Headings & Tables of Contents

Headings are unnecessary in short essays of less than 3,000 words. They are optional between 3,000 and 6,000 words. They are necessary for any document over 6,000 words. Headings should follow the logical structure of your argument, indicating each time you significantly change the subject. The length of each headed section varies according to the writer, the discipline and the publication, but it would be rare to see sections of less than 1,000 words.

Some departments have stylistic preferences for headings, as do some lecturers, so check to see if they have preferences whenever you are writing anything over 3,000 words.

Headings can be numbered, or not. Numbering is more common when documents are larger or highly formal (such as a PhD thesis or Master’s dissertation).

Citation styles usually contain formatting instructions for headings. For example, Harvard recognises up to four levels of heading – “major”, “a-heads”, “b-heads” and “c-heads.” Major headings are for chapter titles; a-heads are reserved for major subdivisions of a chapter; b-heads (level 3 headings) are for subsections within b-headed sections, and c-heads are to be used as little as possible. Harvard defines font, line spacing and alignment for each.

Microsoft word has a strict heading system which enables you to specify that something is a heading and what level it is. It is worth mastering this. It enables you to reformat all headings at a single command. If you use Word’s paragraphy heading styles Word can automatically create a table of contents from your headings.

Your work cannot contain a table of contents unless it has headings, but if it does, it is always worth putting a table of contents on its own page at the start of the document. If you let Word do this automatically, it can keep the page numbers updated if you edit the document later. While Word can go down six levels in headings, a Table of Contents should only go down to level one or two. If your table of contents cannot fit onto a single page, it probably goes too deep.