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.