

→ SAGE Study Skills

Good Essay Writing

A Social Sciences Guide

Fifth Edition

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Stages of Writing, from Preparation to Final Version

- Read the question and any essay guidance notes
- Use feedback
- Identify and organize the relevant material: drafting an essay plan
- First draft to final version
- Time management

Here are some reminders for those of you already experienced in essay planning, and some suggestions for anyone coming to social science essay writing for the first time. In short, there are seven stages to writing an essay:

- 1 Reading and understanding the question
- 2 Identifying the relevant material
- 3 Making an essay plan
- 4 Writing a first draft
- 5 Reviewing the first draft and writing a second draft
- 6 Double-checking the administrative requirements of the essay
- 7 Writing a final version.

In this chapter, we will take an overview of these stages. In addition, we look at some other aspects of planning that you will encounter before you put pen to paper. Thorough preparation and planning is the basis of any good piece of written work, and it really is worth putting some effort into this.

3.1 Read the question and any essay guidance notes

The best advice anyone can offer you when you embark on an essay is to *read the question*. As you will see in Chapter 4, you need to spend time ‘unpacking’ the question and being certain you understand both what the content, or main topics or issues, of the essay should be, and how you are expected to address this (as indicated by the ‘command’ or ‘process’ words and type of question). Here we will examine the importance of this seemingly simple practice, and of considering any guidance you’ve been given, either as part of the essay question, or in the form of feedback on a previous essay.

Essay question guidance

In many universities, in addition to the question itself, you will be given guidance on how to answer the question. This may take the form of formally written notes, or it might be verbal instructions from your tutor. In either case, be certain you are clear about this guidance as there may be suggestions about source material, or caveats about areas that are precluded. Introductory level courses may also include guidance about how to structure your essay which you should follow to the letter.

Let’s look at an example:

Outline the role of risk in contemporary society and the idea that we live in a risk society. Your essay should aim to show the role of the social sciences in understanding risks and how people live with them.

In this assignment, you are asked to produce a descriptive essay that considers the role of risk in contemporary society, to consider Ulrich Beck’s argument that we live in a ‘risk society’, and to provide relevant examples, illustrations or case studies in support of this. You will need to utilize different forms of evidence to help you examine Beck’s ideas. On this module, we have considered, for instance: the everyday ways of dealing with risks; the notion that defining risks depends on the complex and contested production of knowledge; the ways in which people perceive and act in relation to knowledge about risks; the role of experts in making risks known to the lay public; and the ways in which people live with and respond to expert ideas about risk. Remember to reference your sources in the body of the essay and to provide a list of references at the end. Word count: 1,250.

(Adapted from DD101 ‘Introducing the Social Sciences’, 2009J, Assignment Booklet 2, The Open University.)

This example is taken from a Level I or freshman year module, and the guidance is fairly specific. The students are told that they are producing a descriptive essay that outlines ‘risk’ and Ulrich Beck’s argument that we live in a ‘risk society’ in particular. The second part of the question asks them to consider the kind of social science evidence that might be drawn upon in arguing that we live in a risk society, and gives examples of how this has been addressed on the module. However, the guidance also tells students to find case studies and other illustrative material – but which case studies or other examples is left to the students to decide for themselves.

There is also an implicit suggested structure to the essay. Can you make it out? First, students are asked to outline the idea of risk, and describe what Ulrich Beck means by ‘risk society’ – demonstrating their understanding of his argument. Second, they are asked to look at various bits of illustrative material, case studies or social scientific evidence to demonstrate a) what Beck means, and b) how people ‘live with’ risk. Third, students are asked to think about what social science brings to an understanding of ‘risk’ and the ‘risk society’ – this could involve looking at the ‘circuit of knowledge’ (see section 2.2), and showing how social scientists approach both ideas and evidence.

Finally, the guidance includes a word count. Your module or university will have guidelines on how much latitude there is in keeping to the word count. In many social science departments, you will find you are expected to keep to the word count, give or take 5 or 10 per cent. So, a 1,000 word essay could be between 950 and 1,050 or between 900 and 1,100 words long and still meet the word count requirement.

3.2 Use feedback

If this is not your first essay you are at a distinct advantage, especially if you have had individual feedback on previous work. Preparing to write a second, third, fourth (etc.) essay should begin with considering your prior achievements and any and all feedback you’ve had so far. Take a look at the box below.

What to do when your essay comes back

Maggie Coats

Maggie Coats is an Associate Lecturer at The Open University. These are her suggestions for learning from your last essay.

If you’re like most other people, when you get an essay back you’ll check the grade first, read any general comments from your tutor, and quickly flip through the rest looking for

any major embarrassments. You'll probably read it with more care only if the tutor has written something particularly complimentary or irritating. However, learning from previous pieces of writing is an important way of building on your writing skills.

- Take a quick look at the score and any general comments. Feel pleased, angry or despairing, depending on your grade/mood, then put the essay aside until you are ready to look at it with a more 'objective' eye.
- Give yourself 20 to 30 minutes to look over the essay in detail – more if it is a longer essay.
- Re-read any general comments and note the main points.
- Re-read the essay itself, including your tutor's in-text or margin comments, then mark your responses to these comments. Do you agree or disagree? Is there anything you don't understand?
- Next, re-read the general or overview comments your tutor has made at the end of your essay. Can you see what the tutor is saying?
- Having gained a little perspective on your writing, what do *you* think of it? Did you: answer the question; provide the most relevant examples; muster a clear argument?
- On a separate sheet of paper, or in your learning journal, write down one or two key points that will improve your performance when writing the next assignment.

(Adapted from Coats, M. (undated) Handout Material 2.)

If you have reflected on previous work in this manner, you will be in a better position to tackle the essay at hand.

What to do if you don't get feedback, or feedback is minimal

At some colleges or universities, it is common not to get much in the way of individual feedback on your work. In this case, you may need to be a bit more industrious in figuring out what to do to improve your next assignment. Sometimes tutors will offer generic feedback to the whole class – things that most people did well or poorly. If this is the case, read through your essay, look at your essay plan (see below), and try to see where your own work has followed the good practice identified by your tutor, and likewise where it hasn't met your tutor's expectations. You can also use this book as a 'check' on your work. Of course you won't be able to use it to identify your understanding of subject content, but you will be able to use it to help you check whether you have read the question and followed its 'commands' (section 4.2). Upcoming chapters will help you identify whether you have written a useful introduction, a coherent main body, a convincing conclusion, and an accurate list of references (Chapters 7–10).



As Maggie Coats suggests, try to be objective when looking over your work – the idea is to learn from your previous work, so that you can improve in your next essay.

3.3 Identify and organize the relevant material: drafting an essay plan

Once you have a clear idea of what the question is asking, and particular areas you need to concentrate on improving, your next task is to identify and organize the material you will be using in your essay. We will look at researching and note-taking for essay writing in more detail in Chapter 5, and Chapters 7–10 consider the essential components of an essay. Here we offer a quick overview of some of the main activities you will need to do:

- Read through any existing notes that you have, from lectures, seminars or texts; read or re-read the book chapters or journal articles specified for this particular essay; and review recommended or linked websites. Make notes about all relevant material.
- Keep careful and detailed notes of all sources for your reference list (see Chapters 5 and 10).

Having identified the relevant material, you will need to organize this into a shape that addresses the question. Here are some suggestions for tackling this task:

- ‘Wordstorm’ your ideas for the essay (that is, jot down a list of questions and issues prompted by the question, all the relevant examples you can think of, and any other related evidence). For many people, this is most productively done with pen and paper, but if you wordprocess your notes you might like to use wordstorming software, like Wordle (www.wordle.net). This kind of software can help you see graphically where you have lots of material or ideas, and where your notes are lacking. To see a Wordle of this chapter, see Figure 3.1.
- Re-check your notes and add left-out material (do another search).
- Then link and order connected ideas and points. One way to do this is to draw a ‘mind-map’ or diagram of points relevant to the question. Mindmapping is very good for making strong visual links between different parts of an argument. Most people find mindmapping easiest using pen and paper, but there are software packages that help with mindmapping notes, such as Mindomo, Mindmap, Freemind or Tufts University’s VUE – Visual Understanding Environment. Figure 3.2 shows an example of a Mindmap mindmap used to prepare for writing ‘Essay 1’ which appears in Chapter 14.
- Write out points, examples, ideas and connected theories on separate sheets of paper, ‘Post-its’, or index cards. Group and re-group these until you’ve got them in a logical order. Section 8.1 offers ideas for creating a ‘logical progression’ in your argument.

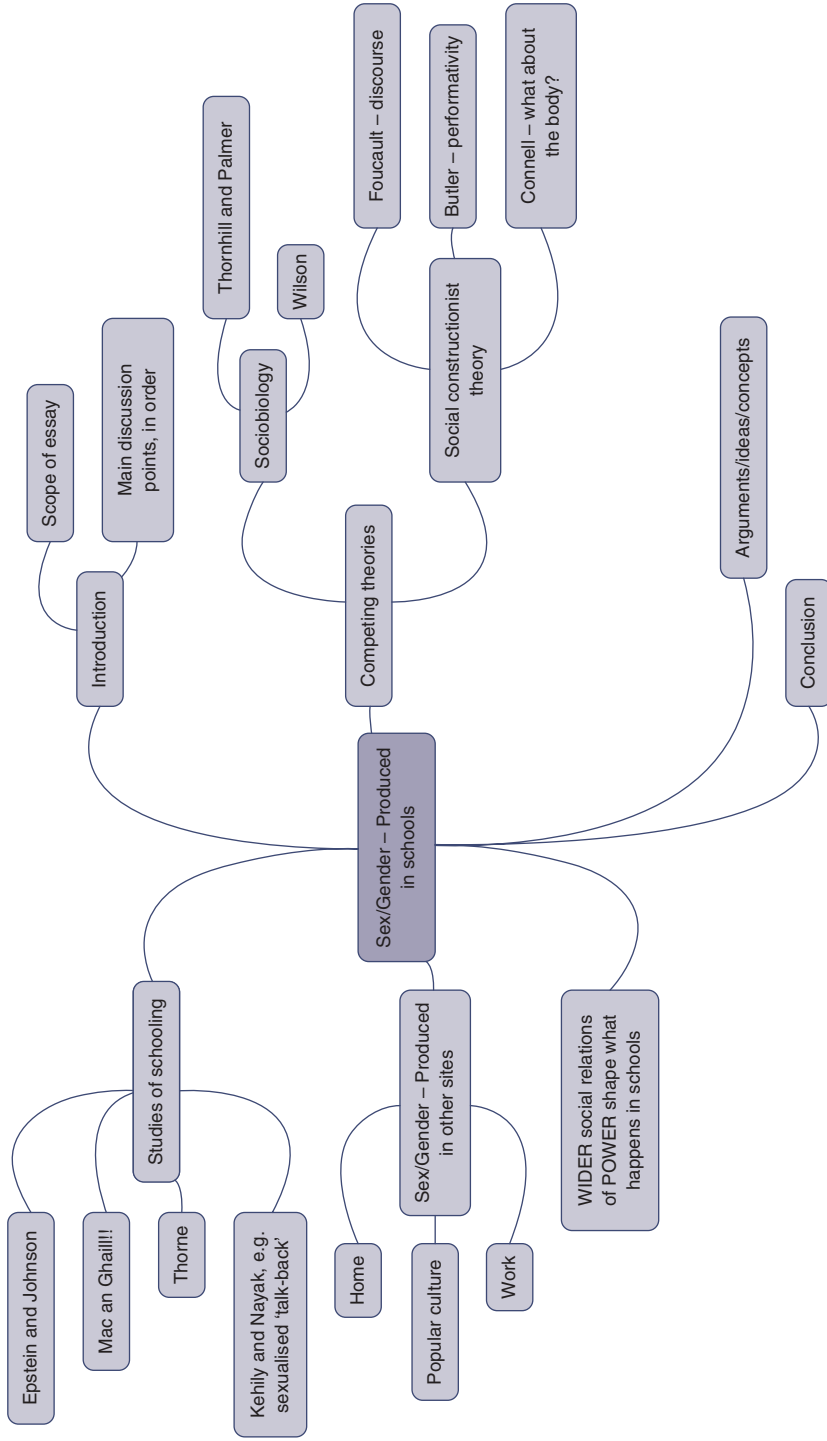


Figure 3.2 Example of a mindmap of 'Essay 1' in Chapter 14: 'School is a significant site in which sex/gender is produced'.
 Discuss.

'School is a significant site in which sex/gender is produced.' Discuss.

Introduction: main points, in order (write this last)

Main body

1. Social constructivism v. biological reductivism (Weedon, 1999; Foucault, 1977, 1984; Lacquer, 1990; Butler, 1993, 2004). 'Hard' and 'soft' social constructivism, e.g. issue of social agency (Butler, 1993 v. Connell, 1995).
2. The active production of sex/gender in schools: recent literature
 - a. Thorne (1993) US elementary schools and teachers' talk
 - b. Epstein and Johnson (1994) pupils' clothes
 - c. Students as active agents, e.g. handball (Thorne, 1993), also mistletoe (Kehily and Nayak, 1996)
 - d. Negotiating the curriculum and differentiated masculinities (Connell, 1993 and Mac an Ghail, 1994)
3. Sex and gender and other subjectivities: masculinity/femininity and age, class, ethnicity, sexuality
 - a. Epstein and Johnson (1998) 'intra-ethnic identification' (find quote about Shamira being a 'tart'?)
 - b. Mac an Ghail (1994) boys' sexualized talk
 - c. Hmm – no room for age – class will be covered a bit with Mac an Ghail
 - d. Need to include POWER and wider social relations

Conclusion – review evidence, modification of social constructionist account, and note relation between sex/gender and other subject positions, restate claim.

Figure 3.3 An example of a linear essay plan of 'Essay 1' in Chapter 14

3.4 First draft to final version

We will look at the elements involved in structuring an essay in more detail in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, but here is an outline of the stages that follow on from formulating your essay plan, and that lead from first draft to final product:

- Write out the question at the beginning of your first draft so that you keep its exact wording in front of you to ensure you are answering the question that is asked.
- Working from your essay plan, begin writing a first draft. Do the best you can, but see it as a first draft and expect to make some improvements – you may need to revise your plan as the essay takes shape. Don't worry, this is perfectly normal!
- Once your first draft has some shape, you may need to go back to your notes to check your references, and you may also want to move sentences or even paragraphs around. Your second draft might deviate from your original plan – this is fine, as long as what you have written makes sense (proceeds in a logical fashion).
- If you have time, it is helpful to put the essay aside for at least a day to let the dust settle, show it to a friend or another student to get feedback, and then re-read the question and the essay yourself. Its strengths and weaknesses should now be a lot clearer to you.

- You are now in a position to write your definitive answer, and this is the time to consider more carefully your presentation (sentence structure, grammar, etc.), and to check for clarity of expression. It is good practice to 'spell check' your work, but remember the limits of spell check – you will still need to re-read your work to be sure it actually makes sense. Learn the difference between 'there', 'their' and 'they're', and where the possessive apostrophe goes, depending on whether a word is singular, plural or ends in an 's'.
- Ensure your reference list is complete and matches the actual citations you have made in the essay, and that you have followed the referencing style required by your course (see Chapter 10).
- Double-check any administrative requirements: is the essay double-spaced and in the right-sized font (some tutors specifically ask for a 12-point font so the essay is easier to read); have you inserted page numbers in the footer; is your name and/or student number, assignment number, etc., in the header?

Administrative requirements checklist:

- Is there a recommended format for the header – for instance, should you include your name or student number, the module title, tutor's name, date of submission, etc.?
- Are you expected to have a separate title page – what should be included?
- What is expected in the footer? Page numbers? Anything else?
- Is there a specified font or typeface, and should the essay be double-spaced? Is there a margin requirement?
- When and where is the assignment DUE? Is there a cut-off time, as well as a date? Is there a specific location, email or drop box?

When this is complete, submit the essay – and wait for feedback with quiet confidence.

3.5 Time management

As the previous sections in this chapter have begun to suggest, as you move from your initial preparation to writing your final draft, you will need to plan your time carefully. Effective time management involves being realistic. You will obviously want to set aside as much time as possible for your essay. However, other important commitments may mean that you need to structure the time available with care. As early as possible look in your diary and, working backwards from your submission date, identify when you are going to be able to do the work. Next, prioritize your tasks and allocate your time accordingly. For example, if you are clear about the question from the start, you will probably have to spend less time on research. If you spend adequate time planning your essay, you may well find that writing the first draft is much easier. As you move through your tasks, concentrate on achieving your major

goals. For example, when (re-)reading for the essay, don't get distracted by material that is interesting but less relevant to the essay question. Similarly, when writing your first draft, try not to get bogged down crafting perfect sentences or clarifying a single point. Focus on putting the whole argument in place and then go back to re-work individual sections and improve your style. Good time management will not necessarily mean that producing an essay is free from stress, but it will allow you to make the most of your circumstances.

The following chapters of this guide offer more detailed help through the process of essay preparation and planning, and of first draft to final version – in short, putting together a social sciences essay.

Summary

- Make use of sources of guidance.
- Essay writing has seven principal stages:
 - 1 Reading and understanding the question
 - 2 Identifying the relevant material
 - 3 Making an essay plan
 - 4 Writing a first draft
 - 5 Reviewing the first draft and writing a second draft
 - 6 Double-checking the administrative requirements of the essay
 - 7 Writing a final version
- Realistic time management is central to effective essay writing.

Self-test

- 1 What are the seven principal stages of writing an essay?
- 2 How can you use guidance notes – notes for the essay and notes on your previous work? How can these integrate with the guidance on offer in this book?
- 3 How do you prefer to organize your essay plan – with a mindmap? using linear notes? Have you tried out any planning software that might help you represent your thoughts?
- 4 How can you ensure you include the most important material in your essay plan?
- 5 How can you be sure you've met all the requirements of the assignment?
- 6 How can you ensure you will have enough time to complete your essay by the cut-off date?

Don't forget! Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/redmanandmaples5> for more tasks and resources related to this chapter.

