

Planning an essay

What do you need to know before you start?

- **Assessment guidelines** –outline the qualities that an assignment must have. You need to familiarise yourself with these guidelines before you begin your assignment
- **Submission deadline** –This is very exact (e.g. 5pm on Tuesday 4th April). The majority of departments impose a penalty for late submission of assignments. Therefore no matter how good your assignment is, you could potentially lose up to 20% of the marks if you submit late. If you miss, or think that you are going to miss the submission deadline, you need to provide your department with evidence of mitigating circumstances in order to get an extension date
- **Contribution to overall mark** – know what percentage of the final mark for your course/module this essay will contribute. If it contributes a lot, then it will require more time and attention
- **Word limit** – know the word limit for the assignment. A shorter assignment can be more difficult to write as you have to ensure your arguments are short, clear and concise. Most departments impose penalties for exceeding the word limit, some allows 10% over or under.
- **References and Bibliography**– before writing your assignment, check whether your references are to be included in the word count and about how many references you should have, should they be from the last 5 years etc.

Getting Started

Step 1 - Picking your Topic:

Be strategic- Will it be easy to find good resources on the topic, will everyone in the class be doing it, have you good notes on it already, is it a topic you are interested in?

Really consider your essay choice before you start writing it, read and research into more than 1 essay idea to see which is best, make sure you are answering what is being asked, and clarify your essay idea with your lecturer if you have to.

Step 2 – Readings:

Check your reading list and make sure to read and include **key readings** in your essay.

Begin reading to get a broad overview of the essay topic. Once you gain an overview, you will need to read in a more focused way and make notes on what you read.

You need to be able to identify what references are relevant to your assignment title and which are not.

Finding relevant info

- Journal Articles- Read the **abstract**
- Books – Look through the Table of contents and identify relevant chapters, read intro, summary, conclusion
- (You will probably find an article or chapter that is very relevant and you may want to take more notes on this and read it all, however this will not be necessary for most of your sources.)
- ‘Evidence of **extra/outside reading**’, is sometimes a criteria in the assessment guidelines. To gain extra marks and show the examiner that you have sourced relevant ‘extra reading’, you can use journals not on your recommended reading list.

Some places to find journal articles

In the college library

Using the college online resources

Google Scholar

Research Gate

Top Tips:

- If you are finding it hard to find information or resources for your topic try **rewording** it when typing it into the search engine
- If you have found a good paper that is very relevant to your topic, look through their **reference list** and read some of the papers they have cited (copy and paste articles from their reference list into the search bar)
- Use the function '**control f**' (hold down the 'ctrl' button and the letter 'f' on your keyboard at the same time) a search bar will appear on your screen and you can type the term you are looking for, it will show you every time in the article that the term is used. If you are just looking for key term, this will save you having to read the whole article.

Step 3 – Planning:

Planning is an essential part of writing an essay. It takes a lot of effort, thinking, writing, and rewriting in order to produce a good essay. A common complaint from examiners and lecturers is that students write a lot of information but they do not answer the question.

Always go back and read what you are being asked to write about and re read the marking criteria!

Planning your essay makes it much more likely that you will end up with a coherent argument

Adapted from 'A Study Guide for Third Level Students' National Learning Network TU Dublin Blanchardstown

It enables you to work out a logical structure and an end point for your argument before you start writing

- Know the **format** and length of your assignment - essay, critical review, report, comparison etc.?
- Answer the question asked - look at 'directive' words in question
- Write using **academic language**
- Include a **reference list** at the end of the essay, keep a record of your references as you work your way through the assignment instead of leaving the referencing until the end.
- Avoid plagiarism

Step 4 - What to include :

- Write the **essay title** on the top of your page, and then write down a list of **headings** you think may be relevant
- Do not evaluate ideas at this stage, just write them down
- Use mindmaps, drawings etc to note down ideas under the headings
- Identify **information that is relevant** and that you are going to use to answer the question by reading journal articles or material recommended by your lecturer
- Make sure at this stage to **keep a list of all your references** as you work through your assignment
- Look through your **notes** and choose examples to provide evidence to support your answer
- Decide which points you will discuss and in **which order**

(Adapted from Davey, 2012)

Directive Words <i>Marshall and Rowland (1993)</i>	
Word	Meaning
Analyse	Show the essence of something, by breaking it down into its component parts and examining each part in detail.
Argue	Present the case for and/or against a particular proposition.
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between propositions
Criticise	Give your judgement about the merit of theories or opinions about the truth of facts, and back your judgement by a discussion of the evidence.
Define	Set down the precise meaning of a word or phrase. Show that the distinctions implied in the definition are necessary.
Describe	Give a detailed account of the topic.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument, give the reasons for and against.
Enumerate	List or specify and describe.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal of worth of the topic in light of its apparent truth or usefulness, include your personal opinion.
Examine	Present in depth and investigate the implications.
Explain	Make plain, interpret and account for in detail.
Illustrate	Explain by use of concrete examples, or by the use of a figure or diagram.
Interpret	Bring out the meaning of, and make clear usually by also giving your own judgement.
Justify	Give adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions.
Outline/Summarise	Give the main details of a subject, omitting the minor details.
Prove	Demonstrate truth or falsity by presenting evidence.
Review	Make a critical survey of the subject.
State	Specify fully and clearly.
Trace	Identify and describe the development or history of a topic from some point of origin.

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