

What different types of academic writing are there?

STEP

UNIT D

1

6

'An essay in its highest form is now expected to be reflective, elegant and philosophical.'

The Oxford Companion to the English Language

A Reflection

Look at the titles 1–5 below.

- In what ways do you think the approach and contents of each essay would differ?
1. Outline the main types of academic writing in common use in British universities.
 2. Assess the essay-based system of assessment which is common in most British universities.
 3. Justify the importance of the essay as a means of assessment.
 4. A critique of *50 steps to improving your academic writing* by Chris Sowton.
 5. What are the most common types of writing in my subject area?

B Contextualization

Match the type of writing (on the left) to its description (on the right).

- Then look again at the titles in part A and decide which title relates to each type of writing.

An argumentative essay is a piece of writing, often used in the sciences, which tests your knowledge about a particular concept.
A critique is writing which you do yourself (not for assessment) to remember information and develop your own learning skills.
A descriptive essay is a much longer piece of writing (usually >8,000 words) which tends to be used at Master's level.
A dissertation both summarizes and offers critical analysis of an academic article or book.
An exam essay tends to be relatively short and very focused, testing your ability to recall key information.
An evaluative essay is often set by teachers to test your understanding of a particular topic – e.g., a process, idea or theory.
Reflective writing tries to persuade the reader that a particular point of view (i.e., your opinion) is correct.
A short-answer question compares and contrasts the different sides of a topic. It may support one side or another, or else take a balanced overview.

c Analysis

What are some of the common types of academic writing?

Although it is impossible to generalize for all subjects and for all universities, it is generally agreed that the essay is the most common means of assessment in the British academic system. Note that the language used to describe the types of essay below may not be the same as you have read elsewhere; there is no generally agreed definition.

An argumentative essay ...

... tries to persuade the reader that a particular point of view (i.e., your opinion) is correct.

Sometimes known as 'expository' or 'persuasive' essays, argumentative essays are the most common type of essay which you will encounter at university. A good argumentative essay will demonstrate:

- understanding and consideration of a wide range of sources (see Steps 3–7).
- critical analysis of and reflection on the source material (see Steps 8–9).
- a clear argument (see Steps 14, 15 and 25).

- This demonstrates that ...
- The evidence for this is ...
- Clearly, the data indicate ...
- This can be proved by ...
- It is impossible to escape the conclusion that ...

A critique ...

... both summarizes and offers critical analysis of an academic article or book.

A critique is a task which may be set by your teacher in order both to test your ability to understand an important text, and to reflect critically on this text. A good critique will highlight the main points of a text (identifying the author's key findings) and will also clearly state your own position regarding this text – whether you agree or disagree with it. Poor critiques tend to have no critical analysis and are just summaries of the text.

A descriptive essay ...

... is often set by teachers to test your understanding of a particular topic – e.g., a process, idea or theory.

Descriptive essays may be common at the beginning of your course, where the teacher wants to check that you have understood a particular topic. They expect less critical analysis than evaluative or argumentative essays. Often they may be used to provide a definition of a key process (e.g., reforming the education system), idea (e.g., civil law) or theory (e.g., Einstein's general theory of relativity).

- There are X main types of ...
- X can be defined as ...
- Firstly ... secondly ... thirdly ...
- This process/idea/theory has X steps/stages/parts.

A dissertation ...

... is a much longer piece of writing (usually >8,000 words) which tends to be used at Master's level.

Dissertations can be divided into two main types: empirical and library-based. Empirical dissertations conduct original research, whereas library-based dissertations use material which has already been published. Students decide their own topic (and therefore title), usually in discussion with their personal tutor. An even longer piece of writing, used at the doctorate level, is known as a thesis.

An exam essay ...

... tends to be relatively short and very focused, testing your ability to recall key information.

Exam essays will generally fall into one of the three essay categories above (argumentative, descriptive and evaluative) and they will share the same principles. However, there are three major differences:

- **Fact-based, not argument-based:** generally speaking, exam essays focus more on your ability to recall information rather than to make a powerful argument.
- **Simple referencing:** you are not expected to reference in the same way – e.g., direct quotations and paraphrases. Clearly, if you can remember such information, and it is relevant, you should include it. Normally, knowing the person's name is enough (e.g., Smith's theory of X ...).
- **Shorter introductions and conclusions:** whereas in a 'normal' essay they will each be c. 5–10% of the essay length, in exams they will be much shorter (perhaps just two sentences). Indeed, in some essays an introduction may not be necessary at all.

An evaluative essay ...

... compares and contrasts the different sides of a topic. It may support one side or another, or else take a balanced overview.

Sometimes known as a 'compare-and-contrast' or 'discursive' essay, this type of essay evaluates a question. You, as a writer, must consider all aspects of the question, and decide which side (if any) you agree with. Note that it is possible to take a more balanced view in this kind of essay (e.g., you may agree 70% with one side and 30% with another). Evaluative essays can take two main forms:

- **Type 1:** Introduction – arguments for X – arguments against X – conclusion.
- **Type 2:** Introduction – topic 1 arguments for and against (repeat for topics 2, 3, 4, etc.) – conclusion.

- Whereas X is ... Y is ...
- X is different from Y in that ...
- X and Y share a number of similarities ...
- On balance, it can be argued that ...

Reflective writing ...

... is writing which you do yourself (not for assessment) to remember information and develop your own learning skills.

REFLECTIVE WRITING is a type of writing which you do only for yourself. As the name suggests, reflective writing may help you to reflect on (i.e., *think about*) an academic topic without having to use academic language. Reflective writing can be described as an informal academic diary.

- I thought that ...
- It seemed to me ...
- From this I understood ...
- This reminded me of ...
- This idea was first discussed in ...

A short-answer question ...

... is a piece of writing, often used in the sciences, which tests your knowledge about a particular concept.

Short-answer questions are used by teachers to check your understanding of what has recently been learnt. Often your answers will comprise just a single paragraph. Therefore, writing in a concise, focused way is very important.

D Activation

Read the following thesis statements and decide which type of writing they would be most appropriate for.

- Then refer to part A and decide which title would be most appropriate.

Thesis statement	Type of essay
There are generally considered to be three main types of essays (as well as other writing forms) used in British universities; I will investigate each of these in turn.	
This essay analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of the essay, arguing that although it is not a perfect means of assessment, it is the best system which exists.	
The essay is a short, dynamic and powerful piece of writing which has been important for hundreds of years in the British academic system.	
Having summarized the main points of this article, I will challenge its main findings, which are based on poor data, unreliable sources and bad arguments.	

E Personalization

What essays are most common in your subject area?

- Check with your teachers/other students/the departmental handbook.

Are you following the rules for each type of writing?

- Show your recent essays to a friend or colleague. Without telling them, ask them to guess what type of writing it was. If they cannot do this, it may be that your focus is not right.

F Extension

- Step 10 examines **note-taking** – the type of essay which you write will determine what information you note.
- Step 13 looks at **titles**, which will be directly related to the type of writing you are expected to produce.
- Step 14 focuses on the skills of **brainstorming** and **outlining**. The outline you eventually produce will be directly related to the particular type of writing.
- Step 22 looks at **reflective writing** in more detail.