

The importance of planning and structuring

The purpose of an essay is to present a logical, reasoned argument in response to a specific question. An effective structure helps your argument to unfold clearly to the reader. You want your response to be focussed and progressive, rather than just a jumble of ideas. This guide suggests some ways of planning and structuring your essays.

The process of essay planning

Everybody works in a different way, so you need to find a planning and writing process that suits you. However, it is important not to leap too quickly from research to writing. It is worth giving some thought to how you will order your ideas, and what the central argument of your essay will be.

On the next page you will find a suggested process for planning an essay. You may wish to reflect on your own process and consider whether it is working. Have you had any feedback from your tutors about poor structure or lack of a focussed argument? If so, do you need to spend more time thinking about the thread that will run through your essay?

A few questions to ask yourself when planning your essay

- Do I understand what my assignment question is asking?
- What is my instinctive response to the question?
- What do I already know that is of relevance to the question?
- What else do I need to find out?
- What have other scholars written on this topic and do I agree/disagree with them?
- What is the main point I want to argue or put across in this essay?
- What reasons do I have to support my main argument or message? (ie, why should my reader believe me?)



Suggested stages of essay planning

Break down the different parts of your assignment question. Figure out what the task word means (eg, discuss, argue, describe) and identify specifically what you need to write about. If the question is very broad and general, decide which aspects to focus your answer around.

Mind map everything you already know about the topic. Try to identify what your instinctive response to the essay question is. Identify some research questions to guide your reading.

Research! Be sure to keep track of where you have obtained information from. Engage with what you are reading, asking questions and challenging points of view. Only note things that are relevant to your essay title. You don't need to include everything about the topic.

From your research, identify key points that will help you to answer the question. You could pool these together in a mind map, or on a large piece of paper, or typed document. Then you need to start organising the points. Which are related? Which are counter-arguments? Begin to group ideas. You should also decide what the over-arching argument of your essay is going to be, based on the evidence you have gathered and analysed.

Now decide on a logical order for your points. You could summarise each point on a separate card or sticky note and physically move them around until you have found the best flow. You will find your own method, but the key thing is to be aware of the progression of your argument. How does each point link to the one before it and the one after? How will your paragraphs build your argument? Don't forget to guide your reader through, communicating with them at every step.

The 'Rule of Three' structure

It is important that your essay has a clear introduction, main body and conclusion. Put simply, you should:

**SAY WHAT YOU
ARE GOING TO SAY**

SAY IT

SAY WHAT YOU HAVE SAID

The actual number of paragraphs in the main body of the text depends on the topic, the discipline, and the number of words you have to write. The crucial feature of the structure is that each paragraph only contains one main idea.



TOP TIP!

First and last sentences of paragraphs are important.

First sentences should tell the reader something clear and specific about the point you are about to discuss. Last sentences should make the relevance of the point totally clear.



You could use a diagram like this to help you order your ideas. Write each of your main points into a section of the structure.

Introduction
Introductory paragraph
Second introductory paragraph if necessary
Body of essay
1st main point
2nd main point
3rd main point
4th main point
5th main point
6th main point
Conclusion
Concluding paragraph
List of references

Introduction: context and aim of the essay. State your argument. Indicate how you will answer the question.

Develop argument point by point. Put forward the reasons that support the argument you declared in your introduction.

Summarise the reasons that support your argument, with no new information. Remind the reader what you have covered and how you have answered the question.

Key structuring conventions to be used:

- Group similar ideas together rather than jumping around.
- Individual paragraphs should be differentiated typographically ie, by indenting or by allowing additional line spaces between (check whether your school has a preference).
- Each paragraph should make only **one** main point.
- Think of paragraphs as mini-essays. Start with a topic sentence to introduce the main point of the paragraph; explain that point further; provide evidence for the point; interpret/analyse the evidence; then summarise the point and indicate how it links into your overall argument.
- Each paragraph should link to the next using transition words or phrases – such as ‘alternatively;’ ‘consequently;’ ‘as a result;’ ‘furthermore...’
- The paragraphs should be placed in a logical and consistent order. Play around with them until you get the best flow. They should feel progressive rather than list-like.

Conclusion

It is useful to know what you want to argue before you begin to write. State your argument in your introduction, and then spend the rest of the essay presenting the reasons and evidence that make it valid. Give some thought to the order in which you present these: what would be the clearest and most convincing way to sequence your line of reasoning?

TOP TIP!

Once you have written your first draft, try to sum up the main point of each paragraph in one sentence. Then look at this outline of your essay. Is it logical?



Further reading and references

Cooper, H. and Shoolbred, M. (2016) *Where's your argument?* London: Palgrave.

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