
Essay Planning & Writing

The following are guidelines for planning and writing a formal essay for university. The indicated times will vary according to students' levels of experience and the length of the assigned essay. Consider using an online assignment planning calculator to establish a timetable for an assigned essay.

A. Initial Planning

1. Understand the assignment requirements (30 minutes)
 - a. What is the assignment topic or question?
 - b. What is the assignment format?
 - c. What is the required length?
 - d. Are you required to consult a minimum number of scholarly sources?
 - e. Which referencing style will you use?
 - f. Has the instructor provided a marking guide/rubric?
2. Generate ideas (2-3 hours)
 - a. Choose a topic that interests you
 - b. Narrow your focus so that your topic is specific and manageable, and so that you can develop it properly within the length limitation
 - c. Ask yourself "what do I know about this already?" and "why is this important?"
 - d. Make a concept map of the topic (see the ASC handout "Concept Mapping")
 - e. Make a list of the major points
3. Make an initial plan (3-4 hours)
 - a. List major themes and points
 - b. Develop a draft thesis statement (see the ASC handout "Thesis Statements")

B. Research (5-7 days, longer for lengthier papers)

4. Search for information
 - a. Consult a librarian if you need help getting started
 - b. Identify useful key words and phrases to search for information
 - c. Using the library catalogue and databases, find, review, and evaluate:
 - i. Books
 - ii. Journal articles
 - d. Find, review, and evaluate websites
 - e. Make notes and summaries and indicate evidence that supports/refutes your thesis
 - f. Be sure to record referencing information (remember that failure to document may be regarded as plagiarism)
 - g. Examine the collected information, compare it to your initial plan, and modify if necessary
 - h. Continue researching to find any missing information (without allowing your research to balloon out of control)
 - i. Arrange your notes to reflect a possible argument

C. Organization (4-5 hours)

5. Plan your essay by making an outline (see the ASC handout “Visual Essay Planner”)
 - a. Revisit your plan and thesis statement
 - i. It is not unusual to adjust your thesis statement at this stage
 - b. Organize and structure the points you want to make

D. Writing (4-7 days)

6. Start writing your first draft
 - a. Work from your outline
 - b. You don’t have to start with the introduction if you are stuck; just start writing
 - c. Keep in mind the appropriate language and tone of your writing; who is your audience?
 - d. Don’t forget to reference
 - e. Keep in mind that each paragraph should:
 - i. Start with a topic sentence
 - ii. Contain one main idea
 - iii. End with a summary/transition sentence
 - f. The introduction should introduce the topic and contain a thesis statement
 - g. The conclusion should adequately summarize the essay and answer the question “so what” (i.e. reflect on the implications of your argument)
 - h. If you identify gaps in information return to your sources or the library for additional research

E. Revision & Editing (refer to the ASC handout “Revision & Editing Checklist”)

7. Revise and rewrite (4-7 days)
 - a. Try to allow some time to lapse between drafts to distance yourself from your work and reread it with fresh eyes
 - b. Clear and concise writing requires multiple drafts
 - c. If a sentence or paragraph doesn’t relate to your thesis, it probably doesn’t belong in your paper
 - d. Consider asking a classmate to trade papers for peer review
 - e. Consult a writing tutor to assist you
8. Edit (1-2 days)
 - a. Refer to a style/referencing guide to help polish your work
 - b. Put the paper into its final format (margins, fonts, line spacing, title page, etc.)

F. After the Assignment

9. Using feedback
 - a. Read the assignment feedback carefully after your marked assignment is returned to improve your writing in the future
 - b. If anything is unclear, see your instructor as soon as possible
10. Keep on writing!

References

<http://owll.massey.ac.nz/> (OWLL: The Online Writing and Learning Link at Massey University)