

ESSAY AND ASSIGNMENT PLANNING

Is planning really necessary? Shouldn't I just be able to sit down and write?

Writing is an iterative process and planning is an essential part of that process. A great essay doesn't flow out fully formed from the mind of the 'perfect student'; nor do coherent, well-developed arguments. Good essays are produced through hard work, thinking and (usually) writing and rewriting. Although it can feel chaotic, planning will ultimately save you time and unnecessary confusion.

Constructing an essay plan is a way to provide yourself with an outline or 'road map' to help work out which direction to take. A plan can focus and define your ideas, provide a starting point and help break the assignment into manageable parts. Drafting a quick initial plan is a great way to avoid procrastination and to get started.

When should I make an essay plan? Will I need to write more than one?

Before you start any journey, it's best to plan your trip. Sketch out a brief initial plan BEFORE you head for the library to spend days or weeks reading. A second plan, one you write AFTER research and reading, will strengthen and clarify your ideas and give you a solid framework from which to begin writing. So, assume that you'll draft a couple of plans over the course of writing your essay or, at the very least, revising your initial one.

What should a plan look like?

An essay plan should allow you to see the shape the essay might take. It can range from a brief sketch of main ideas to a detailed point-by-point outline, complete with draft paragraphs and topic sentences (the sentence that conveys the main idea of a paragraph). How much detail you include will depend on how developed your ideas and your knowledge are.

In terms of how it should look, an essay plan can take a number of forms: a list of bullet points, a mind map, a diagram or a few rough paragraphs. Like notes, plans can take whichever shape you find most helpful and meaningful.

Getting Started

Step 1: Analyse the Task

Confirm what you have to do by establishing some basic information. Check your course outline for assignment guidelines and be certain about the following:

- ④ The format your assignment should follow. Find out whether it is an essay, report, annotated bibliography, critical review etc. Each assignment has a specific purpose, distinctive components and conventions that you will be required to follow.
- ④ The length. This will affect the amount of research and how much depth you should go into.

Analyse the assignment question: read it carefully and make sure you are clear about what you are supposed to do and the key words, terms and concepts

See The Learning Centre's guide to 'Answering Assignment Questions' for further details

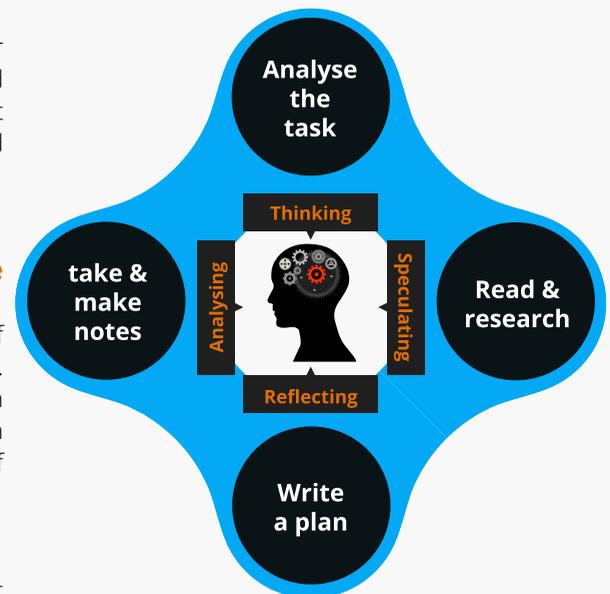


Figure 1: The Essay Planning Process

Step 2: Work out your initial thoughts and ideas about the topic(s)

- ⊗ Do you have any initial responses to the question? What could a possible answer (or answers) be?
- ⊗ Do you have any opinions at all about the topic(s)? Write them down, no matter how 'creative' or non-academic they may be.
- ⊗ What do you already know about the topic(s)? Do you have knowledge that can be built on, such as familiarity with related areas, sources or frameworks for thinking about similar topics? Write everything down—you may know more than you think.

Further your thinking by 'questioning the question'. This helps you focus by drawing out sub-questions about the question and topic.

- ⊗ Question the terms – Is there a generally agreed-upon response to the question or approach to take?
- ⊗ If not, how do different approaches/ theories/ arguments differ? Which ones could/ should you use?
- ⊗ What are the key concepts? How do they relate to each other?

Generate ideas through brainstorming. Come up with as many ideas as you can as quickly as you can. Don't evaluate or discard anything – you can do that later – just jot them down. Use mindmaps, drawings and lists; whatever comes to mind and stimulates your thinking. Look at what you've noted down. Pull out the points that are relevant to the question and discard the rest.

Step 3: Construct an initial essay plan

After you have generated some ideas, it's important to write an initial plan before you head for the library. This can feel strange—after all, how can you answer a question when you haven't done any research?—but starting with an initial plan helps you order your ideas and focus your reading. Without a sense of which direction to head in, it's easy to get lost in the research process. This initial plan will be provisional and might consist of:

- ⊗ a provisional answer to the question (or thesis statement)
- ⊗ a brief outline of possible main points.

As you research and develop your understanding of the topic, your ideas will likely change, and your answers may change with them. Try to see your essay plan as something that evolves as you engage further with your topic.

While it's a good idea to write an initial plan before you start researching, if you really know nothing at all about the topic, some initial skimming and browsing through recommended or assigned readings can provide a few ideas. However, the initial planning stage is not the time for a lot of intensive or detailed reading.

Step 4: Research and gather information

Your initial plan should raise a series of questions and identify key words and topic areas which you can use to orientate your research for the essay. While reading informs your thinking, knowing what you need to find out will give your reading a purpose.

- ⊗ Be sure to examine any assigned course readings that are relevant to your essay topic.
- ⊗ If there was a lecture on the essay topic, did the lecturer recommend or refer to any particular author?
- ⊗ Is there a list of recommended readings for the course? Refer to it for sources of information. Who has written what on the topic(s)? What is essential to read?
- ⊗ Use the key words and topics gleaned from your initial plan for library keyword searches.
- ⊗ Notemaking as you read helps you record how you know something and helps you avoid plagiarism.