

# 6. Writing Essays

---

Use this guide if you'd like ideas, strategies and information about:

- 1. What is an essay?**
- 2. Why write an essay?**
- 3. How to research, plan and write an essay (a 10 step process)**
  - 3.1 Interpret the question and identify the key topics
  - 3.2 Organise your time
  - 3.3 Read (do your research, make notes)
  - 3.4 Think (and establish your position)
  - 3.5 Plan (structure)
  - 3.6 Start writing
  - 3.7 Referencing (quoting, paraphrasing, summarising and plagiarism)
  - 3.8 Draft (and redraft)
  - 3.9 Refine (edit and proofread)
  - 3.10 Review lecturer's feedback
- 4. Language (academic style)**
- 5. Presenting your work (layout and format)**
- 6. Overview:**
  - 6.1 More tips for planning and writing essays
  - 6.2 Checklist (features of a good essay)
- 7. What next? (further support)**

---

## 1. What is an essay?

An essay is a piece of academic writing generally between 500 and 5000 words long. The word 'essay' originally meant a first attempt or practice, which perhaps suggests some kind of provisional exploration. So an essay is an intellectual exploration of a topic, involving looking at

different arguments and evidence and often developing the writer's perspective.

An essay differs from a report in that it is more discursive, that is, the points are often developed in more depth and the language may be a little less concise. Typically, an essay will consist of a number of paragraphs that are not separated by subheadings or broken up by bullet points, unlike in a report. However, some lecturers may allow or encourage subdivisions and headings as this can help both the writer and the reader with the structure of the content. In that case, an essay may begin to look more like the preferred format of some journal articles.

Some disciplines use the word 'assignment' instead of 'essay', although the style is likely to be similar, so this guide will still be valid for those readers. In case of variations in required format and layout, it is important to read your programme or module handbooks carefully for all the information they offer, and check with your marker if you still have questions after that. As with other generic guidelines (e.g. on referencing), this study guide describes general conventions of the Plymouth University and highlights good practice, but is not a rulebook!

## 2. Why write an essay?

The purpose of writing an academic essay is to provide written evidence of your ability to research a topic, weigh arguments, organise your thoughts on these, express these thoughts in a logical, coherent and critical manner, and reach conclusions which follow from the evidence/arguments you advance. It is not only a form of assessment that encourages you to show what you have learnt and what you make of it, but also an opportunity to explore ideas and improve your cognitive skills. This thinking/researching/writing process can be creative, rewarding and enjoyable, and not only demanding!

## 3. How to research, plan and write an essay: a nine step process

Writing an essay, no matter what the topic, is a complex process; it requires a lot of practice, and no formula can guarantee good written work. There is no right or wrong way of approaching an essay; there are, however, certain steps that can be really helpful for most people to take to produce a good piece of work.

### How do you write an essay?

It has been suggested that there are several different approaches to writing (described by Brasington, 2007). All have strengths and possible weaknesses. See if you can identify your style(s) from the list below, and think about how you might improve your approach, perhaps by making the most of several different styles:

**Discovery writing** is when writing is the means of discovering what it is you want to say

**Patchwork<sup>1</sup> writing** is when you write in sections and then 'stitch' the sections together

**Bricklaying** is when you perfect each sentence before moving on to the next

**Watercolouring** is when you incubate ideas in your mind and then write the whole piece in one go

**Architect writing** is when you plan your writing in considerable detail before even beginning to write.

There are many ways to set about planning and writing an essay and, in time, you will develop your own system. However we suggest that most writers can benefit from a process including the following steps.

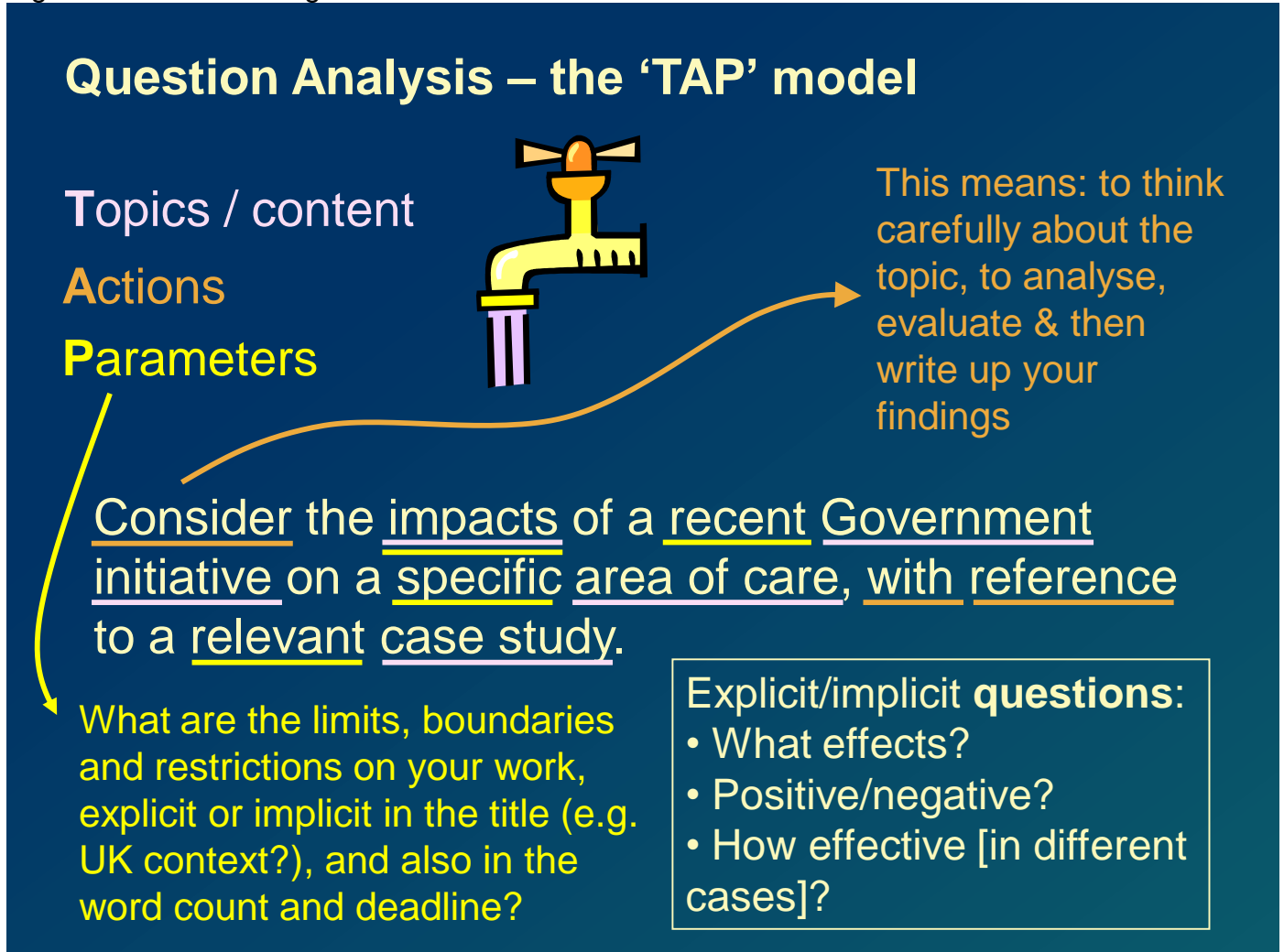
---

<sup>1</sup> The use of 'patchwork' here is different from the practice of 'patchworking' as discussed in the section below entitled 'Refer to sources'.

### 3.1 Interpret the question and identify the key topics

It is crucial that you correctly interpret the essay question before attempting to answer it. Even if you produce an exceptionally well-written piece of work, you may fail the module if you haven't produced an appropriate answer. Essays use different terms in the questions and each term has a meaning which reveals how the question might be answered. Essay questions can be interpreted by **actively** analysing them, for example, by highlighting the key terms and underlining key verbs, or by using the approach illustrated in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Understanding the brief



### Wording a question or brief so it reads like a title

'Consider the impacts of a recent Government initiative on a specific area of care, with reference to a relevant case study' is a typical assignment brief 'question', but does not really make a good title. To show your reader that you have paid attention to detail and engaged with the 'question', and also to help focus both you as writer and them as reader, you can reword this to make it into an actual title. This can be done early in the process to help you keep on track as you plan, or at the end when you are really sure what the most important aspects are to which you want to draw the reader's attention – or both. Certainly in this example it would be useful to replace the generic aspects with specific details, such as: 'The impacts of the 2006 Obesity Plan on cancer care'. As long as the meaning of the question is not altered, you can be more creative, and also consider putting some suggestion of your stance and key issues you have chosen to highlight into your title: 'Does a cancer care nurse have time for health promotion? The challenges of implementing the 2006 Obesity Plan'. Choose something that could grab a reader's attention and give them a clear picture of what your essay focuses on, as well as differentiate it from the other 50 or so essays

'Study Guide 6: Planning and writing essays', Learning Development, Plymouth University (2011)

that your marker will see on a similar topic!

## Glossary of key essay question terms or 'action words'

The list below contains the most commonly used words and terms in essay titles, together with their generally accepted interpretation. You should, however, *always* consult the module outline for the interpretation of words or phrases specific to your course as they can differ according to their context or individual module co-ordinator preference.

<u>Term:</u>	<u>Interpretation:</u>
Account for.....	Give reasons for, clarify, explain
Analyse.....	Examine critically – in detail
Argue the case for.....	Back your opinion by reasoning in favour of it
Assess.....	Determine the value of, or 'weigh up'
Calculate.....	Reckon or compute by mathematics
Comment upon.....	Offer an opinion - give a point of view
Compare.....	Look for similarities and differences, reach a conclusion and justify it
Consider.....	Express your thoughts and observations about
Contrast.....	Oppose, in order to show differences
Criticise.....	Make an informed judgement, substantiated by evidence or careful argument
Define.....	State the meaning and, if necessary, the differing meanings and uses of the term or terms
Demonstrate.....	Show how, prove with examples
Describe.....	Recount, characterise, sketch or relate in sequence or story form
Develop.....	Expand on
Diagram.....	Provide a drawing, chart, plan or some other graphic form of answer. Label your diagram and, if appropriate, add a brief caption (explanation)
Differentiate.....	Explain the differences between
Discuss.....	Explain, then give the sides of an issue and their implications
Distinguish.....	Look for differences between and account for them
Elaborate.....	Add/provide details
Enumerate.....	Write in list or outline form, presenting points concisely one by one
Evaluate.....	Appraise the validity, worth or effectiveness of an issue or method
Examine.....	Describe the material in close detail and include others' descriptions if possible
Expand.....	Go into more detail
Explain.....	How and why it is
Explore.....	Approach in a questioning manner - consider from a variety of viewpoints
Give an account of.....	Describe in some detail
How.....	In what way, by what means or method, to what extent
How far.....	To what extent... (often involves the presentation of evidence and weighing up the pros and cons)
Identify.....	Pick out key features/causes/factors/examples (of something)
Illustrate.....	Usually involves making something explicit by the use of carefully chosen and relevant examples
Interpret.....	Translate into your own words
Justify.....	Prove (with evidence) or give reasons for decisions or conclusions; make sure you are convincing
List(/name).....	Similar to 'enumerate'; write an itemised series of concise statements
Outline.....	Organise a description under main points and a few subordinate points, leaving out minor details. Just the general arrangement or classification of things is required here

Prove.....	As for 'Justify': establish something by giving factual evidence, examples, or clear logical reasons
Relate.....	Show how things are connected or similar to each other, or how one causes another
Review.....	Examine a subject critically, analysing and commenting on its main points
Show.....	Reveal, disclose in logical sequence
Show how.....	Make clear by what means
State.....	Present the main points in brief, clear sequence, with the minimum of details, illustrations or examples
Summarise.....	Give the main points or facts in condensed form, leaving out details and illustrations
To what extent.....	Give reasons to support argument or action
Trace.....	Outline the progress, development or history of the subject, from its point of origin (unless some other starting point is given)
Translate.....	Express in different form or language
What.....	Of which kind/which
When.....	At what time, on which day, year, etc.
Where.....	At/to what place
Why.....	For what reason
Verify.....	Show to be true, confirm

### Identifying key topics

Having interpreted the question, you should now be reasonably clear as to the direction or possible directions suggested by the module leader in the brief. You now need to establish what the key topics are. A *mindmap* can be a good way to collect your thoughts and then to identify essential information and links – see the section below on planning, and also the 'Note-taking and Note-making Techniques' study guide in this series.

Another way of identifying key topics or issues is to use a simple 1), 2), 3) system to help you prioritise what you are reading and thinking.

1. **Need to know:** These things will be topics/points/issues which are to be included in the essay. They are vital, essential, key points. They are the core of the answer and must be included as they are central to the theme.
2. **Should know:** These are important, but less central topics/points/issues, which you plan to include and which will strengthen the points in 1) by illustrating and substantiating them.
3. **Could know:** These are less important and if left out would not profoundly affect the answer, but added, could enhance the answer (and your marks). These points could take the form of extra illustrations and examples that might enhance the reader's understanding.

You could note these topics/points/issues on separate sheets of paper, in separate columns of a table, or on a mindmap with 1) ideas closest to the centre of the page; 2) ideas clustered around the centre; and 3) ideas towards the edge of the page.

### 3.2 Organise your time

You need to start planning your time by finding out when the essay is due. Work out how many weeks you have until this date; you will need to spend at least a third of this time researching and thinking, perhaps a third on planning and a third on writing. Using a weekly schedule (refer to the

study guide on 'Getting Organised' for an example of this), block out set periods of time during each week to work on your essay. Set yourself deadlines for completing the various steps of the essay. For example:

**Week One:** Decide on the issue and 'angle' of your essay. Make a list of potentially useful references (from the reading list and from an independent search using Voyager, the Plymouth University's computerised library catalogue).

**Week Two:** Read collected material and make notes, keeping focused on answering the question set, and keeping track of what you read where.

**Week Three:** Create a detailed outline and write a first draft. Reflect upon the first draft and edit and amend it. Leave it on one side. Prepare a list of references.

**Week Four:** Review the second draft, editing and improving as necessary. Proofread and format the final version to be handed in.

Keep your schedule to hand and consult it regularly. You will probably deviate from it occasionally but try to keep up to date - adjust your speed if you feel that you are lagging behind.

### 3.3 Read: do your research

You can now begin the task of selecting relevant material to start reading. There are numerous sources of information for you to make use of, much of it available in the Plymouth University campus libraries, including:

- academic texts - books and journals
- references in academic journals and books
- government statistics
- newspapers and magazines
- the internet
- private sector research reports

There is usually some constraint on the length of an essay so, inevitably, you will need to be selective about the material. In this selection process, your aim will be to demonstrate your overall knowledge and understanding of the topic at an appropriate level.

Sources of information are wide and varied, but are usually classified under two broad headings. *Primary sources* of information are those from which a researcher gathers information first hand (for example, through interviews, surveys, experiments etc.) whereas *secondary sources* are used when the primary research has already been conducted and is available for example through official statistics, journal articles and newspapers. Collecting information for essays, you will usually rely predominantly upon secondary sources.

The quality of your written material may reflect the range and quality of material you have considered. A poor essay is often a result of a lack of preparation and information gathering. On the other hand, *too much* information can lead to confusion and you can feel overwhelmed. It is important, therefore, to keep reminding yourself what you are reading for; **have the essay question written down in front of you** in terms that you easily understand.

When researching, take into account some or all of the following tips:

- Re-read your lecture notes and review what you already know about the subject. Your lecture notes will provide you with a basic foundation upon which you can build your knowledge, and a useful framework for assignments. They are, however, only the



starting point and guide for your enquiry, so do not rely on them to provide all the material you need.

- Make use of plenty of different types of sources to broaden your knowledge and understanding of the subject.
- Many students use only those texts indicated on the module reading list – consider going beyond this list and use the key words in the essay title as a starting point for your literature search. Consult Voyager (the computerised library catalogue) to find out exactly which sources are available.
- As many students over-rely on text books for research, they under-use academic journals, CD-ROM's and other sources. Journals often contain more up-to-date information than books and can provide a wealth of useful information.
- Ensure as you read and make notes that you record quotes, references and sources accurately and write them under key topic headings or with colour or some other coding system to save time and confusion later on. Make sure that these notes are easily accessible.
- Use one or more of the reading techniques outlined in the 'Reading Skills' study guide: scanning, skimming, reading in-depth, critical reading, rapid reading, intensive reading, extensive reading. As you will not be able to read all the information that you collect, you will need to switch between the various reading techniques so that you can make the most efficient use of your time.
- Take time to think while you read, and make a note of your responses to others' arguments: do you agree? What does the evidence tell you? Is there a conflict? Does it raise a question which you need to be answered by further reading? And, crucially, **how does what you are reading shape your answer to the brief?**

### 3.4 Think: establish your position

Have you read enough to feel that you can answer the question set? Since you are usually expected to answer a specific question, address certain issues and/or make a case for the chosen argument, it is really important that you establish your position, that is, decide what your basic answer, conclusion or argument is. You cannot easily lead your reader anywhere if you do not know the destination yourself, and stumbling on it by accident (as seems to happen in some more muddled writing) is unlikely to impress your marker.

To keep focused, it can be really helpful to write your answer out in a sentence or brief paragraph, and keep that visible as you are planning, writing and reviewing your work. Here is a (fictional) example of what this might look like if the following were your assignment question:

#### **Example:**

**Question** - To what extent has UK educational policy since 1945 ensured equality of opportunity?

**Basic answer** - Educational policy since 1945 has addressed many, but not all, of the pressing issues relating to equal opportunities, especially in the public sector, but implementation has sometimes been slow and problematic, so there is still progress to be made.

### 3.5 Plan: work out the structure

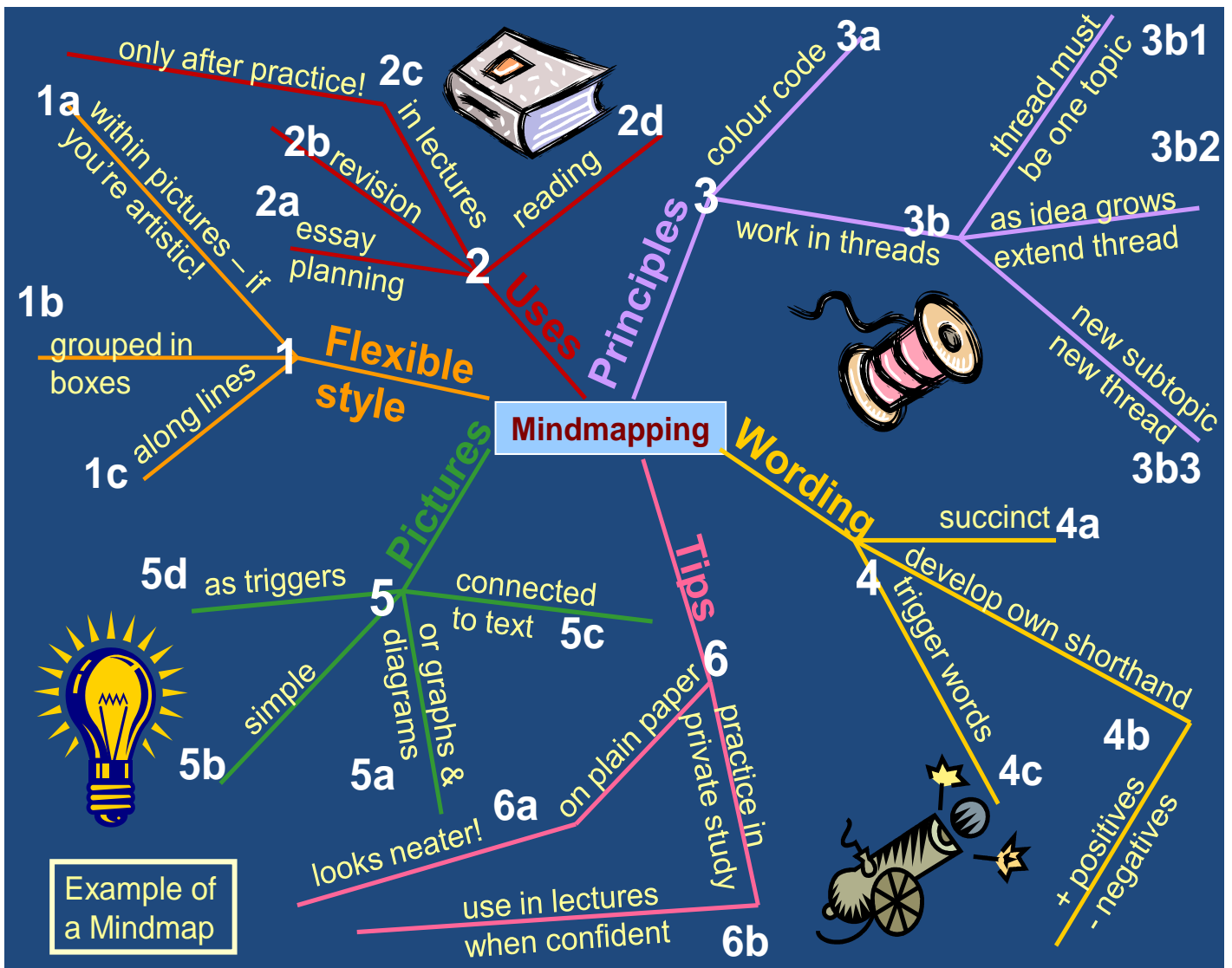
If you think, or have had feedback suggesting, that your writing can be muddled or disorganised, with unclear points or structure, then you could probably benefit from spending time carefully planning what you are going to say and how you are going to say it. Building and presenting a convincing argument requires that you think through the topic and spend sufficient time developing your essay structure. To continue the journey metaphor from above: it is really helpful to plan your route (the landmarks, or crucial points and evidence in your argument) before setting out on the trip, to make the travelling (both your writing process and your marker's reading process) smoother and faster.

Use the notes you have already made - these may include quotations, summaries, diagrams, observations from your reading and even paragraphs you have already drafted. Subdivide all your notes by grouping them in subtopics, themes, positives and negatives, or by order of time, or whatever makes most sense to you for your particular assignment. Arrange the subtopics into a logical order perhaps by cutting them up, putting it all into a table or matrix (you may need a really big bit of paper!), highlighting, colour-coding, using numbers and symbols and/or attaching post-it labels to different sections – be systematic, and creative!

People often think they have put things in a logical order and are disappointed that their feedback still suggests problems with structure. In these cases, it is often because points have been divided superficially and meaningful connections have not been made between them. It is worth thinking carefully about whether the subdivisions you identify will allow you to write a flowing piece of writing without artificial separation of points that could lead to confusion, disjointedness or repetition. Explore the interrelationships of things by making visual plans: mindmaps, flowcharts, tables can all help you plot out the points and see how they fit together to make the big picture of your main argument. It is then useful to translate a many-branched diagram into a linear list, probably by numbering the branches and twigs, so that you can easily turn the map into an essay, with each branch being, say, a subsection and each twig being a paragraph (see mindmap model below).



Figure 2: Mindmap on how to use mindmaps



You do not have to write the various sections of the essay in the order that you want them to appear in the final draft. Likewise some writers prefer to write the introduction first while others prefer to write it after the main body of work has been written. By using a well-organised plan, you should be able to write the various sections out of sequence. If you experience difficulties at any stage, just write down whatever comes to mind without worrying about spelling and grammar – you can reorganise it later.

Structure, in basic terms, refers to the shape of an essay, or the framework around which it is built. At the simplest level, this means the *introduction*, *main body* and *conclusion*. Each of these sections has a distinct purpose and is equally important.

- The **introduction** is essentially a map for the reader; it sets out the path that your essay will follow. The introduction should:
  - ...**identify the major issues** to be raised and outline their significance in relation to the title.
  - ...perhaps **summarise the argument** you are going to make. If the essay is like a journey, your answer, main point/message or conclusion(s) is the destination.
  - ...**set out the structure** of your answer and give some indication of how you intend

to develop your material in the main body. This might involve briefly identifying the evidence you are going to examine and showing how this will help you develop your point. This is like letting your reader know the route you will take to get to your conclusion.

- ...explain briefly **why** you have decided upon **this particular structure**, that is, justify your approach, e.g. explain why it is helpful to address the topics you address in relation to the main debate.
  - ...**'set the scene'** by briefly **describing** (if appropriate) the **context** of your answer. For example, this could be personal (especially if it is a reflective assignment), historical (if events leading up to this are important to help the reader understand your particular argument) and/or theoretical (you might define and/or outline any particularly relevant concepts that the reader needs to understand in order to follow what you are going to say).
  - ...**grab your reader's attention** by writing something interesting and engaging (but without resorting to sensationalism). One way is to start with a brief but interesting example or figure that shows, say, how important, relevant or problematic this issue is.
- The purpose of the **main body** is to develop your argument, analysing all the issues you've decided are relevant. In this section, you should:
    - ...**discuss each of the main topics, subtopics and themes**. This will involve examining, weighing up, interpreting and drawing conclusions from the evidence (see below).
    - ...**order your main points in sequence** using separate paragraphs; important points may need several paragraphs.
    - ...**link the points logically and coherently**. First you will need to be clear what the relationship is between one point and another, and how they all fit together as the building blocks in your argument. Good planning, including perhaps some mindmapping, will have helped you clarify these links. Then use 'signpost' phrases to guide the reader through your thought processes. These might be along the lines of a simple 'however...' to introduce a contrasting point, or a longer sentence like: 'in order to fully understand how Jamieson's model applies, it is worth considering the context in which it was created'. This tells the reader what you are going to do (in this case, you are going to look at the reasons behind creating the model) and why (because that should help them understand its application).
  - The **conclusion** draws together the main threads of your argument and is like the journey's destination: all the material that comes before should clearly and logically lead to this point. In the conclusion, you should:
    - ...possibly **summarise the main points** raised during the essay to open the conclusion.
    - ...**sum up the evidence and your interpretation of it**. That is, look at how all the pieces (the material covered so far) fit together to add up to the sum total, which is your conclusion, or answer to the question.
    - ...show clearly how the essay **has answered the question** and fulfilled the brief.

You can do this by explicitly referring to the keywords and/or themes of the title when summing up the implications of your discussion.

- ...**not introduce new information** to support your argument but instead
- ...look ahead to **implications for the future** and/or **make recommendations**.
- ...**round off the essay** with a good closing sentence, so that the ending is not abrupt, leaving the reader surprised or uncertain as to what you're saying.

NB: For more in-depth discussion of analysis, structure and argument and how to improve these in your writing, see our Critical thinking guide, '[Study Guide 8: Critical Thinking.pdf](#)'. You can see examples of annotated essays on the Writing for Assignments E-library resource, available from [www.learningdevelopment.plymouth.ac.uk](http://www.learningdevelopment.plymouth.ac.uk) .

If you now have a comprehensive plan, you have already done a lot of the hard work that goes into writing an essay. You have thought about how your essay will flow, you have organised your notes and prepared an outline. The purpose of your first draft is to test the developing structure and framework of your essay and begin to construct and develop your argument.

### 3.6 Start writing

#### Getting started

Starting writing can be daunting, although probably less so if you have done plenty of the above kinds of preparation first. When you have done plenty of thinking, mapping and planning, if you find the first words hard to find, consider trying 'freewriting' (Elbow, 1998 and Marshall and Rowland, 1996). Put your title, or some keywords or questions at the top of your page, set a timer for a few minutes, and JUST WRITE! Don't stop to think or edit, just keep writing. Even if nothing apparently useful comes out, it will help you get going, and the chances are that there will be something relevant that you might put in your essay somewhere.

When writing your essay, try to be concise. The most impressive answer is invariably presented in a direct and straightforward manner. Attempt to be natural and sincere in your writing and avoid the use of jargon and slang. When deciding on which words to use, clarity and accuracy are the key criteria - don't try to sound 'clever'!

#### Using theory and evidence to build structured paragraphs

Opinion should always be supported by evidence. In an academic context, a statement that is not supported by some kind of logical or factual evidence is not worth anything at all, even if it is absolutely correct. As highlighted by Coles (1995), evidence can take different forms according to your discipline, including: examples, quotations, the results of case studies, data in the form of figures, diagrams, tables, graphs and anything else that is appropriate to the subject you are discussing. Importantly she also emphasises that simply quoting, reiterating or referring to the evidence is insufficient: every kind of evidence needs to be discussed, addressing possible different interpretations, implications and conclusions that can be drawn from the data. She usefully recommends to:

1. 'First make the point.
2. Then quote the evidence.
3. Then explain how your evidence proves the point you are making' (ibid).

Think of each paragraph as a micro-essay, in other words, just like the entire essay, each

paragraph should have an introduction, main body and conclusion. The introduction to your paragraph is known as the *topic sentence* or *claim*. Topic sentences summarise or introduce the main point of what you are going to say in your paragraph. The body of the paragraph then expands on this sentence by providing definitions, further explanation and discussion of the evidence and examples. The argument then needs 'wrapping up' so that the paragraph has its own conclusion. This might involve discussing the implications, which can often offer the link to the next point in the next paragraph. The following model (figures 3a and b) is a useful framework to help you put this into practice (the text in the second slide is a partly fictionalised example response to the essay title 'The impacts of the 2006 Obesity Plan on cancer care'):

Figure 3a:

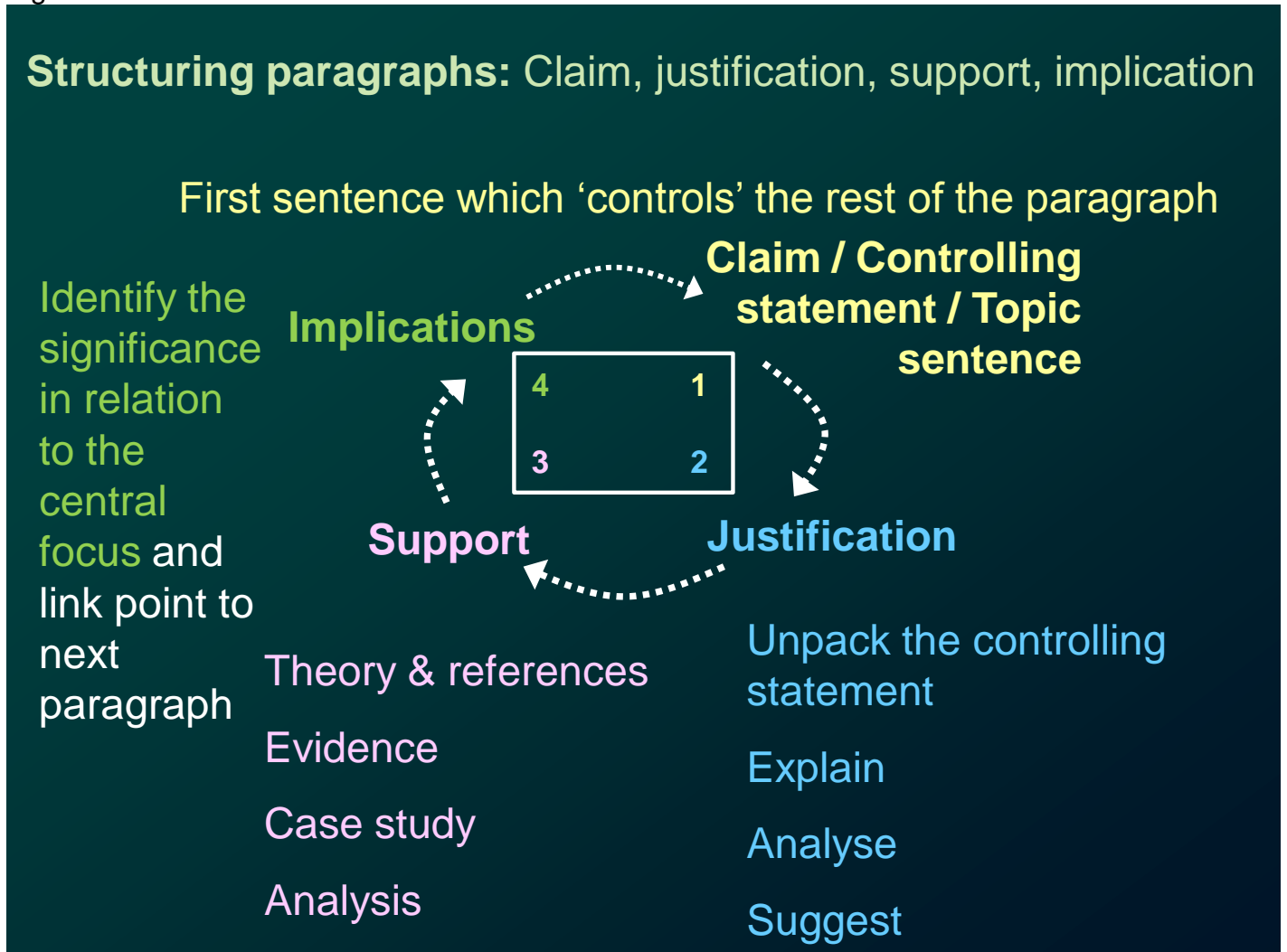


Figure 3b:

e.g. '[...] Weight management should be a part of the strategy to prevent occurrence, recurrence and death because of breast cancer' (Carmichael, 2006)...

**Implications for the nurse's role:**  
responsible for health promotion so that users are aware of the risks and can respond accordingly... However concentrating on weight loss alone as per the policy is inadequate as there are other factors that should also be addressed...

**Implications Claim**

4	1
3	2

**Justification**

...since obesity due to poor diet is estimated by some (e.g. Bloggs, 2002; Jones 2004; Rospigliosi 2007) to account for 30% of cancers in developed countries.

Danger of high fat diets (Chen and Yen, 2007) ; Weight control through physical activity important as lean body mass is key (Rock & Demark-Wahnefried, 2002); Links between obesity, cancer recurrence & oestrogen levels (Machie et al, 2001)

Paragraphs can be linked together with the use of transitional words and phrases, often called directional words, they point in the direction that the reader will take. When transitions lead from one idea to another, the essay will seem logical to the reader. Transitional words and phrases include 'for example...', 'for these reasons...', and 'to sum up...'. However, try to avoid using the same words or phrases to begin each sentence and paragraph.

Avoid using one or two sentence paragraphs. This may reflect the lack of development of the point you are trying to make. Equally, try not to write excessively long paragraphs. An inability to condense or summarise the material may demonstrate an overall lack of understanding of it.

### 3.7 Referencing

Referencing is not a separate step of its own to be left to the end of your writing: it starts before you even start reading, as you note down details of relevant-seeming sources; it continues as you read and make a note of what material comes from where; as you write it is also important to keep track of sources, and you can either make a reference list as you go along or towards the end – but remember that it can take quite a lot of time, so don't leave it until the day before the deadline. Referring to sources has several purposes. It:

- i) establishes authority in your writing
- ii) illustrates your writing with evidence
- iii) allows your reader to trace (and judge the validity of) the material you've considered
- iv) distinguishes your reasoning from other people's
- v) saves you having to conduct primary research for every point
- vi) gives credit to others for their effort



Whether you are using direct quotes, paraphrases, summaries, statistics, studies, theories, ideas, images, data sets, interpretations of events that are not our own or facts which are not clearly common knowledge, **the source must be cited.**

If you do not insert references whenever material (even just an idea expressed in your own words) comes from somebody else, you may be charged with **plagiarism, a serious academic offense, and awarded a 0 grade.** You can take an online tutorial here to check your understanding of plagiarism rules: <http://perception.plymouth.ac.uk/q4/session.dll?CALL=plagiarism.pip>

The principle of referencing in your text remains the same for any type of source. Most disciplines at the Plymouth University use an author-date system (often the Harvard system), in which the author's surname (or organisation name if there's no named individual) and year should be in the text, for example:

One of the most problematic aspects of environmental policy-making is said to be that of persuading big actors of its apparent importance (McDonald, 2006). However...

In the reference list at the end of your work, you would list the following details for every source you use, and the sources would be listed in alphabetical order by author's surname:

Surname, Initials. (year of publication) 'Title of article', *Journal Name in italics*, volume number (part): pages.

For more information on referencing, consult your programme and module handbooks. If you still have questions, or if your faculty does not offer its own guidelines, refer to the most recent version of Pears and Shields, *Cite them right*, available from the library.

Although you can use direct quotes in your text, that is, the exact words of another writer between inverted commas, to emphasise a particular point or to provide an example of another author's perspective or theory, try to keep direct quotes to a minimum. Over-reliance on other people's words can show a lack of understanding, critical thought and/or effort on your part, and is often a part of what is known as 'patchworking'. This is where people 'stitch' together other people's material without adding any of their own judgment, reason or argument. This only shows that you have read some material; it doesn't show that you have really understood about it and thought about it. As a general rule, try to reword a quote in your own words (this is called paraphrasing – see below); remember it is still essential to refer to the source of the material. As a rule of thumb, only include a direct quote when you want to highlight the exact words or terminology used by the author. In most other cases, you will be able to phrase it better for your purposes, whether that involves shortening it, elaborating on it or otherwise adapting it to make it fit smoothly in your text (without altering the meaning, obviously!). When you do include a direct quote, it is very important to reproduce the exact style and form used in the original text. Where the quote is short (less than 30 words), place it in quotation marks in the body of the text. If the quotation is longer than 30 words, indent the quote from both the left and right margins. When illustrating a long quote in this way there is no need to use quotation marks.

A direct **quote** incorporated into your text may look like this (note the page number in the reference):

Amid growing concern for the decline of some wildbird species in UK woodlands, it has been suggested that '...there should be a focus on several wide-ranging issues that could substantially alter the nature of British woodlands and their bird communities' (Fuller *et al*, 2005).



A **paraphrase** of the same point may look like this:

Fuller et al (2005) point out that, since there is growing concern for the decline of some wildbird species in UK woodlands, it is important to address the causes of changes to woodlands and their avian inhabitants.

A **summary** of the details of this point made in a longer text, or perhaps by various texts, may look like this:

Fuller *et al* (2005) outlined the seven most likely potential causes of population declines, namely: (1) pressures on migrants during migration or in winter; (2) climate change on the breeding grounds; (3) reduction in invertebrates; (4) impacts of agriculture on woodland edges and on habitats outside woodland; (5) reduced management of woodland; (6) intensified grazing pressure from deer; and (7) changing predation pressure (due to increases in squirrels, corvids and Great Spotted Woodpecker). (Taken from Hewson *et al*, 2007)

NB the whole of this last example should technically be in inverted commas, as it is a direct quote of Hewson's summary of Fuller's article. This in turn could be summarised in the following way:

Fuller *et al* (2005, cited in Hewson *et al*, 2007) identifies various causes for declines in some species of woodland birds, to do with changes in both natural pressures and pressures from human activity.

Note the legitimate use of **secondary referencing** – for more information see A Guide to Referencing on the 'Resources and Links' tab of the Learning Development portal pages at [www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn), or the useful book, *Cite them Right* (Pears and Shields, 2008). If you are not sure whether to cite something, err on the side of caution and cite it. Organise the sources you refer to in an alphabetical list at the end of your report, as per the references list at the end of this document.

If you are instructed to use the 'Harvard System', use the author-date details in your text as above. In some disciplines you may instead be expected to use a numerical system, as below.

**Footnotes:** A footnote refers to the insertion of a superscript number (e.g. <sup>1</sup>) where the reference should be; the number refers to a note printed at the foot of the page where the corresponding details for the source of the information are listed. Footnotes are numbered consecutively, with the same number never repeated even when starting a new page. This system, however, is generally used less often in reports – check the requirements for your course.

Footnotes are also used for additional, non-essential, information related to the matter being discussed. Footnotes can be used to briefly qualify broad statements in the text. This does not mean that you can simply cut from the text and paste into the footnotes. The basic rule is that you should be able to read the entire report without having to refer to the footnotes at all. If the text does not make sense without the footnotes, you are probably relying too much on your reader jumping from text to footnotes and back.

The first reference to a book, chapter or article in a footnote must provide full bibliographic details as you would provide in a bibliography or reference list. After that, if the same sources are referenced again, you can use the Latin abbreviations *ibid.* and *op. cit.*

### 3.8 Draft: and redraft

Remember that this draft is only rough; it is not supposed to be perfect and it will need revision. If you discovered gaps in your research when you wrote your first draft, you will need to collect

'Study Guide 6: Planning and writing essays', Learning Development, Plymouth University (2011)

further information. Once the first draft is complete, leave it alone for a few days; this will help you to gain a more objective perspective of your own work.

The purpose of successive drafts is to improve the overall presentation, comprehension and coherency of the essay. In order to achieve this, consider undertaking the following tasks:

- Re-read the question, then your draft. Check that what you are writing is actually answering the question.
- You may do a better job if you do your editing on paper rather than on screen.
- Don't be afraid to cut it into sections and shuffle it around to improve the sequence.
- Re-write the draft. Consider using a different coloured pen for each editing stage to reduce confusion.
- Again leave it, or give a copy to a (trustworthy) fellow student for comment. It doesn't matter if the student/friend is not familiar with your course; s/he can still give you useful feedback. Do the same for them some day - the process will help you both.

### 3.9 Refine: edit and proofread

Even upon completing the final draft, the job is not yet complete. It is *extremely* important to proofread what you have written before submitting your work; you will invariably come across numerous mistakes which can easily be corrected. Proofreading is an essential task that many writers do not take very seriously. Allow sufficient time between completing your final draft and the submission date in order to critically review your work.

At the proofreading stage you should check for errors with spelling, grammar and punctuation, coherence and structure of the essay, and the overall presentation of your work. When proofreading, consider some of the following useful tips:

- Re-read the essay to make sure that it flows well and that it makes sense as a whole. Reading your essay from beginning to end may make you realise that it is less coherent or not as thorough as you had thought.
- Proofreading will allow you to rectify incomplete sentences, insert citations which have been inadvertently omitted, or (if you are using a computer) erase unwanted text left as a result of cutting and pasting. **NB** other people may proofread for you, that is, highlight anything that needs correction, but **you must make the corrections yourself**, as otherwise the other person becomes a co-author; work you hand in as yours must be entirely your own, bar properly referenced material.
- Check the spelling. Incorrectly spelled words can distract the reader from the content of your essay. It is important, therefore, that you check your work thoroughly for any unnecessary spelling mistakes. One of the most efficient ways of picking up spelling errors (if you have the time) is to read your work backwards. That way you are looking at each individual word, not getting distracted by the meaning of the sentence or passage.
- Using the spellcheck facility on your computer can be a quick way of checking for errors. However, don't rely too heavily upon spellcheck as it doesn't differentiate between words that are spelt correctly but misused grammatically or illogically. Consider, for example, the following paragraph:

*Jack run too the hose and opened the poor. She was prized that no one*

*was at dome. Fortunately, he new were the keys are kept, and could drove him self to hospital if necessary. She stooped in front off the mirror and raw blood ripping down his lace.*

Although this paragraph does not contain any spelling errors, its sense is dubious! This emphasises the importance of carefully proofreading your own work, even after using the review tools on a PC. Even if your reader can understand what you mean, if it is harder work for them to follow, they may not be inclined to give you the benefit of any doubt they may have.

Surprisingly, a grammar check doesn't necessarily highlight the problems in the above passage either. However, a grammar check is also worth using, so when words or phrases are underlined in green when typing in Microsoft Word, right click and check the grammar pop-up, as well as selecting the 'explain' option to understand the issue and improve your grammar. Consider using a good grammar book or online guide (e.g. [English language and grammar](#) or [English Language – the basics](#)) if you know your grammar and punctuation need attention.

### **Further thoughts on drafting, editing and reviewing your work**

Everything you write is provisional. Remembering this can help you relax and get started without inhibiting you with the feeling that every word must be perfect straight away. In fact, you could go on editing, leaving your text on one side for a while, and editing again ad infinitum, without ever feeling you've achieved perfection. One of these versions will have to be handed in when the deadline approaches however, so although perfection is elusive, satisfaction should be a reasonable goal! If you have ever looked back at past work after a break of some weeks or months, you will find that you easily spot areas for improvement: this highlights how valuable it is to allow time in the writing process to put it aside, ideally for a week or so, and go back to it again with a fresh eye to edit and redraft and hand in the best piece of work you can produce in the time allowed.

### **3.10 Review marker's feedback**

If your marker has given you comments about your writing, it is really valuable to think about how you might put their suggestions into practice next time. It will probably help you to look through your work and see if you can spot where you've lost marks, and consider swapping with a friend so you can help each other. If these comments refer to referencing, have another look at your guidelines. If they refer to use of theory, structure, description or analysis, in addition to this study guide see number 8, 'Ideas, Arguments and Critical Thinking'. If they refer to language, expression and grammar, look at the section below, think about how you can improve your proofreading skills, use the spelling and grammar check in Word, and use a reference grammar or online tutorial such as those on the Learning Development 'Resources and links' page.

## **4. Language**

### **Equality and diversity**

When writing an essay, indeed any form of written material, you need to be aware of racist or sexist language which may be implied in your work. The language you use in your essays should not reflect prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, religion or ability.

#### **- Race**

'Coloured', for example, was once considered acceptable for use but, since the 1960s, it has come to be regarded as offensive to many black people.

#### **- Gender**

Until fairly recently it was common practice for the personal pronoun to be male. This is no longer 'Study Guide 6: Planning and writing essays', Learning Development, Plymouth University (2011)

considered acceptable. In an attempt to overcome this language bias, some authors use 's/he', while others use the gender plural 'they'. Alternatively, some simply avoid constructions which involve the use of personal pronouns, perhaps by choosing passives (e.g. 'it was observed that...').

### The first person pronoun

When writing your essay, you may decide to use 'I' in your assignment. There may be a wide range of reasons for the use of the first person in a piece of writing. For example, you might want to signal that the ideas you are presenting are not definitive. It might be that you want to write about your personal opinion at some points and you want to separate this from some other parts of the assignment where you do not use 'I'. Often writers use 'I' in their introduction to establish their place in relation to their material, and then go on to present the material itself in a more distanced fashion. In general, *unless you are instructed otherwise*, use 'I' if it seems sensible for your purposes.

**If you are unsure about the appropriateness of certain words or phrases, refer to your course handbook, ask your tutors for more guidance, or simply err on the side of caution.**

## 5. Presenting your work: layout and format

The presentation of your essay is an important matter; good presentation demonstrates to the reader that you are thorough and organised whereas a series of mistakes and an inconsistent format suggests that you are careless, and does not reflect well upon your work.

Many courses require that you type your work. If you do not have access to your own PC ('personal computer'), you can make use of the open-access facilities available on your campus. Word processing your work can make it look neat and professional, making it easier for the marker to read. Word processing is also extremely helpful at the editing stage as well as checking spelling and grammar. However, do not be tempted to overuse the computer for desktop publishing (unless, of course, this is what is expected of you). If an essay contains an over-abundance of different styles of fonts, decorative borders and intricate artwork, this may detract from the content.

There are a number of commonly accepted conventions of presenting work. Minor variations shouldn't cause you to fail, but you could possibly lose marks if you don't follow the guidelines in your handbooks. *Always* consult the programme style manual for any particular presentational requirements on *your* course.

- For word-processed work, type essays in *at least* 11 or 12 point font size with 1.5 or double spacing. Footnote references should be 10 or 11 point font size with single line spacing. Don't use a range of typefaces and font sizes - some of these may look *smart* but they can be *difficult* to read. Choose one that is clear and easy to read, for example, Times New Roman or Arial. Leave top, bottom, left and right margins of 2.54cm (standard default). Number the pages.
- If you do need to present hand-written work, first check that your marker will allow that, and then write as clearly and legibly as possible, and written on every other line. Try not to fill the page with scribbled out words or indecipherable squiggles. Leave sufficient margins and number the pages.
- Whether hand-written or word processed, print in black ink on white A4-size paper. Unless your guidelines state otherwise, secure the pages with a single staple in the top left hand corner and *without* a protective plastic cover (this is too fiddly for markers).
- Ensure that, unless advised otherwise, identifying details are included on the front cover,

such as your name, student registration number, title of the relevant module, code of the relevant module, name of the module leader, and date of submission.

- Headings and sub-headings can be very effective in presenting the main points in your work, but are entirely optional unless specifically requested. Headings could be written in UPPERCASE or **bold**, and the sub-headings in lower case. Alternatively, you may underline, *italicise* or use a different size or style of font. Whatever system you use, *be consistent*. Inconsistent presentation could lead to confusion and make your work appear messy and disorganised.
- Some information can be presented in maps, tables, graphs, charts, figures, and diagrams rather than in plain text. However, these formats often get confused. Strictly speaking, a table is a list of numbers and should be labelled in the text as Table 1., Table 2., and so on. Although all the rest are different in some ways, they should all be labelled as Figure 1. (or fig. 1.), Figure 2., and so on. Do not get carried away with presentation of such illustrations - it is the content not the form that counts. Remember to cite the source of the table or figure and include it in the list of references.
- Appendices can be used to present material which relates to the subject, but which is too bulky or detailed for use in the main text. Appendices can include many types of sources, from statistical graphs, newspaper cuttings and photographs. Ensure, however, that the appendix is relevant, not merely included to 'pad' out the essay. If appendices are used, they should be numbered or lettered in the same order that they are referred to in the text. Appendices are not usually counted as part of the word total (unless otherwise stated in course literature).

## 6. Overview

### 6.1 More tips for planning and writing essays:

- Ensure that you are clear about the deadline so you can plan your time. Deadlines can be helpful - they can give you the motivation you need to write (refer to the 'Getting Organised' study guide for more information about time management).
- Always have the title or question(s) in front of you, for example, stuck to the computer screen or fridge, or to anything you frequently look at. This may help you to keep on track and not go off on a tangent.
- Occasionally stop and ask yourself if what you are writing makes sense. Are you answering the question? Does what you have written make sense to you? Are you convinced by what you have written? If it doesn't make sense or convince you, it will not make sense or convince the reader.
- Writing on a regular basis will make you a better writer. Like anything else, the more you practice, the better you will get.
- **Always** keep a paper copy of each of your assessments in addition to copies of your work on disk (CD (E:/), memory key (F:/ or G:/) and hard disk (C:/)).
- Computer difficulties are **not** considered to be an extenuating circumstance. If you lose your work, you will not be able to claim this to be an extenuating circumstance. Therefore, ensure that you leave enough time to complete the work and be sure to back up all your files in different locations.
- Keep to the word limit set by the essay: you may be penalised to some degree for an



excessive number of words.

## 6.2 Checklist: features of a good essay

Even after spending hours collecting and reading the literature, planning and drafting the essay, and spending time presenting it in a professional way, before you submit your work *check it over one more time*. The checklist below, containing all the key elements of a good essay, has been included to help you with this final, but extremely important, task.

### Assignment checklist (and tips)

1. Does the essay answer the question/deal with the topic that was set? (Read the brief again!)
2. Does it cover all the key points and a range of arguments or viewpoints? (Have you missed one side of the argument?)
3. Have you covered the main points in sufficient depth? (Use the Critical Thinking Model in study guide 8)
4. Is the essay analytical in style and questioning in approach? (as above)
5. Have you developed and sustained the argument throughout the essay? (Check what you're actually saying)
6. Is the argument logical and realistic? (as above)
7. Is the content accurate and relevant? (check your sources are reliable and up to date)
8. Is the material logically arranged? (check the structure by drawing up a contents list)
9. Is there a sense of direction, a reason why one paragraph follows another? (Consider doing some mindmapping, or going back to ones you've already made)
10. Is each main point well supported by examples and argument? (check your use of evidence)
11. Does it clearly distinguish your ideas from those of others? (make sure there's a reference by every bit you've borrowed)
12. Do you acknowledge all sources, in the main body and at the end? (check your referencing, and Plymouth University guidelines on plagiarism)
13. Have you used an appropriate number and range of sources? (you don't have to read the whole library, but one or two authors' viewpoints won't be enough)
14. Is the essay the correct length? (check the brief)
15. Have you included a word count? (on the cover sheet)
16. Have you written the work in an appropriate style, and simply and clearly? (Would an academic who wasn't a specialist in your subject understand it?)
17. Is the grammar, punctuation and spelling correct? (Use Microsoft Word's spellcheck and grammar check, *plus* a dictionary and grammar guide)
18. Have figures and tables been used appropriately and referenced? (check your guidelines or the generic Plymouth University referencing guidelines)
19. Is the essay well-presented, with the right spacing, font, font size and cover sheet? (check your handbook)

When you feel you have covered all these points, take a well-earned break!



## 7. Further support

If you feel that you need further assistance with some of the study and learning skills highlighted in this guide, consult one or more of the following sources of help:

### Other guides:

To assist you in planning and writing essays, consider using other study guides in this series, in particular numbers 8, 'Academic Writing III: Ideas, Arguments and Critical Thinking', 2 'Getting Organised', 4 'Reading Effectively' and 5 'Note-Taking and Note-Making', all on [www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn).

### Contacts:

Learning Development Advisors are available to help all Plymouth University registered students with a range of study-related issues:

Tel: 01752 587456

Email: [learn@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:learn@plymouth.ac.uk)

Web: [www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn)

Similar support services will also be provided in partner colleges, check the VLE or ask your college tutor for details.

### Feedback:

Is this guide clear and easy to use? Any questions or feedback to help us improve this guide are very welcome: email [learn@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:learn@plymouth.ac.uk)

## Bibliography

Barnes, R. (1995) *Successful study for students*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge

Barrass, R. (1984) *Study! A guide to effective study, revision and examination techniques*. London: Chapman and Hall

Brasington, J. (2008) 'The writing process' [online]. Available: [http://www.hope.ac.uk/component/option,com\\_docman/Itemid,99999999/task,cat\\_view/gid,267/?mosmsg=You+are+trying+to+access+from+a+non-authorized+domain.+%28www.google.co.uk%29](http://www.hope.ac.uk/component/option,com_docman/Itemid,99999999/task,cat_view/gid,267/?mosmsg=You+are+trying+to+access+from+a+non-authorized+domain.+%28www.google.co.uk%29) (Accessed 22 May 2008)

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Sage

Casey, F. (1993) *How to study: a practical guide*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Macmillan Press Ltd

Coles, M. (1995) *A student's guide to coursework writing*. Stirling: University of Stirling

Cottrell, S. (2007) *The study skills handbook*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

- Crème, P. and Lea, M. R. (2003) *Writing at university: a guide for students*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Drew, S. and Bingham, R. (1997) *The student skills guide*. Aldershot: Gower Publishing Ltd
- Elbow, P. (1998) *Writing without teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Fairbairn, G. and Winch, C. (1996) *Reading, writing and reasoning: a guide for students*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Field, M. (2000) *Improving your spelling: boost your word power and your confidence*. Plymouth: How To Books Ltd.
- Fuller, R. J., Smith, K. W., Grice, P. V., Currie, F. A., Quine, C. P. (2007), 'Habitat change and woodland birds in Britain: implications for management and future research' [online]. *Ibis* 149 (Suppl. 2), 261–268, <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1474-919X.2007.00775.x?cookieSet=1> (Accessed 22 May 2008)
- Fry, R. (1997) *How to study*. London: Kogan Page
- Germov, J. (1996) *Get great marks for your essays*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin
- Good, S. and Jenson, B. (1995), *S.O.S.: Students' only survival guide to essay writing*. Victoria, BC: Orca Book Publishers
- Hewson, C. M., Amar, A., Lindsell, J. A., Thewlis, R. M., Butler, S., Smith, K., Fuller, R. (2007), 'Recent changes in bird populations in British broadleaved woodland'. *Ibis* 149 (s2), 14–28 doi:10.1111/j.1474-919X.2007.00745.x
- Hector-Taylor, M. and Bonsall, M. (eds), (2004) *Successful study: a practical way to get a good degree*. Sheffield: The Hallamshire Press
- O'Hara, S. (1998) *Studying@university and college*. London: Kogan Page Ltd
- Oliver, P. (1996) *Writing essays and reports: a guide for students*. Abingdon: Bookpoint Ltd
- Northedge, A. (2007) *The good study guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Northedge, A., Thomas, J., Lane, A. and Peasgood, A. (1997) *The sciences good study guide*. Milton Keynes: The Open University
- Parker, S. M. (2000) *Study skills handbook*. Plymouth: Plymouth University
- Powell, S. (1999) *Returning to study: a guide for professionals*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Race, P. (2007) *How to get a good degree: making the most of your time at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Race, P. (1992) *500 Tips for students*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Race, P. et al (1990) *Learning skills resource bank*. Cambridge: National Extension College.
- Roberts, D. (1997) *The student's guide to writing essays*. London: Kogan Page Limited