

**ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SUUCCESS PROGRAM**

# Essay structure and formatting

**Aim:**

- To develop the necessary skills of writing an academic essay.
- To recognise the main structure of an academic essay that consists of three parts: an Introduction, body and conclusion.
- To identify the content that should be included in the introduction, body, and conclusion of your academic essay.

**Introduction**

Generally, your introduction will consist of two or three main components and for the length of the essays that you will be doing in your university studies, all three sections will be in one paragraph. The introduction contains:

- a) An **Orientation** (also known as the context/background of the essay)
- b) A **Thesis** (your 'argument' or 'claim' or the purpose of the essay)
- c) An **Outline** (the organization of your essay, an outline of what are you going to write about in this essay)

The writing that you do at university is primarily for your lecturers or tutors to read and assess. However, after graduation you will be writing for your academic peers, nationally and around the world. You need to approach your essay writing with these aims:

- When writing for your lecturer/tutor to read and assess, you need to demonstrate that you have done your research, **and you can communicate your findings clearly and concisely**. Students usually think, "but my lecturer/tutor knows everything, I don't need to write the 'basic'/background information". However, you need to think, "how can I best demonstrate what I know and what I am thinking".
- When writing for your academic peers, your aim is to guide them through the topic and **demonstrate that you have done your research, and you can communicate your findings clearly and concisely**.

Note: Your audience is different but your aim is the same.

**a) Orientation**

1. The context tells the reader what the **broad** topic is. Your assignment task usually provides the context and you need to expand on that in your introduction. It should be a general statement (specific information is left for the body of your essay).

Below is an assignment task. Read it and note how it is expanded for the essay introduction.

<b>Task</b>	<p>The internet has become an essential component of people's lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, there are concerns that the disadvantages of the internet may outweigh the advantages.</p> <p>Referring to current literature and drawing upon the perspectives of a minimum of four authors from this unit's recommended reading list, argue either in favour or against the impact of the internet.</p>
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The first sentences of an Introduction to this essay could be as follows:

*As an avenue of entertainment and communication and as a research and reference tool, the internet has become indispensable to the modern societies of developed nations. At the same time, there is concern that the disadvantages and negative influences may outweigh the benefits to the society.*

This is just one of many appropriate sentences you could write as your orientation. If your assignment provides orientation, you can unpack and paraphrase it and use it as your orientation. If not, create your own general context for the topic.

### **b) Thesis**

This is the second part of your Introduction – all still in the one paragraph. Your ‘argument’ or ‘your claim’ or ‘your thesis’ or ‘your statement’ or ‘the academic problem’, all mean the same thing. The sample essay task asks you to take a point of view and support it with evidence. You always discuss evidence to the contrary, basing your argument on the most convincing evidence that you have found in your research. Your thesis might be something like this:

***This essay argues that the advantages of the internet far outweigh the disadvantages. This claim is addressed with the support of current authoritative sources which provide the framework for making such a claim.***

Notice that the verb ‘argues’ is used in the thesis. You could also use ‘finds’ or ‘shows’ or ‘asserts’ to highlight that this is the stand you are taking on the essay question. Conversely, in the organization section of the introduction, you use verbs such as ‘discusses’, ‘addresses’, ‘compares’. Again, what you write in the body of your essay must agree with your thesis. For example, if your thesis statement is the one above, you cannot support that point of view in the body of your essay unless you’ve got some good evidence to prove it.

### **c) The organization of the essay.**

After getting your reader’s mind focused on the topic and what you will argue in your thesis, you now tell them how your essay will be organized. (Prior to writing, you will have already done an essay plan (see *Interpreting the task and planning the essay workshop and handout*) and that tells you what the sub-topics/sub-arguments you will address). In this part of the introduction, you tell the reader what sub-argument the body will start with, then what sub-argument will follow, and so forth. So you might write:

*This essay first explores the beneficial effects of the internet on the social structures of family life, religious and spiritual practice and courtship rituals. Subsequently, it examines the positive repercussions of the internet on national cultural identity and multiculturalism. Finally, the constructive influence of the internet in politics and activism is discussed.*

Notice that it is in the present tense. If you prefer, you can use the future tense. Either way is correct; however, present tense gives writing more of a ‘happening-now’ alive feeling. Your sub-topics are what you are going to write about in the body, and it’s important that you write about them in the same order as you have stated in the organization section. In other words, you must deliver to the reader what you say you are going to deliver and in the order you nominated in your introduction.

As you see, the introduction has three sections. Your reader is now intrigued by your claim/s and the scope of your essay, and is ready to read on and learn how you support your claims.

## Body

In our sample essay, the body will have 7 paragraphs; or at least one for each of the sub-arguments. Within each paragraph you will address the evidence which supports each of the sub-arguments. A paragraph must contain:

1. A topic sentence;
2. Supporting sentences which supports the topic sentence with examples, research findings, data, quotes etc.
3. In-text citing (see Harvard or APA Referencing Workshop)
4. Linking words and phrases.
5. A concluding sentence which either
  - restates the topic sentence in different words to remind the reader or summarises for the reader that paragraph OR
  - links the paragraph with the topic of the next paragraph.

## A topic sentence

The topic sentence conveys the main idea of the paragraph. Every paragraph has a topic sentence - the most important sentence in the paragraph. It is very clear when it is the first sentence. It is like a summary of the paragraph. It doesn't just introduce the topic; it tells the reader your claim on the topic based on the findings of your research.

### Example

Topic: the internet

Focus of the topic: the impact on family life

Topic sentence: *Modern family life has been enhanced by developments in technology, and the internet is no exception.*

There could be many different topic sentences for that topic. Each one is the writer's perspective of what the impact of the internet on family life is, as informed by research. Your paragraph would then go on to discuss the ways family life has been enhanced by the internet. That's what we call 'supporting your claim'.

Or on that same subject, you might create the following topic sentence:

*Modern family life has suffered in many ways since the development of the internet.* Your paragraph would then go on to discuss the ways the internet has had a negative influence on family life. Remember to support your claim.

**Topic sentence practice:** One sentence in each of the following pairs is the topic sentence. The other sentence is one of the supporting or developing sentences. Which is the topic sentence?

### Example

**a.** *The virtual 'congregation' may offer a person more opportunities of interaction with both the spiritual leader and other devotees by providing facilities such as blogs, chat rooms and video links.*

**b.** *Participating in a religion no longer depends on attending the place of worship.* ✓ **topic sentence**

- a.** A positive aspect of the internet has been its ability to absorb traditional practices such as matchmaking and courtship rituals.  
**b.** A couple may become engaged on-line, without ever having met face to face, devoid of any interaction with or the involvement of their family, friends or community.
- a.** The internet offers the opportunity to maintain cultural ties with one's country even when living abroad.  
**b.** Expatriates can view electronic versions of newspapers, and download local dramas from their country of origin, so keeping in contact with the culture.
- a.** Voters have easy access to a party's policy information, political platforms and alliances.  
**b.** An important context the internet plays a vital beneficial role in is the world of politics.

**More practice:**

Referring to the sample assignment, write an appropriate topic sentence, by identifying what the paragraph is about. The topic sentence should always refer back to and reinforce the thesis. Decide if the paragraph is arguing that the internet is a positive or negative thing.

1. ....  
No longer is a campaigner required to doorknock the households of an electorate in order to secure votes. Party members and loyal voters can be reached via email and e-newsletters, while swinging voters can be targeted using on-line campaigns. According to Webster (2008), a high proportion of voters living in Northern Territory marginal seats shun the mass television and print media campaigning undertaken by some parties, preferring to base opinions on information gathered from sponsored links, blogs and incidental advertising on websites.

2. ....  
Also known as electronic advocacy, cyberactivism, E-campaigning, and E-activism, internet activism employs the use of electronic communication for various forms of activism and advocacy and allows communications by ordinary citizens and grassroots movements to be delivered faster and to a larger audience.

**Supporting sentences:**

Each paragraph in the body begins with a topic sentence which is a clear broad statement about the topic of that paragraph. The topic is then expanded by supporting sentences, which detail and develop the topic of the paragraph.

There are many different kinds of elaboration or ways in which these sentences can develop information in the topic. Here are some examples of ways a writer might elaborate on the topic sentence below.

*Online magazines are an extremely effective medium for promoting new products to young consumers.*

1. (**Definition** of the word 'promoting'). By promoting new products, we mean advertising and selling them to teenagers.

2. (A **classification** of the statement in the topic sentence) The online magazines which are most effective are those which either specifically target youth, or those which cater to a gender or special interest group but which also attract a large youth audience.

3. (A **comparison** between online magazines and television.) Online magazines are like television in that they are a form of visual media that every teenager has easy access to.

4. (An **explanation (cause)** for the statement in the topic sentence) Online magazine subscription is relatively inexpensive for today's credit card carrying teenager.

5. (Further **identification** of the term 'young consumers') We are particularly referring to the ever increasing teenage market, more of whom have available cash for spending than ever before.

6. (**Composition** – tells us what online magazines consist of) At least half the space in most online magazines contains advertisements; the rest is shared between stories and features.

7. (A **contrast** to the statement in the topic sentence) Although, as iPhone use increases, this may change.

8. (An **explanation (effect)** of the statement) This is why most youth-oriented online magazines devote 50% or more of their pages to colour advertisements.
9. (A **restatement** of the topic sentence) Digital media has proved very successful in selling products to the youth market.
10. (An **addition** to the statement). It is also one of the best media for promoting specialised interests and fields through stories and interviews.
11. (An **example**). One online magazine that is very popular with teenagers is the music-oriented Rolling Stonezine.
12. (Presenting an **alternative** use for online magazines.) Alternatively, they could be an effective medium for educating or raising awareness in teenagers.
13. (A **description** of online magazines) Online magazines, sometimes called ezines or webzines, are often a digital reproduction of widely circulated print magazine titles.
14. (**Evidence** supporting the statement). A recent government survey has shown that more than 75% of teenagers say they bought a product because they saw it advertised in an online magazine.
15. (A **comment** on the statement) This is not surprising in this electronic age.

Modified from

[http://learningcentre.usyd.edu.au/clearer\\_writing/module1/paragraph\\_structure/body/body\\_part1/body1\\_eg\\_ex.html](http://learningcentre.usyd.edu.au/clearer_writing/module1/paragraph_structure/body/body_part1/body1_eg_ex.html)

Let's review what each paragraph in the body of an essay contains.

1. A topic sentence;
2. Supporting or example sentences which develop the topic (1-15 above);
3. In-text citing (we'll detail that in referencing workshops.)
4. Linking words and phrases.
5. A concluding or linking sentence.

## Linking words

Throughout a paragraph you use linking words or phrases. These make it possible for the sentences in a paragraph to relate smoothly to one another and to achieve unity or flow in the paragraph. (Has your lecturer ever said that your essays don't flow?). Find the linking words or linking phrases in the following paragraph.

*While seeming to be forever pointing us towards a rapidly changing future, the internet has, in reality, led to a revival of past practices. First it was the phone, and then the fax, that allowed modern man to participate in business from home, albeit it in a limited way. Then the invention of the internet allowed people to engage fully in business practices away from the office or factory. Subsequently, the advent of the internet created new online marketplaces, for instance eBay, within which people could sell products they made from home. Thus the term 'cottage industry', which once referred to the process of manufacturing that took place in people's homes previous to the industrial revolution, can be applied to the many micro industries that have, once again, evolved in people's homes.*

Incidentally, can you identify the topic sentence in the paragraph above? Which words make the topic? Which words are the 'claim'? The paragraph then supports the claim given in the topic sentence. This is the format of paragraph that you'll use in your academic writing. Note how the linking words make the text read smoothly, that the first sentence is a topic sentence, and then each issue in the sentence supports the statement made in the topic sentence, either by giving more detail, or giving an example. If an essay were written *without* such a logical process, it would be difficult for the reader to follow the argument.



Several linking words and phrases are listed below and are categorized so we can understand when to use them.

Sequence	Result	Emphasis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>First / firstly, second / secondly, third / thirdly etc</li> <li>Next, last, finally</li> <li>In addition, moreover</li> <li>Further / furthermore</li> <li>Another</li> <li>Also</li> <li>In conclusion</li> <li>To summarise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>So</li> <li>As a result</li> <li>As a consequence (of)</li> <li>Therefore</li> <li>Thus</li> <li>Consequently</li> <li>Hence</li> <li>Due to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Undoubtedly</li> <li>Indeed</li> <li>Obviously</li> <li>Generally</li> <li>Admittedly</li> <li>In fact</li> <li>Particularly / in particular</li> <li>Especially</li> <li>Clearly</li> <li>Importantly</li> </ul>
Addition	Reason	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>And</li> <li>In addition / additionally / an additional</li> <li>Furthermore</li> <li>Also</li> <li>Too</li> <li>As well as</li> <li>Moreover</li> <li>What is more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For</li> <li>Because</li> <li>Since</li> <li>As</li> <li>Because of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For example</li> <li>For instance</li> <li>That is (i.e.)</li> <li>Such as</li> <li>Including</li> <li>Namely</li> </ul>
Contrast	Comparison	Order of importance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>However</li> <li>Nevertheless</li> <li>Nonetheless</li> <li>Still</li> <li>Although / even though</li> <li>Though</li> <li>But</li> <li>Yet</li> <li>Despite / in spite of</li> <li>In contrast (to) / in comparison</li> <li>While</li> <li>Whereas</li> <li>On the other hand</li> <li>On the contrary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Similarly</li> <li>Likewise</li> <li>Also</li> <li>Like</li> <li>Just as</li> <li>Just like</li> <li>Similar to</li> <li>Same as</li> <li>Compare</li> <li>compare(d) to / with</li> <li>Not only...but also</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most / more importantly</li> <li>Most significantly</li> <li>Above all</li> <li>Primarily</li> <li>It is essential/essentially</li> </ul>

Modified from: [http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lisu/content/4\\_WritingSkills/writing\\_tuts/linking\\_LL/linking3.html](http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lisu/content/4_WritingSkills/writing_tuts/linking_LL/linking3.html)

## Linking Sentences

We also need to use linking sentences to join paragraphs to continue this smooth transition. The linking sentence can be the last sentence in the paragraph, and it is written in order to keep the discourse flowing to the next paragraph. An easy way to write a linking sentence is to mention the topic of the current paragraph and the topic of the next paragraph.

Example: If one of our paragraphs is about the effect of the internet on social structures, and the next paragraph is going to be about the repercussions on cultural identity, the linking sentence in the first paragraph may be something like this:

*Besides these impacts on social structures, there are also ramifications for the society's cultural identity.*

Note that the topic of both paragraphs are in that sentence. When you start the next paragraph and do our topic sentence about the impact on cultural identity, you won't be confusing your reader. You are linking the paragraphs smoothly. That's what's meant by making your essay 'flow'.

So the body of our essay consists of numerous paragraphs each with its own topic and each flowing smoothly.

## Exercises

Insert appropriate linking words in the following sentences. When possible, use words you don not normally use. Choose from the list above, or any others that you know.

In the first exercise the category of linking words is given, but not in the second.

### A.

Our state's correctional system is plagued with problems. (a) \_\_\_\_\_, (example) high officials increase their personal wealth by awarding building and catering contracts to disreputable companies in return for bribes. (b) \_\_\_\_\_, (addition) promotions within the system are made on the basis of politics, not merit. (c) \_\_\_\_\_, the system is filled \_\_\_\_\_ (result) with people at the top who know little about what they are doing. (d) \_\_\_\_\_, (addition) careless security measures, allowing trusted inmates to control certain operations of the institution, are part of the growing problem. But one increasing tendency in particular is doing harm to the system's image and efficiency.

This is the tendency of officials who are charged with important tasks and who make faulty decisions to cover up their mistakes. (e) \_\_\_\_\_, one would think that amid all the strife some effort

\_\_\_\_\_ (conclusion) would be made to rectify these problems, but a seemingly dogged determination to resist change overshadows the system.

### B.

Genetic screening in business, or testing the genes of employees to see if they are susceptible to workplace-related diseases, may present problems for the tested. (a) \_\_\_\_\_, the genetic screening tests and technology in general are in their infancy stages. (b) \_\_\_\_\_, many physicians and health professionals doubt their reliability. (c) \_\_\_\_\_, once employees' genetic information is recorded, it cannot always be kept secret. Even though employers are assured that their medical files are confidential, clerical staff have access to them. (d) \_\_\_\_\_, if they are entered into a computer data base, they are available to anyone with access. (e) \_\_\_\_\_, some argue that such screening procedures are violations of personal rights. (f) \_\_\_\_\_, many cite similarities between genetic screening and drug testing, noting that both involve a process of obtaining information from unwilling individuals that might affect them adversely. Opponents of genetic screening point out that some employees with the potential for workplace diseases would rather run the risk than lose their jobs.

**Possible Answers** In each case there may be several correct choices

#### Text A

(a) *Example:* For one thing; Frequently; For instance; For example; Often

(b) *Addition:* Furthermore; Moreover; In addition; What is more

(c) *Result:* As a result; Consequently

(d) *Addition:* In addition; What is more

(e) *Conclusion:* In short

**Text B**

- (a) *Example:* First; First of all; For one thing
- (b) *Result:* Consequently; Hence; Therefore
- (c) *Addition:* Second; Moreover; Further; What is more; Furthermore
- (d) *Example:* Indeed Specifically
- (e) *Result:* As a result; Consequently; Hence; Thus
- (f) *Example:* In particular; Indeed; Significantly

Modified from: [http://www.flinders.edu.au/slc\\_files/Documents/Brochures/linking\\_words\\_phrases.pdf](http://www.flinders.edu.au/slc_files/Documents/Brochures/linking_words_phrases.pdf)

Computer activities to practice linking words and phrases follow. These are particularly helpful if English is not your native language.

An easy start: Identify the linking words and phrases in the paragraph.

[http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4\\_WritingSkills/writing\\_tuts/linking\\_LL/activity2.html](http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4_WritingSkills/writing_tuts/linking_LL/activity2.html)

Drag words into their category.

[http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4\\_WritingSkills/writing\\_tuts/linking\\_LL/activity2.html](http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4_WritingSkills/writing_tuts/linking_LL/activity2.html)

Drag words into a suitable position in a paragraph

[http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4\\_WritingSkills/writing\\_tuts/linking\\_LL/activity2.html](http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4_WritingSkills/writing_tuts/linking_LL/activity2.html)

**Conclusion**

The conclusion is used to restate the thesis and then to summarize what has been argued in the body of the essay. Imagine the essay is 10,000 or 12,000 words long. It is helpful to the reader to tie your body paragraphs together at the end. You are reminding the reader that you have proven your claim by listing again the main points you have made. The difference between what you put in a conclusion and an introduction is that in the Introduction you simply give an outline of your key points, whereas in the conclusion, you include the outcome of your research as well as a summary of the main points. For example, in your **outline** you might write:

*This essay first explores the beneficial effects of the internet on the social structures of family life. Then your **summary** in the conclusion may be:*

*This essay found the internet has had positive effects on family life, allowing the hands on parenting of pre-school children by those parents who are able to use the World Wide Web to work from home.*

Besides the summary you can add more to a Conclusion to make it a little more interesting if you wish. For example, you might choose to:

- suggest other approaches that could be adopted in investigating the issue. You may say that “...the brevity of this essay meant that the historical context could not be discussed sufficiently; however, it is a valid approach, and deserves a closer examination”.

Assignment 4: Argument Essay 2	
Due date:	Friday, Week 10
Length:	1500 words
Value:	35%
Task	The internet has become an essential component of people's lives in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century. However, there are concerns that the disadvantages of the internet may



	<p>outweigh the advantages.</p> <p>Referring to current literature and drawing upon the perspectives of a minimum of four authors from this unit's recommended reading list, argue either in favour or against the impact of the internet.</p>
<b>Assessment criteria</b>	<p><b>Text organisation 40%</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Introduction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides an orientation to the topic (defining topic and key terms)</li> <li>• States purpose of the essay</li> <li>• States thesis or proposition (main point/argument)</li> <li>• States outline of the essay's stages</li> <li>• States scope of the essay</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>2. Main Body</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguments logically sequenced to support thesis</li> <li>• Each argument linked to thesis in topic sentence</li> <li>• Arguments logically organised into paragraphs</li> <li>• Paragraphs linked</li> <li>• Generally one argument per paragraph</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>3. Conclusion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarises outline</li> <li>• Confirms/states thesis</li> <li>• Qualifies thesis if required</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
	<p><b>Content 40 %</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covers all important issues in relation to the topic and stated scope</li> <li>• Evidence contradicting thesis included and dealt with</li> <li>• Uses readings (references) to substantiate positions taken in relation to topic</li> <li>• Clearly distinguishes between references and own statements</li> <li>• Quotations used appropriately (length and position)</li> <li>• The writer's argument is made explicit throughout the essay through the use of semantic markers and restating of the thesis</li> <li>• The argument is presented in a logical order</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Presentation 20%</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Title page including: Title, Name, Lecturer, Course, Date due, Date submitted</li> <li>• Times New Roman</li> <li>• 12pt size</li> <li>• Left aligned</li> <li>• 1.5 line spacing</li> <li>• Spelling and punctuation accurate</li> <li>• Sentence structure not too long and meaning clear</li> <li>• Harvard referencing system consistent</li> <li>• Reference list contains all sources used in essay</li> <li>• Essay is prescribed length</li> <li>• Essay is on time</li> <li>• Formal academic language used</li> <li>• Language specific to the topic/discipline used where appropriate</li> </ul>

## Some final considerations

Assignment tasks also usually have particular presentation requirements (such as in our sample task above). The format may vary depending on whether it is an essay, book review, project plan or lab report for example. Essays do not normally have headings, but reports do.

Note these requirements carefully and/or check with your lecturer if this information is not provided. You could also examine a sample essay, report or other relevant academic text type for ideas on how to present your work. Good word processing skills are extremely useful when preparing your work for presentation.

The editing strategies workshop also considers presentation format. The Harvard and APA Referencing workshops would be useful.

## Practicing for exams

### Use the following 7 steps:

**(i) Analyse the question.** Find the instruction word that tells you what to do. Underline the key words. It would be frustrating if you write a great essay but it's not on the required topic. You'd fail!

**(ii) Do a quick essay outline.**

#### Example question:

*Why is New Zealand a popular tourist destination?*

Your main points may be:

- (i) It is politically stable,
- (ii) It has stunning landscapes, and
- (iii) The people are friendly.

Now jot down some evidence or development of each of these main points.

- (i) It is politically stable,
  - Their government has been elected democratically, and people accept the majority rule.
  - The military isn't able to overthrow the elected leaders.
- (ii) It has diverse landscapes,
  - Snow capped alps in the south island
  - Steaming geysers and bubbling mud pools
  - Green rolling pastures and woodlands.
- (iii) The people are friendly.
  - They welcome tourists because it boosts their economy.
  - The locals have a relaxed lifestyle.

**(iii) Write an introduction** by rephrasing the question and giving your main points, e.g.

*Several factors contribute to making New Zealand a popular place for travellers, including their political stability, their diverse landscapes, and the friendly nature of the locals.*

**(iv) Body. Write your first point as a clear first sentence** in your next paragraph.

**(v) Justify the main point**

**(vi) Repeat 4 and 5 for your second and third points.**

**(vii) Round off your argument with a conclusion which may well be the introduction rephrased.**