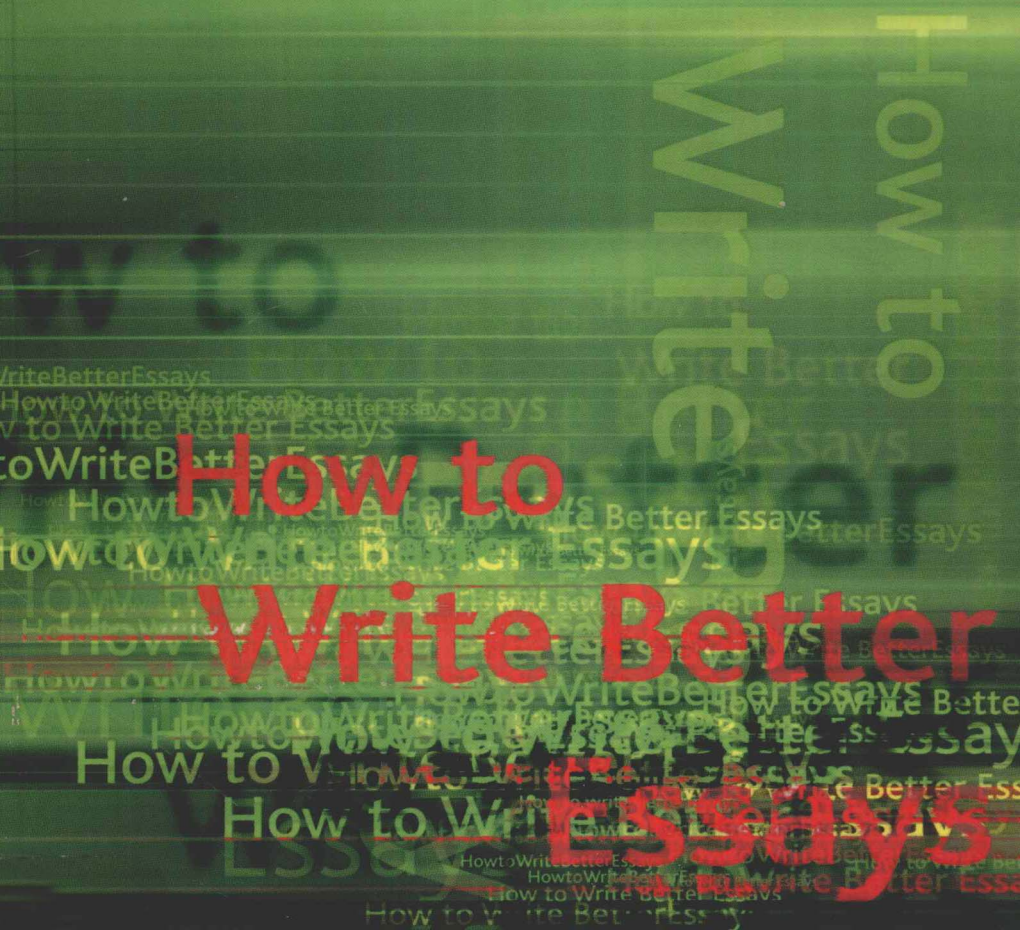


Bryan Greetham

How to Write Better Essays



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palgrave



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For Pat, without whom nothing is possible, and two great men – my father, Robert Greetham, and Harry Rowe, whose rich and interesting life is still an inspiration.

Introduction

► About this book

By the time we reach university a surprising number of us are convinced that we should know all we need to know about researching and writing essays. We're inclined to argue that if we've got this far we should know how to analyse the implications of questions, read efficiently, take notes, plan and structure arguments, use evidence, and write light and interesting prose. Indeed these skills are the very thing that has got us this far in the first place, so to admit that we could be better at essay writing seems to be an admission that we're lucky to have got this far.

Instead of seeking help, then, to improve our skills, we settle for the strategy of just learning by our mistakes, or by example in those rare moments when we might see our tutor think through and analyse a difficult concept, or pull ideas together from different sources and synthesise them into a new way of looking at a problem. If we recognise the significance of the moment, and most of us don't, then we might be lucky enough to retain a small inkling of what went on in the hope that we, too, might be able to do the same.

But it need not be like this. The two types of skills that we all need to be successful in our courses – study skills (reading, note-taking, writing, organisation, and revision) and thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, discussion, argument, and use of evidence) – can be taught. There is nothing mysterious about them. They need not be the exclusive preserve of a few. And there is nothing particularly difficult about them either. Indeed, most of us have the abilities to succeed, if only we can unlock and use them by learning these simple skills.

► Learning the skills

In this book you will learn not just the study skills, but the thinking skills too. What's more, you won't do this alone. At every step of the

way a tutor will be by your side, showing you clear and simple ways of overcoming the most difficult problems. And *you* choose the essay you want to work on, drawn from the courses you're taking at your school, college or university.

You will be taken carefully through each stage of writing the essay from interpreting the question to the research, planning, writing and revision. In each of these you will be given practice exercises to work on, along with their answers, with an assignment at the end of each section. As you work through each stage you will get practical help right up until the essay has been completed. In this way not only will your work improve, but you'll develop those skills necessary to tackle successfully all your future writing assignments.

All of this means this book is significantly different from any other writing or study-skills book you may have read before:

- **It's an integrated approach**

It doesn't deal with writing skills in isolation from the thinking skills and the other study skills involved, like note-taking, reading and organisation. If you've taken study-skills courses before, you'll know that dealing with any skill in isolation results in us just tacking on this new skill to our existing pattern of study. It's not integrated within it. As a result, after a short time we come to realise it's not relevant to the way we use our other skills and we quietly abandon it.

- **It's a purposeful approach**

Because it's directed at a specific goal of producing a certain essay that you have chosen yourself, it has a clear purpose that's relevant to what you're studying. Unlike more general books and courses, you're not working in a vacuum. In effect you have your own personal writing tutor, who will be by your side to help you with the problems you confront at each stage in the production of an essay that you have to complete for one of your courses.

- **The book takes account of the syllabus objectives of your courses**

Unlike most books on this subject, this one will help you develop the skills you need to meet the syllabus objectives of the courses you're taking at school, college or university. You will develop the skills and techniques that allow you to explore more effectively in your writing those abilities your syllabuses set out to develop. As

many of us know from our experience with other books and courses, any book that doesn't do this we are likely to abandon, realising it doesn't address our needs, because it's divorced from the abilities we are expected to use and develop in the courses we are studying.

- **The book is a comprehensive essay writing guide**

After you've read the book and completed the course you're left with an invaluable guide that you can use to diagnose and deal with any problem you might have in your writing in the future. As it's broken up into stages it's easy to identify where the problem is and what you need to do to tackle it. To help you in this, the index can be used to diagnose a problem you might be experiencing, so that you can easily locate the relevant section of the guide.

With these unique characteristics this is a book that will ensure you develop the skills and techniques to unlock your abilities and your potential.

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The Stages

This book is not just about the actual writing of essays; it's also about the various stages you need to go through to produce a good essay, and about the ways in which this can improve your learning. Once you've worked your way through it, you'll find you have an invaluable guide that you can keep by your side as you write your essays, to give you answers to problems as they arise.

► Why write essays?

If you understand the value of doing something, you normally find you're more confident and positive about tackling it. So, what are the reasons for writing essays?

- **It forces you to organise your thinking and develop your ideas on the issues**

In one sense writing is *the* crucial step in the process of learning a subject, in that it helps you to get to grips with the new ideas. Without this it's difficult, if not impossible, to know clearly just how well you've understood the subject.

- **Feedback**

In the same way, it also provides you with the opportunity to get feedback from your tutor, not just on how well you've understood the subject, but on how well you've communicated this, and where your strengths and weaknesses are, so you can concentrate your energies more effectively.

- **Revision material**

If you've planned the essay well, so that it's got a clear structure, you'll find, when it comes to preparing for the final exam, that the plan itself is just about the most important revision material you have. It shows you how you've come to understand the topic, and how you've organised the ideas. As such, it is the one thing that

you will be able to recall and use most effectively under timed conditions. In fact many students who plan well use just these clearly organised thought patterns as their only revision material.

Writing an essay, then, is a valuable opportunity for learning, which ought to be approached positively. If you hide behind the text, just paraphrasing or copying what you've read, without processing those ideas and making them your own, your tutor will rarely see you, your abilities, or your problems, and you will never glimpse the extent of your abilities, or just how much you understand.

► **The five stages**

For any essay to achieve high marks it's essential to go through five distinct stages:

- 1** Interpretation of the question
- 2** Research
- 3** Planning
- 4** Writing
- 5** Revision

If you omit any of these or just rush them, certain familiar problems will emerge in your writing: irrelevance, weak structure, insufficient evidence and examples to support your arguments, lack of fluency between paragraphs, inconsistent arguments, and many others.

It's also as important to separate each stage, so that you leave, say, at least a day between each of them. Of course, it may not always be possible for you to do this. You may have a number of competing obligations that leave you only a few days to complete the essay. On these occasions the skills you'll learn in this book to manage your time will help you cope more effectively. They will also help you organise your time so that with most pieces of work you can in fact find sufficient time between each stage. Not only does this allow you to return to your ideas fresh, so that you're able to see which of them needs to be edited out, but you will also find that your ideas and arguments have developed in the meantime.

Ideas are organic. Hardly ever are they the complete and finished article the moment you grasp them, like products on a supermarket shelf. They grow and develop over time. So, for example, returning to

your plan after a day or two, you will almost inevitably discover new ideas, new evidence and new ways of developing your arguments. You're also likely to see a more sensible and logical way of ordering your ideas.

And the same goes for all the other stages. Each time you return to your work after leaving it to lie unattended for a while, you will find your subconscious has worked on the ideas, restructuring them, answering questions that you weren't sure of, and critically evaluating the arguments you've read in your texts.

But, be reassured, this is not an endless, confusing process, in which your ideas are thrown up in the air each time you return to your work. Within a short time, after revising your plan a couple of times, you will realise that it's ready and you can begin writing. The same is true of your interpretation of the question, your research and the revision of your work. You will know when enough is enough. It may take three or four essays before you feel confident about your judgement, and during these you will have to rely on your tutor's judgement, but it will come.

Stage 1

Interpretation of the Question

