Note any words of direction
• These might include: discuss, discuss critically, discuss the importance of, assess, justify, evaluate, analyse.

Understand the essay question
• Make sure you know the precise meaning of every word in the essay question. Use:
  a) your general dictionary for unfamiliar words such as intrinsic, core values
  b) a subject-specific dictionary, for example the APA Dictionary of Psychology, for academic words such as proof, random sample, significance level.

Think about the different parts of the question
• Decide how many parts the question has.
• List the areas you will probably have to research. It may help to write yourself a brief task description: “First find out what a market niche is, then see what significance this has for marketing. Next…”

Freethinking
• On some topics you already have some general knowledge. To develop your own viewpoint, try breaking down the topic into questions. For example:

  **Topic:** In the last 20 years, rates of divorce have risen significantly in Western countries. Critically analyse some of the different explanations given for this phenomenon. In your discussion you should consider what implications these explanations might have for social policy.

  Break down questions:
  - What are the explanations given for an increase in divorce rates?
  - Has the purpose of marriage changed over the last 20 years?
  - How important is marriage to current members of society?
  - Has the role of men and women changed in such a way that it has affected the marriage union?
  - What are the causes/effects of divorce?

• If you are having difficulty getting started, brainstorm the topic by thinking about it as broadly as you can and jot down what comes to mind.
• Make a mind map (or some rough notes) of your ideas. Add to this map as you research the essay. Try not to be overwhelmed by other writers’ views: recording your responses to what you read is a good way to develop your own opinion (see QuickRef 11 for more information on brainstorming and mind-mapping).
The structure of an essay

**Introduction**
(Approximately 10% of the total length. May be one paragraph or several, depending on essay length.)

- Introduce the topic
- Provide background information
- Limit the scope of discussion
- Define/state the topic/question
- Present the plan of coverage including your line of argument/viewpoint/conclusions

Note: You can set your own agenda to avoid over generalisation or too broad a focus

**Body**
- Each paragraph should have one main point
- Topic sentences carry the theme/outline/argument
- Links

**Conclusion**
- Sum up your argument/information with reference to the essay question
- Perhaps mention wider implications/future directions

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Adapted from: T. Chang, Assignment Writing for Sociology Students (1992)