

How to plan and write a TMA

The best TMAs are those which are well planned and therefore well organised and logical, making them easy to read. Proper planning also makes the writing of the TMA much easier, as you'll know exactly what to write, rather than having to think about it as you go along.

Here's a step-by-step guide to planning an essay so that you enjoy writing it and your tutor enjoys reading it.

Step 1

Read the question carefully and the accompanying notes in the Assignment booklet. Don't just skim through this - read it all carefully.

Step 2

Make a note of the parts of the course that the Assignment booklet says are relevant. Perhaps highlight these in the booklet itself.

Step 3

Re-read the relevant parts of the course, or look back through the notes you made when you first read the materials.

Step 4

Identify the 'process' words in the question. These are the words that indicate what you are required to do. They include words like: "compare and contrast", "explain", "evaluate", "how far", and so on. A list of common process words is at the end of this guide. You may want to highlight the process words in the Assignment booklet.

Step 5

Draw yourself a table with three columns. In the left hand column you write the concepts covered in the relevant parts of the chapter. In the middle column, make a note of all the evidence in favour of such concepts and in the right hand column make a note of all the evidence against. If you don't like tables, perhaps you could use a mind map.

Step 6

Think about the subject and form your own view. Do you find the evidence associated with the subject matter convincing? Can you think of any reasons why you would disagree with the experts? Do your own experiences confirm or disagree with what the course materials say? In other words, spend some time thinking about the subject of the question and form an opinion about it. You might like to make some notes as you go.

Step 7

Go through the notes you made when reading the course materials, your table or mind map of the relevant evidence associated with the core concepts for the question, and your notes of your own views. Now, construct a list of all the items that are strictly relevant to the precise focus of the question. Eliminate items which are not focused on the specific nature of the question, even though associated with the subject.

Step 8

Put your list of relevant and focused items into a logical order - an order which helps you argue in favour of your own view that you worked out in Step 6. You may only need to put a number against each item on your list, or you may want to write it out again.

Step 9

Write your conclusion. This should only be one paragraph and need to outline your argument that says something like “this essay therefore shows that...”, adding some brief summary of the key pieces of evidence that supports your view. Make sure the final sentence of your conclusion is a link back to the question in some way. You now know where you are aiming with your essay - you have a pre-set destination and hence the rest of your journey in writing the essay is much easier.

Step 10

Take your numbered list and for each item write a few extra notes of which evidence you’ll use to support each topic, important data you need to incorporate, or names of key researchers. Make a note of why you need to mention these people, data or other evidence. In other words, connect your numbered notes to your conclusion.

Step 11

Now, take each numbered note and write out in full what you want to say about each item. Add in the references relevant to each item and make a list of the references as you go.

Step 12

Copy and paste the conclusion to the end of what you have just written.

Step 13

Read through your material so far to make sure it flows logically, adding in any necessary connecting sentences to link each topic to each other. You may also need to adjust your conclusion at this stage.

Step 14

Re-read through your text to check it is still focused on the specific nature of the question. Check your notes and check the process words again to confirm that your text does answer the specifics of the question. Tidy up your text if this is not the case.

Step 15

Now you can write your introduction because you know exactly what your essay says. Your introduction should introduce your essay - not the subject in general terms. In other words, you need to say what your essay will cover, what conclusion you will draw and how you will reach that conclusion. You will also need to use your introduction to define your terms.

Step 16

Read your introduction and then your conclusion. If taken together they tell a summary of your whole text, you have done well. If the introduction and conclusion don't make much sense in isolation without your main text, you need to adjust the introduction, the conclusion, or both. A good TMA is one where the introduction and conclusion can be read without any other text, yet the whole idea of the essay is conveyed.

Step 17

Read through your final essay to make sure it flows logically and answers the specifics of the question. Make any adjustments if necessary.

Step 18

Check your essay for spelling and grammatical errors. With spell checkers and grammar checkers on computers, there is little excuse for such problems with people who use word processors for their TMAs.

Step 19

Do a word count of the essay to make sure it fits within the specified limits. If your essay is too long, you need to consider taking out material. If it is too short consider what you may need to add in - look at the items on your notes that you eliminated. They may be useful.

Step 20

Add your list of references to the end of the essay.

Other tips

When you've done your first set of rough notes, take a break. Do something different, preferably taking your mind off your studies completely. When you come back to your work your mind will be fresh and you'll be able to continue more easily. Setting aside such breaks in the time you give yourself for TMAs can be really helpful.

Look through your essay from the end to the start - almost reading backwards. That way any glaring errors will leap out more easily.

Check your work for gendered/sexist language and make adjustments if necessary.

Go through your essay and eliminate words such as "most", "many", "a lot" and any other imprecise terms. Replace them with something that is more specific.

If possible, get someone else to read your essay before you submit it for marking. They will be able to spot any errors you haven't been able to notice because you are so closely involved.

Read your essay out loud. Often you can hear mistakes and sentences that don't make sense, even though when you read them silently they seem OK.

Common process words

Account for	Explain, clarify, give reasons for.
Analyse	Resolve into its component parts. Examine critically or minutely.
Assess	Determine the value of, weigh up (see also evaluated).
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between, perhaps reach conclusion about which is preferable and justify this clearly.
Contrast	Set in opposition in order to bring out the differences sharply.
Compare and contrast	Find some points of common ground between x and y and show where or how they differ.
Criticise	Make a judgement (backed by a discussion of the evidence or reasoning involved) about the merit of theories or opinions or about the truth of facts.
Define	State the exact meaning of a word or phrase. In some cases it may be necessary or desirable to examine different possible or often used definitions.
Describe	Give a detailed account of ...
Discuss	Explain, then give two sides of the issue and any implications.
Distinguish or Differentiate	Look for differences between ...
Evaluate	Make an appraisal of the worth/validity/effectiveness of something in the light of its truth or usefulness
Examine the argument that	Look in detail at the line of argument
Explain	Give details about how and why it is ...
How far ...	To what extent ... Usually involves looking at evidence/arguments for and against and weighing them up.
Illustrate	Make clear and explicit, usually requires the use of carefully chosen examples.
Justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions; answer the main objections likely to be made about them.
Outline	Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasising structure and arrangement.
State	Present in a brief, clear form.
Summarise	Give a concise, clear explanation or account of ... presenting the chief factors and omitting minor details and examples
What arguments can be made for and against...	Give a concise, clear explanation or account of ... presenting the chief factors and omitting minor details and examples