

WRITING ESSAYS : KEY STAGES

1. HAVE A PLAN!

- Think about the question. Read it through, aloud, carefully.
*Study the topic. Get the basics first, then scan widely. Play!
Find the roots & branches of your subject. Form an opinion.
Where does it overlap with other subject areas?*
- Brainstorm. *Structure & flesh for your opinion.*
- Gather material. *Inform & expand your opinion.*
- Select + organise material. *Refine & re-structure your opinion.*

2. WRITE IT.

- ‘Core Statement’. *[see handout] What are you trying to say?*
- Introduction. *More than just a description of the essay?*
- Main body of essay. *Where it all happens. = Your argument.*
- Conclusion. *Not mere regurgitation. Nor too obvious?*

3. CHECK IT.

- Edit. Proof it. *‘Phone a friend’ ... Get a fresh eye?*
- Readable? Right tone? *‘Ask the audience’... Who is this for?*
- Balance (emphasis, etc) *‘50 - 50’ ... Anything too one-sided?*
- Do you meet assignment requirements... *especially word count?*
- Order of Paragraphs. *Check these for flow, logic.*
- Style. *Good use of clauses, connectives, structure, variation?*
- Judge importance of content.
Eliminate: Repetition. Tautology. Superfluity. Repetition!
- “GAPS”! = Grammar, Accidents*, Punctuation, Spelling.

* ‘Accidents’ = gender, number, case, tense. Check these ‘agree’ – i.e. are consistent within/ across sentences.

4. MARKING ...

Your primary audience, at least initially, is likely to be a tutor or exam marker! But you should think about what any reader (as well as your tutor or examiner) would be seeking:

<i>Clarity.</i>	<i>Succinctness.</i>	<i>Focus.</i>
<i>Detail, accuracy.</i>	<i>References, substantiation.</i>	<i>Flair & insight.</i>

Keep an eye on the following factors in your CONTENT and STYLE:

- **Opening.** With clear references to set question; a strong summary of your piece.
- **Conciseness** versus **Development.** Stick to the point; but with sophistication!
- Avoid **Logical flaws** – in sentences, between paragraphs, across piece as a whole.
- **Effect:** clarity, force. Be confident; but always bother to substantiate your views.
- **Appropriateness** – of your material, deductions, rhetoric, tone, etc.
- **Order** and **Cohesion.** A strong, clear, linked progression of ideas.
- **Ending.** Good answers often lead to ‘further questions’. Or a sting in the tail?

BUILDING YOUR ENGLISH :

A STRATEGY FOR OVERSEAS STUDENTS

(1) KEEP A JOURNAL

Buy an indexed journal, no smaller than A5. Section it as follows:

WORDS	<i>New words.</i>	
	<i>Phrases and their uses.</i>	<i>.... etc.</i>
GRAMMAR	<i>Sentence constructions.</i>	
	<i>Verbs, adverbs.</i>	
	<i>Nouns, adjectives.</i>	<i>.... etc.</i>
EXERCISES	<i>At the back of the journal, turned upside down (see below).</i>	

Leave plenty of blank pages for each section. As new topics and sub-sections arise, add them in. As you find new things to put in the front of your journal, imitate and **practise them in the back** under 'Exercises'.

(2) DO WEEKLY TASKS

Taking Saturday or Sunday off, spend half an hour each day (preferably first thing in the morning, NOT late at night!) to do the following:

MONDAY and THURSDAY. Read a short article in a paper or magazine and *study* it. Look at the way it uses and constructs language. Keeping a dictionary close by, pick out new words, idiomatic phrases, unfamiliar sentence constructions. Make a note of them in the front of your journal in the appropriate section. Get the hang of using them, at the back of your journal under 'Exercises'.

TUESDAY and FRIDAY. Study a section of a good grammar book – either at random, or linked to a problem you keep having. Make sure the book is pitched at the correct level for you, and try to find one with exercises in it. Again, make notes in the front of your journal in the correct section, then practise what you've learned under the 'Exercises' part of your journal.

WEDNESDAY [and Sat or Sun]. Do this in the back of your journal, under the heading 'Exercises'. Take any new words or ideas from the last two days and imitate them. Then invent your own sentences which incorporate them in your own way. Find a friend (or tutor) who is happy to look at your exercises to confirm they are correct. Reward them with chocolates and coffee!

(3) INVEST

To learn how to use written and spoken English well you must invest **TIME**, on a regular basis. But you must also invest in some good books... a comprehensive dictionary is essential, one that gives examples of usage. The 'Oxford Concise English' is a fair start. A simple, but thorough, book on English grammar is also important. Eric Partridge's 'Usage and Abuse' (various editions) is a fine manual dealing with common problems, and gives many examples.

TECHNIQUES for READING ...

... and picking up 'CUES'

Skim * Titles * Section headings * Graphics
* Summaries * Contents/ Index pages

Scan Read it – but not every word !
Beginnings/ ends of paragraphs.
Home in on essential sections.
Note key words & phrases.

Spiral In-depth reading of *selected* material.
Take notes & check them
Return to text several times ('**recursive**' reading).
Adapt notes.

MODES OF WRITING

MODE of WRITING	Clarification of Mode	Some comments
Descriptive. *	<i>Implies no Analysis or Evaluation (yet).</i>	Rarely the whole task! Often leads to analysis and/or explanation somewhere along the line.
Chronological, or 'sequenced'. *	<i>One thing at a time, in some kind of order. An ordered form of description.</i>	Usually insufficient for assignments on its own. Often part of preparation for something else.
Categorisation. *	<i>Linear structure – according to 'types'. An ordered form of description.</i>	Occasionally useful for 'Compare / Contrast' tasks or as an organising model where a CORE STATEMENT does not apply. Usually a tool within a larger job.
Cause—Effect.	<i>Consequences, connections, results.</i>	Often leads into (or generates) explanation and/ or analysis.
Compare / Contrast.	<i>Similarities / Differences.</i>	Common essay/exam mode.
Summarising.	<i>Summing up; drawing out generalities.</i>	Often used to begin or end a piece.
Analysis.	<i>Usually involves information or data being assessed or tested.</i>	Good if it can develop into your own questions and qualifications within (and beyond?) the task allocated.
Evaluation.	<i>Judgements that arise from analysis.</i>	Implies you will weigh up and justify your assertions.

* *These modes have to be used with particular care in an essay or thesis – they have a place, but NEVER as a substitute for required analysis, evaluation, etc.*

Note: Other writing modes (such as 'Explanation' or 'Discussion') usually translate into some variation or combination of the above.

Which of these modes do you find most 'natural' to you ? Or most troublesome ? Can you say why ?
