

Approaching Coursework

The Writing Process

We often think of writing as a single activity, but it's actually a complex process with many different steps. There isn't one single way of writing that suits everyone, but a principle that does work for all is to break writing down into the different activities, so you're only focussing on one thing at a time. If you're trying to develop your ideas, decide how to organise them, work out how to express them, edit your drafts and check for errors all at once – this is likely to feel overwhelming and slow you down.

Breaking it down not only makes you more efficient and focussed, but also helps you integrate working on the assignment with other things you also need to do, such as revision. Writing is also an 'iterative' process – you often have to revisit stages to keep improving and checking you're still on track, so don't worry if these stages need repeating or don't quite work for you in this order. It might seem that there is more to do when you break writing down, but separating the process out actually makes each step quicker than trying to do it all at once.

Analysing the question

When you need to write an essay quickly, you might be tempted to dive straight in. But you may not have time later down the line to change your approach if you feel it isn't working, or to go back to the beginning because you realise you've misunderstood the question. It's important, therefore, to take some time to unpack the question, get a handle on what it's asking you to do, and think about how you're going to tackle it. There are several factors to consider:

What are you really being asked to do?

When working under timed conditions, the natural inclination can often be to respond to the topic word and start writing down everything you know about that topic. To produce more focused, analytical work, identify the instruction word as well: how are you being asked to use your knowledge?

What's the focus?

That is, what about that topic are you asked to focus on, exactly? Identifying this will help prevent you going off on tangents and taking too broad an approach.

What level of learning are you being asked to demonstrate?

It's unlikely that, at university level, you will be asked to merely demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of a topic. Instead, are you being asked to apply your knowledge to a particular case

or problem in order to make recommendations or identify the best solution? Or is the question asking you to analyse and evaluate the evidence in order to present a convincing

Reading and notetaking

Getting started

You can save a lot of time by streamlining your reading process to avoid reading more than you need to. An effective way of doing this is to identify the particular 'ingredients' you need to 'make' your answer. In other words, what questions do you need your reading to answer for you?

Consider:

- What wider context do you need to understand?
- What knowledge, information or data do you need?
- What do you need to know, what would be nice to know?
- Do you have any articles/texts/authors in mind that it would be useful to consult?

It's common to feel that you haven't read 'enough' to start writing yet, but this will help you get a sense of what 'enough' would be -you have less time to research than with normal coursework and this will be reflected in the expectations of your markers. If you're still finding this a tricky balance, try jumping into your writing and let the questions or gaps that arise as you write indicate precisely what you need to read up on.

Reading individual texts

Identify your purpose for reading each text so that you know what to look for and what make notes on. Before reading any text, ask yourself:

- Why are you reading this? Consider how your reading might contribute to your assignment.
- What are you hoping it will contribute to your understanding?
- How might it develop your thinking?
- What questions would you like this reading to answer?
- What are the existing stances, perspectives and arguments?

Reading selectively

Once you've identified your purpose (what you need from a text), you can identify your strategy (how to get what you need). This can be a huge time saver because it's unlikely that you will need to read a text in its entirety to draw out what you need. So what strategy would best suit your purpose? For example, if you're looking to identify the central argument a paper is presenting, you might wish to read the introduction, conclusion and first line of each paragraph. If you just need to get a broad overview of a topic and/or clarify your understanding of some key terms, you might just skim the introduction.

Critical notetaking: talking back to the text

'Talking back to the text' instead of passively copying out quotations or underlining key phrases can help you develop a critical stance. Annotate the text with comments and identify:

- Statements you query or disagree with (why? What evidence could you bring in to dispute these statements?)
- Statements you agree with (why?) and might use in the essay (how?)
- Issues or references to read up further about
- Comparisons to what you already know about the topic (what insights does this provide?)

Make sure you're not spending ages copying out information. Each time you go to write something down, ask yourself how you might use it in the assignment and whether you need to:

- copy it down in full (as a quotation to analyse further);
- summarise it in your own words to demonstrate your understanding and keep word count down (paraphrase with a reference); or
- just know where to find it again if needed (just a post-it note or highlighting).

Always take the full details of the reference and page number to save having to look for this information again later on.

Planning

Planning is a key point in the process where we make decisions about what to include and in what order. It can be done following question analysis or after reading, but others prefer to plan later in the process, especially if jumping in and writing helps you to work out your ideas first, before organising them later before the editing process.

Your plan is the basis of your argument's structure. It needs to lead from the question or problem to the answer or solution. A good starting point would be to envisage what sort of conclusion you're aiming to reach (even if you don't know your actual response yet). Look again at the question, and what kind of answer it implies – try and summarise your response in a phrase: 'to a great extent'; 'for these reasons'; 'this is the best approach' etc. This will give you a direction.

What kind of structure does the question imply?

Is it a straightforward for/against, a more complex compare/contrast different aspects in turn, an examination of factors from the most to least important, a development from analysing something to evaluating solutions or explaining outcomes? Bear in mind too the most common structural patterns – move from general to specific, abstract theory to concrete examples, important to less important.

Identifying points

When listing up the points you want to make, don't just list the topics you're going to talk about, as this can become descriptive and too open. Instead, try and articulate to yourself the argumentative statement you're trying to make for each point and how it contributes to your overall argument – if that point wasn't there, how would it damage your conclusion? This might also help you separate things that are essential from those which are interesting, but not necessary.

Approach it as an interview?

You could approach your essay as if it was an interview. Imagine that the reader is asking you questions – what questions would they ask, and in what order? These questions will hopefully 'flow' as a natural conversation, and writing each paragraph then becomes the answer to one of these questions. You'll probably find yourself moving from scene- setting questions 'what does this key term mean?' to more probing questions 'so why exactly did that happen?'.

Writing

You might think of the writing itself as a laborious, drawn out process, but breaking it down into cycles and manageable chunks can really speed you up.

Freewriting

In the initial stages of writing, we're often still working out our ideas and making connections, as if talking to ourselves. To capture this creative phase, try freewriting. **Set a timer for 10 minutes and write, in full sentences, without stopping, re-reading or editing.** If you go blank or get stuck, keep going, writing whatever is coming to mind, as a stream of consciousness. Freewriting is not a draft of the assignment, and is not intended to be seen by anyone but you, so don't worry about style or structure – there is no judgement, but a space to explore and see what happens. You can then review what you've produced, and pick out any useful bits to add into a first draft, or set them aside if it's a tangent you've now got out of your system.

If you're struggling to produce any writing at all, freewriting also gives you a starting point, however messy, to improve from. It can also help you with writer's block or to untangle a tricky point as well as simply warming up and getting in the mood for writing, so you might want to return to freewriting at various stages throughout the process.

A Writing Routine

You might find a structured schedule of writing in short bursts with breaks might help you keep up momentum. After warming up with some freewriting, try setting a timer for 30 minutes (or shorter if your concentration span that day isn't up to longer periods) and write, stopping when the timer goes off for a 5-10 minute break, and repeat. If you're really on a roll, you can always keep going, but if your motivation and concentration are fading, then stop. Leave yourself a brief note of what you

were intending to write next, or a half-finished sentence to complete, so you can easily pick up the thread again.

You can also interleave these short bursts of writing with other activities – revising for an exam or reading for another assignment. The change will keep you fresh, and your mind will also keep processing ideas in the background when you’re working on something else, particularly useful if you’ve got stuck. Interleaving also means that you don’t risk spending all your time on one assessment at the expense of another but can keep progress going on both.

Focussed Writing

To focus a writing stint, you could use various approaches.

- If you make detailed plans, you could go back to your plan and choose one section to work on – one or at most two paragraphs.
- Write the point you’re working on – the argumentative statement you need to convince the reader of – and unpack it with questions, such as ‘what do I mean by that?’ ‘how do I know that?’ ‘how does that work?’ ‘How else might that be explained?’
- Give yourself a writing prompt. This might be a question to answer, such as ‘what is the most important factor in this case?’ or the beginning of a sentence, such as ‘the main factor in this case is...’
- If you’re working on the first draft, focus on articulating your point and its relevance with its reasoning and evidence. You can worry about improving clarity and style, or editing it for conciseness on the next draft, or the one after that.
- You don’t need to write paragraphs in order. As long as you know where it fits and how it links to your question, you can write the section that feels easiest at that time.
- Introductions don’t have to be written first. You could jot down at the beginning what you think might go in the introduction, to help focus your thinking, and/or come back to it at the end to refine it and make sure it fits the essay you’ve actually written. It might actually help to write the conclusion at an early stage to give you a clear sense of where you want to get to – subject to the essay turning out as planned or revising it if not, of course!
- Try answering the following questions for a focussed introduction:
 - What are you aiming to do in this assignment? Don’t just repeat the question, reflect for the reader how you’ve understood it, telling them any choices of topic you’ve made.
 - Why do you feel this is an interesting/significant/tricky issue, worth answering?
 - How are you going to answer it – what structure will you follow, what methods, theories or examples will you bring in?

Editing Your Work

It might be tempting to spend all of the available time writing just to get it done. However, missing out a crucial stage like editing can affect the quality of your work. During the writing stage, you are

writing for yourself – exploring your ideas, letting them develop and seeing how they work on the page. Editing is where you start thinking about your reader. Can they follow your argument? Will they find it convincing? You could apply these techniques at the end of writing before submission, or to review sections of your work as you go.

Editing for structure and argument

- What's your answer to the question set? What overall perspective do you want your readers to take away from your work?
- Have you signalled this in your introduction? And in the conclusion?
- Highlight the first line of every paragraph – this should be your topic sentence or the 'point' you're making in each paragraph. Does each topic sentence indicate how the paragraph relates to the question and how it helps you answer it? If we line them all up, can we follow your argument?
- If not, what might your topic sentence be - is it lurking elsewhere in the paragraph? If you could only keep one sentence from each paragraph, which would it be? That's usually the most important one. If there are two points to keep, and it's a long paragraph, you may need to split it in two.
- Does your work flow? Consider:
 - What is the relationship between each paragraph?
 - Is that relationship signalled to the reader?
 - Do these paragraphs 'flow' together smoothly, or are there jumps in logic?

Editing for criticality

Apply the Challenge Read technique: look at each sentence individually and consider whether it raises a question that you should answer in order to make your point convincing to your reader or fully unpack your points. These questions could be:

- How?
- Why?
- So what?
- How do you know?
- Like what? Can you give me an example?

Editing for clarity

You understand what you've written, but would the reader? Would the reader be puzzled by anything? Would they have any questions like:

- What does that term mean?
- What do you mean by that?
- Why are you telling me this?