

ENhance QUICK GUIDE

Alternatives to essays

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What's the problem?

“When they are clearly focused, well-crafted essay topics allow students to demonstrate how well they can access and manage information in meaningful ways” (Morgan, Dunn, Parry, & O’Reilly, 2004, p. 111) but many argue that writing essays isn’t the best preparation for functioning effectively in the 21st century, when oral presentation and working well with others may be more important considerations. However, others argue that essays can allow students to show their creativity and skills at writing an argument or making a case. Whichever is the case, there are five main problems with the over-use of essays as an assessment device:

- They take a great deal of time to mark, let alone the time it takes for students to prepare, draft and compose them.
- When most assessment is in the form of essays, students’ skills at essay-writing are repeatedly tested, at the expense sometimes of their understanding of the subject.
- Lots of research shows that we’re not at all good at marking essays fairly – different assessors often give the same essay very different marks.
- Essay marks in the UK tend to lie between 35% for a poor one and 75% for a very good one, whereas in many other disciplines the marks for an assignment like a lab report can range across the whole 0-100% span more evenly.
- With coursework essays, there can be doubt about veracity – i.e. whodunit?! (Race, 2014).

Of course, essay questions *in exams* largely get over the last of the above problems, but assessing them often relies heavily on how effective students are at writing legibly and fast, which can have little to do with grasp of the subject matter.

Why is it important?

There is a strong argument to be made for using authentic assessments, that is those that “can demonstrate the knowledge behaviours, qualities and attributes that were described in the course, programme or specification” (Brown, 2015, p. 118). In some disciplines, assessed essays are rarely or never used – for example in many science, engineering, maths and technology fields. But in many other disciplines, the essay as the main form of assessment still dominates, both in coursework and exams. Sometimes we don’t do enough to help students understand what is required of them:

“Often the criteria for the assessment of written communication in essays are not made explicit to students who learn appropriate essay techniques through trial and error” (Morgan et al, *op cit* 2004, p. 90).

Besides the dimensions of the problems listed above, there is a lot of evidence that our feedback on assessed coursework essays does not always help students improve their learning or future performance in the medium – not least in that however carefully the feedback is designed, there is no guarantee that students will study it properly and act on suggestions made in it (Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017).

What can we do?

1. **Reduce the length.** If we want students to demonstrate the skills of synthesis and assimilation, asking them to write fewer words may be more effective than seeking long discursive responses to open essay titles. Shorter word constraints can make marking a great deal faster, and student thinking deeper – it can be a lot harder to write a good short essay than a long ‘woolly’ one.
2. **Require more personal essays.** To avoid mechanistic or reproductive approaches when writing about a topic, rather than asking students simply to reframe content they have derived from reference sources, we can ask them to adopt a personal position in an argument, or ask them to draw on specialist knowledge from professional backgrounds to demonstrate a thorough understanding of a topic. We can therefore ask students to include where relevant their own views, opinions, experiences, predictions and reflections. Personalised essays are more interesting to mark too and have the positive side-effect of being more difficult to re-use or plagiarise.
3. **Couple written work with oral presentation.** If we want students to demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively in a range of media, we can ask students to produce linked oral and written elements within an assignment. We can therefore allot some marks to the written work, but give further marks for face-to-face communication, for example, through a presentation to peers, or answering questions about the written work, where probing questions can be used to gauge depth of understanding.
4. **Get students themselves practiced at assessing essays.** A core skill for effective students is the ability to evaluate how good their work is *during the actual production of it* (Sadler, 2010) so gaining practice in seeing what comprises a really good essay can help them write better ones themselves. This can be one of the fastest ways of letting them know how we might assess essays, and inducts them quickly into the tips and wrinkles which can make their forays in essay design more successful.
5. **Help students understand what good essays look like.** Early in any course, discuss in class good, medium and poor examples of essays, so students learn how best to evidence their learning in this particular medium, and what is valued in the discipline or field being studied.
6. **Familiarise students from an early stage with the importance of the processes of planning, drafting, re-drafting and editing their essays.** In previous learning contexts, they may have had lots of help from teachers in improving drafts, which they can’t necessarily expect to receive in UK HE contexts, so they need to learn how to review and improve their own work and to appreciate that essays are usually best *not* just written ‘straight from the brain’, but must be adjusted, fine-tuned and improved before submission.

Five alternatives to essays that may lead to more authentic and productive measures of learning (Race 2015). We can ask students to:

- **Prepare a word constrained annotated prioritised bibliography, for example of their top five sources.** 21st century students need to become adept at sourcing and prioritising information from the mass that is available, so asking them to find, say, two journal articles, two web sources and a book they have found useful, to explain how they found them, and their rationale for their choices (including what they rejected) can form the basis of a constructive and productive dialogue about information management.
- **Submit incrementally short elements of text on a blogsite to demonstrate their evolving understanding of an issue or topic.** Tutors and peers can then comment on this emergent thinking, enabling students to broaden and deepen their understanding.
- **Review a dossier of evidence and summarise their learning from them in a 500-word Executive Summary.** This matches the kinds of task that many will encounter in industry and the professions in many disciplines and requires the same kind of clear thinking and effective writing skills that an essay does, but asks more of the student.
- **Produce a word-constrained list of arguments for and against a course of action in a complex topic, and a short recommendation for action.** This again mirrors the kinds of activity that many graduates will be asked to undertake in 'real life'.
- **Write an article or a feature for a journal, newsletter or magazine as designated by the tutor.** This task requires students to write fluently and effectively while matching tone and register to a specific publication and can challenge students much more than simply writing an essay. In some programmes, students actually submit to publications even as undergraduates and succeed in getting their work published.

Key takeaways

There is a place for assessment by essays in 21st century higher education, but it might be much smaller than current usage would suggest. If we use essays, we need to make them as authentic an assessment method as we can and we can also explore alternatives that test similar or overlapping skills in more relevant and valid ways.

References

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Notes