

Approaches to essay writing

A: I don't plan my essays; it feels like a waste of time. I'd rather get on with the writing. I think better when I'm writing - how can I know what I'm going to say in advance?

There is no single right way of approaching an essay. Producing an assignment is often portrayed as a linear process of read → plan → write, but the reality rarely conforms to this. Many people think best as they are writing, and it is a valid way of developing and refining your ideas. However, somewhere in the process, it might be helpful to build in a stage of thinking about your structure and editing your writing accordingly. If you use writing to work out your ideas, then you are essentially writing for yourself; when you begin to consider structure, then you are writing for a reader. These are different processes, and a single draft is unlikely to be able to fulfill both functions. This resource contains some strategies to help you move your writing from one to the other. If you suffer from writer's block, it might also be useful to explore different ways of writing, so that you are not thinking about generating ideas, ordering them and expressing them all at once. See the section on [Finding a Clear Direction](#) for relevant guidance.

B: I try to plan my essays - that's what you're supposed to do, but maybe I'm not going about it the right way. It doesn't seem to help me produce better essays. I'm not sure what they mean when they say my ideas don't "flow".

There are many ways of planning your work - it may be that the strategies you are using are not the most helpful for you. Teachers, lecturers and the authors of books on study skills may have their own preferences for planning that they have found successful, but you may need to experiment independently to find a technique or range of techniques that work for you. You can evaluate the pros and cons of each, and maybe combine them to find your own personal approach. It may also be that you could look at the way in which you communicate your structure to your reader in the way that you write; it may be that this aspect could also benefit from some fresh approaches. This resource will suggest a range of techniques for planning and writing structure that you can experiment with and evaluate. See the section on [Effective Planning](#) for relevant guidance.

C: I do plan my essays! It really helps me to work my ideas out, and I really don't know why I keep getting feedback about my structure.

You probably do have a well-structured flow of ideas, and planning techniques that work well for you. However, structure is also something that happens in your writing. It may be that the structure of your argument is not apparent to your reader, as you have not articulated it in the way that you write. Sometimes ideas can be so familiar and clear to the author that it is hard to tell whether they will be clear to the reader also. It is probably possible for the reader to reconstruct the reasoning behind the order of your ideas, but it is the writer's role to signal structure clearly. This resource will help you to review your planning techniques, but will also offer ways to signpost the reader through your essay so that the structure is apparent and easy to recognise. See the section on [Communicating Structure Effectively](#) for more relevant guidance.