



Session

ORGANISING AND WRITING AN ESSAY

At the end of this Session, international students will:

- Have developed effective strategies for writing a well-structured and focused essay
- Have built competence in interpreting essay questions
- Be able to appreciate different ways of organising a logical argument in writing, and structuring an essay
- Appreciate how a unit's marking criteria as well as formative feedback from lecturers can provide guidance for essay writing.

How and when to use this session

The focus of this Session is on enabling students to become proficient at organising a logical argument in writing, and appreciating how this differs from academic writing in China.

Four activities are involved in the Session. The first, introductory activity will be useful if the Session is run as part of a pre-sessional program. Otherwise, if used as an intervention into a media/communication seminar, the lecturer might prefer to omit Student Activity 1 in order to condense the overall Session.

The other three activities could be split into two short, separate sessions, if preferred.

Sessions which might precede this one are:

- **Academic writing**
- **Organising ideas through summary and synopsis**
- **Critical thinking and argumentation**
- **Critical thinking and synthesis**

The following Briefing Note may provide useful background information on why Chinese students are unfamiliar with Australian essay-writing techniques, and the issues that challenge them: **Why Chinese postgraduate students struggle with listening, speaking, reading & writing in English.**

Introduction

The Session begins with an activity on how to unpack an essay question, and then introduces students to techniques for organising evidence into a well-structured argument. In the final activity, lecturers are encouraged to draw on their own unit's marking criteria together with examples of previous assignments as a basis for discussion about how assessment criteria should guide the writing of assignments.

Essay writing on Australian courses differs from the style of writing that students have practised on courses in mainland China. Chinese students are familiar with writing in a relatively flowery, descriptive and sometimes emotional style ('from the heart rather than the head'). They are used to introducing a lot of adjectives, clichés and proverbs into their writing. They are unused to writing extended texts (of more than a few hundred words), and unfamiliar with having to provide references. In the Chinese academic context, it is usually considered unnecessary for students to provide citations, even if direct quotations are used. Therefore, it is helpful if Australian lecturers are explicit about expectations and techniques for essay writing in their own units.

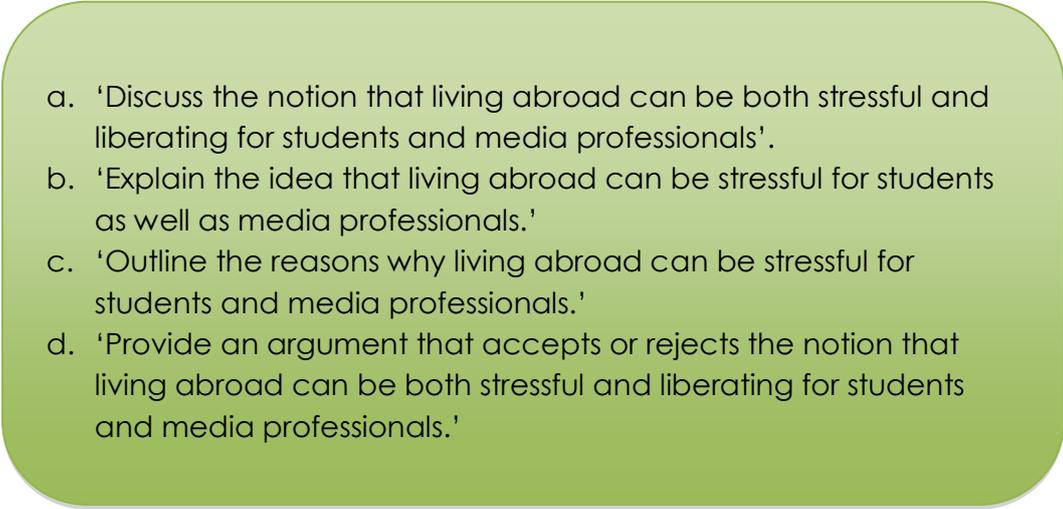
Student activity 1: Comparing essay writing styles

- This activity can be omitted if the Session needs to be condensed.
- Using the **Slide A: Academic writing three views**, ask students to discuss the differences between the three quotations, and compare their understandings about what is required to write a good essay in the Australian postgraduate context. This can be done in pairs or as a wider seminar discussion.
- Make sure that the class discussion identifies that an essay involves:
 - Argumentation, with the different sections of the essay interlinked so that all sections build an argument.
 - Evidence
 - Ideas marshalled logically, and presented in a logical structure
 - Writing that is formal, not flowery or emotional

Student activity 2: Unpacking the essay question

For this activity, the lecturer might wish to focus on the below suggested example essay questions or instead draw attention to a forthcoming essay assignment in their own unit.

- Distribute **Handout 1: Understanding essay questions** and either show the **Slide B: Example Essay Titles** or refer to a forthcoming essay title in the students' unit.
- Allocate a different question from the slide to students in pairs or small groups. Ask them to refer to Handout 1 in order to do the following:
 - (a) identify the key words in the essay title/s
 - (b) decide what each question requires them to do.
- Here's a copy of **Slide B: Example essay titles**

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- a. 'Discuss the notion that living abroad can be both stressful and liberating for students and media professionals'.
 - b. 'Explain the idea that living abroad can be stressful for students as well as media professionals.'
 - c. 'Outline the reasons why living abroad can be stressful for students and media professionals.'
 - d. 'Provide an argument that accepts or rejects the notion that living abroad can be both stressful and liberating for students and media professionals.'

- With the whole class, use student answers to compare the different requirements of the essays, noting how the different process words shape essays differently. Keep referring back to **Handout 1: Understanding essay questions** through the discussion.
- Now work through one of the questions in greater depth in order to start to summarise relevant ideas. For example, take the first title ('Discuss the notion that living abroad can be both stressful and liberating for students and media professionals') and have students identify:
 - What the title requires them to do. Students should refer to **Handout 1: Understanding essay questions**.

- (Answer: 'discuss' which means to 'analyse and critically examine in detail. Consider pros and cons in order to come to a supported assessment and conclusion.')
 - The general focus of the title.
 - (Answer: living abroad is stressful/liberating).
 - The scope of the topic (or the limits).
 - (Answer: students and media professionals).
- Write these answers on the whiteboard as headings in a table (see below example) and ask pairs or groups to brainstorm ideas under each heading.

Living abroad	Students	Media Professionals
Stressful		
•		
•		
•		
Liberating		
•		
•		
•		

- Facilitate a class discussion with each pair or group writing an idea within the table on the whiteboard in order to create a summary.
- **Slide C: Living abroad ideas** provides an example of how the table might be worked through.

Teaching Note

Other Sessions provide guidance and techniques for summarising, writing synopses, and synthesising, as well as developing an argument. For example, it might be helpful to refer back to the Session on **Critical Thinking and Argumentation** as a reminder of how to build an argument.

Student activity 3: Structuring an essay using a fishbone diagram

Because the focus of this Session is on organising the essay, the next activity shifts directly to how to structure the ideas in the above example within an essay format.

Lecturer input

Show **Slide D: Fishbone diagram**. Explain that the structure of an essay is like a fishbone with the following elements:

- An introduction, i.e. the head of the fishbone
- The body of the essay where the main discussion and argument are found, i.e. the bones of the fish, with each bone representing a different factor or piece of evidence related to the topic
- A conclusion, i.e. the tail.

Note that the components of the fish provide a good indication of how much to write for each part of the essay:

- The introduction is short (like the head)
- The discussion and argument are the bulk of the essay (like the fish's body)
- The conclusion is relatively short (like the tail).

- Working in groups, students should write on their own fishbone diagram, filling in the components from the summary table they prepared in Student Activity 2. They should be directed to the following (these are listed on the second slide of **Slide D: Fishbone diagram**):
 1. State the focus of the essay at the head
 2. Write ideas about '**stressful** living abroad' on the bones on the top side of their fish
 3. Write ideas about '**liberating** living abroad' on the bones on the lower side of their fish
 4. Note that each idea on one of the bones should be written like the topic sentence for a paragraph (See the Session on **Academic Writing** for how to construct a paragraph.)
 5. Decide on a stance (point of view) in response to the topic (i.e. their central argument) and identify this by writing a short conclusion on the tail of their fish
 6. Go back to the head of their fish and alongside the focus of the essay (see 1 above.) write down their stance towards the question in the essay title, and how the argument will be presented i.e. how the essay will be structured.

Lecturer input: Summary of how to organise an essay

The below points are summarised on **Slide E: Summary of how to organise an essay**. Use the slide to discuss with the class the following:

There are different ways of organising an essay: In the previous activity, students constructed the basis of an essay. There are a variety of ways of structuring an essay depending on the topic and the preference of the writer.

- Distribute **Handout 2: Different ways of organising a logical argument in writing and structuring an essay**. The type of structure you worked on in the previous activity is called Comparative/Contrastive.

Finding focus: Brainstorming and then writing up ideas in this way provide the beginnings of a writing plan.

- A plan (such as one based on the fishbone diagram) helps you decide what to write about and the stance you will take to the topic.
- It gives focus to your writing and helps you write with a logical sequence by following along the bones of the fish to the conclusion.
- It also gives focus to your reading so that you don't meander through the set readings but instead search for evidence in your reading to support your early ideas.

The writing process is not linear: Note how the introduction was the last component of the fishbone to be completed in the above exercise. This is quite common in essay writing.

- The process of essay writing involves spiralling back and forth as new ideas and evidence are collected through reading, and developed, and revisions are made.
- To start writing, you might fill out the ideas on the different fishbones, starting with a topic sentence.
- Then link different ideas and paragraphs by using signal words such as those in the column of **Handout 2: Different ways of organising a logical argument in writing and structuring an assignment**.
- Are there any terms you would need to define? These are often presented in the introduction.
- Continue to read, re-read, revise and write. It is probable that you will do this many times before you are satisfied with your work. Leave plenty of time to do this.

The need for supporting evidence and referencing: When writing an essay, it is necessary to present supporting evidence for each of the statements written on the bones of the fish.

- How would you find this?
- How would you reference the various sources you use?
- Does the essay call for personal experience or opinion? Where would you position this on the fishbone?

Student activity 4: Unpacking an example essay

If preferred, this activity can be substituted with the following unit-focused activity.

- Distribute **Handout 3: Example essay structure** and guide students through reading this example of a good introduction, body and conclusion. It may be useful to refer back to the Session on **Academic Writing** if this has been run previously as a foundation to essay writing.

Student activity 5: Using the marking criteria as guidance

- Refer students to the marking criteria for a forthcoming assignment in their unit. Point out how the criteria indicate:
 - The focus and emphasis required to undertake the assignment successfully
 - What the lecturer is looking for when marking and how this links to marks and written feedback.
- Distribute an examples of (anonymised) good and poor essays, which include the lecturer's feedback.
- Facilitate a discussion to illustrate how the marker's comments (and mark) link to the marking criteria. Ask students to discuss how the feedback should be used constructively to improve future writing.

Note to lecturer

Research indicates that marking criteria is rarely used in the mainland Chinese academic context, and written feedback (except for a mark) is not provided. Therefore, Chinese students often do not realise that marks and lecturers' written comments align with the marking criteria set out in unit guides. It's worth being explicit about how students should use the marking criteria to guide their preparation of assignments, and how written feedback should help them to improve future work.

To finish the Session, provide students with **Handout 5: Tips for essay writing**.



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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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