

Basics

Having a clear idea of what we intend to do before we act is an essential skill that can be applied to virtually any situation in our personal, academic or professional lives. The same can be said of constantly improving our work by making small changes that produce a significantly better overall outcome.

The academic context

In your studies, planning will help you clarify your ideas, organize your research material and produce a coherent piece of work. Once you have outlined your plan, you will be ready to write your first draft, which will then be developed systematically into the final draft. You should only stop when you are satisfied that you have the best piece of work you can produce within the time limit, word count and other constraints you might face.

Key features

This unit will suggest a five-step approach to writing an essay (and any other written work):

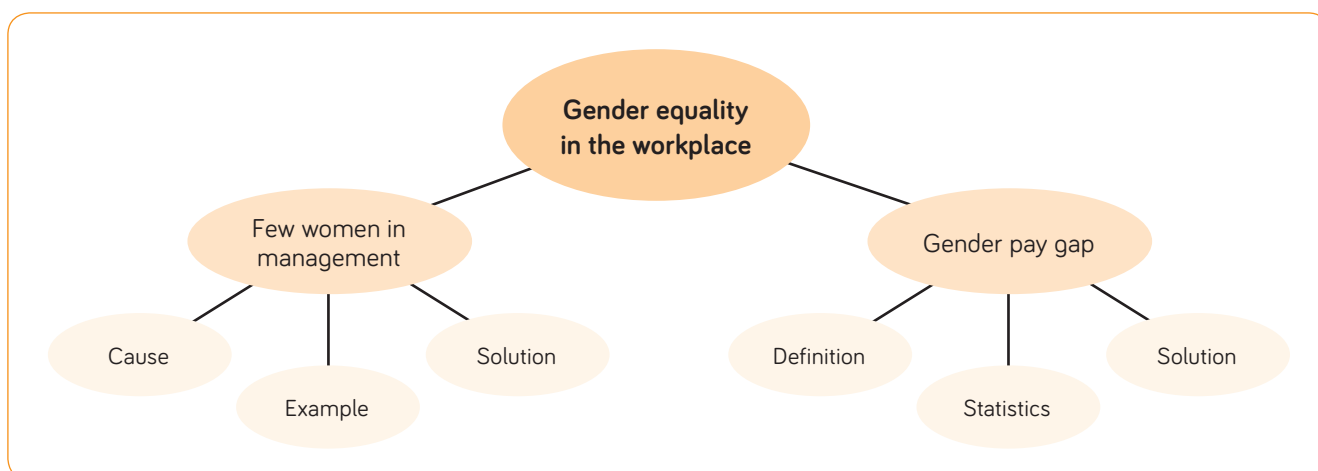
1 Research → 2 Graph → 3 Outline → 4 First draft → 5 Final draft

1 Research

- See **Research (2)**.

2 Graph

- Once you have done all your research, it's time to organize the material so that you will be able to see the connections between the different ideas. A very good way to do this is to represent them graphically by using, for example, a word map:



- In your graph, group ideas together, distinguishing the main ideas (which will become the topic sentences of the paragraphs) from the ideas supporting them (e.g. examples and evidence). In the process, you will have to discard information that isn't relevant for your line of argumentation, or which won't fit within your word count. Graphs are also useful for identifying gaps in your research.

3 Outline

- With your graph to hand, write an outline plan, in note form, with the paragraph topics in order and the main ideas for each paragraph.

4 First draft

- With a good outline, there is no need to start from the top. Take the paragraph you think is the easiest to write. That will get you going, and the other paragraphs will flow more easily.
- In each paragraph, check that you have one main idea, which is supported by evidence, examples and/or citations from authoritative sources.
- Don't worry too much about going over the word count at this stage: it is much better to discard ideas (or whole paragraphs) at a later stage than to try to include sentences to bulk up your essay, which often makes it lose coherence.
- When you have finished, go over your text, focusing on the language: are there any typos, misspellings or grammar mistakes? Can you express an idea in a better way (e.g. with higher level or more precise vocabulary) or link any of your ideas together (e.g. with a more complex sentence structure)?
- Move on to the paragraphing: ideally, all paragraphs should be around the same length (typically 100–150 words for a short essay). If one paragraph is much longer than the others, this might be for two reasons:
 - 1 It is too wordy, in which case you need to be more concise by removing or shortening sentences.
 - 2 It contains two main ideas, in which case you should split it into two paragraphs.
- Next, read your essay out loud to see how the ideas flow. Think about ways to link the different paragraphs and build up your arguments, leaving the strongest for last.

5 Final draft

- Once you have finished your first draft, you might feel tempted to consider it done. Although you have worked hard on it up to now, there is still a lot to do! There should be a number of drafts before you have perfected your work.
- Drafting is not straightforward: you might find later that you prefer an earlier version of your work or decide to use a part you had discarded. For that reason, it is important that you keep your drafts until you have finalized your work. If you are writing online (e.g. on Google Docs) you will be able to access previous versions automatically. If you are using a word processor, save the different versions as separate files, indicating the sequence in the file name (e.g. *Gender equality_v1*, *Gender equality_v2*).
- If your deadline permits, it is useful to leave some time between drafts. This will give you a fresh perspective on the text and make clearer what needs to be changed.

Challenges / difficulties

If your research has been thorough and you have discussed your ideas in depth, you might find your essay far exceeds your target word count. You might feel tempted to shave off parts of each paragraph, but that might result in none of the arguments being fully developed, resulting in a weak piece of work. Consider removing a whole paragraph (or paragraphs) instead. That might not be easy because of all the hard work you have put into developing each idea. But the final result should only include your finest work.

How can I develop this skill?

We looked at word maps above, but there are lots of different ways of representing your thoughts graphically; find a few different types of graph, and experiment until you find your favourites.

Learning outcome

Planning and drafting effectively will allow you to produce clear and coherent written work that expresses your ideas strongly and with suitable support from other sources.

Theory to practice

Order the stages of the planning and drafting process 1–6.

- _____ Write a first draft, starting with the paragraphs you find easiest.
- _____ Consider shortening longer paragraphs or breaking them in two.
- _____ Organize your research sources into a graph, e.g. a word map.
- _____ Check the text for any mistakes and improve the language used.
- _____ Read the text out loud to check the flow of ideas and link paragraphs if necessary.
- _____ Write an outline with the main ideas for each paragraph.

Ways to get more practice

You might also find that organizing your ideas graphically is useful outside your studies, for instance when you have to make an important decision. By systematically using visual representations of your ideas, you will train your thought processes to be more logical and concise.