

Posing the
question.
An academic guide
to planning
essays



Written assignments are an important part of university education. They give you a chance to exercise your skills at assessing evidence, developing and evaluating arguments, and expressing your views. On many courses essays are a major component of the marks.

Students often find the task of sitting down to write an assignment quite daunting. However, as you will see from the list of contents for this section, writing comes quite late in the process. This academic skills guide covers planning your essay, which is an essential aspect of essay writing if you want to achieve high marks (see the guide *Hammering the prose* on the writing process).

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1. Posing a question

The first things you will need to do when starting your research are to think of a subject for your essay and design either a hypothesis (a statement for investigation) or question that you will address.

You can find the inspiration for your research topic from anywhere, for example, the media, current affairs, art, literature, technology or your course notes and general reading interests. Above all, it is important that you are interested in and enthusiastic about your topic. You will be a more successful researcher if you care about your project.

Make sure you discuss your topic with your supervisor. They will talk through with you if the subject matter is suitable for your own skill set and if they are happy to work with you on your chosen topic. Your supervisor will also let you know if there is sufficient information and resources on your topic, or if any problems are likely to arise. Your supervisor will probably help you to develop your hypothesis or question.

Once you have decided upon the general field of study and the main issues you wish to address, then you can think about developing your hypothesis or question in a more detailed way. Hypotheses need to be carefully phrased as the wording is an indication of what will be discussed in your essay. The hypothesis not only gives the reader information about the content you will write about, but also how you will approach the topic.

It is essential that you can **clearly develop an argument** from the hypothesis or question that you pose. Avoid generalisations that are not possible to substantiate, for example: 'The relationship between humanity and nature.' What is this trying to talk about? It could cover so many different topics and subjects that it needs to be much more focused. A better hypothesis would relate to specific relations between humanity and nature. For example, the question 'Has humanity overcome the threat of earthquakes through its specially engineered buildings?' would examine mankind's relationship with nature in light of geological factors. Alternatively, the question 'Does the teaching of creationism in U.S. schools highlight the end of Darwin's theory of evolution?' would explore the relationship between evolution and education.

1.1 Developing your hypothesis

In developing your hypothesis or question, you should begin by asking:

What subject?

What general field of study do you want to cover in the course of your research and writing? For example, you could look at History, Chemistry, Health and Social Care or a combination of subjects that interlink; Biology and Philosophy may lead into areas of medical ethics and raise a question such as 'Is it ethically acceptable to deny NHS treatment on account of lifestyle choices?'

What theme?

Think about your specific themes, which will set the scope of your essay. For example, for the fields of History, Government and Politics, you could look at a theme such as U.S. foreign policy.

What context?

The theme of U.S. foreign policy could cover a 200 year period, which would be too difficult to cover in a single piece of research. You must pick a context for this theme such as the twenty-first century. This would still need to be focused further, for example with reference to policy towards Iran.

What specific topic?

The specific topic could be the role of the U.S. in the 2009 Iranian elections. Is your chosen topic significant to your overall theme? You will need to explain why what you are doing is relevant.

What methodology?

Is there a sound methodology behind your choice of themes, context and topics? Is it feasible to find the evidence to answer your question? Where will you get this evidence? Which sources will you use? For example, is it possible to compare and contrast the official responses of the U.S. and Iranian governments by using public speeches? Is there any further evidence of American involvement in the election highlighted in press reports, or online sources such as Youtube and Twitter?

If you write a well considered hypothesis or question you can:

- Narrow your research and focus more carefully
- Make better choices for the selection of your reading
- From your reading you can select information more carefully and get the right evidence to include in your essay
- Structure your writing to address the question more directly

1.2 Answer your own question

Once you have constructed your hypothesis or question, make sure that you address it throughout your essay.

A tutor has commented that you have not answered the question. Tick any of these that apply to you:

		TICK
1	I can't decide what is wanted for this essay	
2	What does the question actually mean?	
3	Am I answering the question which has been posed?	

If you have problems with some of these points, it would be helpful for you to think about whether you have phrased your hypothesis or question clearly.

Ultimately, it is worth spending time on the question posed – the key to good marks starts with developing an incisive and clear hypothesis.

2. Essay title instruction words

You may decide to develop a question rather than a hypothesis. An essay question will have an **instruction** or **action word(s)**, e.g. Discuss, Explain, Evaluate, etc. You will need to think about these words and their usage, if you are writing your own question, as they will indicate what is to come in your essay. Your choices are important as if, for example, you **discuss** a topic when you have said you will **evaluate** it then you could get low marks.

As a general guideline, the following definitions of instruction words give an indication of what might be expected in an essay:

	TICK
Account for	Give the reason for. Not to be confused with 'Give an account of' which is only asking for description.
Analyse	Describe the main ideas in depth, showing why they are important and how they are connected.
Assess	Discuss the strong and weak points of the subject. Put your own judgement clearly in the conclusion.
Comment	State your views on the subject clearly. Back up your points with sufficient evidence and examples.
Compare	Look for similarities and differences.
Contrast	Show how the subjects are different.
Criticise	Give your opinion/judgement about the merit of theories/facts; back this up by discussing the evidence or reasoning involved.
Define	Give clear, concise meanings. State limitations of the definition.
Describe	Give a detailed or graphic account of the topic.
Discuss	Give reasons for and against; examine implications; present your own position on the topic.
Evaluate	Weigh things up; look at the strengths and weaknesses and assess.
Examine	Look closely at all aspects.
Explain	Give reasons for something.
Illustrate	Make clear by the use of examples/diagrams; clarify points.
Interpret	Express in simple terms. You are usually expected to include your own judgements.
Justify	Show adequate ground for decisions/conclusions and ideas/theories.
Outline	Give the main features or general principles of a subject – should not include all the details.

	TICK
Prove	Establish that something is ‘true’ by presenting factual evidence or giving clear, logical reasons.
Relate	Show how things are connected to each other; how they affect each other.
Review	Make a survey of something.
State	Present brief, clear information.
Summarise	Give a concise account of the main points – should not include details.
Trace	Follow the development of a topic.
To what extent...	Another way of saying evaluate but suggests that you bring out how much (or how little).

3. Preparing to research for assignments

Guidelines

When you have posed your hypothesis or question, check your department’s guidelines:

- How long should the assignment be?
- What is the deadline?
- What other requirements are there (presentation, referencing, bibliography, etc.)?

Basic research

Start with basic reading to get an overview of the topic and the current issues surrounding it. Keep the question in mind as you do your initial research:

- Lecture and seminar notes
- Handouts
- Relevant chapters in core textbooks
- Websites: The internet is a hugely valuable resource for research, but you must make sure that the sites you use are academically reliable. Try starting with those identified in *Learn, discover, develop & create. University of Southampton guide to research.*

Detailed Research

When you are familiar with the basics, move on to more advanced texts where you will find detail on the variety of academic opinions on a given topic and suitable supporting evidence:

- Articles in journals
- Texts referred to by your lecturer
- References in handouts
- References in core texts (you can expand your reading by checking footnotes, endnotes and bibliographies of core texts to find related work and sources)
- Databases and online research

Be selective

It is essential to always make sure your examples are **directly relevant** to the topic in hand. Keep the question in mind, and check the relevance of the material you read and note down.

Also see the academic skills guides *Navigating the page* on reading effectively, and *Making the case* on gathering information.

Once your research is completed you are ready to organise your material and structure your essay.

4. Organising material

When you have finished researching for your assignment and have collected your material together, you need to organise the material to see how the different sources:

- relate to each other
- relate to the question

Here are three methods of organising your material. See which you find most helpful (it might be a combination):

4.1 Mind-maps

Mind-mapping is especially useful for Visual Learners. Draw your ideas on a large sheet of paper and use all of the page:

- Highlight in colour
- Add links around key concepts
- Use different shapes to mean different things

You can use mind-maps when you are collecting information. Mind-maps allow you to represent your ideas visually. You will need to enter one centre concept from which you will link other ideas. This reflects your memory structure as a network. Mind-maps are useful for:

- **Jotting down initial ideas:** They are an excellent way to help you start linking ideas and themes for your essay
- **Note-taking:** You could use a concept as your centre key word and then link issues and arguments, and authors that support those positions
- **Writing:** You can use this to organise the structure or plan of your essay

4.2 Grid of statements for and against the argument

Your 'evidence' can be collected from different sources, and, as you make decisions about who says what, you can place your summarised bullet points in the most appropriate part of the grid.

For example: Is nuclear power the best way to meet the ever-increasing energy needs of the planet, or do alternative energy sources provide a viable alternative?

Key words: Nuclear Power Alternative Energy Sources

Keep these key words in mind so that you remember what it is that you have to focus on. It is not any type of fuel, but specifically nuclear power and alternative energy sources.

	IN FAVOUR OF	AGAINST	ALTERNATIVE
Nuclear Power	Fossil fuels are a finite resource and will run out shortly.	It is virtually impossible to predict how long fossil fuels will last because there are undiscovered resources and because the rate of use cannot be predicted accurately.	Does it have to be one or the other? Is it possible to develop nuclear power more safely?
Alternative Energy Sources	With investment all methods of alternative energy could be made efficient enough to serve humanity.	The great irony is that not only are most renewable sources inefficient but many can also be ecologically unsound.	Is the amount of investment needed in alternative sources of energy realistic? What other options are there?

Notice how the table can help formulate the argument for your essay. Remember that you do **not** want to simply present one side and then the other and then decide on the answer in the conclusion. Decide on your own opinion from the beginning, and present the evidence for your position, making sure that you address any opposing evidence along the way. You can also look at the academic skills guide *Hammering the prose* for help on formulating an argument.

4.3 Index cards

These are useful for those who like to gather information in separate compartments. They can be physically moved around at a later stage to work out the sequence and structure of an essay, and so can be a useful method for kinaesthetic learners. Index cards can prevent copying out word for word what is in books and journals because there is a limited space available for making notes, and as such they are good for developing summary skills.

Write a separate card for each key word.

Each card should contain:

- A title
- The full reference of where you found the information (this will help when you come to doing your reference list or when citing references in your essay (see the academic skills guide *Acknowledging knowledge* on referencing your work)
- Some **brief** bullet points about the information needed for the essay
- Your own thoughts and comments – preferably in a different colour to help them stand out and so you can differentiate between your ideas and those from books and journals

5. Essay outlines

When you have organised the content of your assignment, you may think that you are ready to begin writing. Not quite. You need to draw up some outlines before you start writing.

The most successful essays will often have been based on a detailed outline, as this enables you to give your essay a coherent and logical structure. For each essay you write, you will need to decide what angle you will take and the argument you will put forward in answering the question. Every essay will have the following components:

Introduction:	What is the hypothesis you will address? What is the context of your topic? What structure will your essay take?
Definitions:	How would you define the key terms or the subject of the essay?
Theme/slant:	What angle will you take on the material, or is the question asking you to address? What will you discuss?
Argument:	What is your argument or opinion on the topic?
Supporting evidence:	How can you back up your position?
Secondary literature:	Which scholars support or disagree with your position?
Conclusion:	What is the outcome and significance of your argument and of your supporting evidence? Make sure you answer any question set.

5.1 First outline of an assignment

Decide how you will present the material, by writing an outline that shows the main points and subsidiary points. For example:

Introduction: Context, Hypothesis, Structure

- Context: Include a definition and explanation of terms and outline of the scope of your essay – What are the basic questions and issues being addressed? What topics will you examine and why? What will not be discussed and why?
- Hypothesis: What position will you take?
- Structure: Outline the basic structure of your essay

Body of essay: Overview and Examples

- Overview: General consideration or presentation of the background of the issues raised by the question and your angle or position on this question
- Examples: What you consider to be the most relevant areas of discussion to make your point, but take into account opposing views and dissenting evidence

- For each section/paragraph:
 - What point do you want to make?
 - Outline and discussion of the point
 - Evidence to support what you are saying
 - Link back to argument

Conclusion: Answer, argument, implications and significance

- **Answer:** include a decisive and clear answer to any question set
- **Argument:** a statement of your argument
- **Implications and significance:** what are the implications of your argument?

All parts should make reference to the examples discussed.

5.2 Second outline of an assignment

Before you invest time in writing your essay, take a critical look over your first outline. Does it:

- Have a clear argument that is referred to throughout?
- Contain sufficient supporting evidence?
- Mention the facts that you intended to include?
- Present the facts in a logical sequence? For example:
 - from simple to complex
 - from ancient to modern
 - from specific to general
 - from ineffective to effective
- Use the material in a way that will make your case convincingly?

You are now ready to begin writing.