

# ELS

**Effective  
Learning  
Service**



# Essay Writing



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## **What do tutors want to see in an essay?**

- that you have understood the question
- that you have structured the work clearly and logically
- that you show evidence of relevant reading

## **What are the key stages in writing an essay?**

- analyse the task
- ask yourself what you know and need to know about the topic
- make a plan of the structure of essay
- read and research and note-take
- reflect on and refine your plan
- write the first draft – main body, then introduction and conclusion
- plan your time and set goals

This leaflet will outline the key stages you need to go through and will also show you how to write a good paragraph, an introduction, and a conclusion.

Subject preferences may vary. It is always a good idea to check the preferred format for your assignment.

## What is an essay?

Essays allow students to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of a topic based on research and reading. The skill of good essay writing is to be able to critically discuss and evaluate ideas within a set word limit. The focus of an essay is usually on developing an argument or analysing ideas rather than on description. The essay is written in paragraphs and has a structure that includes: introduction, body and conclusion.

### **Introduction**

The introduction sets the scene for the whole essay. You should not rewrite the essay question. Instead, the purpose of the introduction is to identify the topic, the position being argued and the main reasons for that position. The introduction will normally move from more general statements related to the question, to a specific statement of the main idea or argument that will be discussed in the body.

### **Body**

Here you use evidence from scholarly readings to explain and support in detail the reasons for your point of view given in the introduction. The body contains a number of paragraphs that link together to develop a strong argument or discussion of the topic. Generally, a paragraph needs to be at least four to six sentences long. A single sentence does not form a paragraph in an academic essay and bullet points are usually not acceptable.

### **Conclusion**

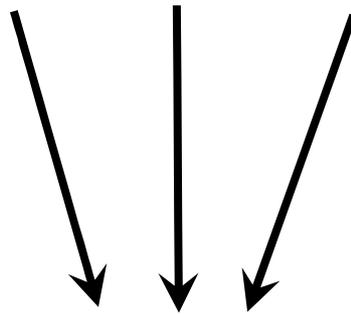
The purpose of the conclusion is to summarise and make final evaluative comments on the ideas presented in the essay. It should not contain new ideas or examples. It is crucial to link the conclusion to the essay question.

# The structure of an essay

## Introduction

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

general



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

more specific

## Body

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

each paragraph should have one main point

< topic sentence

link

< topic sentence

link

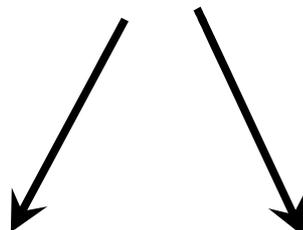
< topic sentence

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

## Analyse the task

Analysing the question is crucial. It is easy to plan and write an essay and then realise you have only answered part of the question, or failed to understand a key word. Take your time and go through the following steps:

- Do you understand all the words in the title?
- What are the key **'task'** words? are you being asked to 'discuss' or 'describe' or 'critically evaluate'...and what is the difference?
- What is the main **content** required? What topics, or issues are you asked to look at?
- Underline or circle key words so that you don't forget about them.
- Try and rewrite the essay title in your own words to check you understand it.
- Discuss the title with other students to help you work out what is wanted
- If you are still not sure, speak to your lecturer.

## Gather initial thoughts and information

- Think about what you already know about the topic, however basic
- Make a rough plan or diagram of all relevant material.
- Ask yourself: what do I already know? What do I think about it?
- What do I need to find out? Where might I look for information?

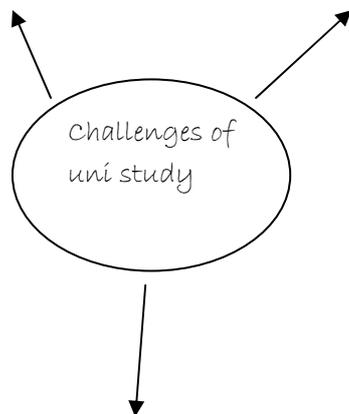
Below are two ways to start gathering ideas for essay title: "Discuss the key differences between school and university study" – find a method that works for you.

School study:

DIFFERENCES  
see teacher a lot  
short deadlines  
quick feedback

Challenges

plan time  
wider reading  
less support



Positive aspects  
more independent  
learn to plan time

Ideas for essay plan:

What's different about uni study?  
What's hard? Why?

- have to plan time
- doing wider reading
- not much contact with tutor...

School - key features

- can talk to teacher
- short deadlines
- quick feedback
- ...

What are positives of uni study?

- more independence
- develop new skills...

## Make a structure plan

Now make a rough outline plan at this stage, **before** you do your research. The aim of this is to help you focus your reading, and make some decisions about how to structure the material. You can return to this and make a more detailed plan **after** the research.

- Using your first plan as a guide, map out the main sections of your essay.
- Allow roughly 10% of the words for both introduction and conclusion.
- Break the essay into 3 or 4 sections – decide which will be longest, which shortest.

This helps you focus on how much/little you can research and write on each.

Below is a sample plan for the 1500 word essay:

### **'Discuss the key differences between school and university study'.**

- First, main sections of the essay are decided and rough word counts attached – these are only rough and can change!
- Next, each section is developed a bit further. Possible topics for paragraphs are sketched in, and a note of where research evidence is needed (section 1 gives an example).

<b>Introduction</b> – roughly 150 words
<b>Section 1 – key features of school study, impact on student 250+</b> Paragraph 1 – 150 words <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• close contact with teachers –explain and give ref?</li><li>• short deadlines - explain</li><li>• set reading, textbooks – explain and ref?</li></ul> Paragraph 2 – 100 words discuss positive and negative impact of all the above
<b>Section 2 – key features of university study, discuss impact 250+</b>
<b>Section 3 – key challenges in moving to university 400+</b>
<b>Section 4 –how can universities/students tackle challenges? 300+</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> – 100-150 words

Plan points  
for  
paragraphs

Main  
body

### **This is only a rough plan!**

However, it gives you useful starting points for your reading, and makes the essay feel more 'real'. You can work on one section at a time, collect ideas from your reading, and re-shape the plan as you go.

## Reading and researching

Look through the points you want to address in the rough plan, and think about what sort of reading you need to support these.

Use reading lists and references from lectures and tutorials as a basis for your research. Your reading might include books, research articles, and online material.

Some of your reading may be more general, to help you get more of an idea of a topic before you decide what you think.

Some of your reading will involve more skimming and scanning – searching for ideas and evidence to support points you want to make in the essay.

### **Tips for reading:**

- Avoid reading through whole books and chapters which you hope will be useful. Instead, use your rough plan as a guide and search for relevant pages/paragraphs.
- Skim and scan for information, and use the index of a book to find relevant pages and paragraphs.
- Read in short bursts – 15-20 minutes - then stop and ask yourself: how is this relevant to my essay? How does it link to what I already know? What more do I need to find out on this and why?

### **Tips for note-taking:**

- Keep notes brief.
- Take notes with the essay title in mind. What might be useful? How will I use this?
- Make a note of any sources. Note down author, title and page information so that you can find it again. Be careful to be clear when the notes are quoting the author's actual words.

A **reading grid** can help you keep track of your reading, and think about how you will use or refer to it in your essay:

<b>Author, book</b>	<b>topic</b>	<b>Key idea (paraphrase)</b>	<b>Good quotations</b>	<b>How to use?</b>
Jane Smith, 1998, Caring for carers, Pub: Nelson – chapter 5	Effect of stress on carer	carer stress can go unnoticed – WHO report on invisibility of carers and lack of organised support, also low priority	'Govt. has failed to acknowledge the true debt owed to carers' (p77).	Mention in introduction  Find date of WHO report

## Reflect and evaluate – refine your plan

After you have researched, and your ideas are more developed, it is time to write a second plan. This might be based on the first plan, but you may need to rethink the structure you outlined before, in the light of your research. Look back at your first plan and your ideas, and use the following questions as a guide:

### **Check the question –have you addressed every part of it in your plan?**

It is easy to overlook parts of the question, especially if your reading has led you in new directions. You may need to go back and think about a new area of the question, or do some more reading to fill a gap.

### **Have your ideas changed about the structure of the essay?**

If you have changed your mind about your main points, or want to find space for some new material from your reading, you may need to cut down some sections and expand others. Decisions made now will save a lot of confusion when you start to write.

### **How and where will you use the research?**

Is it really all useful? Decide where you will use the points as evidence or examples in your essay and put notes in your detailed plan. Do not be afraid to leave some things out altogether. Keep all your research notes, but be selective about what goes into the final essay plan.

### **Can you express each main point as a topic sentence?**

Specify each point the essay will make by writing the main point of each paragraph in a single sentence. You may end up with 8-12 sentences that give you a summary or 'overview' of the whole argument, and tell you that you have a well-structured essay plan.

### **Does each point relate to the question?**

Check you have not gone off track, and that the paragraphs are in the most logical order.

Now make a **detailed paragraph plan of the main body**, with notes on where your reading will fit in.

### **Remember:**

Planning and writing an essay is not a straightforward linear process. Much time may be spent at this stage going back to the reading and rethinking your plan. This is all part of the process, and not a backward step – quite the opposite.

When you have an outline, you can make a few rough notes on what you think you could put in the introduction and conclusion, but it is best to write these **after** you have written the main body.

## Writing – the first draft

**(You may want to look at the ‘paragraphs’ section of this leaflet first.)**

It’s OK to start writing your draft before you have done all your planning and researching. It can be useful to try writing up a few ideas, even paragraphs, as you go, so that you see how long it takes to express something in your own words.

However, a full draft is best tackled when you have read and planned enough to produce a detailed plan of the whole thing.

- **Consider writing the main body of the essay first.** The introduction is best written after this, as you are then clearer about what you are introducing. The conclusion is, fairly obviously, best written last.
- **Start writing a section of the main body that you feel clear about,** and for which you have enough reading and references. It doesn’t matter what order you write sections in. You can look at ways to link them, and improve the flow, later on in the process.
- **Write quite quickly.** Use short sentences which explain your meaning in a clear way. It is usually better to write 3 short sentences than 1 long one which can be hard to follow. Don’t worry about style or grammar at this point, but concentrate on what points you are trying to make.
- As you draft each section, or group of paragraphs, make time later in the day to **re-read your work.** How does it read? Do your paragraphs start clearly? Do they follow each other in a logical way? Starting to think about your work critically early on can help you when you come to edit it in more detail later on.

### **A word about planning your time**

**Essay planning and researching should take a few weeks** – and about the same time, or maybe less, should then be left to write the essay. Most essays would benefit from more time spent on planning.

**Set yourself weekly goals,** working back from the deadline. That way, you can motivate yourself towards the weekly goal, instead of a distant deadline.

**Plans have to be flexible.** If you can’t meet the goal, then just adapt plans for the following week.

Try to **finish a full draft of the essay about 7-10 days before the deadline,** so that you have time to improve it. This can make a huge difference to your final work, and your grade.

## What is a paragraph?

### A strong paragraph

- is a group of related sentences which develop **one main theme or idea**
- has **unity**: it discusses only one idea
- has **coherence**: the idea is developed in a clear and logical way

The theme of one paragraph should follow logically from the theme of the previous paragraph and should lead on to the theme of the next. All the paragraphs should develop the main idea of the essay presented in the thesis statement in your introduction.

### Structure of paragraph:

1. **a topic sentence**: states the topic and the controlling idea and is usually the first sentence in the paragraph.
2. **supporting sentences**: to develop the point you are making using information, explanation, examples, and with a smooth flow from one sentence to the next.
3. **evidence**: your point should be supported by evidence from the literature or by an example from the subject area.

### How long should a paragraph be?

A paragraph needs to develop an idea or new aspect of an argument, and it is impossible to do this in just a sentence or two. In typical student writing, a paragraph should be a minimum of four or five sentences but not normally much longer than half a page.

### Sample paragraph from essay on the positive and negative effects of tourism:

The solutions that have been adopted by governments have not shown much effectiveness or efficiency (Pallant 2009). Although governments have made serious efforts to tackle the negative effects, sometimes by enacting strict laws, mass tourism is still causing many problems, and the intensity of degradation that has been registered in the environment has not declined. According to McCormack and Slaughter (2010), the traffic of ivory and rare animal furs has increased considerably and gangs are becoming more organised because of the potential profits that can be obtained from this traffic. Strict laws do not seem to dissuade the gangs from carrying out these illegal and destructive activities. In addition, in spite of the huge efforts made by the international courts and the organisations for the protection and promotion of children's rights, Slaughter (2009) states that there are still hundreds of thousands of tourists reported to practise sex tourism and to abuse poverty. Moreover, there is a marked deterioration in the behaviour of young people associated with tourism, such as alcohol-related problems and violence, which governments have been unable to prevent despite their efforts to do so (Bailey et al. 2009).

**Comment:** This is a well-developed paragraph of appropriate length. The first sentence is the topic sentence with a central idea (*solutions adopted by governments*) and a controlling idea (*solutions have not been effective*) which is developed through the paragraph with examples supported by evidence from the literature.

## Signalling words within paragraphs

Look at paragraphs 1 and 2. Which is more coherent (easy to follow)?

### Sample paragraph 1

One difference among the world's seas and oceans is that the salinity varies in different climate zones. The Baltic Sea in northern Europe is only one-fourth as salty as the Red Sea in the Middle East. There are reasons for this. In warm climates, water evaporates rapidly. The concentration of salt is greater. The surrounding land is dry and does not contribute much freshwater to dilute the salty seawater. In cold climate zones, water evaporates slowly. The runoff created by melting snow adds a considerable amount of freshwater to dilute the saline seawater.

### Sample paragraph 2

One difference among the world's seas and oceans is that the salinity varies in different climate zones. For example, the Baltic Sea in northern Europe is only one-fourth as salty as the Red Sea in the Middle East. There are reasons for this. First of all, in warm climates, water evaporates rapidly; therefore, the concentration of salt is greater. Second, the surrounding land is dry and does not contribute much freshwater to dilute the salty seawater. In cold climate zones, on the other hand, water evaporates slowly. Furthermore, the runoff created by melting snow adds a considerable amount of freshwater to dilute the saline seawater.

**Paragraph 2** is more coherent because it contains **signalling words** - expressions which lead the reader from one idea to the next. They show the reader how the parts of a paragraph are connected. Note the punctuation (comma) used with these words.

Below is a list of signalling phrases you can use to connect ideas between sentences. These do not need to start a sentence but can also be used within a sentence (see 'on the other hand' in sample paragraph two).

addition	moreover, in addition, apart from this, furthermore
cause and effect	as a result, because of this, for this reason, therefore, consequently
comparison/similar ideas	in the same way, similarly, likewise
contrast/opposite ideas	in contrast, however, on the other hand,
example	for example, for instance
explanation	in other words, to be more precise
generalisation	as a rule, generally, normally, on the whole, in most case, usually
summary/conclusion	finally, in brief, in short, overall, therefore, in conclusion
time/order	at first, initially, eventually, finally, lastly, next, first(ly),

## Linking ideas between paragraphs

As an academic essay consists of more than one paragraph, you need to link each paragraph. Paragraphs should not stand in isolation. Do not expect the reader to make the connection between your ideas; make those connections explicit. This way, the reader will be led in a logical order through your argument and will be reminded of your current theme or angle.

The signalling words in the table above may be of use when connecting paragraphs together. However, you may often need a longer sentence to help create a link from paragraph to a paragraph. The topic sentence can form part of the linking sentence or follow it.

Imagine you are outlining the positive and negative issues of a given topic. You might begin your 'positive' paragraph with one of the following:

- One of the main advantages of X is...**  
**OR One of the positive effects of X is....**

The next paragraph might then begin:

- A further advantage (of X) is.....**  
**OR X is a further advantage worth considering...**

When you are ready to change your discussion to the negative issues, you could write:

- Having considered the positive effects of X, the negative issues need to be taken into account.**  
**OR Despite the positive effects outlined above, there are also negative issues to be considered.**

**Start of three consecutive paragraphs in an essay:**

Having discussed many of the advantages of fast food in the world, some important setbacks need to be considered. Within the last ten years, there has been an awareness of the dangers of eating fast food. Fatty food is unhealthy, .....

A further drawback is that, despite all efforts to keep the environment clean and tidy, it is almost impossible to keep litter off the streets. Takeaway packs and unwanted souvenirs from fast food restaurants can often be found littering the streets.....

The final disadvantage worth considering is the advertising of unhealthy food which targets young children.....

**Checking for paragraph links as you read through your work**

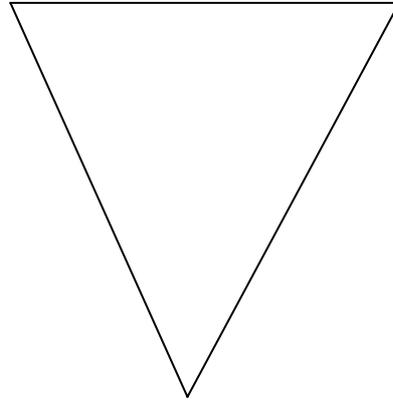
- Does the start of my paragraph show my reader what it will be about?
- Does my paragraph add to or elaborate on a point made previously and, if so, have I explicitly shown this with an appropriate linking phrase?
- Does my paragraph introduce a completely new point or a different viewpoint to the one before? Have I shown this with an appropriate linking phrase?
- Have I repeatedly used similar linking phrases? (If yes, try to vary them.)

## Writing the introduction

The introduction is important as it sets the tone for the reader by giving some idea of the content and the writer's position and suggests how the piece of work is organised. It is normally approximately 10% of the total word count of the essay.

### Key features that are usually included in the introduction; general, narrowing down to specific:

- general point about broad issue or topic discussed
- more focus on particular aspect of this topic
- justification for your choice of focus
- definitions of key terms as necessary
- focussed statement about main argument of position you will consider and some idea of how it will develop through the essay



Don't include unnecessary background information. The introduction should keep moving toward the starting point of the essay, not digress into details that slow things down.

Below is an introduction from a student essay. Each sentence is numbered. Look at the key below for a description of what each sentence is doing.

#### **The application of renewable energy technology in remote areas**

1) Our life is heavily dependent on the supply of energy. 2) After World War II, especially, developed countries received great benefits from electricity. 3) However, today more than 30% of the global population still live in off-grid areas, without electricity (Hogue 2008). 4) This is mostly in developing countries or remote parts of developed countries, such as mountainous areas or isolated islands. 5) Economically, it would be very challenging to produce electricity for these areas (Gillett 2006). 6) As developing countries grow economically, the demand for energy will increase rapidly, thus adding to the pollution problems caused by fossil fuels. 7) Renewable energy technology could be the solution to these problems. 8) This essay will first demonstrate the need for electricity in remote areas, and then the extent to which renewable energy technology can meet this need in remote areas will be examined by looking at some examples.

<b>KEY</b>	1) general statement	5, 6) problems and justification
	2,3,4) background	7) position you will consider (thesis statement)
		8) outline of structure

The exact form of the introduction will vary according to the particular requirements of an individual assignment. However, the reader should feel they have been given the general background scene, introduced to the key issues, have an idea of how the argument will develop, and actually **want** to read on.

## Writing the conclusion

Just as your introduction is the first impression your reader will have of your writing, your conclusion is the last. A good conclusion will show that you have successfully answered the question in an organised way.

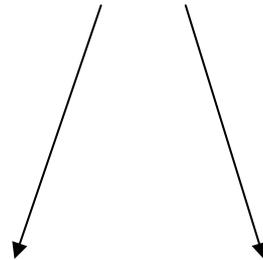
A conclusion is normally approximately 8% of the total word count of the essay.

### **The conclusion at the end of your essay serves a number of functions.**

- It is the final part of your text and so needs to pull together all the main ideas.
- It should refer back to what you outlined in your introduction and to your thesis.
- It is an opportunity to show the extent to which you have been able to deal with the issues involved in your thesis.

### **The conclusion moves from specific to general. It should:**

- restate your main argument
- emphasise or reinforce the main points of your argument in a concise way
- include final broad statements (about possible implications, future directions for research, limitations, to qualify the conclusion).



**NEVER** introduce new information or ideas in the conclusion. If they are important, include them in your main text.

## Writing the conclusion continued

### Example conclusions: one good and one not so good:

Below are two conclusions to a **2000** word essay on the following topic:

*Discuss the causes of stereotyping in the mass media and to what extent they influence social attitudes.*

Which of these meets the criteria for a good conclusion?

#### Sample one

My essay has looked, therefore, at the problems caused by racial stereotyping, focussing on the lack of ethnic minorities working in the mass media. It has been seen that this bias causes a parallel bias in the interpretation of news event. Indeed, the problem is even more acute in the United States. According to a survey conducted by the Pocock Institute (1998), only 7% of newspaper staff are black or Hispanic, which is totally unrepresentative of the population as a whole.

81 words

**Comment:** This is too short. It does not refer back to the question of social stereotyping. It does not move from specific to general. It introduces a new idea at the end and stops short.

#### Sample two

Stereotypes, therefore, have always existed in society, and probably will always do so. The mass media is a relatively recent phenomenon, which is one reason for the widely differing views on its role in creating and fostering stereotypical images. The actual causes of stereotyping in the mass media have been shown to be surprisingly diverse, and, since laws are often ineffective, it is society itself which must prevent any form of stereotyping which leads to suffering. Things are changing, however, and in some areas very quickly; some commonplace stereotypes of only twenty years ago are today virtually taboo. It is society which must indirectly control the mass media, not vice versa. However, in an increasingly 'global' world, controlled by fewer corporations and individuals who are more than willing to use stereotyping in the mass media as a tool to control society, we must be more and more vigilant to avoid this cynical manipulation.

153 words

(Adapted from: <http://library.bcu.ac.uk/learner/writingguides/1.23.htm>)

**Comment:** This is much better. The length is about right. It refers back to the question. It summarises the main points of the essay and finishes with a broad comment of possible implications in the future.

## Academic writing style – a very brief guide

### Use straightforward language

- Avoid long and over-complicated sentences. In general, three shorter sentences are better than one long one.
- Be concise and to the point; e.g: use 'now' or 'currently' instead of 'at this point in time' or 'at the time of writing'.
- Try not to use pompous language; e.g: use 'find out' rather than 'endeavour to ascertain'.
- Avoid jargon, slang or cliches.

### Use impersonal language

Academic writing should be in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person – avoid 'I' and 'we' and 'you'.

For example:

Don't say 'I interviewed the planning officer...'

Instead say 'The planning officer was interviewed....'

Avoid 'emotionally loaded' words or phrases;

e.g. 'The research was not very good...'

better to say 'The research was unproductive, in that...' and explain why.

### Be precise

Avoid using terms that lack a precise meaning, such as 'nice', 'good' or 'excellent'. Terms like these are subjective; your idea of what is meant by 'good' is not necessarily shared by anyone else.

Academic writing needs to be **precise** and **clear** to convey your meaning.

### Avoid generalisations

For example: 'Many people agree that young children's language skills develop through interaction with carers'.

An alternative might be: '*According to Jones (1998)*, young children's language skills develop through interaction with carers'.

### Use cautious language

Cautious language shows you are aware that there may be other evidence:

'Young children's language skills **may** develop most quickly through interaction with carers' (Jones 1990).

### Be careful with abbreviations or acronyms

The first time you use one, write the words out in full;

e.g. 'The recent changes in the National Health Service (NHS)...'

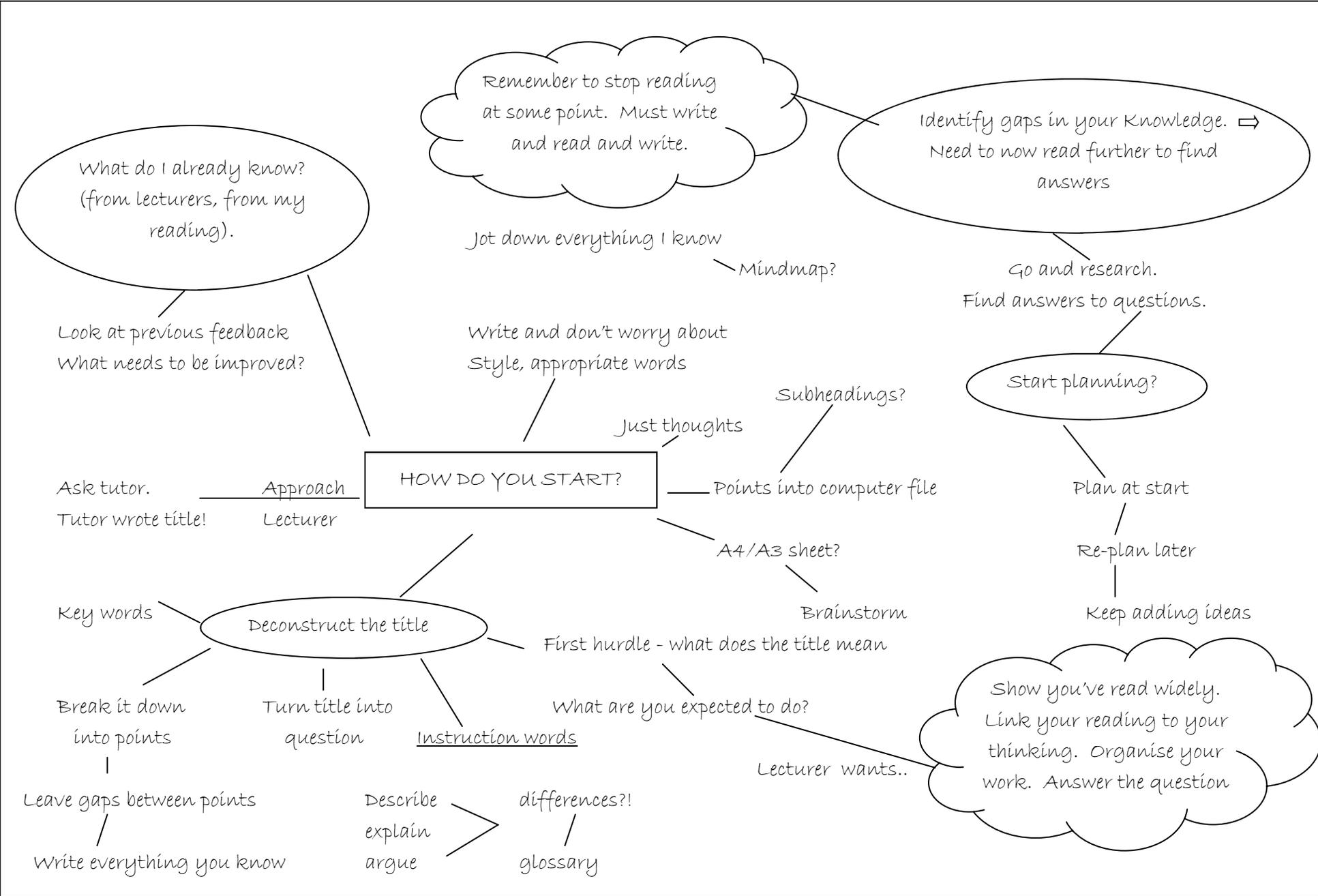
### Other things to avoid

Direct questions: e.g. 'Surely it is time for a change?' : too emotional.

Contractions: e.g 'didn't' instead of 'did not' : always write words in full.

# Planning an essay - a mindmap with an overview

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From: Gillett, A 2009. Successful Academic Writing. Harlow, Pearson Education Ltd