

# **PLANNING AND WRITING ESSAYS**

***The Essential Guide for all Students Working  
Towards a Double Module at Level Five or Level Six***

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# 1. Planning and Writing Essays

An academic essay not only tests your knowledge and understanding of a topic, but requires you to present an argument which includes an element of critical analysis. Therefore, when approaching the essay it is necessary to:

- Interpret the title (taking note of all aspects of this, not just the subject matter)
- Research relevant literature
- Decide what information you are going to include to help you form a convincing argument
- Consider alternative views to your argument, if there are any
- Present the material accordingly. Remember you need a clear introduction to indicate to the reader what angle you are taking in the essay; and a clear conclusion to summarise the main points and bring the essay to a close

## ***What is required of a level five essay?***

To achieve a pass mark at level five it is necessary to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the main concepts
- Show understanding and use of relevant literature
- Include an **element of critical analysis** in your essay

## ***What is required of a level six essay?***

As with level five essays it is necessary to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the main concepts
- Show understanding and use of relevant literature

However, to achieve a pass mark at level six there needs to be clear **evidence of critical analysis throughout** your essay.

## **What is critical analysis?**

Critical analysis allows you to scrutinise the theories put forward by the researchers/authors that you are referring to in your essay. You may wish to do this by referring to another researcher's work that may support or dispute the first ones theories, or you may wish to analysis the actual research methods used; for example:

- Were there enough participants involved in the study – enough, that is, to be representative of the rest of the population?
- Was the research soundly designed?
- Is the research externally valid? In other words, were the methods, group studied, environment the study was carried out in representative enough that the results can believably be generalised for the rest of the population?
- Were there too many variables involved in the study which might undermine the results?

NB. It is useful if you are able to source the research document, as opposed to just a summary of it. It is within the complete research document that you will find the full details about the methodology and results of the study, as well as the conclusions that were drawn from this information.

## 2. Understanding Essay Titles

As well as having an understanding of the actual topic the essay is covering, it is necessary to understand what the essay title requires from you. It is not a matter to simply writing down everything you know about the topic. The verbs used in the title will indicate how you are expected to present the material.

### Common verbs

Contrast*	Bring out the difference between
Examine*	Look closely into
Describe	Give a detailed account of
Compare*	Look for similarities and differences between
Analyse*	Break up into parts and investigate, evaluate
Discuss*	Investigate, or examine by argument
Explain	Make plain, interpret and give reasons for
Summarize	Give a concise account of the chief points
Evaluate*	Weigh up and judge the merits
Explore*	Examine thoroughly from a variety of viewpoints
Appraise*	Compare and evaluate

If an essay title includes the above verbs (marked with an asterix) you will be required to form an argument. Some of the verbs above necessarily expect you to consider both the 'for **and** against' view points. However, some allow you to opportunity to argue your point of view 'for' **or** 'against'. This is useful as you may find that where some topics are concerned, there is very little opposing information. However, it is still important to present your findings in the form of an argument.

There are key words that will help you present your argument as an 'argument' regardless of whether you are arguing 'for and against' or 'for' or 'against':

- Author (year) **argues** that.....
- Author (year) **postulates** that .....
- Author (year) **claims** that .....
- Author (year) **found** that .....
- Author (year) **hypothesises** that .....
- Author (year) **suggests** that .....
- Author (year) **considers** that .....

## 3. Finding Information

There are varies sources that you may wish to take information from in order to address the essay title. The following list will hopefully give you some ideas about where to look for relevant information:

Course notes	These can help you form the basis of your essay, informing the direction you may wish to take and help you form the bare bones of your essays
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Books Journals Touch- Learn Handbook	Allow you to build up your argument – researchers and experts in the field will give you the material to support your argument
Internet	A wealth of information – but make sure the information you use is research based and not anecdotal or speculative
Conferences	Relevant conferences might allow you to access the most recent research that has been done – often speakers chosen are the most prominent in their field, or are in the throws of presenting new findings

## 4. Keeping to the Point

### *Too much information*

#### 1. About a topic

A 1500 essay is not very long. It is therefore important to keep to the point when writing your essay. It is important that you do not include irrelevant material because you risk:

- leaving out relevant material in an attempt to stay within the word limit, or
- go over the word limit, because you have included all relevant material as well

For example, you may wish to include some information about the use of oils in the ‘contraindications’ essay. However, it is important to remember that the essay is asking about ‘contraindications’ – which may allow the writer to argue that a contraindication exists if:

- No patch test has been carried out
- There is knowledge of an allergy
- The oil contains an essential oil
- A mineral oil is being used

In these instances there is clear evidence to link the information to the title of the essay. What needs to be avoided is the inclusion of an in-depth description about the properties and quality of the different oils that are on the market.

#### **Remember**

- It is essential that the information included in the essay is pertinent to the essay title
- A 1500 word essay does not allow for embellishment of each topic within the essay

## **2. About the authors/researchers**

You will find, during your research, that there are a few renowned authors who probably warrant international acclaim of some description. Regardless of whether they have been or not, it is important that you do not take up valuable words in your essays either:

- Praising their achievements, or
- Including their professional biography

There is simply not the room and this information does not address the title of the essay.

All you have to include about any author/researcher is their name and the year of the piece of work you are using as a reference (see the 'Harvard Referencing System' section in the Assessment Booklet).

### **Tiffany Field**

Tiffany Field, director of the Miami Touch Research Institute often receives a biographical account in students' essays. She is without doubt one of the most prolific researchers in the field of positive touch and deserves recognition, but not in either of the essays that you need to produce. A biography of Field, or any other researcher, does not address the title, or the argument you are required to produce. Such information detracts from the title and eats up your limited words.

### ***Keep checking the essay title***

Keep referring back to the title; check that what you have written is clearly linked to one aspect or another of the title. If it is not – take it out.

### **The title page of your essay**

Make sure you write the actual **full** essay title on your front page. A common mistake is to only write the content aspect of the title (e.g. 'The Benefits of Infant Massage' instead of the full title '**Discuss** the Benefits ...'). If the title is missing the 'verb' words (i.e. 'discuss') it usually means the student has failed to see these words as relevant and the essay subsequently proves to be a list of information about the topic with no sign of any argument or critical analysis at all.

## **5. Referencing your Work**

It is vital that the information in your essay is properly referenced. Any information sourced from a book, journal, or internet site that you subsequently use to form part of your essay must be referenced using the Harvard Referencing System.

If you fail to include the reference it appears speculative and/or anecdotal, or may mean that you will be given an automatic fail because it appears that you have plagiarised an author's work.

### ***Originality***

Although you are referring to many authors' work, it is necessary to present your argument as your own. It is important that you decide on your viewpoint before starting the essay then pick out the relevant points to support that argument from the authors' findings.

**NB Your viewpoint is important, but it is vital to remember that you must support this with research based evidence.**

### ***Paraphrasing***

The majority of the information collected from your various sources will need to be paraphrased.

- Firstly, so that you can present the argument in your essay clearly
- Secondly, so that the examiner knows that the work is yours and not just a collection of quotes which are then clumped together to form your 'essay'.

Ideally, when selecting information to include, read the section concerned, and then make a note of the key points that are relevant, but avoid copying the information down word for word. When you can come to include this information in your essay you will have the key points and can easily form a sentence/s in your own words.

### ***Quotes***

There is a place for a few direct quotes in your essay. In fact they are great for punctuating a point you feel strongly about or if you feel that a particular statement is needed for full impact. But remember to use the Harvard Referencing System (see Assessment Booklet) when including quotes.

Furthermore, in a 1500 word essay it is appropriate to use three or four short quotes, but no more.

## **6. Using the Harvard Referencing System**

It is important to read the section in the Assessment Booklet on the 'Harvard Referencing System' and make sure to use this system in your essays. Common mistakes that need to be avoided are:

- Incorrect spellings of an author's name
- Incorrect dates the author's work is published
- The title of the book or journal used, instead of the author's name
- No date given at all. This is a particular problem when the author referenced has been involved with many studies (particularly if more than one is referred to in an essay).
- When many authors argue one point this is often reduced to '*many studies*', which is not specific enough – if many authors argue a point, put all of their names and dates of their work – this allows you to give a strong argument
- A biography of the author is included (see above)
- Only one author's name is given when several have been involved in the research. The first time the work is referenced to it is important to include all names of those involved. Then with subsequent use of the same work, it is acceptable to include the first author's name and 'et al' to cover the others
- The punctuation around the reference is incorrect. A full stop before and after a reference sometimes creates confusion for the examiner, because they are unsure whether the reference is for the sentence before or after it. This is true of situations where no punctuation is used, when clearly there are two sentences present.

- The bibliography is incomplete, or completely omitted. As the main body of the essay only contains the author's name and the date of the work, it is important the full reference can be found in the bibliography.

**NB: By reading the Harvard Referencing System (Assessment Booklet) carefully, all of the above mistakes should be avoidable.**

## 7. Writing in the Third Person

In an academic essay it is necessary to avoid using the first person. Even in the introduction, where you might feel the need to say what 'you' plan to discuss in the essay, it is important to do so in an impersonal manner. For example: *'This essay will discuss the ...'* or *'The benefits of massage for both the parent and child will be considered ...'*

## 8. Bullet Points

An essay should not appear instructional and it should not simply be a list of information. The presence of bullet points in an essay will give the impression that the author is simply listing all the information they know about that particular topic and, therefore, clearly not presenting a discussion or an argument (as is required if the essay title is to be addressed correctly). Alternatively, the essay is turned into a 'how to' guide.

It is important to remember that although the infant massage teacher training course is of a practical nature, completion of the essays, along with the competencies and anatomy and physiology exam, allow you to gain a double module at either level five (diploma level) or level six (degree level). The punchy style of bullet points is helpful in a manual, but is not pertinent to the delivery of an academic essay.

## 9. Signposting

### ***The introduction***

The introduction is your opportunity to 'set the scene' so you can let the reader know what:

- direction you are planning to take (in what order you will deal with the different aspects of the title)
- what argument you are taking (e.g. a mainly 'for' or 'against' or a 'for and against')

It is not necessary to launch into the critical information that you need to include in the main body of the essay. Avoid including elements of your findings in the introduction – use this space to clearly indicate what the reader is to expect from your essay. You are able to indicate how the essay will flow as well as what your standpoint is.

Your introduction should be about 10% (approx. 150 words) of your essay.

## ***During the main body of the essay***

### **Constructing the essay**

It is important that your essay flows from one topic to another as smoothly as possible. When presenting the information in your essay make sure that the topics are clustered together where relevant. For example, for the 'benefits' essay you have to examine the benefits of massage for the baby, for the parent and the benefits to their relationship; so make sure that the information you have on each section is presented together. It is a little confusing for the reader if some benefits to the baby suddenly appear in the section about the benefits for the parent or visa versa. This situation makes the essay appear disjointed, jumpy and lacking a clear direction.

Linking the information together in a logical manner will help with the flow of your essay.

### **Linking information**

It helps with the flow of the essay if you are able to take a clear direction with the information to be included. Paragraphs are so often used as an individual section to an essay and the examiner finds that one paragraph is completely unrelated to the one before or after. Obviously you need to move from one piece of information to another, particularly when moving on to another topic (e.g. from benefits to the baby to benefits to the parent). However, it is important to remember that there needs to be a link, so that your argument flows smoothly.

### **To help you link the information**

1. Separate your notes into topics
2. Decide what information you are going to include on each topic
3. Look at the information and decide if there is a clear path you can take to present this, so that the reader finds it easy to manoeuvre from the beginning to the end of your essay without feeling as if they have been on a jerky ride

### ***The Conclusion***

4. Having indicated which direction your essay will take in the introduction, then enlarged on this in the main body of the essay, it is necessary to summarise the main points in your conclusion. It is important not to introduce further findings, simply draw the reader's attention to the key points you have covered and draw their attention back to the title to indicate that you have given a clear argument to support your findings.

Your conclusion should be about 10% (approx. 150 words) of your essay.

## **10. Reading Your Essay**

It is important to read through your essay when it is finished to check for grammar, spelling and punctuation errors. It is at this stage you can focus on the finer details and tidy up the 'English Language' aspect of your essay. It is always helpful if you can get another person to read it for you and point out any errors.

## 11. Summary

- Make sure you have an **understanding** of the **whole** of the essay title
- Always make sure that you are addressing the essay title, i.e. **keeping to the point**
- Any information from any source needs **referencing** (mainly paraphrase, limit use of quotes)
- Reference using the **Harvard Referencing System** correctly
- **Avoid** using **bullet points**
- Make sure your essay **flows**
- A **clear introduction** and **conclusion** are of great importance
- Remember to **read through** your **essay** to check for (and correct) grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors

**Remember**, you are being marked on:

- How well you have focused on the question, as well as your grammar and spelling
- The amount of suitable research evidence and the range of research (e.g. books, journals, internet) included in your essay
- Your ability to critically analyse evidence from the relevant sources referenced (particularly important for level 6 essays)
- The presentation of your essay (e.g whether the references are present and correct; is there a title page; is the word count stated; is the font, size and line spacing, as stipulated in assessment booklet, all correct)
- The clarity and structure of the essay – is there a clear introduction, main body and conclusion; do the topics flow; is there a clear overall argument
- The synthesis and originality of the essay

## 12. Further Reading

It is vital that you read the Touch-Learn Assessment Booklet's essay section, particularly the 'Harvard Referencing System'.

Also, Redman, P. (2001) 'Good Essay Writing: A Social Sciences Guide' published by Sage Publication, ISBN 07 619 7056 is an excellent book that will help you plan and write your essay successfully.

# 13. ESSAY CHECK LIST

<b>HAVE YOU INCLUDED:</b>		Essay 1 1st marker	Essay 2 1st marker
CRITICAL ANALYSIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A minimum of 3 accounts for an adequate score is required</li> <li>• Required throughout essay for level 6 pass</li> </ul>		
CONTENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you focused on the title</li> <li>• Have you checked the grammar and spelling, third person consistency</li> </ul>		
RESEARCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you shown proof of suitable research evidence, range of research e.g. books, journals, internet, independent research (not just those that are quoted in the 'Infant Massage: A Handbook for Teachers')</li> </ul>		
PRESENTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are all references present and correct</li> <li>• Do you have a title page, with the word count stated</li> <li>• Is the font, size and line spacing (as stipulated in assessment booklet) correct</li> </ul>		
CLARITY AND STRUCTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you written a clear introduction, main body and conclusion</li> <li>• Have you made sure the flow of topics and the overall message/argument is clear</li> </ul>		
SYNTHESIS/ ORIGINALITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you an individual approach</li> <li>• Is your argument/overall message consistent</li> </ul>		