Planning After Research

**Designing your essay**

Before you commence writing, you must plan the structure of your work.

An essay consists of a series of points leading to a conclusion. For the purposes of planning, assume each point will require 250 words. It may be more or less in the final output. 250 words is just an average for planning purposes. Every essay will also have an introduction and conclusion, so allow 250 words for each of these. You can thus determine how many points you will need to make by subtracting 500 from the required word length, then dividing this by 250:

\[
\text{Number of Points to Make} = \frac{\text{Essay Length} - 500}{250}.
\]

**EG:**

2,000 word essay:

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(2,000 - 500) = 1,500
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1,500 \div 250 = 6 \text{ points}
\]

30,000 word dissertation:

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(30,000 - 500) = 29,500
\]

\[
29,500 \div 250 = 118 \text{ points}
\]

*It doesn’t matter if your final work departs from this structure.* Some points will require only 100 words, while others might need 500. The aim is simply to provide enough structure to plan your argument. The general rule is to describe two opposing positions and then provide your own reasoned judgement between them. This means each step requires three points – the pro, the contra, and your assessment.

*The pattern for an essay is thus:*

**INTRODUCTION**

POINT 1: “He says this”

POINT 2: “She says that”

POINT 3: “I think this of their debate, for the following reasons…”

*Repeat Points 1-3 as necessary*

**CONCLUSION**

Your points need to have a logical order to them. You need to use your sources at the right time. You can’t just cite a source, or throw in some facts, just to show you know them. No one cares what you know. It’s assumed you are an intelligent person who can learn things, otherwise you wouldn’t have made it to university. At this level, people only care about how you use what you know.

Your work must follow a logical structure. You should be able to list the points you want to make, in order, before you start writing. This demonstrates you thought about your work before you started writing. This is extremely important – it is obvious to any lecturer if you haven’t planned your work before you start. Not only does this demonstrate poor thinking, it makes your work harder to understand, which will inevitably harm your marks. Your work needs to form a coherent argument.

**Argument**

The most important aspect of any essay or dissertation is the “argument”. Everything you do will be judged in terms of how it fits into your argument – the research, the arrangement of points, your use of sources and the words you use.

*You cannot produce good work at university level unless you understand what an argument is and know how to make one.*
What is an argument?

An argument is an evidence-based defence of a particular position on a specific topic. Each academic discipline has its own style of argument. For example, arguments in biology often draw conclusions from experimental results, whereas arguments in history are more likely to cite historical documents.

Arguments set out to prove “claims”. A “claim” is a conclusion you have about the topic. You prove the claim by first citing evidence and then showing how that evidence supports your claim. Citing evidence and showing how it supports your claim is known as “justifying” the claim.

An academic argument is what your reasoning has led you to believe about the topic. It is your contribution to the academic community’s current conversation about this topic. It provides your readers with your perspective and explains why you take that position. Your task is to lead the reader through a chain of reasoning which leads to your conclusion.

The quality of your argument will be assessed in terms of the sources and evidence you cite, the points you make, the order in which you make them, and the degree to which they support your conclusion.

The aim of the argument is to convince people who disagree with you that they are wrong and you are right. However, since they are just as intelligent as you, they will need good reasons to be convinced. Your argument therefore needs to lead them through your chain of reasoning so they reach the same conclusion. Your reasoning will need to be based on evidence and logic.

Since an academic argument is based on research, it is called an “evidence-based argument.” This means you must support your argument with evidence from sources you find through research.

Reflective Writing

Some disciplines, such as Education, have “reflective” essays. These are the exception to the logical rules. Reflective essays are supposed to be about your emotional and personal responses to experiences. Even so, the occasional citation does no harm, and it is a good idea to provide good reasons for your responses or other evidence you are thinking about what you are writing.

Reflective essays are not arguments.

What is a good argument?

A good argument has the following qualities:

- Concise
- Defensible
- Rational

Concise Arguments

A concise argument is one which says what it needs to say, and no more. Points which do not lead towards your conclusion are a waste of space. Because they are irrelevant, they can’t increase your marks. They take space which could have been used for enhancing your argument and potentially harm the marks you could have earned. Finally, they show you can’t tell the difference between relevant and irrelevant points, so you’ll be marked down for that as well.

Defensible arguments

A defensible argument is one which can be supported by “appropriate” and “valid” reasons. This is a key criteria by which your work is assessed. You must provide reasons for each point you make. To be “appropriate”, they must be the type of reasons used in the discipline for which you are writing. Surveys of public opinion will not support points about the mechanisms of cellular biology. To be “valid”, they must logically support the point you are making. For example, if your point is that the planet is warming up, evidence that temperatures are getting lower is not a valid support of your point.

Rational Arguments

There is no place for emotion in academic writing. University essays should not contain any information about your feelings. Your emotional response to something is irrelevant and tells us nothing about the matter in question. If you want to take a position in favour of something, you must justify your position with logical reasons. These reasons can be drawn from other sources (which you must cite), or from empirical evidence (which you
must describe), or from pure logic, such as the meaning of the words themselves (which you must explain). The same restrictions apply if you want to reject something – provide good reasons.

Knowledge is traditionally defined as “a true belief with an explanation why.” It’s not enough to be correct about something. You have to explain why it is the case. If you can’t explain why, you just have an opinion. Your opinion may be correct, but that doesn’t make it knowledge.

This means you need to be cautious about the statements you make. Unless it is a trivial fact everyone accepts, such as the capital of Ireland is Dublin, you will probably need to provide a justification. The easiest form of justification is to cite a work which defends the proposition in detail.

Making Points

A point is something you want the reader to know. It is a fact, a proposition, a piece of evidence, or some other item of information which forms part of your argument. Your argument is nothing more than a sequence of points.

A point can be positive or negative or explanatory. A positive point adds information to your argument. A negative point refutes something which could harm your argument. An explanatory point is neither positive or negative, it merely establishes something you wish to discuss.

EG:
The 2006 Drunk Driving Act increased penalties for drinking and driving (explanatory). This has been resisted by the Association of Hotel Owners on the grounds that drunk driving is harmless (Jones 2007) (negative). However, it has been shown that drunk drivers are ten times more likely to have an accident (Harris 2008) (positive).

It’s not about the person

Attacking the person is known as an “ad hominem” attack. It is considered rude and inappropriate in academic writing.

You may not criticise or attack any person for their academic writing. You can attack their writing, their theories, the quality of their work, the logic of their thinking, the implications, and any other aspect of their intellectual work, but not them as a person. You might think they are the worst human being on the planet, but you can’t say so.

The academic community depends on the exchange of ideas between intelligent people. Most academics will change their beliefs if you can show them good logical reasons why they should. You have to assume anyone’s position is honestly held as a result of careful reading and serious thought. They are just as intelligent as you and entitled to be treated with the same intellectual respect as you.

Furthermore, you have no rational basis for making comments about the person themselves. No matter what you think of someone’s position or their statements, you know nothing about them as a person, nor is any personal comment a rational response to an intellectual enquiry. Even if you suspect they are biased or have hidden motives, you lack clear evidence of such, so you are just guessing. In the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, either assume the best of the person and respond to their ideas, or simply ignore it.

In the army they say “salute the rank not the person.” In academia we say “attack the position, not the person.”

EG:

Inappropriate:
“Dr Smith’s theory is that the earth is flat and made of cheese. He is either insane or a moron.”

Appropriate:
“Dr Smith’s theory is that the earth is flat and made of cheese. There is no evidence to support his position. In fact, all available evidence indicates the earth is spherical. Furthermore, as cheese is not a naturally occurring substance, it cannot form part of the material from which the planet is composed.”
The structure of an essay

The structure of an essay is:

INTRODUCTION

Point 1 (claim => evidence => justification => conclusion)

AND

As many more points as needed

“These can be put together like this….”

Weave above points together

THEREFORE

Conclusion

The Introduction

A common mistake is to use the introduction to hook the reader’s interest. This is inappropriate in academic writing. Academic writing is not concerned with entertainment, but with conveying information as efficiently and accurately as possible.

The introduction should summarise the entire work. It should explain the research question in order to ensure you and the reader share the same understanding. It should then briefly state your conclusion, which is your answer to the question. It should summarise the steps in your argument, the evidence or other sources you will use, and quickly show how you came to your conclusion.

This helps the reader orient themselves to your work and what background knowledge of their own they will need to understand your argument. How work is assessed is often influenced by the writer’s approach. The more the reader understands how you are thinking, the more accurately they can judge your work.

Because the introduction covers the entire work, it should be written last. People never write exactly what they expect, so an introduction written first always needs changing.

Setting Context

In longer assignments, it is common to set the research question in context immediately after the introduction. This involves explaining how the research question fits into its discipline and the importance of the answer. This may require defining key terms, providing the history of the topic’s treatment within the discipline, or the relevance of the question to the wider world.

If the assignment calls for more than 5,000 words, the context usually splits into two sections. The first will position the research question in its widest context, such as social importance or place within the discipline as a whole. The second will position your assignment in the context of other attempts to answer the research question. This may include the history of attempts, or discuss different approaches or methodologies. You should try to explain your contribution to this matter - what it is you bring to the attempt which is original.

Conclusions

If your essay is more than 1,500 words, you should present the conclusion in the last few paragraphs, summarising the evidence and your justification. If your essay is short, you can present the conclusion in the final paragraph. The conclusion is not the best place to present your answer to the research question. You should have indicated this earlier, and built up to it through the points in your argument. Unless your answer is trivial, it should require more than a couple of sentences. Answering the research question is a process which is woven throughout the entire work. Don’t surprise your reader by answering the question at the end of the work.

A good conclusion will summarise the entire work. It will commence with the aim, such as the research question, summarise the points your argument used, highlight critical evidence and reiterate how this justifies your conclusion. Where appropriate, it should indicate what further work could be done on the topic, or what aspects of interest you couldn’t cover but which would be worth investigating. It should try to tie your conclusions into the wider program within the discipline.
Making Points

Sign Posts

In addition to presenting your argument, you should describe what you are doing as you do it. Tell the reader what you will discuss next, then discuss it, then tell them what you have just done. This is called “sign posting”. Large sections should sign post the entire section, while sub-sections focused on a single point should sign post that sub-section.

Doing this helps the reader understand why you discussing something. This helps them understand it because they can see how it relates to the overall argument. For similar reasons, forcing yourself to sign post forces you to ensure your argument is concise.

EG:

“We will now discuss the nature of the evidence to see if it supports this theory…[DISCUSSION]…This discussion of the evidence demonstrates that the theory is supported. If this is the case, it means that the theory can be applied to the matters of interest. We will therefore now examine the way in which the theory can be applied in such circumstances…”

Evidence and Justification

You will be assessed on the quality of your evidence. Your evidence needs to be presented according to the standards of the discipline and citation style. A key skill is learning how much of the evidence to include in your essay. You cannot get any marks for other people’s work, so if you include too much detail you sacrifice space you could have used for your own (markable) work. You should summarise only the elements you want to make specific reference to. This may require some background on your source in order to understand the material you want to use.

You need to justify use of this source material by showing how it is evidence for the point you want to make. You will be assessed on the quality of your justification.

Ideally, you should show you have considered how someone could attack your justification and offer a defence.

Concluding your points

Try to finish each point with a short sign-posting summary. This should summarise your claim and justification, reiterate how it fits into the larger argument, and then show how this leads to your next point.

Length

All written assignments will specify a required word length. This does not include the bibliography or title page. It does include any inline citations. The word length may or may not include footnotes. This is up to the person setting the essay. In general, at Master’s and PhD level, dissertation word lengths do not include footnotes, while undergraduate work does count footnotes. If in doubt, check.

You must be within 10% of the required word length.

Good academic writers are almost always short of space because they have too much to say. If your work is going to be too short, something is wrong with your argument. You need to find more evidence, or say more about your conclusions, or look deeper. Always assume that being too short is a sign your work is not good enough. If your work is more than 10% above the word length, commence trimming by dumping text while maintaining the argument. If this is not enough, consider whether you can dump examples, minor sources, qualifications or explanations. If footnotes are not included in the word count, look for minor points which can be moved into footnotes.

Never hand in work which is too long or too short. Your marks will suffer significantly.