

Basics

Writing an essay or other assignment that clearly expresses all of your ideas on a topic is not easy, even for native speakers. No one can say exactly what they mean first time, and often your thoughts develop as you write. For this reason, planning, drafting and revising your writing are important skills, and they will continue to develop throughout your academic career.

The academic context

Many students – and particularly humanities and social sciences students – find that they are required to do much more writing in higher education than they were used to at school or college. This often comes as a nasty surprise. Therefore, it is very helpful to equip yourself with a repeatable approach to writing assignments that you can rely on.

By following the step-by-step process outlined here – along with the other parts of the process in **Brainstorm** and **Research (1)** – you will put yourself in a great position to plan out and then write the first draft of your essay. And when you have written your first draft, you'll be able to begin the process of revising your work, which you will continue until you have a final version that you are happy with.

Key features

All essays are different, and how much you write will depend on the word limit suggested by your tutor/lecturer; but a typical essay might contain an introduction, a 'main body' of between six and eight paragraphs, and then a conclusion. A paragraph might be 100–150 words long and contain five or six sentences.

At the start of each paragraph in the main body of an essay, there is usually a topic sentence, which contains the paragraph's main theme or idea. Then, in the following few sentences, you can discuss this idea, put forward some expert opinions and present your own thoughts and arguments.

By planning out the order of your paragraph topics in your document before you start writing, you can avoid getting 'lost'. And by using the flexibility of your word-processing software, you can move around your essay freely, as the ideas come to you, and avoid 'writer's block'.

Although you will probably find it easiest to write your introduction and conclusion at the end of your essay, it is helpful to write a thesis statement at the start, to keep you on track. A thesis statement will often begin with a phrase like *In this essay I will argue that ...* or *In this essay I will discuss ...*

Challenges / difficulties

Many students find the idea of writing longer pieces of academic writing very intimidating. Even after they have mapped out their ideas and conducted their research, they don't know where to start.

Writing well is hard! Even native speakers find it very challenging. On one hand, there are thousands of different ways to respond to any essay question, and it is easy to get lost in your ideas. On the other hand, it is easy to get stuck on one idea and not know where you are going with it.

The process outlined in this Factsheet and the Worksheet will provide you with the tools you need to organize your ideas for a written assignment.

How can I develop this skill?

Look out for how other writers structure their work. When you are reading, try to identify the thesis statement(s) and topic sentences. What is the topic of each paragraph? How has the writer linked the paragraphs together? Could the topics be discussed in a different order? Thinking about a text in this way will prepare you for planning a piece of writing.

Learning outcome

Once you are comfortable with the process of planning and drafting your essays with the help of word-processing software, you will be able to tackle written assignments with confidence.

Theory to practice

Are the statements true (T) or false (F)?

- 1 Each main idea in an essay should be presented separately in a new paragraph.
- 2 Each paragraph in the main body of your essay should begin with a topic sentence stating the main idea of the paragraph.
- 3 The topic sentence should be followed by several sentences that support the main idea.
- 4 To add support or evidence, you should use examples, figures or statistics.
- 5 You should always use quotations to support your ideas.
- 6 Each paragraph should include a concluding sentence referring the reader back to the topic sentence, or linking to the next paragraph or section.

Ways to get more practice

Use the planning and drafting process from the Worksheet for any longer pieces of writing you have to do outside your academic work. For example, you might need to send someone a personal email discussing your reasons for making an important life decision, or apologizing for something you've done. In these situations, a piece of formal writing in an academic style would probably not be appropriate; but identifying your overall opinion about something, and making an ordered list of relevant topics and supporting material to discuss, can still be very helpful for structuring your writing, and can help you make a start on a daunting task.