



UNIVERSITY OF
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Essay planning and structuring

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“Develop your ideas and arguments further.”

“Essay would benefit from a clearer focus.”

“Use a wider variety of sources and brush up on your referencing.”

“Too descriptive - demonstrate more critical analysis.”

“Needs to be more carefully proofread.”



Activity 1 – planning strategies

How do you plan? What is your process for getting going on an essay or assignment? Please share your strategies and ideas.

Some key questions to ask yourself when planning:

- Do I understand what my assignment question is asking?
- What is my instinctive response to the question, and what am I basing that on?
- What do I already know that is of relevance to the question?
- What else do I need to find out?
- What have other scholars written on this topic and do I agree/disagree with them?
- What is the main point I want to argue or put across in this essay?
- What reasons do I have to support my main argument or message? [i.e. why should my reader believe me?]



Break down the different parts of your assignment question. Figure out what the task word means (e.g. discuss, argue, describe) and identify specifically what you need to write about. If the question is very broad and general, decide which aspects to focus your answer around.



Mind map everything you already know about the topic. Try to identify what your instinctive response to the essay question is. Identify some key research questions to guide your reading.



Research! If you are struggling to find journal articles or other resources, contact an Academic Skills Advisor. Be sure to keep track of where you have obtained information from. Take effective notes and engage with what you are reading, asking questions and scrutinising evidence. Only note things that are relevant to the question.



From your research, identify key points that will help you to answer the essay question. You could pool these together in a mind map, or on a large piece of paper, or a typed document. Then you need to start organising the points. Which are related? Which are counter-arguments? Which follow on from one other? At this point, you should also decide what the **over-arching argument or key thread** of your essay is going to be, based on the evidence you have gathered and analysed.



Now decide on a logical order for your points. You could write a summary of each point on a separate card or sticky note and physically move them around until you have found the best flow. You will find your own method, but the key thing is to be aware of the progression of your essay and the unfolding of your line of reasoning. How does each point link to the one before it and the one after it? How will your paragraphs build your argument? Don't forget to guide your reader through it, communicating with them every step of the way.



Breaking down the essay question

Directive or task words:
these tell you how to write e.g. discuss, argue etc.

Subject matter: what you should be writing about.

Limiting words:
may narrow or alter the focus of your answer.



Critically examine the success of Red Bull's marketing strategy



Task words: tell you to explore the topic from different angles, in a critical (analytical) way

Critically examine the success of Red Bull's marketing strategy



Task words: tell you to explore the topic from different angles, in a critical (analytical) way

Critically examine the success of **Red Bull's** marketing strategy

Subject matter



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Critically examine the success of Red Bull's marketing strategy

Subject matter

Important limiting phrase – do not just describe Red Bull's marketing strategy. Focus on ways that it is, or is not, successful



Basic essay structure



Structuring tips

Each paragraph should make only one main point. It is important that both you and the reader are clear what point is being made in each paragraph, and how that point links to the question, and to the other points you have made.

Think of paragraphs as mini-essays – each should start with a topic sentence to introduce the main point of the paragraph; explain that point further; provide evidence for the point; interpret or analyse the evidence; then summarise the point and indicate how it links into your overall argument.

The paragraphs should be placed in a logical and coherent order – play around with them until you get the best flow. They should feel progressive, rather than disjointed or list-like.

Each paragraph should link smoothly to the next, using transition words or phrases – such as ‘alternatively;’ ‘consequently;’ ‘as a result;’ ‘on the other hand;’ ‘furthermore...’

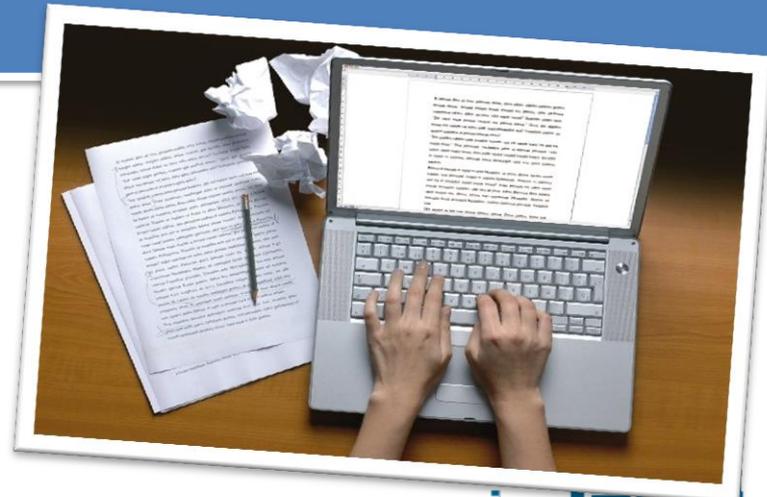


Activity 2: Scrutinising the structure of an essay

It can help, once you have written a first draft, to take a step back and review the structure of your essay. One way of doing this is to **summarise each paragraph in one sentence**. Put these sentences into a list and consider whether each follows logically from the previous one.

Have a look at the example. This writer has summarised each of their paragraphs in one sentence. Do you think their structure is effective? What could they change?

Essay title: How serious a problem is childhood obesity in the UK?



Structuring a main body paragraph

1

- **Introduce** your point (claim)

2

- **Elaborate** on your point

3

- **Evidence** your points with sources

4

- **Comment** on the evidence

5

- **Relate** your point to the essay question



Point, evidence, comment

One way of ensuring each paragraph or section within your argument has a solid structure is by applying ***Point, Evidence, Comment***.

Make a clear POINT which contributes something towards your overall argument.



Present EVIDENCE to support and strengthen the point.



COMMENT on the point and its evidence (this is where you demonstrate critical analysis)



Activity 3: Paragraph analysis with Point, Evidence, Comment

This student writer has used Point, Evidence, Comment to analyse and re-structure one paragraph of their essay on physiotherapy treatment for patients with MS. Can you see the changes that they have made at each stage of their re-drafting process?

For each example, please highlight Point, Evidence, and Comment in different colours, and discuss the ways in which the writer has re-structured.

[Please note that these extracts are purely to demonstrate structuring and re-drafting processes. The facts and evidence are not necessarily accurate!]



Academic Skills Centre

Location

1st floor, main library

Telephone

(0121) 414 3666

Email

asc@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Web

intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/skills/asc/index.aspx

The screenshot shows the University of Birmingham Intranet page for the Academic Skills Centre (ASC). The header includes the university logo, 'UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM INTRANET', and navigation links for 'Main website', 'Login', 'For students', and 'For staff'. The breadcrumb trail reads: 'University of Birmingham Intranet > Academic Services > Library Services > Library > Skills and training > Academic Skills Centre'. The main heading is 'Academic Skills Centre (ASC)'. The page is organized into a grid of service tiles and a right-hand navigation menu. The tiles include: 'Academic skills' (Workshops and guides to develop your skills), 'Mathematics Support Centre' (Maths and stats support), 'Library and information skills' (Find and cite resources for your study and research), 'Digital Skills' (Training in stats software, digital images, spreadsheets and more), 'One-to-one appointments' (Develop and improve your academic skills), and 'PASS' (Peer Assisted Study Sessions for first year undergraduates). The right-hand menu lists: 'Academic Skills Centre', 'New Taught Student Welcome events', 'Events and workshops', 'Transition to University', 'Mature undergraduate students', 'Taught Postgraduates', 'What to expect', 'ASC resources', 'Top tips for revision', 'Appointments', 'Maths Support', 'Academic skills support', and 'Contact us'. At the bottom of the grid are links for 'Academic Skills Gateway', 'Feedback', and 'Contact us'.



Academic Skills Gateway

The screenshot displays the Academic Skills Gateway website. At the top, a navigation bar includes links for Home, Learning how to learn, Maths and statistics, Research skills, Working with others, and Writing skills. The main content area is divided into several sections: a header for Library Services Academic Skills Gateway; a grid of six skill categories (Learning how to learn, Maths and statistics, Research skills, Working with others, Writing skills) each with a representative image and icon; and a footer with the University of Birmingham and Library Services logos. On the right side, there is a sidebar with the Academic Skills Centre logo and a list of services: Confidential 1-1 appointments (with links for Academic Skills and Digital Skills appointments), Workshops and classes (with links for Academic Skills and Digital Skills workshop registration), Library and Information Skills (with a list of college-specific guides), Stand-alone resources (with links for Guide to Effective Learning, transitioning to postgraduate studies, and Skills4Study Campus), and buttons for Feedback, Accessibility, Mathematics Support Centre, and FindIt@Bham.



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