

# What do markers want in an essay?



No matter what course you are doing, it's designed with two specific goals in mind:

- to provide you with some knowledge of a particular subject
- to equip you with skills in thinking and communication.

The first point is about the subject matter: if you are studying commerce, you will learn the significance of a debt to equity ratio and how to read a company's financial statements. The second point is more complicated: these skills in thinking and communication are often not acknowledged explicitly in your courses, but improving these skills is fundamental to successful university study. In developing your knowledge about the subject - whatever subject it is - you will need to:

- develop a questioning and academically critical mind
- develop reading skills to order, test and evaluate ideas and evidence, assess the relationships of these ideas to other ideas and evidence, and formulate questions about these ideas and evidence
- become an increasingly independent learner
- develop a nuanced, coherent position which can be substantiated with evidence
- learn writing and communication skills in order to express your position with clarity and precision.

With this list in mind, markers assess your ability as it is demonstrated in your assignment. This assessment can be considered as four areas of competence: focus, wide and critical reading, argument, and presentation.

## 1. Focus

In order to demonstrate your questioning and critical mind, it is expected that your essay focuses clearly on the issues of the question you have been given. This involves several tasks:

- understanding the question(s) or task(s) you have been given: what knowledge or skill are you being required to demonstrate?
- identifying relationships between ideas: are these ideas in opposition with each other, in support of each other, or somewhere in between?
- what, in a nutshell, are the most significant elements that you explore to answer the question?

## 2. Wide and critical reading

Of all the skills developed at university, reading is perhaps the most important. Reading widely - from a variety of sources, authors and points of view - enables you to understand the spectrum of points of view relevant to the topic. Whatever the topic, it's likely that there is a range of views which take different positions, contradict each other, support each other, use alternative evidence, refute the positions of others and so on. As you read widely, your ideas will be tested, your assumptions may be made clearer to you, and this will help you to develop a coherent argument for your essay.

Reading "critically" means reading for strengths and weaknesses to gain a deeper understanding of a point of view rather than necessarily accepting the writer's position. Ask yourself:

- what is the writer's argument?

- what evidence is used to substantiate the argument?
- what are the limitations to the argument?
- what are the assumptions used by the writer?
- what evidence might refute or question the writer's argument?
- how does this writer's argument relate to other arguments?

### 3. Argument

The "argument" in this sense is not a dispute. Your argument is a combination of reason, analysis and evidence constructed coherently and logically, intended to persuade the reader to this position. The argument of your essay is your answer to the question and is a demonstration of your academic point of view. A reasoned argument requires:

- coherence: its parts fit logically together; the argument announced in your introduction develops through your paragraphs and is confirmed in your conclusion.
- explanation: background, theories, specialist terminology, evidence and conclusions are clearly identified and framed so that the reader gains a better understanding of the topic.
- evidence: examples, source documents, the arguments of others and results of experiments from your wide and critical reading are explored so that they explain, support and develop your point of view, or refute the point of view of others.
- reason: logical connections are made between actions or phenomena and results or implications, so that the reader better comprehends your argument.

Argument is the key to a successful essay, but it is important to realise that your argument relies on the focus of your essay, the wide and critical reading you demonstrate, and the presentation of your essay.

### 4. Presentation

Presentation takes time and attention to detail. If your argument is not clearly articulated, concise, appropriately referenced, easy to comprehend, and does not follow the formatting requirements of your course, the attention of the marker will be drawn to your presentation and away from your argument.

You will be rewarded by the time you set aside for reading your essay. Ensure your essay uses appropriate academic language, and that your punctuation and spelling are correct; check that your referencing is consistent and accurate. These expectations are not simply an unnecessary burden: the elements of presentation are fundamental to articulating a clear and concise – and therefore more powerful – argument.