Structuring Essays

Getting the flow right

With so much information to read and understand, it's hard to know where to start. Planning from the start is the key!

Analyse the question

Ask questions of your question

Organise your reading

Mind-map your question

Make a flowchart

Plan your paragraphs

Proofread

What's it all about? It is impossible to start work on an assignment without first knowing what it is you have to do - it sounds obvious, but many students are quick to get started on an essay without having analysed the question thoroughly.

1) Instruction terms - these are keywords which guide you as to how you are supposed to answer the question (discuss, analyse, measure, contrast, evaluate). Look on the Transition website for detailed descriptions of these words to give yourself more clues as to how to answer a question.
2) Content terms - these words detail what you are supposed to write about. It is easy in a sea of information to get side-tracked and include topics in an essay that are not relevant to the question.
3) Translate jargon - we've all read a question over and over without it sinking in. Type the whole question into a word document, from there you can right-click on any words that are difficult to understand, choose synonyms which will give you a list of alternative words and meanings. We may all know what words like 'elicit', 'imperative', and 'conjecture' mean, but to translate a question into simpler terms will help it become clearer in your mind.

TRANSITION TIPS

analysing your question - mind mapping - creating a structure - asking questions - proofreading - checking for relevance
It's all in your mind...so get it down on paper

Having analysed your question, the reading for your assignment should be well focused upon your essay question. Now is the time to be thinking about what topics you are actually going to write about within your assignment. Doing a mindmap allows you to see your essay start to take shape, discover links between ideas, and develop your own ideas by questioning. Try using A3 paper as the space allows you to explore idea further, and don't worry if it looks messy! See opposite for tips on how to create a mindmap.

Making it flow You need to turn your mindmap into something more structured - mindmaps are great to get your ideas flowing but an essay must have a clear structure. You could transform your mindmap into a flowchart; you can use your linking lines to help you decide the logical order of the points you are going to make. Also, use your word count to guide you how many sub-topics you will write about - at university you are normally expected to be critical and analytical when writing and essay; in order to do this you will need 4/500 words per sub-topic - so, in a 3000 word essay (discounting your introduction and conclusion) you can make 5 or 6 points. See the flow chart example below for a 1500 word essay.

You can take the flowchart to three columns deep if needed, but it is important to get to 'paragraph point' level. Remember again to keep it to keywords. You can also make yourself a paragraph plan if this helps - this can be used as a checklist for all the aspects of a point you may want to cover - introduction to the concept, clarification or explanation, theory and evidence, example, critique, summary or lead to next point. There is no need to start your writing with the introduction, as this is sometimes the hardest part to write.

By planning your essay in this way you are able to clearly see the structure of your essay, and by defining each paragraph clearly you are less likely to 'waffle' onto other topics. When you are clear in your mind about the direction and content of your assignment, you are likely to have the confidence to add your own voice to your work by way of critique and analysis.

Now that's the question You should be applying questioning techniques throughout your essay. Asking simple questions such as 'how' and 'why' of your essay question before you've done any reading allows for more freedom of thought as you haven't already confined your thinking by what's already been written. Even vague questions such as, 'what does this mean', 'how has this been achieved' and 'what are the problems with this?' encourage independent thinking. It is these questions you can use to begin a Question Bank - you can apply various questions you have collected within your bank to many of your assignments. This questioning skill is most useful during the planning stages of an essay, especially your final mind mapping stage. With a mind map you can see the 'whole picture' in front of you - use this opportunity to analyse what you've read - do you agree with it, are there any links, any new ideas, criticisms, benefits? It is important at university to create a questioning ethos; you can also check whether you have been sufficiently analytical and critical whilst proofreading for structure and when creating a paragraph plan. For more information see Transition Bites 'Critical and Analytical Thinking'.

Proofreading You should proofread your essay twice: once for punctuation and grammar and once for structure. Many students miss out on important marks because of silly mistakes that render their ideas unintelligible - always proofread your work. Make sure you leave your essay for a few days if you can before you proofread - you may get 'tunnel vision' with an essay you have been working hard on and may not spot mistakes. If you can't leave it a few days, at least do something else in-between finishing writing and proofreading. Try to print out your work as it is easier to spot mistakes here than on a computer screen (re-use old paper and recycle!).

Punctuation and grammar: When proofreading for punctuation and grammar, you should read your work out loud to yourself, over-emphasising where the punctuation is. You will stumble over any sentences that do not make sense or punctuation that is off. Flag these areas and pay them attention.

Structure: When proofreading for structure, you are checking to see whether you have kept to your original plan. To do this you should read each paragraph and summarise in the margin in one or two words what that paragraph is about. If you cannot do this, it probably means that there are too many different points within the paragraph and it needs attention. Draw out a reverse-essay plan by noting the margin remarks down - this may also help with compiling your conclusion.