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**by Mary Page and Dr Carrie Winstanley**



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## *About the Authors*

**Mary Page** has a lifetime of experience teaching international students of all ages (her youngest pupil ever was 8 and the oldest 92!) and from very many cultures, countries and backgrounds. Her career started as a lecturer at the Université de Strasbourg in France, then continued at Eurocentres, Bournemouth. Since 2002 she has been teaching English for Academic Purposes at the University of Southampton whilst also managing the IELTS Test Centre there. During the academic year she teaches Advanced Level English Language to international students, as well as on courses for undergraduate students in teaching English as a Foreign Language. Through the summer months she directs a Pre-session course for international students wishing to undertake a degree course at the university. She has a busy life and would like a holiday sometime! Her interests include (unsurprisingly!) teaching academic writing, teacher training, and English as a Lingua Franca. Though she's been teaching for many years she still gets a kick out of helping students to learn and seeing them succeed in their ambitions. Mary's first degree is in French (BA Hons, University of Manchester) and she also holds an MSc from Bournemouth University in Managing Business Information Technology, as well as the RSA Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and the RSA Certificate in Counselling Skills in the Development of Learning.

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## ***Dedication***

**From Mary:** To my goddaughters, Kitty, Jemima and Cordelia, in the hope that this book will be of use to you in the future.

**From Carrie:** This book is dedicated to all the students whose essays I have ever read and all the tutors and colleagues who have ever read mine.





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# Introduction

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**T**he first thing we'd like to do is offer you our warmest congratulations on having made it to university. The biggest hurdle is over. How many people do you know who don't make it through uni? There are, admittedly, a few who fall by the wayside, but this can be for health or financial reasons, amongst others. The student who fails to complete the course for academic reasons is a rarity. The vast majority of students will get through, and you will surely be one of them! The thing is, though, that we don't want you simply to scrape through with a third, but graduate with the best possible degree – an upper second or even a first. You've made a positive step towards that goal by picking up this book.

At first it might seem a bit scary to have to write a serious 'grown-up' essay and then hand it in to a real Professor, someone who's spent a lifetime researching his area. Fear not. We'll guide you through the stages of writing an essay and warn you of pitfalls along the way. Remember that professors and lecturers were once, years ago, students just like you – we all started somewhere and had to take those first hesitating steps. Years ago, though, there wasn't a *For Dummies* book like this to help people, so you've already got a head start.

Brows furrow and heads droop when the subject of writing an essay is mentioned. Though essays are serious stuff, they don't have to be painful experiences. They *do* have to be challenging and demanding. After all, you wouldn't like to think that you would come through your degree course on the back of essays that were easy and didn't stretch you, would you? But with the help of this book you'll be able to meet the challenges of essay writing and respond to the demands made of you. We help you in a holistic way with all the aspects of writing, not just the words on the page but the where, when, and how of the writing experience, so that you can not only be successful in your writing at university, but even – dare I say it? – actually enjoy it.

This is the book for you, then, when you need help with the words, and also when the words won't come. When you don't know where to start, and when you start you can't finish. When you've got too many words, or too few. We look at typical difficulties you might

face, and help you through them. And we hope we even make you smile from time to time, because you're at uni and you should be having the time of your life!

### About This book

You may well have used a *For Dummies* book before and be familiar with our easy-to-use format and our chatty style. If, however, you are a newcomer to *For Dummies* books you might be surprised that such a weighty subject as writing essays can be made so accessible. How do we do it? We break down the subject into meaningful, manageable chunks, and then sub-chunks. What you need to do is think what it is you need to know about writing an essay, and then find the appropriate chunk or sub-chunk from our index. What you don't have to do is read from cover to cover. Home in on the bits that apply to you and take our advice. We try to write as if we were talking to you face-to-face, hence our relaxed and informal style. Our book is here for you to dip into when you need us. Think of it as your support and your friend.

### Conventions Used in This Book

Each chapter of this book covers the basics you'll need and also provides further details and examples that you can skim over if you're pushed for time. We also flag up points in the book where you can cross-reference to different chapters, so that you can read the book thematically if you need to.

For ease of navigation, we use the following conventions:

- ✓ *Italic* is used for emphasis, to highlight new words, and terms which the text defines.
- ✓ **Bold** text is used to indicate keywords in bulleted lists.
- ✓ `Monofont` is used for Internet addresses.
- ✓ Sidebars, the shaded grey boxes you see from time to time, point out information which might come in handy, but doesn't qualify as essential reading.

## ***How This Book Is Organised***

We've divided our book into six parts. Each of the first five parts corresponds to a step in the process of writing an essay, followed by a sixth section, the Part of Tens. In order to help you familiarise yourself with the content of our book and find what you're looking for, we summarise each section here.

### ***Part I: Navigating a World of Information***

These first three chapters help you to get a feel for what it is you are expected to produce. We look at the difference between writing an essay at secondary school and writing one at university. Essays often break down into one of several basic types, so we show you what you should be aiming towards and – above all – help you to get going. This can be the hardest step of all. It's downhill all the way now!

### ***Part II: Researching, Recording and Reformulating***

You've got to have something to write about, so these next four chapters help you with the content of your essay. We give you plenty of tips on how best to find your way round your background reading, whether it's from books or online. In addition, we help you to make notes, both from your sources and for your essay. One of the big issues at university, given the ease of the 'copy and paste' function, is lifting, stealing, or plagiarism, whatever you want to call it. Chapter 7 says 'Don't!' in no uncertain terms, but as well as that provides you with the skills so that you aren't tempted to copy someone else's writing in the first place.

### ***Part III: Mastering Language and Style***

One of the worries we can have about writing an academic essay is whether our language is up to scratch. These three chapters provide a quick brush-up in the building blocks of your essay, the sentence

and the paragraph, making sure that you can structure them correctly and then punctuate them accurately, so that your meaning is clear. We also give you advice on how your 'voice' comes across so that you sound appropriately formal and academic.

## ***Part IV: Tightening Your Structure and Organisation***

Now you've got to put it all together. These four chapters divide your essay into a beginning, a middle and an end. Each has its own special features and here we explain what these are and show you what your tutor is expecting to find. In addition you will probably want to use quotations in your essay. Chapter 14 shows you how to do this, and then finish off the whole product with a nice list of references at the end. You're nearly there!

## ***Part V: Finishing with a Flourish: The Final Touches***

Two of these chapters give you tips with the last stage of writing - the one which tends to be rushed. You can gain extra marks by attention to detail in the polishing and perfecting process and we show you how! We then take a positive attitude with the fall-out of the essay, understanding where you went wrong, learning from your mistakes and seeing how you can do better next time if the feedback wasn't quite as good as you'd hoped for. Every mistake is an opportunity to learn!

## ***Part VI: The Part of Tens***

The Part of Tens provides you with two chapters listing helpful pointers to keep your essay-writing on track. Ten Troubleshooting Tips advises you on common problems and what to do if you find yourself in difficulties – for instance, when you've written too much or too little, when you've left it too late, or you have technical difficulties. Ten Tips for Writing Essays in Exams does what it says on the tin.



## Icons Used in This Book

Icons are a handy *For Dummies* way of catching your attention as you run through a page. Icons come in several flavours, each with its own symbol and terms of reference.



This icon does exactly what it says, highlighting helpful hints to ease your essay writing.



Wherever you see this icon there's a point that you should make into a mental or physical note – something for you to bear in mind.



This icon flags up the Don'ts. Things you should avoid doing like the plague. Ignore this icon at your peril.

## Where to Go from Here

You can go pretty much where you like from here. *For Dummies* books are not intended to be cover-to-cover reads, but resources you can dip into as and when you need to. Each chapter is designed to stand alone, delivering the goods on a particular topic. If you really want the lowdown on the whole process, and some ideas on where to go next, you could do a lot worse than read Chapter 1, but never feel that you then have to plod through 2–19 in strict order.

If you want to know more about researching online, check out Chapter 5, for instance. If you're confident that you know what you want to write on, but need to find out how to put the nuts and bolts of your essay together, Chapters 11 to 13 are for you. Chapter 16 shows you how to polish the final item. And so on.

Wherever you go in this book, use it to make writing your essays the most enjoyable experience it can be. Essay-writing should always be a challenge: this book helps it not to be a chore.



# Part I

# Navigating a World of Information



'Isn't it amazing?—They all want  
the same book.'

### *In this part . . .*

**G**etting a handle on what an essay title requires of you is often the toughest step of all, so we cover it thoroughly in this part. We also give you practical tips on how to get stuck in to your essay, and take an in-depth look at the different sorts of essay you might be asked to write. Essays often break down into one of several basic types, so we show you what you should be aiming towards and – above all – help you to get going and keep plugging away.

## Chapter 1

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# Mapping Your Way: Starting to Write Essays

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Moving from school- to university-level writing
  - ▶ Getting a feel for writing academically
  - ▶ Breaking the writing process down into stages
  - ▶ Achieving success in your essay writing
- .....

**Y**ou've probably picked up this book because you're unsure exactly what's expected of you when you write an essay at university. Did your teachers at secondary school explain to you what an academic essay is? Do you know how it differs from other things you've written? You may be someone who writes happily in many situations – for instance you send letters and emails with no hesitation, you have no difficulty keeping a diary or you can write a story from your own imagination. But an academic essay? That's scary!

This first chapter should go a long way to settling any fears you may have about your writing. We make clear how an academic essay differs from the writing you did at school and from other types of writing you may be familiar with. We break the daunting task of writing your essay into manageable chunks and take you through each stage. And we give you some tips on how to gain confidence and write successfully.

## *Transitioning to University-level Writing*

You write in many different ways when you're at university. You take notes during lectures and seminars, make notes from books and web pages, take part in online discussions and course blogs,

and draft essays and reports – as well as writing your shopping list and texting!

Of all your writing activities, the course assignment's the most important. For your assignment, you're set a writing task to do, normally over a period of a few weeks, and the marks count towards your final grade for that unit. Note-taking and blogging are important in that, done well and thoughtfully, they lay the foundations for success in essay writing both in coursework and in exams. But you're assessed on the final product, so that's what you have to give most attention to. You may throw away your notes, and blogs may disappear into the ether, but an essay you're proud of may end up at the bottom of a drawer for you to discover years later and reread, we hope with pleasure.

So, given that essays at university count for so much, why do so many students feel ill-prepared for this type of writing? Basically, writing at each main stage of the education process – primary school, secondary school and university – has a different function. Realising this is the first step to helping you tune in to what's required of you at university. By looking at the big picture, you see how what you write and how you write it changes from phase to phase.

## *Writing at school*

Primary school teaches you the rudiments of writing. You develop basic literacy in letters of the alphabet and sentences so that you can read and start to write stories and short compositions.

Secondary school assumes that you can use writing to express your ideas and your imagination on paper. You write about the subjects you're exploring in your lessons, and you show the teacher what you've discovered. You have opportunities at secondary school to develop creative writing skills and to begin to analyse topics from your courses in an extended way under the teacher's guidance.

## *Writing at undergraduate level*

As at secondary school, at university you also have to write essays to show what you know. But now you can't regurgitate what your tutors have fed you. The depth you go into with a subject is reflected in the enormous, seemingly limitless, amount of reading you have to do.