Six steps to good essays

At school you’re often rewarded for writing a lot of information. University essays need to be based on sound knowledge too, but the questions set will generally require you to include fewer facts and use them to present an argument. Questions will often be directed towards a key debate or controversy within your subject. So how to proceed?

1. Understanding and interpreting the question

Firstly, you should decide if the question you have been set is open-ended or closed:

* Words like ‘discuss’ are open-ended.
* ‘Discuss with reference to’ is more closed.
* ‘Show how’ implies fixed assumptions underline the question.
* ‘Does’ is asking for a yes, no or, less attractively, a maybe reply.

The more closed the question the more you must stay within its limits.

Look at the question again and underline key words. For example, in the question ‘Was 1968 a revolution?’ you could define ‘1968’ and discussed the nature of revolutions or define ‘revolution’ and discuss the events of 1968 in those terms.

1. Reading and note-taking

It is worth remembering that exams will usually be handwritten, so don't completely discard handwriting for note-taking. Sheets of paper can be clearer to work with than different laptop pages because you can see them all at once.

* One page should contain a summary of the book including:
  + the name of author
  + the place and date of publication
  + its main message
  + details of any bias the authors might have
    - are they writing about events they have witnessed first-hand? What sources of information were available to them? and so on.
* Do keep quotable extracts but remember to mark who said them and where so that they could be referenced in your work, avoiding plagiarism.

1. Planning and structuring your essay

In planning your essay try not to forget that you are writing for a reader, your tutor or examiner, so aim for:

* relevant content
* clear structure
* and concise style in readable English

At this stage you will work out what to include and what to discard. You will have lots of ideas and all your notes will be useful for study and revision in due course.

One method of sifting through your material might be to set out on one page, divided into three sections, the evidence for and against the proposition and those ideas which could be used to support either case. If you can use counter arguments, that is include ideas and viewpoints which go against your argument and argue why they are less convincing than yours, this will considerably strengthen what you have to say.

In structuring the essay bear in mind that it should have three sections:

1. The introduction will tell your reader how you have interpreted the question, why it is important, and how you will answer it.
   * You will usually have to narrow down the question, especially if it’s open-ended. Use the introduction to explain briefly what you know and how you’ll answer the question. Show that you are aware of all the issues pertaining to the question before explaining what your essay will focus on and why.
2. The main body of the essay will develop your ideas and arguments. It is best to stick to two or three principal issues, keeping the essay question at the forefront of your thinking and maintaining tight control on your line of argument so it leads directly to your conclusion.
   * Use a new paragraph for each fresh idea, using clear signposting to tie into what went before.
     + This is very simple and involves no more than an open phrase such as ‘on the other hand’ when you are about to make a contrasting point or ‘in addition’ when you’re going to build on what you already said.
3. The conclusion should be a short summary of your argument looking back over what you have said and showing how you’ve answered the question. Do not add any new information in the conclusion, but it is sometimes relevant to look forward on how further research or potential new discoveries might add to the debate.
4. Content

Some subjects and topics require more information than argument and some require more arguments than information. Your tutors will guide you on this, but as a general rule subjects or texts which are new to you, such as microeconomics, ethics, and political theory, will require you to show that you have understood the models and text, that you can reproduce and explain them in the context of the question.

1. If something goes wrong

Try to sort out any difficulties on your own in the first instance, perhaps by revising your plan or rereading those sources which you have not understood. If you’re still at a loss don’t be tempted to borrow or buy essays from the internet. Look at online resources such as WebLearn [Canvas has replaced WebLearn] and the various faculty websites where there are podcast, lecture notes and slides, and the like. Tutors, librarians, and lecturers are all here to support you. Don’t get stuck, get help!

1. Checking your work

You might be so relieved that you’ve finished writing your essay that you hand it in without a backward look, but do take time to read over what you’ve done. You may well have to read it out in tutorials so check the spelling and punctuation errors for logic and clarity. Have you answered the question? Good. Is your answer clear and focused? Good. Your task is complete well done.