

Planning essays and writing essays

Tips [from Sarah Lloyd]

1. Plan your essay (stream of consciousness rarely works)
2. Focus on the question: make sure that everything you discuss is clearly linked to other points and to the question. Show the connections to your reader.
3. Start with the obvious, simple and most immediately central: then work out to more complex issues.

Unpicking the question

4. Break the question down: start simply and specifically and work out from there. Don't jump to conclusions about what the question is about! The clue is always in the question. Define the key words and use them to structure the themes of your paragraphs.

How is the question formulated?

- *To what extent?/what were the causes/consequences* – you need to weigh up different elements, then make a decision in favour of one.
- *Compare and contrast* – you need to do this in each paragraph, but avoid just making a list – analyse why the elements are similar/different
- *Does this model fit the evidence?/how effective was...?* – explain the model, compare the evidence.

5. Reading. What's the starting point; what are the key texts? Is there historiographical debate about the question?
Use the Bibliography of British and Irish History, as well as the general bibliography and the weekly seminar reading lists.
6. What primary sources are relevant? How might you use them to support your answer?
7. Evaluate your evidence and your conclusions. How persuasive is the evidence? Weigh up the different arguments and suggest which ones are most significant, apply most widely or have the best evidence.

8. ***Proof read*** - read your sentences out loud to make sure that they make sense.

Writing History Essays: The Do's and Don'ts

This list is designed to supplement what is already in the History Subject Guide on Writing Coursework Assignments.

A. Do's

1. Use the History Essay Plan sheets on the StudyNet module sites – that way your tutor can offer concrete advice.
2. Use at least 6 books or articles.
3. Look for key words or phrases in the question, and make notes accordingly.
4. Structure the essay with a clear introduction (one paragraph), core (perhaps six to eight paragraphs), and conclusion (one paragraph).
5. Make your paragraphs roughly 2/3 page in length.
6. Differentiate between *themes* and *points*. Each paragraph should address a theme, with points providing supporting evidence.
7. Make a clear argument, perhaps by setting this out very briefly in the introduction. Ultimately, it is the argument on which you are being marked.
8. Achieve a *breadth* and *depth* of analysis, by dealing with key themes one by one in a way that makes sense and avoids repetition.
9. Stay relevant to the question in hand, perhaps by using the key words or phrases identified in the planning stage.
10. Reference your sources fully and correctly, in the History Subject Guide style.
11. Avoid plagiarism at all costs. This includes reworking notes that have not been fully digested.
12. Use the spell and grammar check facilities in 'Word'.
13. Learn from past mistakes by reading through the feedback on your old coursework.

B. Don'ts

1. Plan half-heartedly and/or miss the essay tutorial.
2. Rely on the internet for sources. DO NOT use Wikipedia.
3. Use half sentences that haven't got verbs. If in doubt, read dubious-looking sentences aloud.
4. Use short paragraphs, i.e. 2-3 lines long, which give a bitty, fragmentary look to the essay, or long paragraphs which dwell on a theme.
5. Tell a story, i.e. write a narrative, chronological-based answer.
6. Mistake cosy description for analysis. While writing, keep asking yourself: 'Why is this important?'
7. Go in circles, repeating themes/points which have been addressed in the essay already.
8. Use too many quotes or leave quotes hanging in the air. If in doubt, leave quotes out.
9. Forget your references:
 - Level 1: maximum mark for an essay with no referencing is 60%
 - Level 2: maximum mark for an essay with no referencing is 50%
 - Level 3: automatic fail
10. Forget your bibliography, or try to pull the wool over the tutor's eyes by listing books/articles you have not used.