

Self Study Programs

Essay Writing: The Process



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This module covers:

- 5 stages of essay writing
- Time Management during the process
- Resources to support writing



The Learning Centre

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Essay Writing: The Process

This module introduces you to the process of essay writing - from analysing the question through to the final redrafting and editing of the essay before you hand it in.

There are several key steps in the essay writing process:

1. **ANALYSE & MIND MAP the question**
2. **GATHER RESOURCES, INFORMATION AND EVIDENCE FOR YOUR ESSAY**
3. **DEVELOP A LINEAR PLAN**
4. **GET THE ROUGH DRAFT DONE**
5. **EDIT AND PROOFREAD**

1. *Analysing the Question*

Here are the steps to follow in this important first part of the essay writing process:

1. Develop a time plan that will allow you time to complete each step of the essay writing process. Set completion dates for each of the steps (analysis, research, plan, rough draft and editing/proofreading).

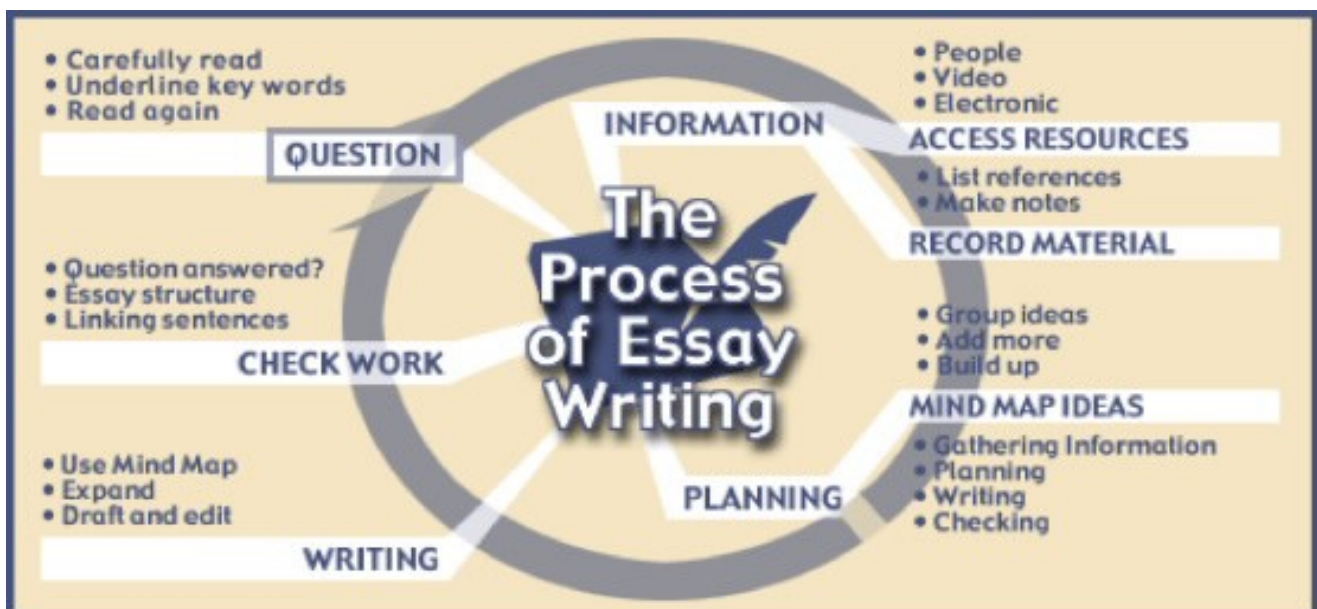
Try Activity 1 ✓

2. Read the essay question carefully, underline key words and action words and check their meaning.

Try Activities 2 and 3 ✓

3. Mind map the essay question. Put the question in the middle of a landscape page and tease out all the possible approaches you may take. You can do this in a small group to make sure you discuss all the options.
4. Prioritise and focus the ideas in your mind map (you could number them) so that you are only going to write and research the most relevant ones. Re-read the question again to be sure that you are going to focus on the things that the question is asking for.
5. When you do a mind map, it will help you focus on the main ideas and then guide you through the next stage where you will gather information and evidence on your topic.

The next stage of the process is to access the resources you will need and your mind map should now act as a guide to help you target your search for information that will support the arguments and ideas in your essay.



2. Gather resources, information and evidence

1. Make sure that you have allocated sufficient time to access the resources in your overall time plan to get the essay completed.
2. You may wish to consult with your [Liaison or Faculty Librarian](#) and any relevant [LibGuides](#).
3. You should have noted on your mind map any referencing instructions and now would be a good time to confirm the details of the resources you will need for your referencing system (author, date published, page, edition etc.). It is far better to record this information when you locate the resources rather than have to go searching for it later!
4. Look at the modules called “Effective Reading” and “Note-taking” to ensure that you read effectively and make clear notes.
5. Continue to refer back to your mind map to make sure that you are only researching the prioritized areas and to check that you are still on track to answer the question. The next step will be to move from your unstructured mind map to a structured linear plan in preparation for writing.

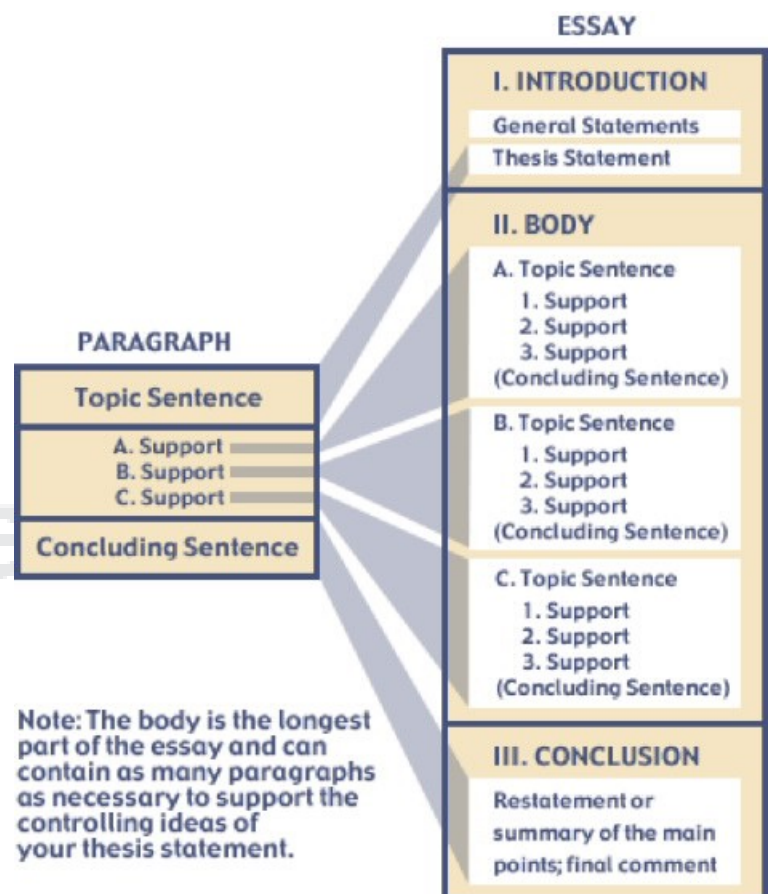
3. Develop a linear plan

Before beginning your first rough draft of the paragraphs in your essay, it is important to make sure that you have a linear plan to follow that will ensure that you will write in a highly structured way. A mind map is a great way to brainstorm all the possibilities for your writing but you will need a linear plan in order to produce a structured piece of academic writing.

1. The areas that you identified in your mind map as the ones you focused your research on, will become the topics for your paragraphs in the linear plan.

2. Allocate your allowed word length to these paragraphs. For example if your allowed word length is 1000 words and you are choosing a three paragraph structure as above you might allocate 150 words to the introduction and conclusion and about 230 words to each of the three paragraphs in the body.

The image below shows the general structure expected in an academic essay:



4. Get the rough draft done

This is often the hardest part and the trick is to use your plan, stick to your rough estimates regarding paragraph word length and not be too fussy. You have a lot of ideas in your head and it is important to get them out on to paper and/or on to a computer. At this stage the rougher the better!



4.1 Key steps in writing the rough draft

1. Many students find it helpful to produce rough drafts of each of the paragraphs in the body of the essay. This is helpful because what did seem like a complex task of “writing 1000 words” has been broken down to “write three rough paragraphs of about 230 words on the specific topics you have researched”.
2. Print out your rough drafts, show them to others for feedback and take note of any changes you might like to make.
3. You might find that the above steps make you go back to your resources and evidence, or even check the question again.

You might also see that the paragraphs could be presented in a different order or with different emphasis. You may even change your mind about the main argument! All this is perfectly normal in the writing process, as is collaboration with others to share and test your ideas.

Often your rough draft will bear little resemblance to the final draft and this demonstrates the importance of getting the rough drafts done as soon as possible!

5.1 Editing checklist

1. Check that all parts of the question have been answered.
2. Check that there is a clear structure within each paragraph and for the essay as a whole. Is there a clear beginning, middle and end?
3. Check that each paragraph has a topic sentence and that each paragraph is linked.
4. Check that the conclusion fulfils the promise you made in the introduction with your thesis statement.
5. Make sure you have checked grammar, spelling and sentence structure.
6. Make sure you have referenced using the required format.
7. Have a look at the marking criteria to make sure you know what your marker expects. You could mark your own essay using these criteria and then address any areas you feel have not been covered well. Some lecturers will provide you with percentage or marking schemes (like the one below) while others may provide a rubric.

5. Edit and proofread

The time allocated to this final stage in the process is often the difference between a pass and a distinction; or a pass and a fail. Some lecturers report that there is often a difference of up to 30% between the first draft and the final version submitted.

Answering the question	30%
Writing style (clarity and organisation)	20%
Analysis of issues	20%
Understanding and interpretation of literature	20%
Bibliography (finding appropriate references)	10%
Total marks assigned to essay	100%

There are also some practical aspects of essay writing that you should check, such as:

1. The length. More than 10% over/under word length may be unacceptable.
2. The title page. This usually includes details such as your name, course, lecturer, topic, length, due date - and anything else your lecturer requires.

Your Turn: Activities

1. Complete a time plan (such as the one below) that will enable you to hand in your next essay. Place the numbers 1 to 5 on this time plan.

WEEK															
DATE															
STEP															

1. Analyse the question
2. Research
3. Linear plan
4. Rough draft
5. Edit and proofread

2. The following five steps are from the University of New England and are explored in detail on their website (address below).

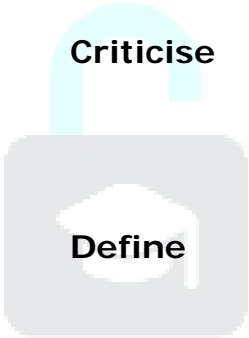
Question Analysis Key Steps

1. Read the whole question twice.
2. Look for topic words.
3. Look for any words that may restrict the topic in any way.
4. Look for instruction words.
5. Rewrite the question in your own words.

From: <http://www.une.edu.au/tlc/aso/aso-online/academic-writing/question-analysis.php>

3. Have a look at the following task words and their meanings. With your next essay or assignment, make sure you identify the task words and understand what you are being asked to do.

Analyse	Separate or break up something into its component parts so that you discover its nature proportion, function, relationship, etc.
Comment	Make critical observations, even if they are fairly open-ended. Your texts, learning guide, lecture and discussion notes should provide sufficient guidelines and your own common sense should prevail.
Compare	Find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events, interpretations, etc. Ensure you understand exactly what you are being asked to compare.
Contrast	Find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events, interpretations etc. Focus on the differences.
Critical Analysis	Examine the topic or argument in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.
Criticise	Express your judgements regarding the correctness or merit of the factors being considered. Discuss both strong and weak points and give the results of your own analysis. Student insights are expected and arguments must be justified.
Define	Provide concise, clear, authoritative meanings. In such statements, details are not necessarily required, but briefly cite the boundaries or limitations of the definition. Remember the 'class' to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in that class.
Describe	Recall facts, processes or events. You are not asked to explain or interpret. Try to provide a thorough description, emphasising the most important points.
Diagram	Present a drawing, chart, plan or graphic representation in your answer. Generally, you are also expected to label the diagram and a brief explanation or description may be required.
Discuss	Present a point of view. This is likely to need both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen and authoritative evidence.
Enumerate	Provide a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one, but concisely, the points required.



Evaluate	Present a judgement of an issue by stressing both strengths and advantages, and weaknesses and limitations. The emphasis is on assessing the value, worth or relevance of the matter under scrutiny.
Explain	Your main focus should be on the 'why' of a particular issue, or on the 'how' with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes and effects. You are being tested on your capacity to think critically, to exercise perception and discernment.
Illustrate	This asks for an explanation; you may clarify your answer to a problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram or concrete example.
Interpret	Explain the meaning of something and give your own judgement of the situation.
List	Give an itemised series or tabulation; such answers should be concise.
Outline	This asks for an organised description. Give the main points and essential supplementary materials, but omit minor details. Present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.
Prove	To conform or verify. You should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence, or by logical reasoning.
Relate	When showing relationships, your answer should emphasise connection and associations in a descriptive manner.
Review	Re-examine, analyse and comment briefly (in an organised sequence) on the major points of an issue.
State	Express the high points in brief and clear narrative form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, may be omitted.
Summarise	Provide a brief statement or an account covering the main points; omit details.
Trace	Give the development, process or history of a thing, event or idea, especially by proceeding from the latest to the earliest evidence.

Source: Adapted from Bate, D. 1979, *Essay Method and English Expression*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Group, Sydney.

Downloaded from the UniLearning website: <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/2c.html>