Essay Writing: Planning, Structuring and Editing

Who is This For?

This session is aimed at developing your academic skills, and to improve your knowledge of the key skills needed to write an essay at University. You will be able to apply this advice and information directly to any essays/assignments/research projects you will be given during your time at University.

What Are We Going to Cover?

This session offers students an overview of the essay writing process. It includes tips and advice on how to plan, structure and edit academic essays.

Aims and Objectives

**Aim of session:**
To gain the skills needed in order to effectively plan, structure and edit an essay.

**Objectives:**
- Students will be introduced to the concept of the academic essay.
- Students will be given advice on how to plan, structure and edit their essays.
- Students will have the opportunity to create their own ‘essay map’.

What is an Essay?

“A piece of writing on a particular subject written by a student”

*Collins Online Dictionary* [accessed 04/04/2019]

“The action or process of trying or testing”

*Oxford English Dictionary Online* [accessed 04/04/2019]
Essays are a way to clarify our thoughts and understanding of a topic. They can be as long or as short as needed, in your case between 1,000-5,000 words and they can be on absolutely any topic. They are key to academic study and are often used in Higher Education and the academic sector.

Activity One

Turn to your activity sheet and try to guess how much time is spent of each area of essay writing. The answers will be at the end so no peeping ahead!

Reading Strategies

There are four main reading strategies that you could use for your essay. Such strategies are essential to prioritising time. You should consider how your time can best be spent with each article/book chapter you come across. Planning how you will read a text will make the experience more efficient.

Predicting

- This is where you guess what the text is from the title or blurb.

Scanning

- Where you look through a text for a specific piece of information but disregard the rest.

Skimming

- Reading the text very quickly to pick out the main ideas of the text.

Reading Intensively

- Reading in detail to fully understand the text.
The S.M.A.R.T method

Large tasks are always more manageable when broken down into smaller sections. You should ask yourself:

• Why you are reading this source?
• What information are you looking for? A specific fact? An overview? An in-depth account?
• How long are you going to spend looking at this source?

Be realistic about how much you can gain from one text. You will need to look at more than one source to gain your information.

Note Taking

Good note taking is essential to good essay writing and there are many ways to take good notes. Some examples are below. These methods can be used for all your schoolwork, not just for an essay.
Paper Note Taking Tips

- Use coloured sticky notes and flash cards to note small pieces of really important information or facts.
- **Top Tip** – If it’s something you need to remember i.e. for a test, try putting the notes on the fridge. That way, every time you go for something to eat or drink you will read it!
- Spider diagrams, puzzles, and animations can really help you visualise your work. You could even colour code them to match your post-it notes.
- You can use highlighters for emphasis and to help key facts stand out on a page.
- This can help if you need to go back and re-read something, it will allow you to skim-read it very quickly and find all of the key points.

Digital Note Taking Tips

- Evernote is suitable for all devices. You can photograph your hand-written notes and sync them with your digital findings!
- ‘Simplenote’ and ‘Noteability’ are for iPad users. They are ideal for people who like notes to be eye catching.
- You can annotate your pdfs or word documents and add your own comments.
- **Top tip** – remember to colour coordinate your digital highlighters to match any written workings!

Good Note Taking

To take good notes you should follow the below steps;

1. **Date:** Make a note of the date -this will help you keep track of your reading, so you know where you got up to each day.
2. Source Information: Ensure you include the following: **author, title, date, publisher, page numbers etc.** This will be useful for referencing and will ensure you do not accidently copy someone else’s work (plagiarise).
3. **Headings and Subheadings:** Note which aspect of your research this source contributes to? Ensure you make this clear!
4. Ideas/Prompts for Further Research/Study: Did this source reference another work which seems to fit in well with your research? If so, note it down!

The Benefits of Good Essay Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organise</th>
<th>Parameters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A plan will help you organise your argument before you begin writing.</td>
<td>A plan sets the boundaries of your argument and helps you stay focused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A plan will help maintain clarity and coherence</td>
<td>Helps you to organise your ideas and make connections between sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enables you to be selective and pick out key ideas – rather than getting lost in your notes.</td>
<td>Plans make it easier to reach well-thought out conclusions</td>
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Essay structuring

Without clear structuring, essays can easily become messy, incoherent and ultimately fail to meet the marking criteria.

Every time you write an essay, whether at school or thinking ahead to University and/or work, you should follow the below structure.

Introduction: Where are you going?

- Clearly states your research question (why it is important or interesting).
- Signals the direction of the essay.
- Provides any necessary background information and context.
- Define/clarify key terms of the essay (and essay title).
• Clarifies its **critical position** i.e. what approach you will approach this essay question in.

**Body Paragraphs: Guiding the Reader**

• Develop **one aspect of your argument per paragraph**.
• **Outline the main idea in the first sentence** of each new paragraph.
• **Make a point, provide evidence, evaluate** that evidence.
• Each paragraph should be **presented in a logical order** and each should build on the last.
• Don’t be afraid to **signpost i.e. ‘Having already consider x, I will now evaluate y’** (and take ‘y’ into your next paragraph).
• For more information on body paragraphs you can watch this short video on [https://vimeo.com/44666462](https://vimeo.com/44666462)

**Conclusion: Where have you been?**

• **Consolidate** the main points of your argument
• **Remind** the reader of the what the essay question was.
• **Reiterate** the key premise of your essay: what do you want the reader to remember?
• **Avoid** bringing in new information. The conclusion **concludes** the argument – keep the focus!

**Ordering your ideas**

You need to make sure your ideas flow from one to the other, giving a clear sense of direction and not leaving the reader confused or surprised. You could try ordering them either by; **importance, chronologically** (the order in which they occurred), or **thematically** (in terms of their theme).
Activity Two

There are lots of tools you can use to help you order your essays. These include spider diagrams, linear lists and essay maps. Take a look at your activity sheet and complete the definitions of each tool.

Essay Maps

Essay maps are a really great way to plan your essays. Below is an example that you could use. If you have time, practise using it on any subject of your choice. Practising will mean you can hit the ground running when you come to plan your Essay!

Editing Tips

• **Read your essay aloud** to yourself or to someone else. This way you will notice any mistakes in the way that it flows.

• Do not fear **drafting, re-drafting**, and re-drafting again!

• Remember to also edit for **clarity, focus and style**.

• Take a few days off after finishing your final draft and then re-read it one last time. Always **leave plenty of time before submission** – you never want to rush a conclusion or have a brainwave after you have submitted it!
Proofreading

Ask yourself:

- Is it clear and readable?
- Is there a coherent and logical argument?
- Does it respond to the question or task?
- Does it stay on topic?
- Is it structured to help guide the reader smoothly through your argument?
- Does it stay within any word counts?

Your final check lists

Content

- Grammar
- Spelling: use spell-check and ask others to read it before submission
- Punctuation
- Abbreviations
- Incomplete sentence

Format

- Layout: check that the formatting of your document is correct, especially if you have saved a few copies.
- Font size, stick to Arial or Calibri (size 10-11)
- Include page numbers

References

- Make sure you reference in a consistent style – the same throughout the whole text.
- Use footnotes or a bibliography
In Summary

01 Plan, Plan, Plan
Cannot stress enough the benefits of planning your essay – helps to keep clarity and focus.

02 Structuring
Remember the key stages of essay writing: introduction, main body, conclusion.

03 Editing
Remember the editing checklist: content, format, referencing.

04 Plagiarism
A well-planned and well-structured essay will help you avoid claiming another’s work as your own by mistake.

Further Resources

1. University of Leeds Skills@Library -
   https://library.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/133/quick_guide_to_essay_writing

2. Tim Squirrel’s YouTube Video ‘How to Write Better Essays’ -
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i13Um4CT95A