

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

Planning what you're going to write

When writing an essay under exam conditions, your time management will determine how successful your paper is. As a general rule, I advise spending 25% of the time planning, 50% writing, and 25% checking and editing.

By “planning”, I don't mean chewing your pen and daydreaming about what you're going to write. I'm talking about active and effective planning. And to plan effectively, we need to mind map and outline. But, when planning an essay, you can also include an additional step between these two stages. Before you transfer the items from your mind map to your outline, split a blank page into the following sections:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Arguments supporting the main idea
- 3) Arguments against the main idea
- 4) Conclusion

This way, you're building the essay structure into your outline. For example, off the back of your mind map, you might come up with the following:

Essay Title: Should the voting age be lowered to thirteen?

Introduction:



- *The idea of lowering the voting age has been discussed in most countries at some time or other.*
- *At the moment, no country has a voting age as low as thirteen.*

Supporting arguments:

- *Children are the future, they should have a say in it.*
- *Children are growing up much faster these days.*
- *Voting will encourage children to take an interest in politics.*

Arguments against:

- *A thirteen-year-old lacks the knowledge required to make a political decision.*
- *Thirteen-year-olds are too impressionable; they are easily influenced by marketing and their parents.*
- *Most thirteen-year-olds have no interest in voting.*

Conclusion: Sixteen should be the lowest voting age.

As you can see, if you plan correctly, you will have done much of the hard work before you have even started writing. If you take ownership of the process of essay writing, you will have plenty of time for editing, which makes essay writing far less stressful.

Structuring your essay

Understanding how to structure an essay is vital if you want to achieve top marks. Structuring an essay is simple to learn, and once you've learned how to do it, you will never ever have to learn it again. Once you see how simple it is to organise an essay, you'll understand why I become so frustrated when students fail to do it correctly.

This is how you should structure an essay:

1) Introduction (1 paragraph): Demonstrate that you have understood the question and capture the reader's interest.

2) Reasons to support the proposition (2–3 paragraphs):

Three reasons are usually enough—unless you’re writing a much longer essay.

3) Reasons to reject the proposition (2–3 paragraphs):

Again, three reasons are usually sufficient.

4) Conclusion (1 paragraph): Restate the main points you have mentioned, which you consider the most important.**5) Your opinion (1 paragraph):** Give your own point of view on the question. Make sure you’re still answering the question you set out to address at the start.

Once you’ve written a few essays using this structure, you’ll automatically begin to organise your work in this way. You’ll soon be able to tell whether your essay is well written just by the shape of the paragraphing on the page.

Doing your research

If you are writing under exam conditions, this section does not apply. However, if you’re composing an essay for coursework, you should definitely research the subject you are writing about.

I suggest approaching research by first going through the usual planning phases—as previously discussed. After that, you can consider your arguments from both sides of the proposition and research quotes or statistics to support these points of view.

The reason I suggest doing the research after the planning stage is that it stops you from wasting time researching the depths of the topic. You will only be searching for specific points you need.

Also, if you dive into the research first, the likelihood of you stealing other people's ideas rather than forming your own is much higher. This is a dangerous situation to be in, and you may inadvertently find yourself guilty of plagiarism.

Finally, if you use a quote, at the very least, you must include a note citing where it first appeared and on what date. Whether you put this information in footnotes or in brackets after the quotation depends on the style guide you are following. There are many contradictory rules surrounding referencing, so ask your teacher if you're unsure about which guidelines you are supposed to follow.

Answering the question

This sounds obvious, but it's astonishing how many students either fail to read the question properly, misinterpret it, or instantly depart from it when they begin to write.

A common mistake is to discuss the topic rather than the question. For example, let's say the essay question is, "Should the voting age be lowered to sixteen? Discuss." Many students see the word "voting", and start writing about this topic, rarely coming back to the actual question at all. This is a huge mistake because it appears as though you haven't understood the question and have resorted to discussing the only word you did understand. Good planning should help maintain focus but, while you are writing, it's also worth glancing at the question from time to time to make sure you haven't wandered off topic.

How not to start your essay

I understand that you may be unhappy at having to write an essay, but this doesn't mean you should tell the reader that. Students often