

Microsoft Word for Essay Writing

Some formatting techniques you need to know to prepare an academic essay

Academic Skills Centre • University of Canterbury

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Setting up your document

Margins: Select the *Page Layout* ribbon > Margins. A wider right margin leaves more room for the marker to write comments. Custom options are at the base of the drop-down menu.

Headers and footers: Good things to put in the header are the course code and your student usercode, in case the cover pages become detached. Both can be found as buttons on the *Insert* ribbon.

Page numbers: These usually go in the footer at the bottom right of each page: *Insert* ribbon > Page Number is better than editing the footer.

Page breaks: If you need to push something on to the next page, *Insert* ribbon > Page Break is far better than just hitting Enter repeatedly.

Paragraphs

Line spacing: Click on the Paragraph Dialogue Box button () on the *Home* ribbon > under *Spacing* select *Line spacing* of either 1.5 or double.

Indenting vs. paragraph spacing: Word now automatically creates gaps between paragraphs so do not hit the enter key twice after each paragraph.

It is more space-efficient, however, to use a first-line indent (Use the TAB key and adjust the indent size in the *Home* ribbon). Word makes default indents too big; they only need to be 0.5 cm or so (around 5 – 6 spaces).

Hanging indents are necessary for your reference list. Select the text and click on the Paragraph Dialogue Box button () on the *Home* ribbon > under *Special*, select *Hanging*. Adjust size as necessary.

Block quotes: Some quotations are too large to leave in-text and need their own paragraph; left-indented by about 1+ cm. Right-indenting is optional. Do not put quotation marks around the paragraph. See style guides, such as the *APA Manual*, for detailed formatting requirements and minimum word length.

Alignment and hyphenation: Left-aligned text is always acceptable. If you make the text justified, it will create strange gaps between words unless you turn on hyphenation (On the *Page Layout ribbon* > Hyphenation). However, Word does not do a very good job of hyphenating.

Editing

Word count: For a count on a selected section, highlight the text. It will be the first of the numbers at the bottom of your screen. The second number will be your total word count.

Spelling and grammar checker: A spell checker will show you some of your spelling mistakes, but not all; make sure it's not set to a US dictionary (test it with a word like *realize*). The grammar checker is not completely reliable. Both can be controlled from Word's *Review* ribbon.

Some typical essay formatting requirements

- Times New Roman 12 pt.
- 1.5 or double spaced
- Make the right margin wider for marker's comments (4+ cm)
- First-line indent for body text, hanging indent for references or bibliography
- Page number in footer
- Student number or user-code in header
- Put a word count at the end (not including references)
- No fancy folders; staple top left
- A cover sheet with your name, course name/code, section/tutorial time (if more than one stream), and tutor/marker name

Some editing tips

- One space after full stops
- Emphasise with italics, never underline or bold.
- Special characters also include accented letters (é) and macrons (ë); these are not optional.
- Some good fonts for text include Times, Georgia, Bookman, Palatino, Garamond etc. 10–12 point is a good size for readability.
- Headings should contrast with the body text, and be a little larger, but not fancy. Arial, Verdana, and Trebuchet make good heading fonts; Comic Sans does not.
- Keep **backups** of your work on remote storage, such as Dropbox (2 GB) or your UC P: drive (1 GB). Do not rely on USB thumb drives for day-to-day storage; they are not sufficiently reliable.