

## Answering Essay Questions

In September 2001 the University of Glamorgan set up a drop-in centre in its law school to support students with their study. We have discovered that there are two main areas that cause problems for students: answering problem questions (see August 2002 edition) and writing essays. Most students are familiar with the essay format from their previous studies and often choose to write an essay in preference to tackling a problem question. However, many then treat the essay as an opportunity to 'write all they know' about the particular topic rather than to specifically address the question they have been set.

Correctly structured, an essay enables you to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject area *and* your ability to present an argument in a clear and logical manner.

### What skills are needed?

In particular you need to:

- Select and present subject matter that is relevant to the essay question in a structured way.
- Plan your essay to make an overall point, passing some critical or analytical comment on the subject matter.

### How should I start?

However able you are and however much research you do, you will only get a high grade if you answer the question that has been set. It is surprisingly easy to twist a question to mean what you want it to mean, especially in exam conditions! Take time to really make sure you've understood exactly what you've been asked to do. Below are two possible methods to do this.

#### 1) Identify two components within a title

There are two components to many essay questions:

**The subject matter.** That is, the issues or debates you are being asked to comment on.

**The instructions.** These are the directions that tell you what to do with the subject matter. Directions fall into two categories: descriptive and analytical. Descriptive directions such as *define* and *outline* usually require you to describe something in your own words. Analytical direction words such as *criticise* and *discuss* require you to evaluate the worth of something, passing some comment of your own.

Here is a sample essay question, using a title from *How to Study Law* (Bradney et al, 1995):

**"The reform of the legal profession by the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990 was a non-event." Discuss.**

**Subject matter:** The success or failure of the Courts and Legal Services Act, 1990, in reforming the legal profession. To answer this question you must find out what the Act stated, what it aimed to achieve, and its impact.

**Instructions:** Discuss. That is, explore from different points of view.

**Warning!** Some titles are simply phrased as questions, without instruction words (e.g. Was the reform of the legal profession by the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990 a non-event?). In such cases you might find it easier to use method number 2 as follows.

## **2) Re-write the title as a series of questions**

Sometimes it is difficult to keep the meaning of an essay title fixed in your mind. One way of making sure that you stick to the point is to re-write it as a series of smaller questions. These can often provide the beginnings of an essay plan too, enabling you to structure your work in a coherent way.

So, the above essay question could pose the following, smaller questions:

What was the situation before the Courts and Legal Services Act of 1990?  
What was the Courts and Legal Services Act of 1990?  
What did the Act aim to achieve?  
Did the Act succeed? If so, why? Who did it help?  
Did the Act fail? If so, why? Who didn't it help?  
In the light of the above, is it correct to say that the Act was a non-event?

## **Plan your essay so that you make an overall point**

We have already mentioned that to write a good essay you need to select and present relevant subject matter and then plan your essay to make some analytical comment about that subject matter. A finished essay should nearly always contain two main ingredients:

1) **Descriptive** sentences or passages where you relate information about a topic. For instance, you might need to *describe* the events of a particular case or

*outline* the history of an aspect of the legal system to provide a context for your discussion.

2) **Analytical** sentences or passages where you make some comment or judgement upon a topic. For instance you might *question* whether an aspect of law is fair, or *criticise* a legal procedure. Good analysis is vital if you want to obtain high marks.

It takes some skill to combine these ingredients so that your final essay makes good sense, so don't be surprised if you need a lot of thinking and planning time.

### **Some guidelines for essay planning**

- ◆ Make sure that you collect and read material that *really* addresses the question. Don't be side-lined into reading everything you can find about the subject unless you've got loads of free-time on your hands!
- ◆ Start planning early because it takes time to think well. What descriptive material might you want to include to set the context for your argument? What overall argument do you want to make? You don't have to stick to your first plan, but at least you have something to work with.
- ◆ Remember that essays are essentially linear in format—one paragraph follows another. At some point you therefore need to work out what you are going to say paragraph by paragraph. This takes some hard thinking. Don't let yourself be vague when deciding what to include in each paragraph: just noting down words like '*Intro*' won't help you much! Fill in the detail.
- ◆ Think carefully about how you sequence material. For instance, make sure that you explain *what* something is before you evaluate it. It might help to imagine taking your readers on a journey. If someone with no previous knowledge of the subject were to read your work would they be able to follow your points? Have you provided enough evidence to convince them that what you say is right?

Below is an example of a first plan for the essay mentioned above. Notice how it combines descriptive and analytical components.

**"The reform of the legal profession by the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990 was a non-event." Discuss.**

- Reasons for reform—reference to relevant reports e.g. Marre
- Reforms carried out by Courts and Legal Services Act—brief description
- Not a non-event a) outcry by barristers and judiciary  
b) removal of barristers' monopoly in higher courts
- Possibly could be said to be an immediate non-event because of delay by designated judges.
- However, conclusion = not a non-event, altered face of legal profession radically—quote from articles.

## **Beginning and ending your essay**

Students commonly report difficulties with beginning and ending essays. Unless instructed otherwise, it is best to avoid getting bogged down with the idea that introductions and conclusions should contain a particular number of words. Nor is there a single right way to begin and end an essay: what you include will depend upon the kind of question that you are answering and your own sense of good style.

Quite simply, an introduction should lead readers into the content of your essay and a conclusion should demonstrate that you've dealt with the question at hand.

### **Introductions**

Here are some possible options:

- If the question is complicated or open to interpretation, you could restate it briefly in your own words.
- You could tell your reader *how* you will address the question - that is outline the steps that you will take, and explain why.
- You could provide a *thesis statement* - that is a statement that sums up your response to the question; the main body of your essay will then be dedicated to demonstrating why your position is justified.
- You might give some historical background to the problem that the question raises.

An introduction to the question given above might look like this:

This essay will explore the impact of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990. Having identified the reasoning behind the Act and the changes implemented, it will examine its impact upon the legal profession, especially regarding the removal of the sole right of barristers to appear in the higher courts. It will be shown that whilst the Act might have initially appeared to be a non-event, it has in fact radically altered and streamlined the legal profession, abolishing to a considerable extent its archaic and hierarchical structure.

### **Conclusions**

A good conclusion can make all the difference to the mark you get for your work and should leave readers with a clear understanding about the subject matter that you have covered. Here are some safe suggestions:

- Summarise your main argument and the theme of your essay.
- State your general conclusions, making it clear to your reader why they are important or significant.
- Aim to make some comment of your own, however tentative, to assess the material you have used. This is part of the analytical process and essential if you are to achieve good marks.
- Refer to the essay title or aim to show that you have addressed the question.
- Avoid including material that you have not previously referred to.
- Avoid making grand, poetic or sweeping generalisations.

### **And finally...**

Remember that good essay writing is a skill that is acquired over time. It may be good idea to get hold of some sample essay questions and attempt them well in advance of a coursework or an exam. Above all, don't expect to get it right first time because only practice will make perfect. Good luck and happy essay writing!

### **Further reading:**

Bradney, A. et.al. 1995. *How to Study Law*. London. Sweet & Maxwell.  
Cottrell. S. 1999. *The Study Skills Handbook*. Basingstoke. Palgrave.