Writing Essay

- The positioning essay is where the writer examines an issue, and then persuades the reader what should change/happen.
- Similar to a pros and cons essay, with a 'should' essay - or position paper - the writer outlines the advantages and the disadvantages, and then argues for what should happen

- e.g., Should the Indonesian Constitution be revised?
- However 'Should' essays are relatively rare: more likely, your essay will be framed without the 'should'

What do markers want in an essay?

- No matter what course you are doing, it's designed with two specific goals in mind:
  - to provide you with some knowledge of a particular subject.
  - to equip you with skills in thinking and communication.

- The first point is about the subject matter: if you are studying commerce, you will learn the significance of a debt to equity ratio and how to read a company's financial statements.
- The second point is more complicated: these skills in thinking and communication are often not acknowledged explicitly in your courses, but improving these skills is fundamental to successful university study

- In developing your knowledge about the subject—whatever subject it is—you will need to:
  - develop a questioning and academically critical mind.
  - develop reading skills to order, test and evaluate ideas and evidence; assess the relationships of these ideas to other ideas and evidence; formulate questions about these ideas and evidence.
  - become an increasingly independent learner.
  - develop a nuanced, coherent position which can be substantiated with evidence.
  - learn writing and communication skills in order to express your position with clarity and precision.

- With this list in mind, markers assess your ability as it is demonstrated in your assignment.
- This assessment can be considered as four areas of competence: focus; wide and critical reading; argument; and presentation.

Focus

- In order to demonstrate your questioning and critical mind, it is expected that your essay focuses clearly on the issues of the question you have been given. This involves several tasks:
  - understanding the question(s) or task(s) you have been given: what knowledge or skill are you being required to demonstrate?
  - identifying relationships between ideas: are these ideas in opposition with each other, in support of each other, or somewhere in between?
  - what, in a nutshell, are the most significant elements that you explore to answer the question?

Wide and Critical Reading

- Of all the skills developed at university, reading is perhaps the most important. Reading involves a set of skills discussed in further detail throughout this handbook.
- Reading widely—from a variety of sources, authors and points of view—enables you to understand the spectrum of points of view relevant to the topic. Whatever the topic, it's likely that there is a range of views which take different positions, contradict each other, support each other, use alternative evidence, refute the positions of others and so on. As you read widely, your ideas will be tested, your assumptions may be made clearer to you, and this will help you to develop a coherent argument for your essay.

- Reading “critically” means reading for strengths and weaknesses to gain a deeper understanding of a point of view rather than necessarily accepting the writer’s position.
- Ask yourself:
  - what is the writer’s argument?
  - what evidence is used to substantiate the argument?
  - what are the limitations to the argument?
  - what are the assumptions used by the writer?
  - what evidence might refute or question the writer’s argument?
  - how does this writer’s argument relate to other arguments?

Argument

- The “argument” in this sense is not a dispute. Your argument is a combination of reason, analysis and evidence constructed coherently and logically, intended to persuade the reader to this position.
- The argument of your essay is your answer to the question and is a demonstration of your academic point of view

- A reasoned argument requires:
  - coherence: its parts fit logically together; the argument announced in your introduction develops through your paragraphs and is confirmed in your conclusion.
  - explanation: background, theories, specialist terminology, evidence and conclusions are clearly identified and framed so that the reader gains a better understanding of the topic.
  - evidence: examples, source documents, the arguments of others and results of experiments from your wide and critical reading are explored so that they explain, support and develop your point of view, or refute the point of view of others.
  - reason: logical connections are made between actions or phenomena and results or implications, so that the reader better comprehends your argument.
- Argument is the key to a successful essay, but it is important to realise that your argument relies on the focus of your essay, the wide and critical reading you demonstrate, and the presentation of your essay.

Presentation

- Presentation takes time and attention to detail. If your argument is not clearly articulated, concise, appropriately referenced, easy to comprehend, and does not follow the formatting requirements of your course, the attention of the marker will be drawn to your presentation and away from your argument.
- You will be rewarded by the time you set aside for reading your essay. Ensure your essay uses appropriate academic language, and that your punctuation and spelling are correct; check that your referencing is consistent and accurate. These expectations are not simply an unnecessary burden: the elements of presentation are fundamental to articulating a clear and concise —and therefore more powerful—argument.

Analysing an essay question

- The academic task in writing an essay is to create an argument that answers the question. Developing a line of reasoning—that is, an essay plan—will help in this process. As your research and writing continues, do not be afraid to alter your plan. Your essay plan should:
  - coherently develop your argument.
  - be clearly identifiable by the marker, so s/he can see how it develops your argument.
  - The diagram in the centre of this handbook is a map of your essay plan. It also shows how each part of the planning and research becomes part of your essay, and it highlights how developing an argument is based on a clear understanding of your question.

Understanding your task—the discipline/field

- The best place to start is the course outline, available on the web, which outlines the important elements, concepts and theories of your course. You will need to demonstrate an understanding of some or all of these in your essay, so it is worth reading very closely.
- Now spend some time analysing the question and identifying the components of your task. Read the question several times, very carefully. What is the question asking you to do? How many questions or tasks are involved? What are the key ideas, themes and theories that this course is designed to cover?

- Consider this question from a first year International Relations course:
- What is the “information technology’s wave”? What are the need causes of it and what might be the economics responses to it? (2000 words)
- While you are reading the following section on subject, angle and process, think about how they apply to the question above.

Subject/Angle/Process

- Analysing the question in terms of subject/angle/process helps you identify the task in preparation to developing a plan.
- The subject of your essay is the broad field or topic—it is the “what” your topic is about: ask yourself, “What do I have to demonstrate knowledge about?” The angle of your essay is the controversy or debate that is at the heart of the subject—“why” you should examine this topic: ask yourself, “What questions do I have to answer?” The process is the “how” your essay is going to proceed in answering the “what” and the “why”: ask yourself, “How should I answer?” The process is the way in which you demonstrate your academic point of view, using evidence to develop your answer to the question.
- If you look at the handout, What do markers want in an essay?" you'll notice that the "subject" above corresponds to the “focus," the "angle" corresponds to the “wide and critical reading,” and the "process" corresponds to the “argument."

Make a plan

- Remember, this is not the answer to this essay question: this is an example of how an answer might develop. From the lectures, tutorials and reading in your course so far, think about the meed causes of the “information technology wave”

Refine your plan

- After some preliminary research, you then decide that two of your causes—trade issues and relative purchasing powers—are really both problems to do with the inequities of power between countries, so these can be addressed together. You also decide, given the limited word length, to combine over-population and environmental degradation into a section on the politics of resources. Finally, your reading uncovers an issue you knew nothing about: the influence of food aid on domestic markets.
- With these changes, you now have the core of your essay plan. It is a 2000 word essay—this means about 10-15 paragraphs

Developing an argument through paragraphs

- The paragraph is a unit of ideas, not a unit of length.
- It consists of:
  - a topic sentence which communicates the main idea of the paragraph—an idea that is rarely just descriptive but always contributes to your overall argument.
  - sentences that support and develop the main idea in the remainder of the paragraph, where each sentence is connected to the others to allow a flow of ideas. These sentences usually provide supporting evidence such as statistics, quotations, critics' perspectives, or other documentary evidence.
  - coherent development signalled by transitions or linking phrases i.e. words such as "moreover," "nevertheless," "for instance," "in addition" and "consequently." Transitions show the reader how a sentence is related to the sentence that precedes it. In other words, linking phrases signpost your argument and the direction you wish to take. Do not, however, use transitions at the start of each supporting sentence. Transitions can appear at various points in the sentence or not at all. As Barnet suggests:

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  - The point is not that transitions must be explicit, but that the argument must proceed clearly. The gist of a paragraph might run thus: “Speaking broadly, there were in the Renaissance two comic traditions... The first... The second... The chief difference... But both traditions... ”
  - a logical end. This end may summarise or conclude your argument on that particular evidence; if possible, it logically leads—and gives some presage to—the argument developed in the next paragraph.

The 'pros and cons' essay

- The 'pros and cons' essay structure typically includes:
  - Introduction
  - What are the advantages of X?
  - What are the disadvantages of X?
  - Evaluation (although sometimes this is omitted)
  - Conclusion

Writing an essay in 11 steps

- Writing an essay is a messy, complex, often frustrating process that, nevertheless, can be ordered and managed in several stages. Remember that it is usually a circular rather than a linear process, that your argument will help develop your writing—and that the process of writing will develop your argument and your use of evidence.

Analyse and define the topic or question

- While an essay question will always have a topic, your first hurdle is to identify and then explore the underlying question/debate/problem within that topic that is central to your course. For example, a Political Science question such as: “What were the causes of the Second World War?” is not asking for a list of causes that you then describe. It is asking: in what way or to what extent did various factors contribute and how were they interrelated? Understanding how the task is situated within your discipline/ field/ courses is crucial to developing a comprehensive answer.

Identify some key ideas

- Remember that any essay question does not stand alone: its purpose is to assess how well you understand some key concepts, theories or conflicts in your current course. Consider these concepts, theories or conflicts while you are preparing your essay. Look at course outlines, lecture notes, seminar readings to identify key themes of the course.
- Use brainstorming or mind-mapping techniques to identify key ideas

The first literature search

- Initially it is often difficult to find readings: search library catalogues, abstracts and databases for material (do a course in the library to learn how). However, when you find sources the amount of reading is often overwhelming. Ask yourself: what is relevant?; what is more central and what is less important?
- Think strategically: who are the key writers in the field?; how can you identify these? Do the course readings contain useful articles? Start with the key writers in the field that your lecturer recommends, and then progress to articles, books and journals as you narrow your search for more specific or specialised material.

Read

- Initially, one of the greatest challenges at university and in essay writing is learning how to read academically. When you read, read for a specific purpose: what is the writer's argument (in the research phase)?; how does this writer refute the position of another writer (later in the research phase)?; are the elements of grammar correct in my essay (in the later stages of editing)?
- Consciously select and apply a reading strategy (see later in the handbook). Read to obtain an overview of what people are writing on the topic: where are the debates within this topic? What are the key issues of these debates? Are there any key theorists writing on the topic? What evidence is being used to justify each position or interpretation of the topic?

Work towards constructing an argument

- Try to express your argument or position in one clear sentence. For example “This paper argues...”
- Select, from your readings, evidence and ideas that might support your argument.
- Next, consider what things you need to do to persuade the reader of your position. Will you need to define key terms, compare and contrast, critically evaluate the literature, provide background context, analyse a case study, and so on? Once you have thought of the things you will do, this is called the structure of your argument and it provides a potential outline of the main sections of the essay.

Construct your argument around an outline

- The first division of your topic into parts represents your view of what is important in these debates: this is your preliminary analysis. Remember this may change as you write, as you read more, and as your essay evolves.
- Keeping the required length of the essay in mind, transfer key ideas and supporting ideas from the brainstorm session to a linear structure (outline). This outline is the bare bones of the essay.
- Prepare a more detailed outline with a section and sub-section plan.
- Expand or contract the outline to suit the length required. Add or delete main points, supporting points, the evidence you will use to explain and support them, potential responses to counterarguments or challenges to your position.
- Remember: you may need to read more in order to flesh out your ideas.

Write the first draft

- The purpose of this draft is to work out what you think about the question, in relation to what you have read. Follow your outline. Resist the temptation just to summarise the ideas you have read, by exessively quoting for example; rather, use these ideas to answer your question. Try to write it all in one go, but do not be too concerned about the order of paragraphs or the quality of the writing—you can develop and polish the essay once you something down worth developing and polishing.
- Focus on one section of your essay at a time. You can have a go at writing your Introduction but come back and rewrite it after your first draft.

Do some more focused reading

- Identify where you need more information. It is easy sometimes to find a position and just follow that argument in your essay. Read more critically than this: what are the different positions or the strengths and weaknesses of each? Identify where you need more information.
- Widen/extend/narrow your literature search for more material. Find examples to support your main points.

Take a break

- Put some critical distance and time between yourself and your work. This will help you to return to your essay with fresh eyes.

Revise your first draft; work on a second draft

- As you write your first draft your ideas and arguments clarify and often the focus of your argument comes together in the last sections of the essay or in the conclusion. In your second draft make sure your argument also appears in your introduction and builds consistently throughout the sections of your essay.
- Give this draft to someone else for comments and feedback, for example, a friend, your partner, a fellow student, or an ASLC adviser. Take note of their comments.

Editing

- Use a checklist for editing the final draft, which incorporates formatting requirements as well as things you know you often have problems with e.g. referencing, expression etc.