Psychology Essay: Writing Guide and Tips
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**General tips:**
When writing a psychology essay it is important to present a review of the surrounding literature. You want to make it clear that you understand and can present the information in your own words. It is therefore important that you do extensive literature research that adds information to the topic. You will typically get extra marks if you are critical and show analytical skills. Lecturers are also often impressed if you find recent articles that they are unaware of, such as *in press* articles.

**Writing approach**
A good 2:1 (Merit) or First (Distinction) essay of 2000 words will in my opinion have at least 15 references, if not more. A very good idea is to base your essay on the lectures or relevant book chapters first, and then build it up around it. It often a good idea to write your essay in sections as you find relevant material and then modify it as you discover more information. This is, however, a matter of personal preference.

Personally, I write essays in this routine:
1) Clearly understand what the question is asking.
2) Read basics around the question by using relevant lecture handouts and book chapters. Perhaps do some light research until you get a clear, general idea of what the topic is about.
3) Start writing the essay. Do not worry about structure at all. If your essay has multiple themes, it can be an idea to create temporary headings and sort all your information into sections.
4) Begin extensive literature review. Read articles that relate to the essay topic. Many of these articles will reference other articles you may find interesting, which you in turn look up. Do a search for relevant articles or books on Google Scholar or Web of Knowledge. You can also browse relevant books in the library and see if you find anything.
5) Revise your essay. Add all the new information and revise any material that may change. Write introduction and conclusion.
6) Proof read and fine-polish your essay. Do this extensively, at least 5 times. There are always minor errors or points that are unclear or could be better. Proof-read it again and again and again. If possible, print it out and read it because this makes it easier to spot errors.

I have used this method for nearly four years and have never submitted an essay with a mark lower than 68% (10 essays).

An alternatively strategy is to read around the topic and do extensive literature searches, and then begin writing when you have all the information. However, if you do it this way, make sure you begin writing well ahead of the deadline,
because there will always be a few issues that are unclear and you need some extra time to sort it out. At the end of the day, the above guide is a suggestion. It is entirely up to you how you feel comfortable writing your essay.

**Finding relevant articles:**
When adding references to your articles it is important to note that you should avoid citing introduction textbooks. These books usually do not add anything new; they are summaries of research fields. However, don’t let this deter you from referencing books in general, because often a researcher has summarised a specific discipline and added new hypotheses in a book. Unless absolutely necessary, avoid citing books like “An introduction to psychology”.

Your main source of referencing should be journal articles. You will find some using Google Scholar, but most of them you have to find through the library.

**Example:**
Imagine you are doing research on working memory. First you read about the relevant information in your textbook or handout. You then want to read around it, and a good idea is to read the essential articles in the field, for example in this case Baddeley’s working memory model (or a recent revision). So, you look up the article in your textbook, and type the article title into Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.co.uk/).

If you are lucky, the article will come up in Google Scholar as a PDF and you can just download it. Usually, however, you must go through the library. Here is how:

1) Go to the library website: http://libwww.essex.ac.uk/
2) Type in the name of the journal in the search field.
3) If the journal is in hard copy (which is sometimes the case for old articles), write down the shelf number and find the journal in library bookshelves.
4) If the journal is an online journal, then click on it and they will ask for your Essex login. Now you just browse (or search) the journal for the correct issue, volume, and page number, and then you can access your article.

Reading the article you are likely to find reference to other articles you may wish to read or cite in your essay. To find them just repeat the procedure above. I strongly advise that you at minimum read the abstract of any article you reference. Occasionally authors will incorrectly use or cite an article in their own paper, and if you take it for granted that the information is true without checking it yourself, you are in danger of citing irrelevant papers.

One approach is to see which papers have cited a paper you’ve read. First, type in the original article into Google Scholar. Once it is located, you can see how many other articles have cited this paper. Click on this and you get a (sometimes long) list of articles, but they may not all be relevant. You may want to search within these results for relevant articles, or perhaps filter them so you can only see articles released within the last five years.
Finally, some lecturers are very impressed if you use articles from the present year or in press articles (articles that are not yet printed, but are available online). These may be difficult to find and are limited to what is in press at any given time, and it often requires you to manually look at online journals. For example, if your essay is about memory, it might be worth checking the Memory or Cognition journals online and see if any of the in press articles are relevant. This can be hard, but it will boost your marks if you manage to find some.

**Essay Structure**

In terms of the format of the essay, make sure you follow the guidelines set out in the psychology handbook. All necessary information about font size, double spacing, margins, proper referencing etc. is all in there (*note: the handbook shows, but does not state, that you need hanging indentation in your reference section. This is very easy to miss. It’s a minor error, but easy to spot*).

In terms of how you wish to structure the essay itself, however, you may approach it in different ways depending on personal preference. I always try to avoid using subheadings, quotes, and illustrations. Some lecturers love illustrations, but in my experience most will find it unnecessary unless you are illustrating a complex model that is much easier to explain with a drawing. I also try to avoid first person perspective words, such as “we”, “I”, or “our”, though sometimes this is unavoidable and lecturers vary in their preference.

I would recommend writing the introduction and conclusion last, because in essays the introduction is somewhat equivalent to an abstract in a journal: you want to outline what you are going to talk about and what issues you are going to discuss.

A good idea is to talk about the different themes in a linear fashion. Go through things one by one, explain in your own words the different concepts and critically evaluate them if necessary. For example, if you have an essay about memory you may want to have one part of the essay about short-term memory, another about long-term memory, and perhaps a third part about similarities between them. You do not need to mark these parts with headings.

It is important to be concise. Don’t use 100 words when 20 will do. By all means, you should write your own words and evaluate the information you find, but if you go into too much detail you will start to move away from the topic question. You want to make sure you stay on topic. Personally, if I have written two paragraphs in a row without a single reference cited in them, then this is often a sign that I have strayed too far away from the topic or into too much detail.
When writing your first draft, do not worry about the word limit. It is better to write way too much and then revise your essay later. When you revise and polish your essay you can rewrite anything that is too long or delete something irrelevant. My first draft of a 2000 word essay was once 5000 words.

**Avoid the super-citation trap:** Some students think that more references = higher mark, but this is not the case. You are expected to show extensive reading, but what matters the most is your understanding, presentation, and evaluation of the topic, not how many references you have.

**Avoid sentences like this (fictional example):**

“Baddeley’s (1986; 2007) working memory model has later been criticised by a variety of researchers following its publication (Brown, 2008; Harrison, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Thomas, 2007; Sjoberg, 2010; Xavier-Johnson, 2011).”

You might see some journal articles do this, but you have a word limit to adhere to. If you do it, you may be criticised for “wasting words”. Instead, write something like:

“Baddeley’s (2007) working model has been largely criticised following its publication (e.g. Brown, 2008), especially for lack of validity (Thomas, 2007).”

**Essay examples:**
I have provided 3 example essays for you to look at to get an idea of what to look for in writing essays.
- Animal Behaviour essay on natural selection (mark: 75%)
- Neuropsychology of memory essay on faking amnesia (mark: 75%)
- Top-down and bottom-up processing (mark: 68%)

To save paper I have not printed these out. They are available online at: [www.iamalivep05.wordpress.com](http://www.iamalivep05.wordpress.com) - go to the “Downloadable Files” section. You will also find an electronic copy of this handout there.

**Quick format tips (also stated in the handbook) that are easy to miss:**
- Remember to double space the entire essay, including reference section.
- Use either two spaces or first line indentation to separate paragraphs, not both.
- Use font size 12.
- Try as best you can to stay under the word limit, and as close to it as possible.
- Reference correctly in the text and in the reference section. Remember to use/avoid the “&” symbol appropriately. E.g. “Thomas and Brown (2008) found X.” vs. “It was found that X (Thomas & Brown, 2008).”

**Mentor note:**
Please note that I am in no position to proof read or review your essays before submission. If you have questions about specific sections, format, or some content, you are free to ask for my help but do not ask me to actually read and evaluate your entire essay before submission. Essays already submitted/marked are different and I have no problem looking through them in a more detailed way to give you tips on improving your next essays.