

Four Rules of Thumb for Essay Writing:

- 1) Keep your sentences under 30 words. Anything over 30 should raise a “yellow flag”: Re-read, consider re-writing. Anything over 50 words should raise a “red flag”: it’s quite possibly two sentences instead of one; re-write.
- 2) Keep your paragraphs to between 100-200 words. A minimum of 100 words promotes sustained engagement; a maximum of 200 curbs the likelihood of waffling.
- 3) Use an average of 150 words per paragraph to determine how many paragraphs you might need to use in your essay. Divide the word limit by 150, and that gives you a rough range. For instance, $1000 \div 150 = 7$ (rounded up). With one paragraph for the introduction and one for the conclusion, that gives you five paragraphs for the body to work with.
- 4) Aim for one citation per hundred words of the word count. So a 1000-word essay would have 10 citations. This may include a mix of direct quotation and cited paraphrase. In addition, aim for at least one substantive quote in each of the body paragraphs.

Combined, these four rules of thumb give you a loose structure with which to build your essay. These rules of thumb can even help you produce an essay plan, if that’s how you work best. For instance, calculate the number of paragraphs you will need, and work with that initially as your plan. Articulate what each body paragraph will be about, what each main point will be for each paragraph and what (if any) subordinate points will be included, and allocate the key quotes to each paragraph. The spine of your essay is already taking shape.

These “rules of thumb,” however, aren’t rigid or invariable. They provide gentle constraints that can help you in the early stages of your essay to imagine or visualise your essay. Every essay has a shape; an essay will look like something on the page, and the clearer you can “see” it before it’s written, the easier it is to work towards it, reading, writing, and grappling with the evidence. The final shape of the essay might not closely adhere to the image derived from the above rules of thumb. The structure you start with can change as the essay develops. That’s entirely normal. *Beginning* with structure, however, gives you a better chance of producing an essay of quality. These rules of thumb offer a very useful way to begin with structure.