

essay savvy

a step by step
guide to writing
that dreaded
essay



P.P.P.

robin taylor

INTRODUCTION

Just a quick word

Most of us would rather drag a dead horse through a sewer than write an essay. The trouble is, because essays are required by most educational institutions, we must write them. The trick is to find a way to get through the essay writing process without being a little black cloud looking for a storm.

This book is an experiential (and not academic) approach to essay writing.

Experiential, meaning I have suffered and survived. Returning to study as a mature age student, my problems with essay writing came as a shock. It was the last thing I thought I would have trouble with. I knew I would have to learn to handle a class-room situation, study discipline and exam situations again, but trouble with essay writing? No, I loved to write!

A few years later, when I was teaching undergraduates in a Faculty of Creative Arts, many of my writing students had trouble writing essays. Like me, these students loved to write. They could write prose, poetry and drama with little trouble. They could give a good verbal presentation on a given subject. But when the time came for an essay to be handed in, they became Bogong moths looking for headlights on a highway. And of course, the essays were terrible. How could they write a good essay when they were out looking for 100km/h headlights?

So ignore the myth that says if you are a 'good' writer then essay writing is easy. Also ignore the myth that says you have to be a 'good' writer to write a 'good' essay.

We don't write an essay, we build it - bit by bit by bit. Giving ourselves the time to do this is the easiest way to get good marks. Plenty of time and an attitude that pulls us along Essay Road instead of pushing us down Depression Alley or Panic Street has more to do with getting a decent essay written than all the fiddle-faddle about whether we can 'write' or not.

A high percentage of people in study have difficulty writing essays and many of them think it's because they 'can't write'. Most of the time, problems with essay writing have nothing to do with being able to write and everything to do with other things.

These 'other things' are what this self-help book is all about. It's a how-to book (including attitudes and approaches with tips thrown in), for students of all ages who want to know what to do next, at any point in the essay writing process.

I give you ten steps to help write the dreaded essay that arrives regularly to muck up your social life. Even the most dedicated of TV addicts, couch potatoes, computer game freaks and Internet junkies can't complain about a journey of ten steps.

I throw ideas at you and you grab what you think you can use. The aim is for you to become a little more street-wise about essay writing.

I'm not saying you'll get to love essay writing. In my opinion it's a task enjoyed by only a small percentage of the population. But if you develop certain skills, it becomes easier with every essay. Hopefully this book will remind you of things you already know, give you some street-wise action when you need it, and urge you along Essay Road to arrive on time with an essay that answers the given assignment, with your fingernails still intact!

A graphic consisting of five horizontal lines, resembling a musical staff. The word "Step" is written in a cursive font across the middle lines, and the number "2" is written in a bold, sans-serif font inside a black square on the right side of the staff.

Step 2

EVERY LITTLE BIT HELPS

*If you use time well
you always have plenty of it.*

The second step is the beginning of what is commonly known as the pre-writing stage. Put enough time and effort into this stage and you'll find it's a simple, stress-free way to write a good essay. It's all about collecting. Collecting ideas and advice, collecting thoughts, as well as collecting information.



A procrastinator
relies on tomorrow
never coming.

Getting Started

Okay, you have just been given an essay assignment, it looks awesome and you don't know where to start. Don't panic. Getting started is difficult for most of us. However don't keep putting the job off until tomorrow to start, because time passes and tomorrow sometimes ends up being the day before the essay is due.

Little bits add up to a whole essay

You've already taken the first step - you've changed your attitude. Now stop thinking of the essay as something you have to write that's as big as Star Wars. Anything large divided up becomes manageable. There's an old Scottish proverb - Many a little makes a mickle (a lot). So think of long writing (essay) as a collection of little bits (known as sentences and paragraphs). Put them together and they add up to one whole essay.

Remember everyone is different and there is no set way to write. Also, stop thinking that getting started on the essay means writing the essay. You don't know enough to do that yet. But here are some things you can do to get going.

Start to think about the question immediately you receive the assignment, no matter how far away the due date seems. Weeks grow wings and fly by as fast as jet planes when it's assignment time. Okay, so you may have more than one essay given to you in the space of a week with each hand-in date around the same time. This situation makes it all the more important to start assignments immediately. It prevents disorder and confusion later on.

Give yourself plenty of time so that you can relax along the way. Do a bit every day. Lots of little bits of time can finish an essay sooner than you think. A bit every day for every essay. You may even hand in before the due date!

Create a comfortable writing space. Make it a special place you enjoy going to. Not just an efficient work space, but one that has some of your favourite things in it too - pictures, posters, your sound system, etc.

Discuss the essay's topic with family, friends, fellow students, and anyone you know who can help you see where you have to go with the essay. The more you talk and listen the more the little black cloud hanging over your head lifts. If you pick up anything new, anything interesting - note it down immediately. Don't count on remembering, you probably won't.

Talk to your teacher or lecturer and find out exactly what they expect from the essay. If it's possible, talk to them away from the class-room situation. Make an appointment with them. Then you can talk about your ideas without interrupting class time; it's more casual, it's private and you can often get a better idea of where you're going. Don't be put off easily - by yourself or by them. Ask, ask, ask. Don't be embarrassed; don't feel a fool. Even question the answer if you don't understand. It could be lack of communication.

Jot down ideas on how to tackle the essay. Ask these questions to help you understand what you have to do:

- What am I being asked to do?
- What facts will I have to include?
- Where can I go to get the information I need?
- What books will I have to find and read?
- What do I already know about the subject?

Not answering the question

You may write a wonderful essay, but if you haven't answered the question asked or covered the right ground, then you lose marks. Not answering the question is one of the main reasons students don't get the marks they think they deserve - in some cases a lot of marks, so you must define the question/subject.

Pick out all the key words and then think about the assignment. For instance, you are studying a certain novel about a small country town and your assignment question is:

Discuss the personalities of Jenny, Will and Ted and compare their attitude and actions when the floods came. Which character do you think shows the most courage?

So you talk about the three character's personalities in general; show the similarities and differences in their attitudes and actions when the floods came; and then give your opinion as to which character showed the most courage and explain why you think so.

What you don't do is re-tell the novel's story. It's a common fault with essays in both exam and assignment situations that students tell all they know about a particular book or topic or whatever, but don't answer the question.

So remember, the essay must answer what is asked, otherwise it's like giving the chook instead of the egg.

Another common failure is answering only part of the question or assignment. Going back to Jenny, Will and Ted - if your essay discusses their personalities, compares their actions when the floods came, gives your opinion as to which character showed the most courage and explains why, but doesn't compare their attitude when the floods came - you've missed the key word, 'attitude', and missed out on important marks.

Or, say you answer everything but don't give your opinion as to which character shows the most courage. Again, you've missed out on important marks. Questions are often 'double-barrelled', exam questions especially so.

While we're in the warning mode, some questions can be confusing, depending on the thought and skill that went into its invention.

So don't always think it's your fault if you don't know what is wanted. If it's not an exam situation make sure you ask and understand and keep asking until you understand - it's the squeaky wheel that always gets the oil.

Become a key-word fanatic

As soon as you get your question or assignment, underline what you think are the key words. Then talk it over with your teachers/lecturers, friends and fellow students. It will save you a lot of hassle and heartbreak

Now you've got the key to the door - we can move on to step four.



KEY MEMO

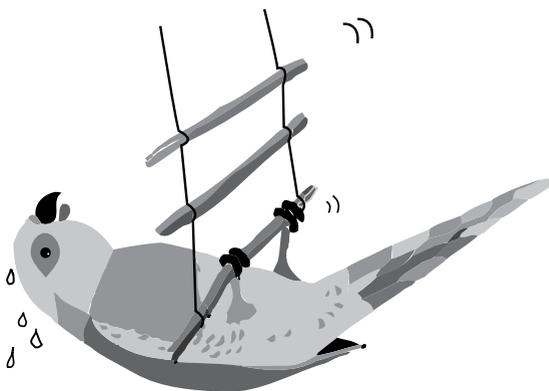
ALWAYS PICK THE KEY WORDS
AND UNDERLINE THEM.

UNDERSTAND THE
ASSIGNMENT.

ANSWER THE QUESTION.

Mindmapping/Brainstorming/Clustering

Try using the right brain/left brain idea to create a map for your essay. You can be left-brained about it, listing the information you have in the order you want it to appear. This is fine if you are clear in your mind about how you want to write the essay. Even so, try switching off the left brain at some stage when you are listing. This will allow ideas from your right brain to come through.



Or you can create a web of circles or squares which is another way to map an essay assignment. It is also a good way to remember what you think you've forgotten in an examination situation. There are various names for this circles or squares mapping but they all do much the same job. Some call it Mindmapping, others Brainstorming and it's also referred to as Clustering.

I discovered clustering a long time ago and I still cluster everything I write before I write it. I cluster to find out what I don't remember, what I know, and the order in which to write it all down. I have clustered outlines for writing

courses, writing workshops and I clustered this book. I clustered to remember the idea of it, what my aims were, and what I wanted to include in the chapters.



Letting go
is letting it
happen without
you interfering.

The exercise need take only a few minutes and the gist of the idea is this. You make a circle (or square) in the middle of a blank page and write the word, or question or subject or project in that circle.

You deliberately switch off the left brain (it is probably telling you this is a silly stupid exercise) and allow the right brain to take over. You then write down all the flashes that come and draw circles or squares around them. It's a letting go process that takes practice, but is worth the effort.

Don't allow the left brain to question what is being written down. It may look as though it doesn't belong to anything, but leave it and carry on anyway, allowing one flash to connect with another and another and so on. Or a flash may remain on its own, while you take off in another direction.

You may not use everything your unconscious mind throws up to you, but leave that judgement until you finish the exercise. Don't spend any longer than five minutes on this. Two or three minutes is ideal. The left brain won't stay out much longer than that.

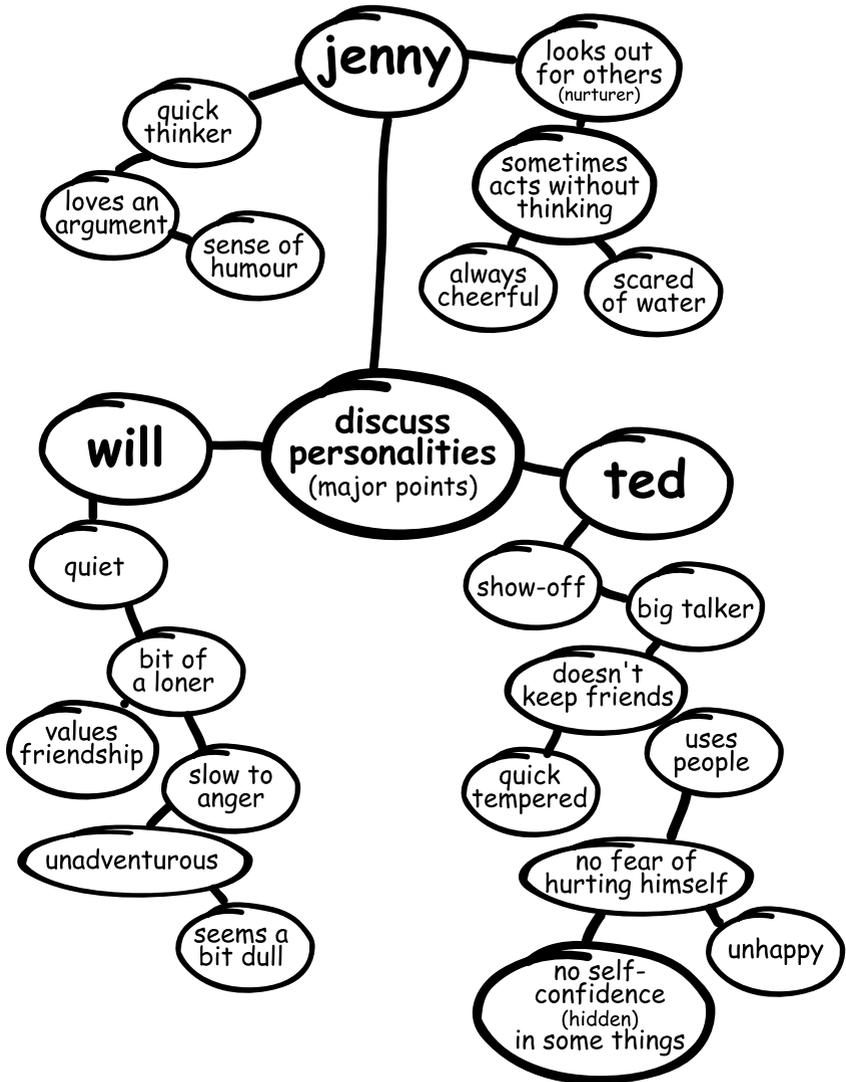
Now you have a page of words with circles or squares in front of you. Your unconscious (right brain) has given you all the bits stored from the reading you have done. There will be some bits you didn't know were there - and hopefully some good ideas! You can now do another cluster using both right (unconscious) and left (conscious) brain to organise and map your essay.

Let's look at the Jenny, Will and Ted sample question again and I'll show you what works for me. The question was:

Discuss the personalities of Jenny, Will and Ted and compare their attitude and actions when the floods came. Which character do you think shows the most courage?

Okay, so there's the question from hell and I've underlined what I think are the keys words.

Here is an example of some of the clustering I would do.



With Jenny, Will and Ted's personality traits out there in front of me, I would then cluster their attitude and actions when the floods came, probably in two or three different clusters so that I could clearly compare, but you may decide on just one.

I would find examples (in my reading of the text and the opinion of others) of all the points I have circled in my clustering. I would then put these bits in my info-file as evidence - as well as my own thoughts and ideas about their personalities.

Then I would cluster Jenny, Will and Ted's courage. I would also pick out examples of courage in the text, and that would help me to decide who I thought had the most courage. And I would probably cluster that one again after I had written about their personalities, and compared their actions, because a lot of things become clearer as I write.

By looking at my cluster just on Jenny, Will and Ted's personalities, I would see at least three or more good paragraphs of discussion. The topics for the sentences are there before me and I know that when I have my sentences the paragraphs take care of themselves. This is how I build an essay.

Creatively map at various stages when writing the essay and it will:-

- Direct your reading and research (balanced right and left brain exercise).
- Retrieve information and ideas (right brainstorming exercise).
- Map or plan your essay (balanced right and left brain exercise).
- Help in examination situation (balanced right and left brain exercise).