

# Academic Writing Skills

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# Aims of the Session.

- To consider the requirements to write at HE.
- To assess the criteria required for what constitutes a good essay.
- To consider note taking strategies.
- To consider and understand key words used in essay titles in Psychology.

# So what is an Essay?

- Have you ever considered exactly what an essay is? This is a big question, and one that is not often asked.

Typical Answers might include

Something I have to do

A task students complete as part of their degree

A type of academic writing

An activity that induces dread, panic and unhappiness.

Something I gained a high mark for, or a low mark for!

This PPT will help you to produce essays more successfully, improve your grades, which will help in your studies.

# An essay is

A method of communicating thoughts from yourself to another.

A one-way conversation with your reader that sets out your thinking in relation to the question posed.

A piece of writing that uses academic and credible evidence to provide a defensible answer to the question posed.

A piece of formal academic writing, in English.

Usually an assessment that is written according to the instructions given in the assessment brief and graded using a designated mark scheme.

A piece of writing which accurately uses the relevant referencing system demanded by the university department that has set the essay task.

A logical, structured and evidenced argument leading to a conclusion that addresses the question posed.

# Essay Writing

- Coursework is designed to assess the Students understanding of the subject area / module topic.
- Therefore a well structured Essay that demonstrates good understanding of the QUESTION is FUNDAMENTAL.
- Failure to communicate / demonstrate the understanding = lower marks.

# So do I just write or think and write?

An essay is a written record of your thinking. Most of the time spent on an essay (up to 80%) should be reading and thinking about the theories, ideas and understanding in your essay.

Writing involves some thinking but should mainly involve committing the ideas you have already formed to a clear written record.

Reading leads to thinking and all the evidence of your reading needs to be referenced.

Keeping a record of the sources of your reading as you prepare for your essay saves a lot of time and enables you to reference accurately when you are writing.

# Basic essay structure

**A title** - This is usually the question that is being answered.

**An introduction** - Here, the main ideas are introduced, as is the structure that you will follow so the reader know what to expect.

**A main body** - This is where the argument is formed. There should be a logical sequence of paragraphs, all based on evidence, that show the reader the argument and that leads towards answering the question in the conclusion.

**A conclusion** - This is where the question is answered and sometimes the implications of the answer are explored.

**References** - Using the specified referencing style, a list of sources used in the essay should be provided.

# Stages in (general) assignment writing

1. Read the assignment instructions thoroughly. What exactly do you need to do?

2. Read, make notes, think critically, repeat. This is a crucial step!

3. Make a general plan with the main points.

4. Make a detailed plan, focusing on creating a clear structure.

5. Check the plan. Is the task addressed fully? Are you being critical?

# Stages in (general) assignment writing

6. Write the first draft. Read and think more as needed.

7. Edit and redraft as needed.

8. Proofread carefully. Focus on referencing, spelling and grammar.

9. Submit the assignment. Give yourself time before the deadline in case of problems.

10. Read feedback carefully to help improve your next assignments.

# Planning your essay.

- Once you've understood the task requirements, done some reading and come up with some ideas for what to include, you can start mapping out your assignment structure.
- A good plan is key for a well-structured assignment - don't just launch into writing with no idea of where you're going!
- This planning stage can also be a useful opportunity to think more deeply about the assignment and consider how the different ideas fit together, so it can help you develop your argument.
- It's ok to make changes to your plan later - you might come up with more ideas, or another line of argumentation while writing. Make sure that you check the structure is still logical though!

# Planning your essay

- The best way to write a well-structured assignment is to have a good plan before you start writing. What's your argument? What are the main points you want to include? What's a logical way to order these points? Don't just launch into writing with no idea of where you're going!
- To make a general plan:
  - Make a list of the information and points to include.
  - Organise similar points into groups.
  - Put the groups in a logical order.
  - Within each group, organise the points logically.
  - Check the plan to make sure it meets task requirements.



## Assessment Planner: Essay

*Psychology and  
Counselling*  
**UWTSD**

**Essay Title**

**Deadline**

**Basic Plan**

**Introduction**

**Main body**

**Conclusion**

**Research Needed**

**Key References**

# Writing

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- Analysing the Task
- Preparing a Plan
- Collecting relevant information
- Writing up
- Checking your writing

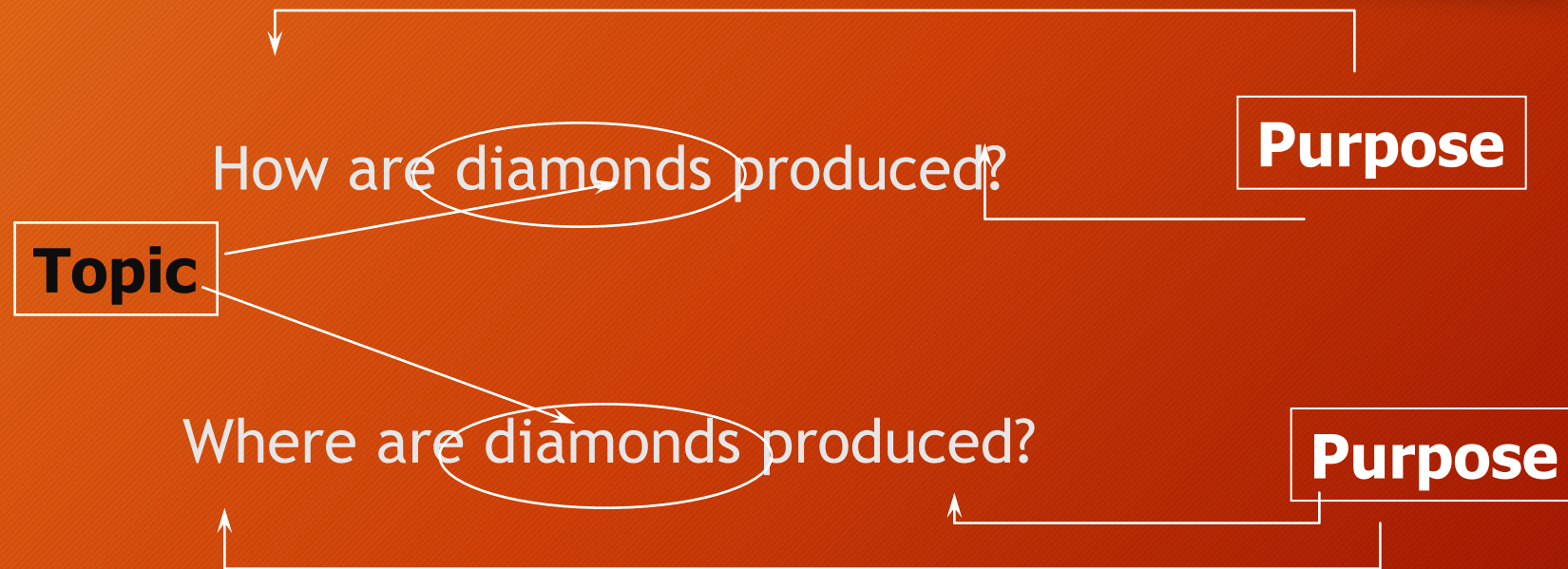
# Analysing the Task

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- What is the question?
- Long description
- First step is to locate the question itself
- Locate the **Topic** and then the **Purpose**
- **Topic** - what the question is about
- **Purpose** - the information you need to give about the topic

# Example

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- If you fail to identify the topic of the question you are likely to produce an assignment which lacks direction and irrelevant to the question.
- This will score badly when marked.

# Purpose

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- After identifying the topic the next stage is to identify the purpose.
- You can do this by asking the following question:
- What does this question require me to do?

# Example in Psychology

- Discuss Erikson's theory of Lifespan Development with particular reference to Adolescent stages.
- What are the **topic** and **purpose** of this question?

Oh no!  
I have to write  
an essay



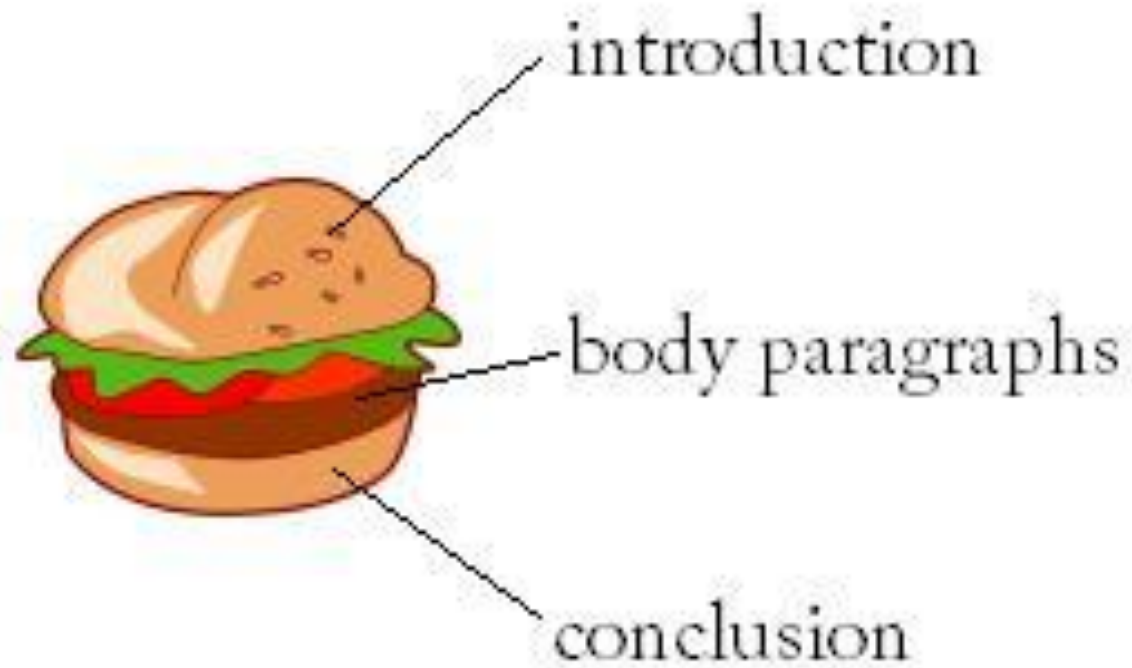
# First things First.....

- UNDERSTANDING THE TASK.
- Understanding and interpreting the task.
- Planning
- Structuring
- Drafting

# What constitutes a “good” Essay

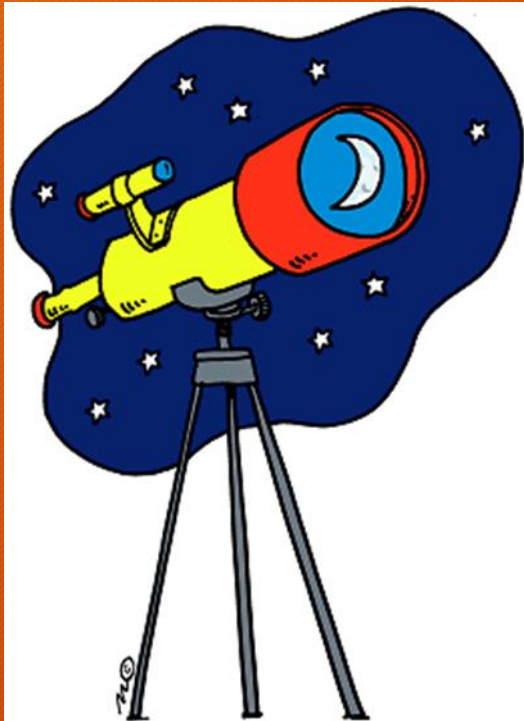
- Understanding of the set question.
  - Interpretation of the question.
- Understanding of the topic.
  - Demonstrate your OWN understanding of the topic.
- Critical Thinking
- Structure.

# Essay structure



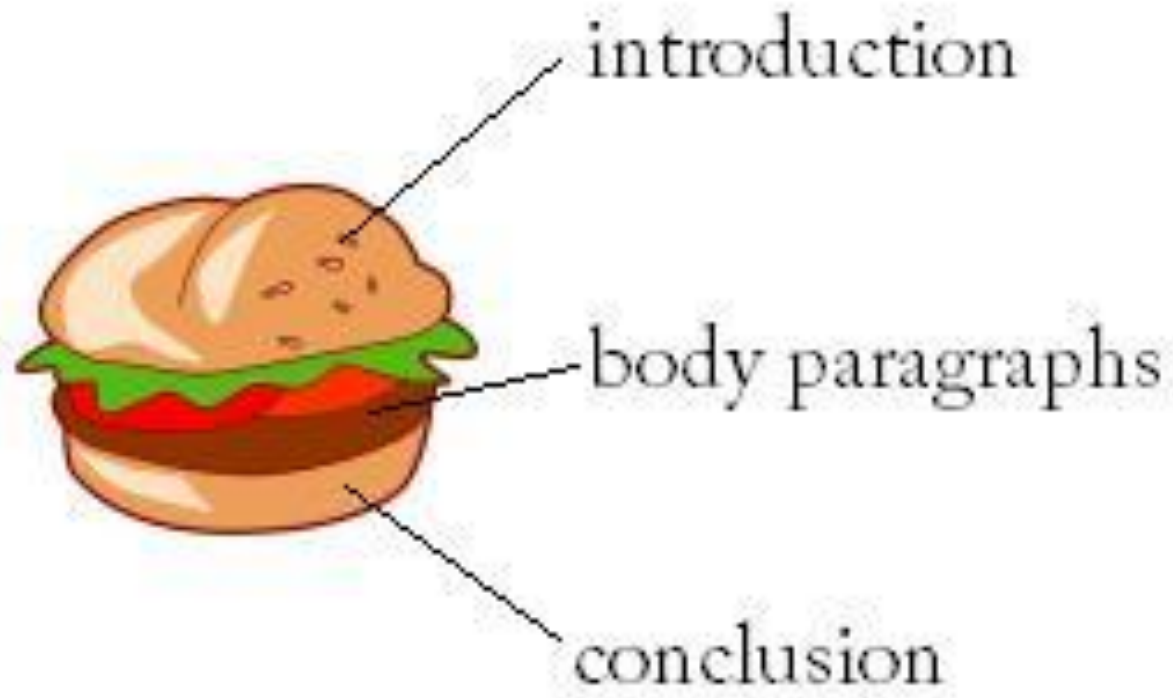
# The Title!!!

- 



Make sure  
that you focus  
on the title  
throughout  
the writing  
process.

# Essay structure



# Guidance for writing an essay

- Introduction

An introduction provides some background to the issues that will be explored in the essay, and indicates how the topic / question will be addressed. The whole point is to provide a context for your discussion.

# Structure

- ▶ Introduction.
- ▶ Sets the tone to the whole Essay - Vital.
- ▶ Introduces the reader to the topic.
- ▶ Introduces the reader to the rest of the Essay
  - Revert back to question.
- ▶ 1 - 2 paragraphs
- ▶ Make sure there is distinction between Introduction and “meat” but not via subheadings.

# Introduction

- Some students like to complete their introduction AFTER they have planned what they want to say in the main body.

# Structure

- Main Focus “Meat”.
  - Answer the Question.
- Demonstrate Understanding of Area/Question
- Demonstrate Effort
  - Read, Read, Read
- Back up with evidence where possible.
- Critical Thinking.

# Coverage of literature

- You must ensure that your essay covers a reasonable amount of information relevant to the question that you are addressing. You must try to present a balanced argument, which often means finding information for and against a particular position. Also the literature must be up to date. Marks may be lost where old sources are used when more up to date references are available.

# Structure

- ▶ An essay must have a clear structure in order for the reader to follow your argument. There should be a clear progression of ideas. The type of ordering used is highly individual and will also depend on the question. Ordering need not necessarily be chronological (particularly if this does not form a logical argument).

# Clarity of argument

- Most essays present an argument, which means that there is often more than one theory covered and conflicting perspectives. You must try and indicate how a particular piece of evidence relates to theories that you are discussing (does it lend support or dispute). Using research evidence effectively to clarify your argument is a very important aspect of essay writing. Studies reported should be relevant and this relevance should be made explicit in your work.

# Critical analysis

- ▶ This is where you come in. Stop writing, engage brain and start to think about the issues that you are discussing. Are the arguments plausible? Do they ignore important pieces of evidence? Do they explain what they are supposed to explain? Have they been interpreted accurately? This is where you show how you are an intelligent person and not simply a photocopier. Remember we want to see that you understand what you have read. Also remember that opinions are of little value unless they are supported by or grounded in, some kind of research evidence.

# So where do we start?

- Analysis means:
  - - critical engagement
  - - scrutinising

# Research



- How?
- Think about how you would plan a holiday.

You must think hard and make careful selections, otherwise...



# Read



But not everything!

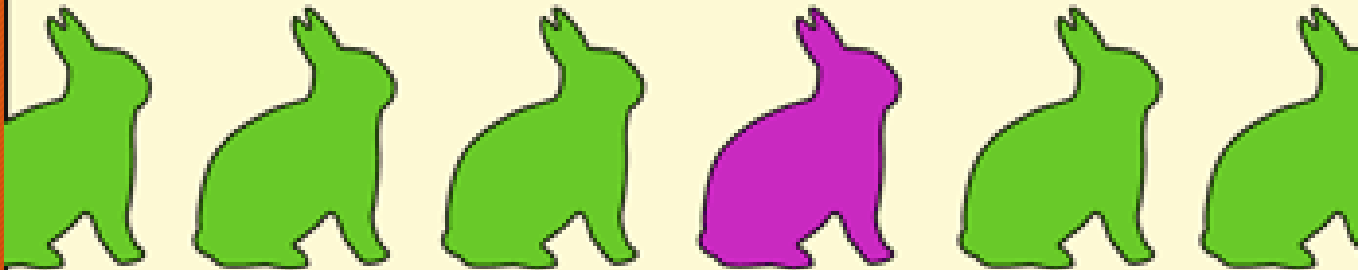
# Be selective.....

- Book list
- Library
- Internet
- (advantages/ disadvantages)
- Intranet (module resources etc)



Sometimes, you will have to repeat some steps.

*repetition*



ORGANISATION - as you research, you must keep your notes in good order.



Remember: avoid this...



...and attempt this:



# Main Focus... “Meat”

- ▶ Sources of Evidence
  - Why?
  - Demonstrates reading/effort and understanding
- ▶ Empirical or Anecdotal
- ▶ Empirical
  - Journals
  - Text Books.... Not just ANY book.
  - Internet ?
  - Lecture notes?
- ▶ Anecdotal
  - Real life examples (including Biographies).
  - Hypothetical examples.

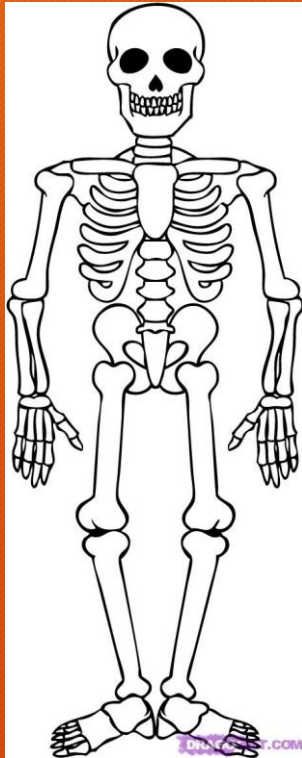
# Empirical vs. Anecdotal

- ▶ Empirical = preferred option.
  - More “scientific”
  - Demonstrates reading
  - Anecdotal sometimes considered “lazy”
- ▶ Anecdotal = useful also.
  - Sometimes unable to find research examples.
  - Demonstrates understanding.

# Main Focus.... “Meat”

- Other points to consider.
- Flow
  - No topic/paragraph hopping.
- One paragraph leads to the next.
- Sub headings = Not encouraged.
- Critical Thought.
  - Demonstrates understanding and viewpoint
- Spelling, Grammar and Presentation.

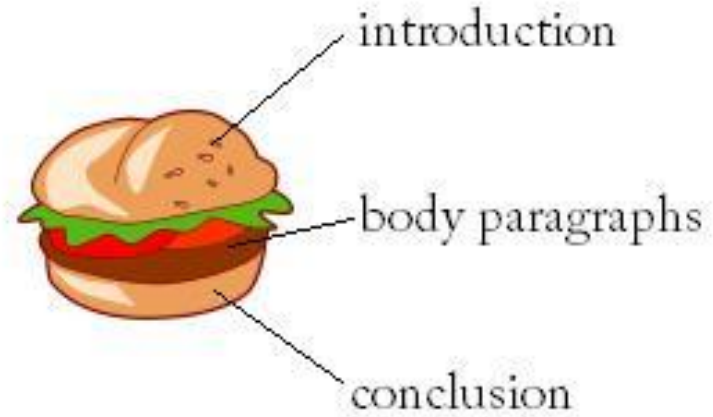
# Structure your answer.



- Aim for a skeleton structure early on in the process.
- You can flesh it out later with more detail

# STRUCTURE

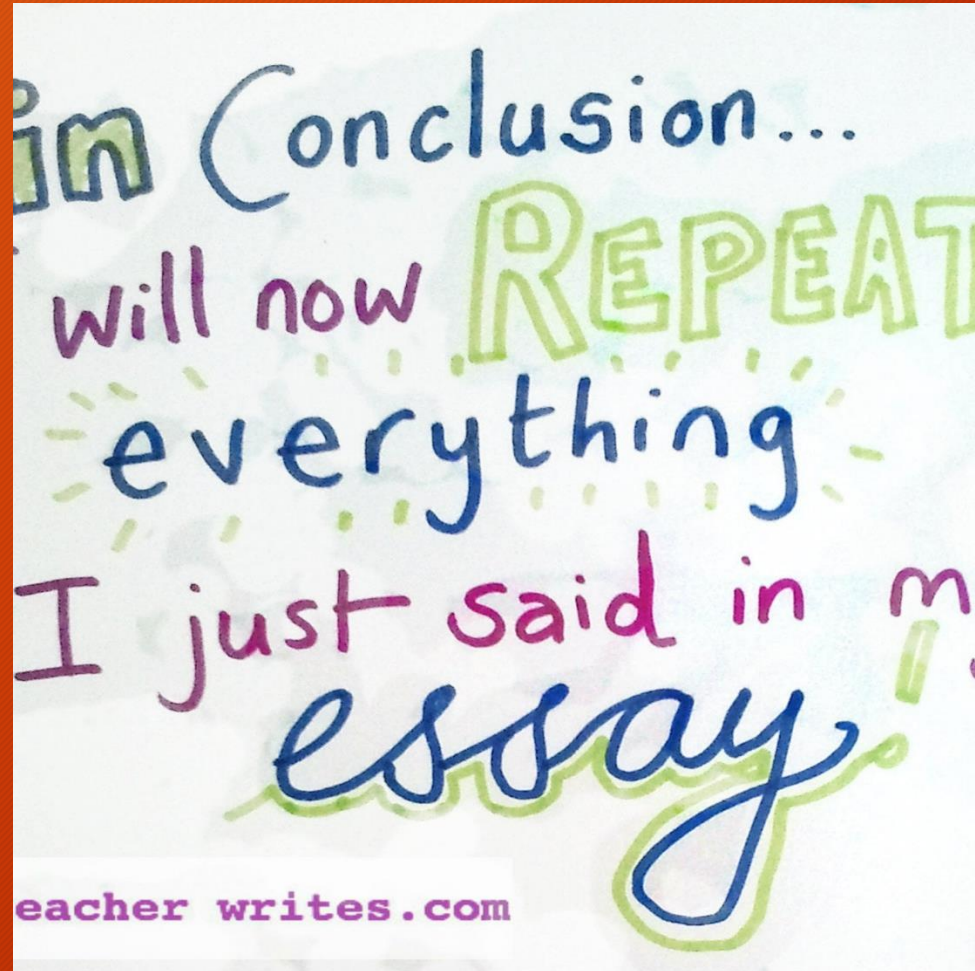
- Introduction and Conclusion
  - > 15% of the content



# Conclusion

A conclusion should include a brief summary of the main arguments (no new ideas here) and bring your ideas together. You will comment on strengths and weaknesses of the work and speculate on possible gaps in the literature.

- DON'T.....



# Making links....

- Each section needs to relate to the next
- Use 'linking phrases'  
*therefore; on the other hand; next; however*



# Tips

## ▶ Plan ahead

- Mind Map the area and QUESTION.
- Interpretation of the question.

## ▶ Clear Introduction.

- How you will answer the question.

## ▶ A “meat” which answers the question and showing understanding, knowledge and critical thinking.

## ▶ Conclusion

- Reverts to the question
- Critical Thinking.

# Academic Writing



# Why bother?

- Objective
- Presenting complex ideas clearly and concisely
- Researching
- Selecting relevant information
- Supporting position with evidence

# Writing style

- Try to cultivate an objective and authoritative tone. Don't be too chatty and informal and aim to write in the third person. Keep language simple and sentences a reasonable length. Don't use long words simply to sound clever - an occasional trip to the thesaurus stands out like a sore thumb to the reader! Remember the point of the essay is to clearly communicate your ideas on a given subject - read it through and check that you understand what you've written (better still get a friend to comment)

# Formal Writing

- Avoid emotional and subjective forms:
- (i.e. not 'in your face')
  - The author's argument is terrible and I don't agree with it.
- Rather, be more OBJECTIVE:
- (take a step back)
  - It could be suggested that the author's argument has not been fully developed.

# What is subjective and objective?

- Subjective .... Me! Me! Me! Me! I! I! I!
- Objective ... take a step backwards; take yourself out of the discussion to a certain extent.

# Formal Writing

- I'm
- It doesn't
- There's no



- I am
- It does not
- There are no ...



# Check you work carefully

- Use
  - i) Dictionaries
  - ii) spell - check programmes
  - iii) reference books: grammar, style, thesaurus etc.
- Make sure it makes sense to another reader
- Get someone else to read it through?

# Tips

- ▶ Offer own viewpoint without using “I”.
  - Use existing reference/s
  - A feasible notion was brought forward by
  - A large number of research has supported.
  - This Author.....
- ▶ Proof read
  - Get a 2<sup>nd</sup> opinion.
- ▶ Presentation
  - Make sure its Legible
  - Simple is often best.

# Academic Style

- Critical rather than descriptive writing
- Draw on the opinions and findings of experts;  
Use evidence to support your views
- Draft/ edit
- Persevere/ learn from feedback

# Using direct Quotes

- Using direct quotes does demonstrate to the reader that extra reading has been carried out.
- However, an assignment that has become “reliant” on quotes might also demonstrate a true lack of understanding on the topic.

# As an example

- ▶ Essay 1.
- ▶ Paiget (1932) wrote “Children’s games constitute the most admirable social institutions. The game of marbles, for instance, as played by boys, contains an extremely complex system of rules, that is to say, a code of laws, a jurisprudence of its own... All morality consists in a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought in the respect which the individual acquires for these rules”.

# As an example

- Essay 2.
- Piaget in 1932 compared moral judgment to a game of marbles, he claimed that morality is a system of rules which requires interaction between people. This helped form his judgements on when children acquire moral judgement.

# Tips

- ▶ The “dreaded” Word Count.
  - Word count + 10%.
  - The aim of a word count is to demonstrate that **you can answer the question** in a concise manner.
  - Don’t waffle or write a book chapter.
  - Shows lack of understanding
- ▶ See guidance from Academic Quality Handbook.

In Summary

# What is a Good Essay? Checklist

- Have you answered the question in the title?
- Have you drawn on a good range of up to date and relevant material?
- Do you show a grasp of the main issues / theories?
- Have you presented a critical analysis and not merely a description?
- Have you written objectively with appropriate evidence?
- Is the essay reader friendly and logical?
- Is the work your own and is the work of others made clearly visible?
- Have you adhered to word limits?
- Have you referenced properly?

# Stages of writing

- ▶ Think about the title
- ▶ Gather appropriate information
- ▶ Make a plan
- ▶ Organise material to fit your 'story'
- ▶ Write the first draft
- ▶ Review the draft in light of the title and 'good essay characteristics'
- ▶ Write the final draft
- ▶ Read (or better still get someone else to read

# Title

- What is the title asking you to do? - look for key words (compare, contrast, evaluate, consider, discuss).
- What do you understand by the question?
- If you are unsure about requirements - ask!

# Planning

- Get some notes down on paper - by reading you will have an idea of what others think - but don't forget what you think in relation to the evidence.
- Scrappy notes will soon become a logical plan and just writing something down gets you over 'clean page syndrome'!
- Use notes to find themes or arguments you will cover

# Organising the material

- When you have the main themes or arguments, list the evidence or literature, which relates to each. How do you propose to use the evidence to ‘tell your story’?

# Writing style

- Write objectively and in the third person
- Avoid a chatty, informal style
- Avoid unnecessary long words or jargon
- Avoid bullet points, lists and sub-headings unless absolutely necessary, they tend to make work disjointed and do not read well

# Remember.....

- 1.5 or double line spacing
- Remain in the third person
- No personal anecdotes or opinions
- Do not write don't, isn't etc... write do not, is not.
- Do not write in slang....remain academic throughout
- Proof read!!!

# References and Bibliography

- ▶ References
  - The full details of a book/journal/ electronic resource cited in the essay.
  - Reader must be able to know full details of EVERY source cited in the essay.
  - Even if you only read part of the article/book or it was from a secondary source.
- ▶ Bibliography
  - The full details of a book/journal/electronic resource read but not cited in essay.
- ▶ No “shame” in not having a Bibliography.

**Read through, read through and put it  
away for a few days then read through  
again!**