

Planning and writing your essay – an overview



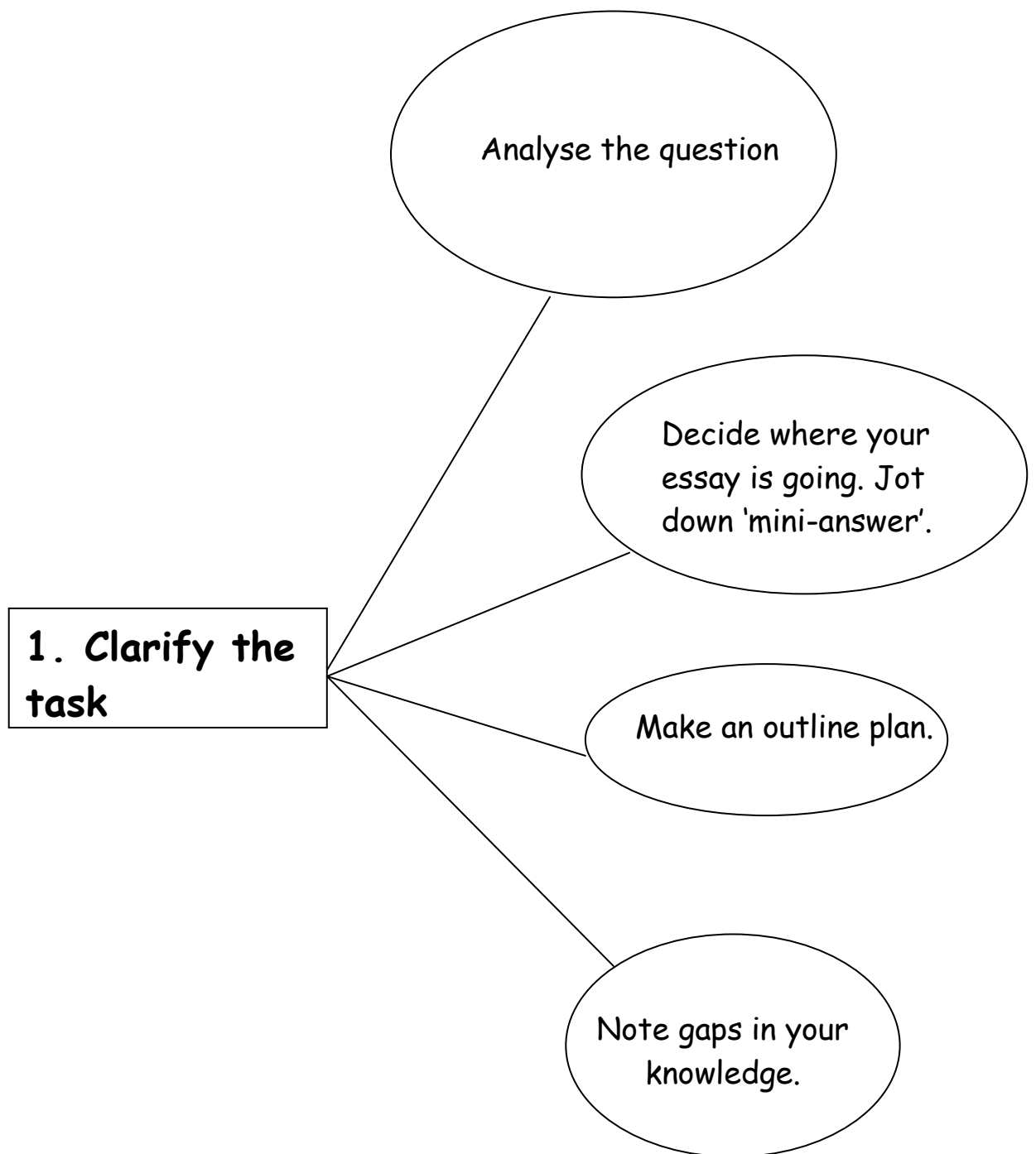
Do not expect to sit down and write an essay all in one go. There are many stages to go through before that.

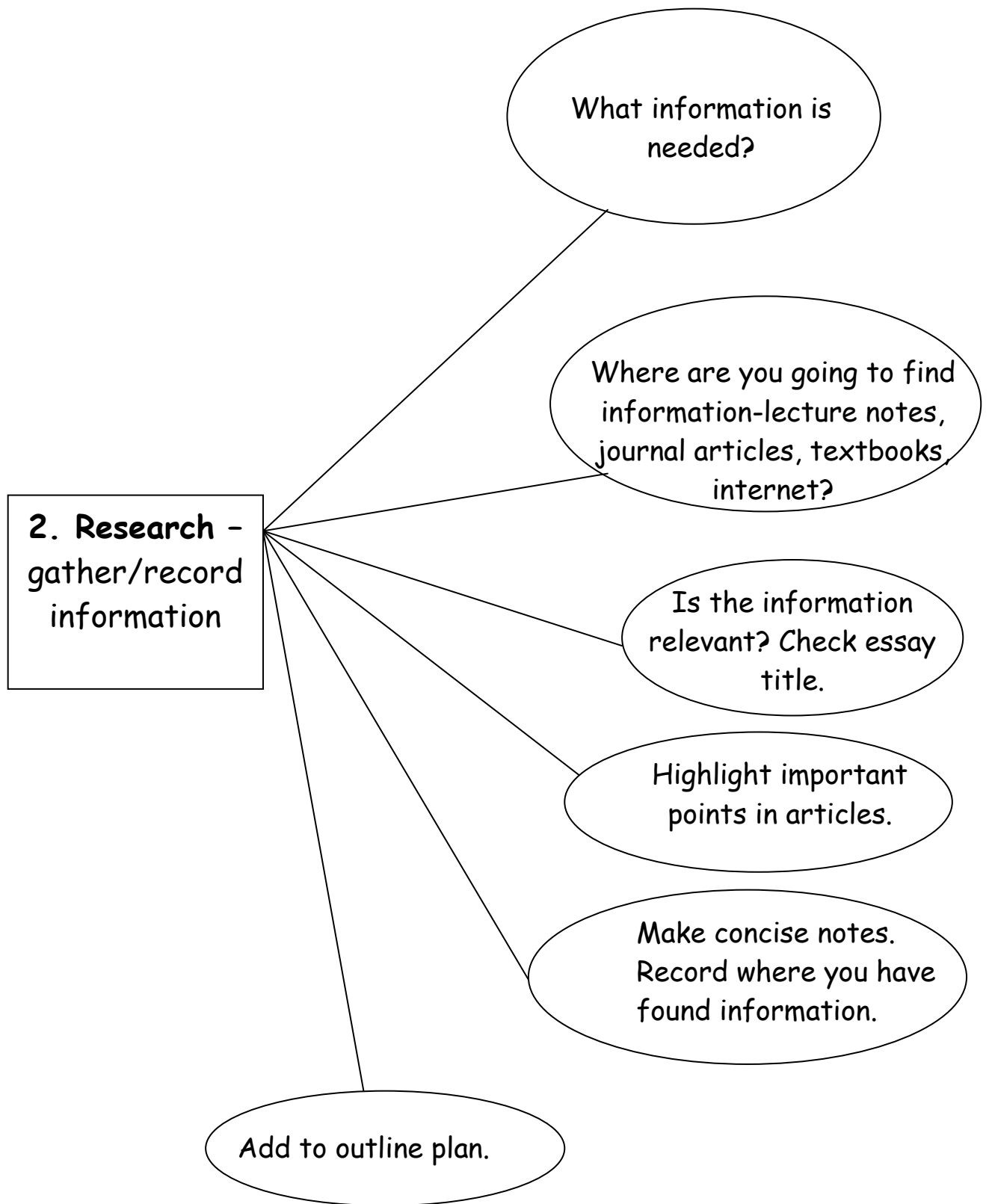
- ❑ First of all you must do a detailed analysis of the question, to make sure you are answering in a totally relevant way.
- ❑ Then you must plan your research to fill in any gaps in your knowledge.
- ❑ You will need to do an essay plan. This can be done in several ways, depending on the type of essay and your preferences.
- ❑ When you have the necessary information, you will need to do a paragraph plan to see where your essay is going before you get started.
- ❑ Now you can write your first draft.
- ❑ Finally you will need to edit your essay, to produce a final polished draft. The number of drafts needed will vary.

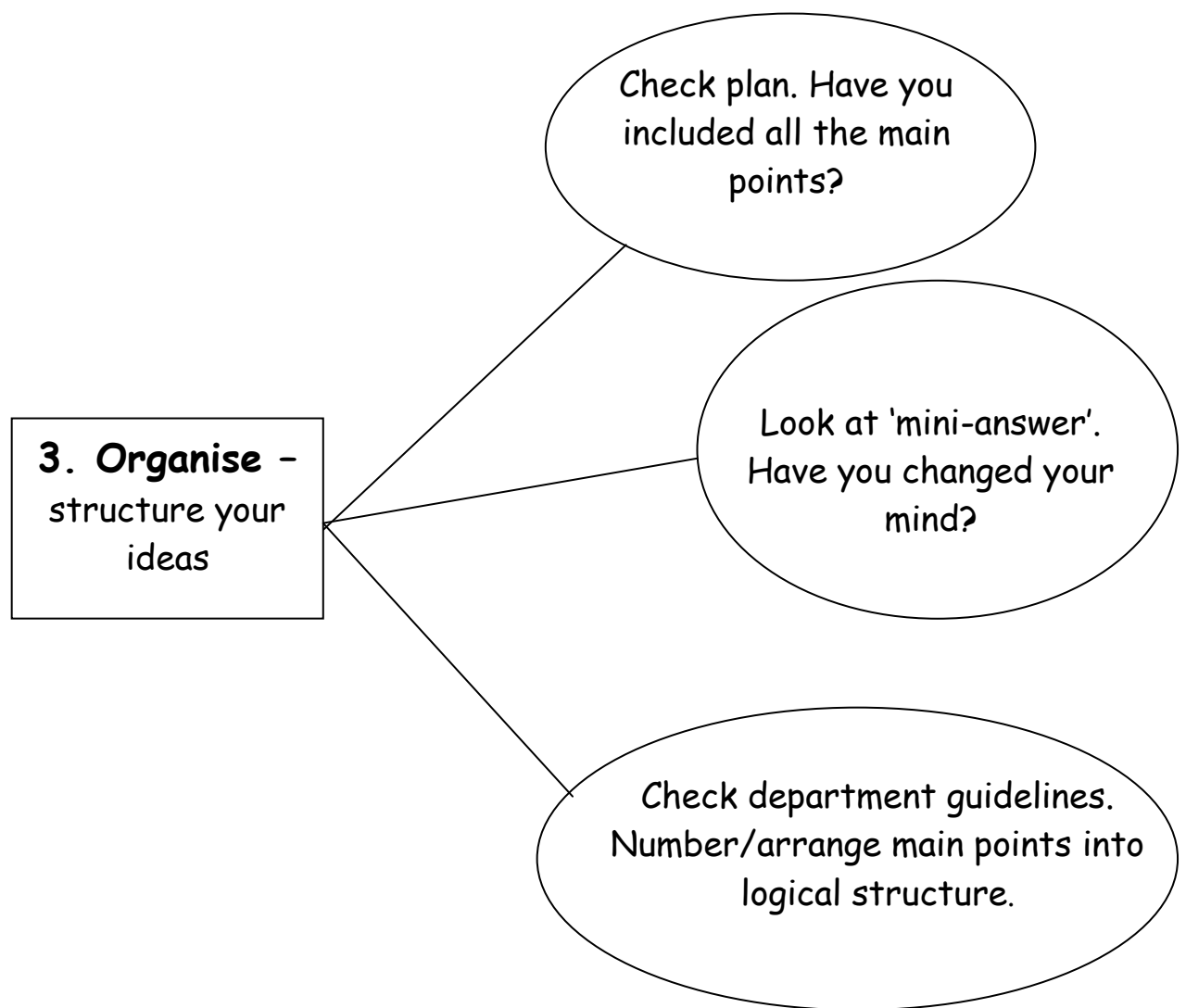
At all stages of the essay writing process, you will need to have the title firmly in mind. It is a good idea to write the title on a separate piece of paper or index card and have it in front of you all the time.

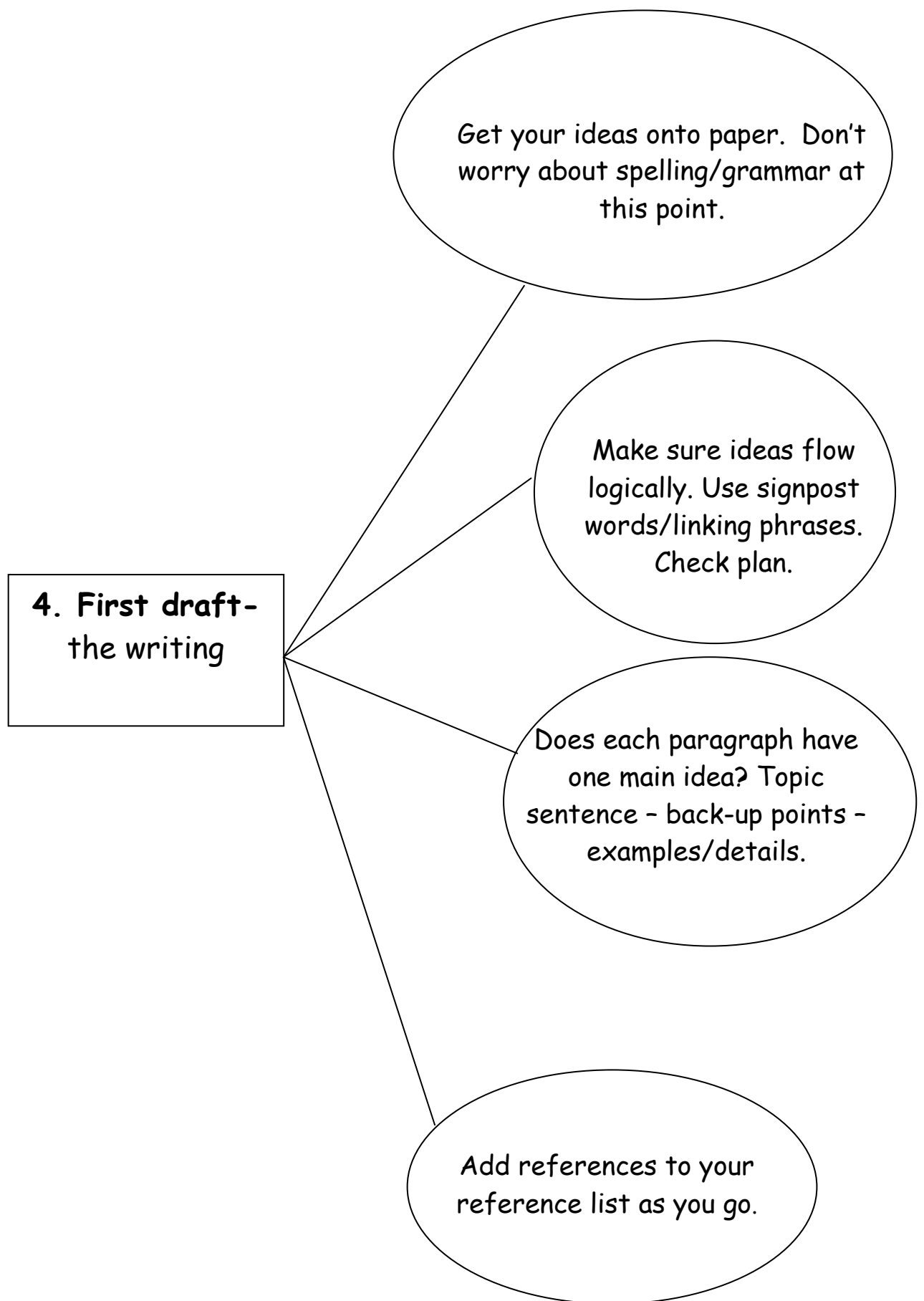
On the next few pages you will find a guide to
Essay Writing in 5 Steps →

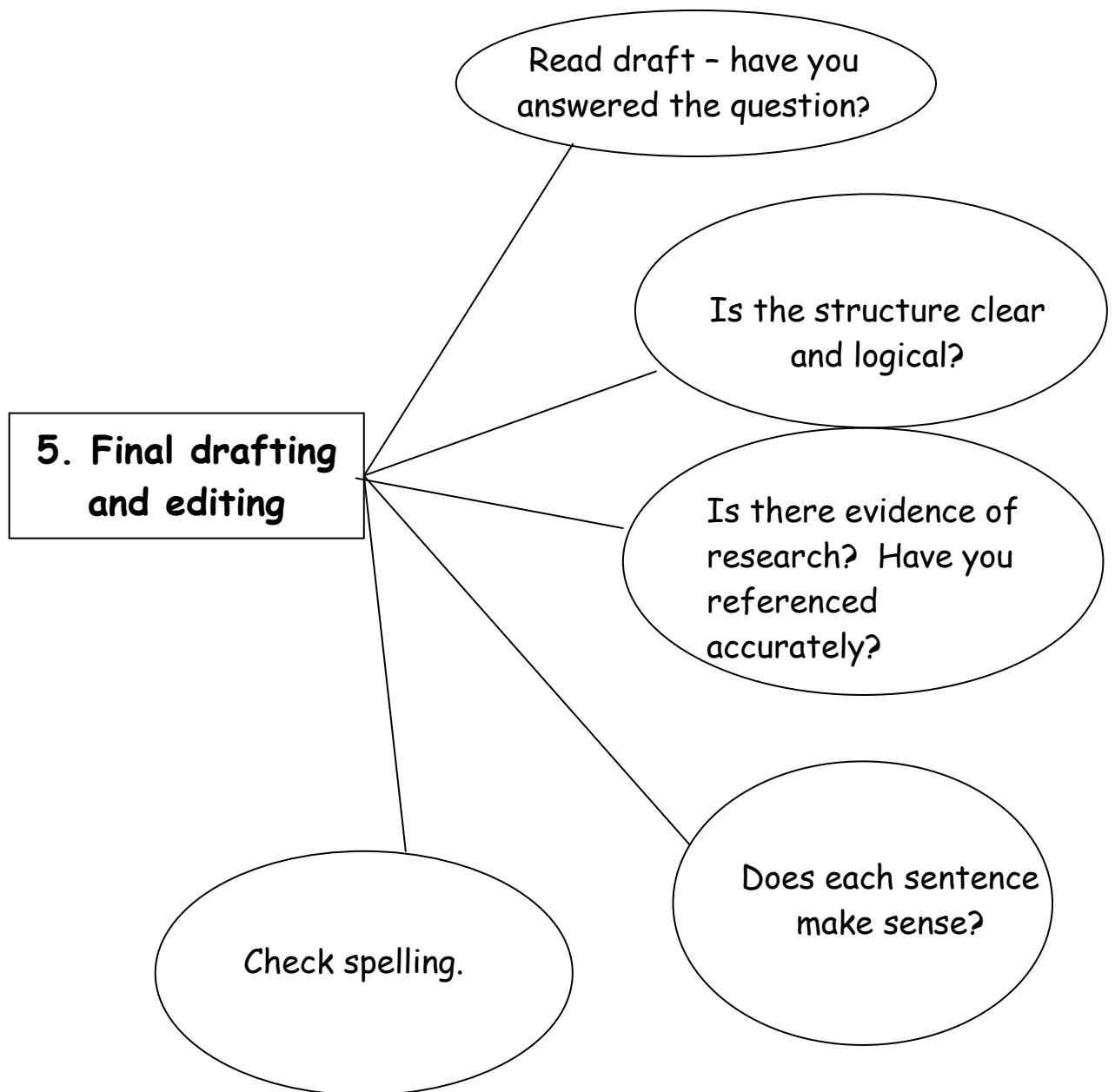
Essay Writing in 5 Steps







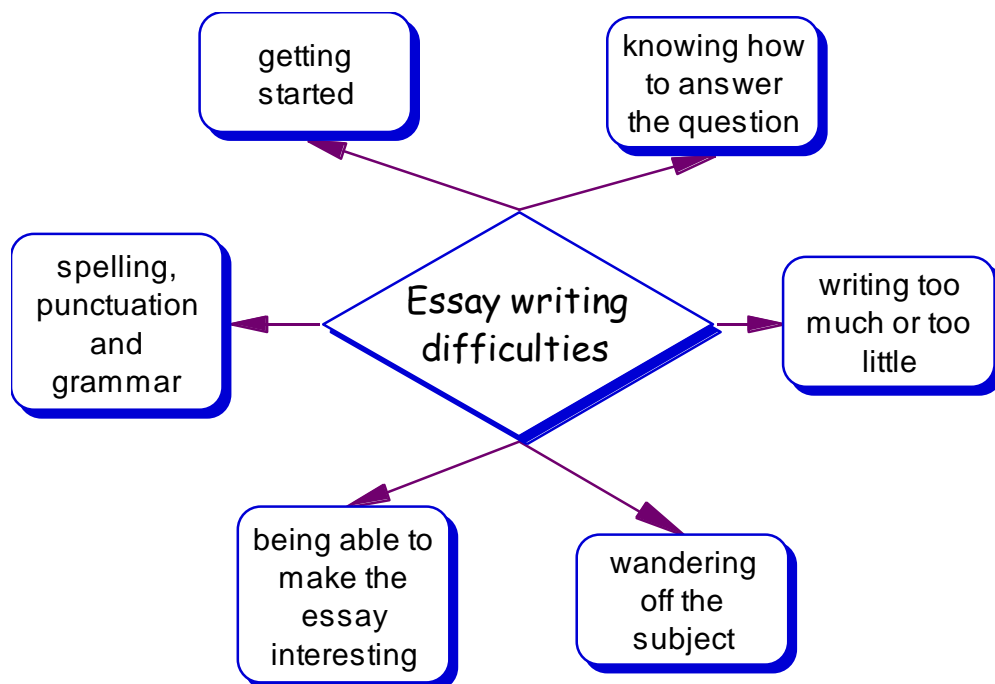




Difficulties

Writing essays seems to cause some students a number of difficulties. Some find it very difficult to get started; others find it particularly difficult to keep their essays relevant.

It is worth analysing your approach to essay writing to see how you can improve your essay writing technique. ➤ See the checklist on the following page.



Analyse your essay writing skills



Think about an essay you have recently written.
Write down the process you went through from first looking at
the title to finishing the task. Write your thoughts here ↓

Consider whether this process is typical of your approach to
other essays. In what ways does it differ? Why?

Analyse your essay writing skills (continued)

Do you ever have difficulty writing essays?

If so, think about where exactly these difficulties arise.

➤ See page 7 of this guide.

Take a large sheet of paper and divide it into two columns. In the first column, note down the difficulties you have with essay writing and in the second column, list ideas about what you want to improve.

Do you consistently get lower marks than you had hoped for?
What comments do your tutors make about your essays?
What can you learn from their comments?

Answering the essay question

Always read the question very carefully. It is easy to lose marks if you haven't answered the question set or because you have included too much irrelevant detail.

It is well worth getting into the habit of analysing the question before you make a start on the essay. Make sure you are familiar with the common question words, eg 'Compare', 'Discuss', 'Outline', that are used in essay titles. ➤ See next page for the meanings of some common question words.

Isolate the key words in the question. Here is a way to help you do this.↓

Box and underline

Use this technique to identify exactly what you have to do to answer an essay question.

It is particularly useful in an exam when you may be feeling pressurised by time and need to be certain that you focus upon whatever you have been asked to do.

- **Box** the question words
- Underline the important content words

Ask yourself:

- ❑ what does the question mean?
- ❑ what does each word mean?
- ❑ what is the link between the words?
- ❑ what do I need to include in my answer?
- ❑ What type of essay is it- descriptive/factual/discursive?

Key words used in essay questions

ACCOUNT FOR

Give the reason for. Not to be confused with 'Give an account of' which is only asking for a description.

ANALYSE

Describe the main ideas in depth, showing why they are important and how they are connected.

ASSESS

Discuss the strong and weak points of the subject. Make your own conclusion.

COMMENT

State your views on the subject clearly. Back up your points with sufficient evidence and examples.

**COMPARE and
CONTRAST**

Write about the similarities and differences in the subject matter.

CRITICISE

Express your own balanced judgement of the subject. Give views for and against, backed up with examples and references.

DEFINE

Give clear concise meanings. State limitations of the definition. (How it is used in your essay.)

DESCRIBE

Give the main features or characteristics of something or write about the main events or stages in a process.

DISCUSS

Write about the subject in detail, giving points for and against, advantages and disadvantages. Give a balanced conclusion.

Key words used in essay questions (continued)

EVALUATE	Give your opinion of the importance, usefulness, accuracy, etc of the information. Include good and bad points, backed up with theories and references.
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EXAMINE	Look at the subject in detail.
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EXPLAIN	State clearly how and why you think something happens or why it is the way it is.
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HOW FAR/ TO WHAT EXTENT?	Give your own opinion as to whether something is completely true or accurate, partly true or perhaps not true at all. Back up your points with references.
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ILLUSTRATE	Use specific examples to make clear points.
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INTERPRET	Express what something means in simple terms.
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JUSTIFY	Use evidence and reasons to support your judgement. Make your points clearly and forcefully.
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OUTLINE	Give the main ideas, but do not go into too much detail.
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RELATE	Show how things are connected or similar.
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REVIEW	Give an overall view of the subject in a critical way. Pick out and analyse important parts of the subject.
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SUMMARISE	Write briefly about the main points or facts, omitting details. Use references to back up your conclusion.
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Researching your essay

Use your essay guidelines

Before you start to plan your essay, check any guidelines provided by your department. These should include:

- ❑ date essay has to be handed in
- ❑ length of essay
- ❑ presentation/layout - are sub-headings allowed?
- ❑ required reading
- ❑ learning outcomes
- ❑ marking criteria

Assemble all this information and have it in front of you before you start.

Gathering and organising ideas

Even before you do a detailed plan, you can plan your initial research by brainstorming ideas based on your existing knowledge and any relevant lecture notes.

You need to find information in a wide variety of sources - your reading list, books, journals, databases, the internet, lectures, seminar and tutorial discussions, questionnaires. You do, however, need to be very selective in what you research and actually use in your essay.

Work out roughly how many words you write or type on one page of A4 paper. Check on the word limit and work out how many pages your finished essay is likely to be. The word limit will help you to decide how much reading and research you have to do.

➤ See also LDC booklet on Reading.

Researching your essay

Gathering and organising ideas (continued)



Producing an essay involves more than simply writing down everything you know about a subject. Your selection of material demonstrates:

- ❑ your understanding of the specific question set
- ❑ your ability to extract and present relevant items from a large body of information
- ❑ your understanding of how the particular angle of the question fits into the topic as a whole

If you are not selective your essay will either become rambling and repetitious or too superficial, with essential facts omitted. When you carry out your research, you need to strike a balance between finding enough background information to provide a context for your answer and focusing on specific details.

Make sure that you record all your sources of information as you go along.

Don't forget to keep referring to your essay title to check that the information is relevant.

➤ See also LDC booklet on **Note taking**

Planning your essay

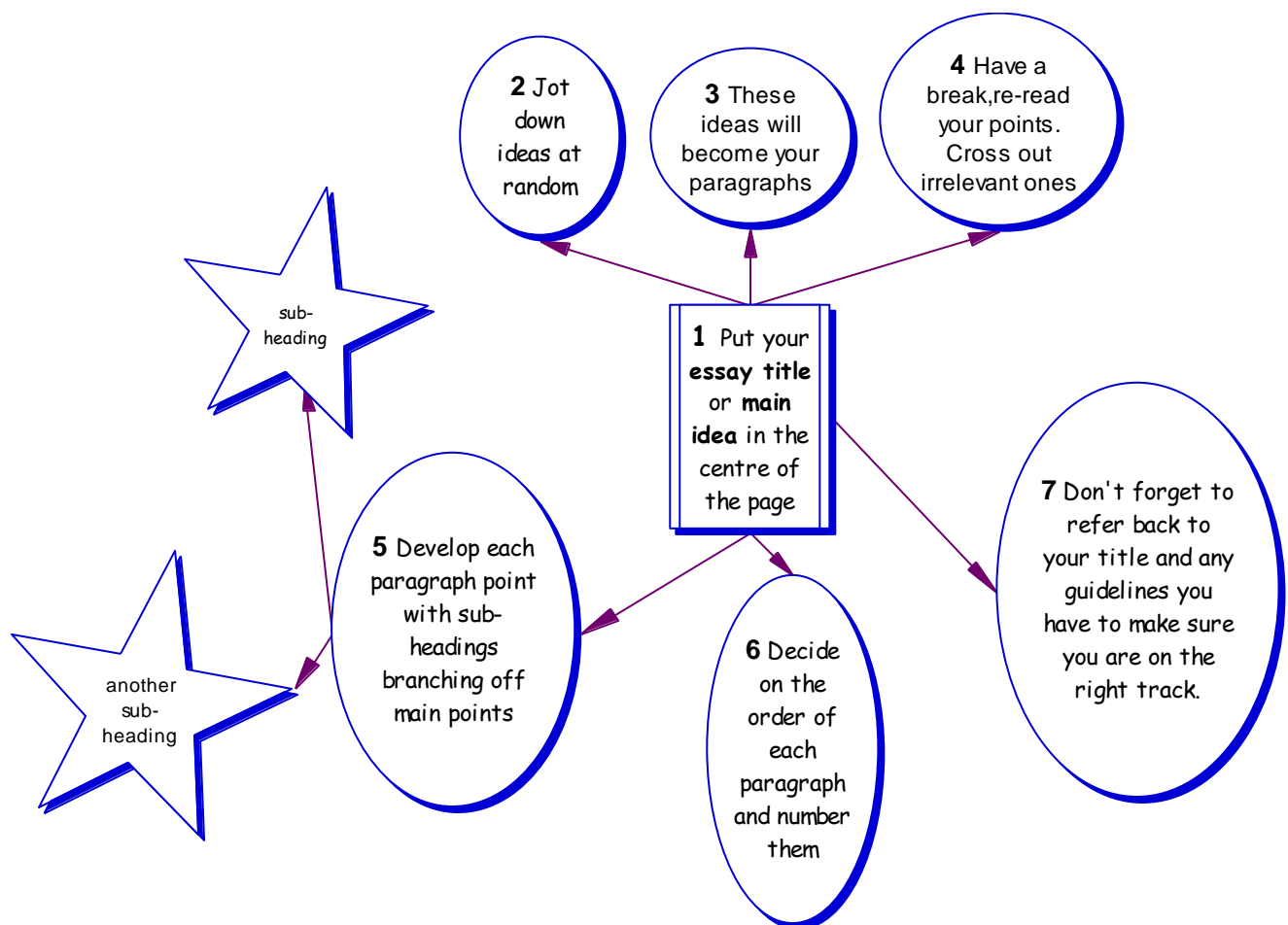
Order and structure

Planning is essential if you want to write a well structured, logical essay. You can plan your essays in a number of ways.

- ❑ Mind maps/think tank plans/spider diagrams
- ❑ Concept pyramids
- ❑ Flow charts
- ❑ Columns/frameworks
- ❑ Listing items on index cards

Mind maps/think tank plans/spider diagrams

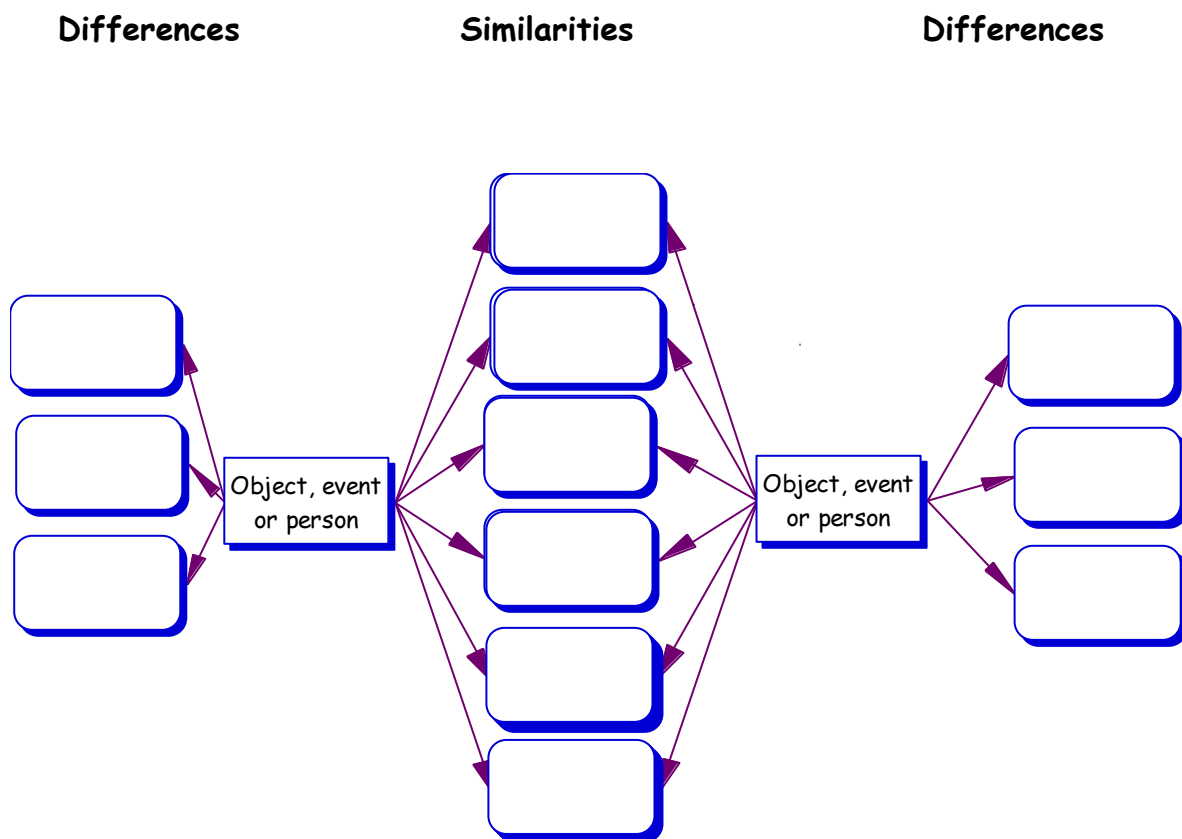
These are particularly useful if you are a visual type of learner.



Planning your essay (continued)

Flow charts

You could organise your ideas in a flow chart, which shows clearly how one idea follows on logically from another. You could also use flow charts to compare and contrast items as in the one below.

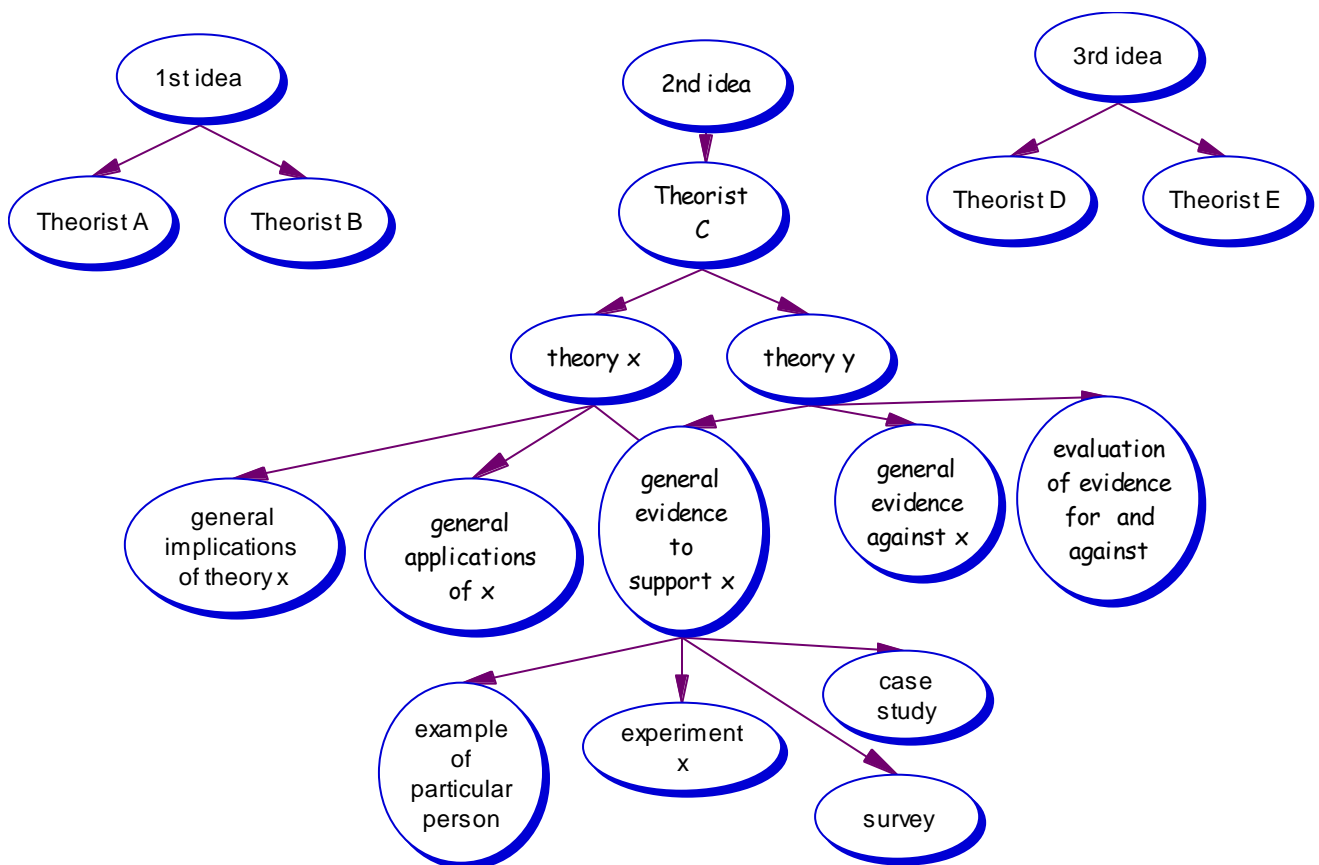


Planning your essay (continued)

Concept Pyramids

Sheila Cottrell, in her book The Study Skills Handbook, describes another way of planning essays which some students may find helpful. It is particularly useful when you need to compare and contrast different ideas.

The diagram below is adapted from an essay plan that compares three different schools of thought on a given subject.



Planning your essay (continued)

Columns/frameworks

You can plan your ideas by taking a large sheet of paper and dividing it into three columns. Each column can be used to plan a different part of the essay.

This is particularly useful for a 'Compare and Contrast' essay. In the first column, define the areas to be compared, in the second column, list the similarities and in the third column, list the differences. You can adapt the basic framework to suit a particular essay.

Areas for comparison	Similarities	Differences
1		
2		
3		
4		

Index cards/stickers

You can use index cards or stickers to plan your ideas. Use a separate card or sticker for each point or concept. A big advantage of this method is you can keep adding to and re-arranging your ideas until you are satisfied.

You could also use different coloured highlighters to distinguish between major and minor, general or specific points when you have written them down.

Writing the first draft of your essay

When you have completed your research and planned your essay in your preferred style, you will need to make a paragraph plan before you begin writing. A good starting point is to refer back to your 'mini-answer' to clarify your thoughts.

➤ See page 2 of this guide.

Write a list of your main points in the order that you want them to appear in the essay. Each main point needs a new paragraph and the first sentence of each paragraph introduces the point. It is often called a topic sentence.

If your essay is 2000 words, allow about 200 words (10%) for the introduction and 200 for the conclusion. That leaves 1600 words for the main body of the essay. So if you want to make 8 main points, each paragraph will be about 200 words long.

Of course some points will be more important and complex than others, so your paragraphs won't be all the same length. By working out roughly how much you can write on each point, you will begin to see the shape of your whole essay.

This is what a basic paragraph contains:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| ❑ Topic sentence | Expresses your main point |
| ❑ Supporting sentences | Develop the main point
Give back-up points
Examples/Quotes
References |
| ❑ Concluding sentence | Gathers together the content of the paragraph and leads on to the next paragraph |

Writing the first draft of your essay (continued)



The paragraphs that form your introduction and conclusion will contain different elements. ➤ See pages 23-24 on writing effective introductions and conclusions.

Your paragraph plan will look something like this:

Paragraph 1 (introduction)

- ❑ use of words in the essay question to make general points
- ❑ definitions
- ❑ what the essay will cover
- ❑ the order

Paragraph 2

- ❑ 1st main point
- ❑ back-up points
- ❑ examples/references

Paragraphs 3

- ❑ 2nd main point
- ❑ back-up points
- ❑ examples/references

and so on with Paragraphs 4, 5, 6, etc

Last paragraph (conclusion)

- ❑ refer back to question
- ❑ bring together main points
- ❑ give results of your thinking

Essay language

Signpost/link words

Signpost or link words join your sentences and paragraphs smoothly so that your ideas flow. They help your readers to follow your argument by leading them from one idea to another until they reach your conclusion. Link words have different functions. Here are some examples:

- ❑ **to add more ideas**
again, furthermore, in addition, moreover
- ❑ **to compare or contrast ideas**
alternatively, contrastingly, conversely, whereas
- ❑ **to prove something**
evidently, for this reason, because, inevitably
- ❑ **to show exceptions**
however, nevertheless, yet, in spite of
- ❑ **to repeat or refer back to something**
As has been mentioned/noted.../As previously discussed...
- ❑ **to show that you will include something later**
This will be discussed in more detail later/ in chapter two, etc
- ❑ **to emphasise something**
definitely, obviously, inevitably, undeniably
- ❑ **to give an example**
for example, for instance, in this case, in particular, notably

Essay language

Signpost/link words (continued)

- ❑ **To show the order of things**
previously, following this, initially, subsequently, finally
- ❑ **To conclude**
to conclude, to summarise, in conclusion, consequently, as
I have shown.../As has been shown...

Introducing references

Your essay will be more interesting if you use a variety of words to introduce quotes and references. Try these:

Bloggs (2002) argues.../believes.../ considers.../
demonstrates.../identifies.../points out.../states.../suggests...

According to Bloggs (2002), '...

Writing in the third person (avoiding the use of 'I')

<u>Using 'I'</u>	<u>Without 'I'</u>
I think that	It can be argued/seen that
I found that	It was found that
In this essay I will discuss	This essay will discuss
I carried out the following experiment	The following experiment was carried out

Writing an effective introduction

Do not begin too abruptly by starting your essay with the first point you wish to make. The introduction should prepare the reader for the main body of the essay. Aim to create interest, atmosphere or surprise.

It is a good idea to refer specifically to the question title or your purpose in writing the essay in the introduction.

Consider the following possible ideas in your introduction:

- ❑ state the background that has given rise to the topic
- ❑ define the scope of your topic - what you will cover and what you will not
- ❑ define terms that have a broad meaning - say how the term is being used in your essay
- ❑ identify important issues and state how you will deal with them
- ❑ make an apt quotation
- ❑ state a pertinent fact
- ❑ give a definition
- ❑ make a provocative statement
- ❑ give an interesting opinion

When you read your introduction again, ask yourself:

- would this introduction make anyone read on?
- does it introduce the title or purpose of the essay clearly enough?
- is it interesting?

Writing an effective conclusion

The conclusion is as important as the introduction. Do not end abruptly with your last point.

Refer back to the essay title or theme in some way.

A good conclusion should:

- ❑ end positively - make your final points clear to the reader
- ❑ bring together the main points
- ❑ state the results of your thinking on the issues discussed
- ❑ end strongly - include an interesting opinion

A good conclusion should not:

- ❑ simply repeat points already made
- ❑ summarise every single thing you have said
- ❑ introduce new ideas
- ❑ rely on worn out phrases such as 'to sum up' or 'in conclusion'

When you read your conclusion again, ask yourself:

- does this conclusion leave me with a good impression?
- does it gather together the ideas presented in my essay?
- does it refer back to the title and introduction?

Editing your essay

If possible, allow some time before reading through your first draft in a critical way. You are more likely to spot your errors that way. If you read your work immediately after writing it, you will tend to read what you expect to see and not what is actually on the paper.

You will need to look at various aspects of your work:

- ❑ content
- ❑ structure
- ❑ spelling and punctuation
- ❑ style
- ❑ presentation

Content

Have you answered the question?

Have you included all the necessary points?

Is what you have written relevant?

Is your meaning clear?

Is it the required length?

Structure

Is there a clear introduction, main body of argument and conclusion?

Is your essay clearly divided into paragraphs with only 1 main point in each paragraph?

Are your ideas linked together in a logical order so the reader can follow your argument?

Have you used enough signposting or linking words?

Is your argument backed up with references and supporting statements?

Editing your essay (continued)

Spelling

Read your work aloud. Even if you have used a computer spellcheck, it is easy to use the wrong word.

Start at the end of the line and read backwards. You are more likely to read what you have actually written and not what you think makes sense.

Make a checklist of words you have difficulty with. It is easier to check for specific things.

The software package TextHELP is very useful for proof reading.

Punctuation



Read your work aloud. Every time there is a pause or a slight drop in your voice, some sort of punctuation is needed.

If you get out of breath, your sentence is too long!

Style

Have you written in an appropriate academic style?

Have you avoided informal or chatty language?

Have you only used 'I' in an appropriate part of the essay or when advised that you can use it?

Have you avoided abbreviations, eg 'can't'?

Are your sentences too long and rambling or short and jerky?

Presentation

Have you followed guidelines, eg on the use of sub-headings?

Is the essay clearly laid out with paragraph spaces?

Are all your tables, graphs, illustrations clearly labelled?

