

Shorter and single paragraph responses

What is a shorter or single paragraph response?

A key difference between an essay and a shorter response is length; often you will be given a specific word limit which means you must be very concise and focused. Although there is no set rule about paragraph and shorter answer length, usually paragraphs are between 4 to 8 sentences, or 90 to 200 words, long.

Usually in an essay, you will give a little background information and define key words and concepts before you give your thesis statement and begin your discussion. With a shorter or single paragraph response, however, this is usually unnecessary (unless, of course, you have been asked for definitions). Instead, you can simply get straight to the point and do what you have been asked to do.

Identifying the command words, topics and focus

It is very important to identify the command word, the topic of the question, and where you are expected to focus. Normally, there are three main parts to a question or topic:

- **Command/s:** These are command or directing words that tell you what to do, such as “Discuss,” “Analyse,” “Compare and contrast,” “Critique,” or “Evaluate.” Sometimes there is more than one command in a question. For more examples of command words, see the section on assignment command words on OWLL.
- **Topic/s:** This is the general area(s) for your discussion. The topic/s can be determined by taking the command word/s and asking “what?” after each command word. For example, Discuss what? Compare and contrast what with what?
- **Focus:** This is the specific area(s) of the topic that you need to concentrate on.

Sometimes there is more than one focus in a question. The focus of a topic can usually be identified by extending the topic strategy above. For example, Discuss - what? - in relation to what?

In a shorter or single paragraph response, it is a good idea to mention your topic and focus in your first sentence. Often, a command word (discuss) is simply implied. For example, in the single paragraph topic “Discuss the implications of the government’s Fee Free Tertiary Policy,” the command word (discuss) is implied in the first sentence, and the topic (Fees Free Tertiary Policy), and focus (the implications of this policy) are explicitly stated (see example below).

With different command words (e.g., compare and contrast), however, the command word can be explicitly mentioned (e.g., This paragraph compares and contrasts the potential impacts of the Fees Free Policy with the previous policy of first year tertiary students paying fees, with a focus on inequality of access and future preparedness of workers).

How to structure a shorter or single paragraph response

In a shorter or single paragraph response, you should get straight to the point. Usually, it is okay to assume that the reader (i.e., the marker) will have some background knowledge so you may not need to give background information or define key terms as you would in an essay. The acronym PIE (which stands for Point/Illustration/Explanation) is helpful when developing well-structured, coherent paragraphs.

- **Point:** The first sentence of your paragraph or short answer should immediately tell the reader what the topic is and what point you are making about this topic (this is also sometimes called a topic sentence). Generally, your first sentence tells the reader the topic and focus of your paragraph.
- **Illustration:** The main part of your paragraph or short answer is the illustration which consists of reasons, supportive evidence and examples. The illustration can include facts, and published opinions or research.
- **Explanation:** The explanation clarifies how the reader should interpret your illustrative evidence. Your explanation should relate to the main point of your paragraph or short answer.

Signpost language and flow

Flow refers to how cohesive your writing is and how it moves from point to point. Signpost words help to improve the readability and flow of your writing because they signal to the reader that you are making another illustrative point. Common examples of signpost language include “Firstly,” “In addition,” and “Also.” Signposting words such as “In contrast” prepare the reader for a contrasting idea or point while “Similarly,” tells the reader you are expanding on your previous illustrative point or explanation.

It is also important to consider the order of your illustrative points and explanations- a logical progression of thought enhances readability and flow.

Example short answer paragraph

Note the first sentence of the example paragraph below- it tells the reader what the paragraph is about (the topic) and that there are two key points discussed (the focus). Although a brief explanation of the policy is given, this is not the focus of the paragraph. Also, pay attention to the signpost language in the paragraph (i.e., firstly, furthermore)- this tells the reader another point is being made. Finally, consider how each implication (i.e., increasing equality, improving preparedness for work) is introduced and explained.

Discuss the implications of the government’s Fee Free Tertiary Policy.

There are two main implications of the government’s Fees Free tertiary policy, which pays first year fees for first time students - increasing equality with respect to access to education and improving students’ preparedness for employment. Firstly, the Fees Free policy can help students who might not otherwise be able to access tertiary education or industry training without the need for debt. In particular, this policy could help students whose parents may not be able to help with fees. This has significant societal implications as

increasing inequality is a growing concern across the world, and the Fees Free policy attempts to address this issue (Adern, 2018). Furthermore, the policy allows students to train for future jobs and this means the country will benefit from workers who are ready to enter employment. Although the policy has a cost, this should be compared with the cost of students not studying and also not working, possibly while on an unemployment benefit. Students who are employment-ready may also mean less burden on employees who may not need to train staff.

Review checklist

As part of your review and editing process, it is a good idea to read your assignment topic or question several times (or even have it taped to your computer screen so you can refer to it while you write) and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you doing what your command word/s asked you to do? E.g., Are you analysing? Comparing and contrasting?
- Does your first sentence tell the reader what your shorter response is about and what the rest of your response will discuss?
- Are you focused on your topic throughout your response? Ideally, you should be able to pick out the key points of your illustrations and explanations and see a direct relationship with your topic and focus
- Is your grammar and punctuation of an acceptable scholarly standard? Try reading your response aloud- sometimes hearing your writing can help identify errors that you may have missed.

Academic writing and study skills support

1. Academic Q+A

If you have a quick question about study skills or academic writing, then they can ask it on the [Academic Q+A forum](#), which can be accessed via the [Academic Support Stream site](#).

2. Consultations

One-to-one consultations with learning advisors and writing consultants are [available online and on campus](#). Consultants can answer your questions about academic writing and study skills or give you feedback on your assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, presentation, use of sources, and referencing.

3. Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL)

Develop your academic writing and study skills with the [Online Writing and Learning Link \(OWLL\)](#) website from Massey University. OWLL includes information on assignment writing, assignment types, referencing, study skills, and exam skills.

4. Pre-reading Service

The [Pre-reading Service](#) is a free service, which gives students an opportunity to send their draft assignment to [CLS consultants](#) for review and advice. Students

receive individual written feedback on their assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, style, presentation, referencing, and use of sources. The service can be accessed via the [Academic Support Stream site](#).

5. Workshops

Free study seminars and workshops are run on campus and online. See [Workshops page on OWLL](#) for [programmes and registration details](#).