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## Essay Planning & Writing

The following are guidelines for planning and writing a formal essay for university. Times indicated will vary according to students' levels of experience and the length of the assigned essay. Consider using an online assignment planning calculator to establish a timetable for an assigned essay.

### A. Initial Planning

1. Understand the assignment requirements (30 minutes)
  - a. What is the assignment topic or question?
  - b. What is the assignment format?
  - c. What is the required length?
  - d. Are you required to consult a minimum number of scholarly sources?
  - e. Which referencing style will you use?
  - f. Has the instructor provided a marking guide/rubric?
2. Generate ideas (2-3 hours)
  - a. Choose a topic that interests you
  - b. Narrow your focus so that your topic is specific and manageable, and so that you can develop it properly within the length limitation
  - c. Ask yourself "what do I know about this already?" and "why is this important?"
  - d. Make a concept map of the topic (see the ASC handout "Concept Mapping")
  - e. Make a list of the major points
3. Make an initial plan (3-4 hours)
  - a. List major themes and points
  - b. Develop a draft thesis statement (see the ASC handout "Thesis Statements")

### B. Research (5-7 days, longer for lengthier papers)

4. Search for information
  - a. Consult a librarian if you need help getting started
  - b. Identify useful key words and phrases to search for information
  - c. Using the library catalogue and databases, find, review, and evaluate:
    - i. Books
    - ii. Journal articles
  - d. Find, review, and evaluate websites
  - e. Make notes and summaries and indicate evidence that supports/refutes your thesis
  - f. Be sure to record referencing information (remember that failure to document may be regarded as plagiarism)
  - g. Examine the collected information, compare it to your initial plan, and modify if necessary
  - h. Continue researching to find any missing information (without allowing your research to balloon out of control)
  - i. Arrange your notes to reflect a possible argument

### **C. Organization** (4-5 hours)

5. Plan your essay by making an outline (see the ASC handout “Visual Essay Planner”)
  - a. Revisit your plan and thesis statement
    - i. It is not unusual to adjust your thesis statement at this stage
  - b. Organize and structure the points you want to make

### **D. Writing** (4-7 days)

6. Start writing your first draft
  - a. Work from your outline
  - b. You don’t have to start with the introduction if you are stuck; just start writing
  - c. Keep in mind the appropriate language and tone of your writing; who is your audience?
  - d. Don’t forget to reference
  - e. Keep in mind that each paragraph should:
    - i. Start with a topic sentence
    - ii. Contain one main idea
    - iii. End with a summary/transition sentence
  - f. The introduction should introduce the topic and contain a thesis statement
  - g. The conclusion should adequately summarize the essay and answer the question “so what” (i.e. reflect on the implications of your argument)
  - h. If you identify gaps in information return to your sources or the library for additional research

### **E. Revision & Editing** (refer to the ASC handout “Revision & Editing Checklist”)

7. Revise and rewrite (4-7 days)
  - a. Try to allow some time to lapse between drafts to distance yourself from your work and reread it with fresh eyes
  - b. Clear and concise writing requires multiple drafts
  - c. If a sentence or paragraph doesn’t relate to your thesis, it probably doesn’t belong in your paper
  - d. Consider asking a classmate to trade papers for peer review
  - e. Consult a writing tutor to assist you
8. Edit (1-2 days)
  - a. Refer to a style/referencing guide to help polish your work
  - b. Put the paper into its final format (margins, fonts, line spacing, title page, etc.)

### **F. After the Assignment**

9. Using feedback
  - a. Read the assignment feedback carefully after your marked assignment is returned to improve your writing in the future
  - b. If anything is unclear, see your instructor as soon as possible
10. Keep on writing!

### **References**

<http://owll.massey.ac.nz/> (OWLL: The Online Writing and Learning Link at Massey University)