

Planning and Writing Essays

Many of your coursework assignments will take the form of an essay.

This leaflet will give you an overview of the basic stages of planning and writing an academic essay but it is intended as a very general guide.

Bear in mind the following:

Subject preferences may vary. Always check whether there is a preferred essay format in your subject area. Check the guidelines in your subject handbook, and if in doubt ask one of your lecturers for advice.

Essay writing is a skill that needs practice. Your first university essay will be the most daunting, but think of it as a starting point. Take notice of the feedback you receive, and view it positively and as a guide to what you can work on next time.

Leaflet contents

1. Analysing and understanding the question
2. Planning
3. Reading for the essay
4. Evaluating and planning
5. Writing - the first draft
6. Writing - revising

Extra ideas: Making effective links

Extra ideas: Planning your word count

If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as larger print, contact:
ELS@qmu.ac.u

1. Analysing and understanding the question

Your essay will be largely assessed on how well you have understood and answered the question, so take time over this. You may want to use some of the steps below as a guide.

- Read the title slowly and several times.
- Underline words which guide you on the subject information you need
- Underline words which guide you on the approach or task involved
- Identify any words you don't really feel sure about and examine them
- Write the title out more fully in your own words
- What are the central questions the title is getting at?
- Which aspects of the title have you read or heard about in lectures?
- Which areas look new, or are ones you feel less sure about?
- It can help to discuss the title with someone else
- Try doodling, jotting down rough ideas and thoughts connected with the title to see what you know, and where your gaps are

A key task is to look at your **essay title** and sort out **two main areas**:

- The area of subject information you need to include in your essay
- Your main **task** – what you have to do, how you approach the topic

In the example below, the subject information (underlined) is clear, but the key task words need to be carefully understood if you are to answer the question.

Outline the main organisational theories underpinning modern management and **discuss** their relevance to the Tourist Industry

Make sure you are clear about the 'task' words - the list below is a useful guide.

Academic keywords used in titles

Account for: Explain why something happens; give reasons for it

Analyse: Examine in very close detail; identify important points and chief features

Comment on: Identify and write about the main issues, giving your reactions based on what you have read or heard in lectures. Avoid purely personal opinion.

Compare: Show how two or more things are similar. Indicate the relevance or consequences of these similarities.

Contrast: Set two or more items or arguments in opposition so as to draw out differences. Indicate whether the differences are significant.

Critically Evaluate: Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.

Define: Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show that you understand why the definition may be problematic.

Discuss: Write about the most important aspects of the topic (probably including criticism); give arguments for and against; consider the implications of.

Distinguish: Bring out the differences between two (possibly confusable) items.

Evaluate: Assess the worth, importance or usefulness of something, using evidence. There will probably be cases to be made both for and against.

Examine: Put the subject 'under the microscope', looking at it in detail. You may be asked to 'critically evaluate' as well.

Explain: Make clear why something happens, or why something is the way it is

Illustrate: Make something clear and explicit, giving examples or evidence.

Interpret: Give the meaning and relevance of data or other material presented.

Justify: Give evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why a conclusion or decisions were made, considering objections that others might make.

Narrate: Concentrate on saying what happened, telling it as a story

Outline: Give only the main points, showing the main structure.

Relate: Show similarities and connections between two or more things.

State: Give the main features, in very clear English (almost like a simple list, but in sentences).

Summarise: Draw out the main points only, omitting details or examples.

To what extent: Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which the proposition is not true.

Trace: Follow the order of different stages in an event or process.

2. Planning

Organising your time

Set yourself targets for each stage of the process. It helps if you work back from the essay deadline, allowing roughly half the time to research and planning, and half to writing, although this will vary according to your learning style. Decide where you want to be each week before the deadline, and have that as your weekly goal. Each week, set yourself tasks that work towards that goal, then assess how it's going. There has to be flexibility, and no plan should be a strait-jacket – but it gives you a starting point, and, importantly, a sense of achievement as you reach your targets and realise you are making progress.

When you have analysed the essay question (discussed earlier), start thinking about:

Deciding a structure for the essay

It helps to start on this **before** you do any research, as it will help you identify the kind of material you need to read. You are trying to create a very broad structure for the essay, which your research will shape and develop. You may change this plan a great deal, but it gives you an initial grasp of the essay, and some essential starting points.

Your structure plan can be very basic

Decide which main sections – 3 or 4 – you will have in your essay.

It helps to make a rough estimate of which section will be the biggest, and which may be shorter, to help you prioritise your reading.

Under each section, have some key topics, angles, information or questions you will look at, to help keep your reading focused.

You might do your plan as a mindmap, a diagram, lots of bits of paper...find a method that suits you and helps you collect your thoughts best.

Research questions

As you do your rough structure plan, it is important to start **formulating research questions** to direct your reading and research for the essay. This will make your reading purposeful and save time.

Typical questions might be...

- What part of this topic do I know most about?
- Which least? What do I need to find out?
- Which kinds of books, journals, information, will be most useful?
- Which aspects of this topic should I make a priority? Which not?
- What different points of view are there on this? Where would I find them?

The more you note questions like this that you want to answer, the more you can focus your reading and research for the essay.

You can skim material with a sense of what you are looking for, instead of spending a lot of time reading every word.

Overall, the asking of questions early on helps you to feel more in control and to **think more critically and independently about the topic**.

Once you have thought about the rough structure of your essay, and formulated some questions, you will be clearer about the kind of information you are looking for. Start identifying useful books, periodicals, journals, newspapers and other sources.

- Familiarise yourself with the resources in your subject area
- Find out where you can get hold of specific information – journal articles, online resources

3. Reading for the essay

Try this approach:

- **Survey** any useful-looking material. Look quickly through contents tables and chapter headings. Flick through pages to see if anything looks right for the questions you want to answer. Use the index for key-words. Keep asking:

‘Do I need this information?
How would I use this information?’

- **Skim** through any sections that look more useful. This involves glancing over paragraphs and picking out key points, words, and phrases – and gets easier with practice!
- **Make a note** of important sections you want to go back to
- **Carefully re-read** those sections and check you are clear about what the author is saying.
- **Make notes** of any ideas, data, and information you can use in your essay
- Be sure to **reference** the material as you go along – note author, title, date, publisher and place of publication – keep a good note of all your references for your bibliography later.

When you take notes from your research, be clear when you are directly **quoting** material, and when you are **paraphrasing** – putting something in your own words. In both cases you need to reference this material in your essay, so make a note of where you found it (as above).

If you mistakenly use a writer’s words in your assignment without referencing them, you will be plagiarising, regardless of whether you intended to or not.

For more information on referencing and plagiarism see the Good Scholarship website:

<http://www.qmu.ac.uk/goodscholarship/>

4. Reflecting and evaluating

As you gather fresh pieces of information and ideas, you need to re-assess where you have got to.

Keep checking:

- What have I discovered?
- Has my viewpoint changed?
- Have I clarified any of the points/arguments?
- Have I got enough evidence/examples?
- What arguments/evidence are there for other points of view? Are they valid?
- Do I feel ready to put this all together yet?
- What else do I want to know/find out?

These questions will vary, according to the type of essay title you are dealing with.

Important

As you think and question and read, you will need to go back to your plan and add/take things away. Your reading may get you thinking freshly about the title, so you may need to go back and think about it again. New questions may crop up in your mind, and you need to look at them. You may need to look for some extra bit of information.

Planning and researching an essay is not a linear process. You need to keep re-visiting ideas, and adding and exploring new ones, in order to make process with your thinking and preparation for writing.

Organising

Although this is a brief section here, give yourself a good amount of thinking time to do it. You need to make as full a plan as you can, so that you can start writing with a clear sense of which points you are covering, and the order in which you will write them.

- Look at your original basic structure plan
- Note down the main topic headings for the essay – you may have three or four
- Under each one, list the points you want to cover – note any references and examples you want to use
- Decide how many paragraphs you want under each topic heading to cover these points – just a rough guide
- Think about how many words/how much space you need for each topic (see guide to **planning word counts** at the back of the leaflet)

(It may help to have lots of numbered pieces of paper for each section. Number them, so you know where to start and can see that they follow on)

This all takes a while, but the more 'thinking through' you can do at this stage, the quicker the writing stage will be.

5. Writing - the first draft

Start writing! Try not to worry too much about how your writing looks, or how much sense it makes at first. You will be making changes and trying things out as you write each assignment. The important thing is to get going.

You don't have to start with the introduction. A few points will help you get going, but it is often best to start with the **main body** of the essay.

You may have **three or four main sections** in the main body.

Each section should be made up of a series of **linked paragraphs**.

Each paragraph should deal with one piece of information or idea, and be introduced by a topic sentence or opening statement. The rest of the paragraph should develop this piece of information, along with evidence and references to back up points where needed.

For a first draft:

- Write each point up quite quickly, in short sentences
- Don't worry about style or spelling
- Just keep to the points you want to make, as briefly as you can
- Keep sentences short and to the point, rather than trying to cram several points into one long sentence. You can always go back at the re-draft stage and re-word bits you don't like.
- Check that you reference properly, in the style advised by your subject.

It can be encouraging to have a plan of points for each paragraph, so that you can tick them off as you write them. It helps the whole process go more smoothly and feel better.

Now tackle:

The introduction – this should include:

An introduction to the main subject of the essay

An outline of the main points to be discussed – briefly

An outline of how you will address these, and in what order

The conclusion

Restate briefly the key points in the essay – making clear how they answer the question

Emphasise the significance of any particular point or points made

6. Writing - revising

When you have got a draft down on paper, leave it for a day or so.

People talk about being 'too close' to their work, which can mean finding it hard to see what it's really saying.

A break (if you've got the time) and a different activity help you come back freshly for a read through.

Plan your re-drafting.

- Read to get a general view of how the essay comes across.
- Does it address the question?
- Pretend it was written by a friend – what advice would you give them to help them improve it?
- Check the structure:
 - Does the introduction do what it should?
 - Is it clear where the different sections are in the essay?
 - Does each paragraph have a point? If you aren't sure, check you haven't repeated yourself, or made the point clearly enough, and re-draft.
- Re-read several times for meaning, flow, logical progression of points, links between points and paragraphs (see **links** sheet further on)
- Check **spelling, punctuation** and **referencing**.

You decide when your essay is finished, rather than letting the deadline decide for you. That way, you are making yourself more responsible for judging your own work, and this is more empowering for future essay writing. No essay, particularly your first, can ever be the final word on the subject – what you learn from each one can be carried over into the next.

Linkage in writing

Any argumentative or discursive writing should have coherence: that is, the ideas and points in it should be clearly connected or it can be hard for the reader to follow your logic.

When you are writing a first draft, don't worry too much about this, but on a re-draft, it is useful to add linking words and phrases to paragraphs, to strengthen the flow of your argument and make it hold together better.

The following are useful words for different linking purposes:

Adding points

And, also, as well as, moreover, further, furthermore, in addition, additionally, next, first, second, third etc

Making comparisons

Similarly, likewise, in the same way

Contrasts

Although, for all that, however, on the contrary, otherwise, yet, but, even so, despite, conversely, alternatively

Reasons

For this reason, to this end, for this purpose, because, since, so that

Results

As, as a consequence, as a result, hence, therefore, thus, inevitably, so

Examples

For example, for instance, in other words, by way of illustration, such as

Conclusions

As has been noted, finally, in brief, in short, on the whole, consequently, so, on other words, to summarise, accordingly, therefore, in conclusion

Useful links for connecting ideas

These words and phrases can be useful for connecting paragraphs, and developing an argument or line of reasoning in your essay

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| a) within one sentence | so
because
owing to
as a result of |
| b) using two sentences | Thus
Therefore
Consequently
For this reason
It follows that
In view of this
Moreover
In addition
Indeed
In short |

The following words and phrases can be used to help redirect an argument, or introduce a contrasting viewpoint

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| a) within one sentence | but
in spite of
despite
although
even though
whereas
while |
| b) using two sentences | However
Nevertheless
On the other hand
On the contrary
It has been suggested that
It could be argued that |

Extra ideas: Using a word count plan

A word count plan is a way of breaking down an essay plan into sections, topics and issues, and allocating rough word-counts to each section before you start research and writing.

What are the advantages of this?

- A word count plan helps you to plan and then write within a realistic word count, so that you avoid writing pages and then having the difficult task of cutting down.
- By showing how much space each section needs to take up, you can think about how much information and ideas you need to fill it.
- By having to spend more time breaking the title down and identifying topics and sections for your essay, you develop a clearer grasp of what you need to tackle to answer the question.
- It helps you think things through critically before you research and write, rather than at the same time.
- It helps you plan your time better. When you have a rough idea of the size of sections of your essay, you have a better idea of how much time you need to spend on each one.

At what stage is it most useful?

After spending time thinking about the essay title and breaking it down into the topics and sections you think are most relevant. You can keep rethinking throughout the whole process, but it is important that you have thought through some of the issues to tackle in the essay, and identified the main ones.

Before you start any detailed reading and research. The spatial plan helps you see where you need information and references, and you can list some of your 'research questions' in the plan as you go. This all helps clarify the issues further.

Making a word count plan for your essay

When to try:

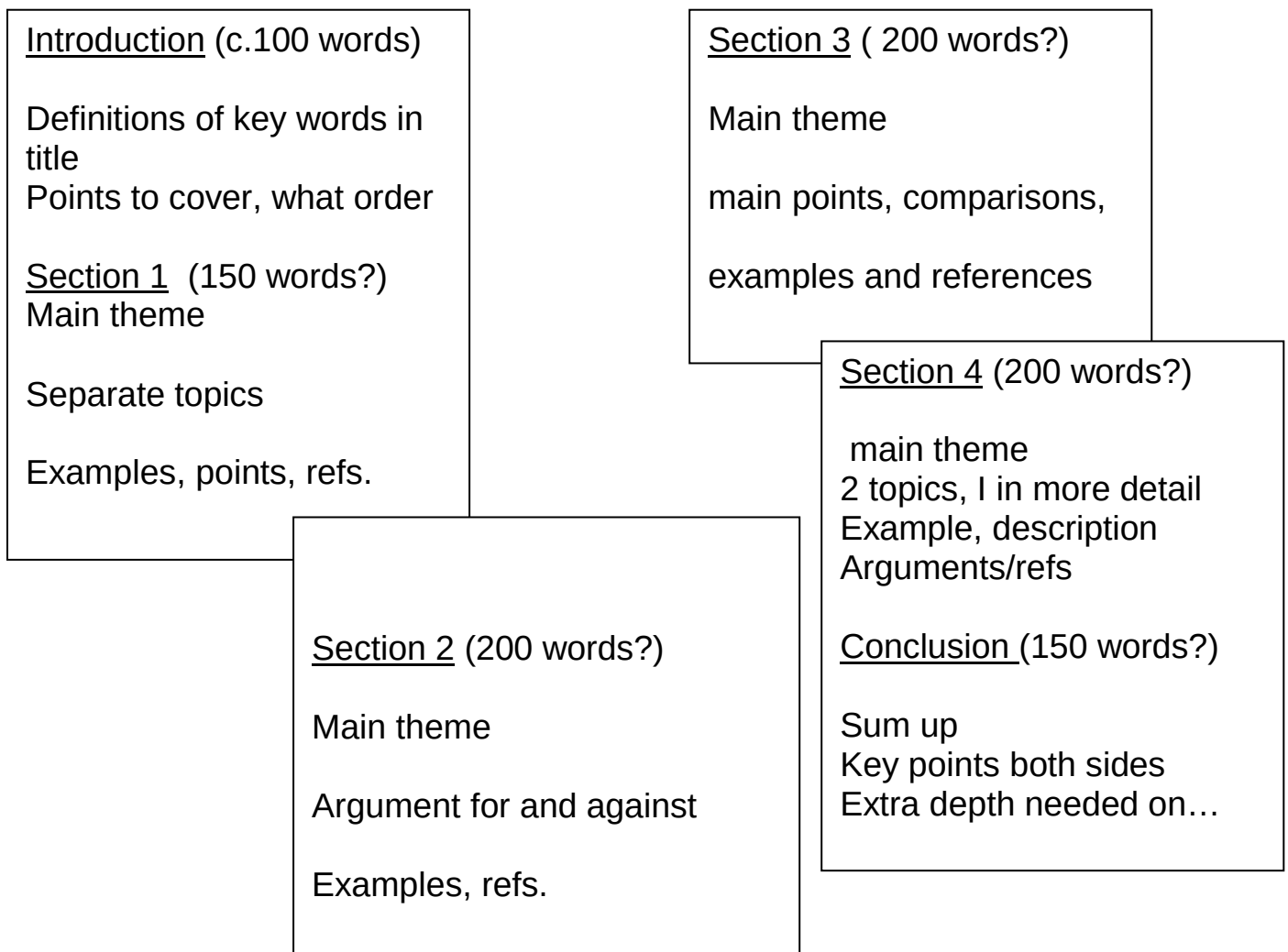
After breaking down the title and deciding what you would like to cover
Before beginning any research into the topics

- Work out roughly how many words you write or type on an A4 page
- Check the word limit for your assignment
- How many pages will your essay take up?
- Sketch out your essay on the right number of blank pages
- Draw out roughly how much space you will need for each topic, main section. Pick a rough word limit for different topics or section (this only needs to be very general, as you have not done detailed research yet)
- Note how little you need to write for some examples or topics
- You can continue planning out your essay and research plans on these sheets, so you see how much space you will need, and where to be more brief

You should now have a rough idea:

- ✓ How many pages of writing your essay will take up
- ✓ Where sections or topics will be in the essay
- ✓ How the word count divides up
- ✓ How to prioritise your research
- ✓ Which areas will need the most thought

Sample word count plan:



Remember, it's only rough. Adjust the word count as you do your research. It helps to start deciding what to leave out early on – it's much harder later. Making these choices and priorities is a skill – and gets easier with practice

For each topic, think of 'critical thinking' research questions

- What do I know/not know about this so far?
- What kind of information do I need?
- why....how....where do I find it? How much can I fit in?
- What examples shall I use? How many?
- How does this relate back to the title?
- How does it link to the next section/topic?