PLANNING AND STRUCTURING AN ESSAY

1.   Introduction

Common criteria of undergraduate essay writing focus on the following requirements:

students need to be analytical and critical in their response

students need to structure their writing logically

students need to be persuasive writers

students need to answer the question

This booklet looks at the requirement, how to **structure your essay logically**. Other Learning Centre booklets in this series deal with the other aspects, Analytical Writing, Analysing the Essay Question, and Developing an Argument.

Producing an essay is a complex process, and although it is possible to break the process down into neatly sequenced stages, in real life most of us spend a lot of time procrastinating, reflecting and often going down blind alleys. This does not mean that planning is a waste of time. At best it ensures that we are well-organised, focussed and in control, at worst it gives us a basis for departure and a structure for getting back on track.

This booklet aims

•   to review general skills and time frames that we need to have under control in order to plan and research an essay

•   to develop strategies for structuring essays in a coherent and logical way

2.   General time frame for producing an essay

Below is a table showing the main stages involved, and approximate times we should allow for each stage. These times are just a general guide. As you become more accustomed to the process and to your own most efficient way of working you will be able to program the stages more accurately.

	STAGE	PERCENTAGE OF TIME AVAILABLE
1.	Planning (including information gathering and preliminary structuring)	45
2.	Producing first draft	20
3.	Rewriting	25
4.	Presentation	10

While the stages seem very distinct it is important to be flexible enough to modify early decisions and make adjustments as you work your way through the process. The structure of your essay is something you need to keep in mind from the preliminary planning to the final presentation and editing checks.

⌘   Exercise 1:

Consider your current writing requirements and the time you have available and write a preliminary plan that takes into account the four steps above.

3.   General Skills

Before you tackle any of your essays, it is wise to familiarise yourself with the following.

3.1   Information sources

- the layout of Fisher Library and relevant branch and department libraries.
- on-line and CD Rom resources
- search facilities
- systems of information storage and retrieval

3.2   Departmental preferences

From your various departments you need to find out their style preference in
- in-text referencing
- reference lists / bibliographies

3.3   Audience and context

Audience: Who am I writing for? what do they expect?

Some subject teachers provide support for the first undergraduate essay in the form of models, format information and assessment information.
Research indicates that most subject staff look for

- **relevant content and focus**
- indication of wide and critical reading
- **logical and reasoned development**
- precise, accurate and appropriate language, style and format

(Ref: Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. [1991] *Essay Writing for Students*, Longman Cheshire.)

In this booklet we will be working mostly in the first and third areas.

Context: What are the requirements of writing in my discipline?

Each discipline has its own
- method of analysis
- highly specialised language
- preferred structures

Some departments produce writing guidelines giving information in these areas, which can be extremely helpful to first year students. Please check if these are available in your department.

You can also help yourself by
- reading the faculty handbooks, which will often give information about the disciplinary expectations,
- reading in the subject as much as possible, which will help you understand the technical language and the conventions of the particular subject area.

4.   Getting started

The starting point for planning your essay is the essay question. Read it carefully in order to identify the instructions, the specific content and the scope. (The booklet Analysing the Essay Question gives you strategies for this.) When you have a clear idea of the question, you can focus your preparatory reading and predict a possible structure for your essay.

4.1   Focus your reading

Strategy 1: Asking questions

⌘   Exercise 2:

Consider the following question from the field of Education:

> "There is no reading problem. There are problem teachers and problem schools."
> (Herbert Kohl, 1974:9)   Discuss this statement.

(a)   Underline the main content keywords and the instruction.

> See the booklet *Analysing the Essay Question* if you are uncertain about content keywords and instructions.

(b)   Write down as many questions as you can about the question (start off with "What...?" "How...?" Who....?")

Many of the first questions you ask may turn out to be inappropriate or too basic. But just asking them will focus your reading as you look for the answers. You will discard some of them and substitute more appropriate questions as your reading continues.

Strategy 2: Analysing your reading list.

Most essays are accompanied by a reading list, which may be
- general for the course
- more specific for a set of essay questions on specific topics

What and how much you read depends on
- the length and comprehensiveness of the list
- the word length of the essay
- how much time you have available

The discipline you are working in will influence the type of source that you read.

PRIMARY SOURCES	are the original data, e.g. case study notes (Nursing), letters & diaries (History), lab notes (science).
SECONDARY SOURCES	are comments on a primary source, e.g. research papers, journal articles, government policy documents. In most essays in the social sciences and humanities your reading will involve analysis and evaluation of such sources.
TERTIARY SOURCES	give you background knowledge and an overview of the topic, e.g. summaries, abstracts, textbooks, encyclopedia.

> **Find out which types of sources are appropriate for your discipline.**

⌘   Exercise 3:

(a) Consider the following essay question in the field of Sociology.

"There is a strong relationship between a person's perceived physical attractiveness and the likelihood he or she supports the women's movement." Critically examine this statement.

What positions could you take on the statement? Decide on your position - this is the starting point for your reading.

(b) Below is the reading list which accompanied the question.

Decide:

• which texts you will need to read in detail
• which texts you will skim for background information
• which texts you may not need to read at all

Check your answer in the Key, pages 11-12

REFERENCE LIST

Beaman, A.L., & Klentz, B. (1983) The supposed physical attractiveness bias against supporters of the women's movement: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 9, 544-550.

Beaman, A.L., Klentz, B. & Conrad, B (1984). A direct test of and an alternative explanation for judgements of attractiveness of supporters of the women's movement. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science,* 16, 191-195.

Cohen, J. (1977) *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (Rev.ed). New York, Academic Press.

Devitt, M. & McKelvie, S.J. (1991) Effects of physical attractiveness on perceived support for women's rights, *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 19(3), 151 -156.

Goldberg, P.A., Gottesdiener, M. & Abramson, P.R. (1975) Another put-down of women? Perceived attractiveness as a function of support for the feminist movement. *Journal* of *Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 113-115.

Grieve, N. & Burns, A., Eds. (1994) *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought.* OUP.

Herzberg, P.A. (1983) *Principles of Statistics.* New York, John Wiley & Sons.

Humm, M. (1990) *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory.* Columbus, Ohio State University Press.

Johnson, R.W., Doiron, D., Brooks, G.P. & Dickinson, J. (1978). Perceived attractiveness as a function of support for the feminist movement: Not necessarily a put-down of women. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science,* 10, 214-221.

Johnson, R.W., Holborn, S. W. & Turcotte, S. (1979) Perceived attractiveness as a function of active vs passive support for the feminist movement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 5, 227-230.

Rowland, R. Ed. (1984) *Women Who Do and Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

4.2   Predicting a structure from the question

The wording of the essay question will often give you a framework for your preliminary structure.

Example: (using an essay question from the field of Education)

> It has been cited with alarm that modern children spend more hours in front of television than they spend at school. Is this necessarily cause for alarm? By examining the relevant research literature, critically discuss the effects of television on children with respect to at least one of the following:
>
> a)   the development of aggression
> b)   educational television
> c)   the development of fantasy and imagination
> d)   the development of sex-role stereotypes.

Table (i) shows the connection between the parts of the question and the preliminary structure of the essay.

SECTIONS OF QUESTION	FUNCTIONS OF SECTIONS	CHOICES FOR THE WRITER	STAGES WITHIN ESSAY
It has been cited with alarm that modern children spend more hours in front of television than they spend at school.	Factual statement to orient topic	Confirm or deny statement	Orientate to topic (introduction)
Is this necessarily cause for alarm?	Question	Establish position: yes / no / partly	State position (introduction)
By examining the relevant research literature, critically discuss the effects of television on children	Instructions	Select evidence to support position and criticise selected evidence	Present / criticise evidence (body)
with respect to at least one of the following:	Scope	How many?	State scope (introduction + body)

Table (i)   (adapted from Webb, C. [1991] *Writing Essays in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Learning AssistanceCentre, University of Sydney*)

5.   Developing a structure

The following tables illustrate how two essays were developed from the preliminary structure shown in Table (i)

⌘   Exercise 4:

Read Tables (ii) and (iii) below and consider the following questions:
a) What are the differences in the writers' choices concerning their position towards the main proposition? Is the position statement consistently confirmed throughout the essay?
b) What are the differences in the writers' choices concerning the scope of each essay?
c) Are the different sections of the essay well balanced?
d) Are all the functional stages used in both essays?

Check your answer in the Key, pages 13-14

Table (ii)

ESSAY STRUCTURE A

PARA	FUNCTIONAL STAGE + WRITER'S CHOICES	STRUCTURE
1	Orient to topic - *acceptance of fact* State position - *effect of TV is 'potentially damaging"*	Introduction
2	Evidence to support position *bomb threats*	
3	Confirm topic - *number of viewing hours etc*	
4	Confirm topic - *factors influencing no. of viewing hours*	
5	Confirm topic - *children watch a lot of TV* Establish conditions for position - *effect depends on content*	
6	Evidence - *violent TV content*	Violent TV
7	Confirm position - *TV violence desensitises children*	
8	Evidence to confirm position - *research study : TV violence makes children insensitive to violence*	
9	Confirm position - *effect of TV violence is longterm* Evidence to confirm position - *research results: TV violence makes children continue to be aggressive*	
10	Confirm position - *TV violence cases aggression* Evidence to support position: *research*	`
11	Criticise evidence - *in research, violence is not contextualised*	
12	Recommend: *reduce violent TV content*	
13	Confirm position - *TV is educational*	Educational TV
14	Evidence to support position - *examples of educational TV*	
15	Confirm position - *educational TV is good* Evidence to support position - *research on Sesame St*	
16	Confirm position - *benefits and problems of ed TV* Recommend - *to improve educational TV*	
17	Confirm position - *sex role stereotyping on TV is evil*	Sex Role Stereotyping
18	Recommend - *reduce sex role stereotyping on TV*	
19	Confirm position - *TV is both good and bad, effect depends on content*	Conclusion
20	Recommend - *educate children and parents about TV* Warn - *otherwise TV will have a bad effect*	

(Adapted from Webb, C. [1991] *Writing Essays in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Learning AssistanceCentre, University of Sydney*)

Table (iii)
ESSAY STRUCTURE B

PARA	FUNCTIONAL STAGE + WRITER'S CHOICES	STRUCTURE
1	Orient to topic - *fact is important* Confirm fact - *number of viewing hours* State purpose - *to investigate effects of TV exposure*	Introduction
2	State scope - *TV violence* State position - *research shows link between TV violence & aggressive behaviour*	
3	Confirm fact related to scope - *amount of violence on TV*	General Theoretical Positions
4	Outline controversy - *confirm position - cause/effect analysis societal violence and increased TV*	
5	Outline controversy - *criticise position - analysis to extend causes of societal violence beyond TV*	
6	Confirm position - *children learn aggression by imitation*	
7	Evidence to confirm position - *research studies*	Critical Discussion of Research Evidence
8	Criticise evidence - *research conditions not authentic*	
9	Evidence to confirm position - *more realistic research*	
10	Criticise evidence - *research studies short-term*	
11	Contradictory evidence - *research showing no link*	
12	Mixed evidence - *research shows link TV violence / physical aggression, non-violent TV /verbal aggression*	
13	Causes of effects of TV violence - *changes in perception of reality*	Critical Discussion of Theory
14	Evidence to support causes - *research : TV violence dulls sensitivity to real violence*	
15	Focus on particular group - *disturbed children most at risk*	
16	Summarise evidence - *research data not consistent`* Confirm position - *TV violence causes aggression* Qualify position - *particularly in aggressive children and in particular environments*	Conclusion

(Adapted from Webb, C. [1991] *Writing Essays in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Learning AssistanceCentre, University of Sydney)*

How can the information in this booklet help you?

We assume that you are currently writing an essay. Here is a checklist of questions to help you plan and structure your essay.

Are you familiar with the library resources on campus? Can you use the on-line services?

Do you have an efficient system for storing and accessing your information?

Have you made a general time plan for the process of producing your assignment?

Have you read everything your department / faculty has supplied on writing expectations?

Have you used the assignment question to focus your reading?

Have you prioritised your reading?

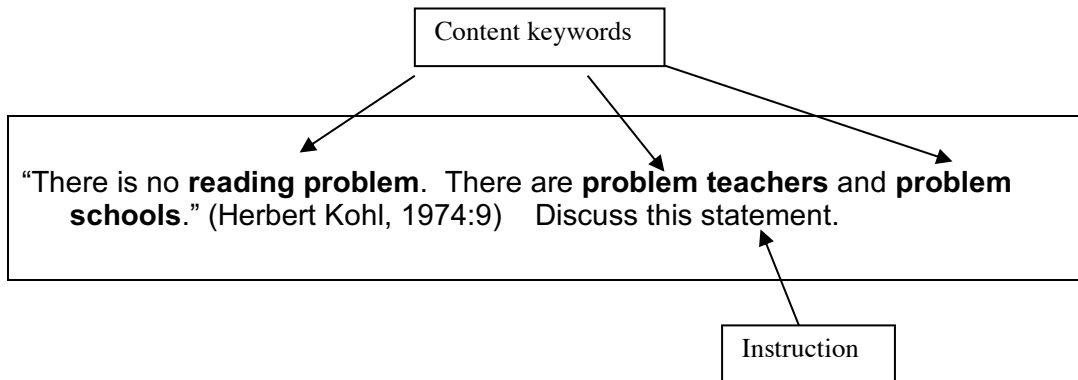Have you used all the information provided in order to make a preliminary structure?

❖

Don't forget:

- The development of your structure will depend on the choices you make.

- Be flexible.

❖

KEY TO EXERCISES

⌘   Exercise 2:

Content keywords

"There is no **reading problem**. There are **problem teachers** and **problem schools**." (Herbert Kohl, 1974:9)   Discuss this statement.

Instruction

Your questions might include:

- what kind of reading problem?
- how severe is the reading problem?
- which children are not learning to read? what are their ages?
- who are the problem teachers? Are all teachers problem teachers?
- which schools are reporting reading problems? Are all schools problem schools?
- why do some children learn to read and others do not?
- who is Herbert Kohl? Is he an important writer / thinker in the field? What evidence does he have to support this statement?

.....

⌘   Exercise 3:

Here is the essay question again.

> "There is a strong relationship between a person's perceived physical attractiveness and the likelihood he or she supports the women's movement." Critically examine this statement.

a)   Possible positions are:

1.	Yes, there **is** a strong relationship	between a person's perceived physical attractiveness and the likelihood he or she supports the women's movement.
2.	No, there **is not** a strong relationship	between a person's perceived physical attractiveness and the likelihood he or she supports the women's movement.
3.	**Partly ....**	

b)   Below is the reading list which accompanied the question.

The following decisions could be made in regard to:

• which texts you would read in detail
• which texts you would skim for background information
• which texts you may not read at all

REFERENCE LIST	DECISION
Beaman, A.L., & Klentz, B. (1983) The supposed physical attractiveness bias against supporters of the women's movement: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 9, 544-550.	Read in detail
Beaman, A.L., Klentz, B. & Conrad, B (1984). A direct test of and an alternative explanation for judgements of attractiveness of supporters of the women's movement. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science,* 16, 191-195.	Read in detail
Cohen, J. (1977) *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (Rev.ed). New York: Academic Press.	Don't read at all
Devitt, M. & McKelvie, S.J. (1991) Effects of physical attractiveness on perceived support for women's rights, *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 19(3), 151 -156.	Read in detail
Goldberg, P.A., Gottesdiener, M. & Abramson, P.R. (1975) Another put-down of women? Perceived attractiveness as a function of support for the feminist movement. *Journal* of *Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 113-115.	Read in detail
Grieve, N. & Burns, A., Eds. (1994) *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought.* OUP.	Skim
Herzberg, P.A. (1983) *Principles of Statistics.* New York, John Wiley & Sons.	Don't read at all Skim
Humm, M. (1990) *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory.* Columbus, Ohio State University Press.	Read in detail
Johnson, R.W., Doiron, D., Brooks, G.P. & Dickinson, J. (1978). Perceived attractiveness as a function of support for the feminist movement: Not necessarily a put-down of women. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science,* 10, 214-221.	Read in detail
Johnson, R.W., Holborn, S. W. & Turcotte, S. (1979) Perceived attractiveness as a function of active vs passive support for the feminist movement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 5, 227-230.	Skim
Rowland, R. Ed. (1984) *Women Who Do and Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement.* Routledge & Kegan Paul	

⌘   Exercise 4:

Repeated here are the questions under consideration.

a) What are the differences in the writers' choices concerning their position towards the main proposition? Is the position statement consistently confirmed throughout the essay?

b) What are the differences in the writers' choices concerning the scope of each essay?

c) Are the different sections of the essay well balanced?

d) Are all the functional stages used in both essays?

	ESSAY STRUCTURE A	ESSAY STRUCTURE B
a)	The writer • states position in paragraph 1 that the effect of television is "potentially damaging". • confirms position in paragraph 7 that television violence makes children insensitive to violence • contradicts initial position in paragraph 13 stating that television is educational (no acknowledgement that this conflicts with two previous statements) • contradicts second position in paragraph 17 stating that sex-role stereotyping on television is "evil" • concludes in paragraph 19 that television is "both good and bad" There is no discussion and acknowledgement that position changes.	The writer • states position in paragraph 2 that research shows a link between TV violence and aggressive behaviour (this is consistently restated each time new piece of evidence is introduced) • slightly qualifies position in paragraph 12 stating that research shows link between TV violence / physical agression and between non-violent TV / verbal aggression (qualification is discussed explicitly) • confirms initial position in paragraph 16 with an explicit statement of qualification (conclusion)
b)	The writer • chooses 3 areas to cover - violence on TV, educational TV, and sex role stereotyping (too many areas, superficial analysis, no one area researched well, not possible to do justice to research across 3 areas)	The writer • chooses 1 area to cover - violence on TV (allows writer to investigate the issues in depth and develop the argument effectively)
	ESSAY STRUCTURE A	ESSAY STRUCTURE B
c)	The writer • does not balance sections of essay well • 3 areas are too many • effect of TV violence on children received most attention, sex role stereotyping received little analysis and discussion	The writer • balances sections of essay well • has only one area to discuss • can analyse theotical positions and research evidence properly
d)	The essay outline	The essay outline

• lacks a State Scope stage in the introduction • lacks any stages which Present Evidence to Contradict Position • includes only one Criticise Evidence stage • includes several Recommend stages and a Warn stage, neither of which are appropriate for the essay question	• has every stage predicted in Table I • has no inappropriate stages

(Adapted from Webb, C. [1991] *Writing Essays in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Learning AssistanceCentre, University of Sydney)*