The writing triangle (1)

Effective academic writing needs to come to a point and should have the right proportions of breadth and depth for the scale of the piece of work you are writing.

You should be aiming for an equilateral triangle shape. This will equally proportion your BREADTH (the top of the triangle: representing the range of sources or the context of your topic – previous relevant evidence) with your DEPTH (the remaining two sides of the triangle coming to a point: representing detailed analysis of what your evidence and examples mean – their significance to your argument)

Your writing should therefore come to a focus – using a variety of sources in different ways, and to varying levels of detail to support the point of your argument

Remember as well that if you go broader – so you look at more examples/themes and evidence - you cannot then go into as much detail. You could end up with a shallow flat triangle, where your writing comes to a point within the word/page limit, but has very limited depth or critical analysis).

Alternatively, if you do go into further analytical depth on your points, you could find you have a much bigger essay (see the larger dashed line triangle shape) – so to get your essay to fit the word/page count would require you to do a lot of editing.

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Similarly if you look in detail at one thing, you cannot get as much breadth or context (range) into your writing. Your writing will come to a point, but it is likely to be more difficult to make that level of detailed analysis make sense. How does your detailed example relate to the bigger picture? What is the purpose of the topic or the module as a whole? This can be represented by a narrow thin isosceles triangle.

Some sources will be background reading, helping contextualise the topic for your reader. You probably won’t need to read these sources in as much detail, because you won’t have space to discuss them.

Remember as well that if you try to read all your sources in the same level of detail, you’ll end up with a square (see the dotted outline). So instead of your argument coming to a point at the end of the assignment – the bottom of the triangle or funnel – you don’t have a clear overall focus.

Hunter gatherers – as discussed in our hunter gatherer resources (see reading strategies, Study resources) are therefore often faced with two fears that lead to problems:

- fear of not getting and understanding enough detail - whether you read too deeply into one source or try to read too many sources (the triangle isn’t in the right proportions)

- fear of not being able to express your ideas concisely enough - often because you have gathered too much detail and cannot make it all fit the page/word count required (the triangle is too big, or there isn’t a clear point/focus to your shape).

This handout is part of a set: ‘When is ’enough reading’?, ‘Planning your writing to manage your reading’, and ‘Tailoring notetaking to manage reading’.

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