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## WHY WRITE ESSAYS?

### *Other Handouts:*

- Why is plagiarism so wrong?
- Why do we learn?

To do something well it is necessary to understand how to do it and also why one should do it! To write soundly constructed essays at university it is important to think about why academics ask students to perform this task.

### **Reason 1: Measurement**

Do you think it is to:

- Assess your knowledge of a subject?
- Grade your achievements?
- Judge your writing skills?
- Gauge your understanding?
- Measure you against your peers?
- Challenge you to deepen your awareness?

All of these potential reasons measure your levels of understanding and your ability to communicate that understanding in an essay and, yes, that is in part why you are asked to write essays at university.

### **Reason 2: Development**

There is, however, a second and more important reason why you are asked to write essays, and that is to give you the opportunity to explore what you think, to improve how you go about thinking and to practise communicating your thoughts with other people.

Writing is a tool which allows us to organise our thoughts coherently. Writing also allows us to categorise our knowledge and to distance ourselves from our ideas so that we can stand back and reflexively examine what we think about a subject, why we think it and to decide if we should keep thinking it! Writing essays with this purpose in mind is much more fun than finding an answer to simply fill in a blank page. Recognising that writing essays is an opportunity to explore my own thoughts means that I become part of the assignment and, as we know, we are always interested in ourselves!

When I think of an essay as an invitation to explore what I think about something and who I am as a person, rather than only as a document that will be used to judge me, the issue of plagiarism also changes. Plagiarism then becomes an act in which I am cheating on my opportunities to learn as well as being an infringement of other people's intellectual property. (See the other handouts in the "Why" series to explore this idea further.)

If I place myself as a participant in this project of writing essays, thinking about what I think and why I think that, then I also start to consider the questions of:

- What is knowledge?
- Am I constructing what I know in this process of researching and writing?

- Is knowing something more than just collecting and memorising the facts that experts tell me I should know?
- Where does knowledge come from?
- How is knowledge made?
- Who makes knowledge?
- What does it mean to understand knowledge?

So, another reason why we ask you to write essays is because we want you to understand that knowledge is constructed through a process of debate, disagreement and argument amongst people. And we want you to practice your skills of debate, disagreement and argument by writing essays. In this way you become a producer of knowledge!

You may consider that scientific knowledge is all about ‘hard facts’ to be memorised and is therefore not part of this process of debate. However, remember that scientific knowledge changes and scientific experts disagree. Good advice then for a young scientist is:

Try to learn what people are discussing nowadays in science. Find out where the difficulties arise, and take an interest in disagreements. These are the questions you should take up. In other words you should study the *problem situation* of the day.  
(Popper, 1962, p.129)

What does it mean when we see knowledge in this way? It means that we all have to decide: what we think, why we think it, on what basis we think it. Further to that we have to consider the implications of our decisions and what actions (if any) need to be taken.

### **Reason 3: Decision-making**

Sustained, coherent and complex thinking cannot be done silently. It must be supported and examined through some form of conversation and one way we manage that conversation in literate societies is through the written word. Thus, the third reason for writing essays can be stated as: you are asked to write essays as part of your induction into a community of professionals. Wherever your life journey leads you after completing your studies, and whatever degree you are enrolled in, to graduate from Murdoch University is to become a professional person in your field.

A professional person is someone who has the capacity to distinguish distinctions and differences, who has the ability to discern between better and worse ways to understand the world and who takes the responsibility to profess their ideas, theories and knowledge within their area of expertise through reasoned argument.

A university is a community of people drawn together to pursue knowledge, all of whom are involved in increasing their understanding or literacy. Some members of this community call this research and are academics; some are students and call this an assignment; some are graduates and call this their profession; but, all of us are part of a thousand year project based on the belief that improved knowledge will lead to a better life and to a better world for all people. Welcome to University!

#### **Reference:**

Popper, K. (1962) *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.