# Guide to Essay Writing

Study Development Factsheet

There are several stages involved in creating an effective essay at university. This factsheet provides a step-by-step guide to writing better essays. For each stage, we have explained why it is important, and then outlined the key things that you need to do.

## Stage 1: Analyse the question

This stage ensures you answer the question(s) fully.

* Identify important subject words in the title.
* Identify instruction words and decide what you need to do.

## Stage 2: Check the assessment guidelines

This stage is important to ensure you fulfil the assessment criteria and meet the learning objectives.

* Read the assessment guidelines thoroughly.
* Check you understand the learning objectives.

## Stage 3: Make a rough plan

This stage helps you to identify relevant research topics and limit unnecessary reading.

* Brainstorm: write down your ideas and identify what you need to research.
* Mind-map your initial ideas: try to identify links, common themes and a possible order.
* Use reading lists to look for clues and select the most relevant sources.

## Stage 4: Read/research and make notes

This improves your understanding and ensures you provide reliable, academic evidence for your ideas.

* Start with an overview of each book or article: look at the table of contents, the abstract, the subheadings.
* Think of your key questions: have them in front of you as you read, to keep you focussed.
* Write down the answers as you find them, keeping a clear record of sources and page numbers.
* Write a short summary of what each source says before moving on to the next one.

## Stage 5: Plan the structure of your essay

A good plan keeps you on track and highlights how much weight (how many words) to give each topic.

* Draw a mind-map or spider diagram.
* Use colour and images to connect ideas.
* Identify an appropriate / logical order.
* Draw up a list of points and subpoints.
* Divide up your word count: allow 10% each for the introduction and the conclusion, and decide how much to spend on each of your points and subpoints.

## Stage 6: Draft the body of your text

This stage enables you to present and develop your argument.

* Write a paragraph for each idea:
* Introduce the idea.
* Explain the idea.
* Give supporting evidence.
* Use [signposting words and phrases](https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/) to move from one paragraph to the next.

## Stage 7: Edit and check and against your plan

This stage ensures your points answer the question and are presented in a logical order.

* Think Big – Have you followed your plan?
* Think Medium – Does each paragraph stick to one point?
* Think Small – Does each sentence make sense?

## Stage 8: Write the introduction and conclusion

The introduction needs to make a good first impression and present your argument. The conclusion clearly states the position you have arrived at.

* The introduction should state the position you are taking (your ‘thesis statement’) and give an outline of your structure.
* The conclusion should sum up key points and implications, and clarifiy the ‘message’ that you want the reader to remember.

## Stage 9: Proofread

Good spelling, grammar and punctuation make your ideas clearer, and stop you losing marks.

* Read your work aloud, paying particular attention to commas (short pauses) and full stops (longer pauses). Avoid contractions: write ‘do not’ for ‘don’t’.
* [Accessibility tools such as Microsoft Editor and Read&Write](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/library/digital-training-and-support/assistive-technology/) are available through your YSJ account. Such software goes beyond spellchecking to include read aloud and immersive reader modes that intuitively help you to revise and improve your work.

## Stage 10: Referencing

It is important that you acknowledge the sources of the ideas that you have used, to avoid plagiarism.

* Go to [the Library’s referencing page](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/library/referencing/) for guides specific to your course’s referencing style.
* List all your sources in alphabetical order by surname of author in the reference list.

**Support**: Study Development offers workshops, short courses, 1 to 1 and small group tutorials.

* Join a tutorial or workshop on the [Study Development tutorial and workshop webpage](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/library/library-study-and-digital-skills/study-development-tutorials/) or search ‘YSJ study development tutorials.’
* Access our Study Success resources on the [Study Success webpage](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/library/library-study-and-digital-skills/study-success/) or search ‘YSJ study success.’