



Academic Writing: Essay Planning & Structure

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(Developed by Helen Cooper)



The aim of today's session

We will explore the importance of effective planning and logical structure to an academic assignment, and consider how you can refine and test the structure of your arguments.

The emphasis of this session is on the essay. Other forms of academic writing may have a unique structure or slightly different principles. Always rely on the guidance given by your tutors.

For further help on writing and academic skills, please visit our website:

www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/asc

To book a 1-1 appointment to discuss and develop your skills, please email

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Activity 1

Planning Strategies

How do you plan? What is your process for getting going on an essay or assignment? Please share your strategies and ideas



Some key questions to ask yourself when planning

1. Do I understand what my assignment question is asking?
2. What is my instinctive response to the question, and what am I basing that on?
3. What do I already know that is of relevance to the question?
4. What else do I need to find out?
5. What have other scholars written on this topic and do I agree/disagree with them?
6. What is the **main point I want to argue or put across** in this essay?
7. What reasons do I have to support my main argument or message? [i.e. why should my reader believe me?]

Suggested stages of planning

Break down the different parts of your assignment question. Figure out what the task word means (e.g. discuss, argue, describe) and identify specifically what you need to write about. If the question is very broad and general, decide which aspects to focus your answer around.

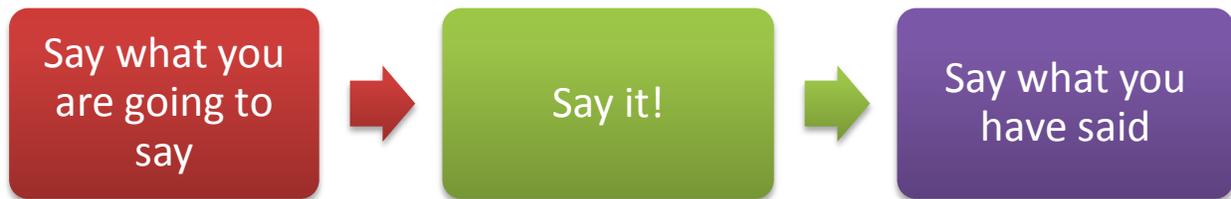
Mind map everything you already know about the topic. Try to identify what your instinctive response to the essay question is. Identify some key research questions to guide your reading.

Research! If you are struggling to find journal articles or other resources, contact your Subject Advisor , Lynne Harris. Be sure to keep track of where you have obtained information from . Take effective notes and engage with what you are reading, asking questions and scrutinising evidence. Only note things that are relevant to the question.

From your research, identify key points that will help you to answer the essay question. You could pool these together in a mind map, or on a large piece of paper, or a typed document. Then you need to start organising the points. Which are related? Which are counter-arguments? Which follow on from one other? At this point, you should also decide what the **over-arching argument or key thread** of your essay is going to be, based on the evidence you have gathered and analysed.

Now decide on a logical order for your points. You could write a summary of each point on a separate card or sticky note and physically move them around until you have found the best flow. You will find your own method, but the key thing is to be aware of the progression of your essay and the unfolding of your line of reasoning. How does each point link to the one before it and the one after it? How will your paragraphs build your argument? Don't forget to guide your reader through it, communicating with them every step of the way.

Basic essay structure



Structuring Tips

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each paragraph should make only one main point. It is important that both you and the reader are clear what point is being made in each paragraph, and how that point links to the question, and to the other points you have made. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think of paragraphs as mini-essays – each should start with a topic sentence to introduce the main point of the paragraph; explain that point further; provide evidence for the point; interpret or analyse the evidence; then summarise the point and indicate how it links into your overall argument. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each paragraph should link smoothly to the next, using transition words or phrases – such as ‘alternatively;’ ‘consequently;’ ‘as a result;’ ‘on the other hand;’ ‘furthermore...’ |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The paragraphs should be placed in a logical and coherent order – play around with them until you get the best flow. They should feel progressive, rather than disjointed or list-like. |

Activity 2: Scrutinising the structure of an essay

It can help, once you have written a first draft, to take a step back and review the structure of your essay. One way of doing this is to **summarise each paragraph in one sentence**. Put these sentences into a list and consider whether each follows logically from the previous one. Is there a sense of progression in your essay? Were you *able* to summarise the point made in each paragraph? If you couldn't, it may mean you have tried to make too many points within a paragraph, or that the main focus of each paragraph is not clear.

Have a look at the example below. This writer has summarised each of their paragraphs in one sentence. Do you think their structure is effective? What could they change?

Essay title: **How serious a problem is childhood obesity in the UK?**

- Intro: At least 10% of six-year-olds and 17% of 15-year-olds are now clinically obese, and this is having major effects on their health, both physical and mental.
- Paragraph 1: The main health problem that obesity causes is cardiovascular disease, which has immediate effect on children's arteries and so prevention is better than correction.
- Paragraph 2: Obesity also causes long-term mental effects, including depression and low self esteem
- Paragraph 3: Another consequence of obesity is Type 2 diabetes, which is preventable through diet and exercise.
- Paragraph 4: Obesity also has a financial impact on the NHS.
- Paragraph 5: Childhood obesity is more of a problem now than in previous years.
- Conclusion: More education about healthy living is needed in order to reduce childhood obesity.

Your thoughts on this structure:

Please see end of booklet for my comments on/summary of this activity

Paragraph Structure

You can think of paragraphs as mini essays, discussing, supporting and criticising a single idea. They will vary depending on your essay question, and the nature of the point that you are trying to make, but a good paragraph structure might look like this:

1. **Introduce** your point: The first sentence of your paragraph should signpost to the reader what the paragraph is going to discuss. Keep these sentences concise and clear. Remember that the reader is trying to orientate themselves as your essay moves forward.
2. **Elaborate** on the point you have introduced. Having introduced it in a clear and snappy way, you can now explain it further, making sure you don't skim over any important details that will help your reader to understand the point being made.
3. **Evidence**: Introduce and reference the evidence that supports the point you are making in this paragraph.
4. **Comment** on the evidence: Criticise, interpret or engage with the evidence that you have introduced. What does it demonstrate? In what way does it support your point? How does it relate to other evidence in the field? What are the strengths and limitations of the research?
5. **Conclude** your point: Finish with a sentence (or two) that summarises the point you have made in this paragraph, and indicates what it means for your overall argument or discussion. This is your "so what?" sentence. You have presented the reader with information, evidence, and analysis... but they should not be left wondering 'so what?' You need to show the relevance of what you have discussed.

A TIP

'**Point/Evidence/Comment**' is a useful way of analysing your paragraphs. Go through your essay and highlight all the **points** you have made in one colour, all the **evidence** you have used in another, and all your **analysis/comments** in a third. Sometimes you may realise that you have dived straight in with your evidence, without actually making a point first. Sometimes you may realise that you have made a point without supporting it. Mostly, it will enable you to check that you are applying enough critical analysis throughout your essay.

Activity 3: Paragraph analysis with Point, Evidence, Comment

This student writer has used *Point, Evidence, Comment* to analyse and re-structure one paragraph of their essay on physiotherapy treatment for patients with MS. Can you see the changes that they have made at each stage of their re-drafting process?

For each example, please highlight Point, Evidence, and Comment in different colours, and discuss the ways in which the writer has re-structured.

[Please note that these extracts are purely to demonstrate structuring and re-drafting processes. The facts and evidence are not necessarily accurate!]

Paragraph Draft 1

Bandy and Irion (1994) examined the length of time a muscle should be sustained in a stretched position to maximally increase flexibility. They compared the effect of holding a stretch for 15, 30 or 60 seconds on 57 subjects with limited hamstring muscle flexibility, once daily, for a 6 week period. The results showed 30 or 60 seconds to be the most effective time period in terms of increasing the range of motion. Similarly, a study by Roberts and Wilson (1999) investigated the effect of stretching duration in muscles of the lower limb, and discovered that 15 seconds was more beneficial than 5. However, these studies do not give a long term view into the effect of stretching as they only ran for 5 and 6 weeks. Furthermore, the mean age of participants in the first study was 20, whereas MS has its peak incidence between the ages of 25 and 35 (Stokes 2004).

Paragraph Draft 2

There is much debate over the optimal time period to sustain a stretch. Bandy and Irion (1994) examined the length of time a muscle should be sustained in a stretched position to maximally increase flexibility. They compared the effect of holding a stretch for 15, 30 or 60 seconds on 57 subjects with limited hamstring muscle flexibility, once daily, for a 6 week period. The results showed 30 or 60 seconds to be the most effective time period in terms of increasing the range of motion. Similarly, a study by Roberts and Wilson (1999) investigated the effect of stretching duration in muscles of the lower limb, and discovered that 15 seconds was more beneficial than 5. However, these studies do not give a long term view into the effect of stretching as they only ran for 5 and 6 weeks. This is significant in a condition such as MS as it is chronic and therefore a longer-term look into the effects of stretching would be more viable. Furthermore, the mean age of participants in the first study was 20, whereas MS has its peak incidence between the ages of 25 and 35 (Stokes 2004).

Paragraph Draft 3

There is much debate over the optimal time period to sustain a stretch. Studies suggest that stretches are more effective if held for longer periods of time, but not all of the research can be applied to patients with MS. Bandy and Irion (1994) examined the length of time a muscle should be sustained in a stretched position to maximally increase flexibility. They compared the effect of holding a stretch for 15, 30 or 60 seconds on 57 subjects with limited hamstring muscle flexibility, once daily, for a 6 week period. The results showed 30 or 60 seconds to be the most effective time period in terms of increasing the range of motion. Similarly, a study by Roberts and Wilson (1999) investigated the effect of stretching duration in muscles of the lower limb, and discovered that 15 seconds was more beneficial than 5. However, these studies do not give a long term view into the effect of stretching as they only ran for 5 and 6 weeks. This is significant in a condition such as MS as it is chronic and therefore a longer-term look into the effects of stretching would be more viable. Furthermore, the average age of participants in the first study was 20, whereas MS has its peak incidence between the ages of 25 and 35 (Stokes 2004). It seems, therefore, that further research into the long term effects of stretching, on a more representative range of patients, would help physiotherapists to improve their treatment of patients with MS.

Please see end of booklet for my comments on this activity.

My Comments on Activity 2: assessing an essay's structure

Essay title: **How serious a problem is childhood obesity in the UK?**

- Intro: At least 10% of six-year-olds and 17% of 15-year-olds are now clinically obese, and this is having major effects on their health, both physical and mental.

[Has the introduction clearly indicated whether the writer is going to argue that childhood obesity is a serious problem or not? Are other factors mentioned in the introduction, such as the financial implications, which are discussed later but don't seem to be signposted here?]

- Paragraph 1: The main health problem that obesity causes is cardiovascular disease, which has immediate effect on children's arteries and so prevention is better than correction.

[Link to the question needs to be clear. 'Prevention is better than correction' is slightly tangential. Must stay focussed on arguing that childhood obesity is (or isn't) a serious problem in the UK.]

- Paragraph 2: Obesity also causes long-term mental effects, including depression and low self esteem

[Implies it *is* a serious problem, but, again, must make that link clear]

- Paragraph 3: Another consequence of obesity is Type 2 diabetes, which is preventable through diet and exercise.

[The writer seems to have talked about physical effects, then psychological effects, then gone back to physical effects. More logical structuring needed.]

- Paragraph 4: Obesity also has a financial impact on the NHS.

- Paragraph 5: Childhood obesity is more of a problem now than in previous years.

[Would this have made more sense earlier in the essay? Is this the main point that the writer wants to make? It's positioning here feels quite random.]

- Conclusion: More education about healthy living is needed in order to reduce childhood obesity.

[A conclusion should be a consolidation of the points made in the main body of the essay. Here, a new point seems to crop up which has not been discussed. Also, the question does not ask what needs to be done to prevent obesity; it asks how serious a problem the issue is. Although a conclusion may make recommendations based on the essay's findings, its main purpose should be to summarise the writer's response to the question.]

My Comments on Activity 3: Paragraph analysis

Point

Evidence

Comment

Where is the writer's POINT?

Where is the link with MS? It does not become clear until late in the paragraph, and then there is still not enough of a link. Critical analysis/evaluation could also be developed further – as shown by the overwhelming amount of blue!

Paragraph Draft 1

Bandy and Irion (1994) examined the length of time a muscle should be sustained in a stretched position to maximally increase flexibility. They compared the effect of holding a stretch for 15, 30 or 60 seconds on 57 subjects with limited hamstring muscle flexibility, once daily, for a 6 week period. The results showed 30 or 60 seconds to be the most effective time period in terms of increasing ROM. Similarly, a study by Roberts and Wilson (1999) investigated the effect of stretching duration in muscles of the lower limb, and discovered that 15 seconds was more beneficial than 5. However, these studies do not give a long term view into the effect of stretching as they only ran for 5 and 6 weeks. Furthermore, the mean age of participants in the first study was 20. MS has its peak incidence between 25 and 35 (Stokes 2004), so this age range would only accommodate younger MS sufferers.

Writer has now begun with a point – but the point is not focussed on MS, which is the focus of the essay. Critical analysis has been expanded and set in the context of MS, improving the paragraph hugely. The writer has highlighted why the evidence is either significant, or limited, in the context of MS.

Paragraph Draft 2

There is much debate over the optimal time period to sustain a stretch. Bandy and Irion (1994) examined the length of time a muscle should be sustained in a stretched position to maximally increase flexibility. They compared the effect of holding a stretch for 15, 30 or 60 seconds on 57 subjects with limited hamstring muscle flexibility, once daily, for a 6 week period. The results showed 30 or 60 seconds to be the most effective time period in terms of increasing ROM. Similarly, a study by Roberts and Wilson (1999) investigated the effect of stretching duration in muscles of the lower limb, and discovered that 15 seconds was more beneficial than 5. However, these studies do not give a long term view into the effect of stretching as they only ran for 5 and 6 weeks. This is significant in a condition such as MS as it is chronic and therefore a longer-term look into the effects of stretching would be more viable. Furthermore, the mean age of participants in the first study was 20. MS has its peak incidence between 25 and 35 (Stokes 2004), so this age range would only accommodate younger MS sufferers.

Paragraph Draft 3

The writer's initial point has been expanded, as they have realised that the key thing they want to say in this paragraph is that research into stretching cannot always be applied to the condition of MS. They have also pinpointed what most of the research says about stretching, making their initial point more specific and concrete.

There is much debate over the optimal time period to sustain a stretch. Studies suggest that stretches are more effective if held for longer periods of time, but not all of the research can be applied to patients with MS. Bandy and Irion (1994) examined the length of time a muscle should be sustained in a stretched position to maximally increase flexibility. They compared the effect of holding a stretch for 15, 30 or 60 seconds on 57 subjects with limited hamstring muscle flexibility, once daily, for a 6 week period. The results showed 30 or 60 seconds to be the most effective time period in terms of increasing the range of motion. Similarly, a study by Roberts and Wilson (1999) investigated the effect of stretching duration in muscles of the lower limb, and discovered that 15 seconds was more beneficial than 5. However, these studies do not give a long term view into the effect of stretching as they only ran for 5 and 6 weeks. This is significant in a condition such as MS as it is chronic and therefore a longer-term look into the effects of stretching would be more viable. Furthermore, the average age of participants in the first study was 20, whereas MS has its peak incidence between the ages of 25 and 35 (Stokes 2004). It seems, therefore, that further research into the long term effects of stretching, on a more representative range of patients, would help physiotherapists to improve their treatment of patients with MS.

This time the writer has also included a summary sentence, indicating what the point means for their overall argument or message

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