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Guidelines for Writing Effective Essays

Can you read and digest a series of articles assigned to you? Next, can you extract the essence out of each article and summarize it in no more than a few sentences? Okay, you can read, you can summarize, but can you pull together the threads that connect each of the articles together and create a new idea? Can you offer thoughts and insights on the ideas in these articles? We want to know.

So, you have been given an essay to write. We design essay questions in order to challenge you in many ways that we believe you will be challenged while you are at MIT and beyond MIT. But, where do you begin and how do you know when you're done?

Task 1: Review and review again the essay question.

Sometimes you develop the questions yourself – thesis questions. Most of the time, however, you will be handed questions that were written by your professors and you will need to respond. Examine the question. Think about the question. Brainstorm answers and otherwise get into that creative space inside you.

Some essay questions are really broad. Broad questions can be helpful, but sometimes they can make you want to tear your hair out because you are not sure what the professor expects. Try to think of these types of questions as an opportunity because they may signal that the door is wide open for you to pick and choose what you really want to say. Usually what broad questions really mean is that the professor is not exactly clear about what s/he wants in terms of an answer. Or, it means that the case can be approached from a number of different angles. Regardless, when a professor offers you a broad question, rejoice! You have lots of room to create.

Some essay questions are very specific. Here the professor knows what s/he wants and s/he wants to know that you know what s/he wants. Here you need to focus your attention on the articles. You need to take good notes, work to distill the information. Most of all, you need to figure out what is asked and how best to respond so that you all questions are addressed. Once you figure out what type of question you have, I recommend that you focus on a few key elements:

Task 2: After you have reviewed the question ask yourself the following:

- Do you understand the question that is being asked?
- Do you know what topic you need to address?
- Did you already summarize each of the articles in your own words? If not, go do this.
- Can you tell from your notes, which ideas are yours and which ideas are the authors' ideas? If not, fix your notes – no plagiarism please!
- Did you craft an outline for your essay question?

Task 3: Write a first, messy draft:

- Don't try to control your first responses to the question too much, just write what comes to mind while you have the question in your mind.
- What questions do you have for the authors of the articles you are responding to?
- What inconsistencies do you find in the articles? What problems do you see? What holes can you identify?



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- What is your main message – what you really want to say about the topic you have been asked? Draw a big circle around this idea.
- What claims or assertions can you make that might support your main message? If you don't have any, you need to check to see if your main message is robust enough.
- What evidence and examples do you find that support your claims? If you don't have any, time to do more writing and reviewing.

Task 4: Focus on your introduction. Once you have your first draft written, it is time to edit -- to scrutinize what the creator in you thinks is important.

- Does your introduction provide some context or background for the issue and then relate your thesis or main message? If not, why not?
- Is your thesis clear? Do you need to explain what you are trying to show?
- Does the last sentence in your introduction draw the reader into the rest of the paper?
- Does your introduction relate to the essay question? If you have a specific essay question, your intro must relate directly to the question. If you have a broad essay question, your response must touch on the issues discussed in the question, but usually cannot attend to all the details of the question.

Task 5: Focus on your supporting paragraphs.

- Do you develop your main idea in your subsequent paragraphs using assertions and supporting evidence to make your point? If not, start finding evidence and examples to support your points.
- Do you include lots of “shoulds” in your writing? If so, this type of writing can point to assertions without evidence and examples to back up claims. Sometimes we think if we use strong language --“The BRA should understand that low income housing is good for all of Boston” – we don't need to support our statements. Try to rewrite most of the “shoulds” out of the response. Try replacing “shoulds” with “coulds” to see what happens. Usually you have to offer more evidence and examples to shore up your ideas.

Task 6: Focus on your conclusion.

- First, do you have a conclusion?
- Does your conclusion restate your first paragraph? If so, delete your conclusion and start again, this is freshman college writing.
- Does your conclusion synthesize the many ideas discussed in the essay in order to offer your reader more insight on the problem? If not, why not? If not, what does your conclusion need in order to further the main idea that you are discussing? I know this is hard, but try to push yourself!
- Did you pull the strings of the analysis together for the reader?
- Did you show how the chunks of analysis work together?

If you have done all of these things, you are probably done writing and you need to turn to editing.

Task 7: Take time to edit.

- Predict three questions your professor will want to ask you about your ideas. Have these questions been answered?
- Get a friend to read your essay.
- Proofread.



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- Read your essay out loud.

Essay writing can be challenging, there is no doubt. But, try to think of it as a way you can teach yourself about the issues and ideas that are important to you. Who knows, maybe one of these ideas will turn into your thesis!