

Guidance on how to answer essay questions

Essays are one of the most widely used and important forms of assessment in undergraduate law degrees, but essay writing something that many students find very difficult to master. There are probably good reasons for this. You may have had little experience of writing essays before, or the essays you have been asked to write might have been much shorter. The content of the essay may have been descriptive rather than analytical. At school you are often given a great deal of guidance by your teachers as to what is expected, but at university there is much more emphasis on independent learning, and on wider reading and critical thought. You will be expected to work out an answer to an essay question on your own and the focus of your work will be critical rather than descriptive.

That said, it is possible to identify the key features of a good essay. It's important to remember that your lecturers and tutors are looking for a variety of things from your essays. These are likely to include:

- **Knowledge** – this requires legal research skills. Your knowledge must be accurate, up to date, and appropriate for the question that has been set and must be referenced. You should demonstrate this through proper referencing (of appropriate sources) and a bibliography.
- **Relevance** – you must exercise judgement about what material you will use in your essay. Not everything you know about the subject will be relevant (this is particularly true for examination essays). A key skill is the ability to discard the irrelevant and ensure that the relevance of what you retain is made clear to your reader.
- **Analysis** – it is not enough to describe the knowledge you have acquired: you must also be prepared to evaluate that knowledge, to point out the problems with it, to weigh up its significance and long-term implications.
- **Focus** – your essay must demonstrate that you have understood the question that is being asked and must answer that question.
- **Written skills** – your writing must be fluent and structured. You must use appropriate language and referencing.
- **Originality** – it should go without saying that your work must not be plagiarised. More than that, it should in some sense be creative. Strong essays take an original approach to the question set. You should work out an argument which demonstrates that approach and your essay should deliver your argument.

How to write a good essay

Here are two key points to bear in mind before you start work on any essay:

1. Before you start writing an essay, check the assessment criteria for the piece of work that you have been set (often found in a module handbook or similar). If you cannot find them, or do not understand them, ask your lecturer or seminar leader. After you have written your essay, read it through again to make sure it addresses this criteria.

2. Read the feedback on the last essay you wrote (this may not be in your tort law module) and use it to improve your work. If your lecturer or seminar leader has suggested that your work is insufficiently analytical, then ensure that you address that weakness. If they have suggested that you have not been sufficiently accurate or precise, then concentrate on that. Whilst students complain that lecturers give insufficient feedback or give their feedback too slowly, lecturers complain that students don't take any notice of what is written. Don't fall into that trap! We discuss the best way to respond to feedback below. You may also find examples of good student essays on your institutional online resource centre.

The components of a good essay

A good essay is a combination of:

- Critical thinking about the question which you have to address.
- Wide but focused and critical reading appropriately applied to the question in hand. You should read carefully and pay close attention to the ideas which inform the material you are considering. As you read, develop your own ideas in response. Ask yourself, do you agree or disagree with the author?
- Effective writing, which means you must pay attention to the following:
 - Planning the structure of your essay so it allows you to develop a coherent argument about the question you have been set.
 - Constructing an introduction which sets out the argument you wish to present.
 - Summarising your argument in the conclusion.
 - The fluency of your writing. Your sentences and your paragraphs must be well structured and purposeful.
 - You will almost inevitably need to redraft all, or parts of your essay as part of the writing process.

Active words in questions

Once you have chosen your question you must think about what that question requires you to do. All essay questions require that you do something with the information you have to hand. What you have to do is set out in the question and described by an active word. Whatever the active word is in the essay, whether it is 'consider' or 'assess' for instance, make sure that the whole of your essay does just that! Whenever you read an essay question locate the active word or words in it, make sure that you understand what they require of you, and then deliver that action in your essay. As you write, keep referring back to the active word to remind yourself what you are required to do.

Developing an original argument

One crucial component of a successful essay is a clear argument, presented in a structured form. In developing an argument the first step is to think carefully about the question. Here is an example of a question set on a non-tort related – but topical – topic: devolution. It is used to here illustrate how you might go about developing an argument (and so you concentrate on that and don't get distracted by the substance).

Example

Explain your view of the desirability of devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To what extent do the reforms put in place match your view of what is desirable?

This question is quite explicit about what it wants you to do. You must set out your views about the desirability of devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is not asking you for the pros and cons of devolution. It wants your views. However, remember that your views must be authoritative. Even though the question asks what you think, it is probably best to avoid the phrase 'I think' in the answer. It is better to use 'I prefer the argument of...' or 'I consider that ...' or 'I give greater weight to the opinion of X' and then explain why you think in that way.

The obvious trap the unwary student will fall into is writing a description of the devolution frameworks in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That would be hard work, almost inevitably tedious to write and certainly tedious to read, and would probably result in a low mark. You can avoid this trap by concentrating on what the question asks you to do. Once you have worked out what is, in your opinion (based on the informed opinions of commentators) desirable about devolution, you can go on to measure the reforms against your own criteria. This is bound to provide you with an original argument, because it is your ideas and your evaluation.

How do you go about developing an opinion about devolution in the UK? It may be that you have strong views already. That's fine – you just have to express those views appropriately in the essay, without ranting and supported by authority. However, many students find it difficult to formulate an opinion, though there may have been hints about particular viewpoints etc. given in your lectures or textbooks, which you could use as a starting point. Other good sources of views which you could use initially to help form your own opinion are broadsheet newspapers (including comment pieces), specialist blog sites, Hansard etc. Once you start forming your opinion, move on to more scholarly/academic articles and comment pieces.

[...]Nothing is as valuable in developing your own ideas as careful and critical reading of informed opinions. Make sure you have read every article which is on your reading list. Remind yourself of the importance of active reading. If you read articles closely you will develop your own critical thinking skills.

Planning your essay

When we ask students if they plan their essays there is a tendency to avoid answering the question. We suspect that many undergraduates do not know how to plan an essay, or even what a useful essay plan looks like. An essay plan takes as its starting point the argument you intend to present in your answer to your essay. In the introduction it sets out the main points of the argument, and then the plan indicates how

paragraph by paragraph the argument will be delivered in the essay. Finally the plan sets out the main points of the conclusion which will be a summing up of the argument.

Next steps in planning

If you set out your plan in the right way you will ensure that you have made argument and analysis the centre of the essay. The process is not a simple one; it requires a lot of thought, but is really a crucial step in a successful essay. The next step is to think over the plan and consider which references and authorities you are going to use to back up your argument. If you have not got authority for a point, then you are going to have to do further research, or abandon that point. An important focus of your plan is the introduction. If this is not strong and well-thought through, then your essay is not going to work.

Using cases in your essay

Key point

When you use cases in your essays you must:

- cite the case properly
- quote from the judgments and not from what a textbook tells you about the case
- use the case to enhance your arguments and not simply to demonstrate that you have read the case
- you can use opinions from authoritative textbooks and articles as evidence – but you should evaluate these opinions and explain why you prefer one interpretation to another.

Writing your essay

There are some particular points it is worth making in the context of essay writing, for it is in marking your essays that your lecturers pay most attention to your writing skills.

It is good practice in an essay to:

- Start paragraphs with a strong sentence to indicate the importance of the point you are making. A strong beginning to the introduction to your essay is particularly useful to suggest that you are confident in the argument you are putting forward.
- Link one paragraph with the one which follows it. Sometimes that means you have to be explicit, writing, 'I will now go on to discuss...'. If your lecturer does not like the use of the first person, you can write, 'The discussion will now move to...'. These are acceptable devices as they help your reader navigate your essay.
- End paragraphs with a short summary of the contents of the paragraph. This will emphasise the coherence of your work, and remind you that each paragraph must focus on and develop one main idea.

- Use quotations, but use them well. Remember, quotations do not speak for themselves, and people's opinions need evaluating. Do not use up too much of your word count in quotations. You can use quotations from cases, articles and authoritative textbooks. Remember, however, that if you are going to use extracts from primary sources, such as cases or legislation, then you should quote directly from these, and not from a textbook digest of them.
- Vary the length of your sentences. Short sentences are easy to read, but can sound too staccato. Long sentences are often disastrous, because students fail to communicate with their reader. Split long sentences into shorter ones. You will find that it forces you to think through, and to develop your point effectively.
- Voice your opinions, but ensure that your opinions are authoritative. Use cases, quotations from authoritative textbooks or from articles to give weight to your opinions. Explain why you prefer one opinion to another.
- Remind yourself throughout the writing process of the essay title and of the active word in the essay title. Ensure that you are delivering what you are required to deliver.

Conclusions

Key point

Do not introduce new material, either facts or ideas, into the conclusion of your essay. If this happens you need to re-draft the essay so that you explore the new material properly within the body of your essay.

A basic essay structure would look something like this:

■ Introduction

Set out how your 'answer' to the question – that is how you interpret the question

Summarise your key points and argument

■ Main body of essay

Legal and contextual background

3 or 4 key points

Relate discussion to the question – why is this relevant? Why are you including it?

■ Conclusion

Make sure you answer the question – not a general discussion on topic

No surprises