

Skills necessary to write a good essay

Below is a list of the skills you need to write an effective essay at university level. As you'll see, it's a long one! Mark three of these as your strengths with a + sign and three as your weaknesses with a – sign.

- The ability to spell, to construct a sentence, to punctuate rationally and to divide writing into logical paragraphs.
- Competence in word-processing, cut and paste, formatting, page-numbering and foot-noting.
- The ability to assimilate and organise information.
- The confidence to read widely, fast and with focus.
- A grasp of the subject under discussion.
- The confidence to select and discard material.
- An understanding of the particular style and format required by your chosen discipline.
- An understanding of how to compile a bibliography, and to reference your sources.
- An understanding of what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it.
- An understanding of how to interpret and read a question or title so that you can respond to it with confidence.
- A facility with language, so that you can give expression to complex ideas.
- An ability to plan.
- The ability to develop an argument, so that the essay flows smoothly from one idea to the next because there is an underpinning logic.
- The courage to face a blank page (screen).
- The confidence to search for help from a supervisor, other students, the library and the internet.
- The courage to re-write or start again as necessary, to extract the good from the over-written or irrelevant, to restructure and on some occasions rethink completely.
- An understanding that writing is a creative process that in itself develops ideas and often produces more than the writer imagines possible at the start.
- The ability to think laterally and make connections.
- The ability to edit, re-draft and proof-read.
- The qualities of self-motivation and patience.
- The qualities of self-discipline and time-management, to give time for analysing the question, reading and note-taking, first, second and third drafts, proof-reading.

- The ability to be receptive to verbal and written feedback, so that you can build on strengths and weaknesses identified in previous work.
- The ability to work for long-term aims, with little immediate reward.

Adapted from Katharine McMahon, '*What's Going On With Student Writing?*', study commissioned by the Royal Literary Fund (June 2004) – see <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>