

Unit 39

Planning and Writing Essays 1

Use this unit to help you to:

- * Identify particular problems you may have with essay writing.
- * Distinguish between different types of essay.
- * Develop a strategy to cope with your difficulties.

What's Your Problem?

Essay writing poses problems for many students, so if you regard it as a difficult task, you are certainly not alone!

Exercise 1

Have you ever stopped to think carefully what it is you find hard? Try this now, because once you have analysed **what** goes wrong, you will be in a better position to see how to improve the situation. Think for a few minutes, then jot down the things that bother you about essay writing.

Response

Your difficulties may be a little different, but here are some of the most common answers to this question. Do you recognise a number of them?

- * Difficulty deciding on a subject or recognising what the question wants.
- * Difficulty writing enough.
- * Difficulty with planning and organising material.
- * Wandering off the subject.
- * Difficulty with making it interesting.
- * Difficulty in getting started.
- * Problems with spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.

Apart from the last mentioned problems which are best helped by frequent practice exercises, all the other difficulties may be tackled by a systematic and organised approach to the business of essay writing. It is this we will look at in these units on planning and writing essays.

What Do 'They' Want?

It is important to begin by:

- * Recognising that there are many different kinds of essay.
- * Working out what a particular essay is asking you to do.

There are 2 main kinds of essay:

- * Essays which invite imaginative or personal writing, and which may cover almost any kind of subject.
- * Essays which are set to test your knowledge and understanding of a text, topic or issue. These essays depend largely upon information, facts, awareness of alternative views, and an ability to interpret a question adequately or create a convincing argument.

For the moment let's think about the second kind of essay.

Exercise 2

Try to recall essays which you have been set. What were you asked to do? Very often, essay questions contain a key verb which tells you what is required. See if you can add at least 5 or 6 more examples to the list started overleaf, and say what you think each means:

Verb Meaning

Contrast Bring out the difference between

Examine Look closely into

Describe Give a detailed account of

Response

Other familiar key verbs are:

Compare Look for similarities and differences between;
perhaps conclude which item is preferable.

Analyse Break up into parts, investigate.

Discuss Investigate or examine by argument, weighing up points for and against.

Explain Make plain; interpret, give reasons for.

Summarise Give a concise account of the chief points, omitting details and examples.

Outline Give the main features or general principles of a subject, emphasising structure and arrangement.

State Present in a brief, clear form.

Trace Follow the development from some point of origin.

Evaluate Weigh up and judge the merits, giving evidence.

Explore Examine thoroughly from a variety of viewpoints.

Having identified the task before you in this way, you now need a strategy for dealing with it.

Developing a Strategy

Essay writing is a skill, and like other skills it may be acquired and improved by practice and experience. The most effective kinds of practice involve a structured approach to the skill which you wish to build up, and essay writing is no exception to this general rule.

Look at the diagram below which suggests the important stages in the execution of an essay-writing task, and the additional preparatory work you may sometimes have to do.

The key verbs are underlined to emphasise what you need to do at each point.

1

2

3

4

5

If Yes

6

Action Plan

You should now use this process to structure the next essay you are required to write on a factual subject. If it seems laborious at first, don't forget that you are learning the process as well as producing an essay. As you grow familiar with it, it will become part of your work routine. Note down here:

Title:

What is required?

Notes to consult:

Other material to read:

Issues to be dealt with:

People who can help:

What else?

Other units related to this one are:

11 Brainstorming.

40 Planning and Writing Essays 2 - gives more advice on selecting and developing material.

41 Planning and Writing Essays 3 - gives advice on organising ideas.

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