# Essay Writing Handout

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## 1. Why Essays?

Essays give you the opportunity to demonstrate a wide range of skills. A good essay shows that you:

- Have engaged with the material and learning
- Are able to identify and prioritise appropriate material to read
- Understand and are able to evaluate that material
- Can select and apply the most relevant material to a task
- Can construct an effective argument and arrive at a well-supported conclusion

Often, it isn't until you try to communicate an argument and its evidence (through an essay, in a lecture, to your peers, etc.) that you discover where the gaps are. In this way, essays help you consolidate and make sense of what you've learned. They do this by helping you organise your thinking on topics.

With essays, you are also typically restricted by a small word limit and/or little writing time; this encourages you to produce an essay that is precise, concise, and clear – an important skill in itself, beyond university. Other transferable skills from essay writing include: ability to organise ideas; ability to manage time; ability to argue a case and communicate effectively; active reading; critical thinking; and analysis.

## 2. General Advice

An essay is not just about showing what you know. A good essay, whether for an exam or during term-time, is one that *applies* what you have learned to the task of addressing the specific essay question. With this in mind, the general advice is:

- Answer the question; keep it relevant
- Develop a logical and clearly structured argument
- Support and illustrate your argument
- Go beyond description to demonstrate critical thinking
- Practice writing and proofreading

## 3. Plan Your Essay

Every essay needs a strong and clear structure, organized around an argument. The planning process is likely to be iterative for term-time essays. In an exam setting, where time is limited, it can seem like a waste of time to brainstorm and plan before beginning. However, creating a plan, even in exams, should help you in a number of ways:

1. The process of creating a plan helps you identify the most relevant points rather than the first ones that come to mind.
2. Having a plan with key ideas written down to refer back to allows you to rely less on your working memory as you write.

## R1. Definitions of Terms

### R.1.1. Critical Question Terms

***Analyse:*** Break the issue down into parts; present evidence for/against these parts and how they inter-relate to inform your final argument on the topic.

***Assess/to what extent***: With evidence, weigh up different stances to make a judgement about the extent to which an assertion is true/you agree with it.

***Discuss (debate):*** Make a case for or against an argument with reasoning and evidence before arriving at a conclusion.

***Evaluate:*** Give a verdict/weigh up to what extent an assertion is true based on evidence for and against.

***Examine:*** Establish key facts and issues relevant to the topic and justify why these are important, in context. Also, provide an evaluation (see directly above).

***Justify:*** Make a case for an idea/point of view and back this up with evidence, considering and debunking the opposing view(s) before coming to a conclusion.

***Review:*** Recap/summarise the main themes/points and comment on any major arguments arising from them in relation to your own stance on the topic.

### R.1.2. Descriptive Question Terms

***Clarify:*** Explain (see below) the concept/topic in simpler/clearer terms.

***Compare:*** Concentrate on the similarities between 2+ subjects, and point out where they diverge.

***Contrast:*** Concentrate on the differences between two+ subjects.

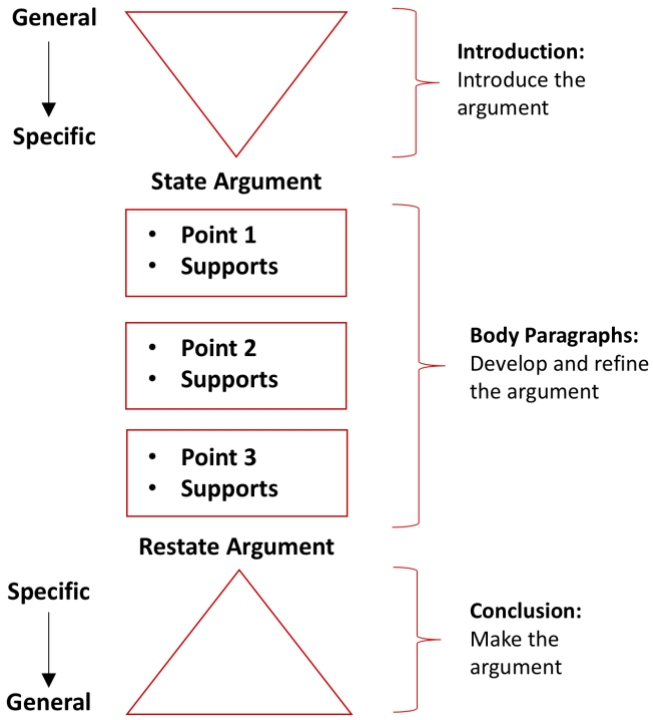
***Define:*** Give the meaning; bring attention to different interpretations and problems with the definition.

***Demonstrate/illustrate/show:*** Present the stages/factors that give rise to a phenomenon or show how an assertion is valid; present in a logical order with examples/evidence/reasoned arguments.

***Describe/give an account of:*** Objectively provide insight into the main characteristics of the subject; explain how and why a phenomenon has occurred.

***Elaborate:*** Give more detail/information.

3. If you run out of time in an exam, the reader may be inclined to look at the points you were hoping to make. Just make sure you cross the plan out so that the examiner doesn't include it as part of your essay! You don't get points in essays for lists and diagrams.




In creating a plan, you should attempt to garner as much guidance as you can from the essay question. Deconstruct the essay question and examine every word (see ***Reference 1. Definitions of Terms***). Use the component parts to build up your essay answer; respond to every element of the question in corresponding measures.

## 3.1. Introduction

The introduction should lead into a focused argument. **Every sentence needs to show a *progression* towards your argument**. Some tips for leading into your argument include:

- Re-write/explain how you interpret the question/show your understanding of the task set
- Challenge or (re-)define the issue/topic
- Engage with definitions of terms
- Establish the historical/social/economic/political context
- Briefly describe is the starting/common position, relevant theory, or other perspective
- Indicate how you will answer the question in your essay structure
- Give a summary of the main (relevant) issues/themes
- State why the topic is important/interesting/relevant

***Explain:*** Answer "what", "how", and "why" (as if teaching); make clear and simple; define key terms and substantiate with relevant research.

***Explore:*** Consider, in an objective and questioning (less argumentative) tone, different stances on the topic and reconcile them where possible.

***Identify:*** Point out and describe key points/ideas in relation to the topic/argument, including implications.

***Outline:*** Organise and present the main/global points and inter-relations.

***Summarise:*** Give the condensed and/or general version of main points.

## R2. Word Choice

You need to choose your words wisely so that they do not get in between the intended message and your reader. Formal, precise words don't make your essay boring; they help you communicate your message *objectively, clearly,* and *confidently.*

### R2.1. Choosing Strong Verbs

Phrasal verbs are common in informal spoken English. Formal writing benefits from the use of stronger verbs. Examples include:

- "Anticipate" instead of "look forward to"
- "Build" instead of "put together"
- "Communicate" instead of "put across"
- "Conceal" instead of "cover up"
- "Consider" instead of "think about"
- "Delay" instead of "hold up"
- "Eliminate" instead of "wipe out"
- "Establish" instead of "set-up"
- "Examine" instead of "look at"
- "Exhaust" instead of "use up"
- "Influence" instead of "bring about"
- "Occurred" instead of "came about"
- "Omit" instead of "leave out"
- "Produce" instead of "bring out"
- "Raise" instead of "bring up"
- "Reject" instead of "turn down"
- "Test" instead of "try out"
- "Tolerate" instead of "put up with"
- "Understand" instead of "make sense of"

Try to get to the point quickly, starting with more general statements and finishing with specific ones. Keep in mind, however, that moving from general to specific statements in itself is insufficient. You need to be selective, starting with a *relevant* general point. Avoid very broad statements that provide no new insight or meaning, such as "*Security is very important"*. Also, avoid padding your introduction with *too much* general information.

## 3.2. Main Body

The main body of your essay needs to: *a.)* fulfil the promises made in the introduction; and *b.)* support your final conclusions. You can achieve these goals with the help of a well-considered and clear structure. There are several structures you can consider (chronological, comparative, thematic, context, etc.); this will partly depend on the terms used in the essay question. The structure *can* be more complicated. For example, it may be appropriate to have a thematic structure overall, and to be comparative within paragraphs. You can sometimes use the wording of the question to create your structure.

Your structure should help the reader navigate through the argument in your essay. To this end, when it comes to deciding on the main points to include and how to organise them, you need to consider how each paragraph progresses your argument.

You make this progression clear by 'signposting' at the beginning of each paragraph with a sentence that transitions cleanly and logically from the previous paragraph. Once introduced, don't just state your point, *demonstrate it* with examples, evidence, and reasoning. Round each paragraph off by explaining how it contributes to your argument, and transition into the next point.

Transitory words and phrases should be based on a genuine link (see ***Reference 3.1.*** for transition types). For example, it is inappropriate to use words and phrases like "*on the other hand*" if you do not then express an idea that contrasts with the idea that was expressed immediately beforehand. If you are having trouble figuring out how to transition from one paragraph to the next, it may be that your structure needs work.

Keep in mind that transitions are also important *within* paragraphs. Transitions like: "*it is also important to note*" should not be used indiscriminately to shoe-horn interesting but irrelevant content into your essay. To keep a tight focus throughout, remember that **every sentence in your essay is essentially a transition sentence** – or should be; this will help you avoid redundant information and repetition.

### R2.2. Choosing Specific Verbs

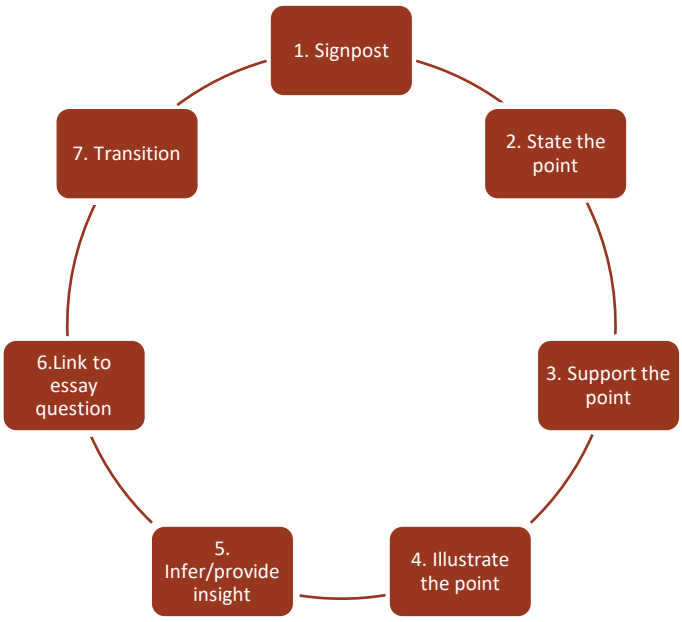
A mark of good essay writing is specificity. So, instead of writing "*X is good*", you could specify "*X is useful*". If referring to *"**something**"*, you should specify what that something is: a concept, protocol, theory, debate, case study? And when reporting what you have learned from reading (*"The authors show …"*), you can use specific verbs such as the following, instead of more general words like "show":

- Argue
- Assert
- Claim
- Contend
- Conclude
- Demonstrate
- Find
- Illustrate
- Imply
- Infer
- Maintain
- Note
- Outline
- Postulate
- Reason
- Support

### R2.3. Removing Unnecessary Words

Another mark of a good essay is 'preciseness and conciseness', using only words that are necessary to convey meaning. You can weed out redundancy by asking whether every word and sentence is necessary for communicating the message effectively. Below are some common redundant or filler words and phrases that can normally be removed:

- There is a ~~more~~ preferable method
- This is the ~~most~~ unique case
- The system ~~makes a~~ request(+s) ~~for~~
- The algorithm comprises~~ of~~
- Passwords should ~~instead~~ be replaced with
- ~~In order~~ to examine
- ~~Well,~~ cybercrime has increased
- The authors ~~started to~~ explain
- Passwords are ~~basically~~ usable
- It was removed ~~entirely~~
- The paper has ~~got~~ twenty references
- This did not provide ~~any~~ new insight
- The paper~~ serves/helps to~~ explain(+s)
- You need to ~~make sure you~~ answer the question
- It will happen again ~~in the future~~
- Sometimes ~~it is the case that~~ users need to
- A random string of 8 characters is ~~just~~ as secure as a four-word passwords




1. **Signpost.** What is the paragraph about?
2. **State the point.** What is your argument on this?
3. **Support the point.** Expand or explain if necessary.
4. **Illustrate the point.** What is the evidence/example/underlying theory/policy?
5. **Infer/provide insight**. What does this mean? So what?
6. **Link.** How does this relate to the essay question?
7. **Transition.** Relate to the next paragraph.

## 3.3. Conclusion

The conclusion is a place for **synthesis and analysis** based on your essay's content; it should bring closure to the essay and provide the final perspective on the topic. You can do this by:

- Summarising the argument and the main supporting points
- Highlighting why the argument/conclusion is important; reference the larger issue
- Briefly evaluating the main points; highlight the important aspects
- **Link to the essay question/state how you have answered it**

The conclusion should **not**:

- Be a hit and run
- Introduce new information or evidence
- Voice sentimental or emotional appeals
- Repeat what you've already said in the main body
- Copy the introduction

### R2.4. Replacing Intensifiers

Common overused intensifiers are "very", "really", "quite", "too", "so", "even", and "pretty". You can strengthen your writing by choosing a single word that replaces both the adverb (e.g., "very") and the word that follows. Below are some examples with "very":

- very important → crucial
- very sure → convinced
- very good outcome → ideal outcome
- very bad outcome → disastrous outcome
- very big difference→ large difference
- very small difference → negligible difference
- very strong argument → robust argument
- very weak argument → unconvincing argument

You can tell if the replacement is a strong alternative based on how the new word sounds with "very" in front of it. For example: "very negligible" is unusal.

### R2.5. Avoiding Contractions

Contractions are mostly used in informal language, making them unsuitable for academic essays. Some common examples include:

- Aren't/weren't → are/were not
- Can't → cannot
- Didn't/doesn't/don't/isn't → did/does/do/is not
- Hadn't/hasn't/haven't → had/has/have not
- I'm → I am
- I/they/we/you've → I/they/we/you have
- Mustn't/shan't/won't→ must/shall/will not
- Let's → let us
- (S)he's → (s)he is
- (S)he/I/they/we/you'd → (s)he/I/they/we/you had or would
- Should've/would've/could've → should/would/ could have
- (S)he/we/I/they/you'll → (s)he/we/I/they/you will
- That's → that is or has
- You're/they're → you/they are

### R2.6. Commonly Confused Words

Some words are commonly misused in both speech and writing. It is worth getting your head around them to avoid making obvious mistakes that change the meaning of your sentences:

## 4. Checking and Editing

The essay is not done as soon as you finish the conclusion. You now need to pay attention to the smaller details. It is only when you re-read your essay that you can see how your argument fits together and how well it is expressed. So, once your essay is written:

- Review the question to check it relates to your essay's main points
- Ensure the order of your main points make sense
- Re-read to check sentence structure and flow
- Check for grammar and spelling errors

You should do this for both term-time and exam essays. Take care doing this, since **it is much harder to detect mistakes in your own work than in someone else's**. That's because most errors in written work are made unconsciously, and there are two main types:

1. Faulty information from kinaesthetic memory
   → Re-read your essay slowly, and word-for-word; do this out loud if not in an exam

2. Momentary inattention as the mind works faster than you write
   → In exams, devote 5 minutes to a brain dump of keywords and a plan at the beginning so there is less memory load while you write

## 5. Writing Style

An interesting essay emerges from the way you present an argument, which relies on a good structure and supporting evidence. Fancy words and intricate sentences don't do this for you. To the other extreme, an essay is also not a conversation between friends. What is understood in speech between peers is often insufficient for conveying a meaningful argument in an essay. In either case, you should put effort into communicating a clear and effective argument.

### 5.1. Avoiding Colloquial Language

Colloquial language is conversational and informal – unsuitable for an academic essay. There are several types of colloquialism that you should avoid in essays:

- Shortened forms, including contractions (see ***Reference 2.5.***) and every-day abbreviations (e.g. asap, info, 'till, telly, DIY, veg)
- Slang (e.g., cool, quid, cuppa), insider terminology/jargon (e.g., coding, address, memory), and regional language.
- Informal words, including filler words (see ***Reference 2.3.***) and words used in casual situations (see ***Reference 2.8.***)
- Phrases, expressions, aphorisms, and clichés. For example: "*At the end of the day*". Many such sayings, are also overused and have lost their meaning/effect. For example: "*Think outside the box*".

- Access and assess
- Accept and except
- Complement and compliment
- Effect and affect
- Exacerbated and exasperated
- Infer and imply
- Its and it's
- Lesser and less
- Less and fewer
- Lose and loose
- Personal and personnel
- Precede and proceed
- Principle and principal
- That and which
- There, their, and they're
- Weather and whether
- Your and you're

#### R2.7. Incorrect

Sometimes words and phrases used and understood in everyday speech are incorrect. For example: "***literally***" is often used to mean "*figuratively*", but neither word is usually needed. Other examples include:

- ***Alot*** → (meaning "a lot") many/several
- ***Alright*** → all right
- *Could/would/should* ***of*** → have
- ***Inbetween*** → in between
- ***In tact*** → intact
- ***Re-occurred*** → recurred
- ***Use*** *to* → used to

#### R2.8. Too informal

Other words should be avoided on the basis they are informal or casual. For example:

- ***A bit/lot*** → "somewhat"/"several" (or remove)
- ***Big, huge, humungous*** → "large", "sizable"
- ***Get*** → "receives" or "understands"
- ***Give*** → "provide", "offer", "present"
- ***Kind of, sort of*** → "somewhat"

## R3. Transitions

Transitions provides a sense of coherence and allow the reader to follow your thread of thought; they are not space fillers, and need to be appropriately chosen based on the direction of your argument.

## 5.2. Maintaining an Objective Tone

Highly opinionated words and phrases should be avoided to help you maintain an objective tone. Subjectivity often arises with use of:

### 5.2.1. Absolute Terms

Adverbs of frequency ("everyone", "always" "never") and superlatives ("best", "most", "worst") are usually too dramatic, and usually untrue. They weaken your argument by revealing bias. Unless stating pure fact, avoid these absolute terms. Alternatives include: "*frequently*", "*typically*", *"undesirable*", and "*ideal*".

### 5.2.2. Value Judgements

Value judgements reveal your subjectivity. Words like "*wonderful*", "*good*", "*horrible*", "*bad*", "*terrible*", etc., can usually be removed with the meaning intact. For example, "*the paper included many ~~good~~ references*". In this example, if the writer felt it was important to emphasise that the references were especially *good* – if that was the focus of the sentence – there are stronger and more objective alternatives, such as "*the paper included many **relevant** and **scientifically sound** references*" (see ***Reference 2.2.**).*

### 5.2.3. Stance Adjuncts

It is also common to use words and phrases like "*naturally"*, "*obviously"*, and "*of course"* in essays. These typically express a subjective evaluation or comment in terms of:

- Validity/certainty (e.g., "undoubtedly", "certainly", "impossibly")
- Attitude (e.g., "amazingly", "surely", "unfortunately", "thankfully")
- Personal experience/belief (e.g., "supposedly", "apparently", "in my view")
- The writer's own comments (e.g., "honestly", "frankly", "confidentially", "hopefully")

Again, these can usually be safely removed to reduce the subjective tone without affecting the meaning of the sentence.

## 5.3. Subjective Pronouns

Until recently in science and academia, formal and objective writing was prioritised over readability; writers were strictly advised to avoid using "I" and "we" in essays and papers.

Many are bucking this trend in protest of imprecise statements, such as "*it was found…",* instead of unambiguous ones, such as "*I found…"*. The latter is also (typically, but not always) easier to read because it uses the active voice (see ***Section 5.4.3. Active versus Passive Voice***).

On the other hand, several other sources (e.g., *Scientist's Handbook for Writing Papers and Dissertations; Good Style: Writing for Science and Technology*, Kirkman, 2005*; Eloquant Science,* Schultz, 2009) argue

### R3.1. Transition Types

- Address a similarity (e.g., "likewise", "in the same way") or dissimilarity ("in contrast", "however")
- Present a causal relationship ("thus", "consequently", "hence", "therefore", "accordingly", "for this reason")
- Suggest a meaningful order or temporal sequence (e.g., "first", "then", "at the same time", "prior to this", "later", "finally", "subsequently")
- Add something ("furthermore", "moreover" "also", "in addition", "another")
- Use a 'hook' – keyword, phrase, idea, or theme in the previous sentence that is repeated in the following sentence to **introduce a new point**.

### R3.2. Transition or intensifier?

As well as transitions at the beginning of sentences, words like "however", "furthermore", "therefore", and "moreover" can be used as intensifiers *within* sentences for emphasis.

Students often get confused about when to use these words as intensifiers (which require a comma on either side), and when to use them at the beginning of a sentence to introduce the next point. A short cut to figuring this out is to identify whether you have complete sentences on either side of the word. If so, you should split the sentence with a full stop or semicolon. For example:

**Incorrect**: *"I chose to study computer science, however, I also enjoy mathematics."*

**Correct**: *"I chose to study computer science. However, I also enjoy mathematics."*

## R4. Verb Tense

### R4.1. When to Use Tenses

Use **present tense** when writing about:

- Factual topics, e.g., "*Most of us **are** able to operate smartphones."*
- Your own ideas, e.g., *"Privacy laws should **apply** equally to adults and children."*
- An action or idea in a reference, e.g., "*The author **argues** that our current understanding of cybercrime **is** insufficient."*

against subjective pronouns, claiming they should only be used for stating personal opinions, actions, or observations, and/or when it is necessary to indicate who carried out a specific action.

Writers need to make a judgement call based on who is reading their work and what the purpose of it is. **Whatever you choose, your guiding principle should always be clarity.** If you decide to limit your use of subjective pronouns, avoid the words: "I", "me", "we", "us", "you", "they", and "them" by writing in third-person. For example:

**Informal**: "*You can see from the findings …"*

**Formal Alternative**: **"***The findings reveal …"*

Typically, third-person is used when the specific steps taken and/or a formal writing tone are more important than the subject/doer. For example, in the methods section of a research paper, the precise procedure is needed for scientific replicability. Personal pronouns are more common when you introduce your own research or are writing for an audience that is less familiar with the subject area.

For exam essays, examiners are likely to be less strict about subjective pronouns than during term-time and in supervisions.

## 5.4. Sentence Structure

You can improve the clarity and accuracy of your statements, and the readability of your essay as a whole, by carefully considering sentence structure.

### 5.4.1. Splitting sentences

Less is more; you can keep wordiness down and sentences easier to read by splitting them into smaller ones. An effective tactic is to replace words like "and" and "but" within a sentence with a full stop or semicolon. If you have a complete thought on both sides of one of these words, you can use a full stop to make two sentences, or a semicolon after the first complete thought. For example:

*"Today I have to hand in an essay,* ***and*** *tomorrow I have two exams"*
*→ Today I have to hand in an essay; tomorrow I have two exams"*

### 5.4.2. Subject-Verb-Object

If you have a complex sentence that might give readers trouble, you can attempt to fix it by re-writing it in the following format:

**Subject (doer) → Verb (action) → Object (receiver)**.

Such sentences tend to be shorter, have more clarity, and use the active voice (***Section 5.4.3. Active versus Passive Voice***). They are thus more readable. For example:

**S-V-O structure:** *"Alan Turing [subject] broke [verb] the German Enigma Code [object]"*

Use **past tense** when writing about:

- Past events, e.g., "*Raspberry Pi* ***was*** *released in early 2016"*
- Complete studies or findings, e.g., *"The findings* ***showed*** *that…"*

Use **future tense** when writing about an event that will/might occur in the future, e.g., "*Legislation for self-driving vehicles* ***will need*** *to consider liability."*

### R4.2. Consistency and Shifting Tenses

A common error is to shift between tenses within sentences. For example:

**Incorrect:** "The authors **provided** a protocol and **offer** an alternative ..."

**Correct**: The authors **provide** a protocol and **offer** an alternative ..."

Change tense only when the content demands that you do so for clarity, for example, when dealing with several time periods:

*"The movie* ***is based*** *[present tense] on the life of Alan Turing, who* ***died*** *[past tense] in 1954."*

You should also avoid changing tense within your essay as a whole; establish a primary tense (usually present tense for readability and clarity), and keep this consistent from sentence to sentence.

As within sentences, you might *need* to shift tenses if there is a time change to be shown. For example:

*"The lecture* ***starts*** *[present tense] at 9:00am. The bus* ***arrives*** *[present tense] at 8:50am. If the bus is late, the student* ***will be*** *[Future tense] late."*

## R5. Comma Use

### R5.1. Used Correctly

***R5.1.1. To separate three or more items in a list***

Example: *"Computer science is used to solve problems, improve communication, and further education."*

***R5.1.2. To separate independent clauses***

- Joined by connectors: "and", "but", "for", "nor", "neither", "so", or "yet". For example, "*The student answered the essay question well, and received a good grade*".

**O-V-S structure:** *"The German Enigma Code [object] was broken [verb] by Alan Turing [subject]."*

This isn't to say that you should limit yourself to this structure, but you should consider it for sentences that do not seem to be working well.

#### 5.4.3. Active versus Passive Voice

When you follow the S-V-O pattern, you are on your way to writing in the active voice. When sentences are passive, the action is applied to or happens to the subject; when sentences are active, the subject directs the action. The passive voice emphasises the action being performed and the active voice emphasises the subject of an action.

The passive voice tends to be more formal, but is less easy to follow. On the other hand, while it may be easier to *read* the active voice, it can sound more informal because active sentences often rely on subjective pronouns (see ***section 5.3. Subjective Pronouns***). This is not always the case though. Using the same example as above:

**Passive:** *"The German Enigma Code was broken by Alan Turing."*

**Active:** *"Alan Turing broke the German Enigma Code"*

Neither example uses a subjective pronoun, but the active example is still easier to read because it is shorter and more direct.

#### 5.4.4. Proper Modifier Use

For clarity in your writing, it is important that a modifier (word, phrase, or clause that qualifies another part of the sentence) refers to the correct subject, for example:

**Incorrect:** *By working far into the night, the essay was finished on time*
[Technically means that the essay worked far into the night]

**Correct:** *By working far into the night, you finished the essay on time*
[Means that *you* worked far into the night]

## 5.5. Grammar

#### 5.5.1. Commas

Perhaps the most useful (and misused, ***Reference 5.2.***) means of making the intended meaning of a sentence clear is comma placement. Common myths include that you should always use commas if the sentence is long, and that you should add a comma whenever you would pause in speech.

This is incorrect. **Rather than dealing with sentence *length*, commas deal with sentence *complexity***. Commas exist to avoid confusion and ambiguity by indicating what parts of the sentence go together. Examples of correct comma use are in ***Reference 5.1.***

- In the middle of a sentence with a clause, phrase, or word that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence (i.e., could be removed and the sentence would still make sense), for example:
  - **Clause**: *"That reasoning, **which happens to be correct**, is very cynical."*
  - **Phrase**: *"Your essay reads really well. My essay, **on the other hand**, isn't even started."*
  - **Word**: *"In this case, **however**, it was not necessary."*

***R5.1.3. After introductory clauses and phrases***

Examples:

- After/later, e.g., "*Later, I backed up my computer."*
- However, e.g., "*However, this was not the case."*
- If […], e.g., *"If you want to be a physicist, you should be good at maths."*
- When […], e.g., *"When I go to the computer lab, I will take my bike."*
- Having […], e.g., *"Having realised his mistake, he tried to apologise"*
- To […], e.g., "*To learn a programming language, you have to practice consistently"*
- Because […], e.g., *"Because she started early, she finished first."*

***R5.1.4. To separate 'describers' (co-ordinate adjectives) of the same noun***

Example: *"It was an engaging, thoughtful presentation."*

You can decide if this rule applies based on whether the sentence would make sense if the adjectives were in reverse order and if they had an "*and*" between them.

***R5.1.5. To separate contrasted co-ordinate adjectives at the end of a sentence***

Example: *"He had remembered the facts, not understood them".*

***R5.1.6. To avoid possible ambiguity or confusion***

Example: *"To Cambridge, Oxford became a friendly rival."*

### R5.2. Used Incorrectly

***R5.2.1. Comma Splices.***

Rather than clarifying their sentences, students sometimes *create* confusion with commas, for example, by using them to separate two independent clauses.

### 5.5.2. Colons and Semicolons

Colons (:) introduce something that follows, such as dialogue, a list, or an example. Students sometimes use semicolons (;) when they should use a colon. Semicolons serve an entirely a different purpose:

a. Joining two independent clauses that are closely linked, giving them equal rank. For example: *"I chose to study computer science; I didn't want to do the same thing as my dad."*
b. Separating main clauses joined by a conjunctive. For example: *"We didn't check the map* ***and*** *now we're lost"* → *"We didn't check the map; now we're lost"*
c. As 'stronger commas' (aka, the 'super-comma function') for avoiding confusion between items in a list, especially when the items in the list already use commas. For example: *"The four cities I visited last year were: Glasgow, Scotland; Salzburg, Austria, Copenhagen, Denmark; and Zurich, Switzerland."*

### 5.5.3. Adverbs and Intensifiers

Academic writing usually contains fewer adverbs than adjectives. Adverbs are modifiers, and there are many types, including: frequency adverbs (e.g., "often"), additives (e.g. "also", "too"), hedges (e.g., "usually"), restrictives (e.g., "only"), and intensifiers (e.g., "quite").

Adverbs in themselves are not bad, but they are often unneeded or awkwardly placed. Intensifiers are especially problematic because they lead to exaggeration and leak bias. Writing generally sounds stronger if you remove adverbial phrases and replace them with more meaningful words. "Very" is the most obvious and widely used culprit; there are examples of how the word "very" can be avoided in ***Reference 2.4.***

These misplaced commas should be replaced with a conjunction (word), semicolon, or full stop. For example:

**Incorrect***: "I cannot remember my password, I created it a long time ago"*

**Correct Alternatives:**

- Conjunction: *"I cannot remember my password* ***because*** *I created it a long time ago"*
- Semicolon: *"I cannot remember my password**;** I created it a long time ago."*
- Full-stop: *"I cannot remember my password**.** I created it a long time ago."*

#### *R5.2.2. Between essential elements.*

A common error is to use commas between essential elements and relative clauses, which undermines the intended meaning of the sentence. For example:

**Essential element, so no comma:** *"Teachers who use images in their lectures are engaging."*

In this example, "who" is *essential* because the writer is referring to a group of teachers defined by a lecturing technique; the clause "*who use images in their lectures"* is restricted to the noun (teachers).

**Nonessential element, requires a comma:** "*My teacher, who uses images in his lectures, is engaging.*"

Here, "who" is *nonessential* because the writer is referring to a particular teacher who happens to use images in lectures. The clause "*who uses images in his lectures*" could be removed and the sentence would still make sense; it is 'bonus information', separated from the rest of the sentence with commas.

***N.B.*** Nonessential clauses like this can start with "which" but never "that". "*That*" (but not "*which*") after a noun or a verb describing a mental action is always essential, so does not require a comma (e.g., *"The book that I borrowed…"*).