



Planning Your Assignments

Overview

Have you ever planned a vacation? A camping trip? A big party? Probably yes. It takes time, it takes effort and it takes organization. Well, the same holds true for a University writing assignment. Think of a writing assignment, not as a thing, but an event. Like other kinds of events, completing an effective writing assignment is a problem-to-be-solved and there are a few things to think about in that process.

Now, I do not want to suggest that a “plan” for a writing assignment is a formula, or a blueprint. On the contrary, the writing process is often best when it is messy and allows for enough freedom that the writer can take leaps and risks through the process. Do not think of a plan as some kind of paint-by-numbers template. You may have been given such templates in high-school, usually called “outlines”. Throw those away. Writing a good essay is not simply a matter of filling in the blanks of a prescribed form; it is a complex thinking process. So, think of plan as a verb, not a noun.

Good planners can draw upon a variety of techniques to help them solve the problem and reach their goal. We call these techniques heuristics. Linda Hayes and John Flowers (1977) suggest that most novice writers rely upon a very limited repertoire of technique: filling in the blanks of a prescribed outline, hoping for late-night inspiration just before the essay is due, or being paralyzed by writer’s block. You need more techniques than that – you need a wide range of problem-solving techniques to get you through, drawing on alternatives when something isn’t working. Only then can you truly “plan” your essay.

You have two essential goals when writing an essay:

1. To generate ideas;
2. To arrange those ideas into written form.

These two things interact through the process and require you to do a few things:

- Understand the assignment – look it over, talk to your professor, talk to others, begin thinking deeply on the matter, decode and clarify the purpose of the assignment its length and scope.
- Ask questions – begin pondering questions related to the assignment, start to imagine possible paths your essay could take, formulate initial ideas.

- Establish your goal – build on your initial thinking with some reading and determine what the goal is. What do you want to do with this essay? What do you want readers to take away?
- Begin playing with the writing – brainstorm, free write, make mind maps, jot notes, and annotate your readings This will help you to freely explore the territory of ideas.
- Go to Writing Support– “test” out your ideas with an actual listener. Tell the Writing Support Consultant what you are thinking, what you goals are, get them to respond to your ideas.
- Take a break – an essay takes time. Period. So you should be doing all this initial stuff very early after receiving your assignment. Then you can leave it for a day or two or more to let your ideas percolate.
- Do more reading – dive into the relevant research on your topic, have a system for recording and organizing your source material, get informed on the topic from a variety of experts in the field, get help from librarians.
- Start mapping your thoughts into writing – in a way that suits your style, begin creating some structure for your ideas, how it will flow, what you’re working thesis will be, how you will integrate your source material with your own ideas.
- Visit Writing Support again – have a discussion about what you have done, test your ideas and structure, get guidance on where it is working and where it might need further work.
- Write your first draft – give more formal structure to your ideas and write fully formed ideas with an audience in mind. Put the pieces together into a coherent whole – beginning, middle and end.
- Visit SLS Writing Support again – read what you’ve written out loud, see if your essay is doing what it intends to do, get guidance on revisions and editing.

Revise – move ideas around, consider a different flow to the essay, connect ideas with adjacent ones, and check the way in which your sources are integrated in your essay.

Edit – do what is necessary to ensure that your grammar and mechanics are correct. Remember that this is not a step-by-step procedure. This is a complex thinking process and all these elements will interact throughout the process. And it will take time. A good essay requires this kind of work. It does not simply spring forth in one sitting.

How We Can Help

In the preceding, I've emphasized the value of talking throughout this process and this is where Writing Support can be a very good partner. We can help to guide you through all this messiness, help you to see new ways of looking at your ideas, help you to articulate them more fully and provide useful feedback about whether the goals of your essay are being met. We can also give you support and advice about revision and editing strategies to help you to polish the final product. Many students find that this relieves some of the stress and anxiety associated with writing, gives them more confidence with their writing, helps them to engage more meaningfully in the writing process and find their own voice.

Resources

Flowers, L. & Hayes, J. (1977) Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process. *College English*, 39, No. 4, 449-461.

OWL Purdue, Introduction to Prewriting (Invention)
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/673/1>

University of Toronto, Organizing an Essay
(<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/planning-and-organizing/organizing>)