

Essay Writing and Evaluation

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These guidelines describe the general characteristics and learning outcomes of an essay and provide instructions for students writing essays and instructors grading essays.

In this text, an essay primarily refers to an academic essay. An academic essay is a practice thesis that is based on the literature and that is both more limited in scope and freer in form than a thesis. In an academic essay, students formulate a research assignment either independently or under the supervision of an instructor and analyse their current knowledge based on assigned literature. The result is a reflective and recapitulative written work on a clearly defined topic or question that refers to several sources. The purpose of an academic essay is to allow students to practice how to read analytically and critically and to produce a comparative summary. Essays can also introduce the author's well-argued views and other material.

Writing an Essay

Essays must include a title, the name and student number of the author, the date, the name of the course and the number of credits awarded for that course.

A good essay has a clear and logical structure. In academic writing, essays usually first present the research question or problem and conclude by providing answers or solutions to the research question. Even short essays should include an introduction which briefly introduces to the reader the essay's topic and approach. Lengthy essays in particular should be divided into sections, and it is important to ensure that the text runs smoothly from one paragraph to the next and from one section to the next. Authors may use examples to illustrate phenomena or conclusions, but should not use them to excess. At the end of the essay, the author can present a summary of his/her and/or others' conclusions; this is also where the author can demonstrate the quality and originality of his/her thinking.

Sources must be cited according to a scientific referencing system, for example SIS's instructions on writing a Bachelor's thesis ([LINK](#)).

Essay Length and Number of Credits

The number of credits to be awarded for an essay mainly depends on how much the literature is used for the essay, not on the length of the essay. The more credits awarded, the more widely the student must familiarise himself/herself with the literature. The instructor will decide the scope of the literature required for the number of credits awarded and determine the length of the essay. The scope of the literature required for the essay will also be determined by the type (articles or monographs) and language of sources required: students may be required to read more popular literature in Finnish than term-heavy specialist literature in a foreign language, for example.

General Learning Outcomes

After writing an essay, students will

- be familiar with the literature on the topic, be able to apply the literature to the research assignment in question, and be able to discuss and define key concepts in the field.
- be able to define and set the context for the essay topic or research assignment.
- be aware of the various approaches researchers take to the topic and how they put their case, and be able to present and argue for their own conclusions based on the literature.

Grade

Essays are usually graded on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 as the highest grade. Students must use the literature defined in the course description or agreed on with the instructor as much as possible. When grading an essay, the following will be considered:

- The definition of topic and research question
- Command of the topic
- Writing quality and style and the quality of the discussion presented in the essay
- Argumentation and independent thinking

If an essay is evaluated based on other factors, instructors will define their evaluation criteria in the course description: instructors may, for example, require students to reflect on what they have read in terms of how useful it is for their thesis project. Students can also request written feedback in addition to a grade.

Defining the topic and setting research questions. A good essay has a clear approach and a well-defined topic. A poor essay is vague, and the only thing holding the information together is the overall topic. An essay will be regarded more highly if students set their research questions themselves and use the literature to answer them. In these cases, the research question acts as the thread of the essay: the student discusses the literature and the different approaches in relation to the issue in question.

Command of the topic. The essay must demonstrate that the author has understood the literature he/she is referring to, and a mechanical citation of sources or the use of incorrect concepts and terminology would indicate that this is not the case. The ability to apply information gleaned from the literature is a sign of a good command of the topic. In a good essay, the author discusses the literature in his/her own words and provides well-justified interpretations. Authors should seek to rid themselves of uncritical use of the references and word-for-word or uncritical citations while still respecting the original.

Style of writing and quality of discussion. A good essay is well structured and proceeds logically. The writing is consistent, grammatically correct, easy to read and formal in style. A good essay follows the conventions of scientific writing, e.g. employs a correct referencing technique that involves each source being specifically stated.

Independent thinking. In all writing, it is essential that the author demonstrates how he/she has made use of what he/she has read. This means, for example, that he/she can answer the question, create a synthesis of different writers' thoughts, compare their thoughts and methods, and devise arguments based on this information. In writing essays, students practice their skills in summarising and referencing: this means discussing other people's claims and thoughts in an evaluative, comparative and analytical way and placing one's own thinking in that context.