

Getting started with essay planning



Analyse the title or question

Begin with the essay title. What do you think is the main topic? 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. Some examples of verbs often seen in academic assignments:

analyse; consider; evaluate; discuss; outline; explain; justify.

Look them up if you are unsure of the meaning.

Check for any other significant words or phrases and highlight them.

Brainstorm the topic

Engage with the question and activate your thought processes BEFORE you start researching. Write the topic in the centre of a blank piece of paper. Around it, write all the words, phrases, questions and ideas that you can associate with it.

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. For example, in a 2000 word assignment:

- The introduction and conclusion would each be about 200 words
- Main body would be about 1600 words
- Remember, references are not included in your word count

As a rough guide, the introduction and conclusion should each be about one tenth of the total number of 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.

Activity:

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. Spend a little time getting this part right as the rest of your essay will flow from it. Whilst researching you will probably modify your outline more than once! A good outline will stop you from going off on a tangent or from missing important points. You should be confident once you begin to write that you have included all the main 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 and especially how to change attitudes to recycling. Include case studies from 3 departments*

Main Body:

- Consists of sections divided into paragraphs.
- Each section addresses a particular aspect of the title
- Each paragraph (in that section) addresses one idea within that section
- Each paragraph should begin with a sentence which introduces the main idea (of that paragraph)
- Following sentences should support the lead sentence
- Support your ideas with references to other work and some quotations
- 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.

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

- Use a new paragraph for each new idea within a section
- Don't 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

If you're having difficulty getting started, even when you have an outline, try some of these tips:

- Start in the middle or at the end. Drawing on experience or using case studies are often easier sections to write. Doing this first may encourage you to continue
- If you like to work in WORD, create a document and write a list of your ideas. You can easily move around 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. You will finish the task by writing little and often, but it might not seem such a chore
- Remind yourself that it isn't going to be perfect first time. You should always expect to write at least one rough draft