

Approaching Essay Questions

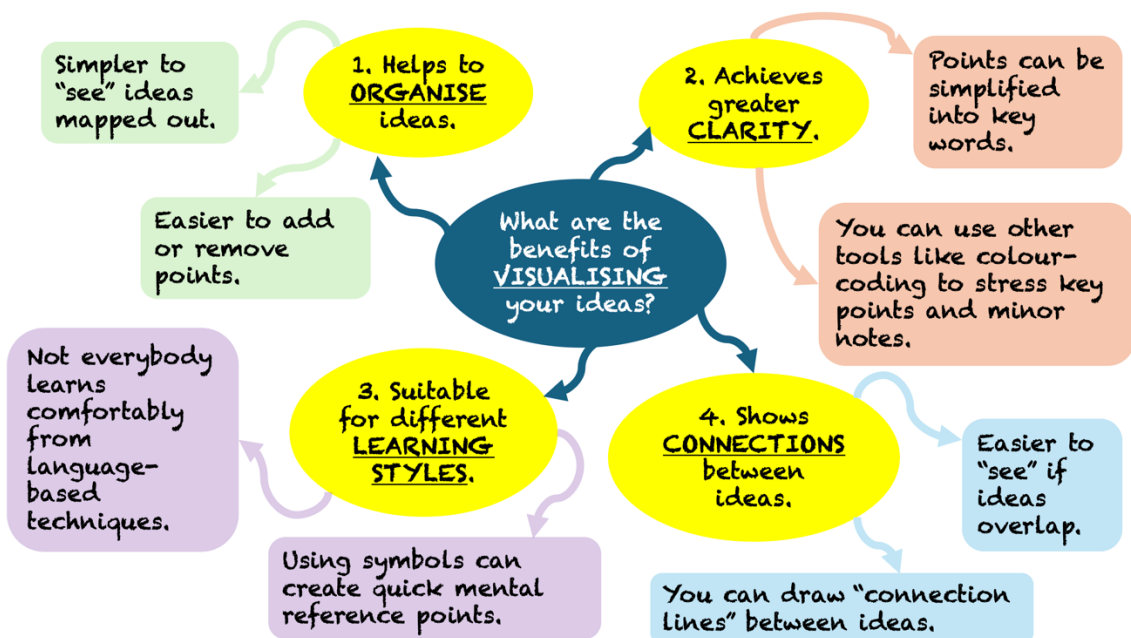
Initial Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Do I completely **understand** what this assignment is asking?
- What are the **keywords** of this assignment? i.e.
 - What do I need to know/ demonstrate? What are the **major points** I need to address for marks?
 - Are my initial ideas sticking to what has been **asked**? Where/why am I drifting from the topic at hand?
- Is there any **flexibility** in the assignment? If so, how can I **narrow** the topic?
- Are there any specific/ unusual **details** that are to be included in this assignment?

Putting Ideas on the Page:

Get rid of the white blank page immediately by typing out the question or title of your essay, along with preliminary details, e.g. name, course, lecturer, etc. Then, jot down your initial thoughts/ response to the question by:

- **Free writing/ auto writing**, i.e. writing without thinking about what you are writing. Some of this may be gibberish initially, but eventually it can be a good way of discovering and recording new ideas, and it helps to prevent what is called “writer’s block”.
- **Bullet-point lists**, i.e. simplify and organize your ideas into key terms such as themes or topics, which can be quickly referenced, moved, changed, removed, expanded, etc. You can do the same with scholar surnames and ideas, so that you have a quick index of relevant secondary support.
- **Spider diagramming**, i.e. visualise your ideas by mapping them out in a spider diagram, like the one below.



Interpreting the Question: Task vs. Subject Matter

In order to ensure that you are doing exactly as you have been asked, it is important to distinguish between the **task** and the **subject matter**. The task refers to all instructive details like word count requirements, submission procedures, formatting, etc. The subject matter refers to the content of the question/ the substance of the topic you are being asked to analyse. Here is an example of how you might break down a question:

The Question		The Breakdown
<p>Discuss the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in improving patient outcomes in critical care settings, with a focus on its impact on clinical decision-making, patient safety, and healthcare efficiency. Your essay should be 2,000 words (excluding the Works Cited) and should use at least 5 scholarly sources to support your ideas, as well as relevant case studies from the module. Your answer should clearly define evidence-based practice and its importance in critical care settings.</p>	SUBJECT MATTER	<p><u>Substance/Content of Essay:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence-based practice (EBP). How EBP improves patient outcomes in critical care settings. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Impact of EBP on clinical decision-making. Impact of EBP on patient safety. Impact of EBP on healthcare efficiency.
	TASK	<p><u>Discuss:</u> When an essay asks you to “discuss”, “outline”, “evaluate”, “assess”, or “explain” a topic, it is always asking for critical analysis:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The <i>WHAT?</i> i.e. identify a pattern or trend. The <i>HOW?</i> i.e. map the pattern or trend through evidence. The <i>WHY?</i> i.e. interpret the meaning of the pattern or trend. The <i>SO WHAT?</i> i.e. explain the significance of the pattern or trend. <p><u>Word Count:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This essay should be 2,000 words in length, and the instructions also specify that this word count does not include the Works Cited section at the end of the essay. Not all assignments will clarify this inclusion/ exclusion and, in those cases, it is important that you ask your lecturer whether the word count is inclusive or exclusive of the Works Cited section. <p><u>Secondary Support:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The assignment clearly states that you should use 5 sources for secondary support. It also specifies that these should be “scholarly”, i.e. peer-reviewed works from academic sources, like those you will find through <i>UCD OneSearch</i>. The assignment also stresses that, in addition to your 5 scholarly sources, you should use case studies from the module. As such, you should revise all Brightspace materials from your lecturer that might be relevant, as well as case studies mentioned in lectures throughout the module. <p><u>Specific Instructions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some essays will make specific instructions that are not required in all essays. For example, this essay specifies that you must provide a definition of the topic and its importance in relevant contexts.

Establishing a Purpose

Academic assignments need to have a sense of purpose and direction. To achieve this, it is beneficial to create a **thesis statement**, i.e. a key argument that makes a claim, which you present in 1-2 sentences in the introduction, and which you then prove to be true throughout the body paragraphs of the essay. Try the exercise below, which might help you establish a sense of direction/ purpose for your essay.

Essay Prompt (Art History Example): <i>Discuss the theme of trauma in relation to abstract expression in 1940s and 1950s America.</i>			
TASK	INSTRUCTION	EXAMPLE	
Topic	Write a bullet-point list of the key words of the essay.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Topic: <i>abstract expressionism.</i> ▪ Context: <i>USA, post-WWII.</i> ▪ Theme: <i>Trauma.</i> 	WHAT?
Stance/ Position	What do you want to say about this topic? Your stance/ position should take a clear angle on the topic, i.e. the risk is that you are wrong, but your essay should prove that you are correct.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Artwork of this time was a trauma response to WWII.</i> 	
Rationale	Explain why you have adopted this stance/position, i.e. give a brief overview of the reasons why your stance/ position is correct.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>This art emphasises individuality + emotion.</i> 	HOW?
Broader Significance	Outline why this is an important topic, e.g. culturally, socially, politically, medically, artistically, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Reveals art's cathartic capacities.</i> ▪ <i>Shows importance of expression without language.</i> 	
Final Thesis Statement	Using your bullet-point lists, explain your argument in 1-2 sentences.	<i>The evolution of abstract expressionism in post-World War II America reflects a cultural shift towards individualism and emotional expression as a response to societal trauma, thus revealing art's cathartic capacities, as well as the limitations of language for effective expression.</i>	WHY? + SO WHAT?

Alternatively, you can outline your essay's **key findings**, i.e. what are the major discoveries/ revelations of the essay, or what are the "big takeaways" that you want the reader to know about the topic? Again, you can outline your key findings in a few sentences in the essay's introduction and then use the body paragraphs to unpack those key findings in more detail/ with evidence. You can still use the exercise above to help you structure your key findings.

Types of Essay Questions

Essay questions are often presented in different ways to students, but they are all ultimately asking you to write an essay about a selected topic. Below you will see different types of essay questions, as well as some quick tips that might help you to respond to the question and organise your ideas.

QUESTION TYPE	EXAMPLE	QUICK TIPS
Quote and Discuss	<i>"Millennials are reporting the highest levels of stress and anxiety than any other generation at the same age". Discuss.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get to grips with the statement/ quotation used: what is the central point of the statement? Do you agree/disagree with the quotation/statement? Where does this quotation come from? What is the background and broader context of the quotation? Are you required to use the quotation somewhere in the body of the essay? (recommended). If the assignment uses the words <i>discuss</i>, <i>reflect</i>, or <i>evaluate</i>, remember that you are still conducting a critical analysis. Spider diagrams are very useful for these types of questions.
Direct	<i>What role does human activity play in global warming today, and how can humans reduce their impact on the environment?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A direct question requires a direct response. Complicate your response, i.e. make it nuanced/critical. Direct questions can sometimes be answered in one sentence, but you are <i>always</i> being asked to think critically about the question and answer as fully as you can. Stick to what has been <i>asked</i>! Writing a thesis statement can be very useful for these types of questions.
Prompt or Open-Choice	<i>Critically discuss the role of propaganda in relation to one of the following: WWII, the Cold War, the 2016 Election.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selecting the topic: while your interests matter, you should choose the topic that you know best and for which you have evidence/ can make a good argument. To the best of your ability, you should try to narrow the scope of the topic as much as possible. These are merely prompts and you need to be more specific. Writing a hypothetical research question can be very useful for these types of questions.
Comparative	<i>What role should politics play in national health services? Illustrate your answer by comparing the NHS system in the UK and the Private Health Care system in the US.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many things (experiments, theories, concepts, ideas, experiments, methodologies, novels, poems, images, speeches, etc.) are you comparing? Divide your time, attention and marks by that number, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two: 50% each. Comparison is about maintaining a "dual vision". Draw a table so that you can visualise the comparison directly (i.e.) so that you can see the points of overlap and divergence.

Final Recommendations

Work Environment:

When you first sit down to work on an essay, it is essential that you do so in an appropriate environment. Quiet locations that are free from distractions are optimal because they enable you to think clearly and to engage with complex ideas without interruption. Libraries are one of the best locations for this kind of work.

Unplugging:

Academic writing requires sustained attention. In our very technological age, we are constantly bombarded with messages, emails, or social media notifications via our phones, tablets, etc. Have you ever been mid-sentence on an assignment when your phone beeps? Chances are that you found it difficult to go back to that sentence because you had lost your train of thought. Even when we are not actively receiving notifications, the phone can still provide too much of a temptation to procrastinate. We may *think* we worked for 3 hours in the library, but how much of that time was spent scrolling? Phones can be hugely disruptive to the creative and the critical process. As such, it is important to put your phone away or simply switch it off during your writing time.

Time Management:

It is essential to set time aside both for writing and *thinking*. Many scholars use a technique called “timeboxing”. This means that you set aside 2-3 hours for your academic work and you do not work on it outside of this time. Timeboxing helps us to prioritise what is most important in the work, to structure our work schedule, and to set clear boundaries, deadlines, and milestones for our progress. Before commencing your timebox, break your essay down into smaller tasks. For examples, such tasks may include:

- ✓ Brain storming, spider diagramming, creating an essay structure, etc.
- ✓ The thesis statement.
- ✓ The introduction
- ✓ Body paragraph 1.
- ✓ Body paragraph 2.
- ✓ Body paragraph 3.
- ✓ The conclusion.
- ✓ The references.
- ✓ Transitions between paragraphs.
- ✓ Proofreading.

During your timebox, you work *exclusively* on the given task until the time is up, i.e. you do not allow yourself to go on your phone, or to get distracted by *anything* outside of the assignment. Equally, when your timebox is finished, you must put the work away and take a full break from it until your next allocated time.

Ask for Help:

Remember to visit the UCD Writing Centre. We can help you get started with your assignment, as well as with drafting. We offer online bookings, daily sign-ins, as well as a drop-in service. You can book all appointments here:

<https://www.ucd.ie/writingcentre/about/usersguide/makeanappointment/>