

CITY OF GLASGOW
COLLEGE

Essay writing

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Introduction

This guide introduces the basic principles of **essay writing** and aims to assist your study skills development. This guide describes methods for:

- **analysing** essay topics and questions
- **considering** what information to put in essays
- **planning** your essays

Different courses at the College require different styles of essay, so this guide focuses on skills that are useful in **any type of essay**. However, you should always consult your lecturer or tutor to find out what they expect from the essays they set for a course.

The Library offers several other guides for students in this series, as well as resources to support your studies. This includes books, DVDs and useful online information services. Please ask Library staff for any more information on using any of these resources.

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Essay topic or question

The topic of the essay may be **set**, which gives you little or no choice in the subject matter. The benefit of this essay question is that from the outset you know the scope of any research you need to do.

Alternatively, you may be given a number of essay topics or questions from which to choose. How you choose your essay is up to you. You can opt for the essay you find the most interesting - or you can be virtuous, choosing the essay from which you will learn most through research.



The next step of the essay writing process is to analyse the essay question. One method of analysing the essay is to write the topic or question in the centre of a page. Then **identify and analyse the keywords** - as you would in a mind map (see below and the Library's *Mind Maps* guide).

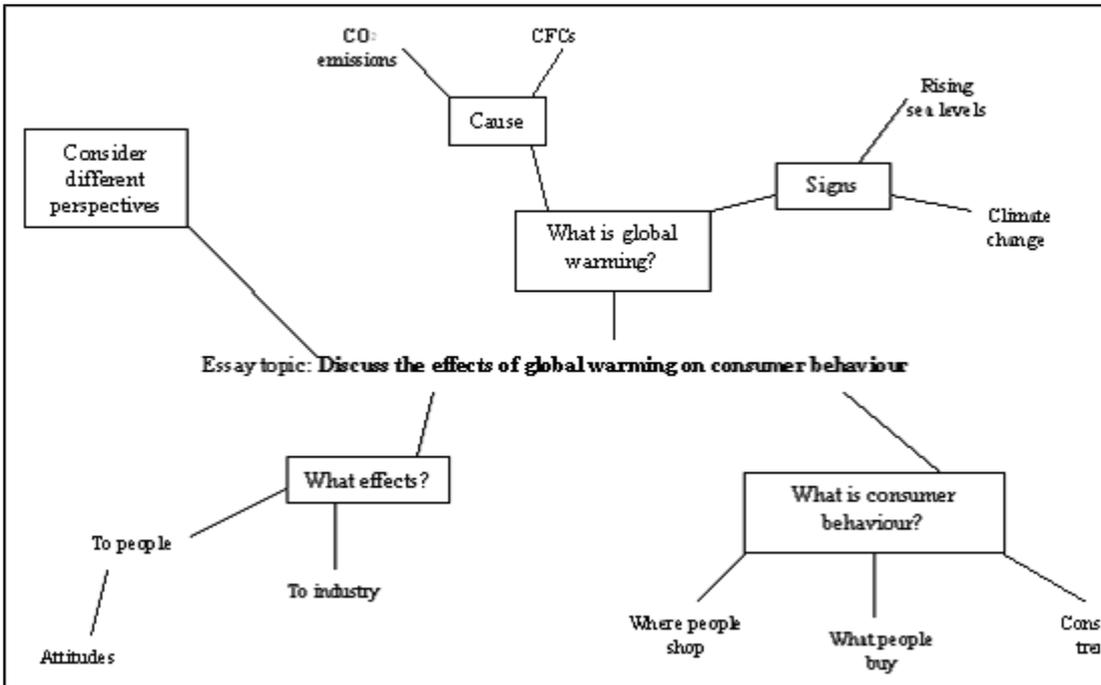


Figure 1 - Mind map example

Researching information

Mind mapping allows you to look at all the areas of the topic in depth. The example above shows how **keywords of the topic** are singled out and analysed.

Having analysed the essay topic, decide next what information is relevant to your essay. Begin to think about where and how you will locate that information. You may already know



which points you wish to include in your essay but be sure you have the information to back up your points.

Using the mind map as an example: if you are writing an essay about global warming, you may know that a side effect is rising sea levels. However, you need to **prove** this, say with official scientific statistics or sources.

Remember to **record** where you gathered your information, as this will form part of your reference or bibliography section at the end of the essay.

Essay-writing tips

1. *The introduction*

Introduce your essay by explaining **how** you are going to address the essay question. You should refer to the topic throughout the introduction as a way of setting the scene for the reader.

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2. *The main body*

A good way to approach planning an essay is to consider it as having three parts - a **beginning, middle** and **end**.

When planning, you should list the content you will include at each stage and what information this will require. By listing the information which will fit into each part of the essay, you can plan a flowing structure for your essay, and establish an order for ideas and issues. This also helps identify any gaps in your arguments or evidence.





3. *The conclusion*

The conclusion to an essay should **re-cap** your argument(s), whilst referring back to the essay topic or question. The conclusion should be unambiguous, never introduces new material, and **ties up** the entire essay.

4. *The bibliography*

Always provide a bibliography for your essay - this is a detailed list of the resources you have used to help write it. You must acknowledge the work you have consulted or quoted, or you are plagiarising (i.e. passing off someone else's work as your own). See the separate guides *How to Cite References and Create a Bibliography* and *How to Avoid Plagiarism*, both available from the Library.

Now write the essay...

With a **plan** in place and the appropriate **research** carried out, you are ready to write your essay.

4

Sometimes despite your best efforts, it can be difficult to motivate yourself to start writing. Here are a few ideas to get you going:

Get scribbling: Write down quickly what comes to mind, in any order. Once you've written down everything you can think of, rearrange what you have written and rewrite it. A bit like brainstorming...and you can try this on the computer too.

Try writing in pencil: This is a visual reminder that you are working on a draft – not the final copy. Don't worry about mistakes - just write!

Start anywhere: Write things down in an order that suits you – you can rearrange what you write later. You may find it is easier to write the introduction last.





Say it out loud: If you are finding it difficult to put the words on paper, try taping yourself saying aloud your thoughts. Write down your recording and redraft, if needed. You could also try discussing your topic with others to generate some ideas.

Question banks: Write a list of questions on the essay e.g. what, where, how, why...? This will focus your reading, structure and organise your writing, and develop ideas.

Adapted from Stella Cottrell's *The Study Skills Handbook* (3rd edition 2008, published by Palgrave Macmillan, and available from the City Campus Library at 378.17 COT)

Understanding essay questions

Below are commonly used phrases from essay questions and suggested meanings. (From Cottrell, 2008, p. 179)

Account for	Explain, give reasons
Analyse	Detail key points and features
Comment on	Not personal opinion – use class notes and texts for guidance
Compare	Examine the similarities of two or more themes
Contrast	Examine the differences of two or more themes
Critically evaluate	Weigh up evidence for and against an argument
Define	Give the exact meaning, clarify any problems
Describe	Give main characteristics or details
Discuss	Identify key aspects/arguments and criticisms of topic
Distinguish	Clarify differences between two topics
Evaluate	What is the value, importance or impact? With evidence, both for and against



Examine	Examine topic in detail – can be critical
Explain	Clarify why something is or happens in a certain way
Illustrate	Clarify topic with evidence and examples
Interpret	Explain meaning or relevance of topic or material
Justify	Provide evidence for a stance – deal with any alternative viewpoints
Narrate	Explain how an event happened
Outline	Main points – give a structure
Relate	Show the links and similarities between two themes
State	Make the main points about a theme
Summarise	Main points only – no details or examples
To what extent	How far is something true or untrue?
Trace	Detail the stages in an event or process

