Step 3: Construct an initial essay plan

After you have generated some ideas, it’s important to write an initial plan before you head for the library. This can feel strange—after all, how can you answer a question when you haven’t done any research?—but starting with an initial plan helps you order your ideas and focus your reading. Without a sense of which direction to head in, it’s easy to get lost in the research process.

This initial plan will be provisional and might consist of:

- a provisional answer to the question (or thesis statement)
- a brief outline of possible main points

As you research and develop your understanding of the topic, your ideas likely change, and your answers may change with them. Try to see your essay plan as something that evolves as you engage further with your topic.

While it’s a good idea to write an initial plan before you start researching, if you really know nothing at all about the topic, some initial skimming and browsing through recommended or assigned readings can provide a few ideas. However, the initial planning stage is not the time for a lot of intensive or detailed reading.

What elements should an essay plan consist of?

A 1-2 sentence THESIS STATEMENT

A plan should indicate the answer to the question. A clear and well-written thesis statement will help you to determine the direction and structure of your argument.

What is a thesis statement?

- a clear and direct answer to the essay question
- a claim that can be discussed and expanded further in the body of the essay
- one or two complete sentences
- part of the introduction

In the initial plan, the thesis statement is usually provisional. However, after you’ve done some research, you will need to work on your thesis statement until it is clear, concise and effective.

Tips

- Try introducing your thesis statement with the phrase ‘this essay will argue’ or ‘this essay argues’.
- Paraphrasing the assignment question can help ensure that you are answering it.

Possible MAIN POINTS

Once you have a thesis statement, follow it with a paragraph or a set of points that indicate the ‘reasons why’ for your
answer. The ‘reasons why’ can be developed into the main points of your essay.

What are main points?

- Main points make up the body of an essay.
- Each point should be developed in a paragraph. These paragraphs are the building blocks used to construct the argument.
- In a 1000-1500 word essay, aim for three to four main points

In the initial plan, try to express the main idea of each point in a single, clear sentence. These can become topic sentences (the first sentence of each paragraph which establishes its central idea) when, in your second plan, you develop these points further.

Arrange your main points in a logical order and number them (is there one that would seem to go first or one that would seem to go last? Are there any two that are closely linked? How are the ideas connected to each other? Do the main points, when considered as a whole, present a unified discussion?).

the STRUCTURE of the essay

A plan should follow the STRUCTURE of an essay (e.g. Introduction, body and conclusion).

While you may not be ready to construct an introduction or conclusion, this three-part structure should be at least suggested in your plan.

For more about essay structure, see The Learning Centre's essay writing guide

some indication of the RESEARCH

A plan should include some indication of the sources you might use to RESEARCH the topic.

Make a few notes about how each main point might be developed. Consider and if possible, specify the evidence you might draw on and which texts you might refer to. Jot down titles, authors, page numbers etc.

Next: Step 4 - Research and gather information