertheless	Similarly,	On the contrary
But	It could be claimed	Consequently
Therefore	Accordingly,	In the meantime,
Overall	To sum up	All in all,
For example,	On balance	In conclusion
As I have pointed out	In other words,	Indeed

Paragraphs

Paragraphs can be long or short, or even only have one sentence. However, a paragraph is organised around one sentence – the **topic** sentence – containing the main idea, and any other sentences within the paragraph relate to that main idea.

The **support** sentences develop the main idea in the topic sentence and define it more. These sentences provide examples to support the main idea and make contrasts or comparisons. They also make links to other paragraphs.

The **concluding** sentence in a paragraph may sum up or reinforce the idea of the paragraph and links to the next topic sentence of the following paragraph.

Punctuation

You need to use punctuation to help the reader quickly grasp the main idea of your essay and to ensure the reader does not misunderstand what you have written.

Here are some punctuation marks you should use:

Punctuation name	Punctuation mark	Use
Comma	,	To separate items in a list, to break up a long sentence where you would naturally breathe, or after speech quotation marks. e.g., Linda went to the shop for eggs, milk, bread, and apples.
Full stop	.	To indicate the end of a sentence e.g., Linda went to the shop.
Speech quotation marks	“ ”	Used around direct speech in written work, or to show where a quotation has

		been taken from another written source e.g. "I'm off to the shop," said Linda.
Apostrophes	'	To indicate a missing letter e.g., don't, or to indicate a possessive e.g., Linda's (belonging to Linda)
Dash	-	Can be used to link the first part of a sentence to an additional explanation or to indicate a separate idea or aside within the main sentence e.g., Linda was tired – too much dancing last night.
Colon	:	Used for lists or series of items, introducing a quotation or speech, or explaining or adding information. e.g., I have been to many ballets: Swan Lake; Cinderella; Sleeping Beauty. e.g., Martin Luther King said: "I have a dream". e.g., The train was very busy: it was rush hour.
Semicolon	;	Can be used to link two related phrases, in a long list containing commas, or to place more emphasis on the added phrase. e.g., Linda loves reading; mainly crime novels. e.g., Linda watched <i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i> ; <i>Me, Myself and Irene</i> ; and <i>Skyfall</i> . e.g., Linda is happy; she has a new book to read.

Vocabulary and grammar

There are times when you need to speak and write formally or informally. You can write informally to a friend in an email or text, but essays must be written in formal language. This does not mean that you need to use long words just for the sake of doing so, nor does it mean you must sound "posh".

When writing, remember to use proper grammar e.g., use "do not" instead of "doesn't"; use "I would" instead of "I'd" and so on. If you feel you are using the same word over and over, use a thesaurus to find an alternative.

Spelling

As we now have access to spell-checkers on computers, it may seem like we don't need to know how to spell. However, the spell checker may not highlight a word spelled correctly but used incorrectly in a sentence. These are words such as **homophones** – words which sound the same but mean different things – such as read and reed, hear and here, right and write, sight and site and so on.

Use a dictionary to check spelling and meaning! Or use a thesaurus to find an alternative word.

There are dictionaries and thesauri available in the Learning Centres or you can use our online resources too:

Gale News, Business and Reference – a database of eBooks and eJournals for multidisciplinary research, with subjects such as psychology, health, science and technology, and business. You can access articles through the Library Smart Search.

