The Stages of Essay Writing

Effective Learning Service
STAGE 1: THE ESSAY TITLE

Do not spend too long choosing an essay question. Select the one about which you have the most understanding and interest, then analyse the essay question for useful hints (cf. below) before doing further research.

STAGE 2: SELECTING TEXTS AND SOURCE MATERIAL

Material you already have: Lectures can give you a good introduction and can help you to identify further material.

Books:
Select a few texts on the topic, which are “user friendly”. Do not take out too many books, you will not use them all and they can overwhelm you. Use the booklists that accompany essays, and follow the references in recommended books.

USER FRIENDLY REFERENCE MATERIAL HAS

- A GOOD INDEX / APPENDIX
- CLEAR CHAPTER HEADINGS
- CHAPTER SUMMARY
- A GOOD TYPE FACE

If you open the text and find it difficult to read or to locate information, you will find you are put off using it. Use a LITERARY REVIEW SHEET to record the information, ideas and quotes you have found in the books. In this way you will not spend too much time trying to remember where “that good quote was” when you come to write the essay. You will also hopefully avoid noting down too many similar quotes on the same topic.

OTHER SOURCES

Internet Resources:
You can get an instant print out from these sources and can highlight the information you need. This will save time on taking notes and give you up-to-date material. Try to avoid sources with anonymous authors as they are more likely to contain errors.

Interviews:
Fieldwork can produce excellent original source material, but make sure that you discuss your plans with your lecturer before you start work on it.

Music Examples:
Be selective, only use pieces and extracts that support your arguments!

STAGE 3: PLANNING THE ESSAY

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Every student knows essay planning is important, but many make the mistake of thinking you start with the introduction. This creates enormous problems, as you can’t start before you know what you are going to write. Students can sit looking at an empty page, waiting for inspiration for hours, not realising that they are setting themselves a very difficult task. An essay plan should outline the main points or issues you are going to cover, not start at the beginning. You can note down the plan in any way that suits you. Some common methods are:

- A SPIDER PLAN
- A LINEAR PLAN
- A NUMBERED PLAN
- A FLOW CHART
- A POINTS FOR / AGAINST PLAN
- A SERIES OF TOPIC SENTENCES

Choose the strategy that suits you best. There is no right way. If you would like more information or help with this, ask for the handout on essay planning.

REMEMBER: DO NOT START BY WRITING THE INTRODUCTION
THE INTRODUCTION MAY INCLUDE:

- A question that will be answered later
- A statement of the case to be argued
- An outline of the general area of focus and the specific aspects of the topic
- A quotation which covers the key ideas to be discussed
- An outline of the points to be discussed later in the essay
THE STAGES OF ESSAY WRITING – PREPARATION SHEET

1. Looking at the question

2. Gathering the material

3. Generating ideas

4. Planning

5. First draft

6. Reviewing

7. Final draft

Now try to identify the reason for each stage and how long you would expect each to take you to complete.

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