

This Skill Sheet shows (1) the background, (2) the contents and (3) the procedures to go through when you want to write a scientific essay. An essay is relatively short, and contains your personal opinion. Because of these properties, however, the inclination to give in to ‘academic opportunism’ is also particularly great. To make a more appealing statement, for instance, it is very useful to leave out some of the evidence, or consciously leave it up to the reader to invent counter arguments. Academic opportunism should be avoided whenever possible. This Skill Sheet ends therefore with a number of pointers that should enable you to avoid this deadly academic ‘sin’ in essay writing.

1 Background

An essay is a relatively short and personal discourse on a scientific or literary topic, which is aimed at a broad audience. In terms of length and contents, articles in the weekend supplement of your daily newspaper and articles in news magazines of around 2500 words (six to seven 1.5 spaced A-4 pages, ordinary font) come closest to the sort of essay aimed at in many university curricula. Articles on the opinion page of your daily newspaper are often not longer than 800 words (two 1.5 spaced A-4 pages). Opinion page articles are the shortest possible version of an essay, but the scientific status is certain to be very limited. Every discourse shorter than 800 words is not more than ‘just’ an opinion, the realm of columnists and *not* of serious essay writers.

Writing an essay is one of the most difficult writing skills for a scientist. The challenge is not only to provide insight into complex approaches, and apply them to an existing problem. You should also be capable of presenting your arguments in a way that can be understood by a broader – not necessarily scientifically – trained audience. In many universities writing essays is part of the first year curriculum. One of the reasons to start with an essay is because the formula resembles that of a high-school essay. The student writer still belongs to the ‘broader audience’ having had practically no scientific training. Writing a good essay thus presents a dilemma, because it is probably only feasible after years of training and practice in research and writing. This dilemma makes essay writing, in the early years of the university training, a particularly challenging – but nevertheless very worthwhile – experience. Continue to practise writing essays even in the later years of your training. Essay writing is a skill that will often be useful for you in your professional career. The essay can then be: (1) a policy memo (⊕B21), (2) the underlying text of a presentation, or (3) an opinion article.

2 Contents

- A scientific essay should be relatively simple: you tackle one problem or one debate! Unless it is actually part of your problem definition, you use one level of analysis in order not to confuse your reader. It is better to tackle a relatively small problem thoroughly, than to force a solution to a large problem on the basis of platitudes and ballyhoo (slogans).
- A scientific essay has a very simple format:
 - introduction: problem definition and background → 20-25% of the text (1.5 - 2 pages)
 - analysis and argument → 50-70% of the text (4 - 5 pages)
 - summary and conclusion → 10-15% of the text (0.5 - 1 page)
 - bibliography
- A scientific essay gets to the point for the reader. Facilitate this as follows:
 - In the first lines: state the problem.
 - In the last lines: state/repeat the conclusion.

- A scientific essay should have an appropriate title. Follow the rules used by newspaper editors:
 - The title includes the *essence* of the essay and therefore the most *important keyword*.
 - The title includes a *running sentence*: ‘Investing in the environment can be profitable’
 - If you use a *subtitle*, do not use this to explain an unclear main title.
 - A title should be *unambiguous*: every reader should attach the same meaning to the title.
 - Normally, a title is formulated in an *active and present tense* and is not complicated.
 - A title should not contain *metaphors*, suggestive remarks, puns or other forced humour.
 - There are *no punctuation marks* or *abbreviations* in a title.

3 The procedure

The procedure for writing an essay includes most of the characteristics mentioned in Skill Sheet B15 (writing with power):

- **Inventory.** Start with brainstorming about the topic you want/have to write about. Make an inventory of *keywords*. Consider the possible angles from which you can look at the topic: economical, political, national/international; from the individual perspective; from the group perspective; chronological; from the perspective of other stakeholders. Read and write about the material you have collected or that is provided with the essay.
- **Structure.** Read the notes from your brainstorm session. Find a problem definition and a structure for your argument. Organise your material according to this structure. Make a page budget for the end result, taking into account the maximum length of the whole essay.
- **Formulation.** Write down your argumentation from start to finish. Do not edit the brainstorm notes, but write from scratch.
- **Editing.** Read the result of your writing carefully. Start rewriting your essay. Try to avoid academic opportunism by considering the pointers in the box below.

Coping with academic opportunism in essay writing

- Think before you start writing.
- Think before you adopt a particular problem definition.
- Be honest in linking your problem definition with a particular argument (no easy and sloppy argumentation).
- Do not unnecessarily confuse your audience. Come to clear choices as to: (1) who you are writing for in particular, (2) the level of analysis you choose, (3) the time perspective you adopt and (4) the most important concepts you use (and define).
- Be honest in your argumentation; if appropriate, give examples, but also counter-examples, give arguments in favour and against.
- Only include those (counter) arguments that are really relevant for your problem definition.
- Reveal the weaknesses in your conclusion yourself, and learn how to deal with them.
- Always reveal your sources!!
- Do not implicitly identify with ‘winners’ to find an easy rationalisation for your arguments.
- Do not (silently) measure ‘success’ by ‘commercial success’ or any other success norm that suits your own presumptions without revelation.
- Be aware that there is no ‘one best way’.
- Be precise with your language (do not use too many foreign words) and with the layout.
- Do not use multi-interpretable tables and statistics.
- Do not list points at random. This is a sign of intellectual laziness.

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