

Key Features of Good Essays

What makes a good essay? From the student's point of view it may be a question of getting the maximum number of marks for the least amount of work. This is a rather immature approach but realistically it is human nature to seek to get maximum gain from minimum effort. However the 'gain' in essay writing should not just be the marks you get at the end, If you are studying a subject that you are interested in then one of the gains can be discovering more about a topic that you like. This has the added benefit of making you a more knowledgeable person who can discuss the relevant issues with more confidence and impact.

Even if you are doing a subject that you do not find so fascinating, the process of writing an essay gives you practice in several skills that will not only make future essay writing easier but will train you as a member of the academic community. Without these skills it will be very hard to progress to higher study. Even if you do not plan to stay in academia, these skills are those that future employers will expect you to have gained from your time at college. You may not use them directly in the same way again but as a qualified professional you will be expected to cope with interesting, challenging, responsible work using the same skills of research, planning and organisation.

From the marker's point of view a good essay is one that shows evidence of these key skills (research, planning and organisation). It is also one where the writer's own voice can be heard – there should be no doubt that the person submitting the essay actually wrote it themselves. This may seem obvious but it would seem that too many students see the essay as an annoying obstacle to avoid which leads them to submit work that they have not researched, planned or organised personally. Large chunks may be 'lifted' from handy electronic sources such as Wikipedia. In extreme cases someone else has been paid to undertake the whole process.

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Contrary to appearances sometimes, the teachers who mark your essays are not naïve. They have many years of experience, marking hundreds if not thousands of essays. The ones that they will have no hesitation giving high marks to are those which fulfil the highest marking criteria and which they KNOW are the sole work of the student in question, usually because the student is a frequent, intelligent contributor to class discussion. When doubt creeps in because previous written performance (in exams for example) or in-class participation does not match the level of the essay being marked, it is likely that marks will drop. A vigilant marker may even find evidence that the essay is a deliberate attempt at deception (plagiarism) and the student will face serious consequences. This can be a mark of zero for the essay.

So what is the profile of students who write excellent essays?

- Interested in the topic, possibly even enthusiastic
- Full of questions which they bring to class or ask the lecturer privately
- Ready to research the topic
- Good at selecting relevant material (examples, quotes, diagrams etc.)
- Good at summarising and paraphrasing
- Able to plan ahead
- Able to organise their ideas
- Able to write fluently and convincingly
- Able to imitate good practice in their academic field, including using the right kind of language
- Meticulous when making notes so that all sources are acknowledged