

How can I brainstorm ideas and develop an outline?

STEP

14

'The outline is 95 per cent of the book. Then I sit down and write, and that's the easy part.'

Jeffery Deaver

A Reflection

The following are statements frequently made by students about planning.

- Which do you agree with?

1. There is no point in planning an essay.
2. Planning takes too much time.
3. I do not know how to plan.

Agree / Disagree

Agree / Disagree

Agree / Disagree

B Contextualization

Read these two paragraphs from the essay 'Academic essay titles: critically important or significantly overrated?'

- Which paragraph was planned and which was unplanned?

Paragraph 1

Answering the question is the most important thing an essay can do. One particularly common problem which students face is that they answer the question they *wanted* to get, rather than the one they actually got. This is a serious error. The result of this is irrelevant detail and unfocused argument. It is commonly known that essays which do not directly address the question posed receive poor marks.

Paragraph 2

You have to answer the question when you write an essay. If you do not, then lots of the essay will not be relevant and the argument will be unfocused. Students often try to answer the question which they wanted to have rather than the question which they actually have in front of them. This is a really big mistake and you're almost certain to get lower marks.

- How did you make your decision? Explain, focusing on specific aspects of the text.

c Analysis

Why should I plan my essays?

There is no point in planning an essay.

This statement is simply wrong. As can be clearly seen from the texts in part B, Paragraph 1 (which has been planned) is far better than Paragraph 2 (which has not). Just by looking at Paragraph 2 you can see that it is:

1. Disorganized

If you do not, then lots of the essay will not be relevant and the argument will be unfocused.

The arguments appear in a **STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS**, rather than carefully developed.

2. Poorly written

This is a really big mistake and you're almost certain to get lower marks.

The style is extremely informal. The text sounds more like a conversation than a piece of academic writing.

In short, writing an essay without having an outline is like going somewhere new without a map.

Planning takes too much time.

There are two reasons why this statement is untrue. The first is that when you develop good planning techniques, the planning process is actually relatively quick. It does *not* take hours and hours to plan your essay; the majority of essays can be planned in less than an hour. Secondly, whatever time you spend on planning is time well spent. The quality of your first draft will be far better, meaning that the editing and proofreading stages will be much easier. Planning is important in all academic writing situations – even exams. In exams, five minutes spent planning an essay is definitely better than five extra minutes of writing.

How can I plan my essays?

I do not know how to plan.

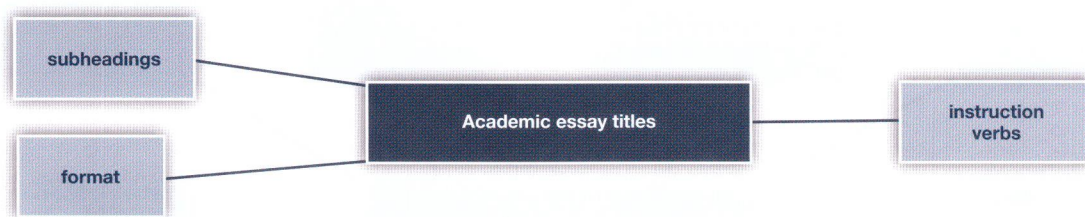
If you feel you have no idea how to begin the planning process, do not worry: you are not alone. There are few things more terrifying than a blank piece of paper staring at you. However, by following the three-stage process outlined here, planning can become a simple and effective process.

Stage 1: Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a process where you simply write down all the information you know about a particular topic. Brainstorming can help you identify what you know (and, importantly, do *not* know) about a subject. There are three key principles to brainstorming:

- **Quantity:** specific detail and accuracy are not important at the brainstorming stage. You are simply trying to empty your head of everything you know on the subject.
- **Variation:** a range of different ideas is to be encouraged – quotations, data, arguments, ideas, background information. They all help to shape and develop your argument.
- **Combination:** once you have listed all your ideas, it becomes much easier to see the main themes, and therefore to build your argument.

Some people prefer to brainstorm on a computer, some by hand. You should do whatever you feel most comfortable with. The most popular method of brainstorming is the **MIND MAP** (or **CLUSTER DIAGRAM**), like the example below. Using Post-it® notes and putting them on a wall (where you can rearrange and order them) is also useful.



Stage 2: Creating an outline

Once you have brainstormed your ideas, you may come to one of two conclusions: either you are ready to develop your outline and start writing your essay, or you do not know enough about the subject. If it is the latter, then you need to read more to develop your knowledge. There is no point trying to start writing an essay if the content is not going to be good enough.

When you look at your brainstormed ideas, do not be afraid to delete many of them. Try to find links between topics (and combine ideas). An outline should contain brief information about what the focus of each of the sections is going to be. For shorter pieces of writing (e.g., less than 15 paragraphs), this may be on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis. To decide how many paragraphs an essay should have, use the following equation: $80\% \text{ of essay length} / 150$. The first figure relates to the essay length minus 10% for the introduction and 10% for the conclusion; the second figure relates to the average length of each paragraph. So, in a 1,500-word essay, this would mean around eight body paragraphs.

Two top tips for writing outlines

The outline should be written in simple language – bullet points can be particularly useful. Do not just keep your essay outline on your computer: print it out and put it on your wall.

Stage 3: Expanding your outline

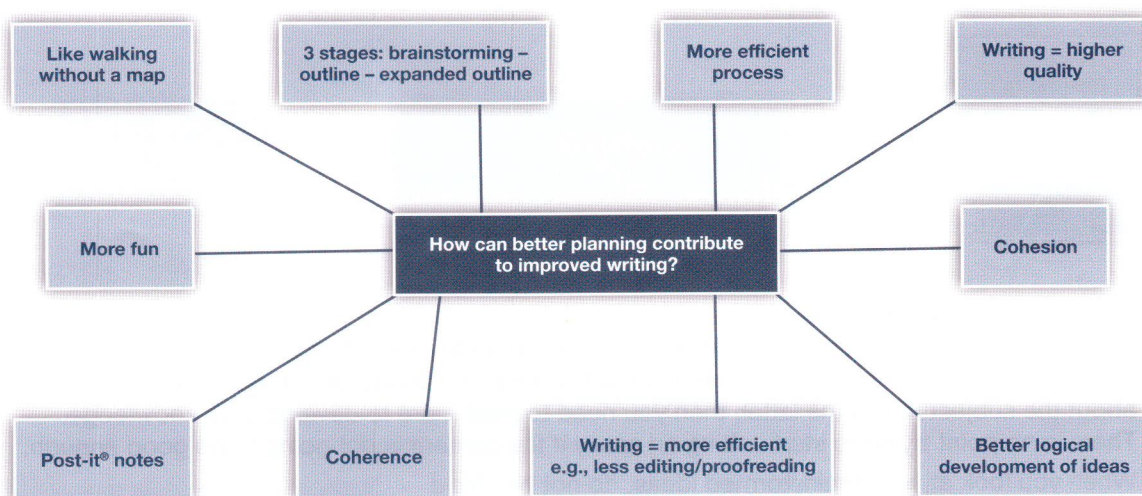
A third stage, which develops the outline further, is to either (a) write brief notes about what will be included or (b) write the accompanying topic sentence for each paragraph. For example:

Basic outline	Expanded outline
Introduction	<i>Topic sentence:</i> This essay will argue that understanding the title of your essay is absolutely critical to producing a good piece of writing.
Answering the question	<i>Topic sentence:</i> Answering the question is the most important thing an essay can do.
What different titles mean	<i>Notes:</i> Ref. to diff. types of essay – language analysis (esp. verbs) – examples from various subjects.
Consideration of counter-arguments	<i>Topic sentence:</i> However, there are others who argue that the title is simply a guide, and that your style of writing is more important.
Conclusion	<i>Notes:</i> Summary of key points – how can this knowledge be applied?

Many people omit this stage, but it can be useful. It can be particularly helpful if you are having problems in areas such as coherence, logical development or structure.

D Activation

Create an expanded outline for an essay from the brainstormed notes here. The outline should be five paragraphs long (introduction – three body paragraphs – conclusion).



Basic outline	Expanded outline
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

E Personalization

- If you do not plan your essays at the moment, consider the reasons for this. Think of possible solutions, based on the information in this step, and try to implement them.
- Practise this three-stage process (brainstorming – outline – expanded outline) on a topic you know extremely well. This will help you focus on developing the relevant skills.
- Compare an essay which you wrote, and you planned well for, with a piece of writing that you did not plan. Identify the differences in quality between the two.

F Extension

- Step 10 focuses on **note-taking**, a skill which is closely related to brainstorming and outlining.
- Step 12 develops your **time-management skills** – an important skill as many students feel they do not have enough time to brainstorm and outline their essays.
- Step 16 looks at **different types of academic essays**. It is important that your outline has a structure appropriate for the kind of essay you are writing.
- Appendix 3, Step 14 provides other ideas and activities for brainstorming and outlining.
- Appendix 4, Step 14 gives a useful online resource which can help in this area.