

How to write a good essay

By Jessie Lamontagne (TA in Economic History)

- **Pick a topic you find interesting**

Familiarize yourself with the topic to make sure it is really what you think; if it has been covered in class, read over the class notes.

If it's an A or B topic, refer to the document called "Master list of essay topics" on Dr. Munro's page. It contains a list of the main questions for each topic.

- **Don't be afraid to change your topic**

As you progress in your essay, you may find that your main point of interest may not be exactly what you thought; this is to be expected. Be flexible

- **Know what is expected**

Prof. Munro has posted links to useful pages on the notices page. They point to guides on the website on how to write an essay, how to write a bibliography, guides on grammar, etc. One excellent guide is McCloskey's "Economical writing".

- **Do the research**

Start with the package of readings; if the topic you pick is in the package of reading, you must include these articles in your research or else justify why they were not relevant to you (not recommended...)

Build your bibliography as you go (every time you finish reading something, type it in the bibliography), it will save you time in the end.

Take advantage of the bibliography Dr. Munro has created for you to find more references. Start with the short format, it's less overwhelming.

If you need help using the library website*, ask a reference librarian on the 4th floor of Robart's library. They are always very happy to help.

**My favorite database is JSTOR. It can be found here:*

http://main.library.utoronto.ca/eir/EIRdetail.cfm?Resources_ID=66751&T=I&FID=

- **Start reading and take notes* as you read, in your own words**

Note the source; this helps prevent accidental plagiarism

Note the time period; economic history is about economic analysis through space AND time.

** Prof. Munro uses half-sheets of paper; others use index cards, of similar size., I use a computer. Large Post-it would do just as well. Use whatever you like BUT no more than one note per file; good organization will save you time later.*

- **Know when to stop reading**

Sometimes, reading can be a form of procrastination. It's important to set a deadline, or a maximum number of papers you will read. It's easy for some

students to get lost in the research, and to read “just one more” reference. The goal of this term essay is to translate your research (input) into a paper (output). Think of it as a production function; while the input matters, the output is what you will be evaluated on.

- **Once you’ve read over the main references, read over your notes**
Look for a main question you can answer.
That answer is your thesis, which you will dedicate the essay to demonstrate.
- **Write a basic outline*. Mine usually looks something like:**
Intro (question, answer, how I plan to answer)
Main body (supporting arguments as sub-topics; usually about 3)
Conclusion (recap, closing statement)

**If you have another way to do this, use what feels familiar. The purpose of the outline is to organize your thoughts. You should always keep in mind the question you are trying to answer and make sure that each point you make provides an element of answer, or else supports your thesis.*

- **Organize your notes according to the outline**
Some of what you noted might not relate to your question. Put it aside.
You may have some holes in your arguments. Now is the time to use the long format bibliography to find specific references to fill in gaps in your understanding.

**I will look at your work up to this point. This means that if you would like feedback on your essay while you are working on it, you can bring your outline, and I will provide guidance (of course you can also come seek help in any of the steps before the outline). I will not, however, look at a first draft, as this would be akin to “pre-marking” your essay.*

- **Write your first draft**
There is no rule that says you have to start with the introduction. In fact it’s better to write the introduction last, once you know what the essay is about.
The only remedy to writer’s block is to write something. If you took notes with a pen and paper, start by typing them up (you should have done that in the last step actually).
- **Read over your first draft**
Read it as if it was someone else’s.
Better yet, have someone else read it. Preferably someone who doesn’t know anything about the topic (that should be easy to find...). A good essay should be self-explanatory; you should write assuming the reader knows nothing and they should understand what it was about once they finish reading it.
- **Re-write, re-write, re-write**
You can raise your grade by a full letter (i.e. from B to A) just by editing your

work. It's always better to sleep on it for at least one night before editing, preferably longer. That is because it's hard to be critical of something you just wrote. This should be a hint that good essays are usually not done at the last minute. Start now!

Good luck!