What is an essay?

- An essay is a relatively short piece of writing designed for a specific purpose. E.g. assessment, demonstration of 'knowledge', exploring ideas.

- The word 'essay' comes from the French 'essayer' meaning 'to try or attempt'. An essay is an attempt to do something, particularly in a new area. Undergraduate essays are usually designed to encourage you to explore a new topic, and test your understanding of something you've just been introduced to.

- An essay is an exercise in synthesizing and weighing up different views, theories or pieces of evidence.

- A dictionary definition: 'An analytic, interpretative, or critical literary composition usually much shorter and less systematic and formal than a dissertation or thesis and dealing with its subject from a limited point of view'.

- Why 'literary' composition? Because an essay is a piece of writing that is valued for its form and style, e.g. the way it is organized and expressed, not just its content.

- Why ‘a limited point of view’? Because an essay cannot contain everything that is known and has been said about a subject – it takes a view of certain aspects or key features of that subject.

- An essay is part of a learning process, not just a piece of work you will be assessed on. Your essays are an essential part of your learning and understanding of the course.