

Chapter 13

Writing at university level



Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ develop your own process as a 'writer'
- ✓ become better at managing academic writing tasks from start to finish
- ✓ apply a seven-step procedure for writing assignments
- ✓ organise and structure material and concepts for academic assignments
- ✓ develop strategies for specific aspects of the writing process such as managing writer's block
- ✓ approach academic writing tasks at this level with greater confidence.

Academic writing

Writing a good assignment is both a challenge and one of the most rewarding aspects of study. It offers a great opportunity for focusing your mind and gaining mastery of a new topic, as well as developing a skill useful for life, employment and study. With the right approach, writing assignments can be inspiring, fascinating and enjoyable!

Assignments at this level are meant to stretch you intellectually so they will seem challenging at times. The advantage is that, usually, students find their writing skills develop significantly. This arises from a combination of:

- ★ enhanced vocabulary and critical awareness gained from reading, writing and discussion on the course
- ★ the amount of practice they gain in writing notes and assignments
- ★ working at their writing to improve their grades.

Typically, students have many questions about what is expected of them and what their tutors look for when marking (or grading) written assignments. That sense of 'not knowing' can be unsettling and deter students from starting and persisting with assignments. Chapters 13–16 clarify core conventions and expectations and provide easy to follow procedures for producing a good assignment.

If you find you know some of this already, that is good and should reassure you. If any is new to you, don't worry: it will become very familiar in time.

Writing tasks cannot be separated from other processes such as critical thinking, organisation and research. Before completing a piece of writing, you might find it helpful to look at Chapters 10–12 too.



As your writing skills develop and you become more familiar with what is required for academic tasks, you can become more flexible in your approach. However, creative flexibility usually has to be within the conventions of the subject discipline: be aware of what is acceptable and what is not, for your subject.

How good am I at managing writing tasks?

For each item below, select ✓ the boxes that apply. Then rate how well you perform the skill currently (9 = excellent, 1 = weak/needs a lot of work). Use your evaluation to decide priorities for improvement.

Do I know how to ...	Yes	I just need practice	Not sure	No	Rating	See pages
1 envision the writing process as a whole?						274–5; 282–3
2 get started/overcome writer's block?						278–80
3 use assignment titles/questions effectively?						284–5
4 write using expected academic conventions?						281
5 organise my thoughts for writing?						289–91
6 plan a piece of writing?						282–3; 387–91
7 organise and structure my writing?						286–94
8 write good paragraphs?						293–5
9 link ideas together?						296
10 write a persuasive argument?						266; 317
11 provide critical analysis?						255–66
12 use academic writing styles?						281; 308–15
13 use reflection in writing?						313–14
14 draft, edit and proof-read?						292–7
15 present my writing?						298–9
16 write an essay?						Chapter 15
17 write a report (e.g. for research projects)?						Chapter 16
18 write a case study?						Chapter 16
19 cite my sources?						249–51
20 use feedback to improve my marks?						315–16

Reflection



Improving your written assignments

- ★ What are the two main priorities for improvement in your next written assignment? Highlight these.
- ★ Repeat this self-evaluation when your next piece of writing is returned, using the tutor's feedback.



Also available on the companion site at www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk.

Getting started on a written assignment

Typical comments from students

Many students get anxious or frustrated about writing. It can be hard to get started, keep going, bring writing to an end, and feel it is good enough to submit.

'I start a sentence, cross it out, start it again, cross it out, throw the paper in the bin, start a sentence, cross it out ...'

'I just see the essay title and panic. I think, "I don't know anything about that!"'

'I can't get down to it – I keep putting it off and then I'm in a huge rush to finish it.'

'Some people write out a report in a night – I have to write it over and over again.'

Reflection



Getting started

Maybe some of these comments strike a chord with you. In your journal, jot down your thoughts and observations about getting started with writing tasks. The list below may help clarify your thinking. Then consider the points on pages 276–7.

What stops me from writing?

- 1 I don't know the best way to go about writing.
- 2 I can't envisage the process from start to end.
- 3 Things don't go as I plan.
- 4 My ideas and writing keep getting in a mess.
- 5 I don't have much to say.
- 6 I don't know what to write first.
- 7 I can't get started. My mind goes blank.
- 8 I don't write well. I worry about grammar, etc.
- 9 I'm not sure what would be considered 'good'.
- 10 I don't do much writing – my skills are 'rusty'.
- 11 I get overwhelmed.

Activity



Working up a piece of writing

Start by gaining a sense of the overall process of working up a piece of writing. On the process map opposite, **Circle** or **highlight** any parts of this process that you tend to rush or omit in ways that weaken your finished item.

Working up a piece of writing

Working out what is needed	Considering the title in detail	Planning my time
----------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------

Finding material/ Reading	Writing notes about relevant material	Keeping a detailed record of sources I use
------------------------------	---------------------------------------	--

Talking about it	Listening	Jotting things down
------------------	-----------	---------------------

Considering different perspectives on the issues	Working out why findings/views differ
--	---------------------------------------

Working out whose findings or ideas I prefer	Checking things I didn't fully understand
--	---

Generating ideas/data	Selecting the best information	Getting my facts right
-----------------------	--------------------------------	------------------------

Synthesising my best ideas	Organising my thoughts	Working out what I really think
----------------------------	------------------------	---------------------------------

Sorting/organising my material	Deciding my argument	Deciding what to include
--------------------------------	----------------------	--------------------------

Deciding what to leave out	Deciding the structure	Planning out the writing
----------------------------	------------------------	--------------------------

Writing some thoughts down	Reworking my initial writing	Re-organising what is written
----------------------------	------------------------------	-------------------------------

Answer any questions I pose in my work	Checking back to the title	Re-working paragraphs
--	----------------------------	-----------------------

Reading it through	Rewriting weaker sections	Moving material around
--------------------	---------------------------	------------------------

Shorten long sentences	Combine short sentences	Remove repetition	Strengthen weak bits
------------------------	-------------------------	-------------------	----------------------

Checking citations	Defining words	Clarifying points made	Re-phrasing
--------------------	----------------	------------------------	-------------

Deleting	Summarising	Adding new points
----------	-------------	-------------------

Reading aloud for sense/flow	Checking references are complete and accurate	Proof-reading for grammar, spelling, punctuation
------------------------------	---	--

Developing your own writing process

10 considerations for developing your own writing process

1. Best way to write?	Every writer approaches it differently: at a set time every day or non-stop for a week; by planning it in detail first or generating ideas and structure through the act of writing. Experiment: find what works.
2. Can't envisage the process?	It is useful to have a mental map of what to do and when (pages 275 and 282–3). This helps you to hold key tasks in mind and manage time. It is likely you will move back and forth to refine and complete a piece of writing.
3. Things don't go to plan?	Be prepared to flex your plan and leave plenty of time to do so. The writing process can be unpredictable: you might find you write for hours when you had planned ten minutes, or take hours to write little.
4. Writing is a messy process?	Yes, it can be. What seemed brilliant when you wrote it might not seem so later. Improving one section can necessitate rewriting others. Clarify your thoughts to help you articulate ideas for your final version.
5. No ideas? Not much to say?	Use lecture material, recommended reading, podcasts and videos to stimulate ideas. Compare and contrast what you discover in these, evaluating their best and weak points. Find details to add. See page 291.
6. Unsure what to write first?	There are no rules. You can start with the parts you find easiest. A draft conclusion provides a useful focus. Introductions can be easier to write once the body of the writing is finished.
7. Can't get started?	Or writer's block? Experiment with tricks and techniques to get something down on paper. See pages 278–80.
8. Can't write well?	Like any skill, writing improves with practice, so don't avoid it: write more! Consider taking a writing course. Keep a blog or journal. Write for yourself as well as your tutors.
9. Not sure what is 'good'?	You don't need to aim at a given written answer for an assignment – there are many ways a piece of writing can excel. Do use academic writing conventions (pages 302–3), marking criteria and feedback (pages 315–16).
10. Writing skills rusty?	If you haven't written much for a while, or want to write something other than assignments, see the companion site for some ideas to get you started and to practise.  www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk .

Don't get overwhelmed: draw on your existing expertise

Every day you are involved in situations that require you to plan and to make decisions similar to those involved in writing. Choose one activity you completed recently, such as planning a holiday, choosing your course or organising a party. Write down what you did, from start to finish. It probably involved six stages.

In the box opposite, identify ✓ the stages you went through to complete your activity.

Getting organised

- ☐ 1 Deciding in general what to do.
- ☐ 2 Collecting relevant information or materials to complete the task.
- ☐ 3 Planning the order to do things.
- ☐ 4 Carrying out the plan.
- ☐ 5 Checking that you were going about the task in the right way.
- ☐ 6 Reflecting on how you would do it better next time.

Academic writing follows a similar pattern of planning and decision-making. Suppose you were asked to write about 'The influence of theories on cloning animals'. You might know very little about the subject, and you may have no clear opinion. However, you can still approach the writing task much as you did with the activity opposite.

Activity

Approaching a writing task

To plan a piece of writing you would probably take the steps shown in the table, but not in the order given.

- ➔ Rearrange the steps in the order you would be likely to carry them out.
- ➔ Consider a second order you could use.
- ➔ Then look below and compare your responses.
- ➔ Would your own suggested order suit you better?

Possible sequences

1 6 2 1 1 10
6 2 13 3 4 8 5

1 0 1 6 11 12
6 2 13 3 4 7 5

Steps taken	Order
1 Decide how you would do better next time	
2 Make an outline plan	
3 Put the ideas in order	
4 Research the subject (reading, conducting interviews, experiments, etc.)	
5 Examine the assignment question and decide what is required	
6 Write a rough draft	
7 Take notes from your reading (or interviews, experiments, etc.)	
8 Select the relevant information to include	
9 Write the final draft	
10 Write out the references (books and other sources of information)	
11 Read through the writing, checking for sense and small errors; make corrections	
12 Check if your text is within the word limit	
13 Separate main ideas from supporting detail and examples	

Overcoming writer's block

The following activities can help to overcome writing blocks. Which would be most useful for you?

☐ **Scribble it down.**

Scribble fast, in any order, whatever comes to mind. Rearrange; re-phrase; rewrite.

☐ **'It's only a draft'.**

Consider each piece of writing as one you will develop and improve over several drafts – you don't need to get it right first time.

☐ **Write in pencil or type in colour.**

This will remind you that your draft is a rough one – mistakes are allowed!

☐ **Ignore mistakes in early drafts.**

Don't worry about minor corrections, such as spellings – you can sort those out in the final draft.

☐ **'For your eyes only'.**

Remind yourself that nobody but you needs to see early drafts. Handwriting, bad typing, untidiness and mistakes don't matter at this stage.

☐ **Start anywhere.**

Write things in any order that suits you – you can rearrange them later. For example, it may be easier to write the introduction last.

☐ **Mark the paper.**

If blank paper or screen puts you off, make a mark, doodle or type so that it's *not* blank. The surface is just your tool – it can't judge you!

☐ **Write by talking.**

If you find it hard to express yourself in writing, speak your ideas aloud. Record yourself. Type or convert speech to text. Redraft it.

☐ **Take one step at a time.**

Break the task into manageable steps. Use C·R·E·A·M strategies ([Chapter 5](#)), such as setting mini-goals.



Make any mark rather than worry about a blank page

☐ **Quick fire headings and bullet points.**

Brainstorm a series of possible headings. For each, jot down a few potential ideas to follow up. Rearrange on the screen in the best order, editing or adding further points. Alternatively, jot ideas down fast onto sticky notes and rearrange these on a large board or piece of paper under headings. Rewrite the bullet points as continuous text.

☐ **Use Apps and specialist software.**

Try out apps to see which make writing easier or more interesting for you. Software (such as *Go Conqr* or *Inspiration*) lets you brainstorm and organise ideas both as pattern and linear notes and to colour-code ideas on screen and print them out.

☐ **Rest and relax.**

If your mind goes blank, you may be tired or stressed. Use [Chapter 7](#).

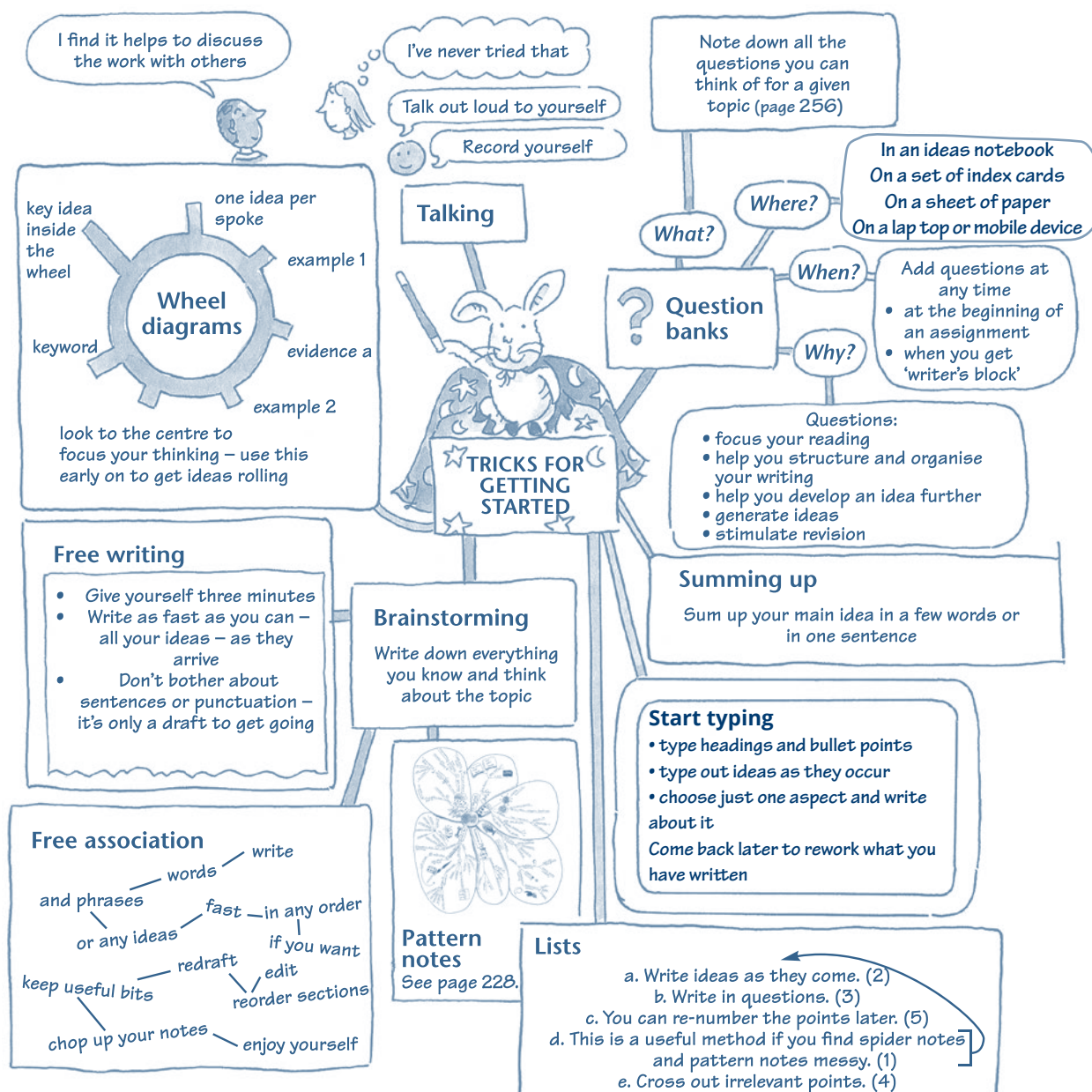
☐ **Experiment.**

Let yourself try out varied methods for getting started. Use ***Tricks for getting started*** (page 279). Which ones work best for you?

Tricks for getting started

Here are some ideas for getting started on a piece of writing.

- ★ You can combine several of these.
- ★ Which ones do you want to try?
- ★ In your journal, keep a record of which work best for you.



Students' solutions to writing blocks

Here two students describe how they incorporate some of the ideas mentioned in this chapter into their own way of working. How would you adapt their methods to suit you?

Marco

WHAT I USED TO DO

I used to find myself staring at the blank screen, not knowing where to begin. I had done the reading. I knew in my head what I wanted to say, but getting started on a piece of writing seemed harder than climbing Everest. Whatever I wrote seemed wrong. I used to write the first line and delete it twenty or thirty times – maybe more, then leave it, come back, and do the same thing again.

WHAT I DO NOW

I realise now that I used to aim at writing my good draft long before I was ready. My plans were too skimpy to be useful. I was actually trying to develop my ideas, organise information, write a final draft and compose good academic prose all at the same time. No wonder I found it hard.

The first thing I do now is insert an emoticon to smile back at me. It reminds me that this is only a draft – not my final version. That reduces some of the pressure. Next, I look away from the page or screen, and stop writing. I think of a few things I want to include in my writing and jot them down as a list. Once my list gets long, I turn it into a map, chart or diagram to arrange my ideas – I think other people do it the other way round but it seems to work OK for me like this. I push each idea as far as I can take it by asking questions (who? why? always? everywhere? example? how do I know this? etc.). As I read or go through my lecture notes, I add new bits to the chart.

When I have all the information I need on my chart, I check that each piece is where it fits best. I rename themes until I get them right. I number the main themes in the order I'll use them in my writing. I do the same with the topics

I will cover under each theme, and any other material – so I know exactly where everything fits. I circle and shade each key theme so it stands out. Sometimes I turn the chart back into a numbered list or plan now, so I am clear what I am doing.

I then start with whatever topic looks easiest and just write the basics – not being too fussy at this stage about whether it sounds good – it's just a starting place. I remind myself that I am free to write any sentence or bits of sentences in any order that I find easiest to do. I can always correct and edit and move things around later. When I have something down in writing, I find it much easier to rewrite it. Ideas and obvious corrections come more easily to me then.

By the time I write my best version, I am already nearly there. By working in stages, there is not that awful moment when writing actually 'begins' – it has developed bit by bit.

Ayeesha

I have revolutionised my writing. I am a 'headings and points' (1, 2, 3) person. I type these out first. This organises everything easily. Then it's like joining up the dots. I write a sentence or two about each point. Everything under one heading is a paragraph. Then I write my conclusion, and the introduction. I keep correcting tiny bits as I go along – I am a perfectionist, I suppose. At the end, if it's an essay, I erase the headings, and find a hundred things to correct – mostly quite small. Then I print it out to read the hard copy, and this usually shows up different things to correct. I might do this many times. I feel like an artist fine-tuning my work until I am happy with it. Well, I am never 100% happy. No piece of writing is perfect. You just have to make a decision at some point that 'that's it', the best you can do for now, and make sure you submit it on time.

Common features of all academic writing

Although assignments differ, most academic writing shares some common characteristics. These require you to do the following.

Draw on good source materials

Do not simply state your personal opinion or what first comes to mind. Draw on good quality material to develop your thinking and to support your case. Use these to provide reasons, evidence, examples and case studies.

Compare and contrast

Most assignments require some element of comparing and contrasting, especially of theories, models or research findings. You would normally evaluate several perspectives, theories or schools of thought, weighing these against each other.

Use criteria to evaluate

It should be clear from your writing which criteria you have used to evaluate evidence. This is often indicated through phrases such as 'the most recent data' (giving dates), or 'data from the largest survey'.

It should be evident that you have really thought about whether the evidence base is convincing, and that you are not over-impressed by material just because it is in print or on the internet. Use [Chapter 12](#) *Critical analytical thinking*.

Show awareness of complexities and nuances

Demonstrate that you are aware that answers are not always clear-cut and that there may be some weaknesses even within an overall strong case. For example, although experts you quote might sound convincing, they may:

- ★ base their conclusions on a very small number of examples
- ★ refer to a large survey or database, but not all the data might be directly relevant to the question.

Similarly, be prepared to acknowledge weaknesses in your own arguments, and strengths in potential counter-arguments. State clearly why there are difficulties in coming to a firm conclusion one way or another.

Provide a well-structured argument

In your writing, provide a line of reasoning which gives direction to your writing: each point should follow logically from another. (Use [Chapters 12](#) and [14](#).)

Make a decision

Don't sit on the fence. Indicate which side of the argument, or which model or theory, you believe is best. Even though the case may be fairly evenly weighted, show that you are able to make a decision on the basis of the evidence.

Synthesise

Look to see if you can draw together the best of several different points of view. Combining these may provide a new overall perspective.

Follow a set structure

There is likely to be a set structure for the type of assignment and a particular style for your subject discipline. (Different styles are considered in the next chapter.) *All* academic writing requires that you group similar points together in one paragraph or section, rather than introducing them in a disorganised way.

Be 'discursive'

Use your writing to discuss the points you make. Link your points so that they feed into sentences and paragraphs, and so each paragraph follows on logically. Every point you make should contribute to a central guiding line of reasoning, as outlined in [Chapter 12](#). All this is different from presenting a random set of points, or a set of headings and bullet points, or stating what others have written.

Be emotionally neutral

Most academic writing apart from experiential writing requires you to stand back and analyse dispassionately, as an objective onlooker.

A seven-step procedure for writing assignments

Until you develop your own method of writing assignments, you may find this procedure helpful. Be prepared to move back and forwards flexibly between steps. Guidance is provided in brackets as a broad indication of the % of the overall task time to allocate to each step.

1 Clarify and plan the task (c. 5%)



Before launching in, work out what is needed.

- ★ Examine the assignment brief carefully (page 284). What exactly is required? (page 97).
- ★ Write one line to sum up your basic opinion or argument. Adapt it as you proceed.
- ★ Jot down what you know already.
- ★ What do you need to read or find out?
- ★ List and schedule tasks so you submit completed work on time.

3 Organise and link material (c. 5%)

Organise your work as you go along (page 287).

- ★ Make a big chart to link ideas and details.
- ★ Make a rough outline plan early on – you can refine it as you go along.

Keep checking that you are on track. Careful planning:

- ★ helps to prevent repetition
- ★ clarifies your thinking
- ★ helps you organise your material.

2 Research (Collect and record information) (40%)

- ★ Be selective – you can't use everything.
- ★ Write a set of questions to guide your research – then look for the answers.
- ★ Check the word limit to see how much information you can use for each point.
- ★ Keep a notebook nearby to jot down ideas.

Sources

Select from sources considered of appropriate quality for academic assignments in your discipline (page 242):

- ★ books, articles, conference papers, academic blogs, webpages
- ★ official records, reports and surveys
- ★ data from laboratory work and projects



- ★ case studies, interviews
- ★ documentary evidence, artefacts
- ★ television, radio, newspapers, videos, podcasts
- ★ experience and opinion (in some subjects).

Selecting

Keep asking yourself:

- ★ Is this good quality information?
- ★ Is it the most up-to-date and reliable?
- ★ Is it the best example?
- ★ How will I use it?
- ★ Do I really need it?

Recording

Note information as you proceed (page 245):

- ★ where you found information/inspiration – for citations and references (page 249)
- ★ notes of themes, theories, dates, names, data, explanations, examples, details, evidence, page numbers (page 226).

4 Reflect, evaluate, critique (10%)

When you have gathered your material, take stock. Think about where you have got to. Consider:

- ★ What have you discovered?
- ★ Has your viewpoint changed?
- ★ Are your arguments and position clear?
- ★ Have you strong evidence/examples?
- ★ What arguments or evidence challenge your position? How will you take these on board or counter them?
- ★ Is it clearer to you why the task was set?

6 Review and re-draft until ready (25%)

Work on each draft, making continual improvements (page 297). Leave time between drafts for ideas to simmer.

- ★ Strengthen the overall structure (pages 293, 364) and each paragraph.
- ★ Make sure your argument is clear to readers.
- ★ Check that you have included good evidence and examples to support your points.
- ★ Check that you have written succinctly, making best use of the word allocation.
- ★ Check you have cited all sources you drew upon for information and inspiration.
- ★ Draw up a full list of references, covering each citation in your assignment.

5 Write an outline and first draft (10%)

Now structure your writing.

- ★ Refine your plan. Work out the order to introduce each point, using numbered headings and lists of points, as in the plan opposite.

- ★ Work out how many words you can write on each point. What must you leave out?

- ★ Write a quick draft to get you started.

- ★ Begin with whatever you find easiest. It can help to type out some headings to guide the structure.

- ★ Keep going: don't worry about style at this stage.

- ★ To begin with, state things clearly and simply, in short sentences.

Outline plan

- 1 Title
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Main argument – notes Q (red) evidence for – notes Q, pp. 3–4 evidence against: Q, p. 5 (orange) evaluation of evidence
- 4 Alternative theory: notes R (yellow) example of application evidence for evidence against (lemon) why not convincing
- 5 Alternative theory 2: notes S (green) evaluation of evidence why not convincing
- 6 Underlying issues – notes T (blue)
- 7 Conclusions
 - a
 - b
 - c

7 Final checks (5%)

Check carefully for final improvements (page 297).

- ★ Read it aloud to ensure it makes sense and is clear throughout.
- ★ 'Fine-tune' as needed: correct errors; improve the flow by adding words or rephrasing.
- ★ Keep fine-tuning until you are ready to submit it.



Analyse the question

Understand the task

However they are worded, all assignment titles contain one or more central questions which have to be answered. Your main task is to apply what you know to a particular problem. It is *not* to show how much you know – however brilliant your piece of writing, if it does not ‘answer the question’ you may get no marks at all.

You are marked partly on how well you select and organise information to meet the requirements of the question or problem – even in exams. Use the question to guide you in selecting what to read and note.

Analyse the title



Pick the title to bits

It's essential to take the time to understand what is required.

- ★ Read the title aloud slowly three times.
- ★ Underline or highlight words which tell you the *approach* to take (page 285).
- ★ Underline words which guide you on how to select the *subject matter* of the assignment.
- ★ Write out the title to help you absorb it.
- ★ How many sections are there to it?
- ★ Write it out more fully, putting it in your own words. What is the assignment really looking for? What are the central questions?
- ★ How does the title link to what you have read or heard in lectures?
- ★ To which topical issues does it refer?
- ★ Discuss the title with someone else to check for alternative interpretations.

Delve deeper

Write down in your own words exactly what the question requires. It may form a useful part of your introduction later. To help identify the core question(s) you need to address in the assignment title, do this:

- ★ Note explicit or obvious questions in the title, such as 'Why did this happen?' 'How effective ...?' or 'Which was more successful ...?'
- ★ Consider why this question was set. Is there some public or academic controversy you should know about? Or a recent publication on the topic? Are there important issues to include?
- ★ Jot down your initial thoughts about it. What do you already know? Do you have evidence to back up your opinions?
- ★ What do you not know yet? Where or how can you find out more?

Retain your focus on the title

Put the title where you can see it easily.

Keep checking the exact wording

As you research and write, remind yourself of the *exact wording* of the title. It is easy to forget your focus and drift off on a tangent.

Introductions

In your 'Introduction' (the first paragraphs of your writing), refer directly to the title in order to focus your reader. Indicate how you interpret it, rephrasing it in your own words. (If you misunderstood the question, at least the reader will be aware of what has happened.)

Conclusions

In your conclusion, refer back to the title to demonstrate to your reader that you are still answering the set question. Link your final sentence to the question contained in the title.

Academic keywords used in titles

These words indicate the approach or style expected for the piece of writing.

Account for Give reasons for; explain why something happens.

Analyse Examine in close detail and in terms of component parts; identify important points and chief features.

Assess Evaluate the merits of something, such as an argument, recommendation or application, typically drawing out strengths and weaknesses.

Comment on Identify and write about the main issues, giving your reactions based upon what you have read or heard in lectures. Avoid purely personal opinion.

Compare Draw out the similarities or common features, indicating the relevance or consequences of these similarities.

Consider As in 'Consider the implications of ...' (or similar) Analyse the key issues, reflecting on the different viewpoints in a balanced way.

Contrast Set two or more items or arguments in opposition so as to draw out differences. Indicate whether the differences are significant. If appropriate, give reasons why one item or argument may be preferable (see [Chapter 12](#)).

Critically evaluate Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.

Define Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show that you understand why the definition may be problematic.

Describe Give the main characteristics or features of something, or outline the main events.

Discuss Write about the most important aspects of (probably including criticism); give arguments for and against; consider the implications of.

Distinguish Bring out the differences between two (possibly confusable) items.

Evaluate Assess the worth, importance or usefulness of something, using evidence. There will probably be cases to be made both *for* and *against*.

Examine Put the subject 'under the microscope', looking at it in detail. If appropriate, 'Critically evaluate' it as well.

Explain Make clear why something happens, or why something is the way it is.

Illustrate Provide examples or evidence to make a point or clarify a position on an issue.

Interpret Give the meaning and relevance of data or other material presented.

Justify Give reasons, supported by evidence, to support a particular argument, point of view or action; address objections that others might make.

Narrate Concentrate on saying *what* happened, telling it as a story or chronology of events.

Outline Give only the main points, showing the main structure.

Relate Show similarities and connections between two or more things.

State Give the main features, in very clear English (almost like a simple list but written in full sentences).

Summarise Draw out the main points in brief (see 'Outline'), omitting details or examples.

To what extent Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which the proposition is not true. (The answer is usually somewhere between 'completely' and 'not at all'.)

Trace Follow the order of different stages in an event or process.

Structuring your writing

The structure and organisation of your work is just as important as the content. This helps you to get your point across, and indicates your understanding and clarity of thought.

How do you structure academic writing?

Like a building, a piece of academic writing gains its structure and shape from several elements.

Design: your argument

What you are trying to say (your argument) should provide the structure for the whole piece of writing. Your reader should be able to follow your line of reasoning easily: how it moves from *a* to *b* to *c*. (Page 311 and Chapter 14.)



Scaffolding: organising and planning

Organise and plan your work before you start.

- ★ Group ideas together, in files or on paper.
- ★ Devise a working plan to guide your research.
- ★ Make an outline plan for your writing. (Pages 287 and 323.)



Central framework: formal structure

Different formal structures are required for different kinds of assignment, such as essays or reports. (Pages 325–8 and 364.)

Building blocks: paragraphs

Writing is organised into paragraphs, and each paragraph itself has a structure. Clear paragraphing assists the reader. (Pages 293–5.)

Cement: phrasing and linking

Use language to clarify and emphasise points and show the direction of your argument. (Page 296.)

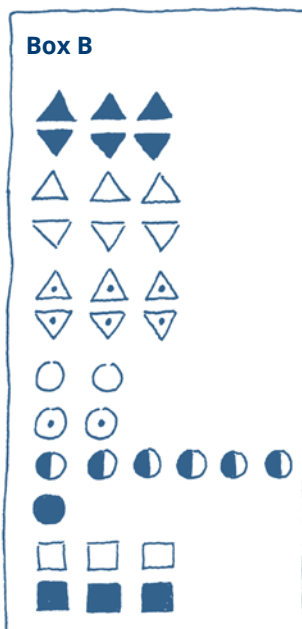
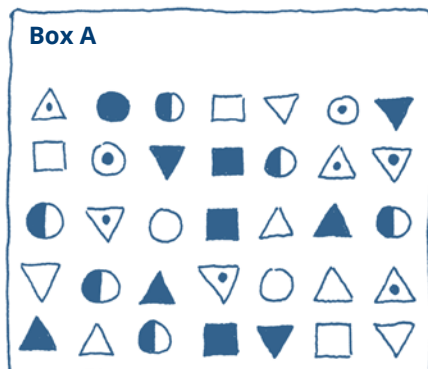


Organising information: grouping things together

First try this ...

For each box, work out:

- ★ How many circles are there?
- ★ How many triangles?
- ★ How many *types* of triangle?



Comment

You probably found it quicker and easier to find the answers for Box B. If so, why was this the case?

Why group information?

Grouping ideas and points has several advantages.

- ★ You will be able to find things more easily.
- ★ You will find it easier to draw up your writing plan and follow it.
- ★ Your thinking will be clearer.
- ★ Your readers will be able to follow your argument more easily.
- ★ You will get in a mess if you don't.

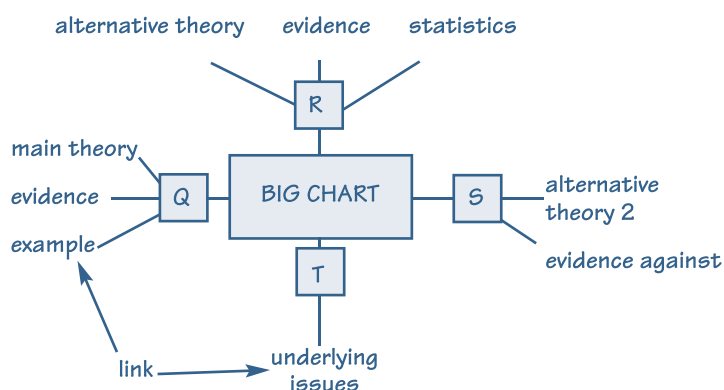
See pages 287 and 289–91.

Organising information: planning your writing

Below are four steps you will need to take in order to organise information for assignments. Each step makes the next one easier. (See also **Reading, recording and using information**, page 245.)

1 Divide the work into topics

When making notes, it may be easiest to use a separate file or sheet for each main point or topic. You could use a large sheet of paper, writing out points so you can see them all clearly.



3 Write an outline plan

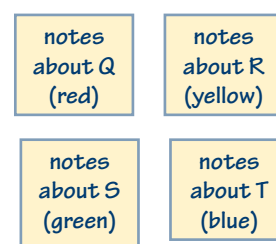
When making notes, it can be easier to use a separate file or sheet for each main point or topic if this helps you to find things faster. You could use a large sheet of paper, writing out points so you can see them all at a glance.

Outline plan

- 1 Title
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Main argument – notes Q (red)
evidence for – notes Q, p. 3–4
evidence against: Q, p. 5 (orange)
evaluation of evidence
- 4 Alternative theory: notes R (yellow)
example of application
evidence for
evidence against (lemon)
why not convincing
- 5 Alternative theory 2: notes S (green)
evaluation of evidence
why not convincing
- 6 Underlying issues – notes T (blue)
- 7 Conclusions
 - a
 - b
 - c

2 Rearrange your notes

- ★ Either spread out hard copies of notes so that you can see them, or compare on screen.
- ★ Group related information in one place.
- ★ Arrange the material in the best order.



4 Organise information into paragraphs

Colour-code each set of notes. Give each topic or paragraph a colour; underline the main points using this colour. The plan opposite uses the sequence of colours of the rainbow, to assist memory. Be consistent in using your colour coding on pattern notes, outline plans, and rough drafts. Divide hard copy files of notes using coloured dividers.

Once you start writing, each paragraph should have one main idea – with supporting detail or evidence, and relating to one set (or page) of notes (page 294).

Planning in stages

Develop your outline plan

Drawing up an initial outline plan

Make pattern notes or a structured outline plan showing what you know, what at this stage you think are the main issues, your questions, and a 'To Do' list of things to find out or follow up.

Creating an Action Plan

Convert your 'To Do' list into an action plan with priorities (page 136).

Planning your time

Use *Working backwards from deadlines* (page 140) and your diary or planner to map out when and where you will complete each stage of the writing process. This becomes easier after a few assignments, when you gain a sense of your own pace for working at this level.

What is the *minimum* you can do? What additional research would you *like* to do, if you have time? Depending on how well you proceed, you can adapt your reading and note-making to suit.

Reworking your plan

If necessary, rework your outline plan as you proceed. You may need to rework it several times as you find out more about the subject, controversies and issues, and as your thinking about the topic becomes more sophisticated.

Making a clear final outline plan

Clarify your final plan. Use colour to highlight certain areas, or rewrite untidy parts afresh. Beware of using the excuse of 'neatening' or 'updating' the plan to delay settling down to writing.

For software that helps with this, see the companion site at www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk.



From pattern notes to linear plan

It's essential to be really clear about the structure of your assignment before you start writing your final drafts. Otherwise, your writing and thinking are likely to sound muddled.

Advantages of pattern notes

Pattern notes, or mind maps, illustrate connections and resemble the way the mind organises information in networks, so can be a helpful starting point for generating ideas.

Limitations of pattern notes and 'mind maps'

It can be difficult to write assignments directly from them as they show interconnected webs of ideas as a whole, whereas writing is linear and sequential – one point follows another. They also tend to be less effective for the kinds of analysis, evaluation, comparing and contrasting needed for academic assignments. Consider whether to use charts such as on pages 326–30 instead.

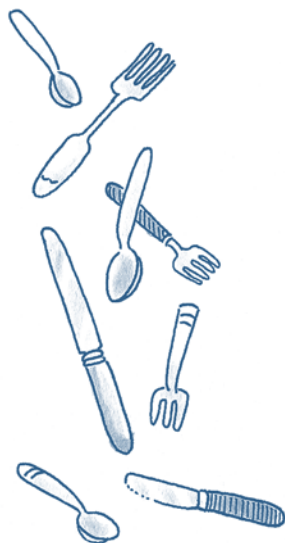
Converting pattern notes into a linear plan

- ★ *Generate*: Use the pattern notes to brainstorm what you know and to generate ideas.
- ★ *Find connections*: Use colour, numbers and connecting lines to link related information in the pattern notes.
- ★ *Group*: Rework the pattern notes, placing together all connected information.
- ★ *Create a hierarchy*: As a half-way stage between making pattern notes and sequential writing, it helps to organise your ideas hierarchically so that key points stand out from underlying details. (See pages 289–91.)
- ★ *Create headings and points*: Give each area of your pattern notes a title or heading. Type out a list of the headings, then type a list beneath it of all points that relate to that heading. Use your colour-code as a guide to what belongs in each paragraph.
- ★ *Relate to the plan*: Position these lists on your spatial plan (page 323).

Concept pyramids organise ideas

What is a concept?

A *concept* is a mental representation of a group of items which are similar in some way. For example, the concept 'cutlery' includes objects as different as a four-pronged fork, a hollowed, round-ended spoon, and a sharp-edged knife. Conceptually, these all share the characteristic of being tools used in eating food. Sometimes the phrase *conceptual category* is used instead of 'concept'.



Why concepts are useful

When we come across a new object, the brain matches the main features of the new experience against those of previous experiences. It can then make a good guess at what kind of thing the new object is – its concept category:



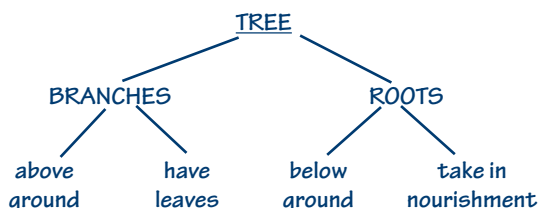
Once it has identified the category, the brain can second-guess, or infer, other information:



This ability to identify and share conceptual categories enables us to communicate more easily with other people: we don't need to describe everything in minute detail whenever we speak. In academic writing, if ideas are well organised, the reader can second-guess meaning and other information more easily.

Concept pyramids organise ideas

We can organise concepts into hierarchies – shaped like a triangle or pyramid, as in the simple one for 'tree' below. You don't *have* to use concept pyramids – but they give you an extra analytical tool.



The most general information, or the most inclusive heading, is placed at the top of the pyramid. Aspects of the tree are placed below. Details of those aspects are placed below again – and so on.

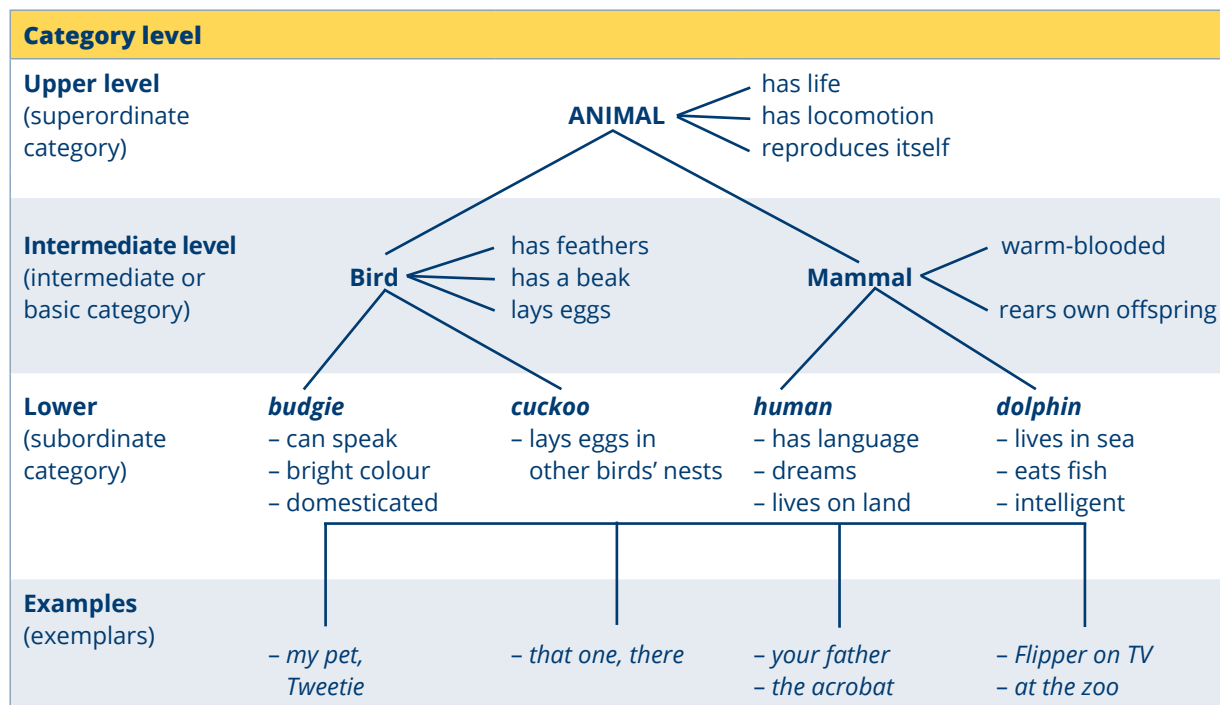
Each level of the pyramid shows information of a different category. There are technical names for different category levels, but everyday terms work just as well.

Technical term	Everyday term
Superordinate category	Upper level (<i>tree</i>)
Intermediate or basic category	Intermediate level (<i>oak tree</i>)
Subordinate category	Lower level (<i>red oak tree</i>)
Exemplar	Example (<i>this red oak tree</i>)

On another pyramid, *plant* might be the upper-level concept, and *tree* would then be at the intermediate level.

Concept pyramid example: Contrast birds and mammals

The example below is of a more detailed concept pyramid, showing how different levels of information about animals can be arranged.



Examples at different levels

If the upper level were *painting*, an intermediate level could be the style, *Impressionism*. A lower level would be painters, such as *Monet*, and examples could be Monet's paintings *Water Lilies*, *Wisteria*, and *Poplars*. You might have separate hierarchies of details of the paintings – with *size*, *colour*, *design*, or *brushwork* as category headings.

If the upper level were *instrument*, an intermediate level could be *drum*, and a lower level might be a *timpani drum* or *African drum*. Specific examples would be *that drum on the table*, or *Gino's new drum-set*.

Using pyramids when planning essays

For using pyramids when planning essays, see [Chapter 15](#), page 324.

Use pyramids to plan assignments

Use pyramid questions

Ask yourself key questions, to search for or organise the information at each level.

Upper level

- ★ How many major schools of thought or key theoretical perspectives do I need to consider for this question?
- ★ Which are the most relevant for my assignment? (If unsure, go down to the intermediate level and check who said or wrote what.)

Intermediate level

- ★ Which theorist (or judge, writer, or similar) said what, when?
- ★ How can I sum that up briefly?

Lower level

- ★ Overall, how good is the general evidence to support this position or theory?
- ★ What are the general implications of the position or theory?
- ★ What are the general applications of the position or theory?
- ★ What is the general evidence against the position or theory?

Exemplar level

- ★ Do I need to include specific examples of applications, implications or evidence? If so, which are the best examples?
- ★ Given the word limit and the time available, how much detail should I include? For instance, have I space only to mention the name and date and one line about this example of research? Or am I short of words so far in this assignment? If so, can I give more details?

Use pyramids to help with word limits

Having mapped your information as a pyramid, do you have the right amount for the word limit?

Too much information?

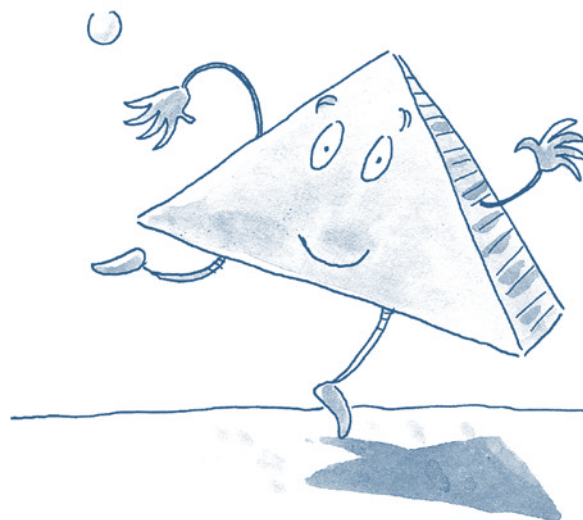
You need to decide what to include and to leave out.

- ★ If you have several examples at any one level, select just one or two examples of them. Do the same with the other levels.
- ★ If you would exceed the word limit by going into detail, it might be sufficient just to refer to specific examples in passing (just naming them). If more is needed, you would need to edit your writing elsewhere. It depends on what works best.

Too little information?

Generate more material to meet the word requirements.

- ★ Add further middle or lower level examples.
- ★ Provide further details of specific examples.
- ★ Critically evaluate the significance of your examples to your overall argument.



Balancing the pyramid

Usually, it is more important to explore ideas and analysis at middle and lower levels rather than including much detail for specific examples. (See also page 402.)

Drafting and re-drafting your writing

The art of writing is in the craft of redrafting

Professional writers redraft many times before they are happy: writing rarely flows 'all at once' into its final version. You would expect to write several drafts of an assignment to shape and fine-tune it.

Drafting stage 1: Lay words down

Use your plan. Don't worry about style or good English at this stage – just get started.

Focus on the assignment question. Write out your interpretation of the title.

Clarify your core points. Write out your central ideas, hypotheses, conclusions or the main direction of your line of reasoning.

Write headings and subheadings. Use your plan (or the pyramid you have created) to identify these. You can retain these headings and sub-headings in most reports and some dissertations, but leave these out of the final draft of an essay. This provides your structure.

Add in supporting details below each heading.

Link it up. Write your headings and points into sentences. Connect your sentences (page 296).

Stick to your plan. Check back to it after writing each paragraph. Go back to the assignment title and its central questions: check that you haven't gone off on a tangent. If so, put a line through anything irrelevant. Be a harsh critic and strong editor of your own work.

Drafting stage 2: Fine-tune the structure

Re-read to check information is grouped, ordered and paragraphed well (page 293). If not, re-organise it.

Check that your line of reasoning (Chapter 12) takes the reader smoothly from one paragraph to the next. If needed, add phrases or sentences to link ideas better. Check whether you could summarise any sections to reuse words for use elsewhere in the assignment. Rewrite.

Drafting stage 3: Meaning and style

Read what you have written aloud. How does it sound? If you are stumbling as you read, this may indicate poor flow or missing words. Check whether you can improve continuity, links, sentence lengths and overall style. Add sentences or phrases to clarify points. If you have a screen-reader, you could use this to read your text aloud. Listen for meaning, and for punctuation pauses.

Drafting stage 4: Fine-tuning

Aim to leave at least a night between drafts – this makes it easier to detect errors and areas that need rephrasing. See **Editing your draft**, page 297.

Saving your drafts

- ★ Save each draft as a separate file (draft 1, draft 2, etc.). Name and date each in the footer.
- ★ Alternatively, use a tool such as Google Docs that enables you to return to revised edits (page 246).

Check using a hard copy

It is easier to identify some errors on hard copy. Print out final drafts and read carefully for errors.

Writing strong paragraphs

The role of paragraphs



Paragraphs are the building blocks of your writing. They should organise material so it is easier for readers to understand, whilst also dividing the page into shorter sections that are easier on the eye.

Successive paragraphs should follow on logically, taking the reader from *a* to *b* to *c*. Phrases within them should link material with earlier or later paragraphs.

Paragraph structure

Paragraphs are, typically, several sentences long. They organise material around a central theme or key point.

A paragraph's opening sentence ...

- ★ is usually the 'topic sentence' that introduces the subject of the paragraph (such as through a summative statement, argument, question or recommendation)
- ★ can indicate whether the paragraph reinforces the argument or takes a new direction.

A paragraph's following sentences:

- ★ develop the theme of its 'topic sentence'
- ★ offer evidence and examples to clarify and support the key point
- ★ follow each other in a logical order, taking the argument forward.

Activity

1 Analysing paragraphs

Choose two or three pages from one text.

- ➔ Read the topic sentences – the ones that sum up the main theme of each paragraph. These are often, but not always, the opening sentences.
- ➔ How well do the topic sentences sum up the main ideas of those paragraphs?
- ➔ How are the paragraphs linked?
- ➔ If paragraphs lacked a clear topic sentence, were they more difficult to read?

A paragraph's final sentence:

- ★ sums up the paragraph and/or indicates a change of direction for the next paragraph.

Activity

2 Paragraphs and sentences

Separate this passage into paragraphs and sentences with correct capital letters and punctuation.

A Life of Adventure

mary seacole was born in 1805 in kingston jamaica her mother practised as a 'doctress' using medical knowledge which women had brought from africa and developed in the tropics from her mother mary inherited her medical skills as well as her ability to run a boarding house from her father a scottish military man she inherited her fascination with army life marys own medical reputation was established during a series of cholera and yellow fever epidemics she made her own medicines and emphasised high standards of hygiene as well as enforcing strict quarantine on victims by these methods she saved many lives on the outbreak of the crimean war mary volunteered her services to the british army although she had worked for the army before at its own request this time she was turned down undaunted mary made her own way to the war zone once in the crimea she not only nursed the soldiers but also ran a hotel and sold food wine and medicines after the war mary was treated as a celebrity she was decorated by the governments of four countries in england a poem in her honour was published in punch and even the royal family requested her company and medical expertise

Activity

3 Identify the theme

- ★ Re-read the paragraphs for Activity 2.
- ★ Decide the main theme of each paragraph and sum it up in 1–4 words.

See page 294 for answers.

Planning your paragraphs

Writing paragraphs

If you have difficulties with paragraphing, this can help.

- ★ Divide a page into three columns:

1 Arguments	2 Main information	3 Supporting detail
-------------	--------------------	---------------------

- ★ In column 1, jot down the ideas, theories, opinions and line of reasoning that you want to include in your writing.
- ★ In column 2, jot down the main examples and types of evidence that support your line of reasoning.
- ★ In column 3, write down lesser details, facts, names, statistics, dates and examples that support your main argument.
- ★ Each paragraph should have:
 - * one item from column 1
 - * one, two or three items from column 2
 - * several items from column 3.
- ★ Items selected for each paragraph should all help to make the same point.

Alternatively, using a concept pyramid:

- ★ Each paragraph is likely to need one item at the intermediate level, at least one at the lower level, examples, and a few details.

Suggested answer (for page 293)

Activity: Answer

3 Identifying the theme

The main themes of the paragraphs are:

- 1 general information: birth and background
- 2 early medical reputation
- 3 the Crimean War
- 4 after the War.

Activity: Answer

2 Paragraphs and sentences

A Life of Adventure

Mary Seacole was born in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. Her mother practised as a 'doctress', using medical knowledge which women had brought from Africa and developed in the Tropics. From her mother, Mary inherited her medical skills as well as her ability to run a boarding house. From her father, a Scottish military man, she inherited her fascination with army life.

Mary's own medical reputation was established during a series of cholera and yellow fever epidemics. She made her own medicines and emphasised high standards of hygiene as well as enforcing strict quarantine on victims. By these methods she saved many lives.

On the outbreak of the Crimean War, Mary volunteered her services to the British Army. Although she had worked for the army before, at its own request, this time she was turned down. Undaunted, Mary made her own way to the war zone. Once in the Crimea, she not only nursed the soldiers, but also ran a hotel and sold food, wine and medicines.

After the war, Mary was treated as a celebrity. She was decorated by the governments of four countries. In England, a poem in her honour was published in *Punch* and even the Royal Family requested her company and medical expertise.

Reflection

The value of paragraphing and punctuation

Did you find it easier to read the text for Activity 2 once it had been punctuated? If so, did this increase your appreciation of the value of good paragraphing and punctuation?

Did you have difficulty adding in the punctuation? If so, you could ask your tutors whether any additional support is available.

Checking your paragraphs

If paragraphing isn't your strong point, then when you have finished your early drafts, you can check your paragraphing by doing the following exercise.

1 Read each paragraph

Read each of your paragraphs in turn. Decide what is the main topic of each.

2 Sum up the topic

Sum up that topic in about 1–4 words.

3 Give the topic a name and colour

Write the topic in the margin. Give it a colour.

4 Which is the topic sentence?

Is it evident which sentence is the 'topic' sentence – that sums up the topic of the paragraph? Highlight it. Is it at the beginning of the paragraph? If not, would it be more powerful there?

5 Is everything relevant?

Check whether everything in each paragraph relates to its topic sentence. If you're unsure about something, underline it and check whether it would be better placed in a different paragraph. Is anything superfluous? If so, cross it out.



Make time for relaxation and exercise – you can go on thinking about your assignment!

6 Is everything in the right place?

Once you have assigned a different colour to each topic (see 3 above), search for each topic in turn throughout your writing to see whether any material on that topic has wandered into other paragraphs. If so:

- ★ highlight it in the topic colour – using colour will show up whether your material is well organised or scattered
- ★ cut separated items of the same colour and then paste them together into one paragraph
- ★ rewrite the paragraph, integrating the segments you have moved, so that the paragraph flows well.

7 Are sentences in the best order?

In each paragraph, are the sentences in the best order? Is it clear how each sentence leads on to the next?

8 Is the line of argument clear?

Is it clear to the reader how the topic sentences of each paragraph relate to each other?

Is it clear how the material in each paragraph builds on that in previous paragraphs in order to establish an argument with a clear direction?

9 Are paragraphs well-linked?

Is it clear how each paragraph leads on to the next, such as through phrases that link the ideas in one paragraph to ones that precede or follow on from it? (Pages 294 and 296.)

10 Is every paragraph relevant?

Is every paragraph relevant to the title? Are they all needed in order to make the argument?

Linking ideas together

Certain words are used to link ideas and to signpost to the reader the direction your line of reasoning is about to take, such as re-emphasising the direction of the argument or introducing an alternative viewpoint. Below is a selection of words used to link ideas, depending on the direction of your argument.

Adding to points made already

- ★ also; moreover; furthermore; again; further; what is more; then; in addition
- ★ besides; above all; too; as well (as)
- ★ either; neither ... nor; not only ... but also; similarly; correspondingly; in the same way; indeed
- ★ in fact; really; in reality, it is found that ...
- ★ as for; as to; with respect to; regarding

Writing in lists

- ★ first(ly); second(ly); third(ly)
- ★ another; yet another; in addition; finally
- ★ to begin with; in the second place
- ★ moreover; additionally; also
- ★ next; then; and to conclude; lastly; finally

Putting the same idea in a different way

- ★ in other words; rather; or; better; in that case
- ★ to put it (more) simply
- ★ in view of this; with this in mind
- ★ to look at this another way

Introducing examples

- ★ such as; for instance; namely; as follows;
- ★ an example of this is; including, for example; as in the following examples;
- ★ especially; particularly; in particular; notably; chiefly; mainly; mostly
- ★ this is evident in ...; this can be seen in; we can see this in ...

Introducing an alternative viewpoint

- ★ however; by contrast; another way of viewing this is; alternatively; again; rather; one alternative is; another possibility is
- ★ on the one hand ... on the other hand
- ★ conversely; in comparison; on the contrary; in fact; though; although

Returning to emphasise your earlier viewpoint

- ★ however; nonetheless; in the final analysis; despite x; notwithstanding x; in spite of x
- ★ while x may be true, nonetheless
- ★ although; though; after all; at the same time; on the other hand; all the same; even if x is true; although x may have a good point

Showing the results of something

- ★ therefore; accordingly; as a result
- ★ so, (then,) it can be seen that
- ★ the result is; the consequence is
- ★ resulting from this; consequently; now
- ★ we can see, then, that; it is evident that
- ★ because of this; thus; hence; for this reason; owing to x; this suggests that; it follows that
- ★ in other words; otherwise; in that case; that implies

Summing up or concluding

- ★ therefore; so, my conclusion is
- ★ in short; in conclusion; to conclude; in all; on the whole
- ★ to summarise; to sum up briefly; in brief; altogether; overall; thus; thus we can see that

Activity

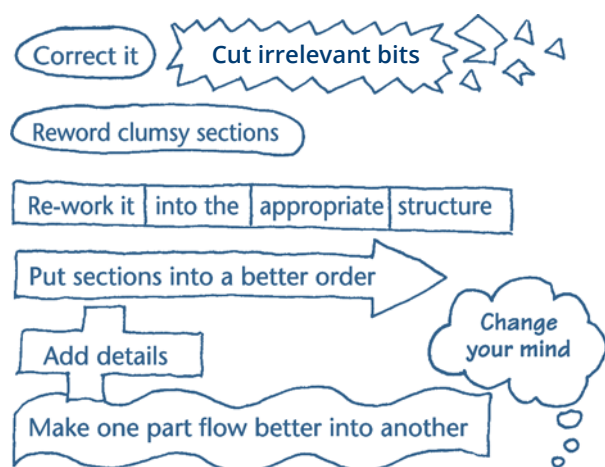
Check for linking words

How are these words used in the sample essays on pages 331–5 and 337–43?



Editing and proof-reading your drafts

'Editing' is working on your draft in order to improve it. When you edit, you can ...



Different kinds of editing

Typically, you would need to go through your work several times, with a different focus each time.

1 Meaning

- ★ Does it make sense? Read it aloud slowly.

2 Organisation and structure

- ★ Have you used the appropriate structure?
- ★ Is connected information grouped together?
- ★ Is information presented in the best order?
- ★ Is the work well paragraphed? (Pages 293–5.)

3 Evidence

- ★ Have you backed your argument with evidence, examples, details, and adequate research?

4 References

- ★ Is the source of your information clear?
- ★ Are your quotations accurate?
- ★ Are citations and references written correctly? (Pages 249–51.)

5 Style

- ★ Is the text easy to read?
- ★ Is it too chatty? Or long-winded? Or pompous?
- ★ Are any sections confused?

- ★ Is it precise and succinct? (Page 304.)
- ★ Is the style appropriate? (Chapter 14.)

6 Presentation

- ★ Is the text formatted consistently?
- ★ Does it look neat and well presented?
- ★ Does it follow any presentation guidelines you were given?

Reflection

Editing and proof-reading your drafts

Which aspects of editing and proof-reading do you need to spend most time on?

Proof-reading

Edit your draft until you are happy with it. Then do final proof-reading using hard copy.

- ★ Read it once again aloud – does it make sense?
- ★ Look for typing, spelling and punctuation errors. Check you have written in sentences.
- ★ Look up doubtful spellings. If you used a spellchecker, look for words that are not misspelt but are not those you want, such as homophones (e.g. 'there' and 'their').
- ★ When proof-reading for grammar and punctuation, it can help to read sentence by sentence from the end of your work backwards (and word by word for spelling), to avoid drifting into skim-reading.
- ★ Everyone has their own pattern of errors. If there are certain mistakes you make repeatedly, note these down and be particularly careful in checking for them.

Resources to help strengthen and edit drafts

- ★ Checking the quality of your essay (page 317). This can be used for assignments too.
- ★ Project report or dissertation: checklist (page 369).

Presenting your writing in assignments

For all assignments

Typically, students are required to submit their work electronically. Software is used to check that it is all their own work. Make sure nobody can copy your work before tutors have returned it marked or graded.

Submit complete, well-organised work

- ★ If you saved several drafts, make sure you submit the right one.
- ★ Complete and attach cover pages, if required. These may include a confirmation that the work is all your own.
- ★ If you have collated references in dedicated software, include these within your assignment.
- ★ Number your pages.
- ★ Remove all colour coding, underlining, inserted comments, links and tracked changes that you used to help the process of writing your work.
- ★ Leave space to one side or between lines for your tutor to add comments and feedback easily.

Anonymity and confidentiality

- ★ If work must be submitted anonymously, take care not to include your own name anywhere.
- ★ Include your student number on every page.
- ★ Write the assignment's short title in the footer, as well as any assignment code number.
- ★ Check that any confidential material is removed. This includes avoiding giving thanks and acknowledgements to individuals and organisations at the start or end of the material or in citations or references if they provided material to use confidentially.

Hard copy

- ★ If you are required to submit in hard copy, your final text should be neatly presented.
- ★ Print on one side of the page only.
- ★ Occasional minor corrections made neatly by hand are acceptable, otherwise type corrections and print a good copy.

For essays

- ★ Write the title at the top of the first page.
- ★ Remove any sub-headings that you have used to help organise your work.
- ★ Follow any guidance provided about securing pages or using folders for hard copies.

For reports and dissertations

- ★ Write the title on a cover page.
- ★ Use section headings, all in the same format. Number sections and paragraphs.
- ★ Insert charts, tables and appendices. Provide clear headings. Check that headings and numbering for material in appendices match those used when referring to them in the report.
- ★ Remove any unnecessary appendices – such as anything not referred to within your report.
- ★ Follow any instructions about binding projects.

Format

Adapt to purpose

Use legible fonts. You may wish to work in a larger font then reduce this and double space text for submission.

For your final copy

- ★ Use only one type size for your main text.
- ★ Use one clear, simple font for your final draft – not script designed to look like handwriting.
- ★ Vary font size for headings and sub-headings. Be consistent in the way you use them.

Check lecturers' preferences

Find out whether your lecturers have preferences and requirements for aspects such as sub-headings, numbering, double spacing, margins, active or passive voice, referencing style and so on. If you wish, you can use the chart opposite to record and keep track of these.

The chart on page 299 is also available on the companion site.



Presenting work to meet course requirements

Note any special requirements for presenting your work. Then check these carefully for each assignment before submitting it.

This is also available for use on the companion site at www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk.



Tutor	Subject/module:
Aspect	Requirements
Electronic submission only or is hard copy also required?	
If a hard copy is required, print on one side or both?	
Begin each section of a report on a fresh page?	
Use sub-headings (or not)?	
Number sections and/or paragraphs? In which format?	
Leave a wide margin for tutor comments? (Left or right?)	
Give my student number on each page?	
Write the assignment title and/or code on each page?	
Write as 'one', 'I' or 'we'? (Address the reader as 'you'?)	
Use passive or active voice? (Passive: 'The essay was written'. Active: 'I wrote the essay'.)	
Is a cover sheet required? What information should it contain? Where can I download this?	
Which software is used for checking for plagiarism and copying? Where can I see this? Can I try it out?	
Which style should be used for references? Any special layout needed for references?	
Bibliography needed? Any special layout?	
Anything else? (E.g. Use of diagrams, charts, graphs? Standard keys on maps? Use of colour in diagrams? Is annotation needed? Any instructions on number, size, location or labelling of appendices?) Any requirements for binding the work?	

Review

1

Aim to enjoy the process

You can gain great satisfaction and enjoyment from writing assignments: mastering the subject, developing ideas, arguing your position, honing skills. Take pride in finishing a piece of work.

2

Be braced for the challenge

Writing can be tough at times. Even talented writers can face writer's block, procrastinate or struggle to find the right words to express themselves. Accept it and gain from the challenge.

3

Practise: develop your talent

You can benefit from making *any* kind of writing a regular activity. You can build speed, become better able to think and write simultaneously and learn to improve a piece of writing.

4

Develop your own process

Find a system that works for you. Use tricks and triggers to get you through the writing assignment, if needed.

5

Keep it manageable

Approach academic writing as a task with sets of manageable steps you can follow, given conventions you can adopt, and requirements you can meet.

6

Write to the brief

Analyse the title closely. Use that and any course guidance to shape your writing. Check you have not drifted from the subject.

7

Clarify, plan, organise

Academic writing is only partly about content: it involves clarity about the task, and strong organisation, planning and structure.

8

Clarify your thinking

Confused thinking leads to confused writing. Clarify your thoughts before you write, or through writing your first drafts. Be able to state, argue and explain your position aloud.

9

Review, redraft, edit

Don't expect to complete everything in one go. Keep working up your initial draft, rephrasing, improving and correcting until it is the best it can be. Leave enough time to do this well.

10

Proof-read

Always check carefully for grammar, spelling, punctuation and other errors. These create a poor impression, can reduce the sense of what you write, and affect your grade.

11

Evaluate your own writing

Use the self-evaluation (page 274) and checklists (pages 266, 317 and 369) to develop a strong sense of what to look for in your writing. Be systematic in using criteria and lists to check your work until you do so automatically.

12

Language skills matter

It is difficult to gain high grades if grammar, punctuation and phrasing let you down. It is worth investigating language workshops or courses at your institution, local college or online.