



Start writing essays

Early stages of essay writing

Jane Van Hool

We now hear from four people in public life about their approach to the early stages of writing. John Humphrys is the presenter of the Today Programme and On The Record, and writes a column for the *Sunday Times*. John Humphrys is presenter of the Today programme and On the Record, and writes a column for the Sunday Times.

John Humphrys:

You have to do your homework. You have to have the facts, or as many facts as possible at your disposal. If you don't know, and this, this applies whether you're an OU student or, or whether you're an interviewer on the Today programme, if you don't know what you're talking about then you won't succeed, it's such an obvious thing to say but, but nonetheless an awful lot of people set out to try to demolish arguments with the force of their invective or rhetoric or whatever. That doesn't seem to me to be the way to do it. But the other thing is that you've got to know your own position very clearly. That sounds easy, yes, of course I know what I think about nuclear weapons or what I think about teenage sex or drug -taking. But do you? Are you, are you, are you sure that you do? Have you thought it through properly? I've been surprised at the number of times that I've thought I would write along certain lines and when I've looked at the argument I've discovered that actually I was wrong and I need to think differently.

Jane Van Hool:

Actor, television presenter and Open University graduate, Matthew Kelly had to conquer essay-writing at the age of 40, when he embarked on his OU studies.

Matthew Kelly:

If you find a passage in a book that puts exactly what you want to say, then use it! But paraphrase it, you know, so in the end it becomes your works. I mean, it feels like cheating, but it's not cheating because you've looked it up, you've researched it, you've used somebody else's ideas that correspond to your own, and you've used it in the right context.

Jane Van Hool:

John Pilger is a journalist and filmmaker, and writes a column for the *New Statesman*.

John Pilger:

It's a kind of endless squirrelling. Research as widely as you can. Writing is always selective, but you can only select if you go to the widest possible landscape of sources, of information. You can reduce these fairly quickly, often, but it does come down to then, almost competing pieces of information, viewpoints, perspectives and that then calls on you to make decisions as a writer. And it, it's, I suppose almost a process of elimination.

Jane Van Hool:

Helena Kennedy, QC - journalist and writer.

Helena Kennedy:

I'm very good at, at sifting, and I think that probably my experience as a lawyer has made me good at that, of recognising where the heart of something is, and, I think that comes with more and more experience. But you have to really discipline yourself, and, to recognise drass and to become quite discriminating.