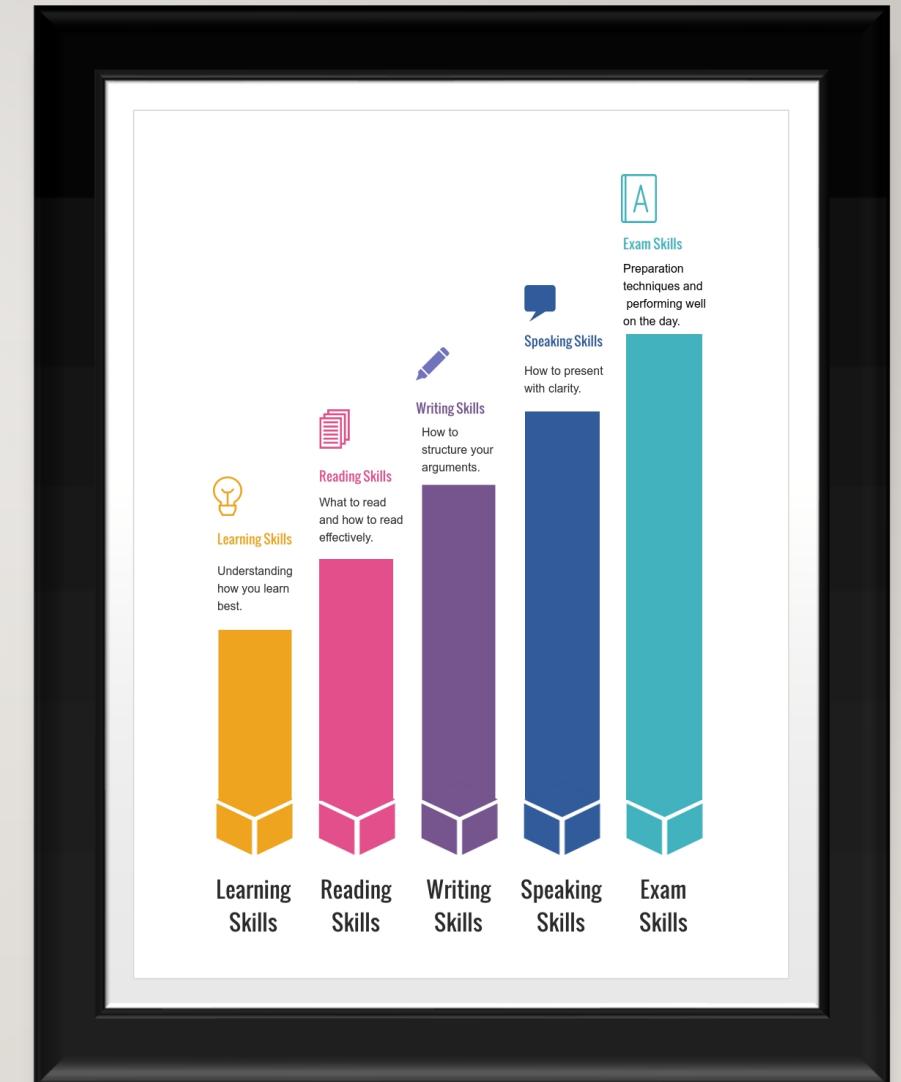




SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

WRITING SKILLS I: PLANNING YOUR ESSAY



WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

1. Understanding why we write academic essays
2. Approaching essay questions
3. Creating and developing an essay plan



WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

- The purpose of an essay and the University's marking criteria
- Planning the essay writing process
- Interpreting and approaching essay questions
- Creating an essay plan and developing an argument

WHAT ARE ESSAYS AND WHY DO WE WRITE THEM?

- Essays help you to develop:
 - Your academic writing skills
 - Your capacity to structure an argument and engage critically
- Use your essays to show:
 - That you have **engaged** with the course material (readings, LEARN, handbook, lectures, tutorial discussions, further readings)
 - That you have acquired and understood a body of existing knowledge
 - That you can organise this knowledge to present an argument

WHAT DOES "ENGAGED" MEAN?



Acquired



Building Block 1: Acquired the information and contents of the course

- Read widely from the course materials
- Reference course materials and the different concepts and theories that you have read



Critically
Analysed

Building Block 2: Understood the course material

- Make sure you have understood the concepts and terms covered in the course
- Paraphrase and explain the concepts, terms, readings and examples you have chosen

Building Block 3: Critically analysed the course material

- Compare concepts and illustrate different arguments with counter-examples and ideas
- Linking and organising the theories and concepts in a way that presents an interesting argument

MARKING CRITERIA

A3 (70-79%)

- A sharply-focused answer of high intellectual quality, which adopts a comprehensive approach to the question and maintains a sophisticated level of analysis throughout. It should show a willingness to engage critically with the literature and move beyond it, using the sources creatively to arrive at its own independent conclusions.

B (60-69%)

- A very good answer that shows qualities beyond the merely routine or acceptable. The question and the sources should be addressed directly and fully. The work of other authors should be presented critically. Effective use should be made of the whole range of the literature. There should be no significant errors of fact or interpretation. The answer should proceed coherently to a convincing conclusion. The quality of the writing and presentation (especially referencing) should be without major blemish.

C (50-59%)

- A satisfactory answer with elements of the routine and predictable. It should be generally accurate and firmly based in the reading. It may draw upon a restricted range of sources but should not just re-state one particular source. Other authors should be presented accurately, if rather descriptively. The materials included should be relevant, and there should be evidence of basic understanding of the topic in question.

[Full details of the SPS Marking Descriptors available here](#)

MARKING DESCRIPTORS EXPLAINED...

70+	Adds critical interpretation to argumentation, building on the evidence presented
Higher 60s	Wide depth of acquired materials (adds further readings), very good understanding of the material (not just paraphrasing) and well-presented argument (highlights counter-arguments too, or adds depth of evidence to support argument)
Lower 60s	You have shown that you have acquired and understood the course material and organised that material in a way that highlights an argument
50s	You have acquired and understood the course material you present but remain a bit too descriptive
40s and lower 50s	You have shown only that you have acquired some of the course materials/information. You do not critically engage with the material.

PLANNING THE ESSAY: TIME MANAGEMENT

- Plan your time over the semester
 - Start thinking about the essay question well in advance of the deadline
 - Schedule time for working on developing an essay plan, finding evidence and writing
 - Allow for time to edit and proofread before submitting
- Feedback from your tutor, course convenor and peers
 - Use office hours: identify the course convenor and tutor's office hours
 - Get feedback on essay plans from your tutor. Note that tutors cannot give feedback on draft essays but can help with essay plans and additional references
 - Set-up feedback loops amongst fellow students
- If you have any issues
 - Extensions and special circumstances: speak to the Course Convener or your Student Support Officer (SSO)

GATHERING EVIDENCE

- **Evidence is what you use to develop and substantiate the arguments you make in your essay**
- **How to strategically look for evidence**
 - The course material: handbooks, ResourceList on Learn
 - Lectures
 - Further readings: DiscoverEd, online searches
- **Understanding different types of material for evidence: different materials have different values**
 - Peer reviewed academic publications that present theory, concepts and empirical analysis: in course handbook and further readings
 - Examples to illustrate arguments: news articles, anecdotes, think tank publications
 - Discussions in tutorials can provide ideas and arguments
 - Lectures: references to peer reviewed publications

ENGAGING WITH THE ESSAY QUESTION

- Start by identifying the different terms in the question
 - Think about what these terms mean in relation to the course material: try and define the terms in the question
 - Once you have identified the terms in the question, brainstorm what evidence you can use to address the question
 - Think about how the different terms relate to each other and to the question being asked
- Can you think of any course material that has addressed the different terms together?
 - This will help you organise your evidence to develop your argument
- Focus on **why** the question is worth addressing?
 - This will help you develop critical engagement/your viewpoint in your answer

Questions are broad and there is no single way of answering an essay question. It is important to provide a focused and well-structured answer and to justify your response.

INSTRUCTION WORDS IN THE ESSAY QUESTION

	What it means	Examples
Description	Give the main information on a topic without comment. Provide evidence and specific examples.	define, present, describe, detail, outline, give an account of, relate, state, explain how, summarise, list
Discussion	Provide the main points of a topic, then examine each point made and look at different arguments. This essay requires more 'critical thinking' and organising. Select material and discuss it.	analyse, explore, discuss, interpret, consider, account for, comment, debate, examine, explain, review
Evaluation	Select the material that you want to present to develop a line of thought or argument. You are usually asked to come to a conclusion and to back your view by a discussion of evidence or reasoning involved - more open questions.	criticise, evaluate, comment, interpret, judge, decide, justify, investigate, reason
Comparison	Asks you to find similarities and/or differences between different viewpoints, evidence or facts. This helps you give a clear structure to the essay.	compare, contrast, differentiate, distinguish, debate, show the relationship between

Source: IAD Study Hub learning resources

EXERCISE: UNDERSTANDING ESSAY QUESTIONS

In your groups:

1. Chooses one question:

- **Social Anthropology:** How is social inequality enacted through practices of health and healing?
- **Politics and International Relations:** Would the world be more peaceful without nationalism?
- **Sociology:** What did W. E. B. Du Bois mean by 'double consciousness'? To what extent does this remain a feature of racial identities today?
- **Social Policy:** Critically discuss the use of evidence in UK social policy making
- **Social Work:** Identify and discuss two major challenges for today's local authority (the statutory sector) children and family social workers
- **Sustainable Development:** The literary critic Raymond Williams observed that 'Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the English language'. Reflect on this complexity using at least two examples from the course.

2. Discuss:

- Identify the key terms of the question
- How the key terms relate to each other?
- Why this is a question worth asking?
- What kind of key argument would you make to answer the question?

CREATING AN ESSAY PLAN: STEP I

Choosing and analysing the essay question

- *Main considerations:*
 - What is your evidence. Research any good cases/empirical evidence that you can use to strengthen your argument.
 - Think of something interesting to say that does not just summarise the readings.
- Read the essay question **carefully**. **Answer the question that has been asked – not the one you wanted them to ask** (pay attention to all terms in the question)
- Brainstorm a few ideas, outlining a rough argument and considering what evidence you can supply. Which of your arguments seems most convincing? Can you fit it all in?
- Pick your best idea and express it in a clear statement
 - Your ‘thesis’ is your main point, summed up in a concise statement. If you do not have a clear thesis you are unlikely to write a clear essay.

CREATING AN ESSAY PLAN: STEP 2

Research – look for ideas and evidence

- Begin by researching your topic carefully
 - Use the course handbook, lectures and tutorial discussions to guide your reading
 - Think about which literature on the course speaks directly or indirectly to the question. Use that as a starting point on which to base your reading.
- How to search beyond the course material
 - Use the library
 - Use online searches, and academic databases
 - Attend the SDO Library sessions ('How to use the Library'; 'Going beyond the reading list'; 'Literature searches')

CREATING AN ESSAY PLAN: STEP 3

Organise your ideas and evidence

- Make a list of the ideas and points you plan to write about
 - List ideas and concepts as well as examples from course material and from extended readings
- Decide in which order you want to discuss these points and ideas
 - Try and think about a logical development for the overall argument and how these ideas and points link to each other
- Structure each paragraph centred on one clear idea or point

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Remember to sign up
for our other skills
sessions!

