

Active essay writing: ten steps to success!

DR HEATHER TAYLOR

What is the idea?

This chapter presents one approach to using the Active Essay Writing Programme (Taylor et al., 2019); an innovative approach we devised at the University of Sussex to support students in planning, preparing, and presenting original, insightful, and well-presented essays.

Why this idea?

From our experience, most students arrive at university with little-to-no understanding of how to approach essay assignments. If left unchecked, this can lead to them feeling overwhelmed and, in-turn, submitting incoherent and uninspired essays that do not accurately reflect their true potential. The Active Essay Writing Programme was designed to address these issues and make the task of completing essays more manageable and enjoyable for students.

How could others implement this idea?

To guide your students through this ten-step programme, you will need to create an example essay question that you can collaboratively answer with them. This will provide them with the

opportunity to develop and subsequently apply the acquired skills to their own essay assignments.

Step 1: Deconstruct the essay question

The first issue students sometimes face when approaching essay assignments is not fully understanding the question. This can result in them writing (potentially good) essays on completely the wrong topic! The first step is to therefore deconstruct the example essay question with your students, breaking it down into its component parts to ensure understanding and overcome any confusion.

Step 2: Generate ideas

Students are often under the misconception that before they can answer an essay question, they must read everything ever written on the topic. Their attempts to do this creates more confusion than it solves and, in turn, can result in submissions that are largely incoherent regurgitation of academic texts. Instead, we encourage our students to ‘think first’ to help them develop a focused strategy for identifying relevant literature to support their essays. To demonstrate this, ask your students to generate ideas, arguments and counterarguments that might help to answer the example essay question and add these to a mind map.

Step 3: Find evidence

After developing their own mind maps, students will need to see if evidence exists to support their ideas. To demonstrate this process,

select some ideas from the example mind map and search for relevant reliable evidence. If no evidence exists for certain ideas, important learning has still taken place; we know that these ideas are unsupported and should therefore not make it into an essay, and, in doing so, greater insight into the topic has been acquired.

Step 4: Critically evaluate the evidence

The type, style, and depth of critical evaluation will differ by discipline and your students' level of study. In consideration of this, critically evaluate some of the sources identified for the example essay with your students to model the skills involved. While revisiting these sources, also be sure to take more detailed notes as these will be used at the next step.

Step 5: Get organised

Another stumbling block for our students lies in their assumption that there is one correct way to organise an essay. We alternatively encourage them to organise their essays based on their own narrative. To illustrate this, separate (either on paper or digitally) the ideas, summaries of evidence, and critical evaluations generated for the example essay and ask your students to organise this information in a way that makes sense to them. No two students will present the information in the same exact order, illustrating that multiple presentations can be 'correct'.

Step 6: Flesh out the essay outline

The end-product of Step 5 is an essay outline, and so the natural next step is to develop paragraphs. The key here is to ensure that students are not wasting words through unconcise writing and/or inclusion of unnecessary detail, while still providing the reader with sufficient context for understanding the points being made. At this stage, it is also good idea to encourage students to cite and reference their sources as they go. Work on a couple of paragraphs with your students and/or provide them with examples of pre-made poorly written paragraphs and ask them to identify issues and edit accordingly.

Step 7: Introduce the essay

Unlike the main body of the essay, when illustrating how to format an informative introduction paragraph, we encourage our students to adhere to the following three rules:

1. Set the scene by introducing the context and importance of the essay.
2. Signpost the reader to the key points that will be considered.
3. State the overall argument/ answer to the essay question so that the reader is made aware of this right from the start

Work collaboratively with your students to create an introduction paragraph for your example essay.

Step 8: Conclude the essay

Our main suggestion here is for students to go beyond simply

summarising to synthesising the content of their essay. Using the example, encourage your students to take a step back and consider the essay in its entirety before working together to connect the main points and develop a take-home message for the reader.

Step 9: Check citations and references

As we encouraged students to cite and reference as they went along, the formatting of these may not be 100% correct. To ensure that your students understand how to format correctly, provide them with a guide and ask them to either apply it to specific sources used in your example essay or correct errors in pre-made examples.

Step 10: Proof-read

By this point students will have spent a great deal of effort planning, preparing, and presenting their essay – wouldn't it be a shame if the reader could not understand it? To illustrate this, provide them with the example essay (or a select few paragraphs) full of typos, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors for them to correct, so that they can see first-hand the difference between an unchecked first draft versus a carefully proof-read and edited submission.

Reference

Taylor, H., Garnham, W.A. & Ormerod, T. (2019). Active essay writing: Encouraging independent research through conversation. In T. Betts, W. A. Garnham, & P. Oprandi (Eds.) *Disrupting traditional*

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About the Author



Dr Heather Taylor

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

<https://twitter.com/HevTheLecturer>

After several years working as a Doctoral Tutor, Dr Heather Taylor was appointed in 2019 as a Teaching-Focused Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Sussex. Since then, Heather has convened two Foundation Year Psychology modules and taught on other Undergraduate Psychology modules. Within her role, Heather has focused heavily on developing her students' academic skills via active-learning approaches and has been appointed the Head of Attainment for the School of Psychology.