

Eight ways to make your essay better

1. Motivate your essay. From Booth, Colomb and Williams, *The Craft of Research* (Chicago UP, rev. 3rd edition, 2008):

Once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer that So what? question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

2. Avoid redundant discussion. If you are covering two or more texts, explain why it is useful to discuss the second one. There's nothing to be gained by saying that one text has a theme and another shares that theme. Instead, use the second text to show how it might cast an alternative (and important) perspective on your research question.

3. Read your essay's concluding paragraph. Might it actually work better as an introductory paragraph instead? Sometimes writers only work up to what they really want to say in the conclusion ("How can I tell what I think till I read what I say?"). Often this means that the conclusion as written would make a leaner, more precise opening to the essay than what you have in your draft.

4. Beware the "five-paragraph essay." A common pre-university essay structure involves stating a claim, providing three illustrations of the claim, and then repeating it by way of conclusion. Avoid this. A pre-fabricated structure of this kind prevents you from using the essay as a genuinely exploratory development of your ideas. The five-paragraph structure (which may involve more than five paragraphs, of course) has nowhere to go once it has begun, and will always have difficulty reaching a higher mark.

5. If you use a block (or inset) quotation, make sure you analyse the passage you've just cited in some detail. Otherwise, paraphrase. Block quotations really only have a purpose if you're spending time making interpretive claims about a passage. If the purpose is simply to support an already stated claim, it's better to assume that the reader trusts you and paraphrase the quotation, in the interests of concision.

6. Use secondary elaborations to develop your essay. If you can "answer" your initial research question, fold that answer back into your essay in the form of a follow-on question. Use your arguments recursively to create a sequence of multiple sections, deepening and reflecting on the implications of your stated thesis. Note that in longer essays it can be helpful to have subsections with their own headings, as a way of sequencing your argument.

7. Shorten your paragraphs. Paragraphs are the rungs in the ladder of an essay's argument. Instead of treating them as unwieldy bin-bags in which to stuff as many ideas as possible, use them to sequence and streamline your discussion, so that they help build your argument over the course of the essay. Each paragraph should carry and develop a single, well-defined point; typically, this means they won't go on too long. Use topic sentences – statements of the leading idea for each paragraph – to clearly telegraph your focus.

8. Look at the last sentence of each paragraph and the first sentence of the next to ensure that the transitions are present and make sense. Then read the introduction and the conclusion to see if they adequately track the development of your essay.