

Writing for university

LEARNING OUTCOMES

This section offers you opportunities to:

- become more aware of any writing sub-skills that you need to develop
- get into the writing habit if you have been away from formal education
- learn how to get started on a piece of writing
- learn how to examine assignment titles
- develop a procedure for writing essays
- understand what is meant by concepts and 'concept pyramids'
- develop strategies for organising your ideas, planning your writing, and structuring essays
- learn how to complete the basic steps of writing an assignment, such as writing drafts and editing

Academic writing

Writing a good assignment is both a challenge and one of the most rewarding aspects of study. Almost all students find their writing skills develop significantly at college. This is due partly to the additional practice, and partly to an increase in critical awareness developed by analysing issues from many perspectives.

Writing cannot be separated from other processes such as reflection, goal-setting, organisation and research.

This section looks at skills and stages common to many types of academic writing assignment. It takes you step by step through the different

processes involved in writing a piece of course work such as an essay or report.

As your writing skills develop and you become more aware of what is required, you can be more flexible and creative in your approach to writing. However, be wary of tutors who say they value 'individuality': this often means 'be individual within the conventions of our subject area'. Make sure you know what is acceptable and what is not in your subject.

Developing your writing

Most experienced writers rewrite their work over and over, refining their thoughts, finding a better way of saying something, making a long-winded section a bit briefer, or adding more details to develop an idea.

Rewrite 1 Filling out the writing

- Take one piece of writing you have done.
- Jot down a list of five extra details you could add to give a fuller picture.
- Add something you know about someone else's ideas: from television, radio, or reading.
- Add a personal opinion about some aspect of what you wrote.
- Rewrite the piece, adding the new detail.

Rewrite 2 Playing with your ideas

Play around with what you have written. For example, you could:

- change the order of the sentences around
- change some of the words
- add more details
- change the order of the paragraphs around
- ask a question and turn what you have written into the answer
- write from the opposite point of view.

Rewrite 3 Organising your material

- Select one of your pieces of writing.
- Read through it, underlining each major idea in a different colour. For each change of subject, change the colour. If a subject comes up again, use the colour you used before.
- When you have finished, check how often the colour *changes*.
- Rewrite the passage so that all the parts underlined in a given colour are grouped together.

Anxieties about writing

Anxiety about writing is very common at university.

Typical student comments

'I start a sentence, cross it out, start it again, cross it out, throw the paper in the bin, start a sentence, cross it out ...'

'I just see the essay title and panic. I think, "I don't know anything about that!"'

'I can't get down to it – I keep putting it off and then I'm in a huge rush to finish it.'

'Some people just write out a report in a night – I have to write it over and over again.'

Maybe some of these comments strike a chord with you? What do you find difficult about getting started on a piece of writing? The list below may clarify your thinking.

What stops me from writing?

- The blank page is very off-putting.
- My mind goes empty.
- I don't know where to begin.
- I just can't get down to it.
- I am not as good as other people.
- The ideas go round and round in my head.
- I am embarrassed about my handwriting.
- I am embarrassed about my spelling.
- I worry about grammar and punctuation.
- Other reasons.



In your journal, note down your thoughts and observations about any difficulties you have in getting started.

Similarities between academic writing and other activities

Every day you are involved in situations that require you to plan and to make decisions. Think of one activity you completed recently, such as planning a holiday, choosing this course, or organising a party. On a separate sheet, describe exactly what you did, from start to finish.

The activity probably involved six stages. Tick which stages you went through to complete your activity.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 | Deciding in general what to do. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | Collecting relevant information or materials to complete the task. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | Planning the order to do things. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | Carrying out the plan. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | Checking that you were going about the task in the right way. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 6 | Reflecting on how you would do it better next time. |

Academic writing follows a similar pattern of planning and decision-making. Suppose you were asked to write about 'The influence of theories on cloning animals'. You may know very little about the subject, and you may have no clear opinion. But you can approach the writing task much as the activity you analysed above.

Activity

Approaching a writing task

To plan a piece of writing you would probably take the steps shown in the table, but not in the order given listed.

- Rearrange the steps in the order you would be likely to carry them out.
- Consider a second order you could use.
- Then look below and compare your responses.
- Would your own suggested order suit you better?

Possible sequences

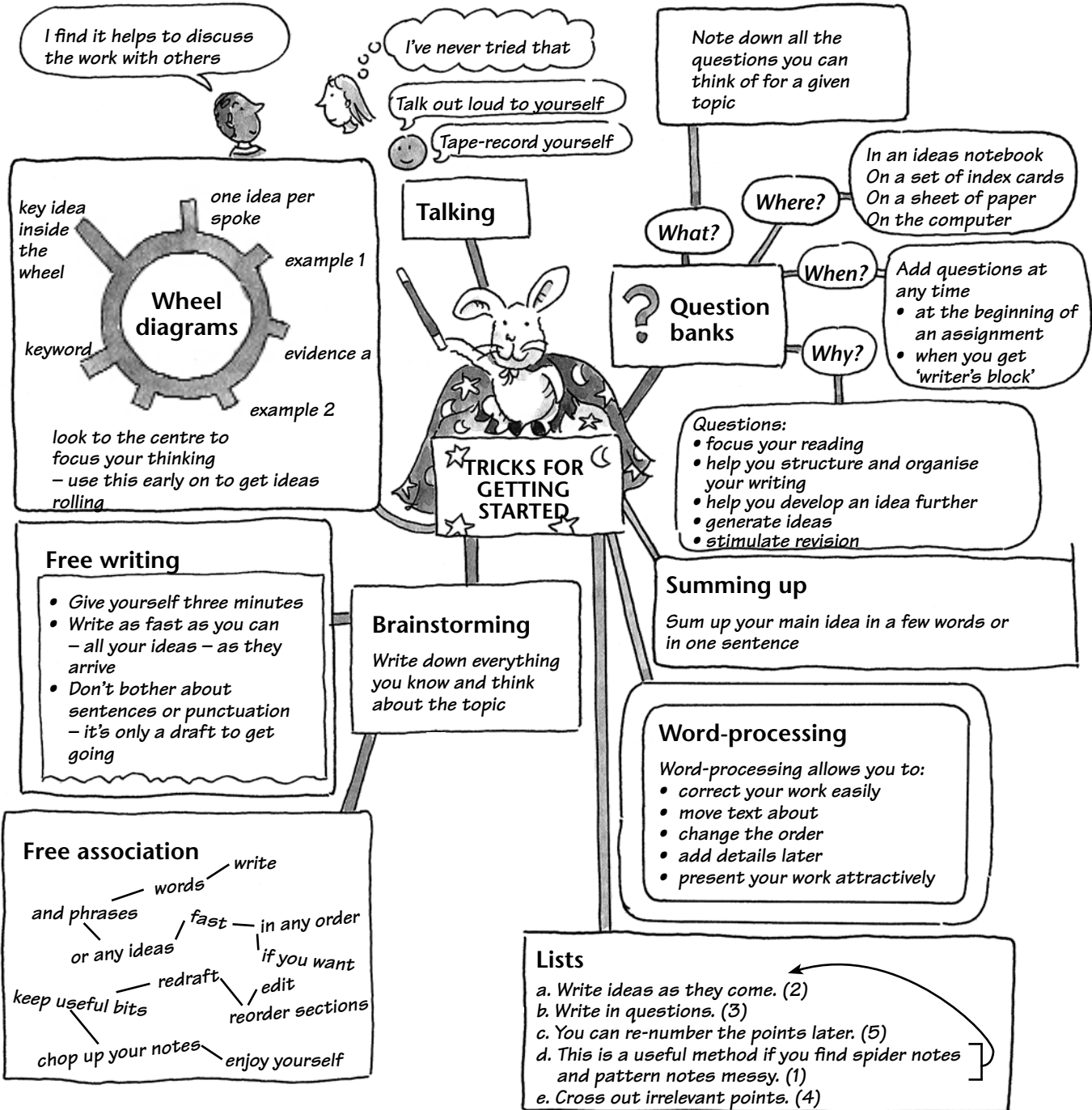
1 6 2 1 1 1 0 1
 9 7 2 13 3 7 8 4 5
 1 10 6 11 2 1
 9 7 2 13 3 7 8 4 5

Steps taken	Order
1 Decide how you would do better next time	
2 Make an outline plan	
3 Put the ideas in order	
4 Research the subject (reading, interviews, experiments, etc.)	
5 Examine the title and decide what is required	
6 Write a rough draft	
7 Take notes from your reading (or interviews, experiments, etc.)	
8 Select the relevant information to include	
9 Write the final draft	
10 Write out the references (books and other sources of information)	
11 Read through the writing, checking for sense and small errors; make corrections	
12 Check if your text is within the word limit	
13 Separate main ideas from supporting detail and examples	

Tricks for getting started

Here are some ideas for getting started on a piece of writing.

- You can combine several of these.
- Which ones do you want to try?
- In your journal, keep a record of which work best for you.



Essays and other academic writing

The following pages look at the basics of:

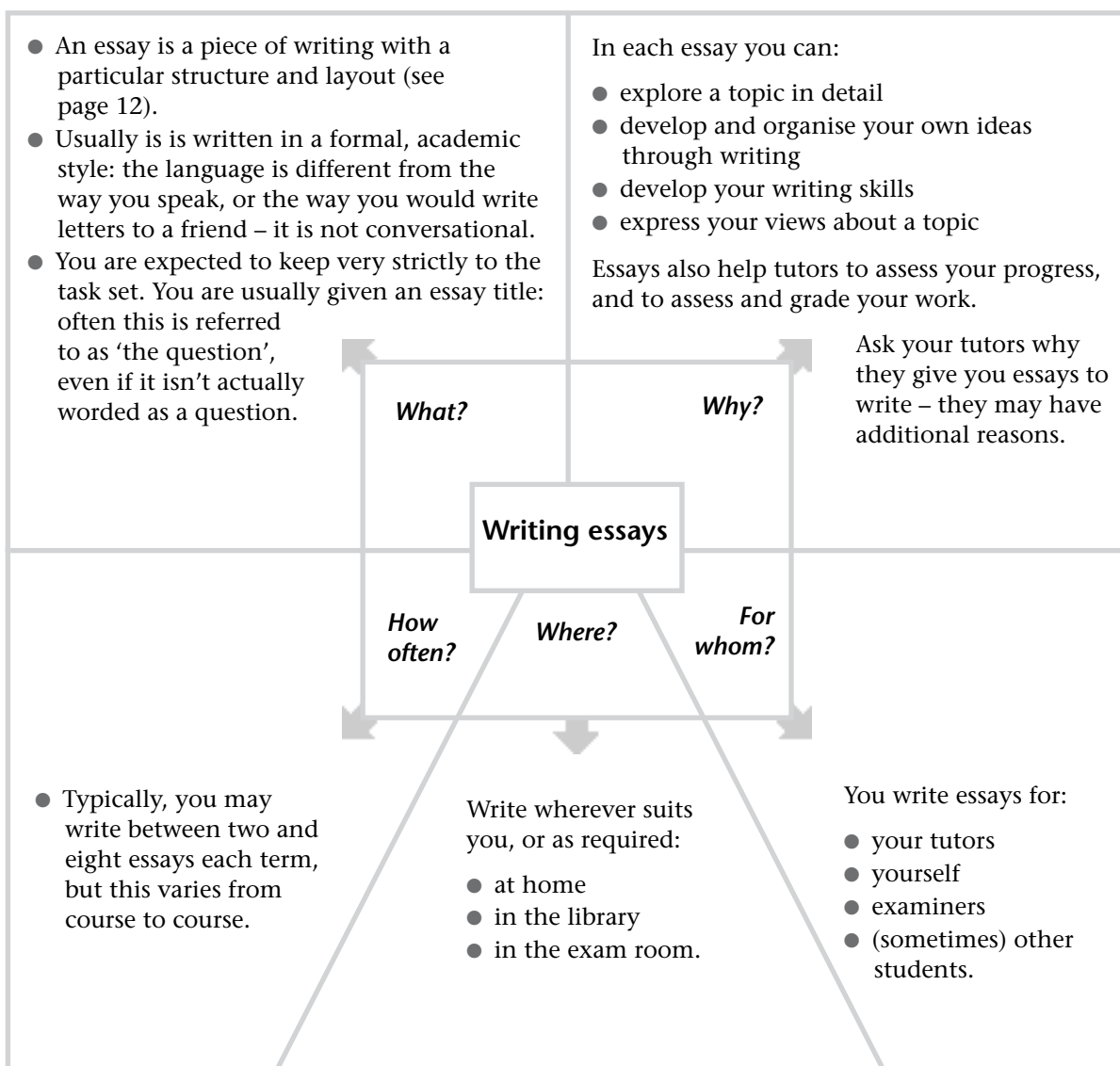
- what an essay is
- a seven-point procedure for approaching writing tasks
- analysing the title
- structuring your writing
- drafting, editing, and proof-reading.

The next chapter looks at more advanced

features of academic writing: aim to read the two quite close together.

What is an essay?

An essay is a piece of writing which is written to a set of writing conventions. The diagram below gives some brief answers to questions many new students ask.



A seven-point procedure for writing assignments

Until you develop your own method of writing essays and other assignments, you may find this seven-point procedure helpful.

1 Clarify the task

Before you start research, make sure you know what you are looking for.



- Examine the title and course notes very carefully (page 8). What exactly is required? Ask your tutor early on if you are unsure.
- Write one line to sum up your basic opinion or argument. Adapt it as you proceed.
- Brainstorm or make pattern notes to record what you know.
- What do you need to read or find out?

3 Organise and plan

Organise your work as you go along (see page 11).

- Make a big chart to link ideas and details.
- Make a rough outline plan early on – you can refine it as you go along.

Planning

Keep checking what you are doing. Careful planning:

- helps to prevent repetition
- clarifies your thinking
- helps you organise your material.

2 Collect and record information

Get the information you need, but be focused.

- Be selective – you can't use everything.
- Write a set of questions to guide your research – and look for the answers.
- Check the word limit to see how much information you can use for each point.
- Keep a notebook nearby to jot down ideas.

Types of material

You can use any relevant material:

- factual information
- ideas, theories, opinions
- experience.



Sources

Many sources of information are available to you, including:

- books, articles, official reports, surveys
- lecture notes, data from laboratory work and projects, talking to others, interviews
- television, radio, newspapers, videos.

Method

Keep asking yourself:

- 'Do I need the information?'
- 'How will I use this information?'

Recording

Record information as you go along.

- where you found information and ideas – for your references list.
- notes of themes, theories, dates, names, data, explanations, examples, details, evidence, page numbers.

4 Reflect and evaluate

When you have gathered the information, think about where you have got to.

- What have you discovered ?
- Has your viewpoint changed?
- Have you clarified your argument?
- Have you enough evidence/examples?
- What arguments or evidence oppose your point of view? Are they valid?
- Is it clearer to you why this task was set?

6 Work on your first draft

Develop your first draft. You may need to do this several times, improving the assignment with each version. Leave time between drafts for your ideas to simmer.

- Rewrite your early draft (see page 14). Adapt the structure and organise the writing into paragraphs.
- Make sure your argument is clear to readers.
- Check that you have included evidence and examples to support your points.
- Write out your references (or bibliography).

5 Write an outline plan and first draft

Now structure your writing.

- Refine your plan. Work out the order to introduce your ideas, using pattern notes or headings and points.
- Work out how many words you can write on each point. What must you leave out?
- Write a first draft. Write quickly: it is only a draft. You may find it easier to type headings onto the computer first.
- Start with whatever seems easiest.
- Keep going: don't worry about style.
- To begin with, state things clearly and simply in short sentences.

1 Title
2 Introduction
3 Main argument – notes Q (red)
evidence for – notes Q, p. 3–4
evidence against: Q, p. 5 (orange)
evaluation of evidence
4 Alternative theory: notes R (yellow)
example of application
evidence for
evidence against (lemon)
why not convincing
5 Alternative theory 2: notes S (green)
evaluation of evidence
why not convincing
6 Underlying issues – notes T (blue)
7 Conclusions
a
b
c

7 Final drafts

Edit and check your final draft (see page 16).

- Enjoy 'fine-tuning' your writing.
- Read it aloud to check that it is clearly written.
- Keep redrafting until you are happy with the text.

Analysing the title

Pick the title to bits

However they are worded, all assignment titles contain a central question which has to be answered. Your main task is to apply what you know to a particular problem. It is *not* to show how much you know – however brilliant your piece of writing, if it does not ‘answer the question’ you may get no marks at all.

You are marked partly on how well you select and organise information to meet the requirements of the title or problem – even in exams. Use the title or question to guide you in selecting what to read and note.

Focus on the title

It’s essential to take time making sure you understand what is required.

- Read the title aloud slowly three times.
- Underline or highlight words which tell you the *approach* to take (see page 9).
- Underline words which guide you on how to select the *subject matter* of the assignment.
- Write out the title to help you take it in.
- How many sections are there to it?
- Write it out more fully, putting it in your own words. What is the assignment really looking for? What are the central questions?
- What topical issues does it refer to?
- Discuss the title with someone else.
- How does the title link to what you have read or heard in lectures? What else does it ask that you need to find out?

Make notes

Write down in your own words exactly what the question requires. It may form a useful part of your introduction later.

- Note obvious questions prompted by the title: such as ‘Why did this happen?’, ‘How often ...?’ or ‘How typical ...?’
- Ask yourself why this question was set. Is

Pick the title to bits



there some public or academic controversy you should know about? Are there important issues to include?

- Note your reflections on the title, and your opinions.
- What do you already know? Do you have evidence to back up your opinions?
- What do you not know yet? Where or how can you find out more?

Use the title

Keep focused on the title

Put the title where you can see it easily.

Keep checking the exact wording

As you research and write, remind yourself of the *exact wording* of the title. It is easy to forget the focus of the title and drift off on a tangent.

Introductions

In your ‘Introduction’ (the first paragraph of your writing), refer directly to the title in order to focus your reader. Say how you interpret the title. You can do this by rephrasing the title in your own words. (If you misunderstood the question, at least the reader will be aware of what has happened.)

Conclusions

In your conclusion, refer back to the title to demonstrate to your reader that you are still answering the set question. Link your final sentence to the question contained in the title.



CHECKLIST

Academic keywords used in titles

These words indicate the approach or style expected for the piece of writing.

Account for Give reasons for; explain why something happens.

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 upon 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. If appropriate, give reasons why one item or argument may be preferable (see Chapter 8).

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.

Describe Give the main characteristics or features of something, or outline the main events.

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

Distinguish Bring out the differences between two (possible 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. If appropriate, 'Critically evaluate' it 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 decision or conclusions 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 written in full sentences).

Summarise Draw out the main points only (see 'Outline'), 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. (The answer is usually somewhere between 'completely' and 'not at all'.)

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

Structuring your writing

The structure and organisation of your work is just as important as the content. What matters is not just what you know but the way that you organise it.

How do you structure academic writing?

Like a building, a piece of academic writing gains its structure and shape from several elements.

Design: your argument

What you are trying to say (your argument) should provide the structure for the whole piece of writing. Your reader should be able to follow your line of reasoning easily: how it moves from *a* to *b* to *c*.



Central framework: formal structure

Different formal structures are required for different kinds of writing, such as essays or reports – see page 12.

Bricks: paragraphs

Writing is organised into paragraphs, and each paragraph itself has a structure. Clear paragraphing assists the reader.

Scaffolding: organising and planning

Organise and plan your work before you start.

- Group ideas together, in files or on paper.
- Devise a working plan to guide your research.
- Make an outline plan for your writing.

(See pages 11 and 13.)



Cement: wording

You can use language, such as linking words and emphasis, to highlight your point and show the direction of your argument.



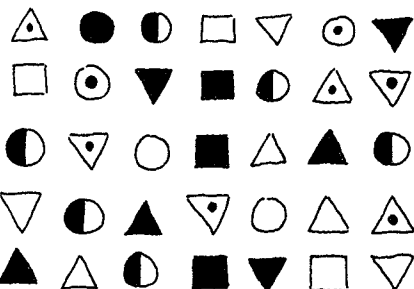
Organising information: grouping things together

First try this ...

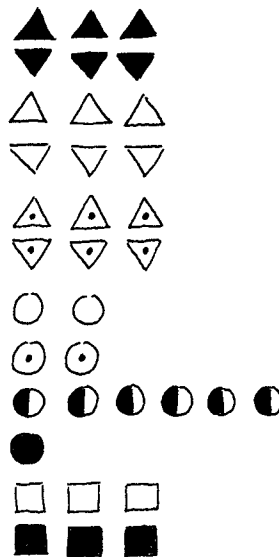
For each box, work out:

- How many circles are there?
- How many triangles?
- How many *types* of triangle?

Box A



Box B



Comment

You probably found it quicker and easier to find the answers for Box B. If so, why was this the case?

Why group information?

Grouping ideas and points has several advantages.

- You will be able to find things more easily.
- You will find it easier to draw up your writing plan and follow it.
- Your thinking will be clearer.
- Your readers will be able to follow your argument more easily.
- You will get in a mess if you don't.

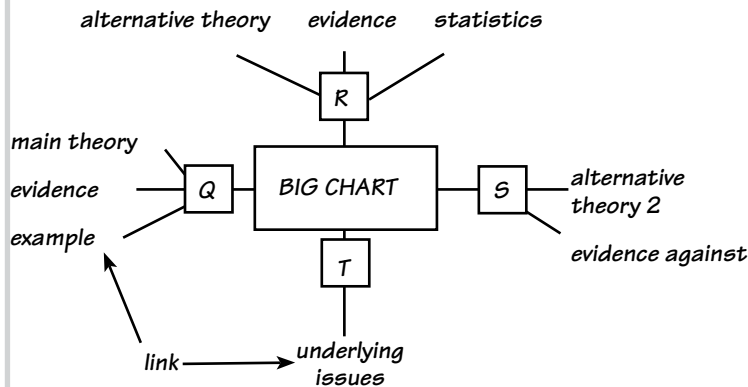
See page 11.

Organising information: planning your writing

Below are four steps you will need to take in organising information for an assignment. Each step makes the next one easier.

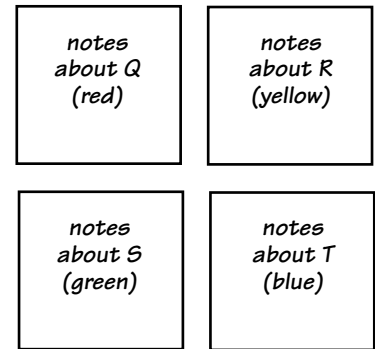
1 Divide the work into topics

When making notes, it may be easiest to use a separate sheet for each main point or topic. Or you may like to use a large sheet of paper, writing out points so you can see them all clearly.



2 Rearrange your notes

- Spread your notes out so that you can see them.
- Look at what you have.
- Group related information.
- Arrange the material in the best order.



3 Write an outline plan

Write your first outline before you have done any research. Often you will find that you know more than you thought. The outline helps to shape your ideas and focus your reading. You can adapt it as you go along.

- 1 Title
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Main argument – notes Q (red)
evidence for – notes Q, p. 3–4
evidence against: Q, p. 5 (orange)
evaluation of evidence
- 4 Alternative theory: notes R (yellow)
example of application
evidence for
evidence against (lemon)
why not convincing
- 5 Alternative theory 2: notes S (green)
evaluation of evidence
why not convincing
- 6 Underlying issues – notes T (blue)
- 7 Conclusions
 - a
 - b
 - c

4 Organise information into paragraphs

Colour-code each pile of notes. The plan shown uses the sequence of colours of the rainbow, to assist memory. Divide your notes with coloured dividers. Give each paragraph a colour: underline main points in this colour. Maintain this colour-coding onto pattern notes, outline plans, and rough drafts.

Having grouped the information and formed the plan, you can start writing. Each paragraph should have one main idea – with supporting detail or evidence. Each paragraph should relate to one set (or page) of notes. (See page 168.)

Structuring an essay

1 Title/question As stated earlier (page 8), every essay title contains an actual or implied question. The whole of your essay must focus on the title and address that question.

2 Introduction In your introduction, explain what the essay is going to do.

- Explain how you interpret the question.
- Identify issues that are you going to explore.
- Give a brief outline of how you will deal with each issue, and in which order.

Length: about one-tenth of the essay.

3 Develop your argument or line of reasoning

Paragraph 1

- This paragraph covers the first thing your introduction said you would address.
- The first sentence introduces the main idea of the paragraph.
- Other sentences develop the topic of the paragraph. Include relevant examples, details, evidence, quotations, references.
- Lead up to the next paragraph.

Paragraph 2 and other paragraphs

- The first sentence, or opening sentences, link the paragraph to the previous paragraphs, then introduce the main idea of the paragraph.
- Other sentences develop the paragraph's topic.

4 Conclusion

The conclusion contains no *new* material.

- Summarise your argument and the main themes.
- State your general conclusions.
- Make it clear why those conclusions are important or significant.
- In your last sentence, sum up your argument very briefly, linking it to the title.

Length: about one-tenth of the essay.

5 References and/or bibliography

References and bibliography

List all the books, articles and other materials you have referred to within the essay. If a bibliography is required, list relevant texts, including those you read but did not refer to in the essay.

The structure given here is the most basic. It underlies not just essays but many other types of writing.

Planning your writing assignment

As you become more aware of different writing formats, you can use the appropriate structure to guide your planning.

Plan spatially: draw out your pages

Before beginning any research:

- Work out roughly how many words you write or type on one page of A4 paper. (This may be about 300 words.)
- Check the overall word limit for your assignment. (This may be 1200 words.)
- How many pages of your writing or typing will your essay occupy? (For instance, 1200 words at 300 words/page will occupy 4 pages.)
- Take that many pieces of paper. Draw out in pencil how much space you will give to each section, item or topic, as in the sample essay below. How many words can you allocate to each section? Or to each topic or example?
- It may take a few attempts to get the balance right. Note how little you can write for each topic or example.
- If you wish, continue to plan out your essay, point by point, on these sheets. Notice how much space each item can take.

With this spatial plan, can you now see:

- how many pages of your writing your assignment will take?
- where sections or topics will be on the page?
- how your word limit divides up?
- how little or how much you need to read and note for each item?

Writing drafts

The art of writing is in the craft of redrafting

Professional writers redraft many times before they are happy: writing rarely flows out ‘all at once’ in its final version.

Writing is easier if the research, planning and organising is already done and if you focus on different processes in each draft.

Draft 1: a quick draft to get ideas down

Use your plan. Don't worry about style or good English.

- Focus on the assignment question: write out your interpretation of the title.
- What is your core idea? Write out your central idea or the main line of your reasoning.
- Write headings and subheadings from your plan (the pyramid, or whatever), but leave these out of the final draft of an essay.
- Add in details below each heading. Link headings and points into sentences.
- Use your plan: keep looking back to it after writing each paragraph.

Draft 2: fine-tune the structure

Check that information is grouped and ordered – especially into paragraphs. If not, cut up your text with scissors and rearrange it, or colour-code and number paragraphs in the order in which you will rewrite them.

Check that the line of argument is clear from one paragraph to the next – if necessary, add in sentences to link ideas. You may need to do this more than once.

Draft 3: fine-tune the style

Read what you have written aloud. How does it sound? Can you improve the flow or style? Add sentences or details where needed.

Draft 4: finishing touches

Aim to leave at least a day between drafts. Your mind will continue to work on your ideas. After a break, you will find it easier to spot passages that need rephrasing. See ‘Editing’, page 15.

Drafting on the computer

People vary in what they prefer to do on paper, what they do on the computer, and how often they move between the two. Experiment to find out what suits you.

Drafting on the computer is a more continual process – you will probably find you make many small corrections and move text about as you go along. Leave spellchecking until the final draft.

File management

If you intend to make major changes to a draft, save a copy of the document with a number at the end of the name (‘Filename2’). Then edit the copy. If you change your mind, you can revert to the earlier draft, or use information from it.

Divide long documents (over about 3000 words or which include graphics) into separate files, adding ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘c’ and so on at the end of the filename. You will be able to move around the file and find information more quickly. Later you can paste the parts together into one long document, or start the page numbers for each part to follow on from the previous file.

Working from a floppy disk is much slower than working from the hard disk. If you can, therefore, copy your essay file onto the hard disk. To save confusion about which copy you are working on, take the floppy out of the computer while you are working. When you finish a session, copy the file from the hard disk onto the floppy.

Listen to your essay

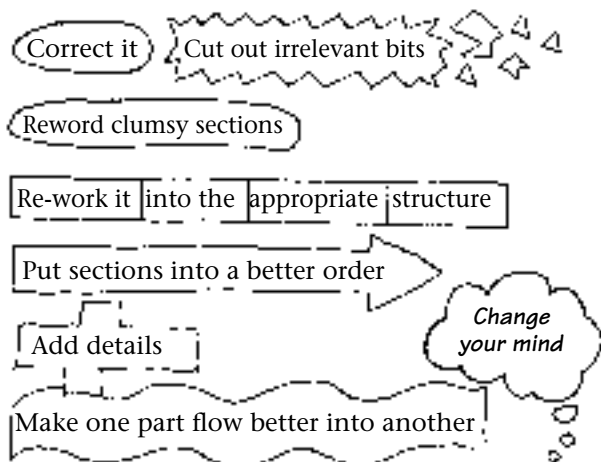
If you have a screen-reader which turns text into speech, listen to the computer reading your text aloud. Otherwise, read it aloud yourself. Listen for meaning, and for punctuation pauses.

Print your essay

It is easier to read and edit your work on paper printouts rather than working onscreen. The shimmering of the screen may tire your eyes, and you may not always be able to use a computer when you wish.

Editing your draft

Editing is working on your draft in order to improve it. When you edit, you can ...



Different kinds of editing

You may need to go through your work several times, checking for different things.

1 Meaning

- Does it make sense? Read it aloud slowly.

2 Organisation and structure

- Have you used the appropriate structure?
- Is connected information grouped together?
- Is information presented in the best order?
- Is the work well paragraphed?

3 Evidence

- Have you backed your argument with evidence, examples, details, and/or research?

4 References

- Is the source of your information clear?
- Are your quotations accurate?
- Are references written correctly?

5 Style

- Is the text easy to read?
- Is it too chatty? Or too stuffy?
- Are any sections confused?
- Is it precise enough?
- Is the style appropriate?

6 Punctuation, spelling and grammar

- Have you written in sentences? (See 'Proof-reading' below.)

7 Presentation

- Is the text legible?
- Does it look neat and well presented?
- Does it follow any presentation guidelines you were given?



Which aspects of editing do you need to spend most time on?

Proof-reading

Edit your draft until you are happy that your draft is written as well as it can be. Then do some final proof-reading.

- Read it once again aloud – does it make sense?
- Look for mistakes such as typing and spelling errors. Look up doubtful spellings or ask someone.
 - If you used the computer's spellchecker, check especially for words that may have been correctly spelt, but which were the wrong words – such as 'there' instead of 'their'.
 - When checking spellings, you may find it helpful to work backwards through your writing, word by word, to avoid drifting into skim-reading.
- Everyone has their own pattern of errors. If there are certain mistakes you make repeatedly, note these down and be particularly careful in checking for them.



CHECKLIST

Editing final drafts

Tick each box below when you have finished checking that point.

Content and argument

- The text answers the central question(s) posed by the title (page 8).
- Sufficient space (or words) has been given to the most important points.
- All the information included is relevant to the set question.
- The main line of argument is clear, not lost in a sea of detail.

Research material

- There are sufficient examples and evidence to prove or illustrate my points.
- My own ideas and opinions are clear to the reader.

Structure and grouping

- The text is in the appropriate structure or format.
- Ideas are suitably linked.
- Each paragraph is well structured.
- Ideas are presented in the right order.
- It is clear how each paragraph links to the others.

Style

- The style is appropriate for my course.

- The text is not too chatty or flippant.
- It is free of slang and colloquialisms.
- Technical vocabulary is used correctly.
- The words used are my own. (There is no plagiarism.)
- The text is not repetitive.
- The text can be read aloud easily.

Clarity

- There is nothing the reader will find confusing.
- The language is clear and straightforward.
- The reader will easily follow the line of reasoning.
- It is clear which sentence in my introduction summarises my viewpoint or argument.
- Sentences are of reasonable length and are uncomplicated.

General

- The introduction is suitable.
- The conclusion is suitable.
- Spelling, grammar and punctuation are correct.
- References are correct.
- The bibliography (if needed) is accurate.
- I have taken account of feedback I received for earlier work.