Writing essays

Analysing essay topics

Note any words of direction

- These might include: discuss, discuss critically, discuss the importance of, assess, justify, evaluate, analyse.

Understand the essay question

- Make sure you know the precise meaning of every word in the essay question. Use
  - your general dictionary for unfamiliar words such as intrinsic, core values
  - and a subject-specific dictionary, for example the APA Dictionary of Psychology, for words such as proof, random sample, significance level.

Think about the different parts of the question

- Decide how many parts the question has.
- List the areas you will probably have to research. It may help to write yourself a brief task description: "First find out what a market niche is, then see what significance this has for marketing. Next…"

Freethinking

- On some topics you already have some general knowledge. To develop your own viewpoint, try to step outside your familiar cultural assumptions and values by asking questions like:
  - What is the ‘western family’?
  - Is there a typical ‘western family’ now?
  - What is the function of a family, anyway?
  - Is it necessary? For whom?
  - What kind of family is/was found in non-industrial societies?

- If you are having difficulty getting started, brainstorm the topic by thinking about it as broadly as you can and jot down what comes to mind.

- Make a mind-map (or some rough notes) of your ideas. Add to this map as you research the essay. Try not to be overwhelmed by other writers’ views. (see QuickRef 25 for more information on brainstorming and mind-mapping)

Other useful references

Arnaudet ML & Barrett ME 1984, Approaches to academic reading and writing, Prentice Hall Regents, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.
The Structure of an Essay

Introduction

(Approximately 10% of the total length. May be one paragraph or several, depending on essay length)

- Introduce the topic
- Provide background information
- Limit the scope of discussion
- Define/states the topic/question
- Present the plan of coverage including your line of argument/viewpoint/conclusions

Note: You can set your own agenda to avoid over generalisation or too broad a focus

Body

- Each paragraph should have one main point
- Topic sentence
- Link
- Topic sentence
- Link
- Topic sentence
- Link
- Topic sentence

Topic sentences carry the theme/outline/argument.

Conclusion

- Sum up your argument/information with reference to the essay question
- Perhaps mention wider implications/future directions

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Adapted from: T.Chang, Assignment Writing for Sociology Students (1992)