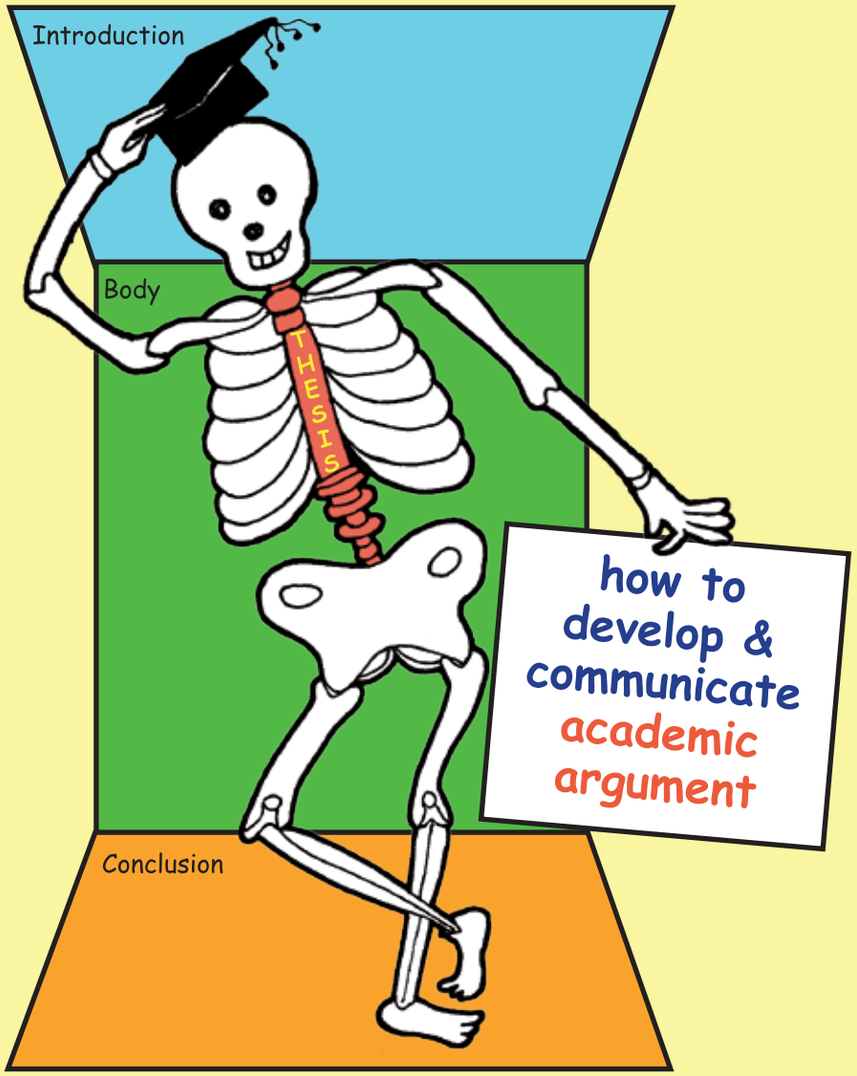
A VISUAL GUIDE TO ESSAY WRITING



Valli Rao
Kate Chanock
Lakshmi Krishnan

Dr Valli Rao, Associate Professor Kate Chanock, and Dr Lakshmi Krishnan use a visual approach to walk students through the most important processes in essay writing for university: formulating, refining, and expressing academic argument.

'MetamorTHESIS'

Your main argument or thesis is your position in answer to the essay question. It changes and develops as you undertake your reading and research towards the essay.

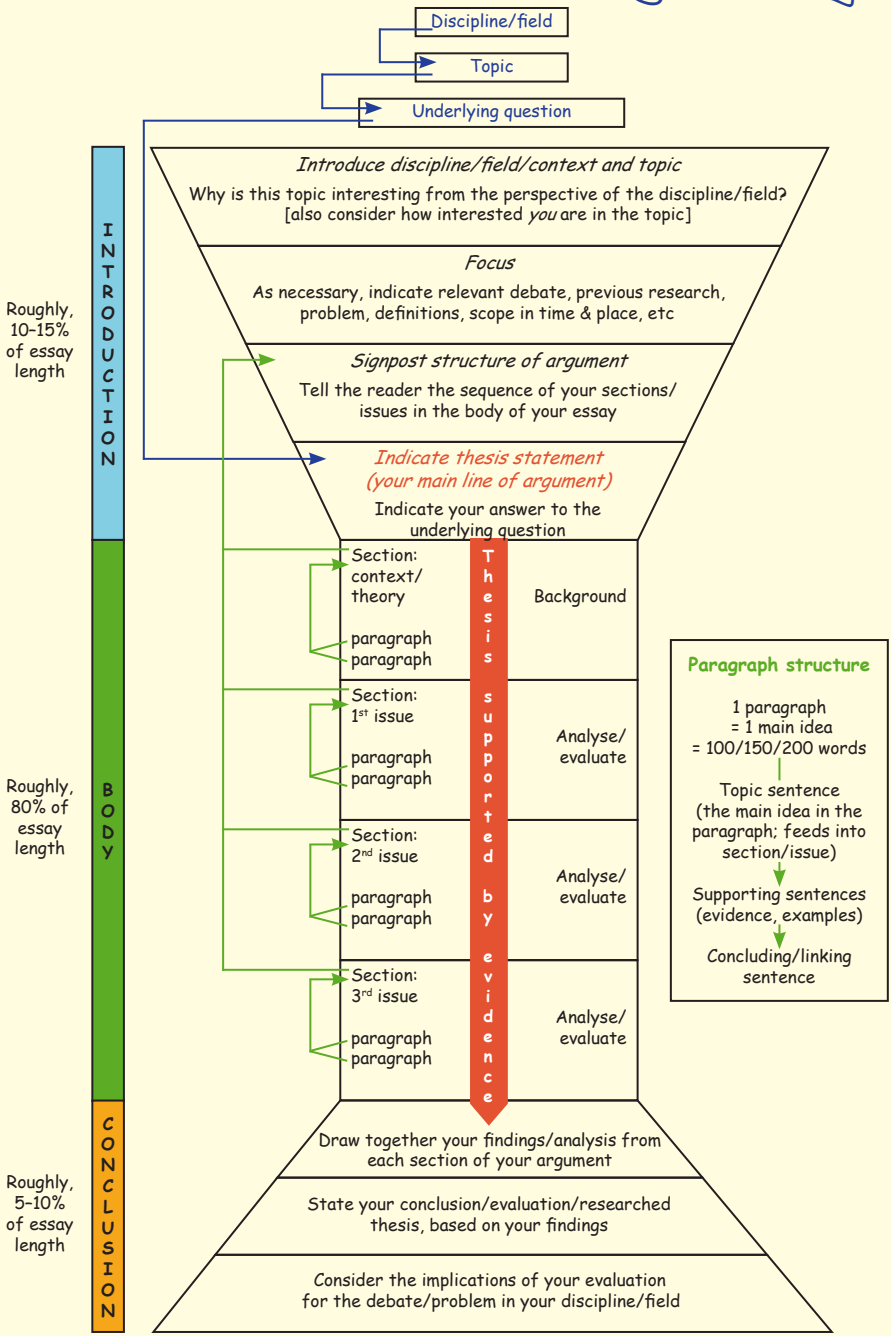
"I love the way the authors explain what an argument is. I also love the way they justify holding opinions in an academic context … A Visual Guide to Essay Writing *shows you excellently how to communicate with your marker by employing your 'authorial voice'."*

- Dr Alastair Greig
Head, School of Social Sciences
The Australian National University

"This is a great book … clear, useful, beautifully conceived and produced … an intriguing approach, one that will make sense to students and really assist their essay writing skills."

- Brigid Ballard & John Clanchy
authors of the international best-seller
Essay writing for students: a practical guide

How effective structure supports reasoned argument in essays[1]



[1] Read the assessment task carefully because a topic or discipline often requires a different structure. And always remember the golden 'creativity rule' — all rules are meant to be broken, it's just that you first need to know them!

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Published by
Association for Academic Language & Learning (AALL), Sydney

Printed by
University Printing Services, The Australian National University (ANU), Canberra

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Rao, Valli, 1947 - .
A visual guide to essay writing: how to develop and communicate academic argument

ISBN 9780980429701 (paperback)
ISBN 9780980429718 (ebook)

1. Dissertations, Academic 2. Academic writing
3.Authorship 4. Written communication
I. Chanock, Kate, 1949 - . II. Krishnan, Lakshmi, 1950 - .
III. Title

808.02

Paperback: A$9.95 (inclusive of GST)
Ebook: free

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This book is available free as an ebook, on the internet.

Log into any of the following websites and look for links to the book.

Association for Academic Language & Learning (AALL):
http://www.aall.org.au/

Academic Skills & Learning Centre (ASLC), The Australian National University (ANU):
http://academicskills.anu.edu.au

Humanities Academic Skills Unit, La Trobe University:
http://www.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/supportunits/hasu

People with dyslexia often have strengths in visual thinking. If you have dyslexia, or are working with a student with dyslexia, we hope you find this book useful. In order to avoid 'white paper glare' we have printed the paperback on recycled cream-colour paper. The online version has been made compatible for use with text-to-speech programs that can read aloud the text.

Contents

1. Introduction: visual thinking to work out ideas 7

2. Planning in time 10

2.1 Planning your semester's work in a course 10
2.2 Clarifying the big picture 14
2.3 The multi-layered timetable 15
2.4 Implementing your intentions 18

3. Before you start: recognising academic argument and its importance 19

3.1 Weighing up the role of argument 19
3.2 What do lecturers mean by 'argument'? 20

4. Topic analysis: predicting argument 23

4.1 Relevance to the topic 23
4.2 Where's the focus? 24
4.3 Analysing a given topic 24
4.4 Making up your own topic and then tackling it 30

5. Reading and research: developing argument 32

5.1 Ensuring a focused thesis statement 32
5.2 Stages of thesis-building 34
5.3 Searching for sources 39
5.4 Reading efficiently 42
5.5 Taking notes from reading 44
5.6 Acknowledging sources 46
5.7 Writing an annotated bibliography 48
5.8 Critical reviews 50

6. Structure: communicating argument 51

6.1 The anthropomorphic ('human-shaped') outline 51
6.2 The introduction 53
6.3 Paragraphing 58
6.4 Structuring a compare–contrast essay 60

6.5 Mindmapping to organise the body of your essay 63
6.6 The conclusion 67
6.7 Redrafting for structural coherence 69

7. Academic style: the language of argument 73

7.1 Audience — an invisible crowd! 73
7.2 Degrees of endorsement 74
7.3 Some common academic practices 75
7.4 Gender-inclusive pronouns 79
7.5 Editing and proofreading 80

8. Links to more resources for visual thinking 82

8.1 Multiple intelligences (MI) 82
8.2 Graphic organisers (such as diagrams, etc) 83

Acknowledgements

We thank all the students with whom we have worked over many years, and from whom we have learnt so much.

We also thank:

the Association for Academic Language & Learning (AALL) for a grant towards the cost of publishing the book;

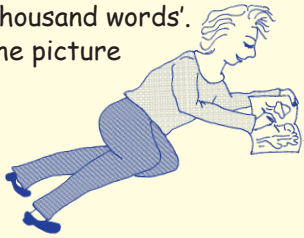
ANU students Maelyn Koo (for technical and formatting help) and Aparna Rao (for help with editing, and so much more);

the Academic Skills & Learning Centre (ASLC) at the Australian National University (ANU) for material support;

our colleagues at the ANU and La Trobe University, and our families and friends, for help in so many ways.

1. Introduction: visual thinking to work out ideas

We all know the proverb, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. For some of us, it would be easier to produce the picture than the thousand words!



Many people think in pictures. Unfortunately, this is often a 'mixed blessing' for students of humanities, social sciences, and other areas where a student's learning is assessed almost entirely in essays. These call for a different way of thinking: verbal, in blocks of words, moving in a straight and narrow line towards a conclusion. If you're a visual thinker, you can get quite frustrated in an educational system that marks not your understanding as such, but your ability to express it in a linear chain of reasoning with all the links spelt out.

To make this linear way of thinking easier to grasp, we depict the shape of an essay visually — you can see this on the cover of the book, and in the colour frontispiece. As you can see from the sketch alongside this paragraph, your structure has a 'backbone' running through the 'body' — this is your controlling or main argument (supported by evidence in the body of your essay), without which the essay would not 'stand', any more than a human being could stand without a spinal column. Of course, your main argument is more than just the backbone. It is also your mind at work in your essay, giving every essay a character of its own. As you can imagine, your argument grows and is refined as you research your topic.

At university, you may hear your academic skills advisers refer to this controlling argument by various terms: at the ANU, advisers tend to use the term 'line of argument', while at La Trobe both 'line of argument' and 'thesis' are used. In this book, we have chosen to refer to the controlling argument as the 'thesis' because that helps to distinguish the main argument from all the tributary arguments that feed into it.

Even though academics often set essay-based assignments, it's not

that they don't see the value in non-verbal ways of representing ideas. Indeed, much of what they study is non-verbal; for example:

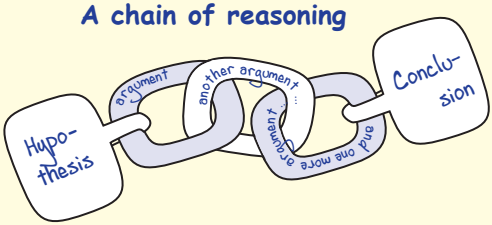
- Paintings, sculptures, and buildings in Art History
- Built environments in Archaeology
- Media representations in Media Studies
- Films in Cinema Studies

Each of these areas, like music, has its own, non-verbal language. But academics who study these subjects work at developing a verbal language in which to analyse what they're studying, so that they can discuss with others how exactly things work in their area. And in order to share such understandings, humanities and social science disciplines traditionally require students to produce extended written analyses.

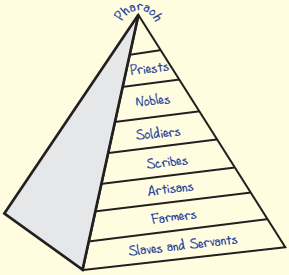
In other fields, such as science and technology, the ideas and subject matter that academics deal with can often be represented more effectively in charts, tables and diagrams than in words alone — think of pie charts, matrices, anatomical sketches …

Obviously, then, visual thinking is in no way inferior to verbal thinking. And in fact, if we look more closely at ideas in the humanities and social sciences, we find that many of the words are about ideas that are actually visual metaphors and analogies! Think of:

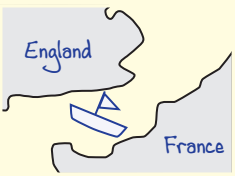
A chain of reasoning



A social pyramid



Channel of communication



Language often expresses ideas in highly visual ways, using an object or system 'on the ground' as a metaphor to carry an abstract idea (like a 'chain' of reasoning). For this reason, a visual metaphor, or a diagrammatic way of representing your thoughts, may take you a long way into the process of writing an essay.

Some ideas in the pages that follow are analogies that may help you think about aspects of your essays: for example, the image of a caterpillar developing into a butterfly is used to highlight how your major argument or thesis changes and develops as you research (below 5.2, p. 34).

Other ideas you will come across include diagrams that may help you with various stages of an essay, such as mindmapping, relating ideas, and organising them into conventional academic formats.

The metaphors, analogies and diagrams may help you in many ways to:

- Plan your semester's work in a subject
- Discover the focus of your topic
- Work out optimal ways of note-taking when you research
- Create your thesis, predicting and refining it as you research
- Ensure reasonable introductions and conclusions

Our ideas are based on patterns that we've noticed in argument essays, and we hope that you can adapt them to help you combine the best of your way of working with the benefits that writing can offer. Our ideas could also be of help to those who teach essay writing strategies to students starting to write in a tertiary context.

The book is organised to walk you through the processes of:

We hope this breakdown into steps will help you take control — even though real life is messier, of course, and you have to be prepared for overlapping of these processes!

We'd like to share a word about our style of writing in this book. You'll notice that our language is informal, but we recommend that in your essays you write formally — for example, no contractions or colloquial words (see below 7.3, pp. 75–78). This is because your audience/marker will be an academic with formal expectations, whereas our audience is you, a student. It's a bit like wearing tracksuits for practice, but uniforms for the game!

At the end of the book we've included some useful websites where you can find information about different learning styles, as well as graphic organisers that can help you structure your thoughts.

Good luck with your studies!

Valli Rao, Kate Chanock, Lakshmi Krishnan

November 2007

2. Planning in time

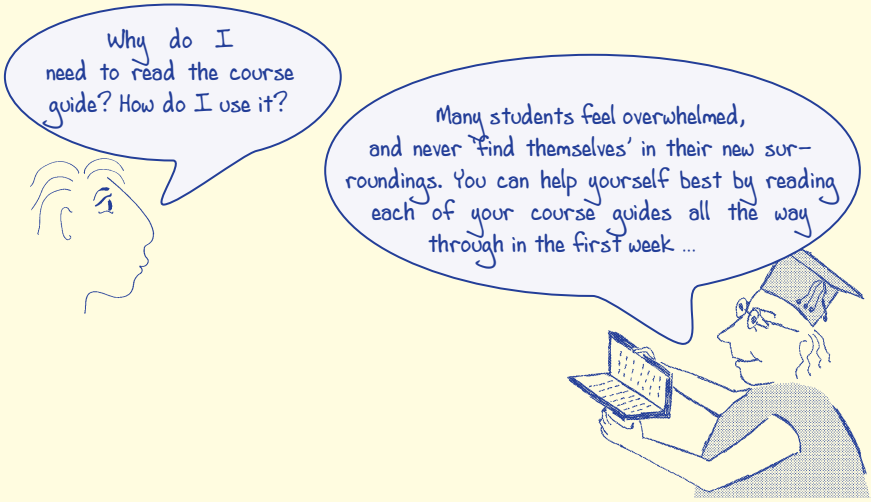
Time management is as important as it is boring — especially in the humanities and social sciences, many students are shocked to discover that the bulk of the workload isn't the lectures and tutorials but the reading, which they somehow have to fit into their crowded lives!

2.1 Planning your semester's work in a course

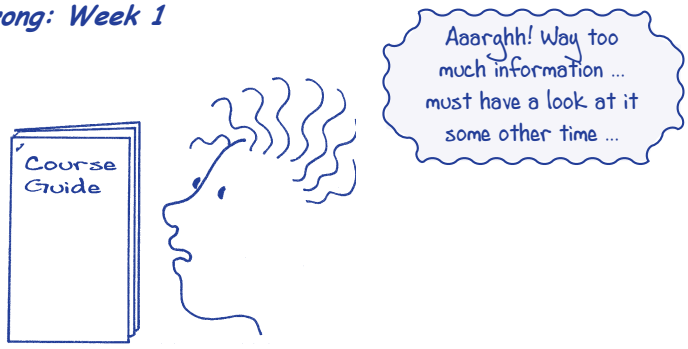
In the first lecture or first tutorial of each course, you should get a course outline or subject guide, in hard copy or online. This typically tells you:

- What the course is about
- What overall questions it will raise
- What you are supposed to learn (content)
- What you are supposed to learn how to do (method)
- What the lecture topics are
- What you have to read and when
- What tasks you have to do
- When assessments are due

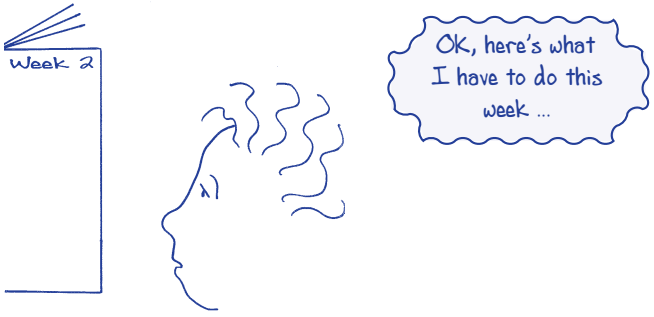
A well-thought-out course guide will also break down the course week-by-week, with questions to think about as you read for each tutorial. It's like hiring a guide when you travel to a new (and maybe daunting) place.



Wrong: Week 1

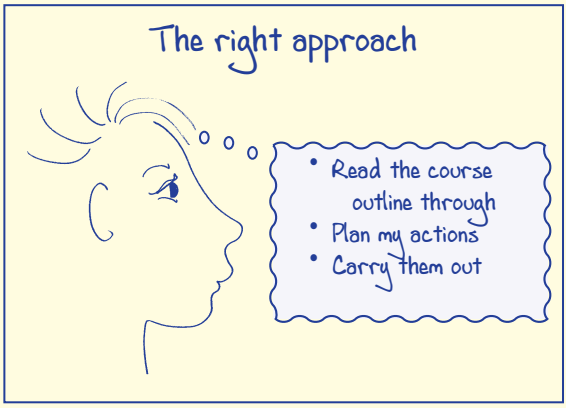


Wrong: Week 2 (looking only at the week's tasks, instead of at the week in relation to the whole course)



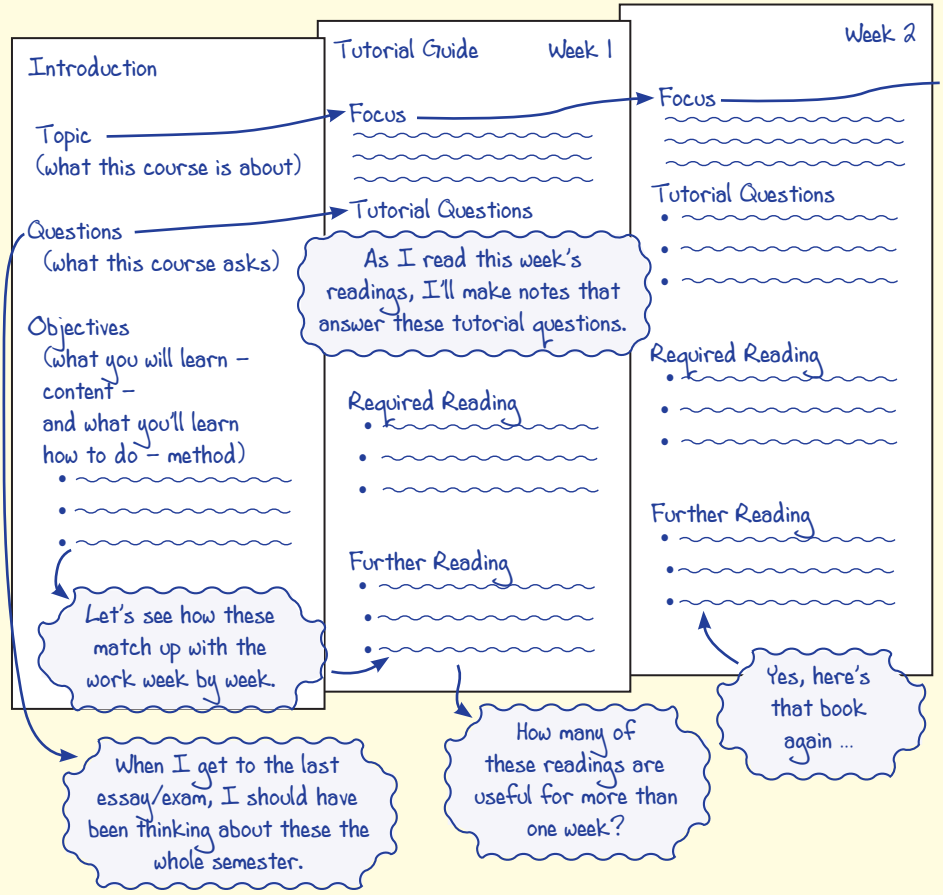
Wrong: Week 6

Right? Keep reading ...



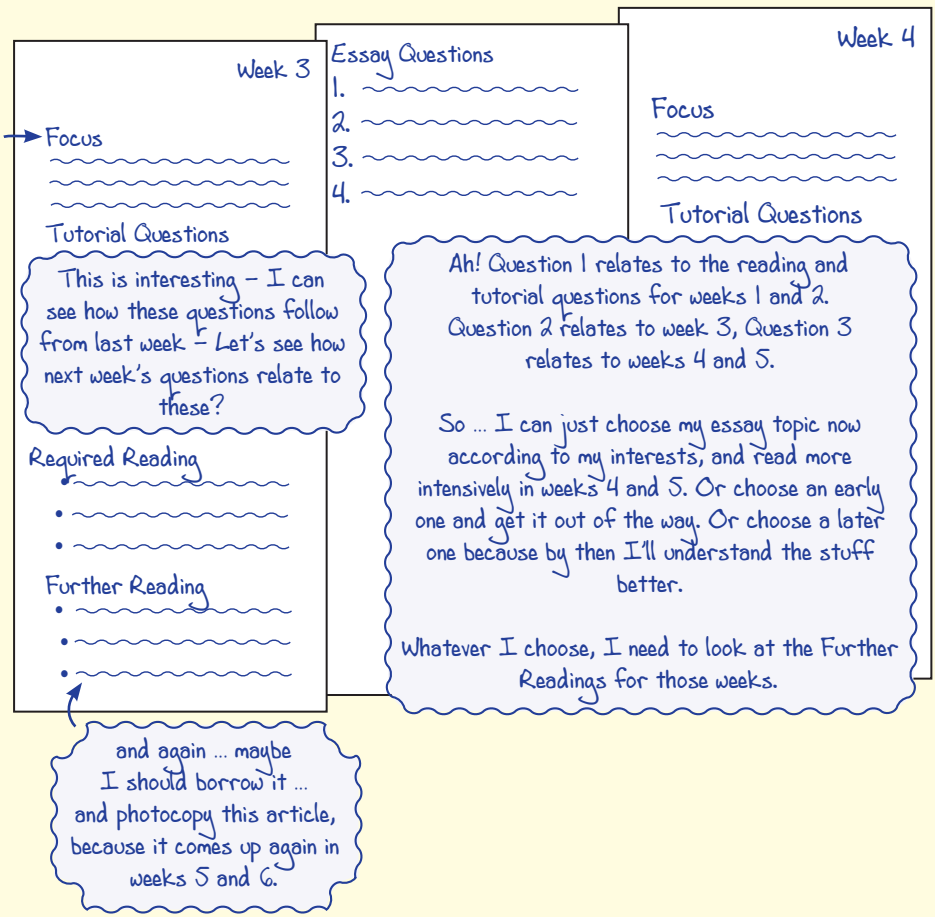
Try to see the design of the subject — how all the parts relate to each other — how it builds up to address some overall concerns or questions.

Your course guide may use different headings, and include more things (or fewer) — but many are organised roughly like the one below.



Using your course outline to plan for your essay

- Use a different highlighting colour for each essay topic that interests you.
- Then use the same colour to highlight tutorial questions and readings that relate most closely to that question.
- When you choose a topic, get the readings early. If possible, photocopy essential readings ahead, while the books are easily available.



2.2 Clarifying the big picture

Planning your semester's work in a course, choosing your essay topics early, and settling into the readings well in time, ensure that you live mainly in the 'important but not urgent' quadrant in the picture below.

The time management matrix

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	**Short-term quadrant** **Immediate deadlines** • Time-driven projects — eg incomplete assignment, due soon • Crises (eg ill-health, financial) • High stress — controlled by events	**Long-term quadrant** **Empowering activities** • Make space in your life by planning your semester's work early • Create specific goals: long, intermediate & short term • Build relationships & health • Low stress — controlled by you
Not important	**Inefficiency quadrant** **Minor activities** • Passive reading (without thinking/taking notes) • Responding to interruptions (eg emails/telephone calls that can wait) while doing scheduled activity • Too much part-time work	**Procrastination quadrant** **Escape activities** • Your favourite ways of wasting time (we've all got them …)

(Adapted from S. Covey, 1990, *The seven habits of highly effective people*, NY, Simon & Schuster)

The more you can organise to work from the long-term quadrant, the less you have to struggle in the short-term. For this, it helps to map your life out on a timetable you can see at-a-glance. We show you one such model in the next section.

2.3 The multi-layered timetable

At the end of this section, we've included a mock-up of a multi-layered timetable based on the four quadrants from the time management matrix. It has five layers, as we've divided the long-term quadrant into two, to suit planning for university studies; the second layer includes all your assignments and exams — when are they due? how long are they? how much are they worth? This allows you to check that you work towards these assignments through your weekly planning.

The weekly planning area works to keep you on track for immediate deadlines happening each week, but also allows you the chance to include activities for health, relationships and relaxation.

Calculating your weekly commitments in terms of hours

- Hours in a week: 24x7= 168
- Sleep hours: 8x7= roughly, 56 hours
- Hours available for non-sleeping activities: 168-56 = 112
- Full-time study: roughly, 50 hours (for every lecture/tutorial, you need to put in at least 3 hours of private study time, so every course takes a minimum of 10-12 hours)
- Part-time work: eg 10 hours
- Hours left for matters relating to relationships, health, personal development, socialising: 112–60 = 52

So, for a full-time student working 10 hours a week, life divides up roughly into a third of time each (ie 60 hours) for: sleep; study/work; and relationships/health/personal development.

You could fill your timetable in this order:

- Think about and note down what's important for you in the next few years, so you can keep track of that big picture aspect of your life (first layer/section).
- Fill in all your assignments and exams into the second half of the long-term quadrant (second layer/section).
- In the weekly planning area, fill in regular classes: eg lectures, tutorials, practicals (third layer/section).

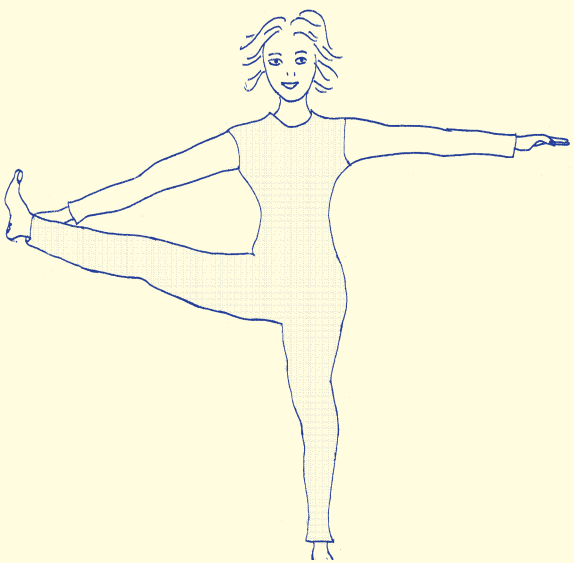
Then think of the following, and fill into the third layer/section:

- At what times of the day do you think most clearly? Allocate these for hard reading, drafting essays, studying hard subjects.
- Mark reading time for lectures and tutorials, and for reviewing lecture notes.
- Allocate time for planning, going to the library, doing easy reading.
- Fit in other weekly commitments, eg:
  - Part-time work
  - Travel time
  - Family, friends, sports and games, social life, TV
  - Household chores, eg shopping, washing, cooking, cleaning
  - Exercise, sleep, food, time for doing nothing (a bit of this can be good for you!)

- Note what's urgent but not important, and find suitable times to do them (when they won't take up your best times) in the fourth layer,
- Sometimes, it helps to become aware of things you *don't* want to waste time on. You could note these (in the last layer/section).

When preparing your weekly timetable, be flexible, practical and aware of how it feeds into your longer-term goals and plans.

Above all, maintain balance!



Mock-up of a multi-layered timetable

Long-term planning section 1: what is important to me in the next 3/4/5 years?			
Study / Career / Work • … … • … …	Relationships • … … • … …	Health • … … • … …	Personal development • … … • … …

Long-term planning section 2: important dates for courses (assignments, exams, due date, length, %)			
Political Science	International Relations	Australian Poetry	Philosophy
Essay, Week 8, 21 Sept, 3000 words, 60% Take-home exam, Nov 2nd week, 30% Tutorial participation, 10%	Presentation, Weeks 12, 17 Oct, 10% Essay, Week 13, 24 Oct, 20% Tutorial participation, 10% End exam, Nov, 60%	4 assignments, Weeks 4, 7, 9, 11 worth 40% Essay, 40% End exam, Nov, 20%	3 assignments, Weeks 5, 9, 11, 30% Discussions, 25% End exam, Nov, 45%

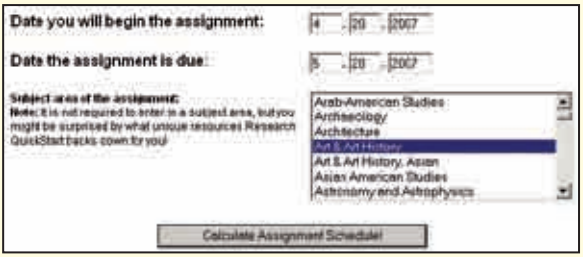
Weekly planning: Week 2 [of Semester 2] Dates: 23–29 July							
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
9–10			Library: research sources for PolSci essay	Read for IR lecture	Philosophy lecture B MCCT2	Work: Angus & Robertson	Tennis
10–11		Reading for PolSci seminar		IR lectureA MCCT1	IR tutorial HAG053		IR essay: analyse & brainstorm topic
11–12	PolSci lecture A Coombs T	PolSci lecture B Coombs T	Aust Poetry seminar LAWG06				
12–1	Lunch	PolSci seminar HAG052		Read for Philosophy tutorial			
1–2	Work: Angus & Robertson	Aust Poetry lecture A MCCT2	Aust Poetry lecture B MCCT2	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
2–3		Lunch	Lunch	Philosophy tutorial COPG31	Review IR lecture/ tutorial	Shopping, washing, cleaning	Make Philosophy notes
3–4			Philosophy lecture B MCCT2				
4–5							Time to procrasti-nate?!
5–6		Gym			Gym		
6–7	Weights training		Work with swimming club	Catch up on chores		Out with friends	Make timetable for next week!
7–8	Dinner	Dinner		Dinner	Dinner with Nurmi		Dinner
8–9			Film group				Relax

Minor activities: things that are urgent but not important — to be fitted into spare time slots
eg tidy emails, buy 21st present

Procrastination quadrant: things I don't need to do

2.4 Implementing your intentions

Once you've worked out what's due when, and your weekly planning is under way, it's helpful to have a specific plan of action for the essay itself. You can help yourself to get your planning off the page and into real life by using this useful assignment calculator from the University of Minnesota: http://www.lib.umn.edu/help/calculator/.



Be careful: because it is an American web site, the month is mentioned first and the date second! Also, in the USA they're a day behind Australia, so allow for losing a day when you use the calculator.

The site gives you 12 steps to follow, calculating roughly how to plan your time. If you're a bit confused about aspects of assignment writing, the site even provides you with useful hints about such things as how to write introductions, plan outlines, find and evaluate sources, etc.

Step 1: Understand your assignment by Sat Apr 21
- Suggestions for understanding assignment sheets — http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/readassign.html

Step 2: Select and focus topic by Sun Apr 22
- Refine your topic — http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/topic.html
  How to begin — http://lrc.uno.edu/writing/getting.htm

Step 3: Write working thesis by Sun Apr 22
- Definition: Thesis Statements and Research Questions — http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/thesis.html
- Sample thesis statements — http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml

And so on, until your final draft a few weeks later …

Step 12: Put paper in final form by Sun May 20
- QuickStudy: Citing Sources — http://tutorial.lib.umn.edu/infomachine.

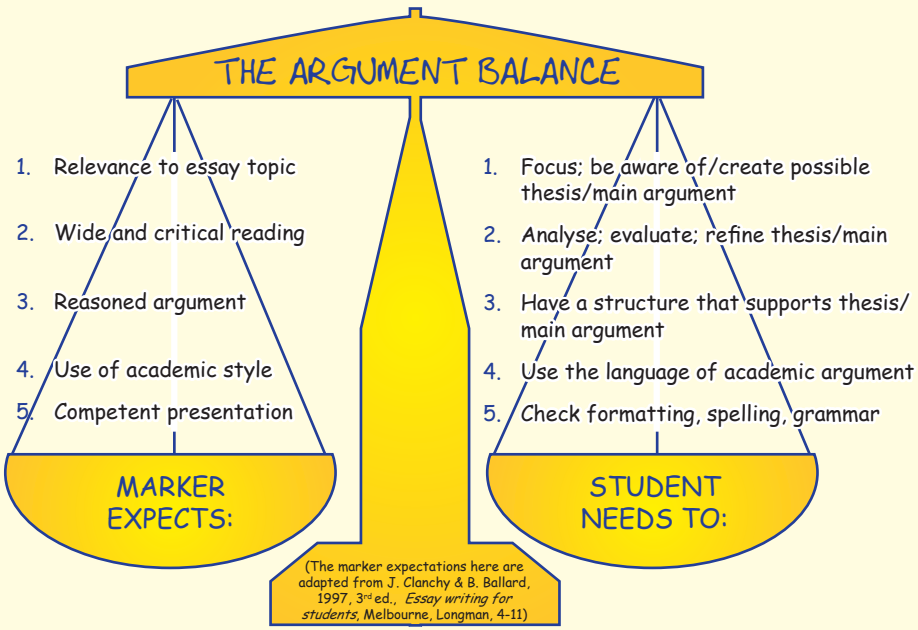
Good planning will structure your time and keep you on track, but most important is what actually goes in the essay! Let's look at that …

3. Before you start: recognising academic argument and its importance

3.1 Weighing up the role of argument

The word 'essay' — like its cousin 'examination' — traces its roots to the Latin *exigere*, 'to weigh'. So, an essay offers a way to explore a topic by balancing what a marker wants with the effort that a student needs to put in to achieve the grade they desire.

In their classic book on essay writing, first published in 1981, ANU advisers Clanchy and Ballard clarified what markers want from students writing essays. Keeping these expectations in the left-hand side of the balance below, in the right-hand side we add what students need to do, in order to meet the markers' expectations.



The rest of this book takes its structure from the steps that you have to achieve in order to predict your thesis (your controlling or main argument), to research and refine that thesis, and to structure your essay so that your thesis is demonstrably supported by evidence.

Seeing that 'argument' is the most important element on your side of the balance, let's begin by examining what exactly academic argument is.

3.2 What do lecturers mean by 'argument'?

Argument is a term that you'll meet frequently, but it can be a somewhat misleading term when you first meet it. At university, it means something different from what you might expect.

Generally, when people talk about 'argument', they mean a disagreement — often, a contentious exchange of views, or expression of personal opinion, not based on logic or evidence. During everyday 'argument', people tend to use strong, emotional language, and perhaps appeal to the reader's or listener's moral sense, rather than to reason.

Mad March logic

A classic example of what academic argument is NOT !

'Take some more tea,' the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.

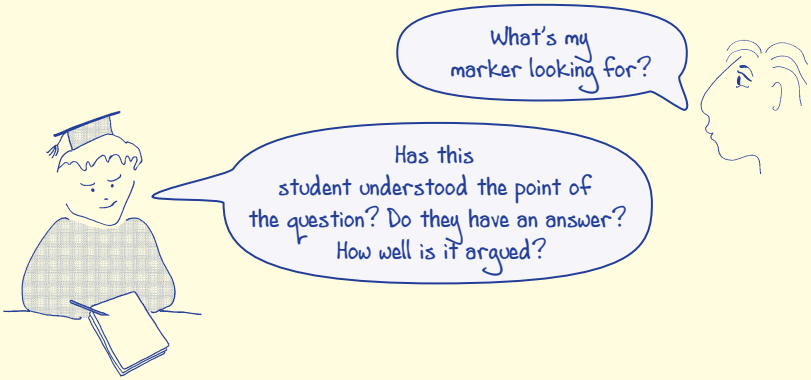
'I've had nothing yet,' Alice replied in an offended tone, 'so I can't take more.'

'You mean you can't take *less*,' said the Hatter: 'it's very easy to take *more* than nothing.'

'Nobody asked *your* opinion,' said Alice.

('A Mad Tea Party' in L. Carroll, 1866, *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*)

So, what exactly is an argument, in an academic context?



Academic argument can be of several kinds. It can revolve around what *should* happen, as in this example from Political Science.

> *Should Australia have a Bill of Rights?*
>
> Here, you might examine the reasons that the experts offer to support or oppose the proposition, and your answer will be your considered scholarly view on the topic, based on the evidence you have come across during your research.

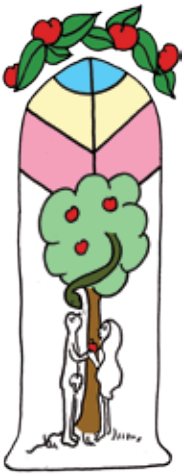
A similar kind of argument is involved in questions that expressly ask for analysis and evaluation, as in the Sociology example below.

> *How far does education act as a social leveller in Australian society?*
>
> You might analyse how Sociology experts discuss this issue, based on their different theoretical stances, and evaluate (as a result of your research, not on personal opinion) how far you find that education does (or does not) act as a social leveller in Australian society.

Not all essay questions involve controversy. Some are aimed at practising your discipline's method — its way of bringing out the meaning of its subject matter. In the Art History question below, the student is being asked to practise the method of visual analysis to explain a work of art.

Account for the formal qualities, iconography and symbolic significance of this [given] stonework decoration in a church.

The student's chain of reasoning, below, shows them bringing together what they've learnt about how decoration relates to form; how form relates to function; how iconography (the use of symbols) conveys meaning; and how each part of a composition relates to the whole.



This tree-branch pattern fits into the shape of the wall here.

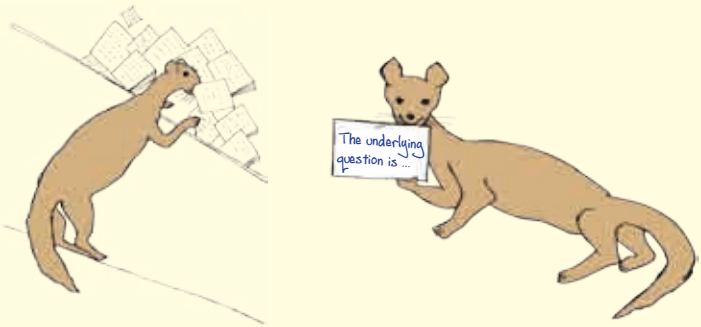
And the raised area of leaves and fruit catches the light from that window, so it stands out.

And it symbolises the temptation of Eve, which is echoed in the stained glass below.

So it contributes to the coherence of the visual narrative in the church's decoration.

Whichever kind of argument your essay topic requires, academic argument *always involves your answer to the question* — argument is basically how you demonstrate your reasons, based on evidence, for the answer that you give.

Now, not all essay topics come readymade in the form of a question; so, in the next chapter, we'll look at how to ferret out the question underlying your essay topic, and how to start thinking of what your answer might be. Subsequent chapters will then look at how you develop and communicate your argument.



4. Topic analysis: predicting argument

4.1 Relevance to the topic

Relevance is the relationship between what you're writing and your topic. As you can see from the picture balancing marker expectations against student effort (above 3.1, p. 19), relevance to the topic is the first criterion that markers look for.

So you need to be as strict about relevance when writing your essay as you'd be about telling the truth when under oath in court.

In order to ensure relevance, you need to:

- Discover the focus of the essay topic by analysing it;
- Constantly keep in mind the essential question underlying the topic;
- As you read and research, think about how your own answer to the underlying question is developing.

4.2 Where's the focus?

'Focus' comes from the Latin word for 'hearth', symbolising the centre of the home

How do you discover the focus of your essay topic?

- Be careful not to jump into writing your essay as soon as you see your topic.
- Remember that topics are often like icebergs — only the tip shows!
- Before starting to research or write, your challenge is to work out exactly what the topic is really asking you to do, from the perspective of the disciplinary area you're studying. You do this through topic analysis.

4.3 Analysing a given topic

Analysis means breaking something down into its component parts and understanding how they relate to one another.

We call our method of topic analysis the Humpty DUMPty method — if this sounds silly, remember that silliness can be an aid to memory!

Breaking down your topic is a bit like helping Humpty Dumpty (the egg in the English nursery rhyme) fall from where he sits on a wall — and in the fall, the 'DUMP' gets mixed up into 'MDUP'. So, you look for the **M**ain idea, **D**irective words, **U**nderlying question, and **P**redictive thesis (acronyms are another memory aid).

Let's look at the steps in the Humpty DUMPty method, using examples from Sociology and Drama:

- Discuss Putnam's views about the loss of 'social capital' in developed societies. What, in your judgement, should be done (if anything) to reverse this loss?
- How might Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* speak to us today?

M ain idea in topic: what am I studying?

D irective words: how am I being asked to study the main idea?

U nderlying question: why am I studying it?

P redictive/working thesis (controlling argument): what is my answer to the underlying question?

4.3.1 Main idea: the first step is to specify the main idea in the topic

The basic question you want to answer here is: 'What is the broad topic I am studying in this essay?'

- Do not take long to answer this question; choose from the words in the topic: so in the above Sociology example, 'social capital'.
- Do think in terms of *relationships* as commonly occurring central concerns. For example, in the Drama topic above, the main idea is the relationship between *She Stoops to Conquer* and today, ie, the relevance of the play to us today.
- Work from the disciplinary perspective.

Working from the disciplinary or field perspective is important, as different topics can be interpreted from vastly different perspectives. For example, take a topic such as the following:

Managing resources is about managing people, not resources.

In Geography, the main idea could be the relationship between environmental resources and people, changing people's *attitudes to the environment.*

In Financial Management, the main idea could be styles of management that make the best of the resources inherent in employees' skills, *maximising employee happiness and productivity.*

4.3.2 Directive words: the second step is to note directive words

The basic question you want to answer here is: 'How am I being directed to write the essay?'

- You want to look for directive words, which include *instructions about coverage*, and any *specified limitations*.

  So, in the Sociology example above, your instructions are to 'discuss', 'in your judgement', 'what should be done (if anything)'. Remember that 'discuss' always translates as 'critically evaluate'. It does not mean simply 'describe' or 'write about'.

  A specified limitation in the Sociology example is 'developed societies' — the scope is limited to developed societies rather than the developing world.

- Be wary of topics that ask 'What is your opinion?'

  Academics don't really want your *personal* opinion; they always mean your considered judgement as a scholar, and based on evidence that you have found through your readings.

4.3.3 Underlying question: the third step is to discover the question underlying the topic

The main question to consider here is: 'Why am I studying this main concept/idea?' This could be time-consuming, so give it time. Walk around the topic as often as is necessary. Frame your question in the context of the larger issues with which your course is concerned.

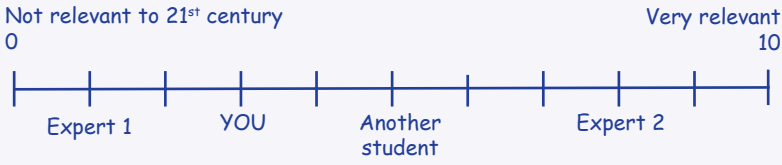
- Ask yourself as you consider the topic: 'Is there a controversy or debate in this area, from the perspective of the discipline?'

  You should have an idea of this, assuming you've been attending lectures and tutorials. Often questions are set around areas where there is controversy, with different experts claiming different things, and you're called upon to understand the controversial area and, in your arguments, compare and evaluate the worth of the experts' judgements.

- Formulate open rather than closed questions because closed questions could limit you. For example: 'Can the play be performed in a way that is relevant to us today?' directs the answer to a yes/no mindset that often doesn't bring out the complexities of academic argument. You're served better by formulating an open research question such as this: 'How far could the play be performed in a way that is relevant to us today?'

  'How far ... ?', 'To what extent ... ?', and 'In what ways ... ?' are good starters for your underlying questions, as they allow you to travel the spectrum of the relevant debate, and discover where you'd like to start pitching your thesis. Visually, this is how you would start to situate yourself:

In the debate about the topic, what positions are the various experts arguing? What convinces you, and why? Where would YOU sit in the debate, between 0 and 10? (Of course, your position will shift as you research.)



4.3.4 Predictive thesis (controlling or main argument): the fourth step is to find your answer to the underlying question

All this leads us to the fourth step of topic analysis, which is formulating your predictive thesis — also known as your rough/working/tentative thesis. It is called predictive because it is your guess about what your thesis might be, based on your knowledge via lectures, tutorials, and readings so far. It indicates where you might sit in the debate, that is, what your thesis/major argument/conclusion might be.

So, for the Drama topic 'How might the play *She Stoops to Conquer* speak to us today?', the underlying question is: *How far could the play be performed in a way that is relevant to us today?*

The predictive thesis could go something like this, depending on the student's hunch after having read the play, attended lectures and tutorials, and done some preliminary reading and brainstorming on the topic:

> *While* She Stoops to Conquer *has undeniable 18th century traits which date it as belonging to that period, it is still very relevant today because it deals with themes of laughter and love that concern the 21st century as much as they did in the past.*
>
> OR
>
> *While the play has themes of humour and romance relevant to the 21st century, it is difficult to perform it in a relevant fashion today because of greater awareness of the position of women within society.*

There are many ways of framing your thesis statement. The two examples above demonstrate a classic approach that uses the 'while clause' or 'concession clause' followed by the main clause. The 'while clause' or 'concession clause' is where you concede the strength of the arguments on the other side; it might also be referred to as the 'balance clause' because it puts forward the opposing side's strongest points before going on to balance it with your own. The main clause of course is your argument, with your reasons.

As we said in the introduction (above p. 7), your thesis is what gives your essay individuality and personality. It is a creative effort, and it grows as you research and think about the topic. Sometimes you may not have even a tentative thesis when you analyse your topic and start researching — for instance, the topic may be one not yet covered by

lectures, or you might find the question too complex and be unsure of what direction your answer might take. That's fine, so long as you remember that as you research you need to keep watching for your thesis when it does start forming itself.

When formulating tentative theses, be careful not to fall into the trap of mistaking a *repetition of the topic* for a thesis (which should in fact be your answer to the question underlying the topic). Let's look at what this sort of 'Echoing' means, using our Sociology example.

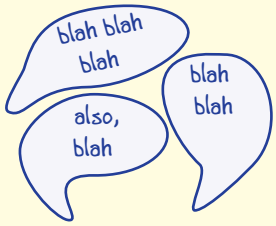
Topic	Discuss Putnam's views about the loss of 'social capital' in developed societies. What, in your judgement, should be done (if anything) to reverse this loss?
Underlying question	To what extent is there a loss of social capital in developed societies, and what can be done to reverse this loss?
Echo of topic (Avoid this!)	Robert Putnam's interpretation of social capital, and his views on problems with its depletion will be considered, together with possible suggested solutions from other sources.
Genuine predictive thesis (Achieve this!)	After considering the loss of social capital as manifested by [issues 1, 2, 3] …, this essay finds that the loss can be reversed not by trying to recreate the way communities functioned in the past but by 21st century solutions that try to bring together a global world in new ways.

As you can see, the Echo indicates that the student has not analysed the topic carefully enough to get beyond the topic to the underlying question, and has not given their answer enough thought to be able to start a genuine dialogue with the topic. Your answer will of course change as you research more, but a genuine predictive thesis takes the first steps to engage in this dialogue — and gives you a sense of direction regarding what to look for in your reading.

4.4 Making up your own topic and then tackling it

Sometimes you are given the option of making up your own topic. That seems like it would be great, doesn't it? You think, 'I'm interested in Taoist philosophy, I'll write about that.' But 'about-ness' is not an essay, and if you just rush off to learn about your topic and report what you learned, there's a good chance that your research will grow out of control and your essay will be too long, lack focus, and have no thesis or controlling argument.

Remember that academics investigate a topic because:



It relates to some question that people are already talking about; and

The discussion around that question is thought to be incomplete; and

Further, or different, thinking and/or more information may help us to understand it better.

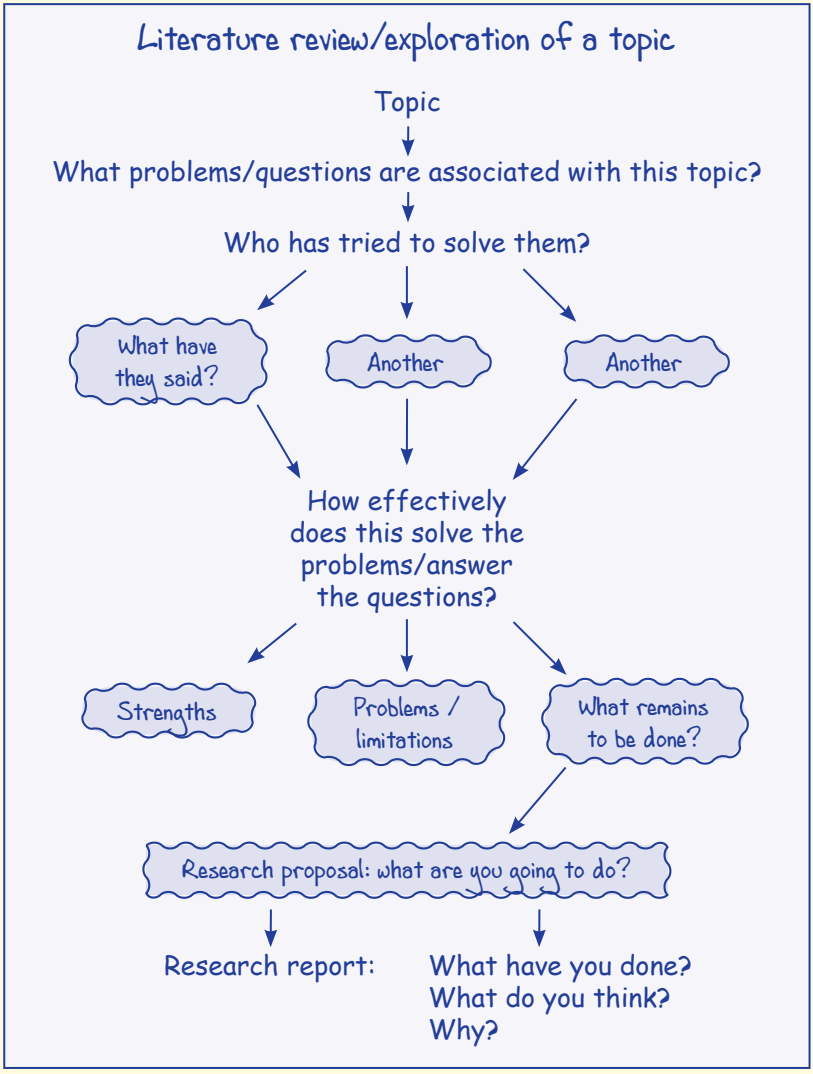
So, for any topic you choose, you need to find out:

- What other (academic) people have said about it (this is called 'the literature').
- What problems or questions might be taken further.

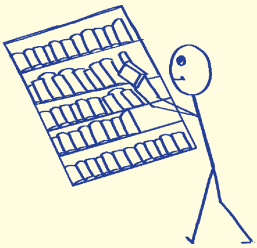
Checklist when devising your own topic

- Does the topic/research interest you personally and yet lend itself to objective analysis?
- Are relevant sources available?
- Have you discussed the suitability of the question, as well as its wording, with your lecturer/tutor?

Sometimes you are asked to undertake a literature survey as a first step towards carrying out some original research of your own — for example, an observation, a case study, a report, or whatever. In this case, you do a 'literature review' to identify a question you want to investigate further, and then you decide how you will go about your investigation — your 'method'. Finally, having done it, you report what you found out and what you think it means. The diagram below shows all the steps in this process — just go as far as you need to for the assignment you've been given.



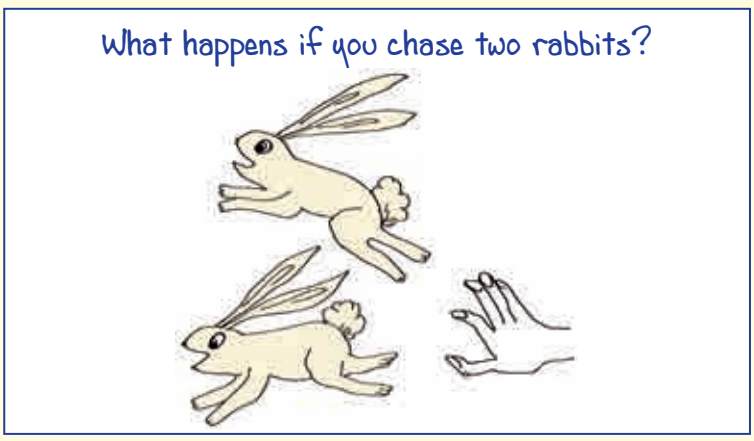
5. Reading and research: developing argument



5.1 Ensuring a focused thesis statement

Just as your essay topic had a focus (which you discovered through analysing the topic), your essay answer needs to have a focus, which is the main position you're developing and towards which all your arguments lead. This main position is your thesis.

Remember to have *one* main position/message.



Sometimes your essay can look like a 'two-rabbits chase' even if it isn't really. You may have a complex argument in which you consider one position and then another. If so, you need to frame a thesis that foreshadows this, so your tutor doesn't think that you're contradicting yourself when the essay gets complex.

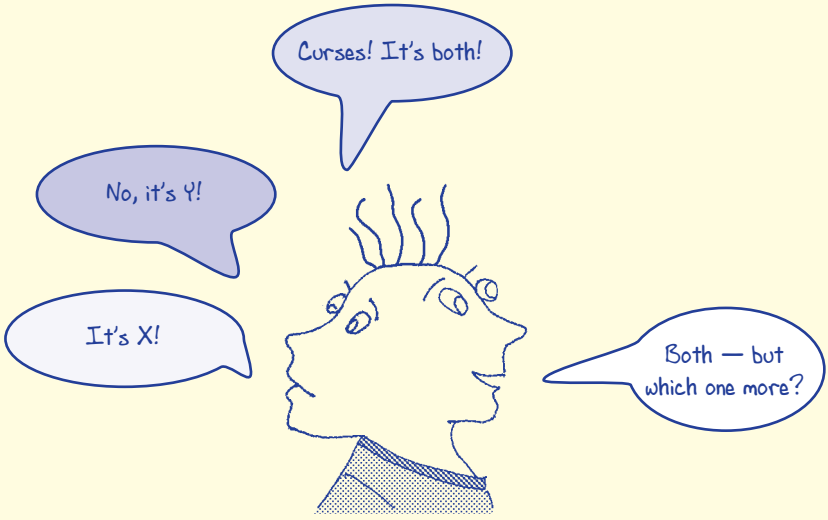
For example, Deb had an essay question for English: 'Is Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* a comic or a tragic work?' In this story, a family of no-

hopers try to cart their mother's remains into town for burial, despite circling buzzards, flooding, and other hazards including their collective stupidity. In her draft, Deb began her essay by discussing what was funny about the novel, then moved on to its tragic aspects. When discussing this with her academic skills adviser, she realised that her answer could be confusing — because her ideas were too complex for a simple 'it's comic' or 'it's tragic' type of answer. During discussion, she worked out that she needed a sentence in her introduction to signpost her *whole* answer, as follows:

'While the Bundren family's incompetence in arranging their mother's burial makes an entertaining spectacle, their inability to deal with their loss is more distressing in the end.'

Then, when the essay moved from the first, 'comic', part of the discussion to the second, 'tragic', part, another signposting sentence was needed so the reader could follow along: 'Although each of the incidents above invites the reader to laugh at the Bundrens, the cumulative effect is to make us sorry for them.'

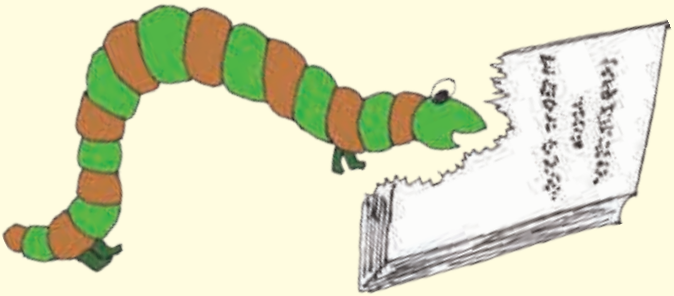
In that essay, as often happens, the student arrived at her 'somewhat X, but mainly Y' type of thesis after days spent changing her mind!



5.2 Stages of thesis-building

As our example in the last section shows, the fact that you have one, focused, thesis statement does not mean that it is the *same* from the beginning of your research to the end. Far from it!

Your thesis changes and develops — like a caterpillar into a butterfly — as you undertake your reading and research towards the essay.



'MetamorTHESIS'

A caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly is called a metamorphosis (a change of form). The evolution of an essay thesis may analogically be labelled 'metamorthesis'.

Here are some characteristics that typify your thesis:

- It is a reflection of the topic seen through *your* eyes, and therefore unique to you.
- It is your answer to the underlying question in the topic.
- It evolves as you research, being your considered position within the debate.
- It is the focus in relation to which your research needs to be relevant.
- It becomes the conclusion to your essay.

Your thesis undergoes changes, both big and small, from the time you analyse the topic to the time you complete a definite amount of research for the purposes of a particular essay.

Three creative stages of thesis-building commonly identified are: the predictive or working thesis; the refined (that is, researched) thesis; and the definitive (sometimes original) thesis.

- The predictive thesis happens as you analyse the topic and start thinking about what your answer to the underlying question might be (discussed above 4.3.4, pp. 28–29).
- The refined thesis emerges as you research and consider the arguments of experts in the area you're tackling for the essay (the subject of the rest of this chapter).
- For the definitive thesis, the writer has to travel further steps up the research ladder — but this is like the top of Mount Everest, a stage that few scholars reach. Most undergraduate essays get a good grade if they can work up to the refined stage of thesis-building. The 'original' thesis is rare, not just in undergraduate work, but in postgraduate and even doctoral work.

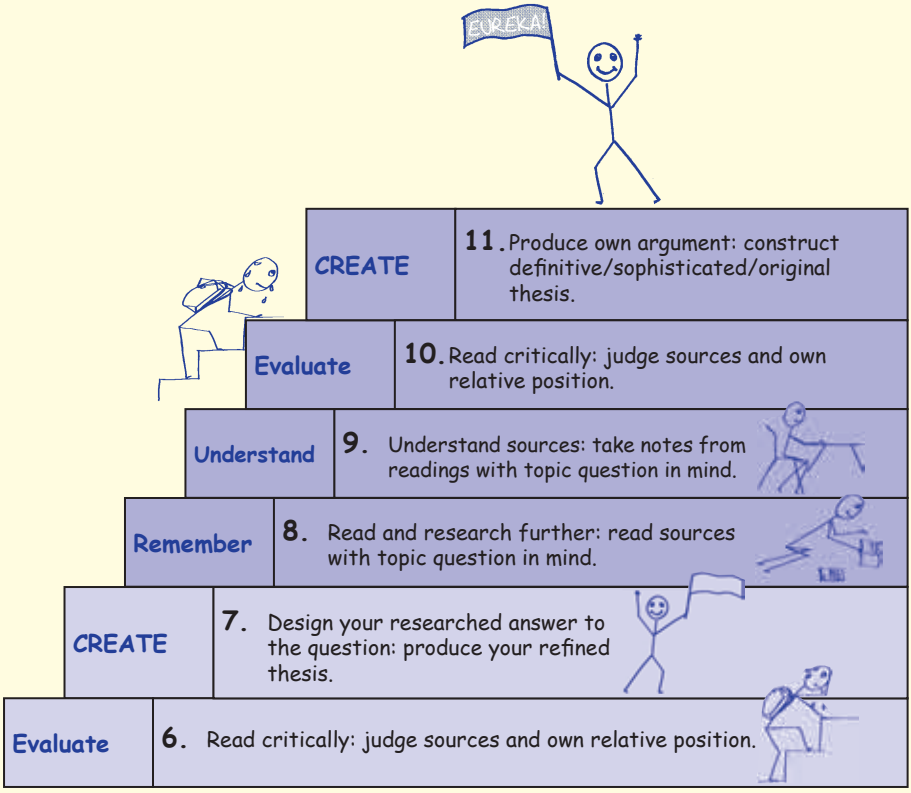
These three stages of thesis-building happen as you read and research towards your essay, and we've depicted them visually in Steps 3, 7 and 11 of the Stages of Essay Writing (SEW) chart on the next page.

The stages of essay writing (SEW) chart

(Derived from L.W. Anderson & D.R. Krathwohl, Eds, 2001, 'The taxonomy table' in *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: a revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*, NY, Longman)

At the heart of every good practice is sound theory, and the practices we recommend in this book are inspired by Anderson and Krathwohl's revision in 2001 of the classic taxonomy of educational objectives first articulated in 1956. In particular, chapters 4 and 17 of the book underpin the SEW Chart.

Understand	**5.** Understand sources: take notes from readings with topic question in mind.
Remember	**4.** Gather information: read sources with topic question in mind.
CREATE	**3.** Start thinking about your answer to the question, and how to construct the thesis: hypothesise/generate predictive thesis.
Evaluate	**2.** Continue process of analysing topic: use lectures & readings to help focus on underlying question behind assessment problem.
Analyse	**1.** Start applying the Humpty DUMPty method to differentiate & organise elements of the essay topic.
Understand	**0.** Understand lectures and readings: take notes with course objectives in mind.
Remember	**-1.** Gather information: attend lectures and tutorials with course objectives in mind.



When you see how many skills and processes are involved in writing a good essay, you can appreciate why it takes so much time, effort, and coffee!

You're right if you think that the order followed in the SEW Chart is quite similar to the one followed by the University of Minnesota's assignment calculator that we brought to your attention when we talked about implementing timelines (above 2.4, p. 18). You can follow either (or both), depending on your needs:

- The Minnesota planning is about the *timing* of your work;
- The 11+2 steps in the SEW Chart are about the internal substantive *development of the thesis* via its three creative stages: predictive, refined and (rarely) original.

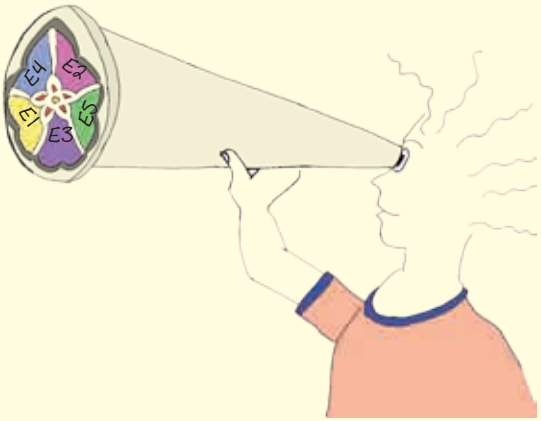
Two important things about where you start and end on the SEW chart:

- Notice the really tricky bit is where you start: with two foundational steps, Step -1 and Step 0.

  These are the preparatory steps you take before you even get your essay topics, so that when you do choose your essay topic you can analyse it (Steps 1 and 2).

  These foundational steps highlight why it is crucial to know your course objectives — as we suggested right at the beginning of this book — and to attend lectures and tutorials, as well as read, understand and take notes from your readings.

- Students sometimes worry about how 'original' their thesis needs to be. At undergraduate level, remember that your reader/marker is looking for your scholarly voice, your ability to generate your own pattern of argument — if it helps, think of it literally as generating a pattern, the view you see when you shake the kaleidoscope of scholarly arguments from the experts (E1, E2, …) you study. Every student's shake initiates their own unique creative pattern, and this is what markers ask for when they comment 'where's *your* voice?'

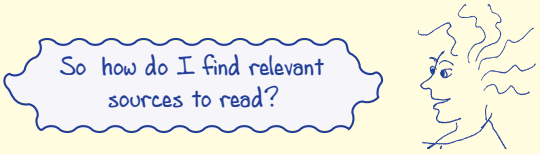


5.3 Searching for sources

As you start researching for your essay, you become aware that there are more types of reading than you'd thought there were. Not just books but (for example):

- Book reviews
- Chapters in edited books
- Journal articles
- Compilations of various reading materials provided by course coordinators (at the ANU, these are called 'reading bricks')
- Specialist dictionaries recommended by your discipline

And lecturers expect you to consult these various sources in a balanced way, not just internet sources which are easy to access these days from home! Reading selectively from encyclopaedias, Wikipedia, or a general Google search is useful for educating yourself by building up background and contextual knowledge, but such material is generally not considered suitable for citation — because it has not gone through a process of review (called 'refereeing') by authorities in the subject area.

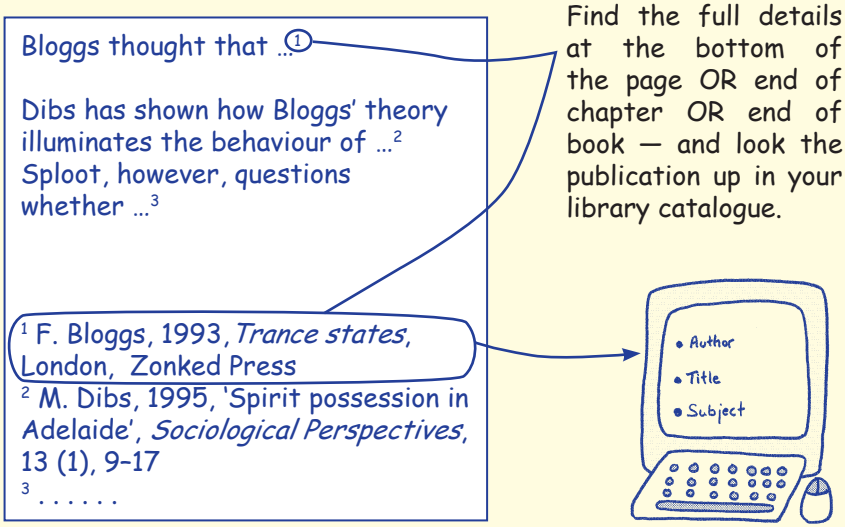


More suitable sources that you can cite in your research and writing are usually refereed journal articles or other academic sources such as published books. One resource that is easily accessible via the web *and* acceptable to the scholarly community is Google Scholar because it finds only academic publications on the internet, weeding out other kinds. Check it out at http://www.googlescholar.com.

When you research, remember that academics don't write in isolation from one another. Everything you read is part of a conversation in which the writer refers to other authors, past and present, whose work is relevant to the topic. Some agree with your writer, some disagree. By following up these references that your authors give, you will:

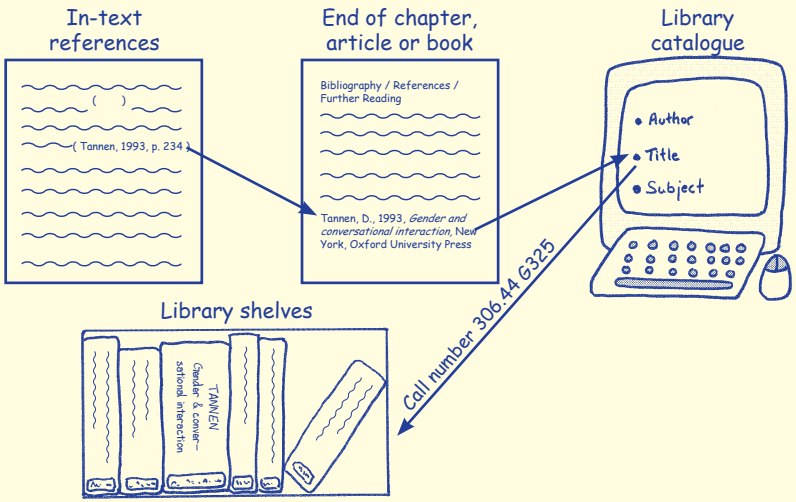
- Find more reading;
- Get a sense of which authors are important for this topic;
- Get a sense of shared views; debates; unsolved questions.

Some readings have numbered references.

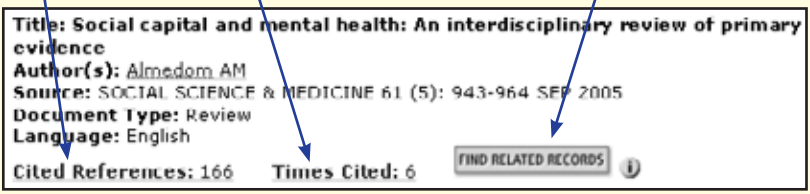


Other readings have references in brackets (author, date).

Look at the end of the chapter or book for a full reference list in alphabetical order of authors' surnames. Check the date, in case more than one publication by your author is listed. Then look up the publication in your library catalogue. If you find the publication on your library shelf, browse nearby — you may find more to read that's relevant. If you're online, consider linked materials that you might find useful.



Electronic database searching offers you a chance not only to access cited references in a particular article but also to locate the number of times the article you're reading has been cited in *subsequent articles*. If you click on the 'times cited' link, it will most often take you straight to the new articles. You can also link into the 'related records' section and find useful material for your research.



If you're not sure which databases are most appropriate for your discipline or field, ask your librarians' advice.

How do I know how many sources to research in the course of writing an essay?

This varies enormously, depending on the lecturer's instructions, and on the subjects you're doing. A 2000-word essay in Literature could require that you consult just the primary text, while a 2000-word essay in Law could contain upward of 30 different sources. So the important thing is to keep track of what the lecturer's instructions ask you to do, and of what the norm is in a particular field or discipline. Here is a very rough guide for working out how many sources you might need:

Number of words ÷ 200 = number of sources

So, for instance, if you have a 2000-word essay to write, you need approximately:

2000 ÷ 200 = 10 sources (minimum)

(Quite incidentally, this calculation also gives you the approximate number of pages — 10 — if you use font size 12 and 1.5 spacing; and very roughly a page has 2 paragraphs, so in 10 pages you might have about 20 paragraphs. These are all only rough guidelines, but worth noting so you can adapt them to your requirements as needed.)

5.4 Reading efficiently

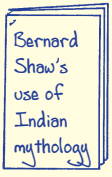
What is critical reading?

At university, you need to read *critically*, and this means you need to follow four steps when reading:

- Know why and for what purpose you're reading;
- Understand what the writer is saying and why;
- Reflect on and question the evidence the writer presents to support their arguments;
- Make a scholarly and considered judgement about the worth of the writer's ideas, particularly in relation to other writers' arguments.

To read with good understanding and reasonable speed, it helps to realise that academic writing typically has a characteristic structure, answering questions that the writer expects readers to ask.

Structure of a piece of writing		To answer these questions in a reader's mind
Introduction	Topic	What's this about? Why is this writer interested?
	Context	May be in terms of theory: what contribution to what discussion in the discipline/field? Or may be in terms of practice: what does the writer hope to achieve?
	Question/problem	What is this writer asking?
	Thesis	What do they think is the answer?
	Signposting	How will they show this to me?
Body	Point I (explanation) Evidence/example Reference(s)	Why do they think so? (What does this mean?) Based on what? Where did they learn this?
	Point II (and so on)	(same questions as for Point I)
Conclusion	So what?	How does all this relate to what they asked at the beginning?



Both readers' questions and writers' answers arise out of the culture of academic enquiry — that's what makes the structure typical!

Once you know that academic writing has this characteristic structure, you can use it to read more efficiently. Most essays, articles and books are organised this way. There are differences of scale, of course. In an essay, the introduction is likely to be a paragraph or two; in an article, up to a page or two; and in a book, the whole first chapter. But knowing this, you can recognise where the author establishes the context for their discussion — what other writers have said — and then the question or the problem they're addressing. When you think you've found the author's answer — the 'thesis' — you can skip to the conclusion, where you should find that repeated. Now you know where the argument is going, you can read with better understanding.

One more feature of academic writing is the way paragraphs are structured in texts. Typically, paragraphs start with a topic sentence (the main idea in that paragraph), followed by supporting sentences (evidence and examples to support that main idea). The topic sentence/main idea relates back to the relevant section/issue, which in turn relates back to the signposting in the introduction (which tells the reader what the main sections/issues are, in that particular text).

Based on observations about the structure of academic texts, the '4-S reading system' was devised by P. Boddington and J. Clanchy in 1999 (*Reading for study and research,* Melbourne, Longman). So:

- **S**earch out the basic structure: look at title, contents page, introduction, conclusion, headings and sub-headings, chapter summaries, graphs, index, etc.
- **S**kim the text (in order to get a sense of the main message in the text, and what might be the writer's perspective, and why): read the abstract (if there is one) and the introduction; then, travel lightly over the text, section by section or paragraph by paragraph (noting topic sentences).
- **S**elect key material relevant to your essay topic and underlying question.
- **S**tudy the key material: make time to read this carefully.

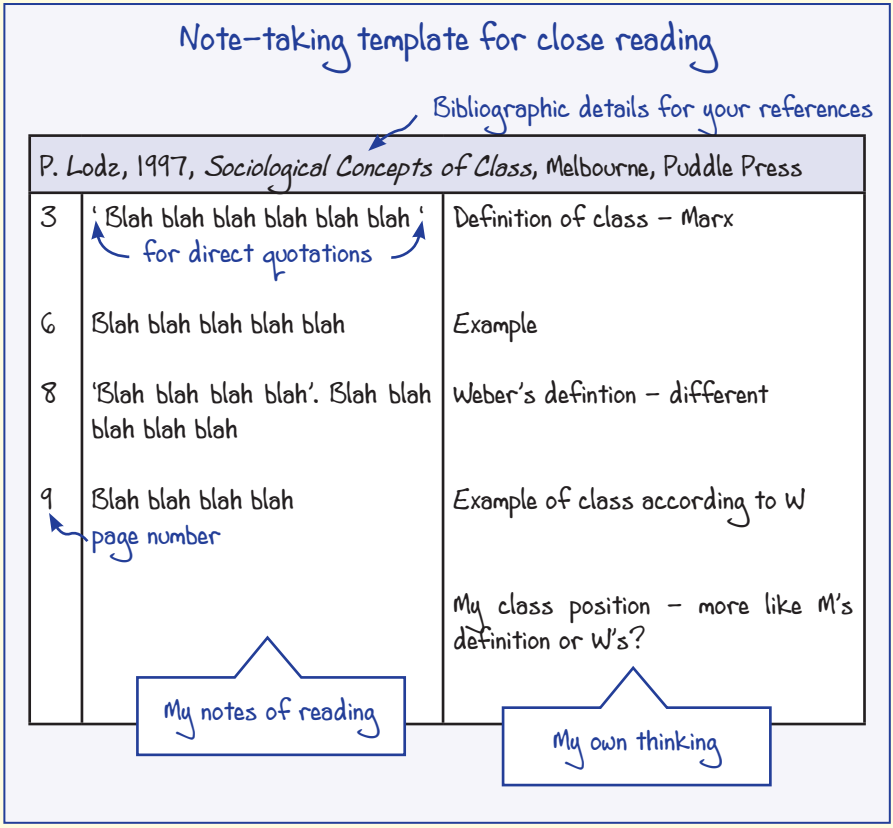
To the above four, we would add two more steps:

- **R**ecall what you have studied (either mentally or, perhaps more usefully, through making your own notes).
- **R**eview your notes of a chapter or book to consider how it might contribute towards your overall argument in your essay.

5.5 Taking notes from reading

Note-taking methods vary with the purpose of the notes and the thinking style of the note-taker (not to mention the time of night …). We can suggest two methods: one for making detailed notes, and one for summarising the gist of the source. Here we use cooking metaphors to help you remember.

'Chopping up' can be useful for close reading, when you are trying to pick a text apart and to gather bits that you may quote or discuss in your writing. With dense or difficult reading, this can keep you focused on the text, as illustrated in the left-hand column below. Meanwhile, the right-hand column lets you record your own ideas about the reading as you go — to see how the readings relate to you; to each other; to lectures and tutorials; and to your essay question.



'Boiling down' is a useful note-taking format when you want to reduce a lot of reading to a few pages of notes.

This format does two jobs at once:

- It records what you need from the reading (and no more than you need);
- It lets you know when you've done enough reading (because you develop your answer as you go, by comparing what you get from each reading).

Note-taking template for gist

P. Lodz, 1997, *Sociological Concepts of Class*, Melbourne, Puddle Press

Section of essay where I use this material:

Lodz's argument:

Lodz's evidence/examples for his argument:

..... (p. no.)
& ..... (p. no.)
& ..... (p. no.)
& ..... (p. no.)

My response to Lodz's argument:

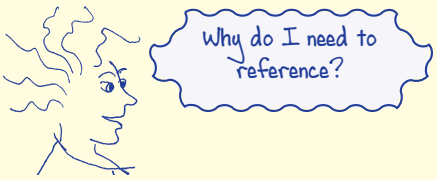
When you research, remember this analogy: your breakfast gives you energy only if you actually eat it. If you carry your toast around all morning, you're not going to gain much!

- Not understanding the concept behind your research is like carrying your breakfast with you all morning, but without eating it — it cannot give your essay life and energy.
- So read and use your research sources (with acknowledgement) for the *ideas* you get out of them.
- Use your own words as much as you can. Use direct quotations only when it's important for the reader to see the original words from your source (eg definitions, legal decisions, phrases from a work of literature, accounts by participants in the events you are studying).

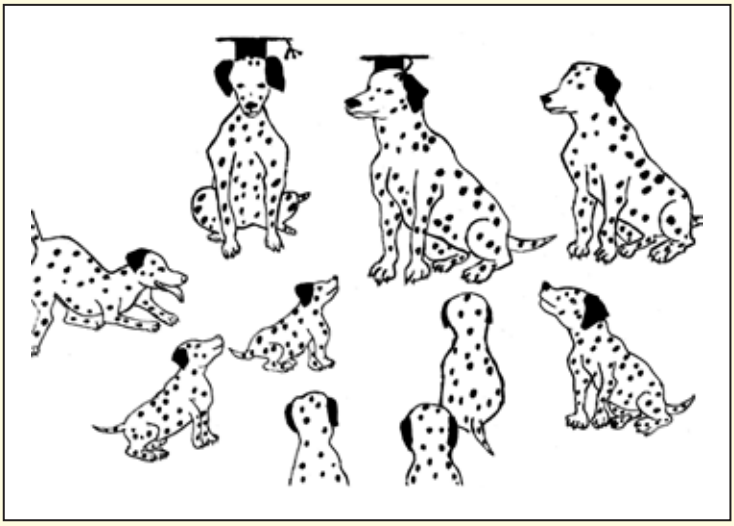
5.6 Acknowledging sources

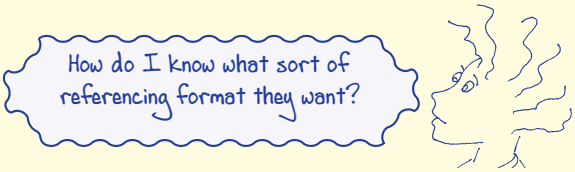
Whatever note-taking method you use, you need to keep accurate and complete records of the sources you use — details such as author/editor, date, title, place, publisher. This is so that you can include referencing details in your essay, in two places:

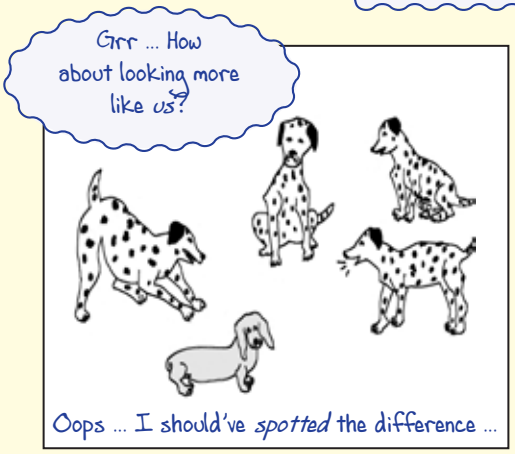
- In footnotes or in bracketed references on each page (check which method your course requires);
- In a list of references at the end.



Referencing not only avoids any accidental plagiarism from others' work, but also shows the academic sources you have researched, this being the 'pedigree' for your essay. Thus, referencing performs the important job of giving your work authenticity, and a sense of belonging within your discipline.





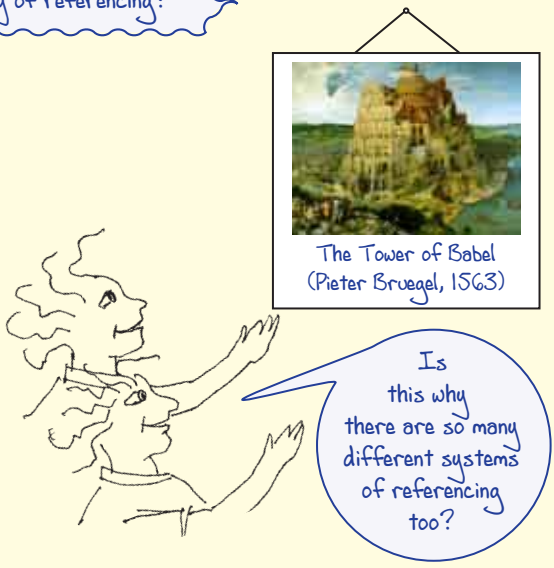


Make sure you clarify with your disciplinary area what system they want you to follow, as they can get quite tribal (even dogmatic!) about this!

Every discipline has its own specific rules about how it wants referencing details displayed, in the body of the essay as well as at the end of it. You just need to find out the style: In-text? Footnotes? Endnotes? APA? Chicago? Vancouver? AGLC? MLA?

Once you know the rules, conform to them rigorously and consistently.

In the same way that we all speak different languages, different disciplinary areas have different ways of referencing. It can be a confused and confusing area, so don't hesitate to clarify with your marker any doubts you may have.



5.7 Writing an annotated bibliography

Most of the time, your note-taking is for your eyes only — and maybe that's just as well! But there is one kind of note-taking that your tutor will expect to see occasionally, in order to monitor your reading.

With some assignments, you may be asked to include an annotated bibliography. This may be an early stage of an assignment, when your marker wants to see how your research is shaping up. In this case, your annotated bibliography says:

Or, it may be handed in *with* the assignment, at the end, in which case it says:

Either way, it's a list of references, each one accompanied by a paragraph in which you say (very briefly):

- What it's about
- Its scope and focus
- Its main argument
- How it contributes to an exploration of your topic
- Any important limitations it has

Below are some university websites our students have found helpful for learning how to write competent annotated bibliographies, as well as for viewing examples of both descriptive and evaluative annotations:

- Purdue University Online Writing Lab
  http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_annotatedbib.html
- University of Wisconsin–Madison Centre
  http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/AnnotatedBibliography.html
- University of South Australia's Learning Connection online resource
  http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/student/learningAdvisors/bibliography.asp#What

You could think of the annotated bibliography as the thing you wish a good fairy who has already researched the same essay topic would simply hand over to you! Suppose you're working on the question: 'How do courtroom conventions work to ensure compliance with the legal system?'

What the student wants to know	How the annotated bibliography provides the answers
You've researched this assignment – what's a good article for it?	F. Bloggs, 2001, 'The architecture of the courtroom.', *Justice Quarterly*, 17 (2), 33–54 This deals with the way that courtroom spaces separate the administrators of the law from the public, elevate the judges, and isolate the witnesses. It draws attention to the use of space to define roles that participants then accept as given. The discussion is limited to the design of the highest courts in the judicial system, which may be different from courts in which mediation is the aim.
How is it useful for this essay?	
How useful is it?	

As you can see, there's an emphasis here on evaluation of your sources as you read, and this is always part of reading for an essay — you choose what is relevant ('how is it useful?') and you read it critically ('how useful is it?'). In fact, you'll sometimes get assignments that ask you to do exactly that, on a larger scale than just an annotation. These are called critical reviews.

5.8 Critical reviews

Sometimes you're asked to review a source, such as a book or an article, in order to display:

- Your understanding of how it relates to discussions in your subject;
- Your understanding of the writer's argument;
- Your ability to read it 'critically' — not to find fault, but appreciating what is informative and illuminating, while being aware of problems and limitations.

A review assignment is not about whether the source is sincere, engaging, or well-written, as a review in a magazine or newspaper might be. (A sentence or two on style is plenty.) An academic review is about telling your readers (briefly):

- What the source does, and why;
- What it says;
- And how that contributes to knowledge and/or academic discussion.

Review of a source: what you might cover

Topic:

Context (contribution to what discussion?):

Purpose:

Method:

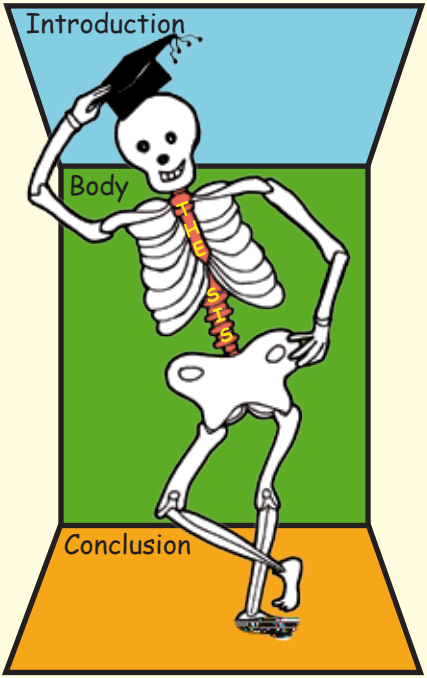
Structure:

Content (themes &/or argument):

Assess: How is it useful?
- To discussion in the discipline
- To you as a reader

How useful is it?
- Strengths — problems — limitations
- What remains to be done?

6. Structure: communicating argument



6.1 The anthropomorphic ('human-shaped') outline

Chapter 5 talks about how you can create and develop your thesis — give it a unique character and personality of its own. In addition to doing this, you have to communicate your ideas clearly so that the reader can follow.

Communicating your ideas is easier if you think about an essay structure as being like a human skeleton. While people have individual personalities, we share a similar skeletal structure. So also with argument essays: while every essay has a unique thesis, all argument essays share a similar structure, with a clear introduction, body and conclusion.

The picture on the next page is an anthropomorphic outline of the structure (see also the colour frontispiece to this book). Note particularly the thesis running through the structure as the backbone that holds the essay up. Structurally speaking, without a thesis your essay will be all over the place!

a great deal. The main thing is to make sure you cover whatever the marker expects you to cover in the introduction.

How strictly do I have to follow the 4 Moves in every introduction?

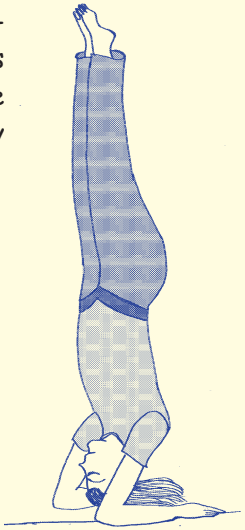
The 4 Moves are only guidelines; you don't have to follow them in rigid order. Use them as needed in your introduction, adapting them to the guidelines given by the marker and the length of your essay (eg, in a short 750-word essay your introduction might be only 75-100 words, so use these words to fit in what's needed — perhaps just signposting and thesis).

Can I have more than one paragraph in my introduction?

Of course, if there is the need — for instance, if the essay is long or complex. So if your introduction is roughly 300 words, you might choose to split it into two paragraphs, with Moves 1 and 2 in the first paragraph, and Moves 3 and 4 in the second paragraph (you can see this is the introduction to the Sociology essay, above pp. 53-54). If your introduction is short, you might need only one paragraph and cover all the 4 Moves.

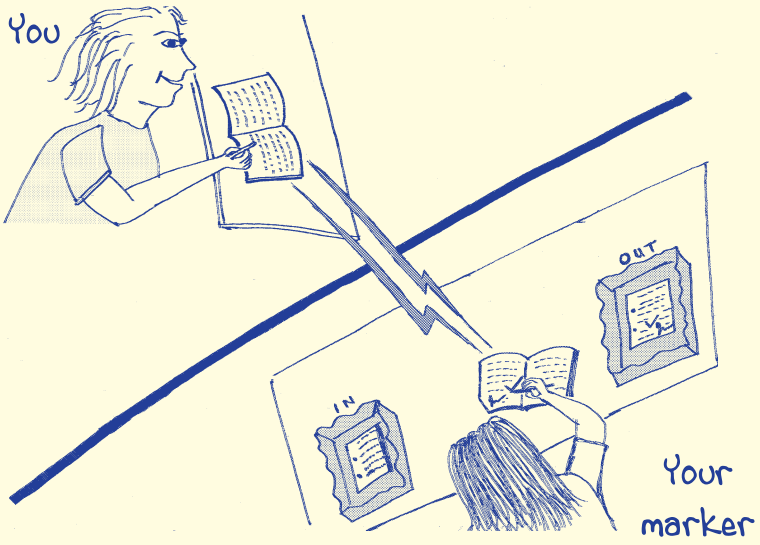
Is it really okay to put my conclusion in my introduction?

In an Agatha Christie murder mystery, she doesn't tell you who-dunnit at the beginning, but argument essays are different. Even though it might sound a bit tospy-turvy, you are usually expected to state your thesis in the introduction, and also give the marker a road map of how you're going to support your thesis. These two Moves are indicated as Moves 4 and 3, respectively, in our anthropomorphic outline; the order can be interchanged as suits your essay, but the important thing is to make sure you've got signposting and thesis statement clearly indicated.



I usually just choose the topic that looks the easiest. Why is it necessary to consider whether it interests me?

That the topic touches you personally is important, even though you do not declare this openly (which is why we've put it in square brackets, in Move 1 in the outline template above). Your enthusiasm will be kindled only if you're interested, and enthusiasm is infectious. Like a cold — only much nicer! — it invisibly transfers itself to the reader and makes them interested in reading your essay.



Sometimes, you may be in a situation where you find all the topics 'boring', perhaps because the course itself has turned out so; in that dire circumstance, we suggest you still aim for the best grades you can get by pretending you love your topic (and the course with which you're stuck, for whatever reason) until you've written your essay! That makes the process of researching and writing more bearable, and might help you concoct a genuine thesis.

In Move 2, how much do I need to talk about what others have written?

The introduction consists only of a tenth of your whole essay, so save the in-depth references to your critics and readings for the body of your essay, where you can analyse and evaluate them. In the introduction, all you need is an indication of previous research, overview of current debate or understanding of the topic, and clear identification of the

issue that needs resolution.

Here's an example from a Science Communication course titled Science, Risk and Ethics.

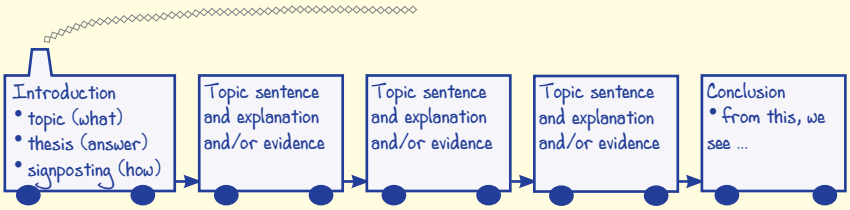
> *Do ethics impede scientific research: is the consent requirement for research on humans in developing countries an impediment to success, or is it integral to good research?*
>
> **[Move 1 — context]** Ethics are increasingly becoming a necessary accompaniment to scientific research conducted on human subjects, to promote and preserve human rights and dignity. This research is of course vital to understanding, curing and preventing diseases. Testing on human subjects is therefore necessary, and measures to protect those subjects are inevitable. **[Move 2 — debate in area]** The controversy therefore lies not so much in the existence of ethical guidelines as in their application, particularly where rigid application means jeopardising scientific research. One such debate is about the application of ethical guidelines requiring the human subjects' consent where the subjects are located in developing countries. This is because, some argue, most ethical guidelines are written for western, developed societies, not accounting for developing nations' characteristics that make it hard to apply the same consent requirements, damaging the quality of research. Others counter that, first, the consent requirement should be non-negotiable in any country; and second, that any modified consent guidelines will also cause conflict and confusion in their application. **[Move 3 — signposting]** I will examine both sides of this argument by looking at whether the basic ethics of consent do impede scientific research in developing countries, based on what information should be given to subjects; the effectiveness of ethical review committees as a substitute or in addition to individual consent; and the consistency between developing countries' ethical guidelines. But I begin with a brief history of the ethical guidelines and the need for consent. **[Move 4 — none**, as this essay's marker told the students not to have a thesis upfront — yes, that can also happen, although rarely.**]**

As the above example shows you, be aware that while we can advise you how to write the 'standard' essay or a 'typical' introduction, when it comes to real life there is no such thing as 'typical' in these areas any more than there is an 'average' human face — with all essays you have to work out what the expectations are, and, if you have any doubts, clarify what exactly is needed!

6.3 Paragraphing

As we saw in the section on reading efficiently (above 5.4, pp. 42–43), academic texts proceed in a series of paragraphs. This is useful to remember not only when you're reading but when you're writing too, as it helps your readers understand the structure of your essay.

Paragraphs are visual aids to the reader, of your train of thought. You could even visualise each paragraph as a carriage on a train, containing one idea, and hooked to the next one by a link.



Every paragraph has a topic sentence, followed by supporting sentences which provide evidence. You can see this in the paragraph below from an essay on Angela Carter's short story 'The Bloody Chamber':

Some words left out from original

Topic sentence →

Introducing evidence →

Male power, in this story, is dangerous in a way that is both attractive and disturbing. Even while the Marquis is courting the girl, she senses that he is not what he appears to be. She feels 'as if his real face ... lay underneath [a] mask' (Carter, 9), and senses that she is not seeing his true nature. She notices the 'leonine shape of his head' and 'his dark mane' (Carter, 8), and the image of the man as a lion is reinforced by his silently stalking her as she sits at the piano, 'mov[ing] as softly as if all his shoes had soles of velvet' (Carter, 8) like a lion's pads. She does not, however, perceive the danger that the reader does, but goes on trusting her suitor.

Evidence: student's words and quotations →

Reference →

Square brackets used to indicate something has been added or changed

All this looks simple, but we don't mean to say that it's easy for everyone. For one thing, some of us are 'holistic' — 'whole picture' — thinkers, for whom things don't easily fall into line. For another thing, the logic of lining things up is not always obvious.

A tutor once asked her student, who happened to be a holistic thinker, how he imagined his ideas about a topic on which he was struggling to write. He drew a lot of balls in the air together, with lines connecting each ball to every other ball — on paper, a real mess, but it represented his ability to keep the big picture (whole = holistic) in his mind, with all its connections, at the same time.

Unfortunately, language can't express that kind of thinking. Written language is linear by nature: one word follows another, and one sentence follows another. Something has to be first! And next … and next …

Added to that, essays are also linear, at least by convention. So a juggler has to become a paver — to pull each ball from the air and lay them all down in a line.

(Adapted from M. Herrington, 'Adult dyslexia, partners in learning', in M. Hunter-Carsch & M. Herrington, Eds, 2001, *Dyslexia and effective learning in secondary and tertiary education,* London, Whurr)

The logic by which you organise your material depends, always, on the question you're answering and on the nature of your material. But we can help you with the process of deciding how to organise your material by walking you through two different kinds of approaches:

- A 'compare–contrast' approach is good for the type of question that asks you to compare and contrast two things.
- 'Mindmapping' is a good technique to use when your question does not, in itself, suggest an order for your essay.

6.4 Structuring a compare-contrast essay

Many essay questions ask you to compare two things — for example, two objects, methods, texts, theories, processes, policies, or approaches.

A simple structure for comparing two things is to consider how they treat common aspects:

Thing 1	Aspect 1 Aspect 2 Aspect 3
Thing 2	Aspect 1 Aspect 2 Aspect 3
So what?	Conclusion

This works well if you're making a point about how all aspects of a thing work together to make it the kind of thing it is, and then drawing an overall contrast between the two things. For example, you might be comparing two poems about love. The three aspects you want to compare might be form, imagery, and tone. So, you show how, in the first poem, these work together to make it a playful comment on the foolishness of love; and how, by contrast, the form, imagery, and tone of the second poem create a dark warning about the misery of being in love.

But what if you want to foreground the differences between particular aspects, rather than the differences overall? For example, you might be comparing two civil rights movements, with similar purposes and values (aspects 1 and 2) but very different methods (aspect 3). An alternative to the first structure is to *take each aspect in turn* and compare what it's like in the first thing with what it's like in the second.

Aspect 1	Thing 1 Thing 2
Aspect 2	Thing 1 Thing 2
Aspect 3	Thing 1 Thing 2

Markers often prefer this structure, maybe because it's harder to be vague when you focus on detail! The format below is an expanded version that may help you to break down your comparison further, and to see how the parts are related. It frames your comparison in terms of questions that are relevant to ask about many different kinds of material.

Aspect	What?	How?	Why?	With what effect?
Aspect 1	Thing 1			
	Thing 2			
Aspect 2	Thing 1			
	Thing 2			
Aspect 3	Thing 1			
	Thing 2			

The next page shows this filled out with an example of an analysis from Anthropology.

How has life changed for the people of Upper Rivers since the 1950s?

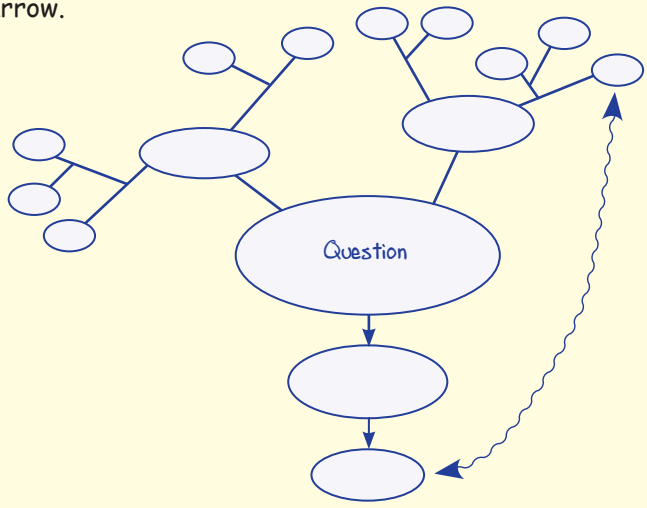
Aspect	What?	How?	Why?	With what effect?
Economic life	Upper Rivers in 1950s (thing 1)	Hunter-gatherer economy	Land unproductive for farming, no private ownership of land	Adequate, shared food resources and simple material life
	Upper Rivers now (thing 2)	Labouring in mine	Investment by multi-national mining company	Govt sold land to mine. Locals lost rights to use land; dependent on selling labour; poor diet
Gender relations	1950s (thing 1)	Men hunted→ Women gathered→	Greater physical strength Could be combined with child-rearing	Gender roles different but both valued
	Now (thing 2)	Men sell their labour Women are unemployed	Where physical strength is essential, women are less productive	Men have sole economic power in family
Family structure	1950s (thing 1)	Extended family lived in large group	Food supply adequate and no known alternative	Resources shared
	Now (thing 2)	Nuclear families of middle-aged adults and young children	Poverty leads to decreased support for elders and young adults	Lower life expectancy Youth move to city to join cash economy
Religion	1950s (thing 1)	Worshipped spirits of land and animal life	Spirituality integrated with maintenance of food sources	Authority of elders derived from experience of living off the land
	Now (thing 2)	Christian	Missionaries offer education to converts	Traditions no longer respected, authority shifts to Church
So what? Conclusion: Upper Rivers is more economically developed now than in the 1950s. However, development has entailed a heavy cost to the local people in terms of interdependence and equality between genders and between generations.				

6.5 Mindmapping to organise the body of your essay

Some essay questions don't readily lend themselves to a linear treatment — for those, you'll need a way of capturing your ideas and herding them into a straight line!

If you're tracing the development of something over time, or describing a step-by-step procedure, the order of points may be obvious. But if you're breaking something down into its various aspects, there may be no evident reason to put one first, another second, and so on. Luckily, you don't have to make those decisions to begin with. If you're not ready to put your ideas in order, you can still use a 'mindmap' to get them out in front of you where you can see them all at once. Then, the relationships between different facts and ideas will start to emerge more clearly.

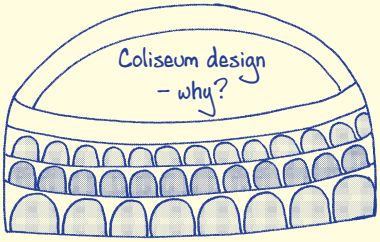
Take a blank sheet of paper and put your question in the middle. Then, draw lines out from the question and add whatever seems relevant. Each point or aspect that you think of will suggest more related things, and some of those will branch into further details. As you begin to see connections between one area and another, you can connect them with a wiggly arrow.



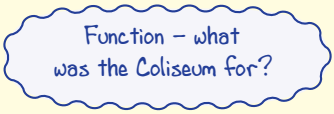
Some people like to use two (or more) sheets of paper taped together, to give themselves plenty of room. Some like to draw pictures in place of words. Whatever helps you to understand and remember what you're looking at, go for it! (Mindmaps can also be a great way to take notes in lectures, from reading, and for oral presentation or revision. They get a lot of material into a small space, with the relations between the parts clearly visible.)

Let's build up an example:

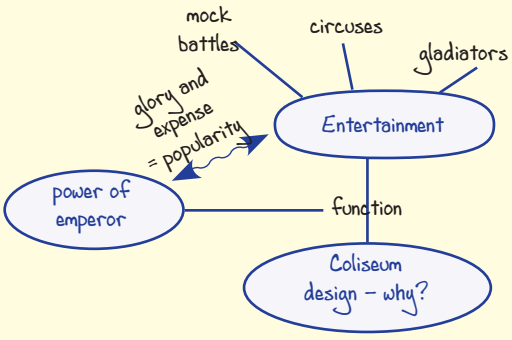
Suppose you're studying a topic in Art History which, overall, is concerned with the ways that form relates to function. You've got a question: 'Why is the Coliseum in Rome designed the way it is?'



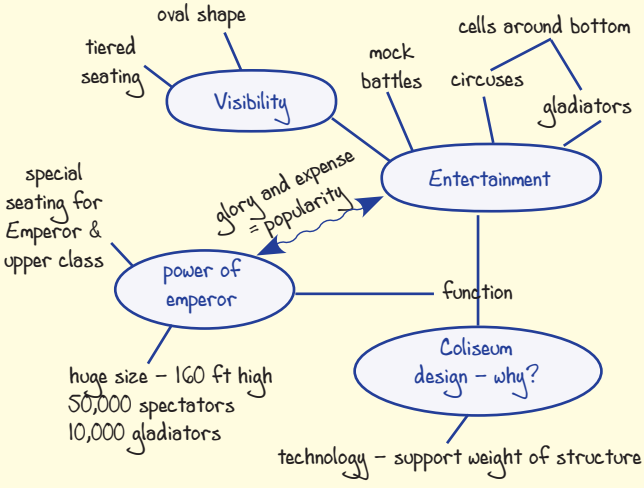
You know the general size, shape, and layout of the building, but it's not going to be enough to describe its design — you need to explain WHY it's like that:



You research the types of entertainment that were held there, sponsored by the Emperor, for the Roman crowd:



And you try to work out where your information belongs, and what relates to what:



At some point, of course, you have to decide how the stuff on your mindmap shakes down into different kinds of points, and what those are, and how to order and connect them. In this example, some of the material is about what the Coliseum was *for*, and some about *how* the design carried out the purposes of the building. That gives us two main ideas, and it's logical to discuss the purpose first. Then, within the *how,* some of the material is about the size, some about the shape, and some about the structure of the building. There's no obvious reason to put these in any particular order, but 'structure' is going to be the most detailed, so maybe it makes sense to start with the more general points and move to the more particular:

Purpose — Types of entertainments, sponsored by the Emperor, for the Roman crowd

Size — to accommodate huge audiences

Shape — for visibility, oval and tiered

Structure — cells around the bottom

Technology — how the building was made to stand up

Eventually, this order is represented in the signposting within the introductory paragraph to the essay:

[Introduction to topic] The Coliseum in Rome was built in 72-80 AD for the Emperor Vespasian. **[Thesis]** It was designed to host spectacular entertainments to underline the power of the Emperor and sustain his popularity. **[Signposting]** This essay shows how its size, shape, and structural details enabled staging of such shows, and explains the technological developments that made its construction possible.

And as you write the body of the essay according to what you have signposted in the introduction, the moves from one section to the next are made by using *transitional sentences* as follows.

Purpose: Types of entertainments, sponsored by the Emperor, for the Roman crowd ...

Paragraph about size: to accommodate huge audiences ...

Transitional sentence to 'shape': Given the size of the audience, it was a challenge for the architect to make sure that everybody could see.

Paragraph about shape: for visibility, oval and tiered ...

Transitional sentence to 'structure': As well as accommodating huge audiences, the Coliseum had to be designed for control of the various performances they came to see.

Paragraph about structure: cells around the bottom ...

Transitions, like the signposting we have seen in introductions, are ways of achieving coherence in your essay — one of the most important qualities contributing to your marks. Coherence within your essay is most usefully looked at once you've got your first draft ready — introduction, body and conclusion. We'll talk more about it in section 6.7 (p. 69), once we've looked at what goes into your conclusion.

6.6 The conclusion

Why does the conclusion's shape go from narrower to broader?

In the introduction your task was to move from the general (your discipline or field) to the specific (your approach and thesis). In the conclusion you move the opposite way, from your specific findings back to the general concerns of the discipline or field, to give the essay a well-rounded finish.

What information do I need to put into the conclusion?

You could follow the 3 Moves shown in our anthropomorphic outline, or some variation that suits your essay. First, you could briefly draw together your findings/analysis from each section of your argument. Second, state your overall conclusions based on your findings/analysis — how persuasive this is will determine your grade. Third, relate your thoughts on these conclusions to the debate/problem in your topic and the wider context of your discipline/field.

Here's the conclusion to the Science Communication essay (the one that unusually didn't want a thesis upfront, but rather a for-and-against format). Compare it with the introduction (above 6.2, p. 57) to see the similarities and differences:

Conclusion

[Move 1: findings] This essay has touched on some major arguments about whether ethics impedes scientific research. Seeing considerable scientific implication beneath ethical guidelines makes me realise how difficult it is to decide what, if any, specific ethical guidelines should be written for developing countries. **[Move 2: overall conclusion]** Looking at both sides, accepting that informed consent means different things in different contexts, and that it can sometimes conflict with cultural practices, I tend to support the compromise view suggested by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, that obtaining individual consent should be contingent upon satisfying any cultural sensitivities in developing countries. This is not so much a modification of the consent rule as a practical prerequisite to its use. Having considered both sides of the argument about whether ethics impede scientific research or not in developing countries, this essay finds that rather than impede science, ethics can make us think more clearly about what constitutes good research. **[Move 3: relation to wider problem]** If research is to be acceptable, people should freely consent to take part. If not, research becomes threatened with diminished worth in the eyes of society.

The 3 Moves of the conclusion can also be clearly seen in this conclusion to the compare/contrast essay discussed earlier (above 6.4, p. 62).

> Conclusion: How has life changed for the people of Upper Rivers since the 1950s?
>
> **[Move 1: findings]** Changes in the nature of work have reduced women to dependency on men, devalued the status of elders, and forced young people to migrate for employment. **[Move 2: overall conclusion]** Thus, though Upper Rivers is more economically developed now than in the 1950s, development has entailed a heavy social cost to the local people. **[Move 3: relation to wider problem]** As in many other places where development is initiated from outside the community, it has displaced traditional ways of life and offered little material improvement.

How do I avoid repeating in the conclusion what I've said in the introduction?

Your conclusion goes further than your introduction, because by now you have presented your evidence and can remind the reader of how that leads to your conclusion. Rather than just repeat from your introduction, try to summarise your main findings, selectively.

And remember that the conclusion can move two steps further on from your findings, by asking: what do your findings mean? and what are the implications of your conclusion for the discipline/field? The conclusion is where you answer the 'so what?' question in your reader's mind.

What should I not put in a conclusion — I've heard that no new ideas should be introduced?

Yes, the general advice is not to introduce new ideas (which you presumably have decided not to analyse and evaluate in the body).

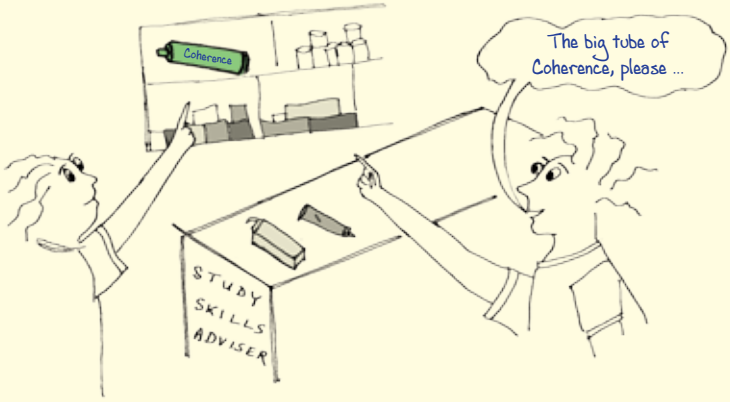
Also, in a conclusion, we'd recommend that you finish in your own words, rather than with a quotation — why give someone else the final word in your essay?!

6.7 Redrafting for structural coherence

It's tempting to believe that an essay can be written all in one go — probably because everyone knows somebody who claims to have done so. But for most of us, anything worth writing takes more than one attempt — on average, you might need to redraft once for clearly communicating your argument, and then again for language and proofreading. This section is about redrafting for clarity of argument, to show how such redrafting can improve overall coherence.

We mentioned how important coherence is, when we discussed signposting and transitions at the end of the section on mindmapping (above 6.5, p. 66). In the anthropomorphic outline, you notice the lines that link up paragraphs to issues or sections, issues/sections to signposting in the introduction, and the thesis line running from the introduction to the conclusion (all the way through the body of the essay). These are crucial links that make for coherence within your essay.

Coherence is the glue that makes your essay stick together and have a well-knit argument. So, from the lowest to the highest level, supporting sentences hold up the topic sentences in your paragraphs, topic sentences feed into supporting your issues/sections/headings, which in turn feed into your signposting in the introduction, and also into furthering your thesis. (Note that some disciplines don't use headings in essays, so check with your marker what the guidelines are.) Basically, coherence ensures that your essay has a clear focus and a central thesis.



There aren't many people who can polish as they create, and trying to do this can cause more problems than it solves. It's hard to keep track of your train of thought while trying to get it down in just the right order, in just the right words. It's particularly hard to write if you feel you've got to get a paragraph right before you move on. We would suggest that you write the first draft for yourself, making sure you get your ideas down on paper or computer as connectedly as possible, but without worrying too much so long as your argument is coming along clearly.

After you've written your first draft, you can use the following exercise to check whether your essay has coherence.

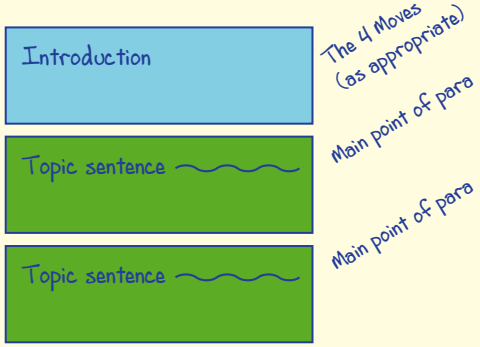
The coherence test

In a spare copy of your essay, electronically delete everything except the introduction, headings, subheadings, paragraph topic sentences, and conclusion. Does the document still make sense as a whole, indicating how your essay develops your thesis? If it does, then you know that you have coherence within your essay — congratulations!

If your draft doesn't pass the coherence test — don't worry, that's what most of us find! Start working towards the second draft, following the steps given below.

Label your paragraphs in the margin

Print out your draft. Now, next to each paragraph, write in a few words what point it's making. A paragraph should be focused on one idea, and present the examples and evidence necessary to show this idea to your reader. If a paragraph isn't making a relevant point, ask yourself what job it's doing in there: if it's not doing anything useful, weed it out.



Ensure you have topic sentences

If the paragraph is useful, but you haven't yet put its main point into words, do that now, and put that sentence at the beginning of the paragraph. If the point is in there, but buried in the middle or at the end of the paragraph, consider putting it at the beginning, as the topic sentence. This will make it easier for your reader to recognise the main idea in that paragraph.

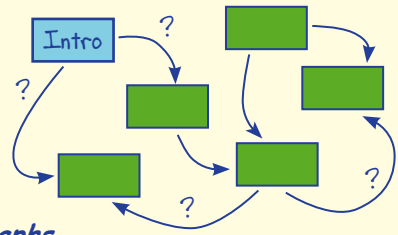
Check for focused paragraphs

If any of your paragraphs deals with more than one point, split it into separate paragraphs, so each point gets a paragraph of its own, and its own topic sentence.

Order your paragraphs

Now, read down your margin notes so you can see what points you've made, and in what order, without getting bogged down in the writing. If you've dealt with any one point in different places, bring that material together, getting rid of any repetition. Use your scissors and sticky tape; move pieces around on the floor; or cut-and-paste straight on the computer, if that suits you best.

Now look at the sequence of points throughout the draft. Do they follow logically? You can try them out in a different order, if you think that could be more sensible.



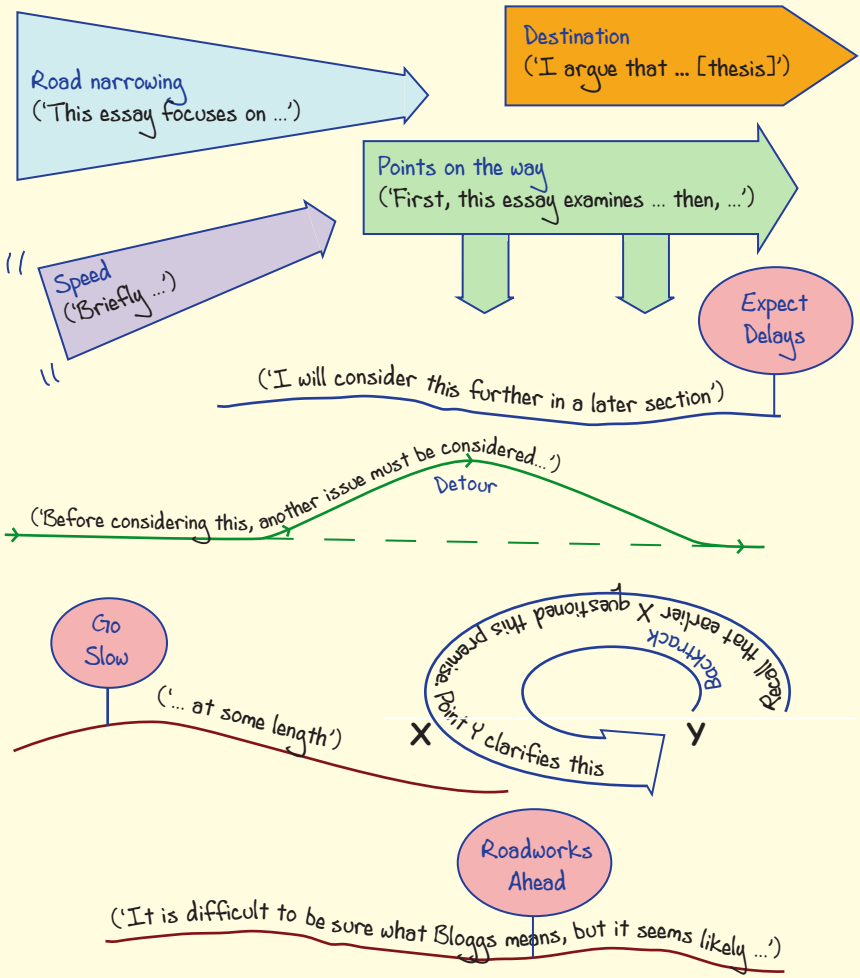
Check for transitions between paragraphs

When you're happy with the order, check for transitions between your paragraphs. Figure out what the connections are, and how best to express them. You might need linking words (such as 'moreover', 'thus', 'however') or phrases (such as 'in addition', 'for instance'). Or you might need whole sentences (for examples in context, see above 6.5, p. 66).

In a complex essay, you might even need a short paragraph that draws together what you've said in the preceding cluster of paragraphs, and signals a move into the next cluster. For example, here is the beginning of such a paragraph: 'For all these reasons [referred to in the previous paragraphs], Freud's emphasis on sexuality seems to be misplaced. An alternative way of explaining the phenomenon is offered by …'

Make sure you signpost

Generally, signposting in essays does all the kinds of jobs that road signs do, and is needed in all the same situations:



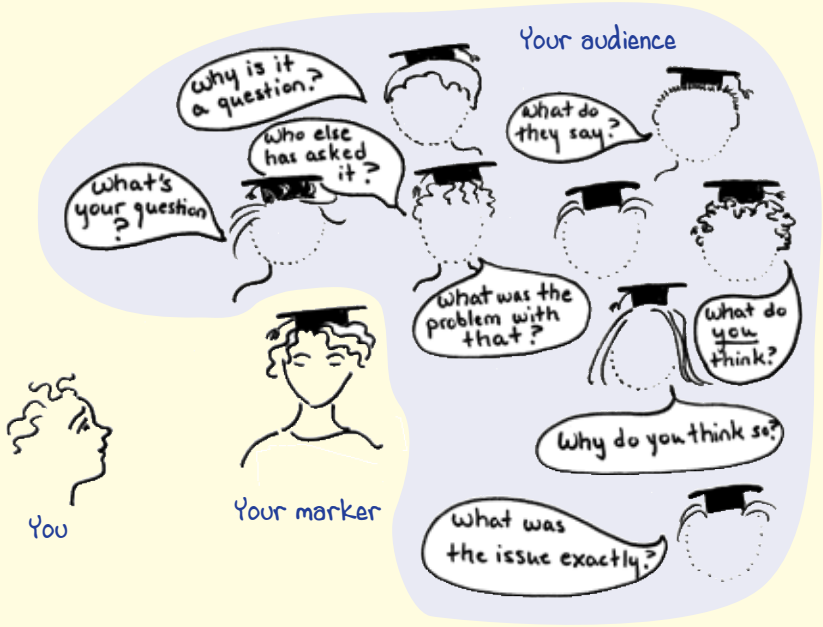
Revise the introduction

Once you've attended to topic sentences, focus, order and transitions in the paragraphs, you can go back to the beginning of your draft and write a good introduction, because now you know, with more certainty, exactly what you're introducing!

After you've redrafted, retry the coherence test (above p. 70), and your essay should make sense this time!

7. Academic style: the language of argument

7.1 Audience — an invisible crowd!



Who are you writing for? It can be very hard, at university, to figure out who your audience is. At school, you probably had exercises where you were supposed to write to an imaginary 'real world' audience. At university your audience is obviously the marker who reads your essay.

But if that's so, then why does the marker write comments in your margins like, 'Who are you referring to?' — 'Why do you think this?' — 'This needs some explanation' — 'Evidence?' — 'Source?' — After all, they have read the stuff you've read, they know where your ideas come from, and they know what you mean — well, probably. So why are they pretending not to?

Partly, it's because the marker needs to be convinced that you, the student, have understood the ideas and concepts in the discipline in which you're writing.

The other part is because the audience you're being trained to write for is not just your obvious reader, the marker, but a fictitious audience of distant readers who know less than you do about your topic.

These imaginary people might be in the same field or discipline, but they haven't asked the question you've asked, or explored the same material. These readers, if they existed, would need you to identify and explain the things you're writing about. They'd need examples to help them follow your ideas, and facts to show them what your ideas are based on. They would want to know exactly where your information came from so they could go to that source and read more about it (hence our emphasis on references and bibliographies).

It's useful to imagine such an audience, because in life after university, nobody's going to ask you to tell them what they already know! You will need this skill of making unfamiliar ideas and information clear and available to other people.

The imaginary readers of your essays are not, however, the general public but academics. So, when you write, remember that the context is not cosmic, but academic. Your imaginary readers don't want to know that: 'Since the dawn of time, humankind has asked itself …' They want to know: 'In the last decade, a number of scholars (Bloggs, 1997; Sploot, 1999; Forz, 2004) have challenged the assumption that …'

Even more, your audience consists of academics in a *particular discipline*. So you should show that you understand the disciplinary context for your question, and produce the kind of analysis that people in that discipline do; in other words, don't write an English essay for Sociology, or a Sociology essay for English!

7.2 Degrees of endorsement

Just as you're writing for a special crowd of readers, so you're writing *about* another special crowd — this time of experts who have written scholarly articles and books and who have their own considered positions about the focus of your essay topic. Your daunting job through your essay is to evaluate carefully these experts and decide where you would like to position yourself within their company! This is what university education tries to prepare you for.

When you discuss and evaluate an expert, the words and phrases you use could usefully reflect your agreement ('endorsement') or otherwise with the expert's stance in the debate. The chart on the next page has a graded spectrum of reporting verbs and phrases you might find useful. Add to this list as you come across more reporting verbs in your journal articles and books, because they can be very useful in helping to convey your views.

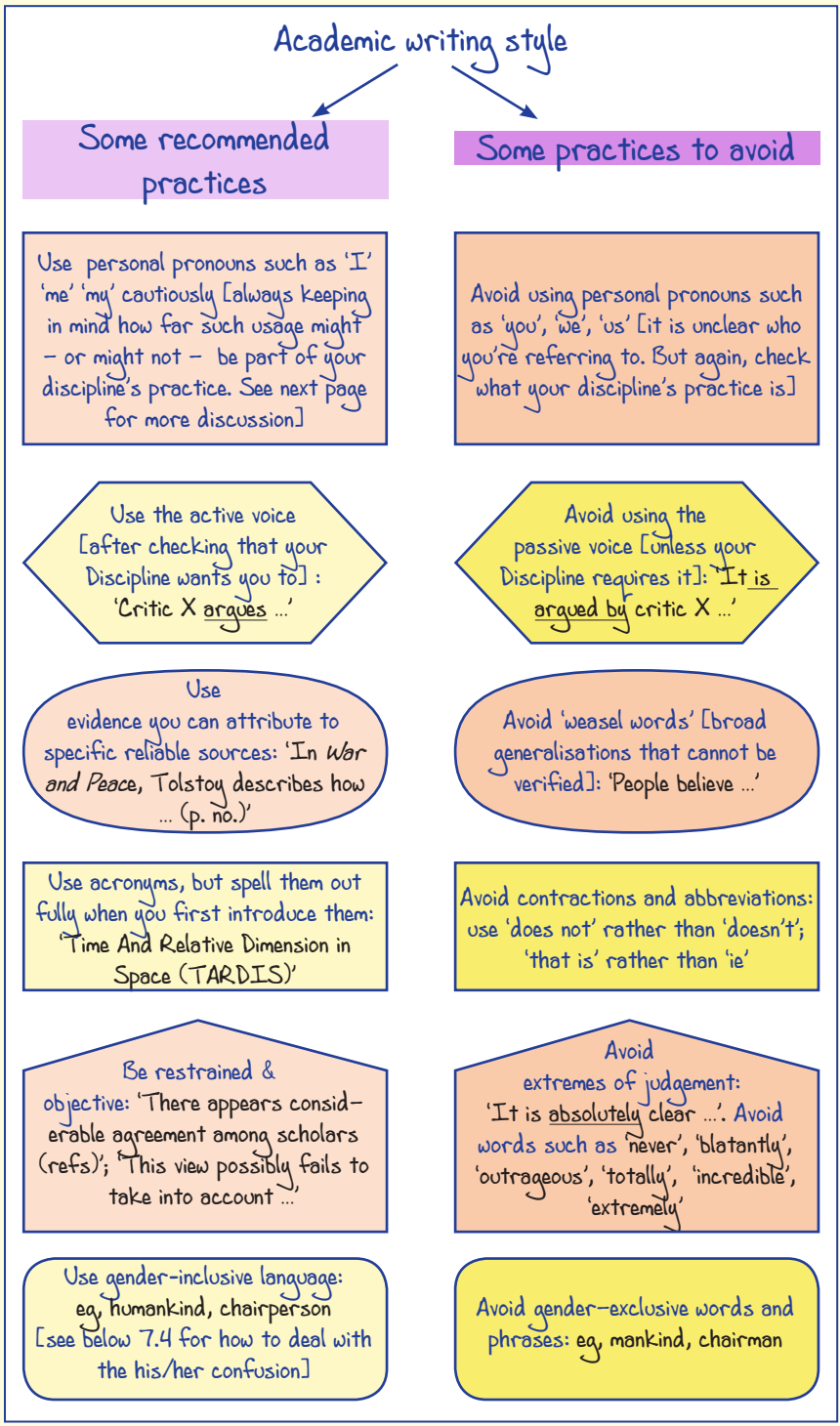
List of useful reporting verbs

Less endorsing <	Neutral	> More endorsing
admits	according to x	accounts for
asserts	analyses	affirms
assumes	argues	adds
believes	calculates	agrees
concedes	cites	concurs
claims	comments	confirms
conjectures	compares	counters
dismisses	details	demonstrates
disregards	estimates	emphasises
favours	examines	highlights
generalises	finds	identifies
ignores	investigates	makes clear
implies	measures	proves
insists	notes	reasons
misattributes	observes	recognises
rejects	postulates	refutes
speculates	proposes	substantiates
subscribes to	remarks	throws light on
suggests	states	validates

7.3 Some common academic practices

Different kinds of writing speak to us in different voices, as you know by reading newspaper reports, advertisements, essays and legal documents. Academic style adopts a formal voice rather than a casual one such as we've adopted in this book. Academic style is more formal than newspapers but less so than legal writing.

The main feature of academic style is language that seeks to persuade by reason, objectivity and accuracy of facts, as opposed to emotionally charged, subjective or overly judgemental language.


Academic writing style
Some recommended practices
Some practices to avoid
Use personal pronouns such as 'I' 'me' 'my' cautiously [always keeping in mind how far such usage might – or might not – be part of your discipline's practice. See next page for more discussion]
Avoid using personal pronouns such as 'you', 'we', 'us' [it is unclear who you're referring to. But again, check what your discipline's practice is.]
Use the active voice [after checking that your Discipline wants you to] : 'Critic X argues ...'
Avoid using the passive voice [unless your Discipline requires it]: 'It is argued by critic X ...'
Use evidence you can attribute to specific reliable sources: 'In War and Peace, Tolstoy describes how ... (p. no.)'
Avoid 'weasel words' [broad generalisations that cannot be verified]: 'People believe ...'
Use acronyms, but spell them out fully when you first introduce them: 'Time And Relative Dimension in Space (TARDIS)'
Avoid contractions and abbreviations: use 'does not' rather than 'doesn't'; 'that is' rather than 'ie'
Be restrained & objective: 'There appears considerable agreement among scholars (refs)'; 'This view possibly fails to take into account ...'
Avoid extremes of judgement: 'It is absolutely clear ...'. Avoid words such as 'never', 'blatantly', 'outrageous', 'totally', 'incredible', 'extremely'
Use gender-inclusive language: eg, humankind, chairperson [see below 7.4 for how to deal with the his/her confusion]
Avoid gender-exclusive words and phrases: eg, mankind, chairman

Academic writing style, continued

Some recommended practices

Use simple, clear language. Academics usually look for sophisticated thinking but plain vocabulary

Write so that your meaning is clear: 'The Australian Republican Movement (ARM) has not been active since the 1999 referendum.'

Ask yourself: 'What do I really want to tell the reader?', and write that in words you understand: 'scholars have not agreed about the final meaning of the term ...'

Use straightforward sentences: '... then members of the economic group who have the collective responsibility also have a derivative responsibility. This derivative responsibility requires establishing the institutions and ensuring that they realize their institutional purposes. Governments are a prime repository of such responsibilities.'

Some practices to avoid

Avoid unnecessary words: 'As such, it is necessary for more research to be conducted within this field of psychology, to fully understand ...'

Avoid slang & colloquialism: 'Republicanism in Australia has taken a back seat in recent years.'

Avoid unfamiliar synonyms from a thesaurus [most have different shades or contexts of meaning]: 'the term has not been given a finale by scholars ...'

Avoid losing your reader in a trackless jungle: '... then members of the economic group who have the collective responsibility have a derivative responsibility to establish such institutions and see to it that they realize their institutional purposes, e.g. governments have a responsibility (where required) to establish such institutions and to regulate such institutions (once they are established) to ensure that they are realizing their institutional purposes.'

Possibly! Fashions change not only in the dress industry but in academic writing styles too. Just as mini-skirts were unthinkable in the 1950s but acceptable 20 years later, so codes of acceptability have been changing where it concerns the use of the first person 'I' and the active voice.

It used to be customary (but is less so nowadays) to encourage writing in the passive voice, thus: 'It is argued …' (instead of 'I argue …'). In the case of the first person 'I', until recently the accepted norm was to write in the third person, thus: 'This essay argues …' Today these fashions are changing, and you may be encouraged to use the active rather than passive voice, and sometimes the first person 'I'. Always check essay guidelines carefully, and clarify with your marker if in any doubt, to confirm what style is expected in your discipline or field.

Even when you use the first person to express your views, be sure that what you're writing comes across as objective rather than subjective: not as personal opinion but as scholarly voice, based on facts.

Compare the following two options: the second uses the active voice in preference to the passive voice, avoids the first person, and is in a more formal style. It is preferable for academic writing.

Option 1: From home I'm used to the idea that the same patients are followed every day and we try to keep the number of nurses caring for the patient limited. I think we get to know the patients better that way and trust is developed between nurse and patient. Here, at the Intensive Care Unit in Sydney, the patients are subjected to change almost every day, and I find that very strange and not good for the patient.

Option 2: In Norway nurses follow the same patients in order to limit the number of nurses caring for the patient and increase continuity of care. This assists in getting to know the patients and developing trust between nurse and patient. At the Intensive Care Unit in Sydney, nurses attend to different patients almost daily, which has the potential to disrupt continuity of care and lengthen the time taken to develop patient-nurse relationships.

7.4 Gender-inclusive pronouns

> Observe the way pronouns are used:
>
> The Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam, which every adult Muslim must undertake at least once in **their** life if they can afford it and are physically able …
>
> If a pilgrim has been unable to return to Mecca to walk around the Kaaba, **he or she** does so on the fourth or fifth day.
>
> ('What is the Hajj?' BBC news, world edition, 18/01/2005.
> Accessed at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4180965.stm)

The above extract shows both the 'he or she' format and the 'singular their' format being used in the same report, which, apart from the question of consistency in usage, raises the important question of how we find a suitable replacement for the practice of using 'he' to encompass males and females. The 'generic he' is now outlawed by university policies because it assumes that males are foremost — which can lead to discrimination.

Options in current usage include:

- 'he or she' used consistently — cumbersome, clumsy, adds extra words, plus the pedantic necessity to balance 'he or she' with 'she or he'
- 'he' or 'she' used randomly — confusing
- 'he' or 'she' used exclusively as a generic form — insensitive, provocative
- s/he — distracting (how about s/h/it? — to cover everything?)
- the use of the singular 'they' and 'their' and 'them' — being adopted more universally these days

We like 'they' best, as it is part of traditional established English usage from the King James Bible to Shakespeare, Austen and Orwell. As you may have noticed, we've used the singular 'their' 'they' and 'them' in this book, wherever a gender-inclusive pronoun is called for.

Authorities as respectable as the *Australian Guide to Legal Citation* now consider acceptable the use of 'they', 'their' and 'them' as neutral singular pronouns. Check out 'Inclusive language', Section 1.11 at http://mulr.law.unimelb.edu.au/PDFs/aglc_dl.pdf.

For the history of 'they', 'their' and 'them' as neutral third-person singular pronouns, visit: 'Singular "their" in Jane Austen and elsewhere: Anti-pedantry page' at http://www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html.

Similarly, R.D. Huddleston & G.K Pullum (2002, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language,* Cambridge University Press) explain why 'they' can be used with a singular antecedent.

7.5 Editing and proofreading

Raed waht's raely on the peapr,
not waht you tnhik is tehre!

For proofreading, we need to read what's *really* on the paper, not what we *think* is there.

Finally, after redrafting for ideas and coherence, and checking academic style and practice, it's time to turn your attention to competent presentation and how you can minimise surface errors in your writing. This isn't a grammar book, so we won't go into any details here, except for a couple of basic hints about how you can help your editing and proofreading strategies.

Our advice about spell checkers and grammar checkers — use the first with caution, but stay away from the second!

Spell checkers are a useful tool to check for simple typos etc. But remember that they can also mislead you — offering to replace your misspelled words with words that don't match your intention or meaning, or offering words that are spelt the American way (rigour/rigor; utilise/

utilize). And of course they won't always pick up incorrect use of words if they are genuine words as well, eg if you type 'asses' instead of 'assess', a spellchecker won't indicate that there's a problem! (We've had a few students who've done this!)

Cath Keenan of *The Guardian* has written a useful news item, with the interesting title 'Spellchecker lets slip a rein of error'; see the following website: http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/07/09/1089000348576.

Grammar checkers are more trouble than they're worth — our suggestion would be to turn them off, and instead help yourself in two other ways. First, make a mutually beneficial deal with a friend to read each other's essays as needed. Having a friend look over your essay for minor editing and proofreading matters, and referencing style and consistency, can be invaluable because they come to it fresh, unlike you as the writer who has lived with that material for a while. For this reason, it may be better if your friend is not studying the same subject. Your friend should make any changes in 'track changes mode' (look under 'tools' in your word processing program), or hand-write changes, if they're reading a hard copy. You can then consider what changes you want to accept.

Second, and as useful as having a friend look over your essay draft, is to learn how to proofread your own writing. It isn't as hard as it may sound, and gets easier every time you practise the skill. Read what's *really* on the paper, not what you *think* is there. Read slowly, clearly, and with pride in what you've written. You will be amazed how useful this strategy is for assessing how far your essay has an academic tone, and for seeing where the style might need changing.

By reading your work aloud, you could also pick up many obvious and/or careless errors in these areas:

- Spelling, punctuation, grammar
- Expression (unclear, poorly expressed, vague, illogical, unnecessary)
- Unnecessary words

For some practical tips regarding editing and proofreading strategies, visit the OWL online writing lab at Purdue University:

- Steps in editing at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_stepedit.html
- Proofreading strategies at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_edit.html
- Proofreading your paper at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_proof2.html

8. Links to more resources for visual thinking

8.1 Multiple intelligences (MI)

There's a lot on the internet about learning styles and 'multiple intelligences' (MI). The idea of MI is that although schools tend to emphasise a narrow range of learning styles — verbal (reading/writing) and logical (maths) — many people learn best in other ways. You may have strengths in visual, musical, body or other kinds of intelligence. This book allows you to approach essay writing through what MI would call your visual intelligence, and suggests ways of making it work for you. On the internet, you can find more discussions of these ideas, as well as quizzes to identify your learning style preferences, and practical techniques and strategies to make the most of your learning style preferences by using your strengths (and/or to develop a learning style that you're not so strong in).

- Learning styles and multiple intelligence, LD Pride
  http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.MI.htm
  - Learning styles Explained
  - Multiple Intelligences explained
  - Interactive multiple intelligence test
  - Interactive learning styles test
  - Making your learning style work for you
  - Learning styles/MI links

- Learning styles and strategies (Felder and Soloman, North Carolina State University)
  http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/ILSdir/styles.htm

  This site distinguishes between:
  - Active and reflective learners
  - Sensing and intuitive learners
  - Visual and verbal learners
  - Sequential and global learners

- Index of learning styles test
  http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html

- VARK (visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic sensory modalities that are used for learning information)
  http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp

  The VARK helpsheets with specific study strategies geared to your modes of learning may be found at
  http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=helpsheets

8.2 Graphic organisers (such as diagrams, etc)

- James Cook University Study Skills Online: 'Learning resources: mind mapping.'
  http://www.jcu.edu.au/studying/services/studyskills/mindmap

- College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois at Champagne

  http://classes.aces.uiuc.edu/ACES100/Mind/CMap.html
  - Tips on making your own concept maps
  - Kinds of concept maps
  - Concept map bank

- Study guides and strategies site, by Joe Landsberger
  http://www.studygs.net

  This site has a sample concept map of causes of the French Revolution, using both words and pictures — a good example of an actual humanities mindmap, and a rare example of one that uses pictures. Have a look at: http://www.studygs.net/images/frrev.gif.

If you would like to give us any feedback on this book, please feel welcome to email us at the addresses below:

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We would be happy to receive feedback about any aspects of the book — anything you found particularly useful, as well as any aspects that you think we might be able to improve upon.