

The importance of essay planning

If you've ever written a shopping list and then forgotten to take it shopping but still remembered to buy everything on your list you'll know that the process of writing the list is almost as important as the list itself. It's the same with an essay plan – the process of writing it will allow you to really consider the implications of a question and all the points you need to include in order to answer it in a way that you wouldn't if you just launched yourself into the essay. A plan should also help you to organise your ideas. Time spent planning is never time wasted. Planned essays are more likely to answer the question in a concise and structured way.

The stages of essay planning

There are definite stages to planning an essay which are as important to follow for coursework essays as for essays written in exam conditions.

1. Read the question (several times).
2. Identify the key words in the question and underline them.
3. Explore these key words.
4. Write a plan which addresses these key words and orders your ideas.
5. Start writing your essay and refer regularly to your plan.

Considering the title

Essay titles are generally framed in the same kind of way. You may be asked to discuss, consider or explore a text or a particular aspect of it. You may be asked what you think about an aspect of a text or you may be invited to consider the validity of a particular statement about a text. You could also be asked to compare and contrast two or more texts.

It is important to make a distinction between the wording of the title itself and the key words which separate the particular title from any other. So if a question asked you to, 'Discuss the importance of time in *The Child in Time*' you could substitute the word 'discuss' for 'explore' or 'consider the importance of' or 'what do you think is important about' and you are still being asked to write an essay about essentially the same thing. The most important word in the question is 'time' and you must consider this in detail before you start writing your response.

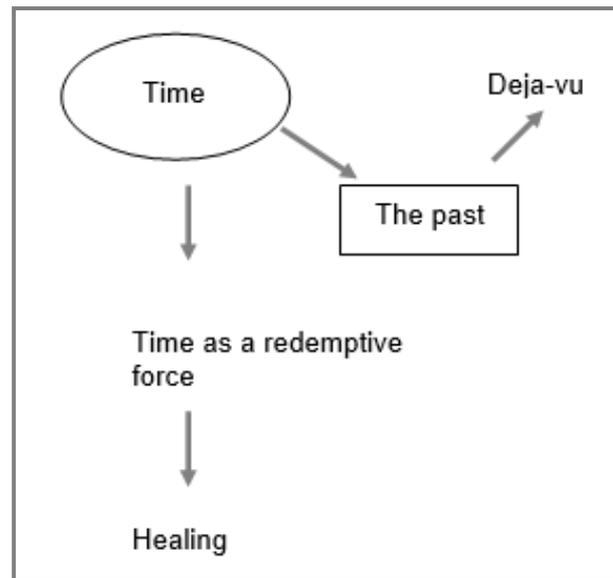
Exploring key words

Once you have identified and underlined the key words in the title you should spend time exploring them. You could do this as a brainstorm where you simply jot down anything that comes into your head in relation to the key words or you could use a 'mind map' which should help you to organise your ideas as they come to you. You can see the beginnings of both approaches below.

Time (brainstorm)

The past
 History
 Memory
 Linear/ non-linear
 Going back in time
 Patterns and sequencing
 The science of time
 Existence outside time
 Trapped by time (birth, death)
 Units of time (weeks, months, years)
 Time standing still
 Time as a redemptive force

Time (mind map)



Planning

Each of the approaches above has its merits or you may have or wish to develop your own way of exploring key words. What is important is that during the planning process you allow yourself the time to really think about the key words in the question and that you also spend time ordering your ideas into clear arguments.

At school you may have been taught to do a spider diagram to plan your answer. This is fine as a way of getting your ideas onto paper but it can then be tempting to start at the top of the diagram and work your way around the ideas in a clockwise fashion. This means ideas are often not linked or effectively structured and can be repeated. So, if you begin your plan with a spider diagram or brainstorm you must then spend time ordering the ideas you have come up with into groups. You could do this by colour coding them, drawing shapes around them or rewriting them into separate lists.