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A short guide to starting the writing process



Academic
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A short guide to starting the writing process



Stage 1: Get started early

Familiarise yourself with your essay titles or assignment briefs at the beginning of term, or as soon as you receive them.

Select a few essay titles that you think you may enjoy engaging with, and keep them in mind, especially during your seminar discussions and reading.



Tip

To remind yourself of the essay titles for a module, keep them in your course folder or even on your bedroom door. You may identify relevant arguments, sources and examples whilst reading or studying throughout the term.



Stage 2: Gathering ideas and research

A few weeks before your deadline, start eliminating some of the titles you initially chose, to find the one which best addresses your interests. Choose the topic you feel most excited about!

Analyse the question. What concepts are mentioned? How can they be defined? What approaches to the question could you take? What is the assumption made within the question, and can you challenge it?

Brainstorm anything you know about the concepts in the essay title, and try to provide an instinctive response to the question, as well as definitions of these concepts.

- **Do not be concerned with finding the most suitable wording,** or having the best grammar, at this stage. What is important now is to jot down your thoughts. Once you have your initial responses, it will be easier to develop a plan of action.

After 20 minutes of brainstorming, read what you have written, identify any gaps in your knowledge, and ask yourself whether you already have a potential argument. Don't worry if you haven't, as you will develop it whilst reading the literature.

Use your reading list as a starting point for your research, but try to seek out other relevant sources to show independence and originality. Identify the broad arguments, approaches, positions, and debates within the literature. Consider how you could comment on, challenge or add to these debates: this intervention is your argument.

If possible, try to order quotes and ideas according to where you think they might appear in the essay. As key themes start to emerge, you could create a planning document and begin recording references in appropriate sections.

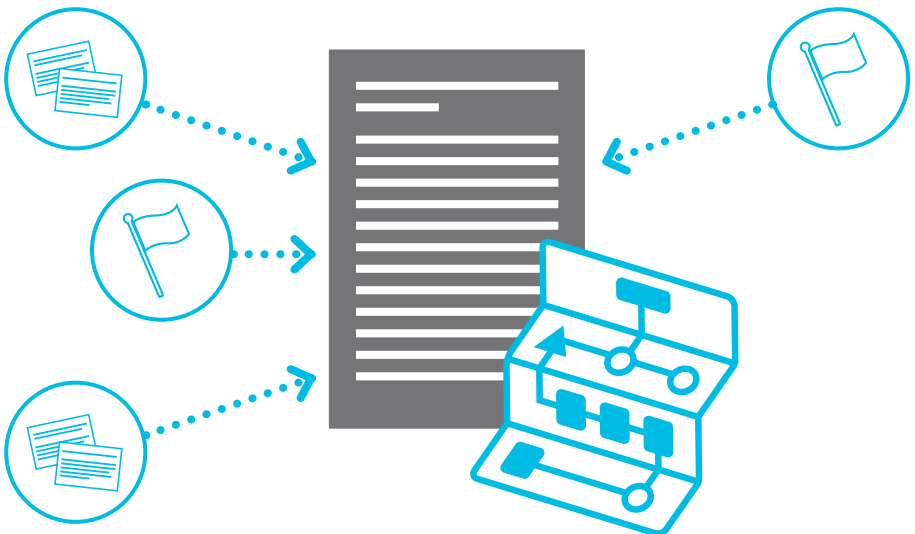
Stage 3: Planning

Based on what you wrote and read during Stage 2, develop a detailed essay plan. Then continue reading and taking notes, changing the plan if necessary.

Organise the points you want to make into broad sections. Even if you decide not to use essay headings in your final version, it can be helpful to use them to structure your drafts.

Decide what your central argument is going to be, what points you want to make in support of it, and what evidence you will use to back up those points.

Consider the flow from one point to the next; what will be the best order for your ideas? Outline the shape of your essay before you begin to flesh out its paragraphs.



Stage 4: Writing

By now, a first draft should start to take shape. Follow your plan, developing one point per paragraph.

As you write, adjust your initial structure if you need to, recording any changes on your plan.

The writing may still be rough at this stage. Work through your ideas and arguments but don't worry about polishing your sentences just yet.

Finish your first draft and leave it aside for a few days.



Stage 5: Re-drafting

With ‘fresh eyes’ and a clear mind, re-read your first draft. Write comments and identify gaps in your argument, to address in your second draft.

As you re-write, always consider your reader and whether they will be able to understand and follow your ideas. Will they be convinced by your logic and use of evidence?



Begin to pay closer attention to your essay’s structure, writing style and grammar.

Ask yourself whether your main argument is stated and introduced convincingly enough at the beginning of the essay. Does each paragraph then develop this argument, and contribute to answering the question?

Check for repetition, muddled sentences, or awkward phrasing.

After re-writing and editing, proofread and format the essay. Make sure your references are all present and correct.

Read the essay again for the last time.

Finally, submit!





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