



Introduction to Academic Writing

UCL Writing Lab

Introduction to Academic Writing

This study pack is designed to take about 50 minutes.

It will give you an introduction to academic writing, sharing the most important principles that will guide you through writing during your degree at UCL.

It was put together by the [Writing Lab](#), which is the section of the [Academic Communication Centre](#) (ACC) that serves students from Bartlett; Psychology & Language Sciences; Arts, Humanities, Social & Historical Sciences. Students from all other faculties can refer to the main ACC page for your provision. But the information contained herein is widely applicable.

A Note on Context

There is more than one correct way to do academic writing. The advice the Writing Lab will give you is based on what will work best in the UK, at UCL. These conventions are based on the rhetorical traditions here.

There are other equally valid styles and systems for other contexts. Research has shown that rhetorical styles in writing vary around the world (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008).

Indeed, styles of writing are also affected by your own discipline / subject area e.g. science, law, humanities – so inflect what you learn here with your understanding of your own disciplinary context too.

Introduction to Academic Writing

This self-study workshop about academic writing will cover:

- developing your awareness of the University's (and your own) expectations of education and academic writing
- tips on planning your writing and on critical thinking
- key principles for academic writing, across the 3 stages of writing
- other useful resources
- beginning to help you feel more confident about writing.

You will do 3 relaxed writing exercises, so have something with you that you can write with.

Ta-Nehisi Coates on breakthroughs and growing new muscles:

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an author, journalist and public intellectual who writes best-selling works of non-fiction, published his first novel in 2019, and is the current author of the Marvel comics The Black Panther and Captain America. Among other things, he writes about race, reparative justice, whiteness, and America.

He has also spoken and written very helpfully about the process of writing.



Ta-Nehisi Coates on breakthroughs and growing new muscles:

In the next slide you can see his description of working hard on writing and gaining new abilities in the process.

He talks about ‘stress’, but we take this to mean not the bad kind of stress we want to avoid or manage, but stress as in a ‘stress test’ in a Physical Education class – in which you do the same run over and over again, measuring yourself, pushing your limits, and getting faster.

(The quote is extracted from a short video he gave on The Atlantic website – you can watch the whole thing using the link in the title here.)



Ta-Nehisi Coates on breakthroughs and growing new muscles:

“I had to write an 8000-word piece for the magazine. It was hell. I think breakthroughs come from that sort of stress. When I got done that piece, I was clear that these were things that I was not capable of doing before. Like, the writing was very, very different, the sentences had much more power, and I think a lot of that had to do with the stress I was under.

I think breakthroughs come from putting [...] pressure on yourself, and seeing what you can take, and hoping that you grow some new muscles. It's not really that mystical, it's like repeated practice over and over again, and then suddenly you become something that you had no idea that you could really be.”



Ta-Nehisi Coates on breakthroughs and growing new muscles:

“This video with Ta-Nehisi Coates really helped me at a time when I thought my PhD thesis was too much for me, beyond my abilities. My friends would tell me, “you can do it!” and although that was nice of them, I felt it didn’t help. Because I knew that there were these moments when it was too hard. Then, when I watched this, hearing him essentially say, ‘that’s true, right now, you can’t do it’ helped me – surprisingly. Because he was reflecting what I was experiencing, and explaining that yes, there are moments when you can’t do it – but, if you keep going, by doing it, you become able to do it. You grow the new muscles. ” – Dr. Kerry-Jo Reilly, Writing Lab Convenor

So remember that as we study and write, we will continue to come up against our limit. We can expect that to happen. But if we keep going, we push through that limit, and make a new one.

Exercise: Free writing

Many writing workshops begin with what's called a 'free write'. This is where you set a timer for, say, 2 minutes, and just write whatever comes to you. The writing probably won't make sense, but that's the point, it's just to get you going. Don't think about what you're writing – just begin and don't stop until the timer goes off.

Now, turn to the next slide, set a timer for 2 minutes, and free write.

(And you can try doing this in future, any time you sit down to write.)



Free Write

2 minutes

Why Do We Write Essays?

Of course, we write essays because we have to, in order to get our degree. But what else does it do for us?

We write essays to:

- To develop and demonstrate our understanding of a topic
- To get useful feedback on our progress, which will help us grow
- To practice and improve writing skills – so that when we graduate, we take with us, not only a body of knowledge about our subject, but also communication skills that will serve us well

Why Do We Write Essays?

- To demonstrate critical thinking – this is crucial, and we will return to it in more detail later in this workshop
- To intervene in academic debates – when we write essays, we are joining the conversation in our field, and contributing to that exchange (this is why we reference properly – and we will also return to that issue later in this workshop)
- To synthesise and develop your own views on a topic – as we will discuss later, the process of writing serves to help us work out what we ourselves think about an issue, and being able to do that will serve us, and our communities, well

Essay-writing might seem like a chore but try to think of it in a positive light – people are interested in your ideas, argument and thinking. It gives you the space to explore your subject.

Higher Education

As you embark on your course of study, take a moment to consider these questions:

- What is my concept of knowledge?
- Is it something given to me by others?
- Is it something I create, or co-create?
- What are our roles, as students, and teachers, in this?
- What kind of thinking is required at UCL?

We could argue that the institutions in which we find ourselves are not perfect. Though we may find ourselves in places with a very imperfect history and present, the intellectual, cultural critic, and writer named [bell hooks](#) suggests what we might do as scholars despite that:

bell hooks on Higher Education

“The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility.

In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.”



(hooks 1994: 207) hooks, bell (1994) *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the practice of freedom*, London: Routledge.

Exercise: Journaling

Many writers and artists have a practice of journaling. This is where we write to ourselves about how we are feeling and what we are thinking about our progress. It can be a very good way to be conscious of how we are doing, and what we need.

Now, try journaling for 3 minutes. Turn to the next slide, where there are some prompt questions, which you can use if it is helpful. Set the timer for 3 minutes and begin.

Journal

3 minutes

Why do I want to study this subject?

Where do I want my studies to take me? (intellectually, professionally, etc.)

A Note on Planning

Using planning techniques can really support us in academic writing. Consider the following tips:

- Use a planner (electronic, or print hard copy for the wall) so you can visualise and plan your time.
- Mark all important dates and deadlines. Mark off any time you know you are not able to spend studying e.g., job, family commitments. Leave room for free time!
- Around this, draw up a rough plan of how you will apportion your time.

A Note on Planning

Consider planning your individual days too:

- Make day-to-day plans, or even experiment with / establish a working scheduling that works for you.
- Study and assessments can be overwhelming, but you need to recharge too. Remember to make sure you take plenty of breaks, and enjoy yourself too.
- Use techniques such as the Pomodoro method: typically this is setting the timer for 25 mins and focusing, then taking a 5 minute break (to get up, go outside, sing, do something you like). After the 4th Pomodoro, that will have been two hours, and you might take a longer break. There are online timers to help you, and you can adjust the timings to suit you.
- Share ideas on things like this, but don't compare yourself to others: different routines/styles work for different people.

A Note on Student Support and Wellbeing at UCL

Many of us in the Writing Lab have had great experiences with the Student Support and Wellbeing office, or their equivalent at other universities. On their website, [here](#), you watch videos about their services, and on the page [here](#), you can read about their services, such as for disabled students, safety, mental health, travel - and generally gaining the most from your time at UCL, while leading a balanced and healthy life.

The Academic Support page, [here](#), also guides you to many useful resources, and the [Library](#) offers support and resources too, including for [disabled students](#).

It's a good thing to ask for help, and the help is there.

Other Support

Again, many of us in the Writing Lab have benefitted greatly from support for our mental health, and it has helped us to be successful in our writing and our degree. Remember, it's ok not to be ok. If you ever feel like you would benefit from something similar, help is available from:

- Each other
- Your supervisor
- Your personal tutor
- [UCL Student Psychological Services](#)
 - [Resources on managing stress, anxiety, depression](#)
 - [UCLcares](#)
 - [‘Looking after yourself’ advice](#)
- [Students’ Union UCL Welfare Services](#)
- [Coronavirus hub](#)

3-Step Essay Writing Process

Now, we will cover all our most important guidance about Academic Writing at UCL. Writing is a three-step process:

- Plan
- Write
- Revise



3-Step Guide to Essay Writing: 1

PLAN



a) Understand the Task

- Always find the assessment criteria that relates to the assignment – digest it and refer to it.
- Find the style guide, referencing and plagiarism rules for your department – keep them somewhere easy to find.
- Always check: what is the WORD COUNT? What are the rules about that e.g. will they let you go to +/-10%, or is it absolutely strict?

b) Unpack the Question

Ask:

- How is the question worded, e.g. *discuss, analyse, to what extent, compare, how far do you agree?* What does that wording mean for your task?
- Does the question assume anything, or leave anything out?
- Does the question ask you to look at a specific number of texts, etc.?
- What is your view on the question being asked? Play around and generate lots of ideas first, even before you start your proper research.

c) Research

Research is developing your ideas and gathering evidence.

How will you go about independently looking for sources?

- Course reading lists
- Bibliographies from any of those texts
- Create key words for the search engines (use precise, unambiguous terms)
- Read strategically, to varying level of detail. Read the abstracts, introductions, headings and conclusions first, to help you navigate the argument
- Academic twitter will also help you

Remain open to what you find, even if you've already started forming an argument.

d) Sources

The number of sources you should use for each assignment will depend on what you are doing, or if there is any guidance on the matter from your department or teacher. This is a good question to ask them.

For example, if you are doing a close analysis of a primary text, you may have fewer secondary resources, though you must have some. Whereas, if you are doing a literature review of a particular topic, you may have many more, because you are covering a lot of ground.

d) Sources

Here are some thoughts on this question from two of our tutors:

Fanny says: “With the added caveat that this is not a strict rule, rather a guidance, and that the selection of the type and number of sources effectively used within your research lies within the assessment and understanding of the researcher - in this case the student her/himself. It could also be helpful to refer or motivate students to look carefully at the academic texts they are encouraged to read in their courses (i.e. reading list) and how these texts (which most likely will lie within their discipline and constitute good examples of academic research within) makes use of sources (i.e. type and number of sources).”

Alex says: “When you get to MA, I think it depends so much- you might only have 10 sources if you're doing e.g. a detailed description of a medieval manuscript, which some of the MA students do in History, so it depends heavily on the discipline. I think I had at least 20 sources in my MA essays, but those were literature ones, but I think what's most importance is a balance between 'primary sources' i.e. the texts you're looking at, 'general works' i.e. context (I usually give Shakespeare as an example) and 'secondary specific literature' (in the Shakespeare example this is e.g. an article on blood in Macbeth).”

d) Sources

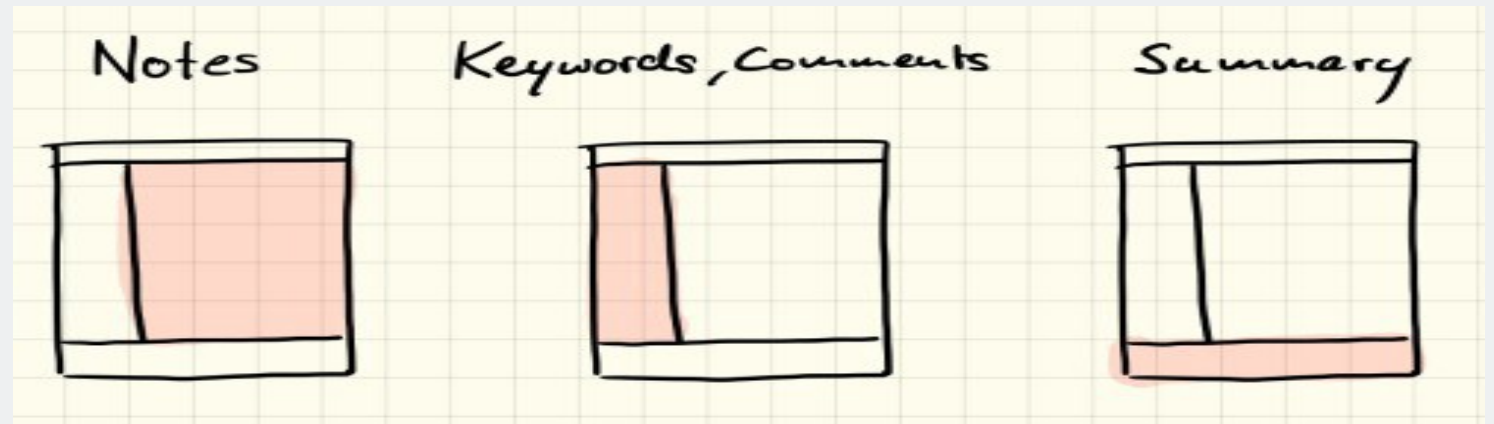
But what is important is that you use scholarly, specialised sources, such as books and journal articles. So you would not now use Wikipedia in your essays. You might draw on sources from outside the academy though, if they are excellent and you are using them judiciously.

Also, check that you have have an understanding of the most up-to-date research on a subject. You could find recent journal articles/books and see what other scholars in your field have been reading and referencing.

ON note-taking

- Draw a line down the side of your page to create a margin in which you can add comments, questions, follow up tasks. By making a space on the page for these thoughts, you will encourage yourself to think critically

Cornel Notes: google this format,
one example of this kind of note-taking



- Build up a discipline of reviewing your notes regularly, not just at the end

We also have a whole workshop on reading & note-taking later in the term.

e) Mapping

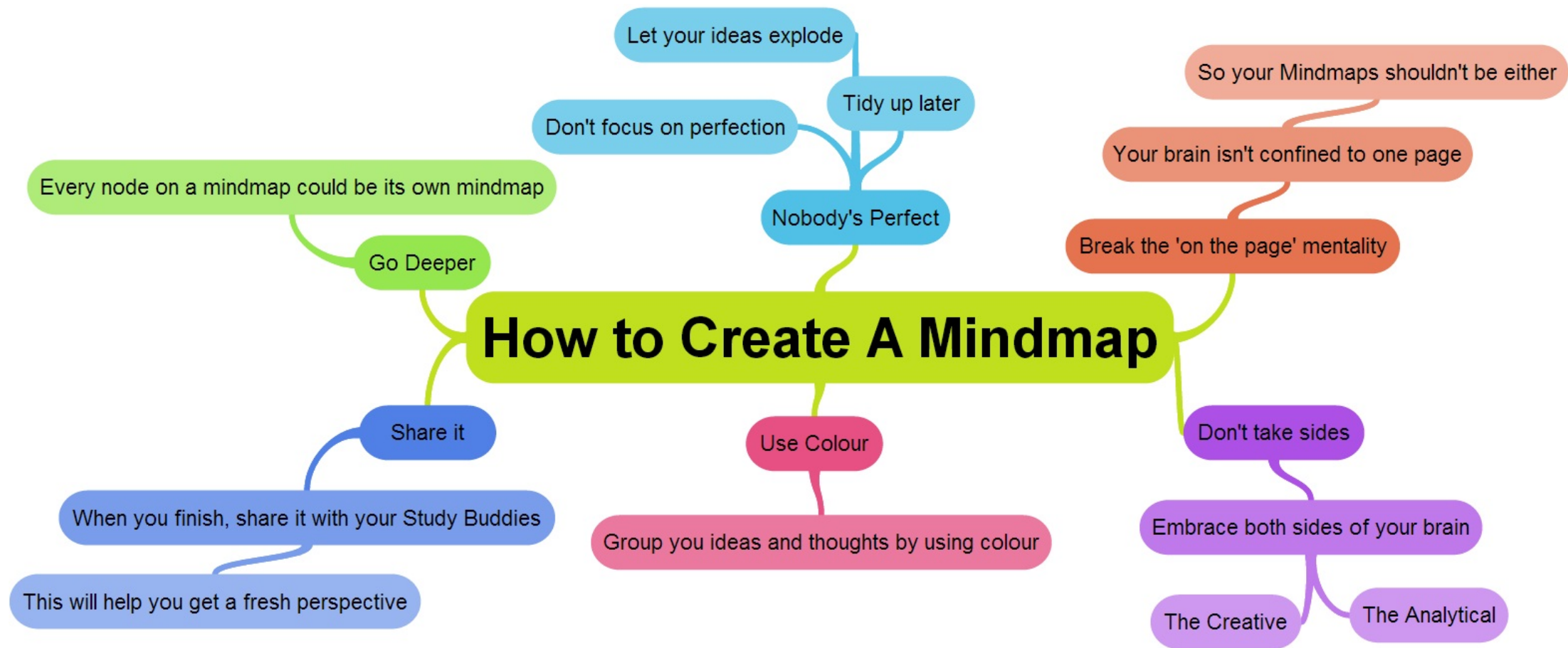
Mind-map during and after your research to explore and think through what you've found.

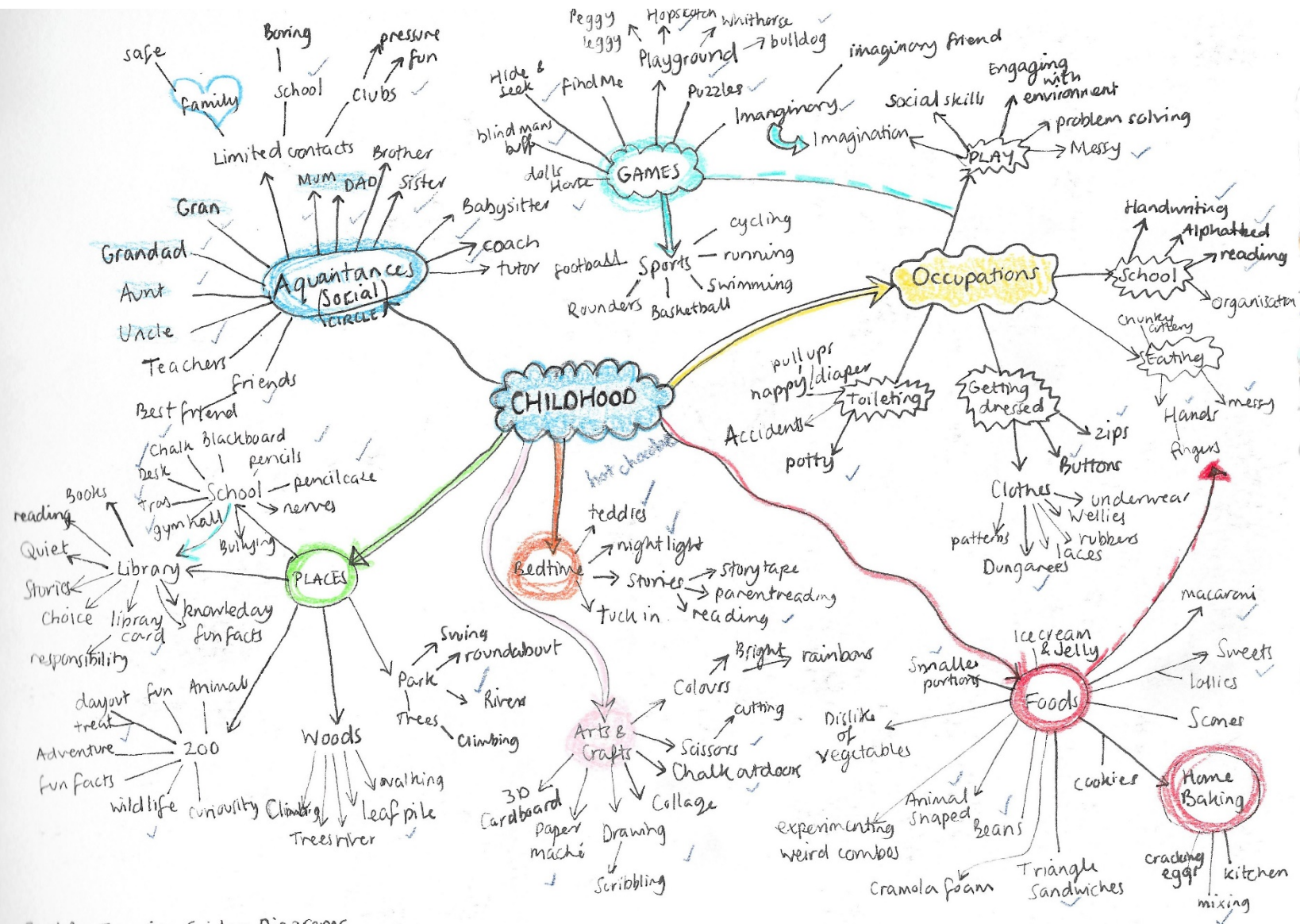
The following three slides explain and give examples of what mind-mapping is.

If the examples look messy to you, you can do the same process, but in a more linear fashion, such as using rows and columns in Excel.

e) Mapping

- While mind-mapping you are free to explore ideas
 - Be inclusive and open-minded.
 - Consider all sides of a question.
 - Identify key evidence and opinions.
- Then – identify the key points of your argument
 - What stands out?
 - What is most interesting?
 - Do any of these ideas connect with one another
 - Can you link them together?
- Flow chart your argument
 - Think about the logical order of your points – how will they lead your reader to the argument you want to make? (remember to pick a side!)
 - $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow E = \text{Argument!}$
 - Not set in stone – just a guide.





Part 2: Exercise Spider Diagrams

e) Mapping

When doing this, consider:

- What is the overarching argument? What do you want to conclude with?
- What evidence are you using to support your topic?
 - Also, Identify any limitations or biases of the pieces of evidence you use
 - Utilize evidence to help you avoid generalizations
 - Use evidence to argue against opposing viewpoints
- Have you narrowed down the topic?
- Can you handle your argument/topic in that amount of time?

f) What Will You Say?

At the end of the process, and before you start writing your essay, know:

- What you want to say (what is your argument?)
- How you will structure your argument (the flow)? e.g.
 - Chronological
 - Topical/thematic (political, economic, cultural factors)

Academic writing in the UK/UCL context is structured around the argument, which is stated from the start, not revealed at the end.

You should be able to express your argument succinctly, in one or two sentences. That is called the **thesis statement**.

3-Step Guide to Essay Writing: 2

WRITE



a) Structure: Introduction & Conclusion

We have a whole workshop on introductions and conclusions later in the term, but for now, make sure you do this:

Introduction - define your approach to the topic and outline the areas you will discuss. Make sure you cover these three things:

- What is your argument? What is your overall thesis/response? (include the thesis statement)
- Do you need to define any terms or set any parameters (e.g. chronological, geographical)?
- How you are going to structure your argument.

Conclusion - should bring together the main ideas from the analysis, and put forward **your** perspective on the topic.

b) Structure: Main Section Paragraphs

One point = one paragraph.

Each paragraph should be functioning as a unit of your argument.

Each paragraph should contain three things:

1. A topic sentence (or point)
2. Evidence and example to support this point
3. Analysis of why the point is important and how it helps you to answer the question

c) Making Effective Arguments

- The main body of the essay is the place to make all the components of the argument that support your thesis statement.
- **The order of your paragraphs should reflect a logical flow of your argument.**
- **Guide the reader through your argument** - elegantly transition between paragraphs, showing how each unit of the argument is linked to the next.
e.g. at the start of a new paragraph, as you get more specific, you might say
 - “One such fundamental change in society is the increased prevalence of rock and roll music...”

This is called **signposting**, and we will also have a whole work shop on that later in the term.

d) Writing Style

- Use appropriate, subject-specific terminology.
- Aim for a scholarly tone: try to be careful and specific and base the things you say on evidence.
- You should discuss ideas critically, or bring your own informed perspective to the topic. We will discuss critical thinking and writing later in this workshop, and we have a whole workshop on it later in the term. There is also some good advice from the University of Leicester [here](#).

e) Language

“pick a word like you pick a melon. examine its skin. its weight. its viscosity. its sound. its texture. its ability to be juice and meat.”

~ Nayyirah Waheed

So, just as when you pick up fruit and chose carefully according to, for example, whether you need a piece that is ripe to eat today or a piece that will ripen in 3 days when you will be ready to eat it, chose the exact word or phrases that you need.

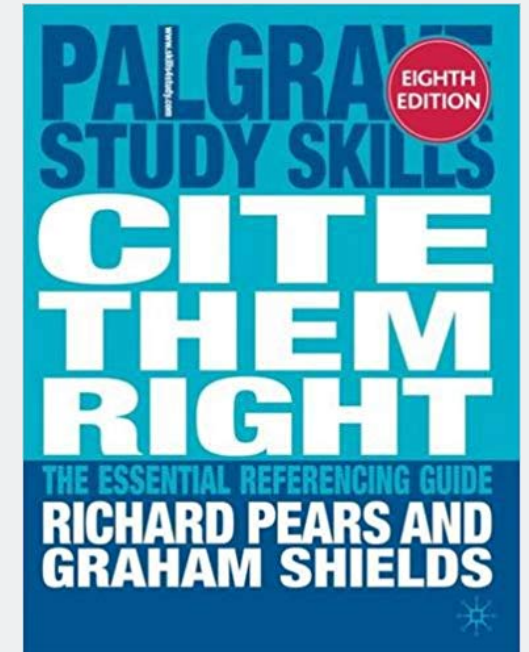
e) Language

- You can do this when you are writing, and you can review it later when you are editing – you may find then that when you were writing, you picked up the wrong piece of fruit too quickly, and now you need to put it back and chose another.
- As we reach for the right words, picking up and putting down the wrong words, we sharpen our thinking about what we are writing on. And as we sharpen our thinking, we are better able to pick the write word. In this way, the act of writing helps us to think.
- Use language to communicate, demonstrate, not to hide.
- Say precisely what you mean.

f) Referencing Format

- Use a formal referencing system for all sources consistently.
- Either use the system (e.g. Harvard) that your department or teacher tells you to, or, if you have a choice, pick one. Either way, you must use it consistently throughout.
- You should have a full alphabetised bibliography at the end of your essay.
- There are helpful handbooks and web resources to help you reference properly. We like this handbook, for example:

Cite them right : the essential referencing guide / Richard Pears, Graham Shields. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan: 8th ed.: 2010



g) Originality, and why we reference

- When we write essays, we **are joining in the conversation** that is happening in our academic community. Therefore, **it needs to be very clear from your writing who is speaking at any time** – whether it is you, or whether it is someone else whose work you are referencing.
- You need to reference properly so that if you are telling your reader what another scholar said – either with a direct quotation, or using your own summary of what they said – it will be **very clear to them where they can read that themselves**. Then, they can go to the library, go to the publication in which that scholar discusses that idea, or go to the exact page where the quotation you cited is, read it themselves, and come back to you to continue the conversation.
- **Add your own contribution to the conversation**, by not just relaying what other scholars have said, but by engaging with what they say, making your own assessment of their work, and building your own argument.
- Assume the marker has a good knowledge of the subject – avoid basic, generalised descriptions, and only add background information if it relates directly to your argument.

h) How to Avoid Plagiarism

- Plagiarism is presenting another person's ideas or words as your own. So if you forget to do what we just discussed – make it clear where you got other ideas from - then you will be plagiarising. So:
- Always **cite everything** that you obtain from an outside source, even if you came up with a similar idea on your own before you consulted other sources.
- Take careful notes while researching. Note the source, the author, and the page number.
- If you are paraphrasing or summarising someone else's ideas, give the **reference**.
- If you are quoting someone directly, use **quotation marks *and* give the reference, including page number**.
- It's probably safer to cite as you write – don't leave until the end.
- Remember, your work will probably have to be submitted via Turnitin – a system which checks for missing references and plagiarism.

3-Step Guide to Essay Writing: 3

REVISE



a) Read It

- Your first draft will not be perfect! You had to get it on the page, in order to be able to sculpt it further and finish it.
- Read your work back to check clarity and errors - do this more than once!
- Read your work out loud - this helps show grammatical errors, repeated words and long sentences.
- Ask your friends and classmates to read it and you can read theirs.

b) Re-draft

- Don't be afraid to make changes to your work. Ask:
 - Does it make sense? Is the information relevant to the argument?
 - How could you say it better?
- Re-draft and re-write sections to make your argument clearer and to cut the word count. Make sure you've answered the question.
- Your writing will improve if you learn to think critically about your work and re-draft it. Your critical thinking, in turn, will improve if you use it to evaluate your own writing.

c) Make final checks

- Are you within the word limit?
- Have you fully referenced all your sources and included a bibliography?
- How do you think the marking criteria apply to your work? Have you done what you need to do?

We also have a whole workshop on editing later in the term.

d) Relax!

- Try not to panic about your work. Each essay is just that essay, not the whole degree – take one step at a time.
- Ask for help if you need it.





Critical Thinking

The rest of this session will consider critical thinking in more detail.

Thinking and Reading Critically

- **This starts with ourselves:** question your own assumptions as much as those of others - why do you agree or not agree with something? Become conscious of the positions you take and how you've come to them. **Listen** to others.
- **Don't automatically treat every knowledge claim as if it is true**, well supported, and applicable in the context you are writing about. This may not always be the case. Evaluate it.
- How you take notes will help with this – see UCL Study Skills for ideas. Read whole paragraphs before you take any notes – identify the ideas first, then note down quotations.

Thinking and Reading Critically

- **Cultivate intellectual humility.**
 - **Willingness to be wrong:**
 - Actively try to prove yours and arguments you agree with wrong.
 - Use the counter-arguments: incorporate them, learn from them.
 - (The very best scientists try everything they can to prove themselves wrong, because they want their results to be as accurate as possible.)
 - Admit what you don't know. That will clarify your thinking.
 - **This may feel uncomfortable.**
- This mode of thought could be characterised as **playfulness + discipline**

Thinking and Reading Critically

- Read the first and last passages of what you read to try to get an overview of the arguments. Try to find the conclusions first. Draw out the **argument(s)** from within the text.
- Look for the **evidence** supporting an argument – does it actually do its job? is it credible? is it biased?
- Look out for **absences** in arguments, or places where factors are not given their proper weight. Use your own experience of the world to help you find these.

We also have a whole workshop on critical thinking later in the term.

Grace Lee Boggs

“Talk and write in a way that encourages the mutual exchange of ideas and acts like a midwife to people birthing their own ideas.”



A great tool we have for developing our critical thinking is **each other** – the fact that we are learning alongside each other, coming from different perspectives, and exchanging ideas. As Grace Lee Boggs says, how we talk, and how we are, with each other can impact our critical thinking.

Consider: what techniques could you and your classmates / study partners could use to help each other think critically, for example about a paper on your reading list, or an assignment topic?

Exercise: Thinking Time

Now, do this 6-minute activity.

When you move to the next slide, you will see a quote. It may be one you are familiar with, it may be one you have never come across. It doesn't matter. There are 3 slides.

Give yourself 2 minutes per slide to slow down, and just consider the idea given on the slide. Ask yourself:

How far do you agree? How far do you disagree? What might you connect it to? What are some implications? What else would you want to know? And so on.

Set a timer for 2 minutes per slide to do this. But: try not to write anything for the first 30 seconds – stop yourself from writing right away. Then, give yourself 1 min 30 seconds to do get down as many ideas as you can.

Each time, if you find yourself going down only one line of thinking, see what happens if you make yourself look at it from a totally different angle.

Thinking Time

After each quote, wait for 30 seconds before writing anything

1 min 30 secs to write

6 minutes total

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

~ Albert Einstein

“ Language exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides.”
~ Rita Mae Brown

“ The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.”
~ Sydney J. Harris

Final Thoughts

- **Practice** writing and critical thinking – these are things we learn and improve **by doing**, often.
- Work towards being ‘balanced’ in your writing. This doesn’t mean taking the middle position, but rather not **automatically accepting others’ claims, saying precisely what you mean**, basing your arguments in **evidence**, and **finding your own position(s)** or voice.
- Writing means **drafts**.

Arundhati Roy

“To **never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple**. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.”

So, don't try to make grander claims than you can support – they may be oversimplified. We produce much better, more beautiful writing when we are careful and nuanced.

And don't overcomplicate things – wherever possible, use the simplest language, the most 'plain English'. That will be the best structure to hold your sophisticated thinking, and the sometimes complicated concepts you discuss.



The Writing Lab & the Academic Communication Centre

Follow us on Twitter ([@UCLWritingLab](https://twitter.com/UCLWritingLab)).

Our services are available for students in Arts, Humanities and Social and Historical Sciences; Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment; Division of Psychology and Language Sciences.

Students in other faculties should contact the [Academic Communication Centre](#), of which Writing Lab is a part.