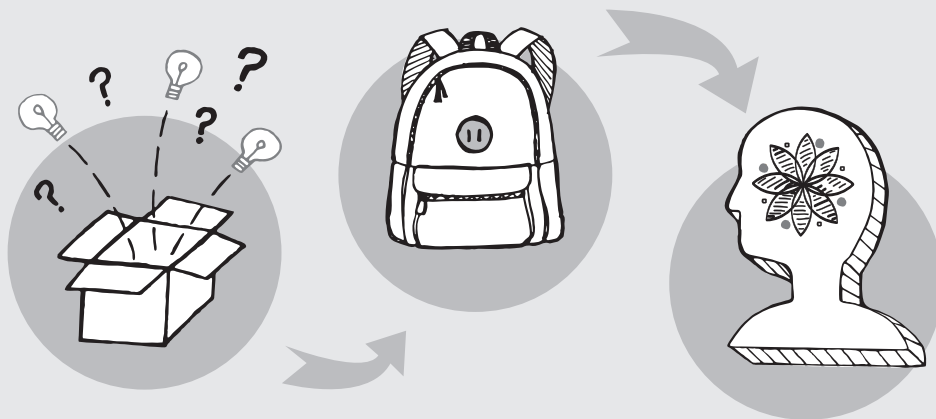


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ACADEMIC

HOW TO WRITE THEMATICALLY

This chapter leads on from the section on ‘how to read’ in Chapter 2. However, should you be on a deadline and have quickly flipped to this section as you have an essay due in and no time to read Chapter 2, let us quickly recap.

You should read widely, which means reading books and journals, and you should start with the reading lists that your university provides. When reading you may have the option to read online or to print, and of course printing can incur a cost. However, you will be able to highlight or annotate parts of the article, without having to be attached to an electronic device such as a laptop. This can prove really helpful on placement, if you are maybe reading one journal article a day over lunch. Moreover, printing does give you the option to digitally switch off to complete your reading, whereas if you are reading online the temptation is to look at other content, or to be distracted by notifications. There is also emerging research about how much you really ‘take in’ when reading from a screen, and this may be a consideration for you. However, there are of course advantages to reading onscreen: you can use the ‘find’ function to scan texts for key words or terms without having to read the whole document. Whichever way you choose to read, while reading you should note down key concepts or ideas on post-it notes. And then almost as important is keeping these safe. You will know when you have read widely enough and it is time to

finish reading as you will start to read about the same concepts time and again, without new information or ideas coming to the fore. This then means that it is time to start writing.

The first point to make is that if you try to start with writing, before you have conducted wide reading, you will find this a tortuous pathway to go down. This is because you have no ideas and are no more informed about your topic than what is already in your head at the start of the process. It is almost guaranteed that some students reading this book will have skipped the section on reading and turned straight to this section, as they are busy and do not have time. This is completely normal; after all writing feels like an action. An action that will get your essay done. Finished. Boxed off. Therefore, you can try to have some down time. However, you should note that reading is also an action. Sure, it is not the star of the show like writing, but trying to write without reading is like building your house on foundations of sand. Furthermore, your writing process will be considerably longer as you have to keep stopping and starting to ‘find reading which supports your point of view’.

Of course, you have a choice, but it is very much recommended that if you have not conducted your reading, that you go back, and start to develop some essay writing discipline. In addition, as a side note, this is not in any way your fault, it is probable that no one has ever told you this, or modelled for you how to write an assignment properly. However, it is never too late to learn, you just have to practise.

Depending on previous experiences, students can underestimate how important it is to plan their essays. Alternatively, they may misinterpret this term, and consider that popping in some key terms such as introduction, discussion and conclusion is enough, without populating each of these sections with further ideas. The first step in planning your assignment should be to get your module guide, or assignment handbook or similarly titled document, which tells you about the learning outcomes for your module, the assignment question/title and the marking criteria. In the ‘boring’ guff at the start of this document it will give you all sorts of information about what you will be studying and how this links to the outcomes and aims of the module and the programmes. Of course, ‘busy trainees’ do not ever read this; they simply do not have time. Generally, they want to know two things: when do they have to be there and what do they have to do to pass the module. However, when you are writing an essay it can be helpful to understand what the module you are studying is about. Granted, this might be nice to know at the start of the year and would provide you with intrinsic motivation for turning up each week, but no one’s perfect. When lecturers write

these documents, they have to ensure that the assessment that they create allows each of these outcomes to be measured. There is usually some form of information (table, chart, paragraph) that explains this to you. If you have two assessment points in a module, it will tell you what outcomes are measured through which assessment.

Now that you have the ‘big picture’, your next step is to look at the essay title/question. Sometimes, these can be a little wordy or long; if this is the case read through it a couple of times, thinking about the outcomes that are measured for this piece of work. Start to consider how you can break down the question into actions and topics. Most questions or titles will require you to ‘do something’ ‘about something’. For example, critically evaluate drama (thing you have to do) as an approach to teaching English (about this thing), or compare and contrast (thing you have to do) Scandinavian and English EYFS settings and their impact on outdoor learning (here there are three things: Scandinavian approaches, English approaches and impact on outdoor learning). By really taking time to understand the question this will ensure that you are aware of what you are trying to answer. So, for example, if we take the question above, some students may be tempted to outline EYFS settings in Scandinavia, EYFS settings in England and then maybe consider outdoor play in the final paragraph. However, few marks will be awarded for the presentation of this material. Most likely, it is your lecturer who has informed you about these settings in the first place, so they do not need you to simply regurgitate it back to them. Instead, you have to use this information to create new learning, through comparing and contrasting. You really have to think, synthesise the information and craft a line of argument. Again, this is where your reading will come in handy, because it is the ideas that snowballed into themes (on your post-it notes) which will act as your paragraphs. So in this example, paragraph topics gathered from the reading might be: outdoor education, length of EYFS phase and government subsidies.

Finally, once you are informed of the ‘big picture’ and how you are required to demonstrate your knowledge, you should turn your attention to the marking scheme. The person who is charged with marking your assignment will have a copy of the marking scheme in front of them. Pay attention to the verbs and what you need to demonstrate. The example above is again useful to bear in mind, because if the marking scheme says ‘is able to demonstrate comparing and contrasting settings’ rather than ‘is able to present information about settings’ then you would not receive marks. The module guide/assignment handbook may contain bullet points for you to consider in your assignment. Generally, these bullet points have been included by your

lecturer as points for consideration, rather than individual considerations for you to agonise over and try to include each one into your assignment. If you are unsure of what you need to include, this is where you need to consider the marking scheme again, as this sets out, in black and white, what marks you gain, and perhaps more importantly how to move from one grade boundary to the next.

There may be 'past examples' for you to view before you write. Past papers should have a large note of caution against them as they will provide you with a model of constructing your essay that once seen cannot be unseen. Instead of being able to consider the literally thousands of ways in which you could write your essay, you will instead only have in your mind the one way that you have seen. This can make it very difficult to then put the example essay aside and move on to writing your own essay. After all, the only essay that you can write is your own. The structure, to some degree, is irrelevant as long as you understand the outcomes, the question you are answering and the marking scheme, and so this is where you would be best to spend your time.

Sometimes, referencing is part of the marking scheme. Referencing is as dull as dishwater. As it is so dull and something that you do not participate in doing either willingly or frequently, then each time you are called upon to do it you may find that you cannot remember ever having done it before. While certainly a boring pastime, it is not a difficult one and as such you will simply need to obtain a 'how to reference' guide and sit with it open. There are various different technological solutions to referencing, some being a little better than others, but irrespective of the method you decide to use, just make sure that you are aware of your university's requirements and you stick to them. Do not assume that you know how to reference, and do not assume that just because you know how to reference a book, you know how to reference a website because it changes frequently. If you really have a blank about referencing, go to your library and make an appointment as most will meet you for a one-to-one tutorial, or check your central university offerings as there might be group sessions.

WRITING

Reading, check. Fully briefed about module aims and outcomes, assignment and marking scheme, check. Referencing guide open next to you, check. Right then, yes, you are ready to write. Moreover, your writing process should be considerably more enjoyable and quicker as you have really firm foundations on which you can build.

When you were reading you wrote down key ideas or themes from the texts you were considering. Now is the time to gather together all of your post-it notes. Read each of these quickly and try to notice if groups or themes emerge from them. For example, if you were writing an essay on why we teach foreign languages, you might group together openness of young children, curiosity of kids, naturally inquisitive, learning about others under the theme of intercultural understanding. Alternatively, you may group together financial reward, mobility, economic opportunities, better job prospects under the theme of extrinsic rewards. You may need to go over your post-its a number of times to elicit these themes, and you may need to redistribute some of the post-its as you progress through until you are finally happy with each one. Put all of the post-it notes that contain ideas with the same themes together. Sometimes, you might find that there are too many in one pile, in which case consider whether there are in fact multiple ideas here which you could split up. Or maybe you have only one or two post-it notes in another pile, in which case consider whether these ideas could join another group. It is this group that will form the topics of each of your sections. Of course, the length of an essay dictates how long each section should be, but you should aim to have the main body (everything apart from introduction and conclusion) of the assignment as the largest part and look to split the word count up between these sections, leaving enough words for a short introduction and conclusion section.

Different people have different takes on where to start next. Some people prefer to write the introduction while others prefer to jump straight into the main body of the essay and come back and add the introduction and conclusion later. The approach here favours the latter, because in general an introduction and conclusion never really gain you any marks. They are important as they set the scene for the reader and signpost what will come in the essay and then recap and draw together the threads at the end, so you cannot hand in a piece of work without them. However, you can always add them in at the end once the main body of the essay is completed.

When writing the main body of your essay, this should be approached in sections. For most assignments required on your course two to four paragraphs, which each cover a separate theme, might be appropriate. A theme should be an overarching idea that links the concepts which you are discussing; for example you might choose the theme of discovery learning to discuss science, outdoor learning and maths investigations. The advantage of using themes is that it stops you having to write in a linear way, whereby you would need to write a section on each (science, outdoor learning, maths investigations) and then another section where you link these all together. This means that you have room in your word count for those

higher order skills, such as critical analysis or synthesising a line of argument from a selection of sources. Furthermore, because you have had to think about what links all of your ideas from the reading to the post-its to the themes, when you come to write you have a really good understanding of the information.

As you consider starting to write, you may feel that you have not been given enough support from your sessions or lecturers, and sometimes this might be the case. However, quite often students can simply default to this thinking because writing an essay is not easy, it is horrible. It makes your brain hurt, it is a bit boring and quite frankly you would rather be doing something else. It is not a nice experience. It is sometimes made more difficult if, when you last wrote essays as part of an undergraduate course or in sixth form, you were never required to simply 'go it alone' and 'get on with it'. Furthermore, the stakes are high, especially if the grades go towards your final degree classification. Feeling overwhelmed is understandable but there really is nothing a lecturer can say that would make it all completely OK for you, apart from, 'Tell you what, I've a spare afternoon, why don't I write this for you?', which clearly (both having a free afternoon and offering to write assignments) is not going to happen. Joking aside, when you catch yourself feeling overwhelmed by the task you have to complete, it is important to consider that no amount of assignment support would make it an easy or enjoyable activity. So calm yourself by approaching it in a clear, ordered and methodical way. The anxiety that writing an essay produces (for most people not suffering from an anxiety disorder) is the motivation that you need to actually get started and to make you do a good job.

When starting to write there can be nothing more offputting than a blank page; the worry about 'getting it right' or knowing where to start can be crippling for many people. Luckily, for you, you will be writing your assignments on a laptop or computer, rather than quill pen and ink or carving tablets of stone. This is important to remember, because if you make a mistake or you think another section should go before the one you are writing, you can simply cut and paste or delete it. There is no such thing as a perfect essay. There are, however, completed essays and these are nearly as good. So try not to set yourself impossible targets – you simply need to write your essay in the first place and then if you are concerned or worried just go back and edit it. In fact, this is what you should be doing anyway. One final tip, which may be of use, is to open another Word document, let's call it the 'Extra Word Graveyard' (EWG), and this is where, when you come back to review your work, you can cut and paste all the sections and parts that you think on consideration are not actually

needed, or required. The reason why these words will go in the EWG rather than simply being deleted is because of the emotional attachment you have made to them over the course of writing your essay. These words represent the hours of evening and weekend work that you have endured and so it can be heart-breaking to just delete them. Instead, pop them into your EWG and you can keep them for ever, and even reinstate them if you change your mind. Although, as sad as it is to see your words find a new home, it may be that it was the right decision and you will never reinstate them.

Achievable targets are really useful in keeping you on track and focused when you are writing. If your target is to write a set number of words before you get to X (play football, shop online, eat a huge bar of chocolate, or go out for drinks that night) it can really ensure that you remain on task. Each time that you find yourself wandering onto Twitter or online shopping, just remind yourself that you have a choice. If you spend time now on other things, it will only delay finishing and enjoying yourself fully as a proper reward knowing that there is no essay at the back of your mind troubling you. This is not an easy frame of mind to enter into and certainly requires practice. However, if you do try you will find you eventually get better at focusing and doing what you need to before taking a break. Just try to ensure that what you are aiming to do is achievable for the time set. Writing an entire essay on a Sunday afternoon is bound to end in failure one way or another.

Once you have written the main body of your essay, it is time to come back to the introduction, which should set the scene for the reader. If you are choosing in the introduction to present some information for the reader, do ensure that you say why this is important to know; your marker will not be a mind reader. Then you should try to signpost for the reader what they can expect in the assignment, so outline the key themes and the order in which they come. Keep the introduction brief and focused. The conclusion should aim to draw together the information that you have presented in the main body and provide the reader with a sense of 'completion'. You are not looking to introduce new concepts here, although you could flag areas that should be considered for research in the future.

Throughout the essay, as a rule, short sentences are better than long ones. Apostrophes are useful as a teacher to model standard English. They are useful in the classroom and they are used to show possession of things in your writing. However, they do not improve work when sprinkled across your essay like glitter on primary school classroom carpet at Christmas. Let us illuminate this further: plurals do not need an apostrophe. Pupil's is something belonging to one child, while pupils' is something belonging to

all the kids. And then, there is children's. As it is already plural, the apostrophe comes before the s. There are whole books dedicated to grammar rules and if you are unsure you need to check, not only for your essays but because you could end up teaching your pupils (just a plural) misconceptions. When editing your work try to develop an internal alarm which sounds when you encounter an 's' at the end of a word; then you can ask yourself if it should or shouldn't be there. Much better to be safe than sorry as you start out, but eventually this will become second nature. Finally, activate the spell check and grammar check on your laptop/computer and if there is a blue/red wavy line under a word, do some further investigations. The main bulk of the marks you will receive will come from meeting the learning outcomes; however, a well-written, easy-to-read piece of work is a rare treat for a lecturer. And while not all your marks will be given for good writing, it certainly doesn't hurt.

Generally when writing an essay it is always better to paraphrase an author or to synthesise their ideas/research into your line of debate. This is because by synthesising the key authors together to craft a line of debate, it is you who is doing the 'heavy lifting'. The chances are that if you are simply presenting quotes, by just plonking them down on the page, you are not really too sure of the point that you are making. It may even be that you have not conducted your reading and have simply googled points to 'back up what you think' and this is your way of demonstrating it. Furthermore, writing in this way means that precious word count is used up on direct quoting when in fact it would be better served really unpicking the why behind the ideas that you are presenting. Again, most universities offer group classes or one-to-one sessions on how to do this successfully. However, ensure that you always acknowledge the words that you used, by including quotation marks around the actual words. Most universities run all academic assignments through a piece of software that can attribute words to their authors. Of course, if you have referenced where these words have come from, this is of course fine (although see above, paraphrasing might be better for a number of reasons). If you have not referenced where the words have come from, at best this is considered to be academic ineptitude and at worst this could be considered plagiarism.

The final job that you need to do before handing in your assignment and having a little relax is to review and edit it. Agreed, the last thing you want to do once you have finished writing is to go back to the start and edit it. However, you do need to because the calm, zen, space which you inhabit once the writing part is done is very different from the anxious, panicked and stressed-out state you were in prior to starting writing. You need to review your work, checking over the boring bits such as grammar and

referencing. But more importantly you also need to consider if you have answered the question, as per the marking scheme and the question. Ideally, you'd be checking this as you were writing but a double check at the end is helpful. Sometimes you can be too attached to your work (after all you have written it so you must think it is right) and so swapping with a friend or asking a family member to help you is important. Make sure you ask the right friend because they are not going to relish telling you where to improve or what to take out, and despite what you think, you are not going to want to hear it. However, a good friend will do this for you, and you may just need to learn not to speak up straight away when they give you critical feedback and at all costs resist the urge 'to argue' with them, or you might find you lose a critical friend in the future. Instead have a bank of phrases to use to buy you a bit of time, such as 'Thanks, I hadn't thought of it like that before', or 'I'll have to go away and consider what you've said in a bit more detail'.

There are many ways you can write an essay, but writing a good essay takes a little time. And writing a good essay and not becoming an anxious bag of nerves, who skips lectures and placement while getting it done, can take a bit of trial and error. So in the meantime while you are finding your own route, you could give the above approach some consideration and adapt as you go. But if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get the same thing. And no one likes a frazzled essay loony. Be kind to yourself, get organised and make a plan.