Chapter 1

Preparing for writing

The writing process

When you’re a new student, it’s easy to talk about your assignments only in terms of their length: ‘Oh no — I have to write 1,500 words for this assignment!’ You may try to get as many words written as fast as you can, so you can reach that ‘magic number’.

But you usually end up stuck — either your words dry up, or you tie yourself in mental knots trying to say five different things at the same time.

In this chapter, you’re going to learn to slow down, and invest some time in thinking and planning before you start writing. This investment will pay off for you again and again.

We usually think of an academic essay or assignment in terms of the finished product. After all, this is what your tutor or lecturer will read, comment on, and mark. But the finished product is only the final step of a more extensive writing process. Many students find it difficult to write essays and assignments because they don’t understand or work through this process.

In this book, you’ll be introduced to the writing process, and see examples of work at each stage. You’ll learn that time spent thinking and planning is an excellent investment in your academic writing.

Four steps to better writing

We have divided the writing process into four basic steps. The first one helps you understand your topic. The other three help you to start drafting and writing your essay.
Step 1: Preparing for writing

This involves thinking through and analysing your essay topic or assignment question carefully. At this stage you also need to generate ideas and do any research that's required; in many cases, the ideas and arguments you develop in your academic writing should be built on what other people in the field have said or done. By the end of this stage you should have an essay outline which will be the basis for your first draft.

Step 2: Structuring and drafting

Good writing evolves from a good plan, which will help you:

- write in a logical order
- develop your arguments systematically
- include all of the important points.

Once you are clear about your plan, it is time to start writing your first draft. In that draft, you'll need to write your introduction, main body, and conclusion. You'll also need to structure your paragraphs effectively, and choose the right words to make your points.

Step 3: Refining your writing

Writing an academic essay is different from other types of writing you may have done. It is important to select the right tone and appropriate vocabulary for your essay. You also need to pay attention to your sentence structure and make sure you are using tenses accurately. You should be able to summarize the ideas of scholars in the field and acknowledge your use of them in a reference list. You may also want to enhance the presentation of your work with some graphs or figures to back up your points.

Step 4: Checking, editing and proofreading your work

After you've completed a first draft, it is quite normal to revise and redraft your work five or six times. Make sure that you allow enough time for this part of the process. You'll need to ask yourself some hard questions as you check your work, and be objective. Is there anything that might confuse your reader? Is the style of your writing appropriate? Are your grammar, spelling and punctuation correct? Have you acknowledged all of your sources and provided a reference list (if appropriate)?
Preparing for writing

- Analyse the question
- Generate ideas
- Research the topic
- Write an outline

Structuring and drafting

- Plan your essay:
  - Introduction
  - Main body
  - Conclusion
- Structure paragraphs

Refining your writing

Incorporate correct and appropriate:
- vocabulary
- sentence structure
- tenses
- visual materials
- references

Editing and proofreading

Check:
- content
- structure
- style
- grammar
- spelling
- punctuation
- referencing

The writing process
We’ll handle the first step in this chapter. The next chapter will help you with Step 2 — that is, structuring your thoughts and writing a first draft. Chapter 3 will help you refine your writing. We’ll address editing and proofreading in Chapter 4 and in the final chapter we’ll look at some sample essays.

Planning your writing

The first challenge in academic writing is to stop and think about exactly what is required by a particular assignment question and how it should be tackled.

Time spent thinking through your assignment topic, preferably even before you begin to study the relevant course material, will not be wasted. It will help you to focus on the topic and will give your reading purpose and direction.

In this section you will learn to:

1. analyse assignment questions and pick out key words
2. determine the scope of the question
3. think about your writing context
4 consider your writing purpose
5 generate ideas for your essay.

Analysing assignment questions: picking out the key words

Essay questions are very important. They contain information about the topic of the essay and give directions as to what you have to do with that topic.

The best way to understand an essay question is to identify the key words. These include both:

- content words — these tell you about the topic of the essay; and
- instructional words — these give directions or tell you what to do with the topic.

Read the question carefully and identify the key words it contains. These key words will help you focus your research and planning.

It doesn’t matter how you keep track of these words. One way is to underline the content words and circle the instructional words.

Let’s try this out with some examples. Here are the questions for three different writing assignments. We’ll be using these questions as the basis for the examples throughout this book.

**Question 1:** Air pollution has become a major environmental issue in Hong Kong. List and briefly describe its major causes, then outline and assess its effects on Hong Kong’s quality of life.

**Question 2:** In order to avoid crashes like the one in 1997, some economists argue that stock markets must be regulated. Discuss.

**Question 3:** Some education experts believe students should always learn in their native language; others argue there are benefits to learning in a second language for some subjects. Evaluate both points of view, and indicate which you agree with.
After you have identified the key words, you need to look at them closely. Ask yourself these questions.

- What do the key words mean? If you don’t know the exact meaning of any of the words in the question, look it up right away! This is not the time for guessing or making assumptions.

- What topic are the content words addressing? What is the subject area I have to write about?

- What are the instructional words telling me to do with the topic? The instructional words you’ve identified should give you a sense of how to tackle the assignment. Are you being asked simply to describe or explain a topic, or is the task more challenging, e.g. asking you to make an argument for one point of view? Identifying the instructional words will also help you start thinking about how to structure your essay; we’ll come back to this a bit later.

You can better understand the importance of instructional words simply by looking at three variations of the same question:

1. Describe the local waste recycling system ...
2. Explain the local waste recycling system ...
3. Evaluate the local waste recycling system ...

Describing, explaining, and evaluating are clearly not the same. Each question is focused on a waste recycling system, but each one is asking you to do a different task.

The following table introduces a number of instructional words commonly found in assignment questions, and gives you hints about how you should respond when you see them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When you see this key word ...</th>
<th>... you should</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summarize</strong></td>
<td>Restate, as briefly as possible, and in your own words, someone else's ideas or arguments. Your own opinion isn't needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explain</strong></td>
<td>Name, describe, and make connections between the main points of a topic, and use examples or illustrations to clarify these main points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compare/contrast</strong></td>
<td>Consider the similarities and differences between two ideas or points of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describe</strong></td>
<td>Focus on the key features/aspects of a theme/topic/theory, using your own words to show your level of understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Illustrate</strong></td>
<td>Make the meaning of something clearer by giving related examples. You can cite specific real-life instances, theories or case studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outline</strong></td>
<td>List and describe the main ideas or characteristics of a topic or idea. You will not need to go into the minor details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discuss</strong></td>
<td>Present a balanced investigation of relevant main points. You will be expected to show an understanding of important concepts and ideas related to the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argue</strong></td>
<td>Either discuss and evaluate the main points of a topic, or support a particular point of view. A balanced argument should be presented in such assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluate</strong></td>
<td>Consider the strengths and weaknesses of someone else’s ideas or arguments. Your own opinion is called for, but you must support it with evidence and reasonable arguments.</td>
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You may also find questions that use phrases that give you hints about how you should go about answering the question. Here are several examples:

- To what extent ...
- In what way ...
- Give an account of ...

When you see a phrase like this, stop and think: is there a similar instructional word or task which has the same meaning, and therefore helps you to get a clearer picture of what the question is asking you to do? For example, the phrase ‘give an account of’ really means to describe or explain.

**Handling assignments with multiple instructional words**

Many assignment questions contain only one instructional word, as shown in the earlier examples. For instance, a question that begins

*Outline the advantages and disadvantages of ...*

contains just one instructional word, i.e. ‘outline’, so it’s quite straightforward to answer.

If an assignment question contains more than one instructional word, you must be sure to complete the tasks associated with each word. For example, let’s say you were given an assignment question that began

*Compare X and Y. Indicate the one you prefer, then explain your choice.*

This question is more complicated because it contains three instructional words. But also note how the question gives you an idea of how to plan the structure of your assignment. First you will need to *compare*, i.e. talk about the similarities and differences. Next, you will need to *indicate* — i.e. state clearly — which one you prefer. Finally, you will need to *explain* your choice. We’ll consider ways of structuring your assignments in more detail later on.
Consider the scope

If you are writing an essay, you also need to think about the scope of the topic you intend to write about. Most academic topics can be written about at great length. But you know you don’t have the time to do that. So how do you define the boundaries of your essay’s coverage of your topic? Here are some hints for getting the scope of your essay’s coverage right.

Recommended length

The most obvious way to judge the scope of an essay topic is by looking at its ‘recommended length’. For example, if the topic is ‘Pollution in Hong Kong’ and the recommended length of your essay is 500 words, you could only touch on this topic briefly. At a recommended length of 2,000 words, however, you would be expected to cover several aspects of the topic in greater depth.

How specific is the question you’ve been given?

The topic of an essay can range from general to specific. A general topic is very broad in scope. This means that it has many aspects that you can write about. This may sound attractive at first, but it is often difficult to cover a general topic adequately in an academic essay. A specific topic is much narrower in scope. This means that there are fewer things you’re allowed to write about. This allows you to write in reasonable detail about each aspect — making it easier to stay within the required word length.

It therefore helps to pay close attention to the nature of the essay question/topic itself. You should look carefully for any words or phrases that limit the topic. For example, let’s take a close look at our second sample question:

In order to avoid crashes like the one in 1997, some economists argue that stock markets must be regulated. Discuss.

Note that the question mentions the 1997 stock market crash. That was a severe economic downturn, and it was centred in Asian countries. So you know this question isn’t asking you to consider less severe stock market downturns; you can concentrate on the most severe cases.
If you are writing on a general topic, it’s likely you will be expected to either:

- **outline** the topic and write **briefly** about a number of aspects; or
- **focus** on a particular aspect of the topic and deal with it in some detail.

Usually you will know which kind of answer is required. If in doubt, ask your tutor.

**Think about the context**

As well as thinking about your reader, you must also think about the context of your writing. At university, your writing will take place within a particular **academic discipline** or **field of study**. This context will have a particular effect on the way you view a topic, and your choice of vocabulary and style.

The same topic can be viewed from a number of different angles. For example, you can look at issues such as pollution from a geographical,
social or public health perspective. Similarly, our stock market question can be attacked using a purely economic approach, or an argument might be made from the point of view of a small investor who’s worried about losing savings. The way you write about an academic topic, therefore, depends to a great extent on the orientation of the course and the academic staff who designed it.

Each discipline has its own jargon and terminology. As well as writing a well-constructed essay, you will be expected to use this vocabulary in your discussion of the topic. Likewise, different disciplines often have their own requirements regarding the style and format of essays.

Normally, guidelines on any specific requirements for completing the assignment will be provided together with the assignment, or given by your tutor. If in doubt, check with your tutor. You must read the guidelines to ensure that you are clear on what is expected, for example whether there is a set format for presenting the essay.

**Think about the purpose**

In a way, all the tips you’ve just been given can be summarized by simply realizing that whenever you are faced with any writing task you must review your *purpose* in writing. Why are you writing? What are you being asked to do?

Remember, as a university student, your main purpose in writing is usually to communicate your understanding of a topic by presenting a reasoned *argument*. In an academic sense, the word ‘argument’ does not necessarily mean ‘to take sides’ or only present ‘one point of view’. Rather, it means that you explore the topic. To do this you must:

- develop your ideas in a clear and logical way
- support your ideas with examples, figures and statistics, or quotations
- organize your material towards a logical conclusion or point that you want to make.
Your writing will also have a specific purpose. This can be found in the essay or assignment question. Remember the key words we picked out earlier? If you look closely at the instructional words they will give you a clearer picture of what you have to do.

This is very important, because describing something is quite different from summarizing, just as a comparing two items is different to evaluating what they are worth. Each different purpose should have an effect on the way you write. And if you hand in a summary when you were asked for a description, do not expect to get that perfect grade!

For example, let’s consider Question 3, on language of instruction:

Some education experts believe students should always learn in their native language; others argue there are benefits to learning in a second language for some subjects. Evaluate both points of view, and indicate which you agree with.

Here you are asked to ‘evaluate’ two points of view, then ‘Indicate’ which one you think is best. Your specific purpose is clear: you need to evaluate — that is, analyse the strengths and weaknesses of — both views, then choose one as superior. And if you’re a university student, you know it’s unlikely you can just say ‘I like this one better’, and leave it at that. You will need to show, through your assessment of both views, why one is better than the other.

If you have really thought through your writing purpose, it will make the next steps much easier.

**Generating ideas**

You have thought carefully about the key words in your essay question and the scope of the topic you are going to write about. The next thing is to write down your own ideas about the topic.

Here are some suggestions for generating ideas for your essay.
Brainstorm the topic

Brainstorming is not difficult. With your study notes and other materials close at hand, just follow these steps.

1. Write the topic of your essay or assignment at the top of the page.

2. Under this, quickly write down anything that comes to mind about that topic, in note form.

3. Don’t think too long about it and don’t try to order your ideas at this stage.

4. Keep writing until you cannot think of anything else.

5. When you have finished, compare this list to your study notes.

6. Add any other relevant points or ideas that you have left out.

A simple brainstorming exercise based on our first sample assignment question on air pollution in Hong Kong might look like this:
Causes of air pollution in Hong Kong

Vehicles - cars, taxis, buses, ships, airplanes

Trains? Electric, so none, but . . . .

Power plants

Factories - how many are left in Hong Kong?

Air conditioners? Heat?

Pollution from factories and power plants in Mainland China - wind blows it into Hong Kong

Cars in mainland cities - does their pollution reach Hong Kong, too?

Other Asian sources of pollution - forest fires? Volcanoes? Dust storms?

Effects on Hong Kong quality of life

Asthma and other lung diseases

People always rubbing their eyes and sneezing - allergies

Some tourists stay away or are disappointed in the views

Some companies relocating to other Asian headquarters

It just makes the city look less beautiful

People complain about it all the time!

Some people may want to emigrate

Has bad effect on Hong Kong's international reputation

Makes buildings dirtier
You can see that this sample brainstorming moves from the most obvious points to ones that are harder to prove or are possibly less important. But that’s fine — some of these ideas definitely need to be checked out later, but the important thing at this point is to think of as many possibilities as you can.

Search for Information

Eventually, of course, you will need to try to work out what else you need to know. This exercise will show you where to start reading — or looking for information in the library.

See if there is relevant material from your course materials. Many undergraduate courses provide books, journal articles and reading lists or bibliographies as part of the course materials. In many cases, you will be encouraged to draw from these materials when you write your assignments. Don’t ignore these easy-to-access resources! In fact, many undergraduate writing assignments will ask you specifically to use certain course materials.

List any key words and phrases that are related to the topic, then use them to search for information. You can find hints for these search terms both in the key content words you identified in your analysis of the assignment question, and in your brainstormed ideas. Don’t worry if your list is not very long. You will discover other key words and phrases as you begin to read.

But where should you conduct your search for outside information? Is it enough just to type your search terms into Google or another online search engine, and check out the first 10 or 20 hits you receive?

The answer, generally, is no. In addition to your Internet research, you should pay a visit to your university’s library in order to access the kinds of books and journal articles that are useful as sources to support your arguments in your academic writing.

When should you just turn on the computer and check a search engine? A good rule of thumb is when you know exactly what you are looking for, e.g. general facts or statistics. Then it’s fine to use sources such as government publications, online encyclopaedias, and news service reports.
Organizing your essay

Some students like to jump straight from researching a topic to writing the first sentence of their essay or assignment. They begin with the first word and try to carry on till the end. Usually, however, this burst of enthusiasm lasts only a few paragraphs: trying to write without any real sense of direction, in an effort to save time, simply creates problems and ends up wasting time.

It is unwise to start writing until you have taken the time to plan and organize your work. Without planning it is often difficult to communicate clearly what you are trying to say.

This part of the chapter will give you some ideas to help you plan and organize a piece of academic writing. To be an effective planner you need to:

- select the material;
- organize your ideas; and
- write an outline.

Select the material

If you have done a good job thinking about the purpose of your writing, and generating ideas and finding information on your topic, then you are ready to look through the material that you have collected. This might include photocopies, printouts of articles from electronic libraries or websites, summaries of material you read at a library, or concept maps. Or it might just be pages and pages of your notes! Your job now is to decide if the material you’ve generated and gathered can really help you answer your particular essay or assignment question.

Look again at the question and the instructional words as you select your material. For example, Question 3 asks:

Some education experts believe students should always learn in their native language; others argue there are benefits to learning in a second language for some subjects. Evaluate both points of view, and indicate which you agree with.
After analysing your specific writing purpose, you know that you must write critically about two approaches to learning, then choose one.

To answer this question correctly, you need to collect material that will help you to explain why you think one is better than the other. You may have collected a lot of information about both approaches. You may have uncovered a lot of interesting facts. For example, you may have found a wonderful book about how very small children acquire language. But do you think this book would help you answer this question? Probably not. Although you find it fascinating, this book may contain little information about children who are struggling with a second language when they are school-aged.

So, after some inspection, you will find that not all of the material you have gathered is usable. But what is relevant? What is not? Remember, you can always go back to your purpose for the essay, and think about each piece of information you have. Ask: will it help me fulfil my writing purpose, or won’t it? You may be tempted at this stage to ‘hang on’ to all your material, but I suggest you instead be quite ruthless. If something doesn’t seem to fit, remove it. It is easier to find more information to support a point you need to make later on than it is to try to ‘force’ information that’s not relevant to fit into your assignment.

Think again of our air pollution question. Remember that it asks us to ‘list and describe its major causes’ in Hong Kong. Let’s say we did some research, and discovered that some of the distant Asian sources we identified in our brainstorming are not really major; they do affect Hong Kong, but not nearly as much as the pollutants produced right here in Hong Kong, and in southern China. Have we wasted our time researching these causes? No, not at all. Discovering a way to select information and narrow the topic of our essay will help us to organize and focus it better.

**Organize your ideas**

When your brainstorming and information gathering are complete, you need to organize your ideas into groups and decide on a logical order for those groups.
In some cases, this is an easy step because you will be able to find a clear order for your ideas simply by following the parts of the essay question you've been given to write on.

Let's spend a little time thinking about how you can use your assignment questions to structure your ideas. Whenever this is possible, I highly recommend you take this approach. Doing so means you will be making your answer as clear as possible for your tutor, who will see immediately that you are addressing each part of the question systematically, and therefore covering all the material the question is asking for. You also will not need to waste time trying out different orders.

For example, let's return to our sample Question 3:

Some education experts believe students should always learn in their native language; others argue there are benefits to learning in a second language for some subjects. Evaluate both points of view, and indicate which you agree with.

If you read the question carefully, you can see immediately how you might 'follow' this question when organizing your ideas. We have already picked out 'evaluate' and 'indicate' as the instructional words, i.e. the words that tell us what approach we should take in answering the question.

Following your analysis of the question, then, you might put together your ideas as follows:

Part 1 Define 'bilingual education', and make clear what kind of 'students' you're talking about.

Part 2 Using research on learning in a second language for certain subjects, summarize this view, and again evaluate it.

Part 3 Using research on articles written by 'education experts', summarize their view, i.e. that students should learn in their native language, then point out the strengths and weaknesses of this view (i.e. 'evaluate' it).
Part 4  Conclude the essay by stating clearly which view you support, and perhaps indicating which of the supporting reasons for this view you found most persuasive.

You can see how this basic structure is developed in the sample essays included at the end of this book.

If you go back to the list of instructional words earlier in this chapter, you can see that many of them suggest an order for your ideas. Questions that ask you to evaluate or to compare and contrast usually make it quite easy to organize your ideas in your answer.

But often your assignment question won’t give you a clear idea of how to organize your ideas; it’ll then be up to you to impose order on your ideas more actively.

There are many commonly-used ‘logical orders’ that you can apply to all kinds of essays. The most common are based on:

1  time (chronological order);

2  the steps in a process (what should happen first, second, and so on);

3  priority or order of importance (i.e. ranking your ideas from most important to least important); and

4  making an argument, i.e. stating clearly a general point you then attempt to prove by providing orderly, reliable evidence in support.

Sometimes there seems to be no obvious logical order that could be applied to your ideas. Time is not involved, there is no process, there is no obvious order of importance, or you can’t seem to identify a clear progression of ideas to make an effective argument. If this is the case, you must make a decision on what seems logical to you. The important thing is that you give some structure to your ideas.

If you are having trouble organizing your ideas, there are techniques you can use to help you. One good one is called mind mapping. You start with a single central idea — air pollution, for example — and then connect
the ideas you've brainstormed. You can see how I've done this with my brainstormed ideas:

Mind mapping is a good way to see how your ideas about a topic relate to each other, and also to generate some new ideas as you continue ‘branching off’ what is already on your paper.
At this point, you should be ready to:

1. Rewrite your list of ideas, this time in groups of related concepts or facts.
2. Cross out ideas that do not fit or are repeated.
3. Write a heading for each group.
4. Decide on the order of your groups. It must follow the logical order that you establish!

However, just having this general idea of how to organize our ideas usually isn’t enough. It’s much better to work out a more detailed outline, which we’ll do in the next section.

**Write an outline**

If you’ve completed the steps in the writing process we’ve outlined so far, then you’re well-prepared to write a more formal outline, which is really just a plan for your writing. An outline contains points and sub-points. These ideas should be written in the order in which you plan to write about them.

Most students find writing an outline very useful. You can use an outline to check that:

- your ideas are in a logical order;
- your arguments are developed *systematically*; and
- you have covered all of the important points.

Writing an essay outline is not a difficult task. It's likely that you will simply use your groups from the selection step above as your main headings. Then, under each main heading, try to group your subcategories and supporting ideas in a way that makes sense. Don’t worry too much at this point about getting your outline ‘perfect’. Remember: you’ll be turning in an *essay* to your instructor, not an outline. Also, most writers find that they don’t end up following their outlines exactly once they start writing anyway.
The main point of outlining is to make sure you’re giving yourself a roadmap for writing. That way you won’t get too far lost, even if you wander around a bit later on.

Let’s return to our pollution topic for an outlining example. First of all, let’s consider the question, as you learned to do in the previous section. Does it give us some idea of the best way to organize our ideas?

Air pollution has become a major environmental issue in Hong Kong. List and briefly describe its major causes, then outline and assess its effects on Hong Kong’s quality of life.

I think this question does give us a basic organizational plan. We’ll need to divide our answer into two main parts, one that lists and describes the major causes of air pollution in Hong Kong, and another that sets out and assesses the effects of that air pollution on the quality of life in Hong Kong.

So an outline for an essay our Hong Kong pollution question might look like this:
Essay outline

Air pollution in Hong Kong

Major sources of Hong Kong’s air pollution

A Local sources
  1 Vehicular traffic: Private vehicles, cars, and trucks
  2 Public transport: taxis, buses, ferries
  3 Power generation
  4 Industrial sources

B Mainland China sources
  1 Industrialization in the Pearl River Delta
  2 Urbanization and growth in China’s cities (More vehicular traffic)
  3 More power generation needs

Impacts on Hong Kong quality of life

A Health concerns
  1 Respiratory diseases
  2 Impact on children

B Economic impacts
  1 Effects on tourism
  2 Effects on businesses locating in Hong Kong
  3 Less healthy workforce; higher health-care costs

C Other impacts
  1 General unpleasant nature of living in bad air
  2 Harm to Hong Kong’s international reputation
At this point in the process, it is important to check two things:

1. Do the sections in your essay outline follow a logical order? If so, what is it? Can you explain, in a few words, how the argument of your essay proceeds? If you can’t, now is the time to restructure your material into a logical order that makes it easy for the reader to follow your point of view.

2. Are the sections balanced? If some sections are more overloaded with information than others, you should think about cutting down or splitting up longer sections, and adding some more supporting points and details to shorter paragraphs.

You’ll learn much more about structuring your ideas effectively in Chapter 2.