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# How to Write an Assignment: Planning and Writing

## Planning your essay

### Objectives:

- To understand and be able to *plan an essay effectively* so that it is one logical piece of work.
- To understand exactly *what an essay* is and to examine some different forms of essays.
- By the end you should understand *what is expected* from an essay.

### 1. Planning an Essay

So – you have decided upon your essay question and you have compiled a reasonable bibliography. You have then read the material from the most up-to-date works, books, journals, etc. and have made notes as you read. Now what? Now it is time to plan your writing task.

**During *planning* we decide what to say;**

**During *writing* we work out how to say it.**

Planning is concerned with *what or content, not style*. It involves re-reading notes, sifting and sorting facts, ordering ideas, and deciding priorities. It requires taking a stance toward a question, topic, or issue in light of your research.<sup>1</sup>

Again, flexibility is essential in preparing an essay. A minority of students prepare entirely in their heads and rely on flashes of inspiration as their pen flies across the page or as the keys click on the keyboard (some of them do well). For the rest of us (most students) we must

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<sup>1</sup> “Taking a stance” means having a personal opinion about the subject or a particular interpretation of the subject.

plan in detail on paper using headings, sub-headings, bullet points, etc. Find out what way you work best and stick to it.<sup>2</sup>

**Be warned** – the danger of having no written plan is that your writing will lack coherence and direction – the reader will sense that you are not in total control of the material. The essay will be disjointed and you will get lower marks.

Even authors of fiction have a clear plan – J.K. Rowling famously wrote the end of the last book in the Harry Potter series 7 years before the first was published.

**If you know where you are going – getting there is easier.**

The following points are an “action plan” for outlining your essay:

1. **Read over your Notes:** Make a list of every important point or topic or reference.
2. **Classify and Organise the Points:** Put those important points into some form of logical, chronological, and theological order.<sup>3</sup> What needs to be known at what stage? Classify by themes, issues, priorities. Keep the essay question in front of you as you plan. Material not directly related to the question – discard!
3. **Work out the Main Argument:**<sup>4</sup> This will be refined and altered as you progress – but what is it exactly that you want to say? If you are presenting a point – then present it positively and with force. If you are summarising an argument then make sure it is logical and authoritative. Whatever the purpose of your essay is – make sure that you achieve that purpose. Don't apologise for your ideas or shrink from presenting them forcefully in a scholarly manner.
4. **Introduction:** Every essay needs to have an introduction. This gives a clear statement of the problem, issue or topic, defines terms, and indicates the limits of the essay. The introduction must be clear, crisp and engaging. You want to entice the reader into the essay, not put them to sleep!
5. **The body:** This should be a logical development of an argument or point of view. It should attempt to be a *progressive* solution to the problem stated in the introduction. As you took notes you would have made subject headings, these may form the basis of paragraph topics. Each new topic needs a new paragraph.
6. **Conclusion:** This section presents the findings of the study and a solution or an approach to the solution of the problem initially stated. Above all the conclusion should be a positive regurgitation of material already covered (DO NOT introduce

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<sup>2</sup> There are many books on how to write an essay – ask where they are and get all the help you need.

<sup>3</sup> This is an excellent help with essay planning: Ian Hunter, *Write that Essay: A Practical Guide to Writing Better Essays and Achieving Higher Grades* (North Ryde, NSW: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> What is an academic argument? It is a well-reasoned and well supported case for your point of view (or someone else's point of view that you support). It is respectful of other's opinions and even though forceful, it is always polite and considerate (calling your opponent uninformed or ignorant is not allowed).

new material in the conclusion). It should satisfy the marker that you have met the requirements of the task.

7. **Cross Reference:** Now cross reference your notes with your plan. As you read books for your essay you made notes. Every time you note an idea, issue, or quote, make sure you write an accurate reference down for it. That way you don't have to run to the library every five minutes to check up on material.<sup>5</sup> What do I mean? If you quote someone – make sure you have the book's details including the page number of the quote, etc.

## 2. Writing the Essay

A good essay is concerned with **Style, Structure, and Content**. The challenge in writing an essay is to blend energy and flair with authority and credibility.

### 1. Style:

#### Purpose

In a good essay the reader is aware that the writer is in complete control of the material from the first sentence to the last. There is a strong sense of direction and purpose. Most essays lack a sense of purpose because the writer has attempted to complete the essay in one go, off the top of their head. An essay will convey a sense of purpose if the writer has thought, planned, and read sufficiently *before* writing the essay.

#### Voice

Writers need to sound confident in their essays, but also reasonable, fair-minded, and respectful of other opinions. *You must state your position clearly and then back it up* with examples, illustrations, and arguments. If you disagree with another position that is OK, but *you must state why*.

#### Types of Essays

There are *many different types of essays* from exposition to argument. Your different courses will require different styles of essays. Essays in which you are asked to demonstrate an understanding of the topic by describing, identifying, demonstrating, summarising or explaining require an expository essay. Those which ask the writer to assess, evaluate, argue, comment or examine require an argument. And sometimes you will be asked to do a bit of both.

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<sup>5</sup> See Essentials for Assignments 3. ....

### ***Expository Essay***

You will be marked on your ability to:

1. **Understand the issues clearly:** You must identify the important ideas, rank these ideas in order of importance, and understand the relationship between the ideas.
2. **Select appropriate material for discussion:** You must collect and sift information, only mentioning the most important points. Make sure your material is balanced and thorough.
3. **Organise this material:** The essay needs a clear focus which is made explicit in the introduction and then developed in the body of the essay. Present ideas in a logical, orderly fashion.
4. **Write a clear, straightforward answer to the question:** Pay attention to the details of style.

### ***Argument Essay***

You will be marked on your ability to:

1. **Form and articulate:** a sharply-focused and well-reasoned argument.
2. **Support the argument:** You must be able to prove each part of the argument using factual evidence and sound logic.
3. **Defend against attack:** You need to anticipate objections to the argument and answer them.
4. **Be objective and critical of the argument:** Acknowledge areas of weakness in your own position.
5. **Point out weaknesses:** you build a case by exposing weaknesses in the opposition's argument.

## **2. Structure**

The following points are important when writing the body of an essay.

1. **Balance description with analysis:** it is not enough to just recite facts and support them; you must illustrate your argument. *Why* is this point important? Of *what* relevance is this to the whole essay? It is *your* job to make this clear.
2. **Go straight to the point:** Markers are not impressed with waffle. They admire essays which get on with the business of answering the question in a direct way. The introduction sets the pattern in this respect.

### 3. Content

This is the most important aspect of the essays – *what you actually say*.

#### Building a Case

Every essay contains an argument or a position you wish to convey; the role of the main argument is crucial to the essay.

- It determines what supporting ideas and evidence the writer chooses to include in the essay.
- It determines the order of ideas.
- It gives focus and coherence to the piece of writing.

The main argument must be **precise and well-focused** and **engaging and well-reasoned**. It must also be capable of being developed in the space allowed by the essay. This means choosing a topic and then narrowing it down to a reasonable length.

Once the main argument has been stated you then set about convincing your marker to accept it or at least accept that it is a reasonable argument. You do this by using four means.

#### 1. Support the argument

- Cite facts to back up your claim. This must be specific.
- Explain logically why your argument makes sense.
- Quote experts who agree with you. These should be relevant and reputable authorities.

#### 2. Concede its weaknesses

Ignoring a powerful challenge to your argument does not make it go away. All arguments have weak points. A marker is impressed when you can be critical of your own ideas as well as those of others. It shows an honest, objective, and fair perspective and gives the essay credibility.

#### 3. Defend the argument

This involves raising the objections that may arise and answering them.

#### 4. Refute the opposition

Expose the weaknesses in the opposition's argument by pointing out where faulty logic and inadequate evidence has been used. By refuting your opposition's case you can then argue for the validity of your own.

If you start to use these four strategies in your essays you will see your grades increase along with your understanding of the issues involved. You will also develop a clearer “voice” of your own.