



Plan and structure your essay

Undertaking an academic essay can be a daunting prospect and often many students find it difficult to know where to start. Regardless of the discipline or essay content, adopting a structured approach will help you to break down each part of the process into manageable chunks.

In this guide you will learn about what is involved in writing an academic essay, including some useful resources to help you develop your academic writing.

What criteria is used to assess an academic essay?

- Your understanding of the **subject content**.
- How you explain material **using your own words**.
- How you express **your opinions**.
- The way in which you **interpret evidence** to support or critique.
- How **information** is organised and **evidence** presented.

Being mindful of this from the outset, will give you a frame of reference that you can use throughout the essay writing process to keep you focused on the purpose of what you are being asked to do.

Understand the essay title

Academic essay questions are often made up of composite parts. It is helpful to look at breaking down each part of the question as this will help you to decide how you will need to tackle your assignment and to clarify your search terms.

- Take some time and think – what is the question asking? It is vital that you analyse the question so that you are clear about what you are being asked to do – this will affect what you read and how well you answer the question.
- Identify **keywords/significant words** that help define the scope of the answer. These words will help you start to formulate your search terms.
- Re-write what the question is asking you to do **in your own words**.
- Identify the **subject** – what have you been asked to write about?

Instructional Verbs – many assignment titles start with or contain specific instruction words. These are mostly imperative verbs (action words) which tell you what you need to do, for example:

Discuss – investigate or examine, look at the arguments and evidence used to support them giving reasons for and against both sides.

Analyse – examine in very close detail and break an issue into smaller parts. Look at each part using supporting arguments and evidence for and against.

For more information refer to the glossary terms provided by University of Leeds, within the Interpreting your Assignment online module 2018, at the end of this guide.

Assessment Criteria – Look at the assessment criteria as this will give you guidance as to how you should be answering the question. Will certain aspects of your essay count for more than others? Does your understanding of the topic count for the same points or percentage as the essay structure? Here is an example of some criteria:

- Knowledge and Understanding (How well have you understood the issue?) 25%
- Structure (Is the argument well structured? Is the topic covered in sufficient depth and in a logical order?) 35%
- Use of evidence (Range of sources used, quality of evidence) 20%
- Presentation and Referencing (Grammar, spelling, presentation, referencing) 20%

Before you move to the next stage, make sure that you are mindful of the word count you have been assigned, the referencing style and submission date.

Understand the essay title

At this point you should understand what the question is asking of you and you will be ready to start planning.

- Write the question in the middle of a page of blank paper/word document or whichever medium suits your preference.
- Identify all the keywords from the question title – you may prefer to do this as a mind map. To find out more about mind mapping have a look at the materials that are available on Skills Plus.
- Write down the keywords or key points on the topic using single words or phrases.
- As you do this you may find that you can group together some of the keywords and phrases which are similar or link together.

The table below gives examples of the key points for an essay entitled, **Global Warming: Fact or Fiction? Discuss.**

Kyoto agreement China G8	Globalisation carbon emissions	Transport big business
Polar ice cap melting ozone layer	Rise in sea temperature freak weather	Population increases
Changing flora/fauna	Effect on wildlife deforestation	Growth in cheap air travel

Links:

Causes – population increase, carbon emissions, deforestation.

Environmental evidence – rise in sea temperature, polar ice cap melting, extreme weather.

Globalisation – increase in cheap air travel, rapid industrialisation, global business markets, transporting goods worldwide.

Political aspects – pressure groups, G8 conference, Kyoto Agreement.

- You might want to order the points you have written down to give you a structure to follow
- Check your outline plan – are there any gaps, what do you need to find out? Make sure that your plan answers all parts of the assignment question.

At this point, it is a good idea to think about some basic time management. You will invest a significant amount of time in your assignment, although it does help to factor in a contingency, just in case. This is particularly important if you have more than one assignment on at a time.

There are a number of different resources that you could use to help you to plan your time effectively:

- Four week essay plan – Skills Plus.
- Project plan (cited by the University of Leeds).
- Assignment survival kit (produced by the University of Kent).

Gathering materials: a checklist

- **Lecture notes** – look at your notes, is there anything that is useful to your assignment?
- Use the references recommended by your tutor through your **Reading Lists**.
- Use **Library Search** to identify relevant information in a variety of formats.
- Use some of the **specialised subject databases** such as Business Source Premier, CINAHL, Web of Science etc.

Make sure you use a variety of sources to help you answer your question for example, books, journal articles, government documents, spend time researching and keeping notes. Remember to record all details of your sources: title, author, publisher, date of publication, web addresses etc. EndNote can help you to organise this information, to create a list of sources, create citations and a bibliography. For help using **EndNote** have a look at the materials on **Skills Plus**.

- Don't spend your time reading unnecessary material within books or journal articles. To stay on track check the title, index, chapter headings, introduction, abstract or conclusion. From this you will be able to decide whether or not it is relevant to the question you are researching.
- Look at the material other authors have used in their bibliographies. This might point you towards other related sources that you could explore.
- Do not copy word for word when making notes. Try reading a paragraph at a time and then summarise the main points using your own words. This method of referring to an author's ideas is called paraphrasing and ensures you avoid plagiarism.

Make sure that as you read, you refer back to your plan – this keeps you focused on reading only what is relevant and will answer the essay question.

For help **searching** or **note making**, have a look at the materials on **Skills Plus**.

Planning the essay / writing up a first draft

- When you have completed your research, go back to your plan. Add any additional notes, for example new themes or contexts that you found throughout the research process.
- Make sure that you link these to relevant areas on your original plan. You may want to develop points you have made – remember that this plan will form your essay structure, so it helps to spend time making sure the plan matches the research you have carried out.

From here, it might help to write down each point you are going to make on a separate page, including any supporting evidence from your notes. You could order these points so that they flow on from each other logically.

- Use a new paragraph for each point you want to make. Paragraphs provide order and structure to your writing and help you to organise your arguments.

Using our global warming example, in the first paragraph (after the introduction), we could write about what evidence exists to show that the issue of global warming is fact rather than fiction.

Paragraph 1: Evidence

Look at the rise in sea temperature introducing evidence – Mackenzie 2006.

Polar ice cap melting – British Antarctic Survey Stats 2004.

Extreme weather conditions – Times, 2005 article by Brookes.

Paragraph 2 (& 3) could then look at both the environmental and human causes before moving on to look at possible solutions (**paragraphs 4 & 5**), political and personal, before finishing with a summary and conclusion.

For help with paragraphs have a look at constructing focused paragraphs information and video (University of Leeds, 2018) listed at the end of this guide.

Structuring the essay (introduction)

Now that you have fully explored your essay question, you can start to think about how you will structure your writing within the headings of **introduction, main body and conclusion**. For more help have a look at the **Academic writing** guide on **Skills Plus**.

The introduction is important to hook the reader's interest, to set the scene and to reframe the essay question in your own words. It is approximately 5-10% of the entire essay, although you may choose not to write the introduction first. Many students actually begin by writing the content of the main body of the essay where concepts are developed. As the introduction generally provides a short explanation of what your essay is about and how it is focused, you could list your main concepts as you are writing, then afterwards write the introduction once you know the direction of the main body of your writing. A good introduction will:

- Show how you are going to answer the question and that you understand the key issues and implications.
- Indicate the main areas for discussion, showing how the essay content is relevant and linked to the question.

This point is important if you have been given an open-ended question, like our example, "Global warming: fact or fiction? Discuss.", as this is where you would indicate that you are aware of the main issues raised by the question but that the essay will focus on several of these aspects in more detail. You also need to give reasons why you have chosen to write about these particular issues. In your introduction, you could:

- Use words and phrases from the question, defining any keywords or issues.
- Show evidence that you have carried out research by making reference to one of your sources.

It may help to look at examples of introductions in books or journal articles and how they have been structured.

Structuring the essay (main body)

The purpose of this part of your essay is for you to 'show your work' using the information you have found to answer the question and to support your arguments 'for' or 'against'. Here you will develop the main points you want to make, linking them directly to the essay question. This section should be 80-90% of your essay word count.

Focus on including **only relevant information** which links directly to the essay question. You will have read widely across a number of sources and it's important to reflect this by creating **good arguments which are supported and critically sourced**. Time spent organising the structure of the main body to your essay is valuable as it gives you the chance to **link paragraphs together into a logical sequence**.

Paragraphs need structure – **begin** your paragraph with a sentence that expresses the point you are going to make. This is called the **topic sentence** and it should link back to your essay question. In the **middle** section of the paragraph you should then develop, support and show the significance of the point you have made. You could:

- Explain any keywords or specialised terminology. Use examples or illustrations.
- Write down any evidence that supports the point you are making for example, facts, statistics, research either in the form of direct quotation or by paraphrasing other writer's ideas. Avoid plagiarism – if you use someone else's ideas, provide a reference so that the original source can be traced.
- Comment on how this evidence supports your point.
- Examine opposing theories.

The **end** of your paragraph should explain the consequences/implications of this point, developing your argument to link back to the main point discussed at the beginning of the paragraph, and to the next paragraph.

Use **linking words** such as: **yet, but, however, also, on the other hand, not only.**

For other useful academic phrases that you can use in your own writing, have a look at the **Academic Phrasebank** (Manchester University, 2018).

Keep focused on your essay question and remember to **express your points in your own words.**

It may help to look at examples of paragraphs in books or journal articles and how they have been structured.

Structuring the essay (conclusion)

This is approximately the last 5-10% of your essay. Within this section you need to convey your **concluding thoughts**, directly relating these to the essay question which you can **rephrase in your own words**. You should also give a **summary of the evidence** you have included to support your arguments.

No new facts should be introduced here. Do not include any information which is not already present in the main body of your work. Here are some **common features** of an effective conclusion:

- It should provide an overview of the most important ideas included in the text.
- It may make recommendations if a problem or issue has been raised in the main body of the essay, or it may speculate on future developments.
- If you have been writing about two or more opposing views, your conclusion could give your viewpoint based on the strength of the arguments you have made.

It may help to look at examples of conclusions in books or journal articles to get a feel of the features of summarising.

Reviewing, redrafting: checklist

Once the first draft has been completed, give yourself a break from your essay and go and do something else. After a few days, re-read the draft with a refreshed and objective mind and check the following:

- Does the essay answer the questions you have been set?
- Have you covered all the main points in enough depth and is the content relevant and accurate?
- Does the essay read in a logical order, and flow from one point to the next?
- Have you supported your arguments with evidence?
- Have you acknowledged all your sources and provided a reference list and/or bibliography?
- Does the essay have a clear introduction which sets the scene?
- Does the essay have a satisfying conclusion which summarises the main points made in the essay?
- Check grammar, spelling and punctuation (it often helps to read it aloud to yourself). Don't forget to check your references.

Useful links

- Northumbria University (2018) *Northumbria Skills Plus*. Available at: <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/skillsplus> (Accessed: 16 May 2018).
- University of Kent (2018) *Assignment survival kit*. Available at: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/ai/ask/index.php> (Accessed: 16 May 2018).
- University of Leeds (2018) *Planning your assignment*. Available at: https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/1401/academic_skills/83/planning_your_assignment (Accessed: 16 May 2018).
- University of Leeds (2018) *Essay writing*. Available at: https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/112/essay_writing (Accessed: 31 May 2018).
- University of Leeds (2018) *Interpreting your assignment*. Available at: <https://resources.library.leeds.ac.uk/activities/writing/interpreting-your-assignment/index.html> (Accessed: 16 May 2018).
- University of Manchester (2018) *Academic phrasebank*. Available at: <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 16 May 2018).



Ask4Help information and advice on or off campus 24x7

Contact via your student portal at:
<https://myportal.northumbria.ac.uk>

0191 227 4646

ask4help@northumbria.ac.uk



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE