

## PLANNING YOUR ESSAY

### Before You Start

Choose your essay title thoughtfully. Do not assume that because you have not immediately understood a title that it is completely beyond you. Conversely, don't assume that the one that looks the easiest is the easiest. You should give all the titles some consideration before choosing one.

Decide what the question means and what sort of answer it is looking for. You may be asked to analyse an aspect of one text, to compare the ways different texts treat a topic, or to argue for and against a particular statement. Pick out the key words from the title – both substantive words like “tragic”, which will need explanation and illustration, and provocative words like “always”, which may indicate a need for debate. These will help you remain focused in your reply.

If you are given a choice, spend some time deciding which texts you want to discuss. Where you are asked to compare different treatments of an issue in different texts, you should be thinking about which texts provide contrasts and common ground. In a “for and against” essay, there will often be one text which supports one side of a question and one which supports another. This would help you produce a punchy contrastive argument. However, it may be that all your texts, or some of them, contain evidence to support both sides of an argument. In this sort of case, you will want to extract the elements on each side before you begin to write. When choosing texts for any question, try to summarise for yourself what you would do with different combinations of texts, in order to see which is most interesting to you.

Make a rough list of what you think the important issues are and collect examples from your texts. At this stage, you don't have to put down your ideas in any particular order, just get them down so you can see what you have got and can decide what is most important.

At this point, if you have done background reading, you may want to feed in contextual information as well, always making sure that you quote your source properly and include the book on a bibliography at the end. Do try to formulate your own ideas first, though, otherwise you may find yourself moving away from your own essay topic and structure, and just writing out what critics have said. Never assume that what someone has said in print, however persuasive it may be, is of greater interest than your own informed reaction. By all means use critical studies to help identify the important or controversial issues in the texts you are studying, and for general notes on the unit, but remember that those are not answering the same essay question as you are.

Now write a plan, sorting out the order of your argument. Make sure that this plan corresponds to the title of the essay. Refer back to it from time to time as you write to make sure that you are sticking to the point. Don't be surprised if you find it difficult to decide which order to present your points in, since there are delicate balances to be struck: if you use your best ideas first, the end might seem like an anti-climax, but if you systematically leave your strongest argument to the end, your reader may feel you have initially missed the point! It is however generally a good idea to work from

smaller issues to larger ones, and to end with a strong statement of an argument that you can put forward with conviction. Make sure that your plan remains firm in your own mind, and articulate it by means of links between paragraphs (“consequently”, “nevertheless”, “on the other hand”); but try to avoid cumbersome and inelegant signposts which state the obvious (“before we discuss this statement we must define our terms” or “now I am going to discuss the other side of the argument”). Each comment you make about the text should be supported by an example, or possibly two (you will want to note down more for your own benefit, but there is not room in a short essay to give every single relevant example). You will not be set questions which invite you to recount or summarise the story, and an essay should not be a list, nor can it contain everything you happen to know about that text or its author.

Do not write either your introduction or your conclusion until you have made your plan, and remain flexible about both until your essay is complete.

**Introduction:** your introduction will not only explain what you understand by the question (preferably avoiding the dictionary definition as a support), but should also outline, briefly, the stages of your argument.

The main body of the essay should be clearly divided into conceptual paragraphs. You should also remember that you are writing for a reader, and that your style and use of punctuation should guide the reader through your essay. You should use quotations and illustrations from the main events of the text to support any general point you make about it. Your marker will be looking at both your analytical skills and whether you have a thorough knowledge of the text. The titles of works should be indicated by italics when word-processing or by underlining when writing by hand. This is particularly helpful when distinguishing the title of the text from the name of a protagonist (e.g. *Pierre et Jean/Pierre*). Only longer quotations of more than two lines should be indented. If you insert shorter quotations into the body of an English sentence, do ensure that the whole structure remains grammatically coherent. Quotations must always be acknowledged, in such a way as to enable the reader to find them and check for accuracy and context. You should use a suitable register of English in your writing: it is not appropriate to say that Pierre “fancies” Mme Rosémilly or that *La Machine infernale* is “incredibly tragic”.

**Bibliography:** if you have used secondary material always list texts to which you have made reference at the end of the essay. This is an indication to the marker that they are welcome to verify that this work is all your own and that no plagiarism is involved. You should always do this with coursework.

**Conclusion:** your conclusion should not just be a general repetition of what you have already said. Nor should it begin “thus we see” or similar – this will at best sound trite and at worst will encourage the marker to pick holes in your logic! Instead, it should be a last look at the essay title, discussing how your examination of the text or texts has shed light on the issues it raised. You may want to point to the more general implications of a topic, or you may want to put forward an alternative proposition to that made in the title. The conclusion no longer requires illustrations and should not introduce new material. There is no need to talk of having proved anything - there is no absolute or right answer in literature.

Try to finish your work in time to give it a fresh read-through before you hand it in but make sure that you comply with all deadlines.

Remember: the essay is your work and should be based on your reading of, engagement with, and understanding of the text, against a background of well-informed exploration of secondary sources. Undue reliance on the latter will not produce a good essay, nor develop your mind in the way this exercise is intended to do.