

## Planning Essays

***A good essay plan makes the most of your essay material by helping you to organise the content of the essay before you begin writing. This guide shows you the key steps in preparing and planning an essay effectively.***

Related guides: [‘Writing an Essay’](#), [‘Effective Note Making’](#) and [‘Thought Mapping’](#).

### Using essay plans

Being organised before you begin writing will make the process quicker and easier. Good preparation and planning gives you a **clear overview** of your material so you can see the best way to organise your points. This guide presents four main steps to planning your essay:

1. **planning** ahead
2. **analysing** the question
3. **selecting** material
4. **organising** your material.

### Why an essay?

Essay writing gives you a chance to:

- **explore** a specific subject area in depth
- **select** relevant material
- **explain** theories and concepts
- **evaluate** arguments
- **express** and **support** your own views and opinions.

### Before you begin

Check your department's guidelines. There may be information about:

- how long the essay should be
- what the deadline is
- relevant assessment criteria
- requirements for presentation, referencing and bibliographies.

## 1. Planning ahead

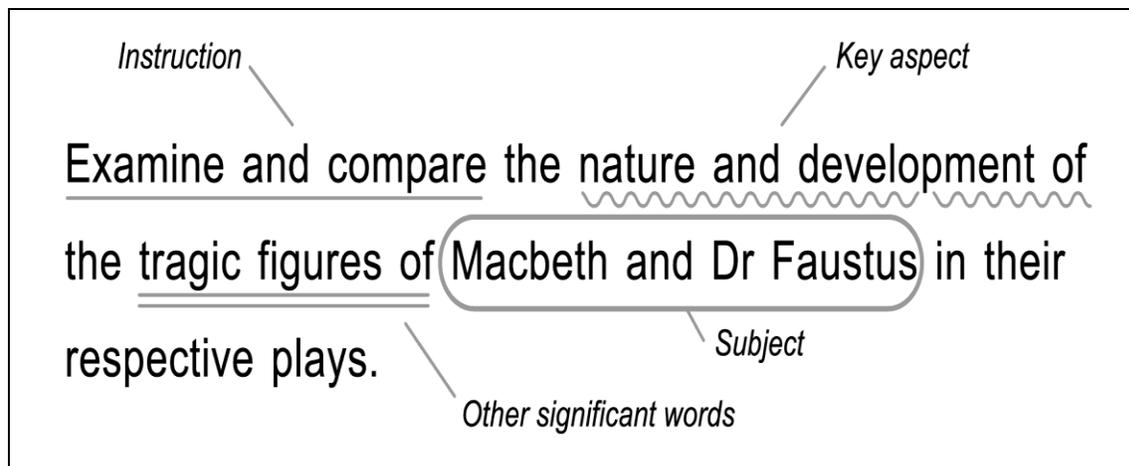
Choose your title as soon as possible. The availability of research resources, particularly books, may affect your choice of title. Plan ahead to ensure you have access to the resources you need in time. Make an action plan or 'to do list' for:

- identifying and finding relevant resources
- reading and making notes, especially from items available only on short loan
- obtaining items through inter-library loan
- using computer facilities.

Look at how much time you have before the deadline so you can see what can be realistically done.

## 2. Analysing the question

Before you can begin to select material for your essay, you need to make sure that you understand the exact requirements of the question. The following method of title analysis encourages you to break the question down into clearly identifiable elements so that you can accurately see what the question requires.



Analysing an essay title

## 3. Selecting the material

Use your analysis of the question to focus your selection of materials. Begin with the basic reading:

- lecture notes
- handouts
- relevant chapters in core texts.

When you understand the basics you can then select more detailed and specific texts. This may be in the form of journal articles or texts referred to by your lecturer. An important place to start will be **any reading lists provided with your module**. You should also follow up useful references in handouts or core texts to widen your reading.

- Be selective when reading to identify relevant material for your essay. Use skim reading as well as abstracts, summaries, chapter headings and the index, rather than reading everything in detail.
- Use the essay question as a focus for note taking.
- Be sure to record only information that is directly relevant to your essay question. This will save you time and make your notes easier to organise in an essay plan.

## 4. Organising your material

A good essay has a structure that is logical and coherent. An essay plan gives you a quick way of trying out different structures. One way of making an essay plan is to list your main points in keywords and phrases and organise them under main headings. This gives you an overview of your points so you can decide which should be included and what is the most logical sequence for them.

### 1. INFLUENCES

- Faustus - warned by Mephistophilis (e.g. 3.82-3)  
- persuaded by Valdes and Cornelius (e.g. 1.119-20)
- Macbeth - supernatural forces, witches, predictions  
- Lady Macbeth manipulative (e.g. 1.5.22-5)
- Macbeth more manipulated than Faustus > Macbeth less responsible?

### 2. SOLILOQUIES

- Faustus conceit = can avoid damnation  
speech = grand eloquent, believes he is in control (e.g. 1.17-21)  
refusal to accept own limitations (e.g. 1.23-6)
- Macbeths = good but weak, becomes evil but strong  
fatalistic, aware of damnation (contrast to Faustus)  
change in style after Lady M dies (e.g. 5.8.27-31)

### 3. DEVELOPMENT

- Theme of damnation (Gardner)  
Parallel to fallen angels  
Crime of despair  
Tragedy v morality

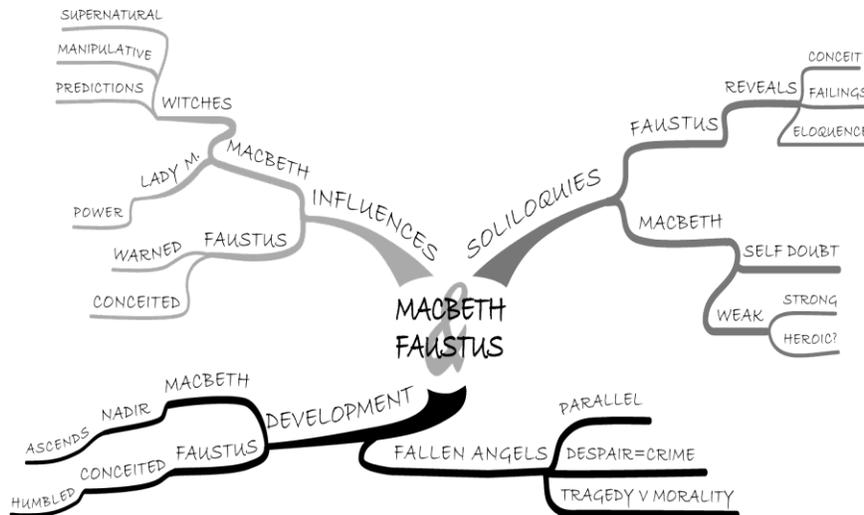
An example of a linear essay plan using key words and phrases

## Using Index Cards

Index cards can be useful in essay planning. Write the keyword or phrase for each point on a separate index card. Use the cards to group and order the points. Number the cards sequentially when you are happy with the order of your points.

## Using Diagrams and Mindmaps

You may wish to use diagrams or mindmaps for essay planning (see the guide [Thought Mapping](#)):



Sample essay plan using the mind mapping technique

## Find your preferred style

Experiment with different styles of planning essays and use the method that you find most useful. Make as many essay plans as you need to find the best sequence for your material. By separating the planning stage from the writing stage you will be better able to write an essay that is well organised and clearly expressed.

## Summary

- Make an action plan or 'to do list' **as early as possible**.
- Analyse the essay question **before** you begin making notes.
- Be **selective** in your reading.
- Record only information that is **directly relevant** to your essay question.
- Use essay plans to **create a clear and logical sequence** for your material before you begin to write.

## Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in **Student Services**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: [ask.let@uea.ac.uk](mailto:ask.let@uea.ac.uk)
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

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