

2012

Planning your essay writing



HARRIET WAS STILL IN THE
MIDDLE OF HER ESSAY.



This pack has been created using materials from the
above Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning



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Essay writing

Expressing yourself through writing is a challenging and fulfilling activity. It is an integral part of the skills set that you will develop at university and it is an effective tool to demonstrate to a tutor your ability to communicate clearly. Essay-style questions are regularly used to draw out an in-depth answer to a complex issue.

An under-valued aspect of essay writing is that it can be part of our learning process. That is, we write to learn our material rather than write what we have learned...

Figure 1 - The main aims of writing an essay



Writing essays demonstrates your ability to group ideas in a logical manner. It allows you to express your thinking and demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of a topic. Figure 2 provides the main purpose of writing an essay and is a guide to what a tutor will be looking for in your writing.

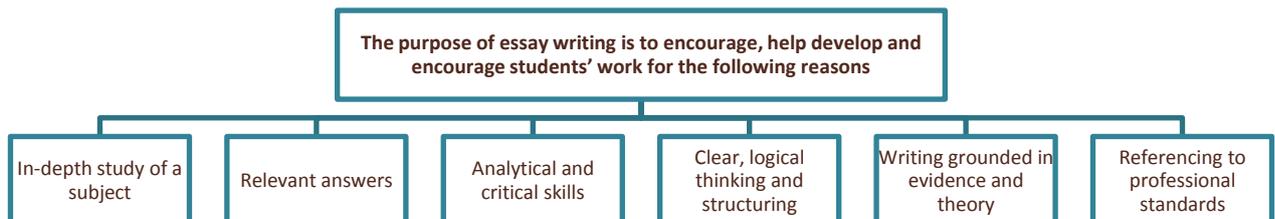
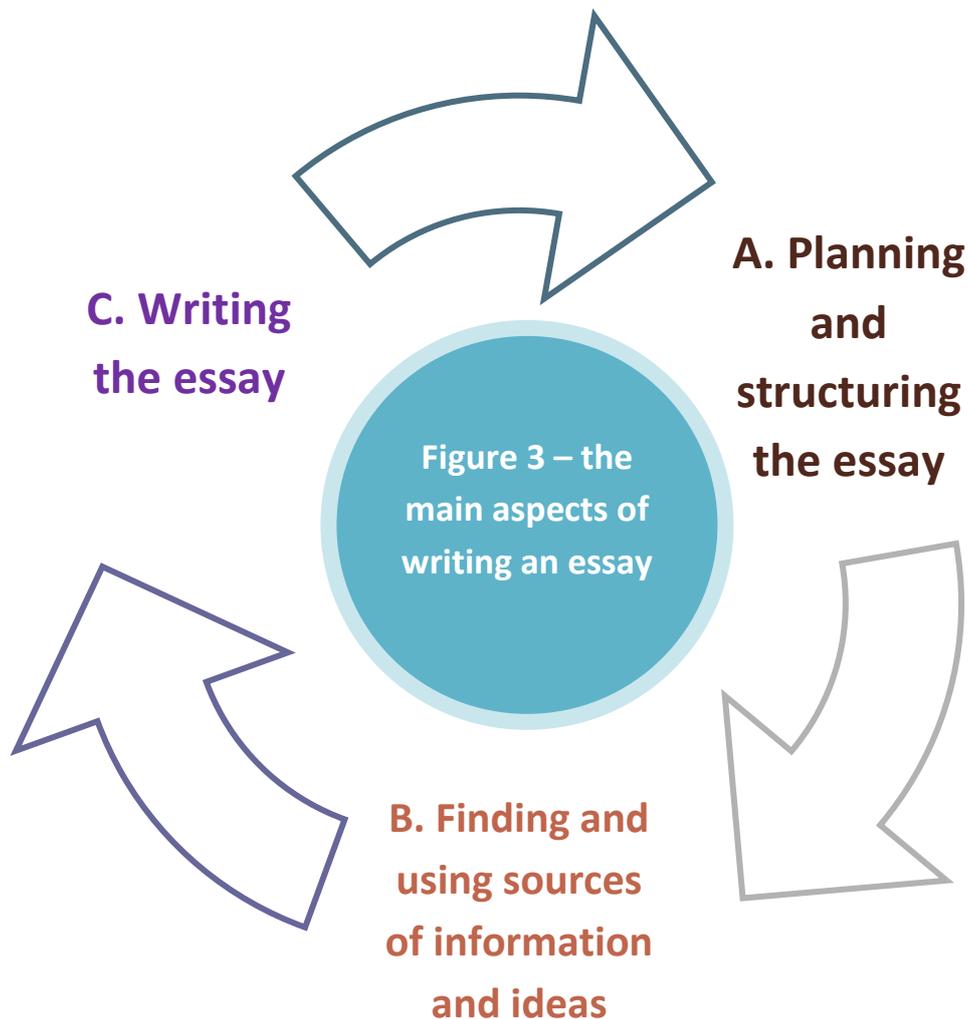


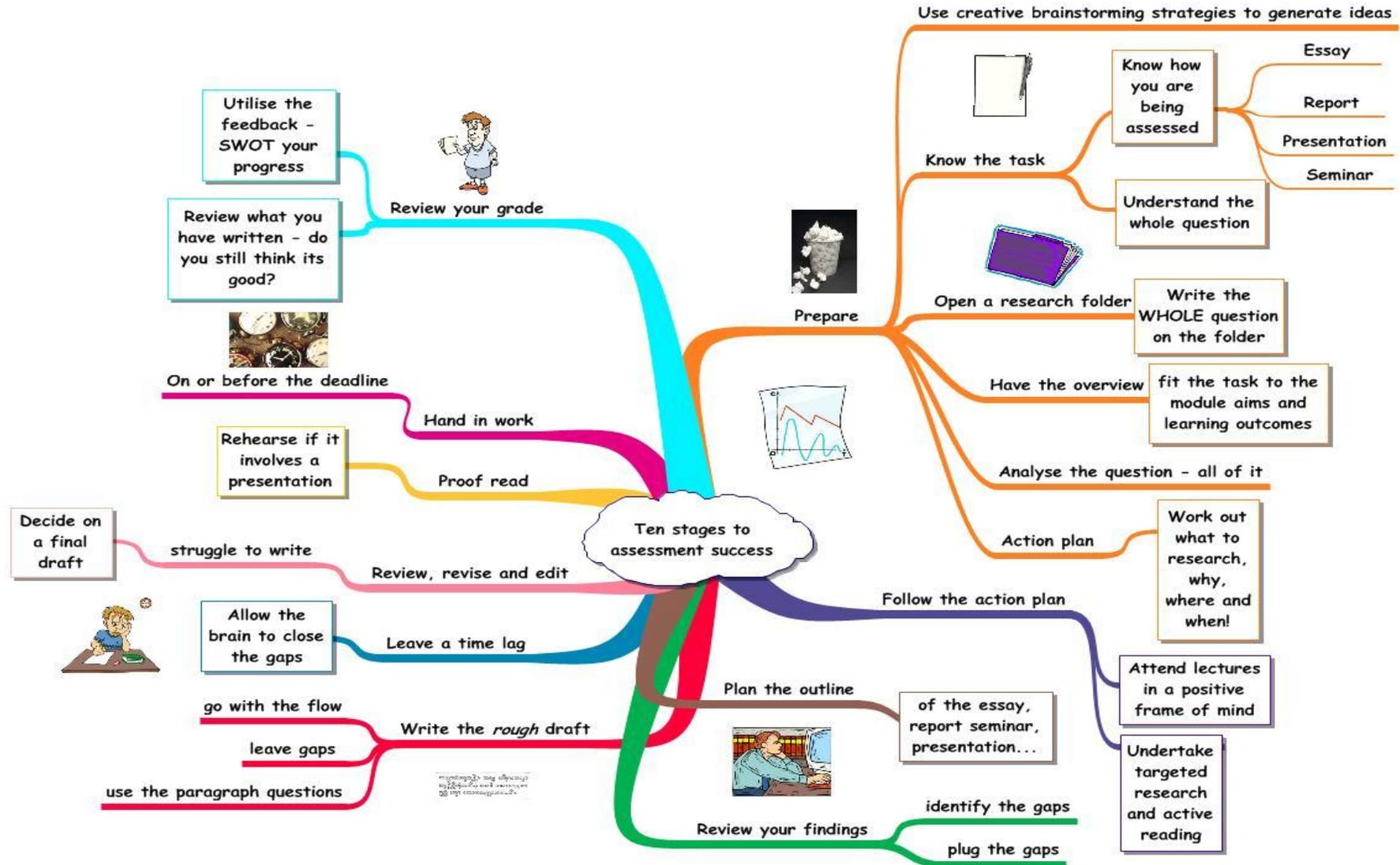
Figure 2 - The purpose of writing an essay

Aspects of essay writing



The task of doing an assignment can be a daunting thought for any student. When preparing it is important to break it down into fundamental stages to make it both easier to handle and to give yourself the best chance of completing it successfully with good results. Figure 3 above shows the main three aspects of writing an essay. Figure 3.1 below breaks this down further and offers pointers for you to consider whilst you go through the process of completing your assignment.

Figure 3.1 – Ten stages of completing an assignment



Planning and structuring your essay

Principles

- Work from your own ideas first
- Work out what the set question(s) means and what it requires
- Spend time working out everything you need to know and everything you need to find out to answer the essay question
- Develop your own ideas and your own essay plan or structure for the essay **before** looking at other sources such as your lecture notes, books and journal articles.

What are the advantages in doing this?

- You will be less tempted to use others' ideas and structures uncritically if you have thought about the essay yourself first, and written down ideas and an essay plan
- Rather, you would be using others' ideas to **support your own analysis** rather than mindlessly copying from them
- You are therefore less likely to plagiarise others' work
- It will be easier for you to use information and ideas you read about **in your own framework** rather than in others' frameworks
- Your work is likely to be more interesting and relevant to the question asked if you use your own ideas and essay structure as a basis
- You are likely to enjoy this kind of research and writing more as you are using your own mind and intelligence to make your own choices about what material to include and where to use it **in your structure**
- Using your own ideas and structure (even if they need to be modified later) give you the opportunity to be an **independent** learner.

Understanding the assignment question

A tutor will often set different types of essay question in which to test you. Figure 4 offers typical examples of these, followed on page 5 and 6 by a table of types of essay you might be asked to write.

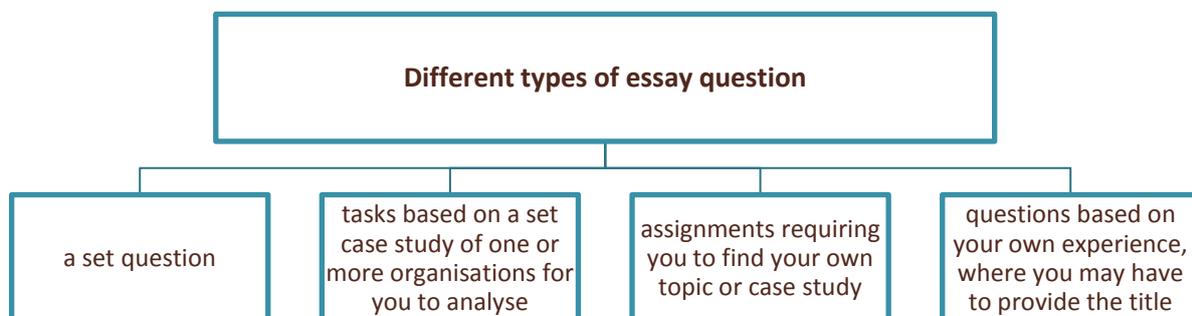


Figure 3 – Types of essay questions

Before you begin to work on reading and writing for your assignment have a clear picture of what the assignment question is asking you to do. This means understanding both the individual words, and also the general scope of the question. This will help to realistically plan when you will complete the work so that it is submitted on time.

In the table below, there are some basic techniques and questions which will help you to understand an assignment question better.

1	Read the assignment title slowly to yourself a few times
2	Underline words which guide you on the subject information you need
3	Underline other significant words which guide you on the approach or task involved
4	Write the title out and try to work out how many topics there are within it
5	Identify any words you don't really understand and examine them
6	Write the question out more fully in your own words
7	What are the central questions?
8	What topical issues does it refer to?
9	Discuss the assignment with someone else if you can
10	How does the title link to what you have read or heard in lectures? What else does it ask for that you will need to find out?

Note: *Asking questions early will help you to feel more in control, as it **helps you to think more critically and independently about the topic.***

Essay questions can look complicated, but most of them will turn out to be a lot less complex than they first appear. To fully understand what a question is asking, a question can be broken up into components, as shown in Figure 5.

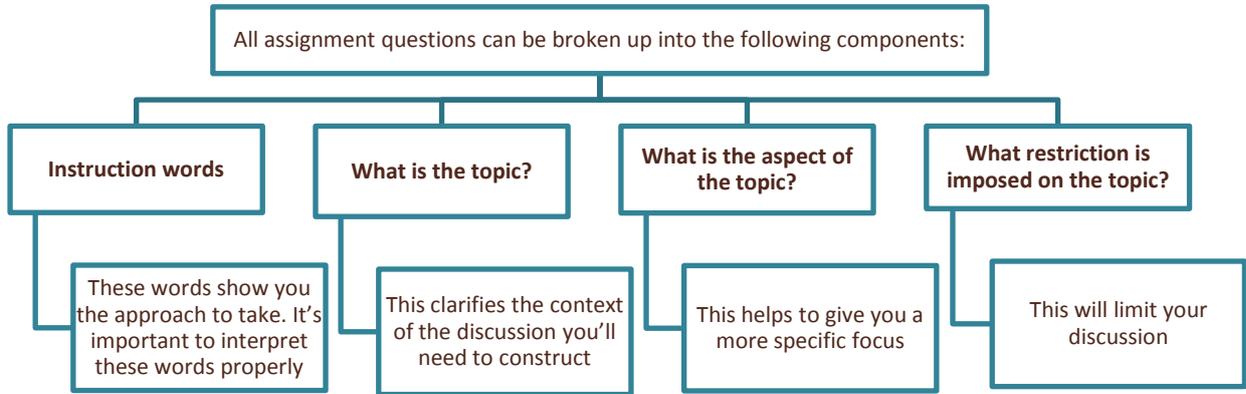


Figure 4 - Recognising the components of the task

Here is an example question to demonstrate what we mean:

Task	•Assess the importance of sport participation for disabled adults living in the UK
Instruction	•Assess
Topic	•Sport participation
Aspect	•Importance
Restriction 1	•Disabled adults
Restriction 2	•UK

Knowing exactly what a task is asking will help you to recognise the scope and limitations of the essay you have to write. It will also reduce the risk of producing a piece of work that waffles and strays from the question.

Examples and categories of instruction word

Instruction words indicate the approach or style you should follow for the essay. In general, there are four common types of question which instruction words fit into. These will require different approaches.

1. Description

Define	Describe	Detail	Outline	List	Annotate	Give an account of
State	Summarise	Present	Relate	Trace	Explain how	Delineate

This is considered the most straightforward question, as you need to give the main information on a topic without comment. Evidence and specific examples are sometimes needed to support these main facts.

2. Discussion

Analyse	Explore	Discuss	Comment	Illustrate	Interpret	Account for
Explain	Review	Consider	Debate	Show how	Examine	

You should provide the main points of a topic, and then examine each point made and look at different arguments. This essay requires more 'critical thinking' and organising. You have to select material and discuss it. Any comments should be on the points you make, and supported by evidence.

3. Evaluation

Criticise	Evaluate	Justify	Comment	Investigate	Interpret	Judge
Reason	Decide					

Select the material you want to present to develop a line of thought or argument. You are usually asked to come to a conclusion and to back your view by a discussion of the evidence or reasoning involved. This is often considered the most 'challenging' of the essay types. You should present selected facts, and discuss them in such a way to direct the reader to a conclusion.

4. Comparison

Compare	Contrast	Differentiate	Distinguish	Debate	Show the relationship between
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This type of essay usually asks you to find similarities and/or differences between different viewpoints, evidence or facts. This helps you give a clear structure to your essay. Comparative essays can require description, discussion or evaluation, depending on what you are asked to do.

Essays like this use task words like....

'**Identify** the main organisational theories underpinning modern management and **discuss** their relevance to the Tourist Industry'

It's not always easy to understand what an instruction word means. Here is a list of the most common instruction keywords with an explanation for each.

Common keywords used in essay questions	Definition
Account for	Give reasons for; explain why something happens.
Analyse	Break up into parts; investigate.
Assess	Decide the importance of & give reasons for.
Comment on	Identify and write about the main issues; give your reactions based on what you've read/heard in lectures. Avoid just personal opinion.
Compare	Look for the similarities between two things. Show the relevance or consequences of these similarities. Perhaps conclude which is preferable.
Contrast	Bring out the differences between two items or arguments. Show whether the differences are significant. Perhaps give reasons why one is preferable.
Criticise	Requires an answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses, and which also indicates any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. It requires a balanced answer.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.
Define	Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show you understand how the definition may be problematic.
Describe	Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show you understand how the definition may be problematic.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate; give reasons for and against; examine the implications.
Distinguish between	Bring out the differences between.
Evaluate	Assess and give your judgement about the merit, importance or usefulness of something. Back your judgement with evidence.
Examine	Look closely into something.
Explain	Make clear why something happens, or is the way it is; interpret and account for; give reasons for.
Explain How	Describe how something works.
Explore	Examine thoroughly; consider from a variety of viewpoints.
Illustrate	Make something clear and explicit, giving examples of evidence.
Interpret	Show the meaning and relevance of data or other material presented.

Justify	Give evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made; answer the main objections which might be made.
Narrate	Outline what happened.
Outline	Give the main points/features/general principles; show the main structure and interrelations; omit details and examples.
Prove/Disprove	Both of these require answers which demonstrate the logical arguments and/or evidence connected with a proposition: prove requires the "pro" points, and disprove requires the "contra" points.
Relate	(a) Narrate (b) Show similarities and connections between.
State	Give the main features briefly and clearly.
Summarise/Outline	Draw out the main points only; omit details and examples.
To what extent...	Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which it is not true.
Trace	Follow the development or history of an event or process.

Note: *The explanation given for these words is a rough guide only. You must always go by the total meaning of the title or question. Read the question carefully and do not jump to conclusions about what is required on the basis of these words only.*

Now that you have read these ask yourself:

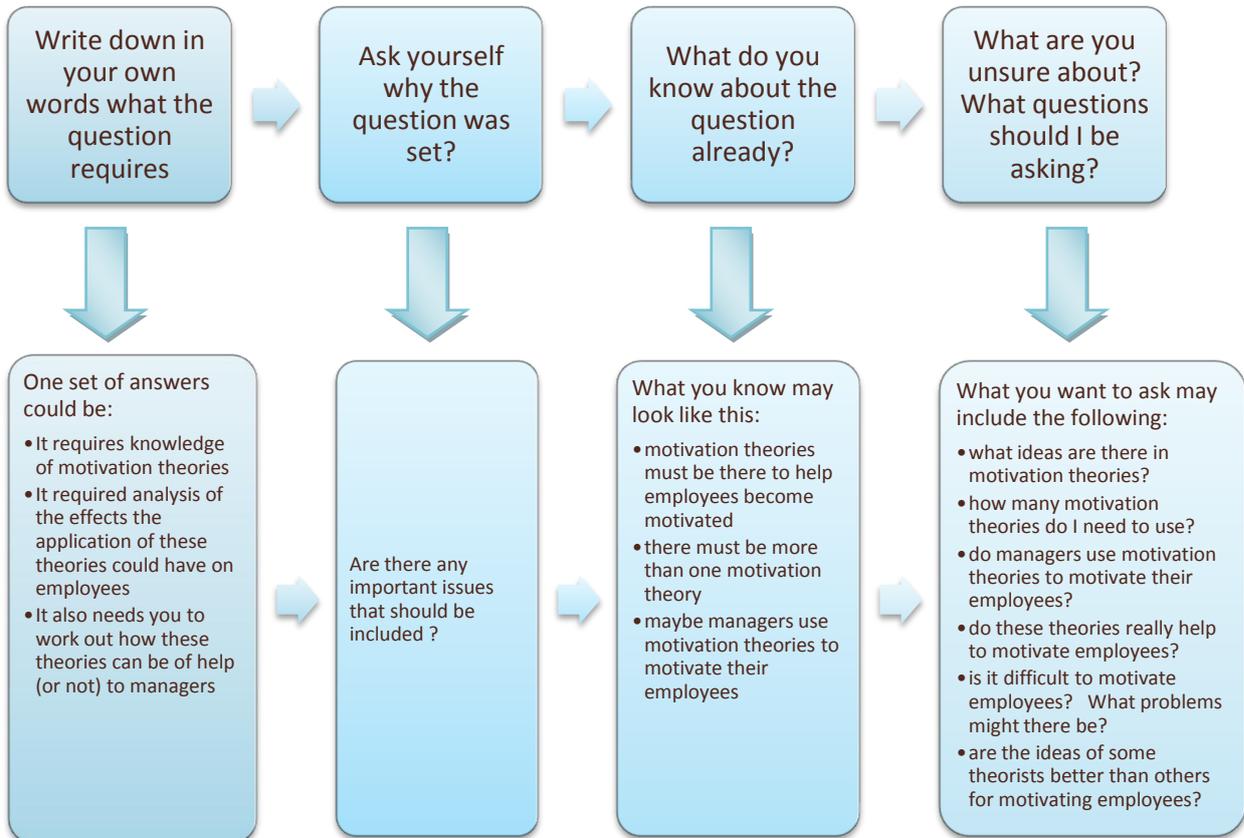
- How does this help me?
- What do you know now that you didn't know before?
- What will you do differently now that you know what these instruction words mean?

Exercise 1

‘Explain how the application of motivation theories helps managers in dealing with employees in the workplace?’

Look at the question and complete the table:

Task	‘Explain how the application of motivation theories helps managers in dealing with employees in the workplace?’
Instruction	
Topic	
Aspect	
Restriction	
Restriction	



Exercise 2

Question: (Insert your question here)

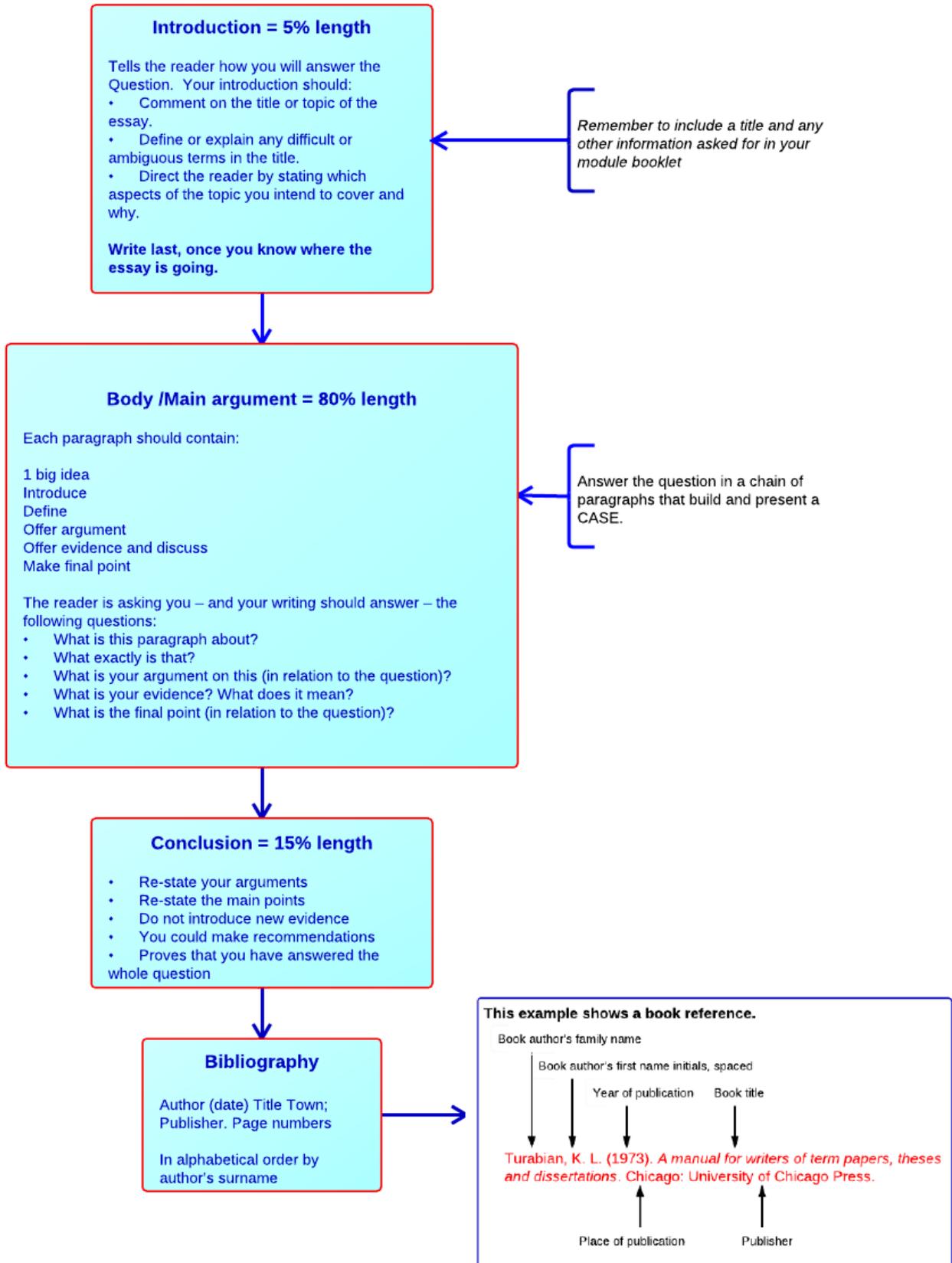
Complete the 'two and two' exercise?

- You first spend 2 minutes writing down everything you know about the topic
- You then spend another 2 minutes noting down questions you want to ask about the topic

2 minutes – everything **you know** about the topic.

2 minutes – everything **you want to ask** about the topic.

Developing a plan or structure for your essay



Exercise 3

Before turning to your notes and books you could now develop your own plan or structure. Have a go, remembering that your final structure should be the frame of your logical argument – from one point to the next.

please make your own plan here

