



Start writing essays *Researching an essay*

Jane Van Hool:

Open University tutors Tim Baugh and Leslie Hoose, and student Beth Lewis, are discussing essay writing. We join the conversation as they discuss researching an essay. They then go on to talk about first responses to the essay title.

Beth Lewis:

I always spend far too much long on my essays. I get too interested in the subject, I do too much research, and I get swamped in the amount of information that I collect, but then reading around does give me more confidence, but it just adds so many more words. And you always feel that if you carry on looking a bit more, you'll find something else that'll, ah yes that's right, that's what fits in there and, but it's hard for me to put the brakes on that sort of work.

Tim Baugh:

I think a schedule should help with that, I'm not saying it's an easy solution, because you're, still up to you to decide what you'd, what you eliminate and what you include, but a schedule should help, because it just gives you a clear indication of, for example, how much research you can do. You know, what, because your interest in the in the subject drives you on, you know, an essay title could also be the title of a PHD, you know, which might have eighty to a hundred thousands words associated, you, you know. One of your briefs in writing your essay is to draw the line at, a thousand words or fifteen hundred words, or two thousand words or whatever the, the word limit is, and it's a difficult business but, but a really important component I I feel anyway is, a schedule. This might be a tricky question for you to answer but, how much of your essay writing time do you suppose, I mean, what kind of percentage is spent on this researching, which is essentially what we're talking about?

Beth Lewis:

The research definitely is easily a third of it, easily.

Leslie Hoose:

I think one of the thing which perhaps you can learn from this is that that, it tells you something about the sort of student you are.

Tim Baugh:

I think, I think Leslie's quite right about that. People are so very different, and they take such very different approaches, both in terms of the way they research, what proportion of time they spend doing it. I think probably, the difficulty here, is that it is your own responsibility, to work out for yourself what works for you, and that's something that you can only really do by trial and error. So when you're sitting there thinking 'oh dear, I'm doing it wrong again, because it feels like I've spent too much time on this', that's not actually right, I don't think. What's actually happening is you're doing the experiment, and you're finding out, in practical terms, how useful this bit of research has been to you, and perhaps you'll modify it again, at, at a later date.

Tim Baugh:

Beth, imagine you've just looked at an essay title, what's the next thing that you do in order to start work on that essay? Let's think about the, the title, 'Are Blood Sports Cruel'?

Beth Lewis:

I think, nearly always when, when I first look at an essay question, and I'm sure other students as well, is that you immediately panic and think, 'Oh my God, how on earth am I going to put, you know, get round this subject?'. I always look at the question and under line

relevant words, and the words that seems to stand out, and I make a list of these words which I put into the computer, and I nearly always do this in a separate colour, so that I know that these are the important words, and the important parts of the question that I have got to get in somewhere. So I mean, for, for that essay question obviously they're discussing cruelty and the word *sport*, for instance, would definitely be two words that I would look into. I always read right around the subject looking for the important parts, points but, also, trying to feel confidence about the knowledge that I've got of the subject before I start writing, just gathering bits and pieces and, getting it settled in my own head, quite what the different aspects of, of the topic are.

Tim Baugh:

And the underlining, the key words and phrases in the title is an important part of, of informing what ... right. Yeah, that sounds extremely useful to me. I often suggest to folks that, having read it through the title, and underlined the key words and phrases, that you write down your first response to the essay title in just a sentence or two. Whatever that response is, it really doesn't matter how unformed it is, because, what's happening is you've addressed the essay writing process in more and more detail, is your opinion, and, and viewpoints are forming on this subject, and it's really helpful to see the process, but also to see that, it is actually quite legitimate for you to have an opinion, and to express it in your essay, as long as it's expressed in a way which shows that you've researched the subjects and read the material appropriate to the essay.

Leslie Hoose:

I find it a good principle to look at the, the question and think about it, and then write down the conclusion, not because that conclusion is going to be the conclusion of the essay, though it may be, but because forming a view at the very beginning of the process, as to what you think is the appropriate answer in a nutshell, has two effects. One, is it gives you the right mind-set, so that, from the beginning you're seeing where you're going, and the second thing is, by the time you get to the end you will be able to compare the point you've arrived at, with your point of departure. And it's going to have the effect, therefore, of being a check to prevent something happening which does happen, and which causes students to lose a lot of credit. That is to say, they produce a very good essay, which contains, by implication, a proper answer to the question, but they don't actually bring it to together in a clear conclusion at the end.