

## Academic Writing handout to view online (zoom to enlarge / read)

### A seven-point procedure for writing assignments

Until you develop your own method of writing essays and other assignments, you may find this seven-point procedure helpful.

- 1 Clarify the task**  
Before you start research, make sure you know what you are looking for.
  - Examine the title and course notes very carefully (page 178). What exactly is required? Ask your tutor early on if you are unsure.
  - Write one line to sum up your basic opinion or argument. Adapt it as you proceed.
  - Brainstorm or make pattern notes to record what you know already.
  - What do you need to read or find out?
- 2 Collect and record information**  
Get the information you need, but be focused.
  - Be selective – you can't use everything.
  - Write a set of questions to guide your research – and 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.

**Types of material**  
You can use any relevant material:

  - factual information
  - ideas, theories, opinions
  - experience.

**Sources**  
Many sources of information are available to you, including:

  - books, articles, official reports, surveys
  - lecture notes, data from laboratory work and projects, the internet, interviews
  - television, radio, newspapers, videos.

**Method**  
Keep asking yourself:

  - 'Do I need the information?'
  - 'How will I use this information?'

**Recording**  
Record information as you go along (see page 127):

  - where you found information and ideas – for your references list (see page 132)
  - notes of themes, theories, dates, names, data, explanations, examples, details, evidence, page numbers (see page 122).
- 3 Organise and plan**  
Organise your work as you go along (see page 183).
  - Make a big chart to link ideas and details.
  - Make a rough outline plan early on – you can refine it as you go along.

**Planning**  
Keep checking what you are doing. Careful planning:

  - helps to prevent repetition
  - clarifies your thinking
  - helps you organise your material.
- 4 Engage, reflect, evaluate**  
When you have gathered the information, think about where you have got to.
  - What have you discovered?
  - Has your viewpoint changed?
  - Have you clarified your argument?
  - Have you enough evidence/examples?
  - What arguments or evidence oppose your point of view? Are they valid?
  - Is it clearer to you why this task was set?
- 5 Write an outline plan and first draft**  
Now structure your writing.
  - Refine your plan. Work out the order to introduce your ideas, using pattern notes or headings and points.
  - Work out how many words you can write on each point. What must you leave out?
  - Write a first draft. Write quickly: it is only a draft. You may find it easier to type headings onto the computer first.
  - Start with whatever seems easiest.
  - Keep going: don't worry about style.
  - To begin with, state things clearly and simply in short sentences.

**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 (orange)  
why not convincing  
**5 Alternative theory** notes S (green)  
evaluation of evidence  
why not convincing  
**6 Underlying issues** – notes T (blue)  
**7 Conclusions**  
a  
b  
c
- 6 Work on your first draft**  
Develop your first draft. You may need to do this several times, improving the assignment with each version. Leave time between drafts for your ideas to simmer.
  - Rewrite your early draft (see page 191).
  - Adapt the structure (pages 184, 264) and organise the writing into paragraphs.
  - Make sure your argument is clear to readers.
  - Check that you have included evidence and examples to support your points.
  - Write out your references (or bibliography).
- 7 Final draft**  
Edit and check your final draft (see page 197).
  - Enjoy 'fine-tuning' your writing.
  - Read it aloud to check that it is clearly written.
  - Keep redrafting until you are happy with the text.

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### What gets good marks?

To get good marks, you do not necessarily have to work longer hours. You do need:

- to identify the task or problem correctly
- to discover the underlying issues
- to find out exactly what is expected of you.

Although all subject areas have their own assessment criteria, the following general requirements provide a good guideline as to how marks are allocated.

**Level descriptors**

- Does your college provide details of the characteristics of each level of study?
- If so, what do these mean for your current assignment?
- What is expected at the next level up – are you working towards that level yet?

**Marking criteria**

- If your college or tutor provides marking criteria, check these before you start your assignment, and again at the end.

**Lowest marks**  
The lowest marks are awarded for work which:

- has weak structure
- shows little research, thought or reflection
- is mostly descriptive, with little analysis or argument
- considers only one point of view.

Tutors' comments may resemble these:

"You have just written out my lecture notes and paraphrased a few lines out of books, without considering why this is such an important issue."

"The student seems to have written out everything he knows about the subject, in any order, with lots of mistakes, and has not answered the question he was asked."

**Better marks**  
Better marks are awarded for work which:

- shows evidence of background learning
- shows some understanding of the underlying issues
- meets the set criteria
- answers the question that was put
- develops an argument or a point of view
- draws conclusions
- shows the relationship between different issues or concepts within the subject area
- reveals some thought and reflection
- organises information into a structure
- gives evidence and examples to support arguments and main points.

**Highest marks**  
Highest marks are awarded for work which includes all of the features necessary for 'better marks', and in addition:

- reveals a good understanding of why the topic is significant, including underlying issues and concerns, and where and why there is controversy
- engages actively with subject-related debates in a thought-provoking way
- reveals understanding of how the topic relates to broader issues, beyond the subject area.

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### Essay plans as pyramids

Essay structures consist of several concept pyramids combined into one piece of continuous writing. A halfway step between pattern notes and linear development, the concept pyramid incorporates more structure and linear development. Unlike pattern notes, it enables you to evaluate the weight (or level) of one kind of information against another – and to see this visually.

**For an essay comparing three different schools of thought on a given subject**  
(e.g. main divisions of thought such as Marxism or Postmodernism)

**Upper-level categories**  
SCHOOL P (name) SCHOOL Q SCHOOL R

**Intermediate level 1**  
(e.g. people whose theories are associated with a major school of thought)  
theorist A theorist B theorist C theorist D theorist E

**Intermediate level 2**  
(each person may have more than one theory, important belief or research finding)  
theory X (what it is in brief, date) theory Y

**Lower level**  
(same for each theory you use)  
general implications of theory X general applications of X general evidence to support X general evidence against X evaluation of evidence for and against

**Specific examples**  
(same for each theory you use)  
examples of a particular person/economy experiment J case study K survey L

**Details**  
number of participants time of day etc.

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Source: Cottrell, S. (2013) *The study skills handbook*. [Book] 4th edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (Palgrave study skills).