



Writing an essay for a piece of coursework or an exams can seem very daunting. It is important to develop your powers of self-expression and your ability to communicate your ideas and arguments in written form.

### Titles and questions

Answering an exam or essay question correctly is more complex than it seems. Below are words you might find in a question or title. Each requires a different type of answer, structure and content. Think about the different ways to answer each word and try making up some essay questions using a few of the words.

**Account for/Why** – Explain, clarify, and give reasons for.

**Assess/Evaluate** – Make an make a judgement/validity/effectiveness.

**How far/To what extent** – Consider and weigh evidence/arguments for and against.

**What** – Identify, describe and evaluate.

**Discuss** – Explain, present and appraise opposing views.

**Argue** – Make a logically structured case for or against a given point of view based on appropriate evidence.

**Comment on** – Identify and write about the main issues. Avoid purely personal terms.

**Compare** – Identify the characteristics or qualities of two or more things. Identify what they have in common and how they contrast.

**Contrast** – Set two or more arguments in opposition to draw out the differences and indicate how significant these differences are.

**Define** – Make a statement as to the meaning of something, give enough detail to allow it to be distinguished from different things.

**Examine** – Look at the topic or idea in detail.

**Explain** – Make clear why something happens. Explore the case for a stated proposition, similar to 'assess'. Probably arguing for less than total acceptance of proposition.

**Identify** – Pick out what you consider to be the key features, making clear the criteria you are using to do so.

**Illustrate** – Make something clear and explicit, giving examples or evidence.

**Interpret** – Give meaning and relevance of data or other material used.

**Justify** – Give valid reasons or evidence to support an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusion was reached.

**Outline** – Give only the main points, showing the structure.

**Relate** – Show similarities and connections between two or more things.

**State** – Give main features in a very clear way.

**Summarise** – State the main features of an argument, omitting all superfluous detail.

**Trace** – Follow the order of different stages in a process.



## Planning

Even if you are naturally a very good and fluid writer, planning will help with any exam question or assignment. It will allow you to have complete control over your writing, keeping you on task, clear, coherent and to the point.

## Producing a plan

It is important to produce a plan for your essay at the beginning of the exam. A plan will help you keep your writing focused and clear. Be clear in your own mind what the purpose of the essay is and what you consider to be the main issues, which need to be addressed. Read the question carefully to make sure you have not misunderstood the theme and emphasis. Try to plan out what you will write about in each paragraph. Some people like to write their introduction and conclusion ideas in their plan first and then join them together with ideas in each paragraph. Keep track of time by working out how much time you have for each section and writing this on your plan. Remember to leave time to check your work for spelling and grammar mistakes.

## Different approaches – find something that works for you!

1. 'I don't do any sort of outline – I just start writing and after I've written a few paragraphs some sort of plan begins to come clear to me and I often tear up what I have written and start again quite differently. I usually don't know what I'm after until I see what I've written.'

2. 'I start by deciding roughly how many paragraphs I've got space for, what point I want to make in each paragraph and where I need to bring in different bits of evidence and that – it's hard – sometimes because one thing merges into another – but I'm not really happy to start writing until I've got an outline that would tell the reader almost as much as the essay I write from it.'

3. 'All I need is my final paragraph. I write that out first – my conclusion, the essentials of the way I've interpreted the topic. I spend a fair bit of time on that – several drafts perhaps but once I've got it right I usually just start at the beginning and bash on towards the final paragraph.'

4. 'I've got to plan a basic framework – beginning, middle and end. I decide roughly how many words in each of the 3 sections and I'll list the probable sequence of points in the middle section. I must have this to start with, even if I change it as I go along.'

Consider what the strengths and drawbacks of each approach are...



## Organising the material

Once you have gathered your material you will need to review and organise it. Check that your material supports your planned answer to the question and modify your argument if necessary.

Select and order your main points. Decide whether you need to adopt a comprehensive approach or focus on a narrower range of issues in order to cover them in greater depth.

Select your sub points and the evidence to support your main points.

Estimate the likely length of your essay and check that it will meet the course requirements.

## Structuring your essay

An essay has a beginning, middle, and an end.

The introduction explores the question, provides context and indicates the structure of the argument to follow

The discussion develops a logical argument from a series of points and supports it with relevant evidence such as facts, examples, illustrations, data etc

The conclusion draws together your ideas, summarises your argument and demonstrates that you have answered the question.

## Good linking words

- To begin with, In the first place, firstly
- Secondly, Moreover, Furthermore, in addition, also
- As a result, consequently, so, therefore, accordingly, as a consequence
  - Next, later, eventually
- However, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, in spite of this, despite
  - For this reason, owing to this, obviously
    - In comparison, in contrast
  - Finally, to conclude, in conclusion

## Top student tip

Write a plan at the beginning of an essay or exam. It will help you keep your answer focused and to the question. Refer back to it during the exam and make sure it answers the keywords in the question.



## Starting Writing

Many students find it is difficult to start writing an essay. You may find it convenient to write your introduction first, but it is not essential to start at the beginning. Select part of your argument that you feel comfortable with and start to jot down your ideas, gradually adding more until you have enough points to begin writing.

Remember to write clearly and precisely and to concentrate upon exploring ideas, analysing evidence and developing an argument. Writing style is a matter of personal preference and competence, and a skill, which is developed over time and with practice.

## Common problems in essay writing

- Understanding what is being asked
- Deciding what you want to get out of doing the assignment
  - Deciding where to look for the 'raw materials'
- Sorting out what is most relevant to the subject
  - Deciding on an overall structure
- Getting started on the actual writing
  - Keeping to the point
  - Good English
- Critiquing and improving on first drafts
- Dealing with comment and criticism

## Always leave time to read through your essay or exam answers.

You will find parts that do not make sense because you have missed out a key word or point. Add extra information at the end and link with an \*

Look closely for spelling mistakes and correct them neatly with a single line to cross out the misspelt word.

Always show your plan as even though you might have not had time to add all the points you might still get marks for showing knowledge.

Write down your start time for each question so you know how long you have left.

## Top student tip

Always choose the question that is easiest for you to start with. It is better to complete a question you have a good understanding of than struggle to finish a section that you are not as strong at. Many students find that after completing the easier section they have a better 'flow' of writing and more confidence to tackle the harder question.