

## Starting an Essay and Choosing a Question

- The best thing to remember when starting any essay is **not to panic**.
- Essay writing is a process and has a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Using a systematic approach to every essay you undertake will help you feel more in control of your work and make the experience less overwhelming.
- Essay writing is also a skill that is acquired and improved over time.
- Feedback on past essays is one of the most useful tools you can use to improve your writing. Look at where you lost marks, speak to your tutor/ lecturer, and seek to improve on a weakness for future work.

## Choosing an essay question

- **Take your time.** You are committing yourself to an essay title for a few weeks. This is not a decision you should rush.
- **Choose a title that interests you** (not the one you think your lecturer/ tutor “wants” to correct). Students always do better when they pick a subject/ topic that they enjoy as they engage better with it.
- **Make sure you fully understand the question asked.** What is the question asking you to do? E.g. evaluate, discuss, contrast, critique, examine. Use a dictionary to double check definitions and any terms you do not understand fully.
- **Write it down!** Writing the essay question down makes you engage more with it, and you are less likely to misinterpret what is being asked of you.

**N.B. Remember, you can only be marked based on the question asked!**

## Things to Consider

### Is it a closed or open-ended question?

- A closed essay question is asking you to engage with a specific task, i.e. its criteria and edges are defined for you.
  - E.g. *Compare and contrast the differences in burial practices between the early and late Bronze Age in Ireland.*
  - This question is asking you to look at a specific thing (burial practice), during a specific time frame (the early and late Bronze Age) and to evaluate the similarities and differences that occur between them.
- An open-ended question gives you scope to choose the direction, stance or even the topic you want to engage with.
  - E.g. *What are the most defining political moments in the history of the Irish State from its foundation to 2010? Discuss.*
  - This question is broad in scope and open-ended. It gives wide parameters, and it is down to the student to define the focus of the essay and decide what is important.

### Try and break the question into sub questions.

- What are you being asked to do? Why is this important?
- Or, if this is an open-ended question: What am I going to focus on? What approach/ stance should I take?

### Think about how it fits in with your course's main themes, objectives, debates etc.

- Your essay question has been set with your overall course in mind.
- Take some time to consider this and what implications it may have on the set question.

### What can you do in the word count?

- Writing an essay that conveys your knowledge and understanding while effectively addressing the question is a skill.
- Many of the topics which you will be asked to write about are extensive; be aware of the word count you have been set and consider what you can realistically achieve in that number.

## What do you already know?

- Establishing what you already know about a topic/ subject is a good starting point for any essay.
- It also helps you figure out what you do not know and where you need to start researching.
- An effective way of doing this is using a **word dump**, i.e. taking a blank piece of paper and writing down key words, phrases, themes, ideas, and questions.
  - You can then organise this information into groups, linking complementary ideas together.
  - This will help you find areas to focus on, and help you identify gaps in your understanding or knowledge.
  - It also starts the process of writing which for many students is the most daunting part of tackling an essay.

## Target reading

- The next step in this process is to start reading.
- Begin with the key texts given to you by your lecturer. These are there to get you started, and they have been recommended because they are of good quality.
- However, they are usually not an exhaustive list of writings available on a subject. Look beyond these books for further reading.
- A useful way of finding supplementary reading is to look at what works are cited by your key texts.
- Be careful of information provided by non-peer reviewed journals or books, as well as information available on websites. If in doubt, check the quality of your source with a lecturer or tutor.
- Be sure you read your texts critically with your essay question in mind and take notes as you go.
  - There are many different methods of note taking using a range of materials such as notebooks, records cards, or digital documents. Find a method that you are comfortable with and that works for you.
  - Taking notes while you do your reading will make the planning and writing stages of your essay much more straightforward and will help you to better retain information.