

Getting started with essay planning



Analyse the title or question

Begin with the essay title. What do you think is the main topic? (If the title is quite long you may have to think carefully about this). Underline it.

Now find the verb or verbs in the title. Circle them. These are important as they tell you how to approach the subject. Here are some examples of verbs often seen in academic assignments: *analyse; consider; evaluate; discuss; outline; explain; justify*. If you are not sure what they mean, check their definition in a dictionary. Check to see if there are any other significant words or phrases. Highlight them.

Brainstorm the topic

Some students find brainstorming at this point very useful. Sit down with a blank sheet of paper. In the centre of the page, write down the main topic of the assignment. In the space around, write all the words, phrases, questions and ideas you can associate with it. These can come out in any order. It does not matter what you write now as you can reject ideas later. This process activates your thoughts and helps you to engage with the question BEFORE you do any research.

If this approach does not help and you find it difficult to get started, try explaining to another student, a friend or relative what you consider the essay to be about. Tell them how you are going to approach it or encourage them to ask you questions about the topic.

Unless you have been told otherwise, stick to this simple structure for your essay:

- A Introduction
- B Main body
- C Conclusion
- D References (details of the academic material you have used)

Plan the balance of your points

Before you begin researching or writing, it is useful to think about the balance of your essay. Next to points A, B, and C above, you can write down the approximate number words you are going to write. Remember, references are not included in the total number of words.

As a rough guide, the introduction and conclusion should each be about one tenth of the total number of words. The main body will account for the rest. For example, in a 2000 word assignment, the introduction and conclusion would each be about 200 words. Therefore, the main body would be about 1600 words.

In the planning stage, the main body should now be divided into sections that have a specific focus relevant to the title. In our example, if the main body were divided into 4 sections of equal importance they would all be approximately 400 words long – in reality some sections will be longer or more important than others.

Think about paragraphs

The sections in a finished essay do not easily stand out because you do not use sub-headings (as you would in a report). However, they should exist in the planning stage to help structure your writing. Within each section you can then begin to think about paragraphs, which are the next level of planning. Deciding in advance how your essay will be balanced and which order your paragraphs will appear may stop you writing too much or too little on each set of ideas.

Now create an essay outline on one side of A4 paper. Make headings and sub-headings using key words to show the order of the points you want to make. It is worth spending a while getting this part right as the rest of the essay will flow from it. You should expect to modify your outline a few times while you are gathering material and doing research but once you begin to write you should be confident that you have included all the main points and you should not make any more significant changes. If it is a good outline it will stop you from going off on a tangent or from missing important points.

Introduction: this is best done in 3 stages.

1. Introduce the general topic of your essay (e.g. recycling). 2. Explain why that topic is important or interesting (e.g. we are now encouraged to recycle at work and at home to take pressure off landfill sites). 3. Detail the specific focus of your essay and indicate how you intend to answer the question (e.g. the challenges of recycling at the University of Sunderland especially how to change attitudes to recycling, to include case studies from 3 departments).

Main Body: Consists of sections divided into paragraphs. Each section addresses a particular aspect of the title and each paragraph (in that section) addresses one idea within that section. Support your ideas with references to other work and some quotations. Each paragraph should begin with a sentence which introduces the main idea [of that paragraph]. The following sentences should support the lead sentence. When you are ready to write about a different idea related to that section, close your paragraph and start a new one.

Conclusion: Synthesises (brings together) the key ideas that you have expanded in the main body and answers the question. Take care not to introduce any new ideas in the conclusion.

Even with an outline for your writing you may have difficulty getting started. Here are some ideas which may help.

Start in the middle or at the end. You do not have to write your essay in the same way that you would write a story. If you are required to draw on experience or use case studies, you will probably find this the easiest bit to write, so do it first. This may encourage you to continue.

If you have good keyboard skills list down all your rough ideas then use the edit tools in WORD to change the order of your ideas and plan the outline of your essay.

When writing in long-hand, make a rough draft using every other line on the paper. This makes your work easier to edit.

Focus on one section or paragraph of the essay at a time. If you write a little and often you will eventually complete the task but it might not seem such a chore.

Remind yourself that it is not going to be perfect first time. You should always expect to write at least one rough draft.

Think about these statements when you begin to draft your essay.

- Use a new paragraph for each new idea within a section.
- Do not assume too much. Explain obscure references.
- Balance your main points. Decide if all points need equal attention.
- Think about structure. Move from general to specific points, strongest argument to weakest argument, causes to consequences, important to less important, or simply write ideas chronologically.