

Access Reading

Study Skills Session, Supporting Documents

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Subject Strand:

PPE and International relations related courses

Approaching an essay:

- One of the biggest challenges students make relates to essay writing.
- Coursework will likely make up a majority of your assignments, especially in 2nd and 3rd year.
- Academic essays often require a lot of pre-reading, planning and checking in order to perfect.
- Approaching essays is often done in a three step process involving planning, writing, then checking the coursework.

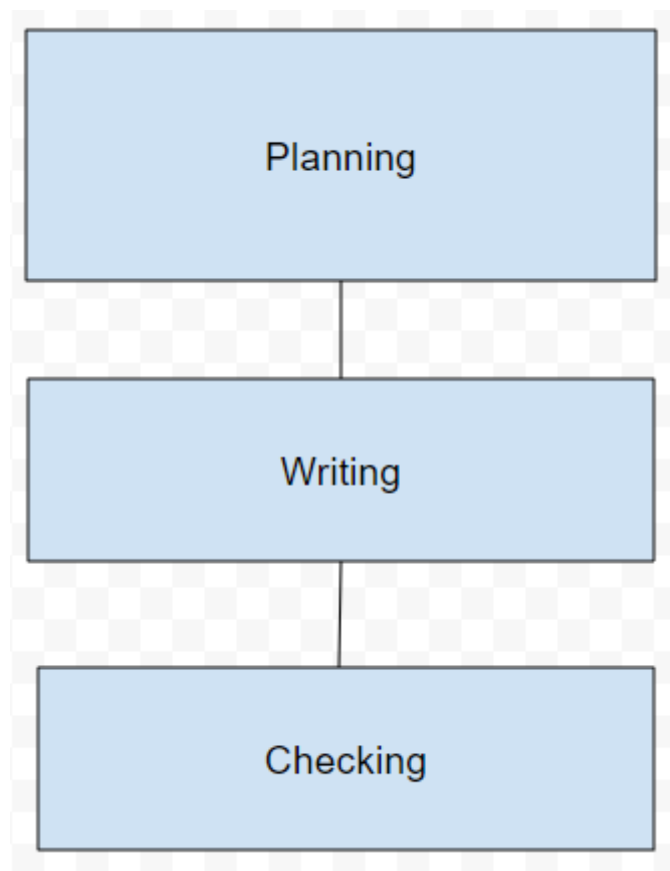


Figure 1- diagram showing the three step process of essay writing.

Planning an essay:

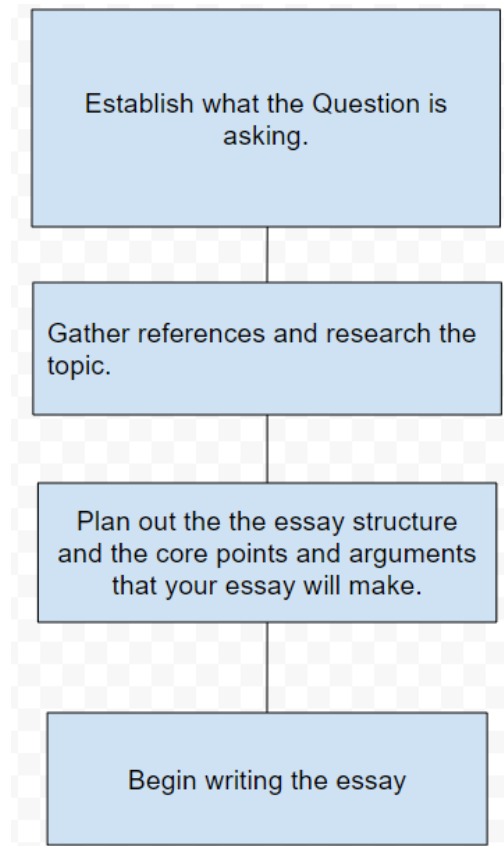


Figure 2- Process of essay planning

Establishing the question:

- What is the question asking you to do, often questions are asking you whether you agree with an existing statement in the literature, or a theory.
- Other questions ask for you to analyse an event.
- These questions will largely revolve around a theory or idea that you have learnt about in your lectures or seminars so you should have some kind of preexisting knowledge about the debate.
- Therefore the first thing to do when planning is to establish what the question wants you to do or what it is asking (Sometimes it can be good to see lecturers during office hours to discuss this).
- This can involve breaking down the question, defining the terms involved or internally simplifying it so that it becomes easier to understand.
- Terms like “Analyse” or specific statements can have layered meanings and are often not asking for a description.
- If a theory or idea is in the question, that should be the predominant focus of your essay, avoid trailing off.

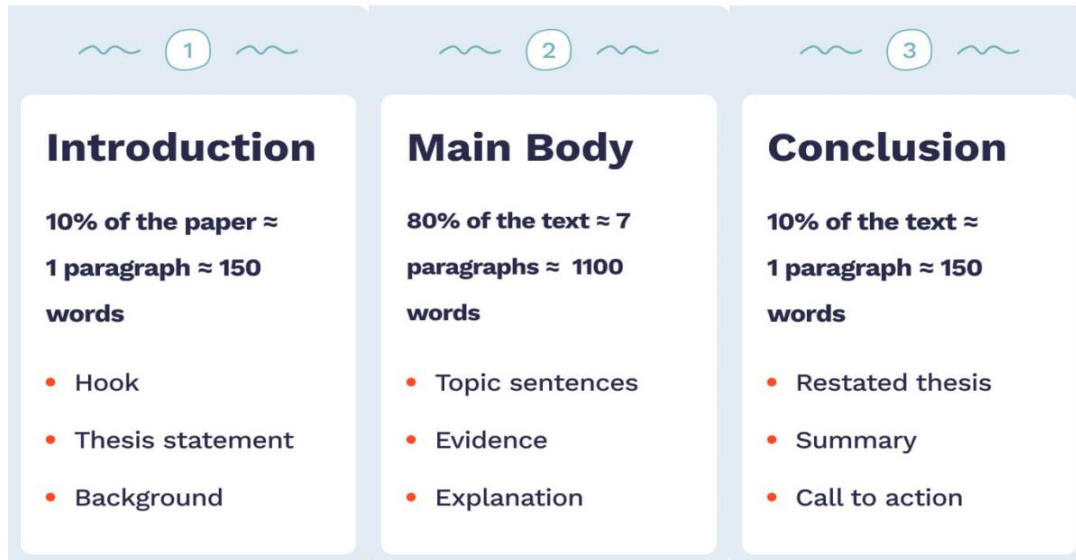
- After establishing what the question is asking, this should remain at the centre of the rest of your project.

Gathering references:

- Gathering references is often one of the most difficult parts of essay writing.
- Firstly you should gather any sources that directly address the question or link to the references, for example if a question revolves around a scholar's quote, that researcher must be central in the essay.
- Most of the central literature should be included within your reading list and this can be a valuable foundation for an essay.
- Other valuable places where you can find references are summons on the University library website, or sites like google scholar that can give you access to a deep range of academic journals and books.
- Avoid over referencing in order to stay on topic, for example for a 1500 essay you should have 10-15 references, Too many references imply that you are merely describing rather than engaging with the literature.
- For sources you should prioritise relevant academic literature, such as journals and books, by well-respected scholars, try to avoid websites with a significant bias or ones that paraphrase core literature.
- Avoid reading entire papers or books when searching out literature, you should first read the introduction, abstract and conclusion, that can provide an overview of the articles contents and tell you its relevance (don't fall into the sunken cost fallacy of using everything you have read don't be afraid not to use articles if they have no relevance to your work).
- Organise your literature into different strands or sections of the debate, attempt to draw out key contrasts between different scholars and where they stand within the wider argument.
- Decide what arguments you find most convincing and why.
- By the end of this, you should have a solid idea of the essay content and subject material, that should enable you to move ahead in creating a final structure.

Creating a structure:

1500-Word Essay Structure



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- Essay structures largely follow a similar formula, as seen above however at times this may need to vary depending on the question.
- This is mainly with regards to the introduction, as more complicated questions may require a more detailed and in depth introduction when addressing topics that may have numerous meanings or subtext.
- In general however your introduction should be an overview to the key arguments that will be the core of your essay.
- A brief outline of your essay structure or the paragraphs that you will be using.
- The argument that your essay will make and the conclusion that you will come to.
- The main body should be planned out to cover one key point per paragraph, similar to A level exams, structures should follow a “Point, Evidence, Analyse” framework, before writing you should bullet point each paragraph to outline what the focus of the paragraph will be.
- Planning in this regard is very important as it's easy to overextend.
- Paragraphs should be 250-300 words for a 1500 word essay.
- You should write your conclusion last, summarising the key arguments made in the essay and making sure to justify the points you outlined in your introduction.
- Your conclusion is important as it ties your arguments together into a wider argument, this conclusion should involve any further calls to action, in order to demonstrate the project's theoretical value.

Writing an essay:

Writing critically

- One of the most central features of a good essay is critical thinking and analysis.
- Therefore it is always important to take a critical stance when writing and analysing perspectives, taking into account possible bias and counter arguments that may undermine the text.
- This involves placing any arguments you make within the wider context of the literature of the field, for example taking into account the theoretical position that a question may take.
- It can also involve identifying gaps in arguments or faulty assumptions that may underpin a theory, or any opposing theories that may have more or less weight in comparison.
- Make sure to include your own perspective based on these analyses, however avoid using the term “I” as it can be read unprofessionally.
- Avoid description at all costs, do not merely describe what is being said.
- To analyse your writing styles Bloom’s hierarchy of criticality can be very useful (see table below).

Stages	Description	Examples of words associated with this level
Create	Produce new or original work.	Design, construct, develop, formulate, investigate
Evaluate	Justify a stand or decision.	Argue, defend, support, critique, weigh
Analyse	Draw connections among ideas.	Relate, compare, contrast, examine, question
Apply	Use information in new situations.	Execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate
Understand	Explain ideas of concepts.	Describe, discuss, classify, recognise, paraphrase
Remember	Recall facts and basic concepts.	Define, state, memorise, repeat, quoting

Referencing

- One of the most important things to do when writing is making sure you are referencing correctly, to ensure this, here are a few tips.
- Always make notes on what sources you have read or are going to use.
- Avoid plagiarism by copying and paraphrasing sources uncited as your own, if you see a piece of literature and are planning on using it, ensure that you reference it either by footnote or in text citation.
- Reference whilst you write, rather than at the end, this will ensure you don't have a last minute panic and lose a valuable citation.
- Stick to a consistent style, do not mix up Harvard and Oxford for example (see guide below for information on the different referencing systems).
- As mentioned try to use some form of referencing software or automated system, this can either be software such as Endnote, Websites such as "Cite this for me", or though the articles themselves on sites like google scholar.

Feature	Harvard	Oxford	Vancouver	MLA
Location	At end of document.	Footnote entry at bottom of page or endnote entry at end of document. Sometimes a list at end of document.	At end of document	At end of document.
Title and sequencing of items	Usually titled <i>References</i> , and ordered alphabetically according to authors' surnames.	If provided, usually titled <i>Bibliography</i> , and ordered alphabetically.	Usually titled <i>References</i> , and usually ordered numerically in order of appearance.	Titled <i>Works Cited</i> or <i>Bibliography</i> and ordered alphabetically.

General writing tips

- Keep the word count in the back of your mind and ensure you are at least somewhat close to it, this can avoid a headache later.
- Take into account font and paragraph size or style, blocks of text or text that is too small to read can be a chore.
- Avoid sentences that are too long or too short, long rambling sentences can be hard to read and follow.

- Write professionally and use the right terminology, avoid using phrases such as “I think” or adopting a casual tone.

Checking an essay and concluding statements:

Checking an essay

- This is one of the most important things to do during an essay, therefore you must always set aside time to check and read through an essay.
- This means not attempting to write the essay the night before, or even right after finishing the writing stage of an essay.
- Sometimes taking a one or two day break can allow you to see flaws or errors you may not have otherwise seen.
- Make sure to pay attention to spelling punctuation and grammar mistakes as these can lead to grade deductions or make your paper harder to read.
- Ensure references are correct and up to date, (I often do this manually though the CTRL/F buttons).
- Check the consistency and flow of your essay. Think “is my point clear throughout the essay”, “is this relevant”, “how do these points connect”.
- Again ensure that your essay is within the word count and do not be afraid of deleting anything if it undermines the flow or leads to an essay going over the wordcount.

General essay tips

- Give yourself plenty of time (at least a week) when writing an essay, do not try to rush it or write the whole essay in a very short period of time.
- Create some form of timetable that takes into account deadlines for different assignments, this is useful in ensuring that you avoid nasty surprises from forgetting when something is due.
- If you have deadlines that are very near each other, try to spread out when you work on them and timetable them out so you do not focus on one too much and neglect the other.
- Keep track of your grades and what you need, the website “university grade calculator” is often very good at calculating what you need for a module, this can ensure you keep track of your targets.
- Use library services and guides, these online services can give you a useful overview of some basic skills that you may need to remind yourself of when writing.
- Always read feedback thoroughly when it's received, knowing where you went wrong or right is vital in ensuring you can improve in future.

- If you are unsure about your feedback please consult your lecturer, they are often happy to help and provide more detailed insights into how to improve.

Concluding advice:

- Almost every student will have an essay they struggle with or won't get the grade they hoped for in an assignment, the best thing to do is read the feedback and improve, do not feel disheartened or hopeless.
- Attending lectures and seminars is important to doing well in essays, they not only introduce you to the topics but often involve being involved in an in-person debate about the topic.
- Avoid working in one place (such as your room) and make the most of study space on campus. Working in one place for long periods of time can lead to procrastination, and losing passion for your work.
- Try to not stay up late writing essays or pulling "all nighters" you will only end up sleep deprived and struggling more the next day.
- Try to network and make friends with your peers on your course, this can make you feel less isolated about essays and grades.
- Avoid social media or your smartphones whilst working on assignments, procrastination can lead to working ineffectively and talking far longer than you need to on an assignment.
- Remember that the first year is largely meant to introduce you to this new style of learning and transition you from A-Levels to University, therefore you should expect to have difficulties at times.
- Try to join relevant societies and clubs, especially those related to your course. These can allow you to make friends with likeminded people who share your interests.

Further resources:

Here are some useful resources that relate to the topics covered in this session.

- The University Library guide provides a valuable overview of how to read and write critically- <https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/critical-analysis/overview>
- The oxford blog is a good way of reading about the differences between Harvard and Oxford referencing- <https://www.oxbridgeessays.com/blog/focus-footnotes-oxford-harvard-referencing-reference-essay-dissertation/>
- A short article about procrastination and how to stop it- <https://www.collegedata.com/resources/campus-life/8-tips-to-avoid-procrastination>
- A blog that goes though how to write and structure a 1500 word essay- <https://overnightessay.com/blog/producing-a-well-structured-1500-word-essay/>
- University of Reading Essay writing guide- <https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/essays/home>
- A short video and article about time management at University- <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/skills-to-succeed-at-university/0/steps/249293>
- A detailed guide about using Harvard referencing system both in text and in the Bibliography- <https://dkit.ie/libguides.com/harvard/citing-referencing>
- A short video on how to use the Oxford referencing system- <https://libraryguides.vu.edu.au/oxford-referencing>
- A guide to the common mistakes when writing essays- <https://www.bibguru.com/blog/common-essay-mistakes/>
- A guide to the basic mistakes made when referencing- <https://www.bibliography.com/citations/10-common-citation-mistakes-and-how-to-ensure-you-avoid-them/>

If you have any further questions please email: accessreading@reading.ac.uk