

1. Different types of writing at university

In your studies at Swinburne, you will be asked to produce a range of different assignment types. The main types (or 'genres') include: essays, reports, book/article reviews, literature reviews.

The following table sets out some of the differences between these genres. In this tutorial we will focus on the essay.

Genres	Description	Conventional Structure	Research base	Format and style
Essay	An extended task that usually requires you to present an argument in response to a question or issue	Introduction Body* Conclusion References *Body – students need to develop the structure of the body, based on the particular question they are dealing with and the argument they wish to present.	Based on wide-reading of books, journal articles etc. around the topic	Formal academic style Personal pronouns ('I') sometimes permitted Paragraphing very important to indicate essay structure Subheadings may be used, but not essential Extensive use of citations
Report	A task that usually requires you to investigate a situation, problem etc. Often involves making recommendations for some action to be taken	Executive summary Introduction Method Findings Conclusions Recommendations References The structure may vary depending on the type of report	Based on background reading on the topic; also often involves collecting/ analysing primary material (eg. interviews, data etc)	Formal academic style No use of personal pronouns ('I') Subheadings with numbered sections essential (eg. 1, 1.1 etc.) Concise, 'to the point' style Some use of citations
Book / article review	A task that requires you to summarise the main content of an article, book, website etc, and then provide an evaluation of this content	Introduction Summary of text Evaluation of text Conclusion	Usually based on the close reading of a single text – but can also include reference to other related readings	Formal academic style Personal pronouns ('I') usually permitted Paragraphing important to indicate review structure
Literature review	A task requiring the collecting, summarising, and evaluation of a range of texts around a particular topic	Introduction Theme 1 Theme 2 Theme 3 etc. Conclusion References	Based on wide and critical reading of state of the art journal articles, books etc.	Formal academic style Personal pronouns ('I') sometimes permitted Subheadings used to structure different themes of review High use of citations

Table 1: The more common genres of university study

2. Essay questions

As we saw in the table above, an essay is usually based on a question. The first thing to be said about essay questions is that they do not usually have any simple and straightforward answer to them. In this way, they are not like the types of questions you will see on an exam e.g. in multiple choice or short answer questions.

For example, the following factual question might appear as a question on an exam.

What is social networking?
(Sample short answer question)

To answer this question, you would just need to outline the basic features of social networking, drawing on the type of information you would find in a textbook, or which is presented in lectures.

Essay questions, in contrast, have no simple answer, like the following question on a related topic.

Has social networking improved the quality of relationships in society?
(Sample essay question)

To answer this question you need to exercise your own judgment, and provide what YOU think is the best answer to the question. The answer you present in an essay is what we call YOUR ARGUMENT.

ACTIVITY 1: Thinking about arguments

Have a look at an essay question you need to complete this semester/study period. What JUDGMENT do you need to make about this topic?

3. What does an ARGUMENT look like?

In an essay it is important to present a clear ARGUMENT. Let's think about possible answers to the 'social networking' essay question above. The following are two possible responses:

NO! Social networking has had a terrible effect on the quality of relationships

YES! Social networking has had an overwhelmingly good effect on the quality of relationships

These ARGUMENTS represent more extreme positions, and while it is possible to argue either position, there would be a good deal of pressure placed on you to justify and support such a strong claim.

The more conventional way to go is to consider both sides of the issue. This however, does not mean you should go straight for the middle, intermediate position; that is to argue something along the following lines.

*Social networking has had both **positive** and **negative** effects on the quality of relationships*

This example is a bit of YES and NO option, and while it is possible to argue it, your lecturer may criticise you for going for the easy, 'sitting on the fence' option.

The better academic arguments are ones that consider both sides of an issue, but ultimately make some commitment either way. Such arguments are often structured around connective words like *while, although, however*, such as the following:

*WHILE social networking has had a number of **positive** effects on the quality of relationships in society, these are outweighed by the problems that this new technology has brought.*

*ALTHOUGH there are certainly some **problems** associated with social networking, on balance this technology has done much to **improve** the way that people relate to each other.*

These are just two of the arguments you could run. There may be other ways you could take the topic. In the first example below, the ARGUMENT is focused on different 'phases' of social networking; in the second example, the focus is on different 'uses'.

In its early phases social networking clearly had a positive effect on social relationships. HOWEVER, in its more recent developments, particularly with its increased commercialisation, it is difficult to see any positive influence.

Some specialised uses of social networking have been most beneficial to people. HOWEVER the more common uses seem to have led to a deterioration in the quality of relationships.

ACTIVITY 2: Possible arguments

For the essay question you are working on, what would be some POSSIBLE ARGUMENTS/ ANSWERS to the question?

4. How do I develop an ARGUMENT?

We do not want to suggest from the explanation above, that you just look at the question and then decide what your position will be. This would be violating a major principle of essay writing – which is that it is always based on wide and critical reading (see Table 1 above). It is through your reading on the topic that your argument will develop and begin to take shape. That is to say, in the case of the social networking question, you will look at research that has been done on this topic, and also read the ideas and views of some leading scholars in the field. It is your engagement with this material that will help you to develop the ARGUMENT you wish to present.

Some students however, find it useful to begin their research by adopting a PROVISIONAL position on the issue. This is the position that you intuitively have when you read the question. So for the social networking question, you may begin by taking for example, a generally pessimistic view of the effects of this phenomenon. This is in effect your hypothesis: *that social networking has generally had a harmful effect on social relationships.*

Equally, though you could adopt the more 'positive' position. It will be in the process of reading and thinking about material that you will decide what your final position will be. It is important when you come to writing and structuring your work that you have made some commitment to the ARGUMENT you wish to present.

ACTIVITY 3: A provisional argument

For the essay question you have chosen, what would be a PROVISIONAL argument?

5. How do I STRUCTURE an essay?

The conventional structure of an essay is usually given as:

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion
- List of references

On its own, this doesn't tell us very much. We know we have to begin an essay with an introduction and finish with a conclusion (and also provide a list of the references we have used). The challenging part is developing a structure for the main part of the essay – the body.

It is important that whatever STRUCTURE you develop for your body, it is one that is going to allow your ARGUMENT to come through.

Imagine for example, that you wish to present the following argument in your essay, one which is focused on the negative aspects of social networking:

WHILE social networking has had a number of positive effects on the quality of relationships in society, these are outweighed by the problems that this new technology has brought.

A possible structure for this work would be as follows:

- Introduction
- Background to social networking
- Positive effects on social relations
 - Positive effect #1
 - Positive effect #2
- Negative effects on social relations
 - Negative effect #1
 - Negative effect #2
 - Negative effect #3
 - Negative effect #4
- Conclusion
- List of references

This essay structure would clearly be appropriate for the negative argument to be adopted. We can see in such a plan there is a clear outweighing of negatives over the positives. If you were to adopt the view that social networking has mainly led to improvements, then the 'balance' in the plan would need to be tipped the other way.

Among other things, a clear essay plan can keep you on track with the number of words you need to write. If for example, you needed to write an essay of 2,000 words, you could work out some approximate allocation of words as follows:

Introduction	100 words
Background to social networking	200 words
Positive effects on social relations	400-500 words
Positive effect #1] 900-1000 words
Positive effect #2	
Negative effects on social relations] 100 words
Negative effect #1	
Negative effect #2	
Negative effect #3	
Negative effect #4	
Conclusion	
References*	

*Not usually included in word count

ACTIVITY 4: Essay structure

What is a possible STRUCTURE for the essay you intend to write? How many words (approximately) might you devote to each section?

6. How do I REFERENCE material in my essay?

As mentioned above, your essay needs to be based on wide reading of sources, and your argument needs to be supported by relevant research, and evidence from these sources. To do this, you need to properly reference these materials in your work. This is done through the practice of citation.

At Swinburne, we generally use the Harvard (or Author-date system) system of referencing. This requires that you include details about the author and date (and optionally the page no) in the text of your essay, and then provide full information about the publication in a separate list of references at the end.

7. A SAMPLE essay

To find out how all the above looks in practice, read a sample essay written on the 'social networking' topic:

http://www.swinburne.edu.au/student/study-help/las/resources/Sample_Text_1_Essay_Social_Networking.pdf

Nowadays as many as 43% of America teens report experiencing some form of cyber bullying (Patchin, 2008).

Nie (2005) explains that time spent on the internet actually 'displaces' time spent socialising, particularly with family.

You will notice that these citations take slightly different forms. In the first one, the citation (author -date) appears at the end of the sentence. In the second example the author is present at the beginning of the sentence.

Thus the two citations have the following forms:

Type 1 *Information (author, date).*

Type 2 *Author (date) information.*

Both of these are acceptable forms, and you are encouraged to use both in your essays. Type 1 citations (information-prominent) are used when the focus is more on the actual information itself. Type 2 citations (author-prominent) are used when the focus is more on the ideas, opinions etc of a particular writer.

At the end of your essay you need to present all the publication details of these texts in a separate list of references. Thus, for the citations above the entries would be as follows:

References

Nie, N 2005, 'Researchers link use of Internet, social isolation', Stanford Report, 23 February 2005, viewed 10 March 2011 <<http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/february23/internet-022305.html>>

Patchin, J. W. 2008. Cyberbullying: An Exploratory Analysis of Factors Related to Offending and Victimization. Deviant Behavior, 29(2), 129-156.

For full details about referencing your essay, you should consult the Harvard Style Guide provided by Swinburne:

http://www.swinburne.edu.au/lib/researchhelp/harvard_quick_guide.pdf