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Developing argument within your writing



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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.

Introduction

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!

Example

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 idea

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
- be an opinion you are defending
- be a product of your own critical analysis

Your main ideas should NOT be facts or pieces of data



Step 1 - Identify the main idea: example

In this example, we've used a question matrix to identify what content to include for this assignment:

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

CONTRAST	SOCIAL MEDIA	NEWSPAPER REPORTING	CIVIL UNREST
ARAB SPRING	Communication, way around censorship, planning for events, real time, Twitter and YouTube	Able to report both sides of the story, access to more information, much slower	Democratic demonstrations against current leaders, problematic, sometimes violent
2011 UK RIOTS	Aid in avoiding police and planning, used to prosecute after the fact, BBM, YouTube, authorities also tweeting	Analysis after the fact. Able to report on both sides of story. Continued coverage after event (after had disappeared from social media).	Triggered by police shooting of a young man who possibly had a weapon. Focused on property damage and looting. Roving groups went into city centres to protest and loot

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Step 1 - Identify the main idea: activity

Below are the main ideas for each of these areas

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

<i>CONTRAST</i>	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	<i>NEWSPAPER REPORTING</i>	<i>CIVIL UNREST</i>
<i>ARAB SPRING</i>	Social media allowed the participants in the Arab Spring to record and promote their own actions quickly and without interference	Newspaper reporting of the Arab Spring was able to look at the whole picture and trace the events from beginning to end	The Arab Spring demonstrated the resentment of the population against the status quo and the leaders who represented it.
<i>2011 UK RIOTS</i>	Social media allowed participants in the 2011 riots to avoid the police and was also used to encourage looting across the UK.	Newspaper reporting provided a more thorough investigation into the events and included analysis that remained long after it disappeared from social media	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

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



Step 2 - Identifying your overall argument

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”

Social media allowed the participants in the Arab Spring to record and promote their own actions quickly and without interference

Newspaper reporting of the Arab Spring was able to look at the whole picture and trace the events from beginning to end

The Arab Spring demonstrated the resentment of the population against the status quo and the leaders who represented it.

Social media allowed participants in the 2011 riots to avoid the police and was also used to encourage looting across the UK.

Newspaper reporting provided a more thorough investigation into the events and included analysis that remained long after it disappeared from social media

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 newspaper 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 2 - Identifying your overall argument

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



Step 2 - Identifying your overall argument

Our main argument is :

Social media, unlike newspaper 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.

Our main ideas are:

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

Idea number 4 doesn't contribute anything to our argument, nor does it answer the question, so we'll have to remove it from our assignment.

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 of 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.

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

Step 3 – Identifying your structure: 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.

Step 4 – Forming your outline

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?

Step 4 – Forming your outline: example

1 Introduction

- *What is civil unrest?*
- *Outline the two events*

2 Examine social media in Arab Spring & 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 & 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 have 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!

Step 5 – Checking your evidence and argument

1 Introduction

- *What is civil unrest?*
- *Outline the two events*

2 Examine social media in Arab Spring & 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 & 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?*

From our example plan, the circled detail doesn't fit with our argument, or answer the question.

This means it has to go!

Summary

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!



Keep in touch!



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