

Seven ways to make your essay better

1. Motivate your essay. From Booth, Colomb and Williams, *The Craft of Research* (Chicago UP, rev. 3rd edition, 2008):

Once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer that So what? question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

2. Avoid redundant discussion. If you are covering two or more texts, explain why it is useful to discuss the second one. There's nothing to be gained by saying that one text has a theme and another shares that theme. Instead, use the second text to show how it might cast an alternative (and important) perspective on the question at hand.

3. Consider whether your essay's concluding paragraph might actually work better as an introductory paragraph. Sometimes writers feel that it helps to have a dramatic finish, using a last minute twist, but this doesn't often work well. Better to tell the reader as soon as possible what it is that you'll be arguing, and how.

4. Avoid the "five-paragraph essay." A common pre-university essay structure involves stating a claim, providing three illustrations of the claim and then repeating it by way of conclusion. Avoid this. A pre-fab structure of this kind prevents you from using the essay as a genuinely exploratory development of your ideas. The five-paragraph structure (which may involve more than five paragraphs, of course) has nowhere to go once it has begun, and will always have difficulty in reaching the first-class degree level.

5. If you use a block (or inset) quotation, be sure to analyse the passage you've just cited. Otherwise, paraphrase. Block quotations really only have a purpose if you're spending time making interpretive claims about a passage. If the purpose is simply to support an already stated claim, it's better to assume that the reader trusts you and paraphrase the quotation, in the interests of concision.

6. Use secondary elaborations to develop your essay. If you can "answer" your initial research question, fold that answer back into your essay followed by a question mark. Use your arguments recursively to create a sequence of multiple sections. Note that often it can be helpful to have subsections with their own headings, as a way of sequencing your argument.

7. Look at the last sentence of each paragraph and the first sentence of the next to ensure that the transitions are present and make sense. Then read the introduction and the conclusion to see if they adequately track the development of your essay.