

Writing discursive essays

Stage One: have a good look at the target, i.e. study the question carefully and reflect on how it might unpack— what are the implications? What are the senses in which the question might be understood? Above all, what sort of information are you going to need as evidence?

Stage Two: armed with pens, pencils, erasers, highlighters, sticky labels and plenty notepaper and/or hard disc space, we approach the text concerned for the first (of hopefully more than one) careful reading. What are the bits that seem to bear most closely upon/shed most light on/deal most fully with the question? We're going to need to know this stuff, where it's at and how to get at it. So, we underline/highlight, we pencil marginal notes into our text, we put in markers taking us quickly to the key sections, and our fingers fly rapidly over keyboards as we begin to compile our notes (containing references to the bits of the text we mean to speak about so we know what they say and where they're at; and any and all ideas/insights/comments of our own [always enclosed in square brackets so we can be sure when we return to them later that the words are our own])

Stage Three: we begin to compile the essay. This is built up in a series of layers. First we rough out an outline argument in note form. Bearing in mind that we're going to need some kind of beginning, middle and end, we decide on the *order* of our selected points (you can adjust these as you go by the simple expedient of re-numbering) them, so we can see the stages through which our completed discussion will eventually go and we can attend to the shape and structure of our argument in detail before we begin to commit it to paper, or screen. Heed will have to be paid here to the amount of space at our disposal. Do we have room for everything we might want, ideally, to say? Or are we going to have to *select*? In which case we will need to prioritise our points. Which one/ones are the most important? They have got to stay in, obviously. How many of these do you need to make your point adequately? What can you do without? Can a number of smaller points be included in a larger more general one, for example?

The next step is to expand each of our essential points into a rough paragraph (or however long it may take, depending on the importance of the point and the scale of the argument—i.e. the space at your disposal), so our original skeleton of argument is fleshed out, point by point, into a sequence somewhat resembling an essay but, as yet, probably, in pretty rough-hewn prose.

Then we put it all together in a clean, consecutive draft.

Then we sleep on it. One of the best things you can do with a passage of prose is leave it alone for several hours. If you have allowed yourself sufficient time to do this, you may be surprised how much seems to fall into place and, almost, to correct itself, when you come back to it.

Stage Four: refining, polishing, working up to a final completed draft—with particular attention to expression: don't try to be too fancy: clarity and economy are the things to aim for. At this stage you will also have to deal with issues of length, and time may have to be set aside to sweating the piece down to the appropriate size: pieces of writing have a tendency to end up about 50% too long at early draught stage. Also you will need to ensure at this stage that your piece is in the correct format for its intended audience. Double spacing, and footnotes rather than endnotes (or references in brackets within the text if you like) are the preferred style options here, and whether the recipient will accept electronic submission or prefers hard copy. Here in 21L.430 we accept either format, although many of you will prefer to submit electronically.

All of this, as you will appreciate, takes time. There's an old writers' chestnut that 90% of a writing task takes up 90% of the available time; the last 10% takes an additional 90%.....

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