

# Reflecting on, and developing, approaches to writing

The following exercise is adapted from a session designed in collaboration with the department of **Politics and International Relations**. It is designed to stimulate peer-discussion around approaches to academic writing tasks. The 'example' approaches used in the exercise are deliberately ambiguous as the purpose of the exercise is to acknowledge that there is no single approach to writing. All approaches carry advantages and disadvantages; the purpose of reflection is to recognise this and to consider ways in which approaches can be developed in light of reflections. The exercise can take **between 20-30 minutes** but can be extended to allow for more in-depth discussion if desired. Tutors are encouraged also to share their own reflections on how their approaches to writing have developed over the course of their academic careers.

## Tutor notes

Introduce the exercise by stating it is designed to:

- a. Encourage reflection on approaches to writing - *why is this valuable?*
  - b. Encourage peer discussion and practice sharing - *why is this helpful?*
1. **Give out the hand-out**, 'The advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to essay-writing'. Ask the students to spend a few moments looking at the different approaches and considering the **advantages** and **disadvantages** for the **three named students** (examples 1, 2 and 3).
  2. Ask the students to work in pairs or threes to compare notes on advantages and disadvantages and to suggest **areas for development** for each. Encourage students to reflect on whether they recognise aspects of their own approaches in the examples provided.
  3. Once the students have had a chance to do this, go round the group as a whole, asking for feedback and comments made in relation to the examples. Use this discussion to prompt deeper discussion, if necessary.



4. Ask the students to work individually on the final exercise - noting **advantages** and **disadvantages only**. Explain that once they have done this, they will be asked to share their reflections with peers.
5. Once again, ask the students to work in pairs or threes to share ideas for how they could develop their own approaches to writing. By the end of this exercise, all students should have a completed final column, based on the ideas they have developed in conversation with peers. Depending on the group size, the tutor can also drop in on conversations, offering advice or answering questions.
6. End the exercise by inviting students (again, depending on group size) to share the areas for development they have identified in relation to their own writing. You can also use this final section to add comments or ideas of your own.

## Sample exercise: the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to essay-writing

Each of the statements below contains potential advantages and disadvantages. For each, think about these and suggest ways of adapting or improving approaches (you might recognise some from your own experience).

e.g.

**Lucy:** ‘When I get an essay title I go immediately to the Library, find some relevant books, articles etc. and start to read up on the topic’.

Advantages	Disadvantages/risks	Suggestions for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enables her to develop her understanding early on</li> <li>• Means she is potentially ahead of the game when it comes to finding and using sources</li> <li>• The sooner she builds confidence with the topic, the more confident she might feel in putting together her essay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going straight to the reading might result in time wasted on material not especially related to the title</li> <li>• The subsequent essay may tend to be led by the reading rather than her own analysis and arguments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perhaps build in some time, initially, to properly analyse the question. This should help direct and focus her subsequent reading and note-making)</li> <li>• Jot down her own initial thoughts, ideas, lines of argument before starting to read and make notes (it's fine if these are subsequently amended or refined). This should help her to focus on developing arguments and should further help provide a framework for the reading</li> </ul>

**Mohammed:** ‘Before I can commence writing my essay, I need a detailed and thorough plan setting out exactly what will be included and in what order.’

Advantages	Disadvantages/risks	Suggestions for development

**Yoko:** 'I spend the initial stages of the essay writing process, reading as much material as possible. It's only when I feel I have arrived at a full understanding that I can start to plan out my own writing.'

Advantages	Disadvantages/risks	Suggestions for development

**Michael:** 'I can only write when I feel motivated and 'in the mood' to do so. When I am in the mood I can work solidly for long periods of time, and have produced some good stuff (and achieved some good marks) so far.'

Advantages	Disadvantages/risks	Suggestions for development

Finally, think about your **own approaches** to essay writing/writing habits, assessing the advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages	Disadvantages/risks	Suggestions for development