

The Essay Process

Objectives

When you have finished this section, you will be able to:

- Analyse an essay prompt to discover the expectations of the task and to plan your answer accordingly
- Derive an essay outline from the essay prompt

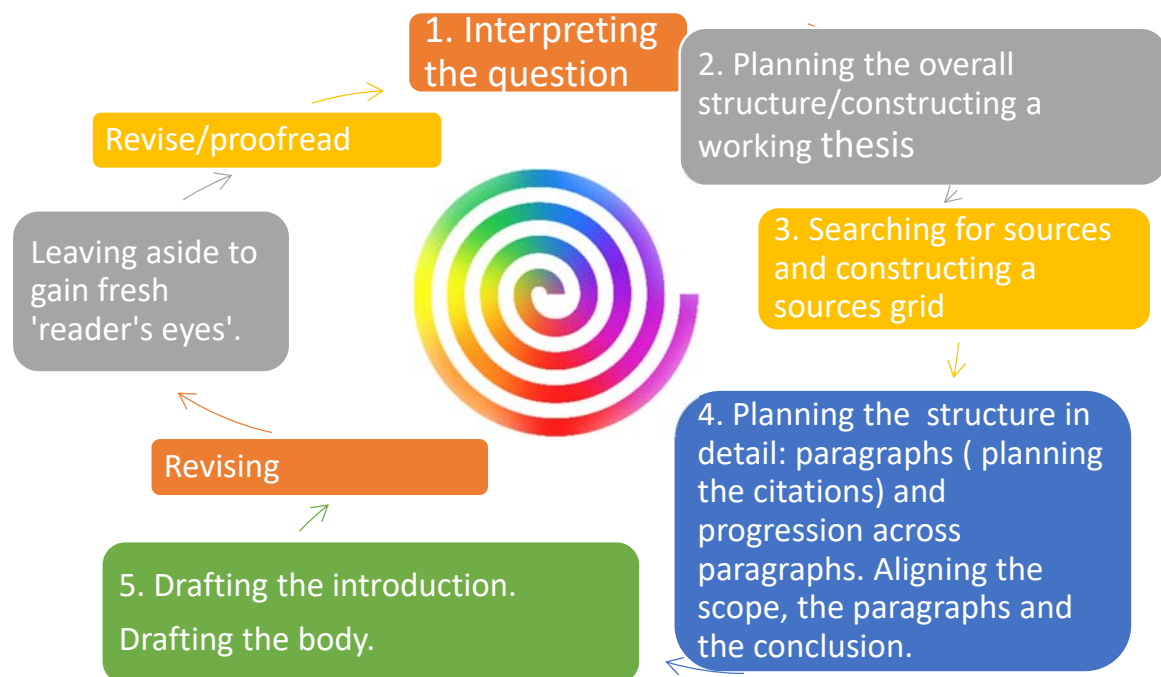
Before class:

Read the webpages on 'Planning your essay':

http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s1/m3u1s1_1.htm

Steps in writing your essay

We ever only read final drafts and so have the impression that writing is very neat. In fact, whatever we read may have taken dozens of drafts before reaching its final form. Writing is a very messy but enjoyable process. Several steps are indispensable:



Steps 1 and 2 are essential: Many students get stuck while writing their essays because they have not planned well. It is during the planning process that you analyse what the essay question requires; strategize how to answer the question; brainstorm, research and select information, and determine what specific arguments and supporting evidence to use to make your case; decide which citations would best support your claims; and determine how best to order your points.

Do not be afraid to spend time planning, and do not be afraid to revise your plan as you gain more information through research and discussion. Remember, this planning process is not a linear one-directional process. At various points in the process, you may backpedal and revise your strategy or main argument, replace a citation or piece of evidence, or rearrange your points.

Step 1: Interpreting the question

The first step in planning to write is to find out what the essay question (also known as the essay prompt) requires.

A prompt is composed of more than 'key words'. In fact you must analyse the following:

- **Content words** (these are the key words): the topic, the concepts the essay is about.
- **Instruction words:** usually the verbs that tell you 'what' to do: *discuss, analyse, explain, assess, evaluate*... These are very important because they directly link with the type of 'genre' and the structure you will use. Evaluate, for example will call for a first stage of 'description', followed by another of 'evaluation'. Discuss, on the other hand requires you to cover the difference aspects (opinions for example) in an issue. So don't ignore the instruction words.
- **Value words:** these indicate an attitude, a judgement within the question. Often they take the form of adjectives or adverbs: *always, never, significantly, major, primarily*... Miss these out and you may answer a completely different question.
- **Scoping words:** these indicate the boundaries of the essay. For example: *in relation to two areas, with reference to three theoretical frameworks, taking into consideration the legal and political factors*.

Sample Prompt:

Task: Look at this sample prompt (below) and highlight the content, instruction, value and scoping words. What will you include in your essay to meet the requirement of this prompt?

"Neither the developed nor the developing countries of the world can afford to reduce their future carbon dioxide emissions drastically.

Discuss giving specific examples."

Task:

1. Read the three pages of *Interpreting the question* at this link:
http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s2/m3u1s2_1.htm
2. Work in pairs. Identify the *instruction*, *content*, *value* and *scoping* words in the following essay prompts.
 - a. The El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is a worldwide climatic oscillation. Evaluate the scientific issues involved in enhancing our ability to predict ENSO events and current limitations to our forecasting ability. Use scientific papers, abstracts, review articles, and course readings to support your conclusions.
 - b. Compare and contrast the male rites of passage among the Sambia of New Guinea and the Maasai of southern Kenya. Consult ethnographic descriptions of Sambia and Maasai rituals in course readings.
 - c. Develop a position in reason to the following question: Do corporate takeovers (changes in corporate control) create or destroy value? To determine how these value changes come about, analyse case studies and Securities and Exchange Commission documents.

Step 2: Planning the overall structure/constructing a working thesis**a) Approaching an assignment in your discipline:**

Have you been given a prompt for an assignment yet? What do the prompts look like in your discipline?

You should use this prompt analysis approach for any prompt you receive to make sure you know the expectations before you start planning. You can consult the guide in the IVLE folder 'Writing in the Disciplines' where you will find some information about writing in several disciplines and on various types of assignments.

Note: Professors in different disciplines may have different interpretations of instruction words. Therefore, it is good practice to check your interpretation with your professors and tutors.

b) Instruction words and text structure:

Instruction words determine the content and structure of your essay (and to some extent, the choice of expressions you use as well). It is therefore important to understand what common instruction words mean.

Task:

1. Read about instructional words at this link:
<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/2c.html>
2. Work in pairs. Discuss what the instruction words in each of the following essay prompts mean.
3. Once you decipher the instruction words, you will probably have an idea of what the structure of the essay may look like. Discuss possible ways to structure each of the following essays.

Prompt	Expected structure:
1. Online learning is more beneficial than traditional classroom learning. Discuss with specific examples.	
2. Some believe that online learning is more effective. Others believe that traditional classroom learning is more beneficial. Which view do you take? Argue with support from the text.	
3. Compare and contrast the reasons why neither developed nor developing countries can afford to reduce their future carbon dioxide emissions drastically.	
4. Critically evaluate the proposition that online education is more beneficial than classroom education.	

Task:

1. Look at your essay prompt on '*A free higher education*' and identify the instruction, content, value and scoping words.
2. Verify your understanding of the prompt's key words.
3. Fill in the graphic organizer below with what you think the overall structure for this essay should be.

Assessment: Essay prompt:

Many in society argue that governments should pay for all higher (i.e. post-secondary) education, including tuition fees for students at colleges, polytechnics and universities. Others believe that such costs should instead be borne by the individual, on the basis that he or she will be the ultimate beneficiary of this education.

Describe ONE problem that may result from the adoption of EITHER (a) a higher education system that is entirely state-funded OR (b) one that is completely self-funded, explaining what, in your view, the problem is. Your essay should focus on a particular community or country. Where possible, evaluate one or two existing approaches that address your chosen problem. Suggest one or more new or improved measures that may further mitigate it.

(You should also check the requirements in the Essay Prompt document in the IVLE folder)

Introduction
Body
Conclusion

c) Constructing a working thesis

Once you have your graphic organiser filled out sufficiently, you are ready to construct a thesis statement.

Task:

1. Read about *Constructing a Working Thesis* at this link (all 4 pages):
http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s4/m3u1s4_1.htm
2. Notice that the thesis statements state the writer's answer to the essay question, and provides a preview of the writer's arguments.

Sample Essay questions	Sample thesis statements
1. Young liberals in Australia have added little to the long-established formal and informal processes which have governed the operations of the Party structure for decades. Analyse the accuracy of this assertion by reference to at least two levels of party processes.	Participation by young liberals in the processes of the party has been largely confined to the replication of long-established structures and few, if any, innovations have been introduced or created by the involvement of the Liberal Party youth.
2. The schooling attainment of children in developing countries is affected by four main factors : the number of siblings in the family, the gender composition of the siblings, the child's gender and the child's position in the birth order. Discuss this statement in relation to at least one developing country .	The essay supports the proposition that, in Malaysia, schooling outcomes differ substantially according to all four identified factors (gender, birth order, and the number and gender composition of siblings), but also presents evidence of two additional contributing factors , rural-urban location and the extended or nuclear nature of the family.

Task: Now construct a working thesis for your own essay. (Note: you will likely change this throughout the process. Do not expect it to remain unchanged.)

What might the first version of the thesis statement for your essay in ES1103 be?

Step 3. Searching for sources and constructing a sources grid

After determining what is required of the question, it is now time to do some research and make sense of the information you collect from your readings.

a) Researching your essay

The keywords in your essay prompt should give you ideas for keyword searches. Although Google seems like a good place to start, consider also other sources of information such as **Google Scholar** and **the NUS library**, which have a huge resource of journal and research articles.

It is not necessary to read every source listed in the search results because this is just too time-consuming. Instead, quickly scan through the search results and click on articles that seem credible, such as those from credible online newspapers and magazines, journals and websites.

Task: Evaluating credibility of sources

Review these links on evaluating the credibility of online sources. Then, as a group, formulate your own set of guidelines (no more than 6 items) on how to determine the credibility of online sources.

- Evaluating sources:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyMT08mD7Ds>
- Evaluating your evidence (all 4 pages):
http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s7/m3u1s7_1.htm
- Tips and tricks for evaluating web sites:
<http://www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/webeval.html>

b) Grouping information

Once you have selected credible and relevant articles, you will need to make sense of all the information you have. You can do this using various techniques.

Task:

1. Read about techniques for grouping information at this link (all 8 pages):
http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s3/m3u1s3_2.htm
2. Start researching for your essay. Use a graphic organiser/a synthesis grid to record information for your essay.

Sources:	Definitions	Key Concept #1	Key Concept #2	Key Concept #3	Helpful Quotes (pg #)
Author: Date: Title: Publ Location: Publisher:					
Author: Date: Title: Publ Location: Publisher:					
Author: Date: Title: Publ Location: Publisher:					
Author: Date: Title: Publ Location: Publisher:					
Author: Date: Title: Publ Location: Publisher:					

Step 4. Planning the structure in detail: paragraphs (planning the citations) and progression across paragraphs. Aligning the scope, the paragraphs and the conclusion.

In step 1, just by reading and analysing the prompt, you will already have a rough idea of the main sections of your essay. But after gathering sources and constructing a working thesis, the original rough structure may change. Once you have a working thesis statement, it is time to plan the overall structure of the essay.

Tasks:

1. Read about *Planning the Overall Structure* at this link:
http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s5/m3u1s5_1.htm
2. Then construct an overall structure (outline) for your own essay.

Introduction			
Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4
Conclusion			

Step 5: Structuring your arguments**Tasks:**

1. Read about *Structuring Your Individual Arguments* at this link:
http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s6/m3u1s6_1.htm
2. Then outline the arguments for your body paragraphs. Use the format on page 2 (http://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m3/m3u1/m3u1s6/m3u1s6_2.htm) of the link as a guide.

What comes next? At this stage, you are ready to work on your introduction. After that is written and your thesis and scope are finalised, you will be ready to write your

first draft. At any stage, it is possible (and advisable) to revise the structure and the content if you notice gaps in the logical development or the quality of the arguments.

Preparation for next class:

1. Continue work on your essay outline, and search sources. Try to complete most of the steps 1-5 described above in the next few days. You will present a detailed outline (including some sources) to the class in Week 6.
2. Read the notes for Week 5 on Text Cohesion and Writing an Introduction.