

# Starting an Essay and Choosing a Question

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The best thing to try and remember when starting any essay is **not to panic**. Essay writing is a process and has a beginning, middle and an end. Using a systematic approach to every essay you undertake will help you feel more in control of your work and make the experience a less overwhelming one. Essay writing is also a skill and it can be acquired and improved on with time. Feedback on past essays is one of the most useful tools you can use to improve your writing. Look at where you've fallen down, speak to your tutor/ lecturer if possible, and seek to improve on a weakness for future work.

Choosing an essay question:

- **Take your time.** You're committing yourself to an essay title for a few weeks. This is not a decision you should rush.
- **Choose a title that interests you** (not the one you think your lecturer/ tutor wants to correct!). Students always do better when they pick a subject/ topic they enjoy as they engage better with it.
- **Make sure you fully understand the question asked.** What is it asking you to do e.g. evaluate, discuss, contrast, critique, examine. Use a dictionary to double check definitions.
- **Write it down!** Writing the essay question down makes you fully engage with it and you are less likely to misinterpret what is being asked of you.

**N.B. Remember, you can only be marked based on the question asked!**

Things to consider:

- **Is it a closed or open ended question?**  
A closed essay question is asking you to engage with a specific task, its criteria and edges are defined for you. An example of a closed question would be: *'Compare and contrast the differences in burial practices between the early and late Bronze Age in Ireland'*. This question is asking you to look at a specific thing (burial practice), during a specific time frame (the early and late Bronze Age) and to evaluate the similarities and differences that occur between them.

An open ended question gives you scope to choose the direction, stance or even the topic you want to engage with. An example of an open ended question would be: *'What are the most defining political moments in the history of the Irish State from its foundation to 2010? Discuss.'* This question is broad in scope and open ended. It gives wide parameters and it is down to the student to define the focus of the essay and decide what is important.

- **Try and break the question into sub questions.** What are you being asked to do? Why is this important? Or if this is an open ended question: What am I going to focus on? What approach/ stance should I take?
- **Think about how it fits in with your course's main themes, objectives, debates etc.** Your essay question has been set with your overall course in mind. Take some time to consider this and what implications it may have on the set question.
- **What can you do in the word count?** Writing an essay which conveys your knowledge and understanding while effectively addressing the question is a skill. Many of the topics which you will be asked to write about are extensive; be aware of the word count you have been set and consider what you can realistically achieve in that number.

What do you already know?

Establishing what you already know about a topic/ subject is a good starting point for any essay. It also helps you figure out what you don't know and where you need to start researching. An effective way of doing this is using a **word dump**. A word dump is taking a blank piece of paper and writing down key words, phrases, themes, ideas and questions. You can then organise this information into groups, linking complementary ideas together. This will help you find areas to focus on, and help you identify gaps in your understanding or knowledge. It also starts the process of writing which for many students is the most daunting part of tackling an essay.

Target Reading:

The next step in this process is to start reading. Begin with the key texts given to you by your lecturer. These are there to get you started, and have been recommended because they are of good quality. However, they are usually not an exhaustive list of writings available on a subject. Look beyond these books for further reading; a useful way of finding supplementary reading is to look at what works are cited by your key texts. **N.B.** Be careful of information provided by non-peer reviewed journals or books and of information available on websites. If in doubt check the quality of your source with a lecturer or tutor.

Be sure you read your texts critically with your essay question in mind and take notes as you go. There are many different methods of note taking using a range of materials such as notebooks, records cards or digital documents. Find a method that you are comfortable with and that works for you. Taking notes while you do your reading will make the planning and writing stages of your essay much more straightforward and will help you to better retain information.