

Stage one: Pre-writing – thinking how to answer the question you have been asked

If you ask a friend the best way to travel to Ibiza, you don't want to be told the best way to get to Moscow. It's just as important to answer the question you have been asked when you're writing an academic essay. Often, students ignore the clues the essay title gives them and so lose marks. Here are two activities that show you **how to focus on what you are being asked to write about**.

ACTIVITY 1 – IDENTIFYING KEY VERBS AND KEY IDEAS

Taken together, key verbs and key ideas give you direction in thinking about how to approach the essay title. Use the essay titles (right) to practice sorting out the key verbs and key ideas in the question. You will need two highlighting pens in different colours. Use one colour to mark the key verbs in the question, and the other to mark the key ideas. Here's an example, with the key verb highlighted in green and the key ideas in blue:

Animal models of disease are of questionable scientific value. Discuss. (Biochemistry, University of Cambridge)

Now mark up these four examples in the same way:

- **In what ways did Peter the Great's reforms transform the concept of the Russian Empire?** (History, University of Loughborough)
- **Explore the meaning of 'radical evil' and the 'banality of evil' using the cases of Idi Amin and Adolf Eichmann.** (Anthropology, University of Sussex)
- **Discuss the 'fallen woman' as a familiar feature of Victorian writing.** (English, University of Teesside)
- **Graphene the wonder material: does it live up to the hype?** (Physics, Imperial College London)

ACTIVITY 2 – BRAINSTORMING

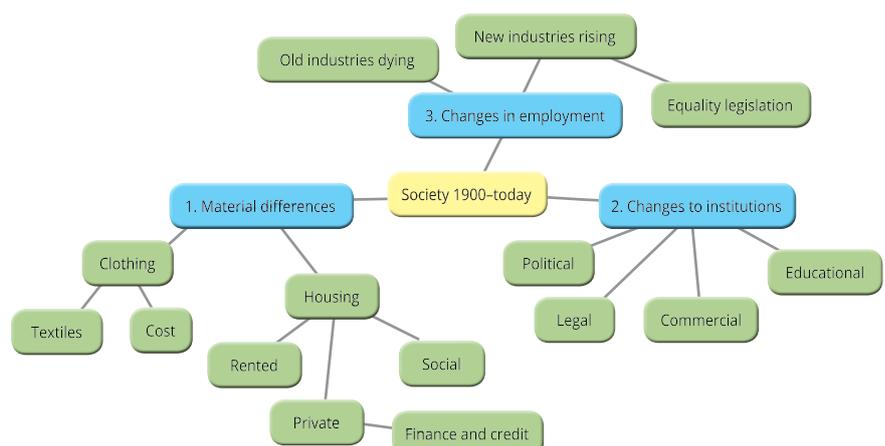
Once you understand what the essay title is asking you to do, you will be ready to write down what you need to find out through reading and research.

Brainstorming helps you explore the subject you're writing about by noting down what you already know, identifying gaps in your knowledge, and listing what you need to find out more about.

- 1 Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen.
- 2 Choose one of the essay titles from activity 1, perhaps the one closest to the subject you are planning to study at uni.
- 3 Look at the essay question, and set a timer for ten minutes.
- 4 Write down as many points as you can – jot down whatever comes into your head. Don't worry at

this stage if some of what you write seems irrelevant. You will be surprised at just how much you can get down on paper!

When the ten minutes are up, you may want to tidy up your brainstorming notes by creating a second version of them, either by hand or using a free mind mapping app. Here's an example for an essay on changes in society since 1900.



Now you are ready to start researching and planning your essay. At undergraduate level, you will be expected to read **primary sources** (also called **original sources** or **evidence**), and **secondary sources** (sources that offer different perspectives and analysis of primary sources).

ACTIVITY 3 – DRAWING UP A READING LIST

Although your tutor may give you book lists, they are intended as a starting point for your reading. You will be expected to decide for yourself what to read in addition to increase your knowledge and understanding of the subject you are writing about. Make a start by putting together your own reading

list for the essay title you have been working with in activities 1 and 2. Establish good habits before you get to uni by noting the shelf location for each book and journal article you find that may have relevance to your chosen subject. University library catalogues are publicly available online.

ACTIVITY 4 – FINDING THE BEST WAY TO TAKE NOTES

In the speech bubbles below are three ways of taking notes. Think about your own study habits. Which of these most appeals to your way of studying? If there's no exact fit, which other approach would suit you? It may be a combination of the way these students go about it, or you may want to do things completely differently.

I put each of my brainstorming points at the top of a piece of paper and write notes from my reading underneath to provide material.

Julian, second year food engineering student

When I find a good point, I write it on a small piece of paper. When I come to plan the essay, I shuffle the sheets around until I get them in what seems like the best order for the question.

Valentina, classical studies student

My notes are on all sorts of odd bits and pieces of paper, backs of envelopes, even receipts from shops. I've tried to be more organised but it's just the way I work.

Gabriela, first year architecture student

CHECKPOINT: Note-taking hints and tips

- Only take notes on material you might use.
- Use your own words rather than copying out what you read.
- Fill out the information you wrote down when you were brainstorming.
- Experiment with different ways of taking notes to find one that suits you.
- Jot down questions that occur to you as you go, so you can follow them up later.

Stage two: Planning – working out what to include, what to leave out, and how to order your material.

When you write an essay, you're pulling together lots of pieces of information into a coherent argument. At the planning stage, you must decide which points to develop and which to discard.

There are three main benefits to planning your essay carefully:

- 1 You won't waste your time on points or ideas that aren't essential.
- 2 You will start writing your essay with a clear sense of what needs to be done.
- 3 You will be sure you have dealt with all the important aspects of the question.

At the planning stage of an essay, you need to be critical of all the information you have collected earlier. You'll summarise, expand, rearrange, and make corrections. Once you become practised at standing back from the notes you have made and thinking about them critically, you'll find it gets easier to select the most promising material. The end product is a plan – a guide to how to write your essay.

ACTIVITY 5 – WRITING AN ESSAY PLAN

Go back to the brainstorming notes you made for activity 2. Use them to write a rough essay plan – one side of A4 is about right. You should aim to make about four points in the main body of the essay. Discard material that doesn't support your arguments. Draw on the main points for the introduction and conclusion. Some students find it easier to plan the introduction and conclusion after they have thought through the main points. Some prefer to think through the conclusion before the introduction.

“ I plan my essays in my head, usually when I'm walking to uni in the morning. A pattern starts to evolve. I get the pattern clear then go back to my notes. I've got quite ruthless about ditching the points which don't fit the pattern. ”

Tom, first year medical student



CHECKPOINT: Planning

Ask yourself whether you have:

- selected suitable and relevant material from your notes
- rejected material that isn't relevant
- taken account of key verbs and key ideas in your plan
- thought through the main arguments, the introduction, and the conclusion
- made a note of the sources you have used next to each point in your plan

Stage three: Drafting – pulling all of your research together to form an essay.

Now you're ready to put the essay together. At the drafting stage, you revise, reconsider, and rewrite what you have already produced, and write fresh sections as necessary. If your planning work has been thorough, you may not have very much to do. You will already have structured the essay and nailed down the sequence of points you want to make. Some parts of the essay may be relatively well structured by this point, and others less so.

Expect to have to draft and redraft parts of your essay, or even all of it. It's a good idea to leave yourself a day or so between finishing the essay and the deadline for submitting it. Most students find it far easier to spot sequence and structure problems after they've taken a break.

Introductions and conclusions

Your introduction and conclusion are as important as the arguments you develop in the main part of the essay. Each of them should account for between five and ten per cent of the total word count.

Your introduction should clearly state the way in which you are going to discuss the subject. It should make the reader want to read on, with a clear understanding of what the essay will cover. The introduction is your chance to show how you are going to address the question.

Your conclusion pulls the essay together, without falling into the trap of repeating what you have already said. A good conclusion will add something new to the arguments you have made, e.g. a different perspective, or a good point you have saved until last.

“I find essays actually crystallise my ideas. I read and read, and end up with lots of what are essentially jumbled together thoughts. The way these different thoughts and ideas relate to one another becomes clear when I start writing.”

Mustafa, first year philosophy student

CHECKPOINT: Drafting

Have you:

- written about your ideas in a logical sequence?
- provided your readers with a clear structure?
- written an introduction?
- written a conclusion?

Resources to help you

All university libraries have books students can borrow or use as reference sources to improve their academic essay writing.

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