

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

I urge all of you to read this very handy document for insight on how to write an essay at university level. The aim of the tutorial letter is to show you how to **plan** and **structure** your essay and how to **convey your ideas in writing** so that your argument is **convincing**.

The tutorial letter reminds you that:

- **writing takes time** (give yourself three weeks at least to plan and write your essay - don't do it the night before and expect a good mark);
- there are four stages to essay writing (**invention, organisation and planning, drafting and revision**).

Stage One: Invention

This starts with **reading the prescribed text and forming an opinion** on it.

Before you can begin writing about something, you need to have an opinion and ideas. The ideas that you will have about your prescribed readings that will eventually appear in your essay have to come from what you already know. This means **how you have interpreted a book or poem**.

Once you have a basic idea or opinion, you can expand on it. Think about one of your prescribed texts, like "A Raisin in the Sun". What ideas do you have about the play? My opinion of it is that it is deep, that there is a lot going on under the surface and that at the heart, it is about believing in who you are and what you can achieve irrespective of skin colour. It's about family. My favourite character is Bennie because she is a young woman interested in growing and educating herself. This, of course, is a tiny fragment of what the play is really about but it is what I learnt most from reading it. This is my starting block. I can now use this information and look at external sources to verify my ideas or to give me other interpretations. I will be drawing from other people's knowledge to make my thinking more objective and well-rounded.

READ YOUR PRESCRIBED TEXTS WITH A HIGHLIGHTER OR PENCIL SO THAT YOU CAN MAKE NOTES AND UNDERLINE THE PASSAGES THAT SPEAK TO YOU THE MOST. This is very helpful when looking for quotes to use in essays.

Exercise on Stage One

For the first writing exercise I would like you to pick one of the texts you are studying for this module and write a short paragraph on what your opinions are of it. You don't need to look at external sources. Just tell me what you thought, which characters you liked and if you could relate anything from the book to your own life.

This is the most basic way we engage with the texts. This is the first step to looking at something critically.

Even if you think that one of your prescribed texts was actually really boring and you hated all the characters, this is your opinions. Tell me why. For instance, I loved "Nervous Conditions". I read it very fast and enjoyed it. I wanted to know what was going to happen to Tambu. It was my favourite prescribed text for this module. "Seven Steps to Heaven", on the other hand, was more trouble to read. While I appreciate it as a work of literature, I couldn't easily identify with the characters and plot. I think I enjoyed "Nervous Conditions" more because the main character was a female that I could relate to. Tambu wants to better herself but is also a slave to tradition. She is growing up and questioning her beliefs and I think reading about this phase of awakening in someone's life is something that appeals to me.

Stage Two: Planning

Planning is **VERY IMPORTANT** when writing your essays. If you think about what you want to write beforehand, it makes for a more coherent and logical and well structured essay.

Jot down your ideas on a piece of paper before you start writing, even if it's random. You can then use those ideas to create an essay that flows smoothly.

There are two ways that you can sort out your ideas:

- **Clustering:** This involves putting similar ideas together. Draw large circles on a sheet of paper and take all the ideas you have created during the invention and research stage. In each of the large circles, fill in the ideas that belong together. This could go according to themes or main ideas. Each circle will contain the ideas for one paragraph of your essay. See page 8 of Tutorial Letter 301/3/2016 for an example of what clustering looks like.
- **Mind-maps:** On a sheet of paper, write the subject of your essay in a circle in the middle. Then draw lines coming out of the circle. On each line, write your main ideas and branching out from these lines, draw more lines with important points related to the main idea. See page 10 of Tutorial Letter 301/3/2016 for an example of what a mind-map looks like.

Exercise on Stage Two

You can plan paragraphs in the same way you plan essays: by organizing ideas so that they can flow smoothly.

Begin your paragraphs with a topic sentence to give your paragraph a main idea. The other sentences give minor ideas in a logical order that support your topic sentence.

Look at page 13 of Tutorial Letter 301/3/2016 for an example.

Then look at the question below. Pretend you are answering this question in an exam. What would you say in an introduction? Think of what your topic sentence might be. Share your answers.

Read the statement below and answer the question that follows:

Although the theme of racial segregation is central to the plot of the play "A Raisin in the Sun", the way in which characters respond to the problems surrounding it are influenced by factors such as gender and class.

Do you agree? With detailed references to the play, comment on the validity of the statement.

Please have a look at the two videos below. These offer guidance on essay writing.

How to write a good essay: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liyFKUFCQno>

5 tips to improve your academic writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgkRoYPLhts>

[Reply](#) [Collapse](#) [Mark as Read](#)

[Re: YouTube Links](#)

by [E TAGER](#) - 27 Feb 2017 @ 23:51

Thank you for these! Both are informative, and although the second one is slightly long-winded, the presenter does set out important points. I think this will help to tighten up sentences and essay structure.

[Reply](#) [Collapse](#) [Mark as Read](#)

[Re: YouTube Links](#)

by [R BEHARI](#) - 1 Mar 2017 @ 17:19

Yes, I agree with you about the second video but it does help. The truth is, we all can always learn more and improve our writing. Glad you watched them and enjoyed!