

Academic Writing Essentials

Plan clearly. Argue carefully. Revise with purpose.

12 practical tips for stronger essays

For undergraduate essays, reports, and short research papers

01

Plan

Turn the assignment into a focused question and a workable outline.

02

Research

Choose credible evidence and keep source notes that stay traceable.

03

Build

Connect claims, evidence, analysis, and transitions into a clear argument.

04

Refine

Improve clarity, citation, academic integrity, and final presentation.

Start with a map, not a blank page

Good academic writing begins before the first paragraph. Spend a small amount of time clarifying the task, and the drafting stage becomes much faster.

1. Decode the assignment

Underline the task verb: analyse, compare, evaluate, discuss, or reflect. Each verb asks for a different kind of thinking.

- Identify the required topic, scope, evidence, format, and word count.
- Turn the marking criteria into a short checklist.
- If the wording is unclear, ask before you research too widely.

2. Narrow the question

A manageable question has a clear subject, angle, context, and boundary. Avoid topics so broad that you can only describe them.

Broad → focused

Broad: How does social media affect society?

Focused: How does short-form video shape news engagement among UK university students?

3. Write a working thesis

Your thesis is the essay's central claim, not merely its topic. It should be specific, arguable, and supportable with evidence.

A useful formula

Although X, this essay argues Y because A, B, and C.

4. Build a one-page outline

Give every section a job. A simple outline prevents repetition and reveals missing evidence before you draft.

- Introduction: problem, context, thesis, route map.
- Body 1: first reason or analytical step.
- Body 2: second reason, comparison, or complication.
- Body 3: counterargument, limitation, or implication.
- Conclusion: answer, significance, and next question.

Quick test

If a paragraph cannot be linked directly to the thesis, revise it, move it, or remove it.

Collect evidence you can actually use

Research is not a competition to gather the most sources. The goal is to find relevant, credible material and understand exactly how it supports your argument.

5. Use a source hierarchy

Best starting points	Use carefully	Usually avoid as evidence
Peer-reviewed articles; academic books; official datasets; legislation; reputable institutional reports.	Quality journalism; professional reports; credible websites; preprints, depending on the field.	Anonymous posts; unsourced summaries; promotional pages; AI-generated claims without verified sources.

6. Keep a source matrix

For every source, record four things while reading:

- The full reference and page number.
- The author's main claim.
- The evidence or method used.
- How the source relates to your thesis.

Why this works

A source matrix separates reading from drafting and reduces last-minute citation errors.

7. Quote less; analyse more

Use a direct quotation only when the original wording matters. Otherwise, paraphrase accurately and cite the source.

- Introduce the evidence: who says what, and in what context?
- Interpret it: what does it show?
- Connect it: why does it matter for your claim?

The evidence sandwich

Claim → Evidence → Analysis → Link back

Important

A citation proves where information came from; it does not replace your analysis. Your reader still needs to see how the evidence supports the argument.

Make every paragraph move the argument

A strong paragraph is a small unit of reasoning. It begins with a claim, develops that claim with evidence and analysis, and shows how the point advances the essay.

8. Use the C-E-A-L paragraph pattern

	Claim	State the paragraph's main analytical point.
	Evidence	Provide a relevant example, quotation, finding, or data point.
	Analysis	Explain how and why the evidence supports, complicates, or limits the claim.
	Link	Connect the paragraph to the thesis and the next stage of the argument.

Weak

Mostly descriptive

Social media is popular among students.
Many students use it every day, and it can provide information quickly.

The sentences report obvious facts but do not make a debatable point or explain significance.

Stronger

Analytical

Short-form platforms compress news into highly visual fragments, which can lower the effort required to encounter current affairs while also weakening contextual understanding.

This version makes a specific claim and creates space for evidence, qualification, and counterargument.

9. Use transitions to show logic

Transitions should describe the relationship between ideas, not simply decorate the prose.

Add	Furthermore; in addition; similarly
Contrast	However; by contrast; nevertheless
Cause	Therefore; consequently; because
Qualify	To some extent; although; under these conditions

Sound precise, not artificially complicated

Academic writing is strongest when the reasoning is easy to follow. Formality comes from precision, evidence, and control—not from using the longest possible words.

10. Prefer clear, controlled sentences

- Put the main actor and action close together.
- Use one central idea per sentence when the argument is complex.
- Replace vague words such as things, a lot, or very with exact terms.
- Use active voice when the actor matters; use passive voice when the process or result matters more.

Cut empty phrases

Instead of It is important to note that..., state the important point directly.

Useful analytical verbs

argues • demonstrates • indicates • complicates • challenges • reinforces • distinguishes • suggests • overlooks • qualifies

11. Qualify claims honestly

Academic claims often need limits. Avoid presenting one study as universal proof.

- Strong but careful: This evidence indicates...
- Limited scope: Within this sample...
- Alternative reading: However, this may also reflect...
- Uncertainty: The findings suggest rather than confirm...

12. Protect academic integrity

- Cite quotations, paraphrases, data, images, and ideas that are not your own.
- Use the citation style required by your department.
- Check every in-text citation against the reference list.
- Follow your institution's current policy on generative AI.

AI reminder

Never submit invented references. Open every cited source and verify that it exists, says what you claim, and is permitted for your assignment.

A practical language resource

The University of Manchester Academic Phrasebank provides adaptable, content-neutral examples for functions such as comparing findings, introducing limitations, and reporting results.

Edit in passes, then submit with confidence

Trying to fix argument, structure, grammar, citations, and formatting at the same time is inefficient. Separate the work into focused passes.

PASS 1	Argument	Does the thesis answer the question? Does each section advance it? Are counterarguments or limitations addressed?
PASS 2	Structure	Does every paragraph have one main job? Are topic sentences and transitions clear? Is evidence followed by analysis?
PASS 3	Language	Cut repetition, vague language, unnecessary quotations, and overlong sentences. Read difficult passages aloud.
PASS 4	Accuracy	Check citations, reference-list entries, page numbers, figures, headings, file format, and the submission instructions.

Final submission checklist

- ☐ I answered the exact assignment question.
- ☐ My thesis is specific, arguable, and visible early.
- ☐ Each paragraph has a clear analytical purpose.
- ☐ Evidence is credible, relevant, and explained.
- ☐ I considered a counterargument or limitation.
- ☐ Every borrowed idea has an appropriate citation.
- ☐ All citations appear in the reference list.
- ☐ The introduction and conclusion agree with the final argument.
- ☐ Formatting follows the brief and department guidance.
- ☐ I opened the final file and checked the uploaded version.

Further reading

Harvard College Writing Center — Strategies for Essay Writing
writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu

Purdue Online Writing Lab — Academic Writing and the Writing Process
owl.purdue.edu

University of Manchester — Academic Phrasebank
phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk

Use this guide flexibly

Academic conventions vary by discipline and institution. Always follow your assignment brief, marking criteria, citation guide, and academic-integrity policy first.