The essay writing process will be discussed with reference to the following example topic: ‘Evaluate the evidence for differences in cognitive processing across age groups when engaging in complex tasks such as driving. Can rates of car accidents in younger drivers be directly attributed to these differences? Based on this information, what would you recommend to policy makers seeking to reduce car accidents in the 18–25 age group?’

1. Analyse the question

Identify the key instruction words and think about what they mean in relation to the essay topic.

Evaluate the evidence for differences in cognitive processing across age groups when engaging in complex tasks such as driving. Can rates of car accidents in younger drivers be directly attributed to these differences? Based on this information, what would you recommend to policy makers seeking to reduce car accidents in the 18–25 age group?

Evaluate the evidence – this instruction indicates that there is some debate about whether there is a difference in cognitive processing across age groups when engaging in complex tasks such as driving. We can assume that studies have been conducted in an attempt to determine the answer, but that different studies have found different things. Some findings may have supported a difference in cognitive processing across age groups when engaging in complex tasks and some may not have. When researching the essay, you would need to search for different studies representing a range of findings and then evaluate the evidence from the studies. This means you need to ‘weigh up’ the evidence on both sides and come to a conclusion based on this evidence.

Evidence AGAINST a difference in cognitive processing across age groups during complex tasks

Evidence FOR a difference in cognitive processing across age groups during complex tasks
Can rates of car accidents in younger drivers be directly attributed to these differences? This instruction is asking you to apply the evidence you have evaluated to a specific situation – rates of car accidents. If you think there is a difference in cognitive processing across age groups during complex tasks, could this be contributing to higher rates of car accidents among young people? If you think there is no difference, then you might need to argue that there is a different cause of the higher rates of accidents among young people.

What would you recommend to policy makers seeking to reduce car accidents in the 18–25 age group? This part of the question asks you to make recommendations based on your response to the first two parts of the question. You may need to think about who the policy makers are. You may also need to consider what current policies there are to reduce the rate of car accidents for this age group and whether these policies relate to cognitive processing. If they don’t, should they?

2. Research the topic

Start by making a list of research questions. This will help you to search for and read the exact information that you need in order to answer the question. For the example essay topic, these questions might include:

What evidence is there that younger drivers have more accidents? Is this evidence recent? From Australia?
What is cognitive processing?
What is a complex task? examples?
Are there any differences in cognitive processing across age groups when engaging in complex tasks? If so, what are they and what causes them?
What cognitive processing occurs when driving?
Which has the greater influence on accident rates among younger drivers – inexperience or cognitive development?
How do the stages of brain development in 18 – 25 year olds affect their decision making, hazard perception and risk taking behaviour?
What current policies aim to reduce car accidents in the 18 – 25 age group?
Do any policies base their recommendations on cognitive processing differences in young people?

Begin with what you know from lectures and tutorials then proceed to books and journal articles. Use library catalogues – including electronic data bases and seek the assistance of your subject librarian.

3. Plan the essay

This involves three main steps. Firstly, brainstorm. Jot down everything you can think of from your research related to the topic. The next step of grouping is critical. This is where you attempt to find common ideas within the brainstorm. Give your grouped ideas a heading. These groups then become the themes for your essay. Finally, outline
the essay in detail with each theme becoming a main point supported by factual evidence. Write down all necessary referencing details as you plan.

4. Write the essay

Construct these ideas into the key elements of an essay: an introduction, a discussion (or body) divided into a number of paragraphs, and a conclusion.

5. Write your reference list

Make sure that all references cited (in-text) are included in your reference list and all references in your list have been cited in your essay (see the previous chapter on referencing).

The structure of academic essay writing

The following examples illustrate the essential elements of an essay – an introductory paragraph, a body paragraph and a concluding paragraph.

Model introductory paragraph

The introductory paragraph sets the scene for the whole essay. It consists of four sections which move from general to specific information.

Introduce the general topic of your essay in an interesting way.

Give background or context which gives relevance to the discussion.

Include a thesis statement which is the main point of the essay.

List subtopics/themes to indicate the order of discussion to follow (each theme mentioned in the introduction, is addressed in the same order in the body).

Keep all information relatively general (no detailed evidence). The rate of fatal car accidents among young drivers (defined in this essay as drivers aged 18-25 years old) is proportionally greater than those among other age groups. In Victoria in 2008, 24% of car accident fatalities were in the 18–25 year old age group, though this age group makes up only 12% of the Victorian population (Age Group Statistics, 2009). During adolescence and into early adulthood changes continue to occur in the brain (Dahl, 2008). This ongoing brain development means young people are still developing and refining cognitive processing skills, which impacts upon their ability to engage in and complete complex tasks (McAnarney, 2008), such as driving. As a result, it can be argued that higher rates of car accidents involving young drivers can be directly attributed to differences in their cognitive processing abilities compared to more mature drivers. To support this statement this essay will discuss brain development in young people, particularly in relation to decision making, engaging in risky behaviours, hazard perception and the ability to divide attentional resources. Finally, it will conclude by reviewing and suggesting ideas policy makers could utilise to reduce car accidents among young drivers.
A brief definition may belong in the introduction (one sentence only).

**Model body (discussion) paragraph**

Each body paragraph develops or expands the original thesis statement in a logical manner using evidence to illustrate the specific point being made.

1. **Topic sentence** = the specific topic of this paragraph (only one per paragraph)
2. **Supporting sentences** = evidence to support the topic sentence
3. **Concluding sentence** = may restate initial point made, lead into next paragraph, provide a link to overall argument or make a final statement
4. **Connectives** = words and phrases that link one idea to another and show the relationship between them. They provide the logic and cohesion for the essay.

This body paragraph introduces the second theme that was signposted in the introduction – *engaging in risky behaviours*.

**Engaging in risky behaviours** is a major cause of accidents among young drivers. This may be due to cognitive factors. Development in frontal and parietal regions of the brain continues into early adulthood (Dahl, 2008). This part of the brain (dorsolateral prefrontal cortex or DLPFC) is where neural networks involved in risk-taking behaviour reside. Beeli et al. (2008) suggest the DLPFC does not mature until late adolescence, when many young people are driving. This late maturation of the DLPFC may explain why young drivers take risks, including speeding and driving after drinking alcohol. Indeed, Steinberg (2010) hypothesises that young people’s heightened risk-taking behaviour is due to immature self-regulatory systems combined with easily aroused reward systems. Two studies suggest there is a strong link between risky driving behaviours of young drivers and their higher rate of traffic accident involvement. Ferguson, Swain-Campbell, and Horwood (2003) completed a 21-year longitudinal study of New Zealand children. They reported that 90% of young drivers who participated admitted to risky driving. In addition, an Australian study by Vassallo et al. (2007) using data from the Australian Temperament Project (ATP) reported similar results. Thus, it can be argued that brain development may be linked to risk-taking behaviour of young drivers involved in accidents.
Model concluding paragraph

The concluding paragraph rounds off your essay by reminding the reader of your **main point**, the supporting **themes or sub-topics** and a strong final comment. There are **four** aspects to consider in the conclusion.

1. **Signal** the end of the essay with a [connective: “In conclusion; To summarise”].

2. **Paraphrase** your **thesis statement** (the main point of the essay).

3. **Paraphrase and summarise** the **sub-topics/themes** addressed in the essay to remind the marker of your main discussion points.

4. Leave the marker with a **strong effective comment**; a message they will remember.
   - **Don’t** add any new material.
   - **Avoid** detailed information – the conclusion is a more general statement.

**In conclusion**, the underlying cause of higher car accident rates among young drivers may be directly attributed to differences in their cognitive processing abilities when compared to more mature drivers. **Young peoples’ brains are still developing in regions responsible for making decisions, participating in risk taking activities, perception of danger and capacity to concentrate.** Hence, young drivers are more likely to engage in risky driving behaviours and have less developed cognitive processing skills to enable them to drive safely. To address this problem, it was suggested to policy makers that there is a continued need to try to limit or reduce the risks young drivers are able to take, and to cater for more practice of decision making and hazard perception skills and more effective use of attentional resources. Although the Victorian Graduated Licensing Scheme helps to address such concerns, it is also recommended that stronger young driver education programs, and more parental and community involvement be included. This will help change young drivers’ attitudes towards risky driving behaviours and ensure they are better informed about their own abilities and the risks associated with driving.