The material included in this guide has been gathered and adapted from the following publications:

*The Study Skills Handbook* – Stella Cottrell  
*The Mature Student’s Guide to Writing* – Jean Rose  
*How to Write Better Essays* – Bryan Greetham  
*Reading, Writing and Reasoning* – Gavin Fairbairn and Christopher Winch  
*Writing at University* – Phyllis Crème and Mary R. Lea

The guide concentrates on structural and organisational aspects. For guidance on style and clarity in essay writing, see the separate guide *Essay Writing Style and Clarity*.

The guidelines should be taken as just that. There is no rule, for example, that says you must plan an essay before writing it. Some people find that they work best by getting the ideas flowing first and imposing some sort of structure later; it is only once they start writing that they start to have an idea of what their direction will be. Even so, they must be clear at the outset as to what the essay title requires of them to make sure that they stay within its constraints. If, however, you are fairly new to essay writing and not very confident about it, you might find it helpful to follow the suggested stages in a fairly methodical way.

**A GOOD ESSAY STRUCTURE:**

- Is made easier by prior planning
- Makes it clear how you are going to address the question, where you are going and why
- Sets out your main ideas clearly
- Makes it clear how the main ideas relate to each other
- Takes the reader through your answer in a logical, progressive way
- Helps the reader to remember what you’ve said
- Organises groups of related information in paragraphs
- Uses connecting words and phrases to relate each point/idea to earlier and later points.

**A MODEL ESSAY STRUCTURE**

**Introduction**

- Arouse the reader’s interest
- Set the scene
- Explain how you interpret the question set
- Define or explain key terms if necessary
- Identify the issues that you are going to explore
- Give a brief outline of how you will deal with each issue, and in which order

**Argument/Main Body**

Contains the points outlined in your introduction, divided into paragraphs:

- **Paragraph 1**
  
  Covers the first thing you said you’d address.
  
  The first sentence (the topic sentence) introduces the main idea of the paragraph.
  
  Other sentences develop the topic.
  
  Include relevant examples, details, evidence, quotations, references.

- **Paragraph 2 and other paragraphs**
  
  The first sentence links the paragraph to the previous paragraph then introduces the main idea of the paragraph.

**The Conclusion**

- Draw everything together
- Summarise the main themes
- State your general conclusions
- Make it clear why those conclusions are important or significant
- Do not introduce new material
- In the last sentence, sum up your argument very briefly, linking it to the title
- Set the issues in a broader perspective/wider context
- Discuss what you’ve failed to do – answers not clear, space limited
- Suggest further questions of your own

**ESSAY WRITING – THE MAIN STAGES**

1. Analyse the question
2. Make a rough outline plan
3. Use plan to guide research
4. Review, revise and refine the plan
5. Write first draft
6. Edit draft for structure and content
7. Edit draft for style
8. Check referencing
9. Proof read for spelling/punctuation
10. Produce final copy

ANALYSING THE ESSAY QUESTION

- Read the question (aloud if it helps!) several times.
- Underline the words that tell you what approach to take.
- (e.g. discuss, assess, compare – see list , "Key Words in Essay Titles", below)
- Highlight key words relating to the subject matter.
- Circle any other significant words that identify the scope of what you have to write about.
- (e.g. simply, fundamentally, only, merely, currently, respectively)
- Note any terms that you need to define.
- Write the question out in your own words.
- In your introduction say how you interpret the question (e.g. by rephrasing in your own words).
- In your conclusion, refer back to the question; show the reader that you’re still answering the set question.
- Write the question out in full on plans, notes and drafts to make sure you never lose sight of it.

KEY WORDS IN ESSAY TITLES

NB. You might find that the title you have been given does not contain any of these key words. You will have to look carefully at the way the question is phrased, along with any accompanying guidance as to what is expected, to establish what sort of approach is required.

**Account for**  
Give reasons for; explain why something happens.

**Analyse**  
Break up into parts; investigate.
Comment on
Identify and write about the main issues; give your reactions based on what you’ve read/heard in lectures. Avoid just personal opinion.

Compare
Look for the similarities between two things. Show the relevance or consequences of these similarities. Perhaps conclude which is preferable.

Contrast
Bring out the differences between two items or arguments. Show whether the differences are significant. Perhaps give reasons why one is preferable.

Critically evaluate
Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.

Define
Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show you understand how the definition may be problematic.

Describe
Give the main characteristics or features of something, or outline the main events.

Discuss
Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate; give reasons for and against; examine the implications.

Distinguish between
Bring out the differences between.

Evaluate
Assess and give your judgement about the merit, importance or usefulness of something. Back your judgement with evidence.

Examine
Look closely into something.

Explain
Make clear why something happens, or is the way it is; interpret and account for; give reasons for.

Explore
Examine thoroughly; consider from a variety of viewpoints.

Illustrate
Make something clear and explicit, giving examples of evidence.

Interpret
Show the meaning and relevance of data or other material presented.
Justify
Give evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made; answer the main objections which might be made.

Narrate
Outline what happened.

Outline
Give the main points/features/general principles; show the main structure and interrelations; omit details and examples.

Relate
(a) Narrate
(b) Show similarities and connections between.

State
Give the main features briefly and clearly.

Summarise
Draw out the main points only; omit details and examples.

To what extent
Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which it is not true.

Trace
Follow the development or history of an event or process.

TIPS FOR PLANNING YOUR ESSAY

Make an outline plan

• Keep the question in sight

• Try using a “spider” or “pattern” plan to brainstorm relevant points – both what you know and what you need to find out. This type of plan reflects the way your brain works and helps to give you an overview of the essay (See separate guide on Mind Mapping for a more advanced form of pattern planning)

Give star ratings to the points you’ve noted:

*** for key points
** for important points
* for background points
Use different colours, letters or lines to show links.
Number the key points in the order you think you’ll introduce them.

Try the Outline View in Word to plan
Try ways of planning where you can physically arrange the points:

Different points on separate index cards – colour code
“Post-its” on a sheet of wallpaper.

**Refine your plan**

- If your research has drawn out key points you’d missed out, include them. Delete anything that now seems irrelevant or unimportant.

- Work out the order for introducing key points.

- Convert your outline plan into a linear plan – list the main topics/arguments as headings in order.

- Code (colour, letters, numbers) the headings.

- For each main topic/argument note the main information you’ll include and the examples/other supporting details.

- Divide up your word allowance between the headings – allow one tenth each for the introduction and conclusion.

- Work out how many words per page you write in your handwriting. Select the total number of pages you’ll need. Draw out pages showing what topics you’ll include on each page.

- Sort your research notes – use the code colour, number or letter to relate them to your plan

- Start drafting!

**DRAFTING**

- Start with the “middle”.

- Take each main topic/idea and write a paragraph about it.

- Don’t worry about style/spelling at this stage – let the ideas flow.

- Leave space for editing.
Each paragraph needs a “topic sentence” that makes it clear what that paragraph is about. The rest of the paragraph will include information and evidence related to that “topic”.

Write the conclusion – it should sum up the content of the “middle” and relate back to the title.

Write the introduction – it’s easier to say what your essay sets out to do once you’ve done it.

If you’ve word-processed your draft, print off a hard copy for editing purposes.

Put the draft aside for a day or so.

EDITING YOUR DRAFT FOR STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Re-read your draft, checking for structure and meaning:

Does the main body do what the introduction says it will do?

Is it clear what each paragraph is about?
  (Sum up the topic in the margin and colour code it.)

Is everything in the paragraph relevant to the main “topic”?

Is there enough in each paragraph to support the “topic”?

Is anything superfluous?

Is everything in the right place?

Are the sentences in each paragraph in the right order?

Is every paragraph relevant to the question?

Does every paragraph relate clearly to the others?
Is it clear how each paragraph leads to the next?

Are the ideas clearly expressed?

Have you cited references correctly and listed them at the end?