

16 Organising your Retrieval System

In this chapter you will learn:

- ▶ how to create an effective retrieval system to catch the ideas of your own ideas and insights;
- ▶ the importance of using a journal and notebook;
- ▶ how to gather notes by using a card-index and a project box.

If we are to generate and use more of our own ideas and insights, we will have to spend some time organising an effective research strategy. The key to this is to have a retrieval system that is sufficiently adaptable to catch the material *whenever* and *wherever* it shows itself, and then provide us with a means of accessing it easily whenever we want it.

Creating such a system isn't difficult, but it means going beyond the normal loose-leaf folder, a few wallet files and a reliable source of A4 paper. It calls for a thoughtful approach, a little imagination and, above all, flexibility. As we've already seen with our reading and note-taking, inflexibility in the way we use our skills can trap us within the confines of low-level work. We're forced into surface-level processing, dependent on the ideas that our tutors and texts can give us.

The same goes for our retrieval system too. Unless we choose and organise its various components thoughtfully, we're likely to lose most of our best ideas, and produce work that is predictable and imitative of the ideas we've been given. To put it simply, our system should promote, not frustrate the quality of our work. This is not an unimportant part of our pattern of study, and its influence is never neutral. Get it right and we can find ourselves with an abundance of insightful ideas that are genuinely our own. Get it wrong and our work struggles to rise above the mundane and imitative.

Without a good retrieval system we will lose many of our best ideas and our work will be predictable and imitative.

● Searching out your own sources

Most of us are used to using the obvious sources of material, like the book-lists and references provided by the tutors of courses. But you can go further

than this and uncover texts and articles of your own by checking the bibliographies of the recommended texts. Certain texts will be common throughout each bibliography, which is often a good indication of those that are the most useful and respected in the field. But check the date of the publication. If you're looking at a text published in 1964 and its bibliography is recommending another text published in 1944, you might find that other texts have been published since, that have superseded it. However, don't be surprised if this is not the case: there are still the classic, highly respected, indispensable texts in most subject areas.

Beyond bibliographies, probably the most under-used resources are libraries and their staff. The local library, and particularly college and university libraries, are more than just a source of books: they collect and classify information from a wide range of sources. Most take an impressive range of journals, newspapers and periodicals, along with government reports on a range of topics. Of course, in addition, most have computer terminals that can give you access to the Internet and specialist databases. Many libraries also have large stocks of recordings of educational material.

Sources

- 1 Tutors' recommendations
- 2 Bibliographies
- 3 Libraries:
 - 3.1 Journals
 - 3.2 Newspapers and periodicals
 - 3.3 Government reports
 - 3.4 Internet
 - 3.5 Specialist databases
 - 3.6 Recordings of educational material

● The richest source is found in your own mind

For most of us this just about covers the range of sources available to us. But it ignores one of the richest sources of ideas and evidence, mainly because we're not accustomed to recognise it as such. Each day we talk to friends and acquaintances, we listen to the radio and watch TV, or we just sit thinking as we drive home in our cars, or on a bus or train. On all of these occasions our minds are taking in ideas and processing them into complex,

self-organised structures. This is rich material that we ignore at our own cost. Just because it doesn't come from an authoritative book or article, or from a knowledgeable tutor, this doesn't mean it's not full of insights that the mind will feed on to produce interesting and useful structures of ideas.

Take those moments in the day when we're alone with our thoughts without any interruptions from friends, the TV, the radio, or a book we ought to read. It's just us and our ideas in the car as we drive home, or in a bus, or on a train. On most of these occasions it's difficult in retrospect to recall exactly what we were thinking at the time. This in itself is not always a bad thing. Such moments of reverie are the time when the mind can process the material it's taken in during the day and organise it into structures for us to use if we have the will to access it.

But on other occasions, rather than whiling away this valuable time with just empty static in your head, it's useful just to set yourself a topic to think about and sort out as you sit there – in fact more useful than most students ever imagine. It's the time when you can do some serious thinking for yourself, not in response to someone else, a book or a tutor, but responding to your own ideas and your own original insights. You will be surprised at the results, maybe not immediately, although that's quite likely to occur, but certainly a few days later when all sorts of ideas, insights and structures will appear in your mind and you'll wonder where you picked them up from.

Practice exercise 16

Tapping into your own ideas

Sit down with a blank sheet of paper; take one of the following issues or one from a course you're studying; and write down the points for and against the argument presented.

Give yourself 30 minutes free of all distractions. As you produce each point or argument ask yourself if it needs analysing into its component points. If it does, analyse it. Be as exhaustive as you can in an effort to empty your mind of all your ideas on the issue.

Issues:

1. There are not enough medical resources to meet all our needs, so we should put those whose illness is self-inflicted at the bottom of the waiting list.
2. Education in schools today is more about testing than teaching.
3. Bribes, gifts and commissions should be accepted as normal, justified methods in the modern business environment.

Some students, who have deliberately set about adopting this strategy whenever they're alone, tell me they plan whole essays in their head. Others describe how they've given themselves a difficult problem to sort out or a complicated argument that they've never really understood before. And, without the usual distractions around them, such as their books and other sources of reference they've come to rely on whenever they want to solve a problem, they've sorted it out on their own terms. Or, failing that, they've at least discovered for the first time what the problem was.

But it's not just these quiet moments that are a rich source of material and insights. When we discuss topics with friends we find ourselves using what we've read in books and articles, in the course of which we produce interesting ideas and arguments without any conscious prompting. Each day as we read the newspapers we are quite likely to come across new evidence for something we've been studying, or interesting quotations that would support an argument we're planning to use in an essay. And, of course, there are those really special moments when we have a sudden dramatic insight, when we suddenly see something that's been troubling us for some time, clear and in sharp focus for the first time.

Spend just 30 minutes alone each day without any distractions to:

- 1 Plan an essay.
- 2 Sort out problems.
- 3 Record ideas that may have come to you during the day as you discussed things with friends.
- 4 Note evidence and quotations you pick up from newspapers.
- 5 Catch insights as they come clearly into focus.

● Carry a notebook

On all of these occasions we need to have our retrieval system well worked out. In particular, we need to have with us at all times a small notebook in which we can note our sudden insights, or just work out our arguments and plans on paper. This represents the internal monologue we have with ourselves on the subjects we're studying. You may say, of course, 'Well, as soon as I leave the classroom I don't think about the subject again, until the next lesson, or until I have to do work on it.' But not only is this unwise for

obvious reasons, it's also most unlikely. This internal monologue may be buried deep, but it's still there. Although for some it's louder than for others, we all need to cultivate a system for tapping into it, so we can make the best use of its insights and then switch it off so we can get on with other things.

We all need a system for tapping into our internal monologue to make the best use of its insights.

The point is that the most thoughtful and creative insights come to us not in the customary learning situations, such as lessons or as we work at our essays, but when we're off guard. And if we fail to live with this internal monologue and organise ourselves to use it, we'll lose a wealth of ideas and insights, which are essentially *ours*. You can always follow these up later with further research, but if you fail to record them the moment they occur, you will almost certainly forget them. Even if you're able to recover a small fragment of them sometime later, the most valuable part, the insight, the form that the idea took in the first place that forced it to the surface, will be lost to you forever. And it's this that made it vivid and clear for you and will in turn, make it vivid and clear for others too.

- Use a notebook to tap into your ideas as your mind sorts them out.
- Here you will find a wealth of original ideas that are genuinely yours.
- Record the ideas as they occur, otherwise you will lose the insight that made them vivid in the first place.

● Keeping a journal

Nevertheless, this is not the only way in which you can tap into more of your own thoughts. Probably the most useful method is to set up your own journal, either manually or in a computer file, in which you give yourself the opportunity of writing, say, two or three times each week for at least half an hour each time.

Unlike a conventional diary where you describe the events that have occurred in your life, a journal gives you the opportunity of writing exclusively about your ideas and their development. For most of us, opportunities to write in this free, unconstrained manner are rare: we're usually working with books, or with our notes, so the ideas that are genuinely ours, untainted by what we're reading or referring to, rarely reach the surface of our consciousness, although they're always there.

● Index-card systems

To make the system complete, back up the notebook and the journal with an index-card system divided into sections for each topic on the syllabus. Whenever we come across an interesting idea, an isolated statistic, or a useful quotation, it's very difficult to know exactly what to do with it. Do you write it up on a sheet of paper? But if you do, where are you going to file it? And it's all too easy to lose just one sheet. To cope with this we need a simple, flexible system that we can use to catch all those isolated items that we would otherwise lose or not know what to do with. The card system fulfils this role perfectly.

Using just one card for each item (a quotation, an idea, an argument, or a set of figures), you have a retrieval system that makes it very easy to find what you want whenever you want it, particularly when you come to revise for an examination, or set about the research for an essay. Once you've worked with a card system for a few months, you'll wonder how you ever lived without one.

Practice exercise 17

Recording isolated material

Over the next week tick the relevant box below, each time you come across material that you would like to retain, but have nowhere to record it.

An interesting idea	
A quotation	
Figures, statistics	
Examples	
The title of a book or article	
Miscellaneous items	

Equally important, most students find a card system frees them from the authors they read when they come to write the essay. First, because they are restricted by the limited space to noting only the ideas they need, they avoid getting trapped within the complex web of the author's arguments. And

second, because they can sort and shuffle the cards, they can take each idea in the order they want to, and not in the order their authors presented them. You will also find a good card system will help you avoid the temptation to plagiarise. Not only is this unacceptable, because, in effect, it's 'literary theft', but it will unbalance your writing. It will break up the flow of your words and ideas, and make it increasingly difficult for you to keep control of your structure and, therefore, the relevance of your arguments. Even more important, it will make it difficult for you to develop your own ideas. Once you've accepted an author's statement as the undisputed authority, you're left with no good reason to discuss or challenge it.

Plagiarism . . .

- Is literary theft.
- Unbalances your essay.
- Breaks up the flow of your words and ideas.
- Makes it difficult to control the structure of your essay and, therefore, the relevance of your arguments.
- Makes it difficult to develop your own ideas.

A card system gives you the opportunity to record your sources accurately at the top of each card, and with the limited space it forces you to put the ideas into your own words. If the phrase or section in the text is so telling that no summary in your own words will capture the idea, then you're restricted to recording only short quotations of a sentence or two, which must be chosen with much greater care.

Index-card system

- 1 Catches all those isolated items we might otherwise lose.
- 2 Easy to find what you want whenever you want it.
- 3 You decide on the order of your ideas, not the authors you read.
- 4 It helps you avoid plagiarism.

The project box

Finally, you might borrow an idea from professional writers. It's not unusual for writers to use a project box or file for the job they're working on. Into this

they will put anything that comes to hand which might be useful in the future when they get around to organising the piece they've planned to write. You can do the same. Take a file, or even an actual box, that you can use for the essay you're going to have to write, or the topic you're about to study, and whenever you come across something that might be useful, drop it in. It may be an article taken from a newspaper or magazine; it may be notes taken from a TV programme; it may be anything that just stimulates an idea that you might otherwise forget.

This has all sorts of advantages. On a practical level, the very fact of having a box or file of this kind will in itself generate material that we would not otherwise have noticed. Knowing that we have something into which we can throw material of all different kinds is all the encouragement most of us need to set about noticing and collecting it wherever we can find it.

- Knowing that we have somewhere to put material, we notice and collect more.
- It prepares the mind to work on the project continuously even when we're not consciously thinking about it.

But equally important, it prepares the mind not just to recognise material when we see it, but to work on the ideas continuously; to see the essay as a developing project to be worked on even when we're not consciously thinking about it. We learn to regard our work as more like open-ended, ongoing projects, which we can't just switch off as soon as we leave the seminar or tutorial, or put down a book. It encourages us to develop our ideas over time and beyond the normal confines of study.

Summary

- 1 To generate more of our own ideas we must have an effective retrieval system.
- 2 With a flexible, effective system we are better able to catch our best ideas and produce work that is not predictable and imitative.
- 3 The richest source of ideas is your own mind and experience.

- 4 Carry a notebook and keep a journal to catch your best ideas.
- 5 Keep an index-card system and a project file to catch isolated items you might otherwise lose.

In the next chapter

Nevertheless, if this retrieval system is to work, we will have to organise our time more effectively. In the next chapter we will examine the simple things we can do to make sure we have enough time not just to catch our own ideas and develop our thinking and writing skills, but also to relax.

20 Editing and Ordering your Material

Planning your essays in this way involves routinely working through two quite distinct stages: editing and ordering your material. Neither of them can be rushed: you must work through them carefully and deliberately.

Both call for what you might describe as the personality profile of a military planner: inexhaustible supplies of quiet patience matched by cool ruthlessness. There will be ideas, arguments and evidence with which you have developed a strong emotional bond, but you may have to cut them out and abandon them without a tear, if the essay is to succeed. However painful it is to realise that some of the material you've worked hard to collect is irrelevant to this essay, you cannot shirk the responsibility. If you do, you will pass on problems to later stages and, if they're not dealt with there, they will seriously weaken the clarity and logical structure of your essay.

By the same token, try to avoid the exhaustive answer in which you try to impress the examiners by putting in everything you know. You're being assessed on your abilities to interpret issues and make a judgement as to what's relevant to them. Don't sacrifice this ability for the chance to impress someone with how much you know. Your abilities to evaluate and discuss issues involve more complex skills, and therefore attract higher marks. Without spelling it out, you can always make examiners aware that you know so much more, but you realise it is not relevant to the particular issues raised by this question.

- Cut out material that is not strictly relevant, even though you may have worked hard to gather it.
- It will cloud the clarity and seriously harm the logical structure of your essay.
- You will earn more marks by showing examiners that you can interpret complex issues and write relevantly, than you can by impressing them with how much you know.

In this chapter you will learn:

- ▶ how to edit your material to create a structure in your essay that is clear and logical.
- ▶ how to order your ideas to develop arguments that are coherent and persuasive.
- ▶ how to make sure the examiners are left with the right impression of your work.

Editing

Unless you've spent enough time interpreting the question, editing the material you've collected can be a tortuous nightmare. We are all quite naturally reluctant to give up material that we've struggled hard to uncover and record, especially if it includes particularly interesting points that we know will impress our reader. It's not surprising, then, that without a clear criterion by which you can decide what's relevant and what's not, you will find it difficult, if not impossible, to resist using material that's not relevant.

This will have the effect of clouding the structure of your essay with unnecessary distractions that weaken your arguments and break up the logical sequence you've worked hard to create. On the other hand, however, with a clear interpretation of the implications of the question, it is so much easier to be uncompromisingly ruthless with your material.

Remove all irrelevant material which will otherwise obscure the structure of your arguments.

Ordering

Although you don't have the same heart-wrenching problems of ditching material you've become attached to, you still need an iron will in ordering your ideas, if you're to avoid the same problem of being dictated to by your sources. It can simply be very difficult to abandon the order in which we recorded the notes in the first place.

Some people find that keeping their notes on index cards helps in sorting out and selecting their material: they can change the order of the cards, and their ideas, much more easily than if they are recorded on continuous sheets of paper in the order the notes were taken from the texts. Others use just one side of the paper and then cut them up and organise them. Both methods give you more control over your material. They free you from the sense of being dictated to by your sources.

Impose your own order on your material, rather than follow the order in which you recorded your notes from your sources.

The simplest way of ordering our ideas, requiring no thought from us, is to arrange them according to their history – the chronology of events. Using this strategy it is time that orders them, not us. So we tend to argue, 'First

this happened . . . and then this . . . and then this . . . and so on.' Beware of this! Not only does it result in answers that are largely irrelevant, but we only use the simplest of our abilities, for which we will receive much lower marks. In other words, instead of analysing and discussing an issue, we merely describe it.

Unless you're asked for one, avoid chronological answers . . .

- They are irrelevant.
- They only demonstrate the simpler abilities and attract, therefore, much lower marks.

As you can see, then, if we use this strategy to answer a question that asks us to discuss or critically evaluate a claim, we're in danger of failing. With this sort of question be even-handed in presenting both sides of the issue. Even though you may have limited sympathy for one side, play devil's advocate and present it as strongly and as persuasively as you can. This way the examiners will know that you are aware of all the issues and you're not blinkered. Equally important, they will realise that you have that exceptional ability and flexibility of mind to argue against yourself – to be self-reflective. As a result, you'll show that you are not trapped by your own ideas; that you can think outside of them and accept new ideas. In the process you'll demonstrate that you are an accomplished and mature thinker.

Playing devil's advocate and arguing against that side of the argument for which you have most sympathy demonstrates that you are a mature and accomplished thinker.

But whatever the type of question, in general it makes sense to arrange your ideas in ascending order: from the simplest to the most complex; from the least persuasive to the most persuasive. In the sort of question we have just considered there will be two parts dealing with each side of the argument, but within each part order the ideas in ascending order in this way. Logically this makes sense, particularly if the clarity of your most complex arguments depends upon how convincingly you've used your simpler, more obvious arguments to build a basis for them. But it also makes psychological sense in that in dealing with the most subtle and impressive arguments at the end of the essay you leave your examiners with the impression that the whole of your essay was of that quality. Hopefully, you will have left them with a well developed, interesting argument to think over as they consider what mark to award you.

Practice exercise 21

Editing and ordering your material

Question

Are there any circumstances where the individual is justified in refusing to obey a law?

Interpret the question above as you did in the first stage: write a statement outlining as fully as you can the meaning and implications of the question. For this exercise you don't need to brainstorm the question as you are given, below, a set of notes to edit and then order into a plan for the essay; but your interpretation should give you a clear idea of what you expect to see as relevant to the question.

Once you've done this, go through the notes below, deciding what you think is relevant and what needs to be cut. Then, order what's left into a plan in linear-note form, indicating how you would tackle this essay.

After you've completed it, compare your plan with the one given below.

The notes

1. Outline the main types of law – common law – judicial precedent – statute law – conventions

2. Refusal justified when:

- (a) Government has no popular legitimacy – lacks majority support – authoritarian governments
e.g. South Africa/apartheid
- (b) Government is legitimate, but the majority tyrannises a minority
e.g. Germany – Nazi Government – 1935 Nuremberg Laws
e.g. USA – 1960s Civil Rights – segregation – M. L. King
- (c) Government extends its powers too far – restricting the liberties of the individual unnecessarily.
- (d) There is a conflict between the legal and moral obligations of the individual. Question: Which takes precedence?
e.g. moral obligation to help a friend by not turning him over to the police, who believe he has committed an offence

3. Give the reasons why Mahatma Gandhi deliberately broke the law in non-violent direct action to bring about the peaceful withdrawal of British power from India.

4. Problem = when government is legitimate and the law conflicts with individual conscience and principles, such as pacifism
e.g. Quakers refusing to pay that proportion of their taxes that is spent on nuclear weapons
5. Danger = social breakdown – it allows individuals to pick and choose the laws they will obey and those they won't.
6. Describe the campaign of civil disobedience launched by the suffragettes in 1906 to get the vote for women.
7. Note the arguments put forward by A. V. Dicey for the importance of the Rule of Law in ensuring regular, non-arbitrary government.
8. The government should only restrict the freedom of individuals when their actions are likely to cause harm to others (John Stuart Mill):
 - (a) If you shout offensive racial remarks at people in public the government should intervene to restrict your doing this.
 - (b) You have freedom of speech but the government should restrict this freedom if you publish pornographic material that can be shown to cause people harm, e.g. rape, child abuse, etc.
 - (c) The government should intervene to prevent employers sacking staff for no reason at all without any hearing or compensation.
 - (d) The government is justified in restricting your freedom when your actions cause physical harm to others, e.g. passive smoking.
9. But should the government be free to intervene and restrict your freedom when your actions cause harm to yourself only, e.g. smoking, wearing crash helmets?
10. Give an account of the ideas of those who have made important contributions to the debate:
 - Socrates
 - Henry Thoreau
 - Peter Kropotkin
 - Martin Luther King
 - John Rawls

The plan

Question

Are there any circumstances where the individual is justified in refusing to obey a law?

1. Problem: Government encroachment on our freedoms v. the danger of social breakdown if individuals are allowed to pick and choose the laws they will obey and those they won't
2. Government with no popular legitimacy – lacks majority support:
 - Refusing to obey the law = justified
 - authoritarian governments, e.g. South Africa/apartheid
3. Government is legitimate:
 - (a) But the majority tyrannises a minority:
 - Refusing to obey the law = justified
 - e.g. Germany – Nazi Government – 1935 Nuremberg Laws
 - e.g. USA – 1960s Civil Rights – segregation – M. L. King.
 - (b) Problem = when government is legitimate and the law conflicts with individual conscience and principles
 - e.g. Quakers refusing to pay that proportion of their taxes spent on nuclear weapons, because of pacifist principles
4. Conscience/principles: Problem = Government extends its powers too far – restricting the liberties of the individual unnecessarily.
 - (a) Extent of power 'harm' – Governments should only restrict the freedom of individuals when their actions are likely to cause harm to others (John Stuart Mill):
 - (i) But should governments be free to intervene and restrict your freedom when your actions cause harm to yourself only, e.g. smoking, wearing crash helmets?
 - (ii) Governments are justified in restricting your freedom when actions cause physical harm to others, e.g. passive smoking.
 - (iii) Justified if you cause psychological harm? e.g. If you shout offensive racial remarks at people in public?
 - (iv) Moral harm? You have freedom of speech but the government is justified in restricting this if you publish pornographic material that can be shown to cause people harm, e.g. rape, child abuse.
 - (v) Economic harm? The government is justified in restricting the freedom of employers to sack staff for no reason without any hearing or compensation.
 - (b) Precedence – Question: Where there is a conflict between the legal and moral obligations of the individual, which takes precedence?
 - e.g. moral obligation to help a friend by not turning him over to the police, who believe he has committed an offence.

1 Editing

Of course, as you haven't made these notes yourself, you can only take them on face value: you cannot go beyond what's given in the belief that if you search you may find something that's relevant. In fact, not being able to do this makes it easier for you to decide what's relevant and what's not.

1.1 Dumping material

We can all appreciate how difficult it might be for someone who has done the research to dump material like that contained in items 3, 6 and 10. If you have slowly worked your way through passages that are very closely argued, taking out a lot of material that you thought might be useful, it will be hard to ditch it. It's not that it's irrelevant, but it has to be used with more discrimination than is proposed here, which appears to be a straightforward description of the material. Far better would be to select from the material quotations and evidence that would support the arguments you want to make elsewhere in the essay.

1.2 Description for the sake of description

In fact the same can be said for items 1 and 7, both of which again appear to be descriptions for the sake of description. It might be useful to know the different types of law and Dicey's arguments for the importance of regular, rather than arbitrary law, but you will have to make this case out: you will have to justify why you think this is relevant. For example, there may be different implications for the question depending on the type of law involved, although on the face of it this appears unlikely.

2 Ordering

Having edited the material, you are now left to order your ideas from the simple to the complex and, as in this case, from the peripheral issues to those that are central. It seems that the best strategy is to work from those situations in which there appears least doubt and very limited discussion as to whether disobedience is justified, to those cases where there is real doubt. In this way you will ensure that your essay delivers you at the point that gives you the opportunity to discuss all the important issues.

2.1 The simpler cases

The obvious starting point, then, is with those governments who pass unjust laws or laws that lack the legitimacy of popular support. Few of us would not see some justification in the actions of those, like Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela, who refused to comply with laws passed as part of the apartheid policies of the South African government, which was supported by only a minority white population.

The more difficult case is that of a democratically legitimate government such as that in Germany during the Third Reich, which passed policies aimed at the minority Jewish population, denying them rights as citizens to practise their profession and to marry non-Jewish persons. Yet, again, few of us would have much difficulty in commending those who bravely refused to comply with the law and rescued Jews who otherwise would have been sent to extermination camps.

2.2 The most complex

So, perhaps the most difficult case that raises the issues we all have to consider is one that avoids both of these problems: that raises the question of a legitimate government that is not tyrannising a minority, yet is passing laws that conflict with what we consider to be our moral obligations. In short, what should we do when our moral obligations conflict with our legal obligations?

This, in turn, appears to raise two distinct issues. The first can be described as the extent of government – the claim that a government can only rightfully restrict the freedoms of individuals when their actions do harm to others. Of course, this part of your discussion will turn on the various interpretations of the concept of 'harm': physical, psychological, moral, economic, etc. The second problem is that of precedence: when there is a conflict, which should take precedence, our moral or our legal obligations?

Assignment

Now that you've completed two practice exercises, on editing and ordering your material, and on rehearsing your ideas in detail, it's time to do the same with the question you originally chose from one of your courses. You've interpreted this question and completed the research on it. In the following assignment you are creating the plan from which you will write the essay.

Editing, ordering and rehearsing your arguments

First, edit your material, cutting out any ideas you think are irrelevant to the question. Be ruthless. Even though you may like some of the arguments, because you know they will impress the reader, or because they have the sort of impact you want, cut them out if they are not strictly relevant to the issues raised by the question.

Then, order your ideas, paying particular attention to ascendancy and fluency. Start with the weakest or the simplest argument and move to the strongest. Try to envisage how you will move from one idea to the next.

Think about the types of transition you will use to create fluency between paragraphs (e.g. 'However', 'Therefore', 'In contrast').

Once you've got the overall structure clear, move to the content of the essay. Your aim is to see clearly how you will develop your arguments: how you will analyse points and concepts, make contrasts and comparisons, synthesise ideas from different sources, extend arguments consistently, and illustrate and support your points with evidence. So, as you go through the plan try to get an accurate measure of each argument, the links between them, and the logical flow of the whole essay. You're trying to put yourself in the position of writing the essay without actually writing it. In this way you will confront all the problems now before you write – there will be no nasty surprises.

Finally, when you've finished, check that you've left nothing out: that you've answered the question relevantly and completely; that you haven't overlooked a major section or issue raised by the question; and that you haven't left important points vulnerable without sufficient evidence.

Summary

- 1 Be ruthless with your material, ditching anything that is not strictly relevant.
- 2 To do this well you will need to have interpreted the question well in Stage 1.
- 3 Be careful not to obscure your structure and weaken the logical sequence of your arguments with irrelevant distractions.
- 4 Impose your own order on your ideas rather than follow the order in which you recorded them from your sources.
- 5 As a general rule arrange your ideas so that you develop your arguments by moving from the simplest to the most complex.