Developing argument within your writing

# Introduction

Once you have broken down your task and started to identify the information you might include, you have the beginning of a plan.

You are now ready to start defining your argument and organising your ideas.

This is an essential step in the process; you should not start writing until you know exactly what you are going to say.

The five steps we’ll examine are:

1. Identifying your **main ideas**
2. Identifying your **main argument**
3. Identifying your **structure**
4. Forming your **outline**
5. Checking your **evidence** and **argument**

By the end, we’ll have an assignment outline and we’ll be ready to start writing!

Throughout this resource, we’ll be using this essay question as our example:

“Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest”

However, the same technique can apply to any question regardless of the topic. Similarly, while we are focusing on essay writing, it can also be applied to any academic work such as writing a presentation or answering an exam question.

# Step 1 – Identify the main ideas

After you’ve broken down your question, thought about what information you’re going to include and done your research, you can start identifying what your main ideas are for each area.

Your main idea should be:

* supported by details/data
* an opinion you are defending
* a product of your own critical analysis

Your main ideas should **not** be facts or pieces of data.

# Step 2 – Identifying your overall argument

Now, you’ve got your main ideas from each section of your plan, you can identify what your overall argument is.

How do the ideas connect? Do they have details or data in common? What are you trying to say in answer to the task you have been set?

You should be able to distil your argument into one sentence (a thesis statement).

Remember, if your main argument is a summary of someone else’s ideas or theories, you probably aren’t answering the question

Here are the six main ideas we identified from our question:

“Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest”

1. Social media allowed the participants in the Arab Spring to record and promote their own actions quickly and without interference.
2. Newspaper reporting of the Arab Spring was able to look at the whole picture and trace the events from beginning to end.
3. The Arab Spring demonstrated the resentment of the population against the status quo and the leaders who represented it.
4. Social media allowed participants in the 2011 riots to avoid the police and was also used to encourage looting across the UK.
5. Newspaper reporting provided a more thorough investigation into the events and included analysis that remained long after it disappeared from social media.
6. The UK riots were triggered by a specific event that tapped into resentment felt by many. It focussed on property damage and looting, which obscured the original message.

Our main argument might be:

Social media, unlike reporting, allows for participants in civil unrest to shape their own stories and have an immediate effect on the situation; however, it does not offer continuing or in depth coverage to trace the background causes of the events taking place.

Your argument is the conclusion you’ve reached from your research into your topic: your job in writing or presenting your work is to convince your audience.

Every section of your work should support your argument.

When you’ve identified what your argument is, go back and review each of your main ideas.

If any of your ideas don’t support your argument, get rid of them

So, our main argument is:

Social media, unlike reporting, allows for participants in civil unrest to shape their own stories and have an immediate effect on the situation; however, it does not offer continuing or in depth coverage to trace the background causes of the events taking place.

# Step 3 – Identifying your structure

Now you can start identifying your overall structure.

A good place to start is by looking at the instruction word in your question. What is it telling you to do? This may give some clues as to how you should organise your ideas.

* Explain/describe: are you outlining a process? If so, you might want to organise your ideas chronologically.
* Compare/contrast: are you highlighting similarities or differences? If so, you might look at all the similarities first, then all of the differences.
* Evaluate/discuss: are you presenting pros and cons? If so, you might want to present all of the pros first followed by all of the cons. Or you could alternate between pros and cons.

Please see the last page for a table explaining the meaning of some of the most common instruction words found in assignment tasks.

It doesn’t really matter how you choose to structure your work, as long as it is consistent and coherent.

## Example

Looking back at our example:

“Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest.”

The key thing to remember is that we must contrast social media versus newspaper reporting, NOT contrast the two events.

Our overall structure might look something like this:

1. Define civil unrest:
   * Outline Arab Spring
   * Outline UK riots
2. Social media:
   * Impact on Arab Spring
   * Impact on UK riots
3. Newspaper reporting:
   * Impact on Arab Spring
   * Impact on UK riots

# Step 4 – Forming your outline

All of the work you’ve done so far has been to figure out what you want to say.  
  
You should by now have a clear idea of what your argument is and how you’ll structure it.

From now on, you need to start thinking about your audience: how can you help them to understand and follow your argument.

Creating an assignment outline or plan will help you to do this.

Using your main ideas and the overall structure you’ve identified, you can now start forming your outline.

Put your outline in the order you would use to guide someone along the process you used to come to your own conclusions.

* Where do they need to start to understand what you want to say?
* What logically follows on next?
* Do you need to introduce one section in order for the next to make sense?
* Are there any areas that need to be combined?

Next look at the details; the evidence and pieces of information you will include within each area.

* Are there any areas in common between these details?
* Can you use those common elements to build a bridge between your ideas?

## Example

Here’s out example outline:

1. Introduction
   * What is civil unrest?
   * Outline the two events
2. Examine social media in Arab Spring and 2011 UK riots
   * Acts as information spreading mechanism
   * Used to prosecute after the fact
   * Avoids official censorship
   * Disappears quickly
3. Examine newspaper reporting in Arab Spring and 2011 UK riots
   * In-depth reporting – traces background events
   * Double check rumour/confirm what is said
   * Can be very slow
4. Conclusion
   * Social media as a vehicle for permanent change is problematic
   * Newspapers are still the “official record”
   * Who is in control?

# Step 5 – Checking your evidence and argument

Now you need to look back at the outline you’ve created.

For each argument or idea you present, ask yourself:

* Why am I saying this?
* What evidence have I got to support this?
* How does this answer the question?

If you can’t answer any of these questions, you need to consider removing it from your plan. Remember, if it doesn’t answer the question or achieve your goal, it doesn’t belong!

From our example plan, the detail in **bold** doesn’t fit with our argument, or answer the question. This means it has to go.

1. Introduction
   * What is civil unrest?
   * Outline the two events
2. Examine social media in Arab Spring and 2011 UK riots
   * Acts as information spreading mechanism
   * **Used to prosecute after the fact**
   * Avoids official censorship
   * Disappears quickly
3. Examine newspaper reporting in Arab Spring and 2011 UK riots
   * In-depth reporting – traces background events
   * Double check rumour/confirm what is said
   * Can be very slow
4. Conclusion
   * Social media as a vehicle for permanent change is problematic
   * Newspapers are still the “official record”
   * Who is in control?

So, we’ve looked at the process of organising your ideas into a coherent plan for your assignment, following these steps:

1. Identifying your **main ideas**
2. Identifying your **main argument**
3. Identifying your **structure**
4. Forming your **outline**
5. Checking your **evidence** and **argument**

Now, you’re ready to start writing!

# Instruction words and their meanings

**Account for**: Give reasons for; explain (note: give an account of; describe).

**Analyse**: Break the information into constituent parts; examine the relationship between the parts; question the information.

**Argue**: Put the case for or against a view or idea giving evidence for your claims/reasons for or against; attempt to influence the reader to accept your view.

**Balance**: Look at two or more viewpoints or pieces of information; give each equal attention; look at good and bad points; take into account many aspects and give an appropriate weighting to those aspects.

**Be critical**: Identify what is good and bad about the information and why; probe, question, identify inaccuracies or shortcomings in the information; estimate the value of the material.

**Clarify**: Identify the components of an issue/topic/problem/; make the meaning plain; remove misunderstandings.

**Compare**: Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps conclude which is preferable; implies evaluation.

**Contrast**: Bring out the differences.

**Criticise**: Give your judgement on theories or opinions or facts and back this by discussing evidence or reasoning involved.

**Define**: Give the precise meaning. Examine the different possible or often used definitions.

**Demonstrate**: Show clearly by giving proof or evidence.

**Describe**: Give a detailed, full account of the topic.

**Determine**: Find out something; calculate.

**Discuss**: Investigate or examine by argument; debate; give reason for and against; examine the implications of the topic.

**Estimate**: Calculate; judge; predict.

**Evaluate/weigh up**: Appraise the worth of something in the light of its truth or usefulness; assess and explain.

**Examine**: Look at carefully; consider.

**Explain**: Make plain and clear; give reasons for.

**Give evidence**: Provide evidence from your own work or that of others which could be checked by a third party to prove/ justify what you say.

**Identify**: Point out and describe.

**Identify trends**: Identify patterns/changes/ movements in certain directions (e.g. over time or across topics/ subjects).

**Illustrate**: Explain, clarify, make clear by the use of concrete examples

**Interpret**: Expound the meaning; make clear and explicit, giving your own judgement.

**Justify**: Show adequate grounds for decisions, a particular view or conclusions and answer main objections likely to be made to them.

**Outline**: Give a short description of the main points; give the main features or general principles; emphasise the structure, leaving out minor details.

**Prove**: Show that something is true or certain; provide strong evidence (and examples) for.

**Review**: Make a survey examining the subject carefully; similar to summarise and evaluate.

**State**: Present in a brief, clear form.

**Summarise**: Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, removing unnecessary detail.

**Synthesise**: Bring elements together to make a complex whole, draw together or integrate issues (e.g. theories or models can be created by synthesising a number of elements).

**Trace**: Follow the development of topic from its origin.