Knowledge - Knowledge and Use of Sources - Analysis - Argument - Structure - Expression

"evidence of capacity to gather information through a wide and appropriate range of reading, and to digest and process knowledge"

'Knowledge' or Have you been paying attention in lectures?
  "detailed knowledge" - "knowledge of the subject"
  "awareness of main issues and an attempt to address them" - "grasp of concepts"

- An essay is at a minimum an opportunity to prove that you have been listening in lectures, doing the compulsory reading, and simply attending. Part of this then is showing the marker that you know and understand the key concepts, debates and/or 'empirical data' associated with your course.

N.B. This, of course, is not enough, resist the temptation to simply describe what you know, simply present empirical data, or show off what you’ve learnt. Exposition requires analysis.

'Knowledge and Use of Sources' or Have you looked at the reading list, read something, and used the library independently?
  "well-illustrated argument" - "handling of appropriate and relevant references and quotations"
  "awareness and critical use of secondary sources"

- Use the work of other, older and more intelligent people than you or I to support and justify your arguments, whether as evidence or intellectual precedent. (Reference properly.)

N.B. 'detailed knowledge' can only come from going beyond the compulsory and recommended reading.

- Show the marker your 'capacity to gather information', in other words, your ability to research.

"beyond that acquired from the teaching received" - "ability to use other evidence e.g. other authors, secondary literature, knowledge of other disciplines, to support arguments and interpretations in the essay"
  "recognition of an argument's limitations, and of alternative interpretations"

'Analysis' or Can you apply what you've learned analytically, critically and independently?
  - "high ratio of analysis to exposition" - "clear evidence of analysis and logical thought" -
- Show the marker your ability to ‘process and digest knowledge’. You understand. You’ve shown that you’ve done some reading. Now what can you do with this knowledge and evidence. What does it all mean? What are the problems? Be critical. What doesn’t add up?
- Apply an appropriate methodology, or analytical framework, perhaps one borrowed or adapted from other authors. (“application of appropriate methodology and understanding”)

‘Argument’ or Do you understand, and can you defend a response to, the question?
- “relevant argument” - “consistently coherent argument” -
  “focused and consistent argument” - “ability to argue a case”

- Throughout your reading and research, always, always be thinking of the question, and when you’re writing your essay, always have the question in mind. You must be consistent.
- How are you trying to answer this question? What are you trying to say? Make a definite claim or proposal and develop your argument fully, what are possible objections?
- It ought to be possible to answer the essay in a sentence, a paragraph and a page.

N.B. Pick the right question, not necessarily on the basis of a topic you are most familiar with, does it lend itself to a critical and argumentative essay, not simply a description of what you know?

‘Structure’ or Can you plan an essay properly?
- “well-structured argument” - “well-ordered structure” - “structure, language and style of presentation…”
  - “a 2.i answer which is too short, rushed, badly organised or unfinished may be lowered to a 2.ii”

- Make a plan and stick to it. How would you explain this issue in person, or in a presentation?
- A solid introduction can not only show a definite claim or response, but indicate to both the marker and you whilst you’re writing it, the intended structure of the essay.
- Good structure will make you consistent and clear. ‘Signpost’ your answer, reminding your marker at regular intervals what you’ve already established, and where you’re headed.

N.B. There is, obviously, never any one framework, despite what people may say. Take a look at journal articles in your field. How are they structured? What makes a good article stand apart to you?

‘Expression’ or How well do you communicate your ideas?
- “maturity, clarity and cogency of expression” - “ability to avoid waffle” - “use of precise terminology and avoidance of ambiguity” - “relevance, clarity and coherence” - “avoidance of generalisations and gross oversimplification” - “accuracy of grammar and spelling”

- Don’t be afraid to develop your own style. Learn from the bad essays, take away the positives from the good ones. First year is an excellent chance to do this.
- Always think of who is marking your essay, approach them in their office hours, even look at their work. Ask your department and your tutors about their preferred referencing system.

‘Originality’ and ‘Flair’. Ignore all of the above, because there is no one formula for a good essay... Show independence of thought and approach. ‘Originality’ doesn’t necessarily mean something new, just something different. A different approach, something borrowed from another discipline, regional interest, or topic, something that sets your ability and thought apart from the others.