## Planning to write an essay

**One starting point for planning for and researching your essay, is to write the topic question down on an index card. On the same card below the topic question write the definition of the verb in the question. Bring the card with you at all times when you are researching the topic to keep the focus of your essay at the fore of your mind. This will prevent you from reading unnecessary irrelevant information.**

### Gather your information

It is highly unlikely that you are the first person to write on the topic you have been assigned in your essay question. You must show knowledge of previous academic research on your topic and incorporate it into your essay. This can be a good starting point as it gives you something to agree or disagree with. Remember that you must back this up with evidence.

Be aware of all of the resources available to you- books in the library, newspapers, journals, Internet, lecture notes, etc. If there is a database specific to your course, this may be very useful to do specific keyword searches using words in your essay title. Awareness of and use of these databases can save you time researching your topic. Any secondary reading lists that lecturers provide are to help you to save time in searching for relevant material. Be sure to incorporate any relevant material in your essay, and in some way show that you are aware of such research.

### Ordering of Information

In the planning stage you must discriminate between what is relevant and what is not. Do not try to include information just because you find it interesting or have spent a lot of time reading something which makes you determined to include it. This is always important, but particularly so when the essay is short. In an essay of 2,500 words you really must keep to the point!

### Outline

At the planning stage, you need to work out in which direction your argument is going to take. Start with the ‘Body’ of your essay and divide it into paragraphs. You will be able to assess how in-depth your argument must be and how many points per paragraph based on the length of your essay. You can do this using a writing frame or planner: spider diagrams, flow charts, lists or boxes. Your preferred learning style – visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or combination – will determine the most effective way to plan an essay.

The main ways to capture your ideas are:

* Use your mobile phone, laptop or a digital voice recorder to record your ideas. This can be done over a time and avoids a situation where thoughts may be lost while you are writing them down.
* Write your ideas down into a frame or planner, or construct a mind map. You could also use a large sheet of paper and index cards or Post-it notes. This way you can move your ideas around until you are happy with the structure or flow. It is not necessary to write in complete sentences; key words or phrases will do.
* If you are a competent typist and prefer to work directly onto a computer, you might prefer to get your ideas down quickly. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar mistakes at this point. You can use editing tools to spell check and re-organise your points.

### First draft

Read the paragraphs in the body of your essay to consider whether or not your points flow together smoothly. Make sure that each paragraph marks a development in your argument. Ensure that the last line of each paragraph either links into the next paragraph, or summarizes the paragraph’s argument.

### Second draft

At this stage, the creative aspects of the body of your essay should be finished, although you will still need to edit and proof-read. You can now write your conclusion. Here, do not introduce new material. The conclusion will summarize your argument and draw the logical conclusion to what you have argued. You may suggest further research which could be carried out on the topic, if appropriate. You can also end with a definitive quotation from your research, if you read something which particularly struck you as a poignant summation.

### Referencing

Make sure that you write down all the information that you need for referencing while you do your research. For a book, you need: author, title, place of publication (i.e. city) and year of publication. To reference other types of publications, see ‘Quotations and your bibliography’ in the Academic Skills Hub.

## Proof-reading

Leave enough time before the deadline to put the essay to the side for a day or two after you finish writing. Proof-read it again at least one day before it is due. You will not be so involved with the logic of the essay and can read it ‘fresh.’ It is likely that you will note some improvements that you can make and you will then have time to make them. Consider the flow of logic as you read the essay. Does it make sense? Have you performed a ‘spell-check’? It is often helpful to get someone else to proof-read your writing for an outside opinion on whether or not you have presented a clear argument. See ‘Proof-reading and editing’ in the Academic Skills Hub for more detailed information.

