1.4 From understanding titles to planning

In both exams and coursework it is essential for students to understand what an essay title is asking them to do. A plan can then be prepared, which should ensure the question is answered fully, while preventing time being wasted. This unit looks at:

- key words in titles
- brainstorming ideas
- alternative methods of essay planning

1 The planning process

Although teachers frequently complain that students do not answer the question set, this problem can be avoided by more care at the start of the process. Planning is necessary with all academic writing, but clearly there are important differences between planning in exams, when time is short, and for coursework, when preparatory reading is required. However, in both cases the process of planning should include these three steps:

(a) Analyse the title wording and decide what is required.
(b) Brainstorm the topic to focus your ideas.
(c) Prepare an outline using your preferred method.

With coursework your outline will probably be revised as you read around the topic.

► See Unit 4.5 Writing longer essays

2 Analysing essay titles

Titles contain key words that tell the student what to do. Note that titles often have two (or more) parts:

‘What is meant by a demand curve and why would we expect it to slope downwards?’

In this case ‘what’ is asking for a description and ‘why’ for a reason or explanation.

Match the key words on the left to the definitions on the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyse</th>
<th>Explain a topic briefly and clearly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assess (Evaluate)</td>
<td>Deal with a complex subject by reducing it to the main elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Divide into sections and discuss each critically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Break down into the various parts and their relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine (Explore)</td>
<td>Make a proposal and support it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate</td>
<td>Look at various aspects of a topic, compare benefits and drawbacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline (Trace)</td>
<td>Give a detailed account of something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Give a simple, basic account of the main points of a topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggest</td>
<td>Give examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarise</td>
<td>Decide the value or worth of a subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Practice

- Underline the key words in the following titles and consider what they are asking you to do.
  
  (a) How and why has the market for international tourism segmented since the middle of the twentieth century? What are the economic and social forces that have driven this process?
  
  (b) Describe some of the reasons why patients do not always take their medication as directed.
  
  (c) How can psychology contribute to the reduction of bullying behaviour in schools?
  
  (d) Is there a move towards subjectivity in criminal law? Should there be?
  
  (e) Discuss the response of buildings and soil to earthquakes, indicating what measures can be used to ensure structural stability.

4 Brainstorming

It is often helpful to start thinking about a topic by writing down any ideas you have, in any order. Taking the example from (3a), you might collect the following points:

International tourism – segmentation of market

**How and why:**
- Package holidays made foreign holidays popular
- Internet allows travellers to plan own holidays
- In 60s jet aircraft permit faster travel – long and short haul holidays
- In 90s budget airlines lower costs – short breaks

**Economic and political forces:**
- Rising disposable incomes permit more spending on travel
- Developing countries see tourism as route to growth
- Older, retired people spend more on travel

5 Essay length

Coursework essays usually have a required length, normally between 1,000 and 5,000 words. You must keep to this limit, although deviations of 5 per cent more or less are generally acceptable. However, at the planning stage you need to consider what proportion of the essay to allocate to each part of the question.

As a basic guide, 20 per cent is usually sufficient for the introduction and conclusion together (references are not included in the word count). Therefore, in a 2,000 word essay the main body would have 1,600 words.

If this was the length given for title (3a) above, you might decide on the following allocation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Segmentation of the market for international tourism – how</td>
<td>300 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmentation of the market for international tourism – why</td>
<td>500 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic forces</td>
<td>400 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social forces</td>
<td>400 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,600 words</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This calculation is useful since it can guide the amount of reading you need to do, as well as providing the basis for an outline. Moreover, it prevents you from writing an unbalanced answer, in which part of the question is not fully dealt with.

Essays in exams do not have a word limit, but it is equally important to plan them in similar terms, e.g. part 1 40 per cent, part 2 60 per cent.

Identify the key words in the following titles and decide what percentage of the main body to give to each part.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Part 1 (%)</th>
<th>Part 2 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Describe the typical social, cultural and environmental impacts experienced by tourist destinations in developing countries. How can harmful impacts be reduced or avoided?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) How can schools make better use of IT (information technology)? Illustrate your answer with examples.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Outline the main difficulties in combating malaria. Suggest possible strategies for more effective anti-malaria campaigns.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) What is ‘donor fatigue’ in international aid and how can it be overcome?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6 Outlines

An outline should help the writer to answer the question as effectively as possible. Care at this stage will save wasted effort later. The more detail you include in your outline, the easier the writing process will be. Note that for coursework it is usually better to write the main body first, then the introduction and finally the conclusion. Therefore you may prefer to outline just the main body at this stage.

There is no fixed pattern for an outline; different methods appeal to different students. For example, with first part of title (5a) above:

‘Describe the typical social, cultural and environmental impacts experienced by tourist destinations in developing countries.’

(a) The outline might be a list:

(i) Social impacts
   - increase in variety of jobs available
   - price inflation
   - new range of business opportunities

(ii) Cultural impacts
   - new patterns of dress and behaviour may cause problems
   - market for traditional crafts and/or rituals grows

(iii) Environmental impacts
   - increased pressure on limited resources, e.g. water
   - loss of natural habitat to building projects
   - provision of new infrastructure, e.g. roads

(b) An alternative is a mind map:

```
       Increase in variety of jobs available
          Social impacts
            Price Inflation
               New range of business opportunities
                     Market for traditional crafts and/or rituals grows

       Increased pressure on limited resources e.g. water
          Environmental impacts
            Loss of natural habitat to building projects
                          Provision of new infrastructure e.g. roads

       Cultural impacts
```
(i) What are the advantages and drawbacks of each method?

(ii) Prepare an outline for the second part of the same title, using either method:

‘How can harmful impacts be reduced or avoided?’

Outline

After finding a suitable source and identifying relevant sections of text, the next step is to select the key points that relate to your topic and make notes on them. This unit explains and practises this process, which also involves skills developed in Units 1.6 Paraphrasing and 1.7 Summarising.

1 Why make notes?

What are the main reasons for note-making? Add to the list below.

(a) To prepare for essay writing

(b) ____________________________

(c) ____________________________

(d) ____________________________

(e) ____________________________
2 Note-making methods

You are looking for information on the current media revolution. Study the text below (key points underlined) and the notes in the box. What do you notice about the language of the notes?

2.1 THE DEATH OF THE PRESS?

A hundred years ago news was exclusively provided by newspapers. There was no other way of supplying the latest information on politics, crime, finance or sport to the millions of people who bought and read newspapers, sometimes twice a day. Today the situation is very different. The same news is now available on television, radio and the internet, and because of the nature of these media, can be more up-to-date than in print. For young people especially, the internet has become the natural source of news and comment.

This development means that in many countries newspaper circulation is falling, and a loss of readers also means a fall in advertising, which is the main income for most papers. Consequently, in both Britain and the USA newspapers are closing every week. But when a local newspaper goes out of business an important part of the community is lost. It allows debate on local issues, as well as providing a noticeboard for events such as weddings and society meetings.

All newspapers are concerned by these developments, and many have tried to find methods of increasing their sales. One approach is to focus on magazine-type articles rather than news, another is to give free gifts such as DVDs, while others have developed their own websites to provide continuous news coverage. However, as so much is now freely available online to anyone with a web browser, none of these have had a significant impact on the steady decline of paid-for newspapers.

(Source: New Business Monthly, May 2010, p. 37)

Decline of newspapers

(New Business Monthly, May 2010, p. 37)

a) Newspapers only source of news 100 yrs ago – now also TV, radio + www

b) Newspaper sales > decline in advertising > newspapers shutting

c) Attempts to increase sales: – more magazine content

– gifts

– websites

but none effective.

3 Finding key points

Read the following text and underline two key points. Then choose a title for the paragraph.

Title: ______________________________

3.1 The generation born after the second world war, sometimes called the baby-boomers, are now reaching retirement age, and businesses are starting to realise that they are a wealthier market than any previous retirement group. Financial products, travel and medicines are well-established industries which interest the over-60s, but others are now focusing on this age group. Volkswagen, for instance, has produced a car with raised seats and more interior space to appeal to their tastes. In Japan, with its ageing population, companies have more experience of selling to the retired, and have been successful with unusual products such as a robotic seal, which serves as a pet substitute for the lonely. There are, however, certain difficulties in selling to this market. Some customers resent being addressed as ‘old’ since they see themselves as more youthful, while there is a huge variation in the profile of the baby boomers, ranging from healthy and active to the bed-ridden and infirm.
4 Finding relevant points

When preparing to write an essay you have to search for information and ideas relevant to your subject. Therefore the key points that you select must relate to that topic.

You are given an essay title:

‘Does the state have a role in promoting public health?’

Read the following article and underline the key points that relate to your essay topic.

4.1 A SLIMMER AMERICA?

Currently over two-thirds of Americans are believed to be either overweight or obese, but recently it has been discovered that the situation may have stabilised. The rate of increase appears to have virtually stopped, so that on average women and children weigh no more now than they did ten years ago. This trend may have important consequences for the health care system: according to a recent study (Finkelstein et al., 2009) an obese American is likely to cost the system over 40 per cent more than someone with normal weight. This is due to the increased risks of medical conditions such as diabetes, to which should be added extra costs connected with illness and resulting absence from work.

Until recently it was assumed that the long-term trend would continue so that ultimately all Americans would become overweight; Wang (2008) had estimated that this would happen by 2048. Obviously, such an assumption implies steadily rising medical insurance costs. If the new trend continues there are clear benefits for public health and the associated finances, but medical researchers still struggle to understand the basic causes of the problem, which is that obesity in America is now three times greater than fifty years ago.

There is substantial evidence that obesity is linked to social class: those with irregular and badly paid employment are more likely to eat what is convenient and tasty rather than have the time or energy to organise a healthy diet. The number of people in this category may have risen in recent years. Another possibility is that food now is cheaper relative to income, while free time is more valuable, so

continued . . .

5 Effective note-making

Notes are for your personal use so you should create your own style.

(a) You must use your own words and not copy phrases from the original to avoid the risk of plagiarism. The quantity of notes you make depends on your task: you may only need a few points, or a lot of detail.

(b) Always record the source of your notes, to save time when you have to write the list of references.

(c) Notes are written quickly, so keep them simple. Do not write sentences. Leave out articles (a/ the) and prepositions (of/ to).

(d) If you write lists, it is important to have clear headings (underlined and numbering systems 1, 2, 3, ) to organise the information. Do not crowd your notes.

(e) Use symbols (+, >, = ) to save time.

(f) Use abbreviations (e.g. = for example). You need to make up your own abbreviations for your subject area. But do not abbreviate too much, or you may find your notes hard to understand in the future!

See Unit 3.1 Abbreviations
6 Practice A

Complete the notes for ‘Does the state have a role in promoting public health?’ using the key points underlined in (4) above.


Have Americans stopped getting fatter?
(1) 2/3 Americans overweight, but lately growth in obesity seems to have stopped
(2) May reduce future healthcare costs (obesity adds 40 per cent to medical expenses - Finkelstein et al., 2009)
(3)
(4)
(5)

7 Practice B

You have to write an essay titled:

‘Improving student performance: an outline of recent research.’

Read the following text and make notes on the relevant key points.

7.1 SLEEP AND MEMORY

In many countries, especially in hot climates, it is the custom to take a short sleep in the afternoon, often known as a siesta. Now it appears that this habit helps to improve the ability to remember and therefore to learn. Researchers have known for some time that new memories are stored short-term in an area of the brain called the hippocampus, but are then transferred to the pre-frontal cortex for long-term storage. They now believe that this transfer process occurs during a kind of sleep called stage 2 non-REM sleep. After this has occurred the brain is better able to take in new information, and having a sleep of about 100 minutes after lunch seems to be an effective way to permit this.

Research by a team from the University of California sought to confirm this theory. They wanted to establish that a short sleep would restore the brain’s ability to learn. A group of about 40 people were asked to take part in two ‘lessons’: at 12 noon and 6 pm. Half the volunteers were put in a group which stayed awake all day, while the others were encouraged to sleep for an hour and a half after the first session. It was found that in the second lesson the second group were better at remembering what they had learnt, which indicates that the siesta had helped to refresh their short-term memories.

The most effective siesta seems to consist of three parts: roughly 30 minutes of light sleep to rest the body, followed by 30 minutes of stage 2 sleep which clears the hippocampus, and finally 30 minutes of REM sleep which is when dreams are experienced: possibly as a result of the new memories being processed as they are stored in the pre-frontal cortex. This process is believed to be so valuable that some researchers argue that a siesta can be as beneficial as a full night’s sleep.