

The Lakes School

EXTENDED PROJECT QUALIFICATION

A helpful guide to writing your
academic essay



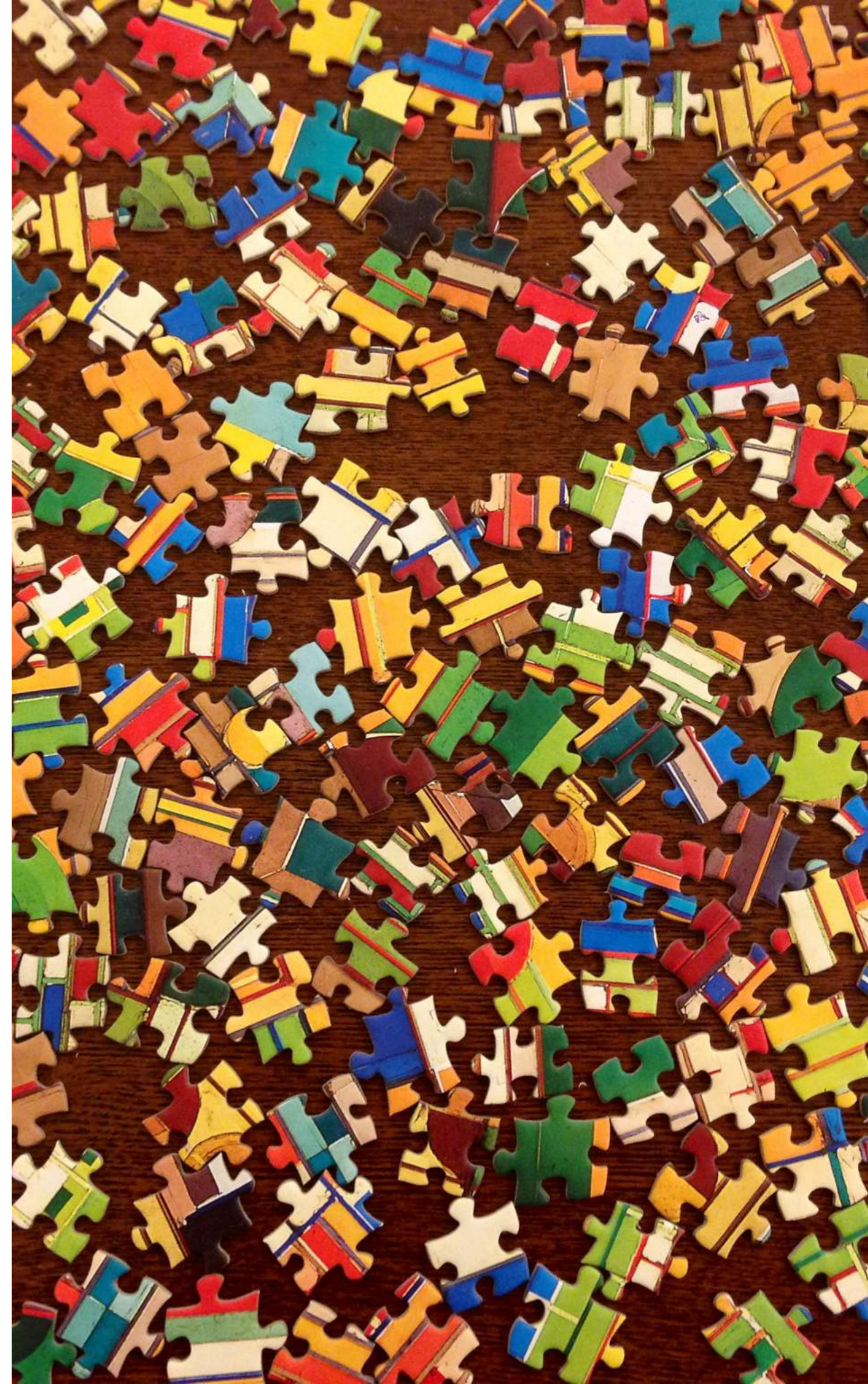
WHERE DO I START?

Writing an academic essay can be a daunting task but it is a skill anyone can learn if you follow some simple guidance. Flair, originality and accurate use of language are all helpful when writing an academic essay but this booklet provides useful guidance on the technique of academic writing. It's a style you can learn if you follow this guidance.

In bringing this guide together, we have sourced the very best advice from top universities, from exam boards and from academic scholars who teach at The Lakes School.

We hope this booklet helps you to unlock your talent for academic writing.

Remember, your EPQ supervisor is on hand to help you so do seek them out if you need help with any part of your extended project qualification.



Section 1

THE QUESTION

- Choose your question or hypothesis carefully
- A well chosen title will help you write a good essay and secure a good grade
- Write down ideas, draft, edit and rewrite your title
- Discuss ideas with your supervisor



This may sound like obvious advice but it is important to take time thinking about how to phrase your question or hypothesis. Get this wrong and you will struggle to make your essay flow and you will encounter brick walls when trying to think freely about your research and the structure of your essay. Will you be asking a complex question with a contentious range of answers? Will you need to compare and contrast? Analyse a particular circumstance and produce a conclusion? Or evaluate the usefulness of a particular concept?

These are some of the common phrases found in essay questions, and each indicates a different set of expectations. If you are asked to critically evaluate a particular theoretical approach, for instance, you have to gain an understanding not only of the theory, but also other common approaches. They must all be weighed against each other, highlighting the relative strengths and weaknesses of each theory and, importantly, you must come to a well-justified and confident conclusion. Is the theory good? What are its flaws? How can it be improved?

If you are asked to evaluate the usefulness of something, however, you don't necessarily need to go into as much critical depth. Yes, you should still acknowledge alternative approaches, and yes, you should still note some strengths and weaknesses – but the bulk of the work must emphasise the concepts practical usefulness. Perhaps the best approach is to find one, or a few, case studies where the theory has been used – what was the outcome of this? Does the application of the theory reveal any particular shortcomings, or strengths? Can you improve the theory?

“Compare and contrast” essays, meanwhile, are essentially a hybrid of the above – you need to take a critical approach and evaluate the literature, but your focus has to remain solidly on the theories that you have researched. It is important to show that you understand both (or all) core theories in great depth, both on a theoretical and applied level.

In essence, the wording of the essay question will tell you how the essay should be written. It will indicate where the focus of your essay should lie as you research and write.

Section 2

PLAN & SCHEDULE



Understanding the question is the first step, but it is equally important that you make efficient use of the available time. Students often underestimate the amount of work required to write a good essay, which results in two things: (1) late nights near the submission deadline, and (2) a disappointing grade. If you want to achieve a good mark, you should start planning your essay as soon as you have agreed your essay question with your supervisor. The following table may be a useful aid.

Set up a table in Word or Excel to help you plan the completion of your essay. Work backwards from the submission deadline at the end of March.

By setting deadlines for yourself and committing to stick to them, you are ensuring that you won't be left with too much work right before your hand-in date. It is also important that you leave time, ideally a couple of days, between finishing your first draft and proofreading.

Step	Notes	Deadline
Set your title/question		
Plan your essay chapters		
Collect articles		
Reading and take notes		
Start writing		
Finish first draft		
Proofread		
Submit essay		

Extend your plan!

Students who achieve the highest grades set out a plan for managing their whole project, not just the essay. Think about expanding your plan to cover the tasks in your log book, meetings with your supervisor and planning your presentation.

Section 3

BE CRITICAL

Perfect theories and academic approaches are rare – the clear majority of theories, arguments, and studies have flaws. Being descriptive is fine if you are looking to scrape a pass, but for a higher grade you need to show that you are able to apply critical reasoning in your dealing with academic materials.

What are the limitations of the theories you are drawing on? How have these been dealt with in the literature? How do they impact the quality of arguments presented, and to what extent do they limit your understanding of what you are studying? What alternate explanations might offer additional depth?

Critical thinking is what will make your essay stand out. It shows the marker that you are not simply repeating the arguments that have been fed to you throughout your studies, but actually engaging with theories in an academic manner.

Work hard to read around your title and find a collection of different sources that both support and challenge your own views.

Organise your thoughts

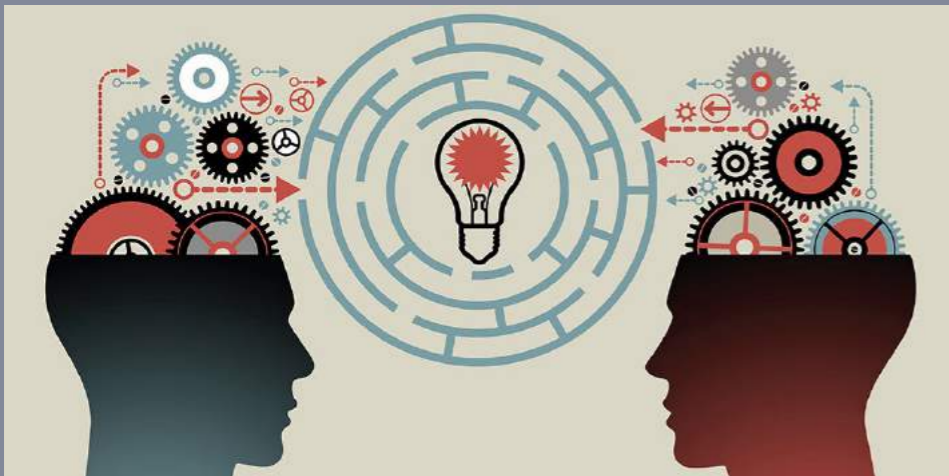
Inevitably, reading about your chosen topic will bring to light many opinions, points of view, arguments for and against and all from different sources. Do you prefer paper and pen or are you paperless? Think carefully about how you are going to organise all of the information you read and collect. Keep articles, annotate them, summaries longer articles so that you can access important information later.

Spread out

A large table or wall can help you set out and move your information around so that you can take a step back and see the big picture. This enables you to make links which will ultimately help you organise your essay paragraphs and make links between different sections.

Reliability and validity

Keep a record of all the source materials you read. Decide if they are from a reliable source and if the information is valid, accurate and based on fact or is it just opinion. You can find an example table for tracking your source materials in the EPQ SharePoint area.



Section 4

STRUCTURE, FLOW AND FOCUS



How you present your argument is nearly as important as the argument itself, which is why it is imperative that your essay follows a logical structure. A classic piece of advice is to “tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, and tell them what you told them” – this, in essence, summarises the core introduction, main body, and conclusion structure of your essay.

Having a clear and logical structure will help ensure that your essay stays focused, and doesn’t stray from the question being answered. Each section, paragraph, and sentence should add value to the argument you are presenting.

As you are writing, it’s good to take a step back and ask yourself “what value does this sentence/section add? How does it link to my overarching argument?” If you find that you can’t answer that question, there is a high risk that you have strayed from your core argument, and you may want to reconsider the path you are taking.

You should also make sure that all the different parts of your essay fit together as a cohesive and logical whole, and that the transition from one argument to the next is fluid. Students often treat essays as lists of arguments, presenting one after the other with little consideration for how they fit together, which inevitably leads to a lower grade. Make sure to tell your reader why you are transitioning from one argument to the next, why they are in this particular order, and how each argument helps shed light on a particular aspect of what you are discussing.

With these points in mind, you need to remember some of the fundamentals of an impressive and effective piece of writing. For example, linking paragraphs together (topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph should somehow link back to the previous paragraph) and using each paragraph to fully explore the point or points.

Sequence your information appropriately and try to ensure that you are always clear – remember that you may be writing on a topic you are extremely knowledgeable about but you must ensure that it is accessible to those who are not.

You will be expected to use appropriate sentence structures; sentences will tend to be complex and longer in length so that you can elaborate on points and use evidence to support your research but a variety is always recommended to maintain interest for the reader.

Section 5

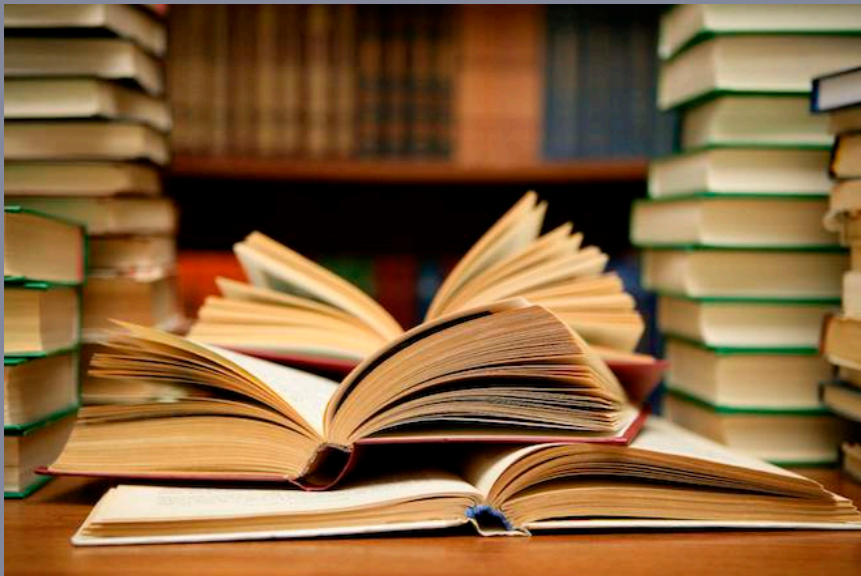
READ WIDELY

Writing may be the core task, but reading is equally important. Before you start writing your essay, you should conduct a broad search for relevant literature. Learning how to sift through a large amount of data is an important academic skill. You should start by searching through databases – Google Scholar is a great tool for this – using key words related to your research topic. Once you find an article that sounds promising, read through the abstract to ensure that it's relevant.

If you are still not a hundred percent sure, it is usually a good idea to skip to the conclusion – this usually contains a detailed summary of the study, which will help determine whether you should read the article as a whole. You don't want to waste time reading through an endless number of articles simply to find that they aren't actually relevant. Once you have identified a few solid articles, you should (a) go through their bibliographies and take note of who they are citing, as these articles will likely be of value for your own research; and (b) check on Google Scholar to see who has cited them. To do this, simply input the name of the article in the search bar and hit enter. In the results, click "cited by" – this will return a list of all of the articles that have cited the publication you searched for.

It's important that you don't rely too heavily on one or a couple of texts, as this indicates to the marker that you haven't engaged with the wider literature. You should be particularly careful in using text books as these are essentially summaries of other people's work.

Always be prepared to back up arguments or points with several different sources of reliable and valid information. Demonstrate to the person marking your essay that you have read widely by referencing the work of several people who may share a similar perspective, whether this is in support of or in contradiction to your own point of view. This also shows the marker that you are able to bring together the findings from your extensive research - analyse and synthesise!



Section 6

QUOTING, PARAPHRASING AND PLAGIARISM



Academic writing requires a careful balance between novel argument, and drawing on arguments presented by others. Writing a completely 'novel' essay, without drawing on a single source, indicates that you haven't made yourself familiar with what has already been published. Likewise, citing someone for every point made suggests that you haven't produced a novel argument. As such, it is important that you provide evidence (a credible citation) when you are making a statement of fact, or drawing on arguments, frameworks, and theories presented by other academics. These, in turn, should support the overarching novel argument that you yourself are making.

When drawing on other authors it is important to understand the distinction between quoting and paraphrasing. The general rule of thumb is that you should paraphrase wherever possible, and quote only when necessary or if it clarifies the point you are making. That said, paraphrasing can be difficult without losing the inherent value of the argument presented. In case you are unsure about the difference between quoting and paraphrasing, we've included an example below.

Quote: "Cultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent, depending on the period, the society, and the social class, in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously" (Bourdieu, 1986: 18)

Paraphrase: Unlike economic capital, the amassing of which requires some conscious effort, cultural capital can be built simply by existing and consuming (Bourdieu, 1986).

Both the quoted and the paraphrased versions carry essentially the same meaning – with the exception that paraphrasing shows slightly wider knowledge of Bourdieu (through mentioning another form of capital), and presents an argument that – while true to the writings of Bourdieu – better fits the overall argument.

Properly citing the sources upon which you draw also ensures that you will not be accused of plagiarism, which is a serious offence. Plagiarism could lead to your essay being discredited and no mark being awarded which would be a shame after all of your efforts.

Harvard referencing

This is a common approach to academic referencing and one that you should use when writing your essay. Research this technique and follow the very clear formula for your references.

Section 7

FIND A 'STUDY BUDDY'

Having a similarly ambitious 'study buddy' is often undervalued by students, but the synergy achieved by working together can help both of you achieve considerably higher grades. It is important to note that you shouldn't write your essays together, nor necessarily agree on the approach to be taken beforehand, as this leads to the risk of submitting two essays or projects that are too similar – again linking back to the issue of plagiarism.

Bouncing ideas around about your project leads to breakthroughs and lines of enquiry you may not have thought about. This can only serve to strengthen your overall project and the quality of your essay.

Ask your study buddy to be a critical friend and to ask you challenging questions, to share their own opinions about your project title and offer up advice, even if it leads you to carry out more lengthy research or it challenges your own feelings or beliefs about your essay focus. You'll both benefit in the end as your projects will be completed to a higher level.

A study buddy will also help you structure your essay so let them look at your plan or invite them to organise your key pieces of information according to their understanding of your project. This might lead to breakthroughs in your own thinking.

Reading, researching, taking notes and bringing concepts together takes time. Your study buddy will be there when you get in a tangle, when you have too much information in your head and you just need to get writing or you need taking for a break!

Take a break..regularly!

Sometimes you'll be in the mood for hours of research and work on your project essay. Sometimes, you'll find it difficult to focus. Either way, learn to break the cycle. Go for a walk, get some fresh air, change the place where you are studying to somewhere with more space. It's ok to leave your essay for a few days and come back to it as this can also lead to you thinking more clearly if things had got a little muddled in your head.



Section 8

WRITE ACADEMICALLY



One of the most critical points is that this piece of writing should be “fluid”. The writing should reflect the journey you have been on and should be expressed appropriately for this level of study (critical, coherent, logical and developed) so aim for “a fluent and comprehensive” piece. Also think carefully about your vocabulary choices as these can seriously enhance the quality of your writing.

A common issue is the use of non-academic language:

“In this essay I will look at how people who buy art use cultural capital. My theory is that having more cultural capital will change their taste in art, as they are able to understand the pieces differently to other people.”

Examples such as the above are unfortunately rather common, and should give you a good idea of what to avoid. The sentiment behind the text is good, but it reads more like a second-rate blog post than an academic essay. An academic might instead write:

“This essay explores the role of cultural capital in the consumption of art, and the impact of cultural capital on consumers’ perception of artistic expressions.”

You will note that this second example is far more concise yet none of the meaning is lost. It also uses present (rather than future) tense, and avoids informal terms. Clear, concise, and precise language is a hallmark of academic writing.

Use footnotes throughout as they are not included in the final word count. The footnotes can refer to the books in the bibliography and can also clarify a point you have made in relation to some research evidence.

Data, diagrams and models

Graphs, charts, diagrams and conceptual models can enhance your essay if used carefully. Learn to refer to them as figures and reference them correctly. Developing your own conceptual model can help to support your arguments and demonstrate that you are bringing something new to a research based essay.

Read about how to write academically and then practice

There are many websites that aim to help people with learning to write academically but select carefully. Take the time to read reputable advice rather than a blog post which may be full of gimmicks and tricks. Try this Harvard University site for some good advice.

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure>

This page might provide you with a possible outline plan for your essay.

- Introduction to your chosen topic.
- State BRIEFLY how you aim to approach and satisfy the task in your title, or deal with the issues raised in the title.



- Give details as to why you have chosen to research and study this for your EPQ and what personally interests you about it.
- Briefly mention one current cultural factor that influences your focus of study (contextualise it).
- If appropriate, state one relevant debate affecting your focus of study and where you stand on the issue.



- Discuss your aims and focus of study (contextualise them) in relation to the following backgrounds:
 - Historical
 - Social
 - Political
 - Cultural
- You may choose to use some relevant and pertinent quotes from your extensive wider reading in this paragraph.



- Focus on the factors that are currently affecting your topic / area of study and try to link this your aims.



- Focus on your main objective.
- Explain why you have chosen this as your main objective to pursue as well as other secondary objectives.
- Offer a detailed explanation of how you intend to achieve it.
- Also refer to any difficulties you encountered and explain how you overcame them.



- Refer to the main steps in your journey including dates, locations and people where appropriate.
- Use plenty of short focused paragraphs and get into detail about how you approached each step of the task.
- Offer a critical perspective on your journey and refer back to your aims.
- Use relevant quotes if appropriate to illustrate points.



- Evaluate the success of your journey against your aims at the outset.
- This paragraph should include to what extent you were successful and to what extent your aims may have changed during the process.



- Your conclusion needs to refer back to your title.
- You must answer the questions or issues raised in your title in a succinct and direct way in the final paragraph of your essay.

The following sources were used in the production of this guide.

<https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/essay-writing-tips/>

<https://www.manchester.ac.uk/connect/teachers/students/post-16/extended-project/resources/>.

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure>