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How to write a psychological evaluation

By Dr. Saul McLeod, published 2014
Before you write your essay it's important to analyse the task and understand exactly what the essay question is asking. It is possible your lecturer will give you some advice - pay attention to this as it will help you plan your answer. Next conduct preliminary reading based on your lecture notes. At this stage it's not crucial to have a robust understanding of key theories or studies, but you should at least have a general 'gist' of the literature. After reading, plan a response to the task. This plan could be in the form of a mind map, a summary table, or by writing a core statement (which encompass the entire argument of your essay in just a few sentences). After writing your plan conduct supplementary reading and refine your plan and make it more detailed. It is tempting to skip these preliminary steps and just write the first draft while reading at the same time. However, reading and planning will make the essay writing process easier, quicker, and ensure a higher quality essay is produced. Now let us look at what constitutes a good essay in psychology. There are a number of important features. A Global Structure - structure the material in a way that allows for a logical sequence of ideas. Each paragraph / statement should follow sensibly from its predecessor. The essay should 'flow'. The introduction, main body and conclusion should all be linked. Each paragraph should comprise a main theme which are illustrated and developed through a number of points (supported by evidence). Knowledge and Understanding - recognise, recall and show understanding on a range of scientific material that accurately reflects the main theoretical perspectives. Critical Evaluation - arguments should be supported by appropriate evidence and/or theory from the literature. Evidence of independent thinking, insight and evaluation of the evidence. Quality of Written Communication - writing clearly and succinctly with appropriate use of paragraphs, spelling and grammar. All sources referenced accurately and in line with APA guidelines. In the main body of the essay every paragraph should demonstrate both knowledge and critical evaluation. There should also be an appropriate balance between these two essay components. Try to aim for about a 60/40 split if possible. Most students make the mistake of writing too much knowledge and not enough evaluation (which is the difficult bit). It is best to structure your essay according to key themes. Themes are illustrated and developed through a number of points (supported by evidence). Choose relevant points only, ones that most reveal the theme or help to make a convincing and interesting argument. Knowledge and Understanding Remember that an essay is simply a discussion / argument on paper. Don't make the mistake of writing all the information you know regarding a particular topic. You need to be concise, and clearly articulate your argument. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences. Each paragraph should have a purpose / theme, and make a number of points - which need to be supported by high quality evidence. Be clear why each point is relevant to the argument. It would be useful at the beginning of each paragraph if you explicitly outlined the theme being discussed (e.g. cognitive development, social development etc.). Try not to overuse quotations in your essays. It is more appropriate to use original content to demonstrate your understanding. Psychology is a science so you must support your ideas with evidence (not your own personal opinion). If you are discussing a theory or research study make sure you cite the source of the information. Note this is not the author of a textbook you have read - but the original source / author(s) of the theory or research study. For example: Bowlby (1951) claimed that mothering is almost useless if delayed until after two and a half to three years and, for most children, if delayed till after 12 months, i.e. there is a critical period. Or Maslow (1943) stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. When one need is fulfilled a person seeks to fulfill the next one, and so on. As a general rule make sure there is at least one citation (i.e. name of psychologist and date of publication) in each paragraph. Remember to answer the essay question. Underline the key words in the essay title. Don't make the mistake of simply writing everything you know of a particular topic, be selective. Each paragraph in your essay should contribute to answering the essay question. Critical Evaluation In simple terms this means outlining the strengths and limitations of a theory or research study. There are many ways you can critically evaluate: Methodological evaluation of research - Is the study valid / reliable? Is the sample biased or can we generalize the findings to other populations? What are the strengths and limitations of the method used and data obtained? Be careful to ensure that any methodological criticisms are justified and not trite. Rather than hunting for weaknesses in every study, only highlight limitations which make you doubt the conclusions that the authors have drawn - e.g. where an alternative explanation might be equally likely because something hasn't been adequately controlled. Compare or contrast different theories - Outline how the theories are similar and how they differ. This could be two (or more) theories of personality / memory / child development etc. Also try to communicate the value of the theory / study. Debates or perspectives - Refer to debates such as nature or nurture, reductionism vs. holism or the perspectives in psychology. For example, would they agree or disagree with a theory or the findings of the study? What are the ethical issues of the research? - Does a study involve ethical issues such as deception, privacy, psychological and physical harm. Gender bias - If research is biased towards men or women it does not provide a clear view of the behavior that has been studied. A dominantly male perspective is known as an androcentric bias. Cultural bias - Is the theory / study ethnocentric? Psychology is predominantly a white, Euro-American enterprise. In some texts, over 90% of studies have US participants, who are predominantly white and middle class. Does the theory or study being discussed judge other cultures by Western standards? Animal Research - This raises the issue of whether it's morally and/or scientifically right to use animals. The main criterion is that benefits must outweigh costs. But benefits are almost always to humans and costs to animals. Animal research also raises the issue of extrapolation. Can we generalize from studies on animals to humans as their anatomy & physiology is different from humans? The PEC System It is very important to elaborate on your evaluation. Don't just write a shopping list of brief (one or two sentence) evaluation points. Instead make sure you expand on your points, remember, quality of evaluation is most important than quantity. When you are writing an evaluation paragraph use the PEC system. Make your Point. Explain how and why the point is relevant. Discuss the Consequences / implications of the theory or study. Are they positive or negative? For Example (Point) It is argued that psychoanalytic therapy is only of benefit to an articulate, intelligent, affluent minority. (Explain) Because psychoanalytic therapy involves talking and gaining insight, and is costly and time-consuming, it is argued that it is only of benefit to an articulate, intelligent, affluent minority. Evidence suggests psychoanalytic therapy works best if the client is motivated and has a positive attitude. (Consequences) A depressed client's apathy, flat emotional state and lack of motivation limit the appropriateness of psychoanalytic therapy for depression. Furthermore, the levels of dependency of depressed clients mean that transference is more likely to develop. Using Research Studies in your Essays Research studies can either be knowledge or evaluation. If you refer to the procedures and findings of a study, this shows knowledge and understanding. If you comment on what the studies shows, and what it supports and challenges about the theory in question, this shows evaluation. Writing an Introduction It is often best to write your introduction when you have finished the main body of the essay, so that you have a good understanding to the topic area. If there is a word count for your essay try to devote 10% of this to your introduction. Ideally the introduction should: Identify the subject of the essay and define the key terms. Highlight the major issues which "lie behind" the question. Let the reader know how you will focus your essay by identifying the main themes to be discussed. "Signpost" the essay's key argument, (and, if possible, how this argument is structured). Introductions are very important as first impressions count and they can create a halo effect in the mind of the lecturer grading your essay. If you start off well then you are more likely to be forgiven for the odd mistake later on. Writing a Conclusion So many students either forget to write a conclusion or fail to give it the attention it deserves. If there is a word count for your essay try to devote 10% of this to your conclusion. Ideally the conclusion should summarize the key themes / arguments of your essay. State the take home message - don't sit on the fence, instead weigh up the evidence presented in the essay and make a decision which side of the argument has more support. Also, you might like to suggest what future research may need to be conducted and why (read the discussion section of journal articles for this). Don't include new information / arguments (only information discussed in the main body of the essay). If you are unsure of what to write read the essay question and answer it in one paragraph. Points that unite or embrace several themes can be used to great effect as part of your conclusion. The Importance of Flow Obviously, what you write is important, but how you communicate your ideas / arguments has a significant influence on your overall grade. Most students may have similar information / content in their essays, but the better students communicate this information concisely and articulately. When you have finished the first draft of your essay you must check if it 'flows'. This is an important feature of quality of communication (along with spelling and grammar). This means that the paragraphs follow a logical order (like the chapters in a novel). Have a global structure with themes arranged in a way that allows for a logical sequence of ideas. You might want to rearrange (cut and paste) paragraphs to a different position in your essay if they don't appear to fit in with the essay structure. To improve the flow of your essay make sure the last sentence of one paragraph links to first sentence of the next paragraph. This will help the essay flow and make it easier to read. Finally, only repeat citations when it is unclear which study / theory you are discussing. Repeating citations unnecessarily disrupts the flow of an essay. Referencing The reference section is the list of all the sources cited in the essay (in alphabetical order). It is not a bibliography (a list of the books you used). In simple terms every time you cite/refer to a name (and date) of a psychologist you need to reference the original source of the information. If you have been using textbooks this is easy as the references are usually at the back of the book and you can just copy them down. If you have been using websites then you may have a problem as they might not provide a reference section for you to copy. References need to be set out APA style: Books Author, A. A. (year). Title of work. Location: Publisher. Journal Articles Author, A. A., Author, B. B., & Author, C. C. (year). Article title. Journal Title, volume number(issue number), page numbers A simple way to write your reference section is use Google scholar. Just type the name and date of the psychologist in the search box and click on the 'cite' link. Next, copy and paste the APA reference into the reference section of your essay. 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