

Excellent Essays

This module covers concepts such as

- Identifying the elements of an excellent essay structure
- Understanding the steps for constructing and editing essays
- Applying your knowledge of the characteristics of essay writing to formulate essay paragraphs with unity and coherence.

www.jcu.edu.au/students/learning-centre



The**Learning**Centre
UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL

Excellent Essays

The ability to write an excellent essay is a skill highly regarded by many different disciplines at university. It is a skill that requires analysis, logic and style – characteristics also often valued in the workplace!

An essay has a distinct overall structure: an introduction, body and conclusion. There are also expectations in regards to how clear the writing is and how well the writing ‘flows’.

There may be slight variations in essay expectations across disciplines (such as whether headings are permitted). Always check your Subject Outline, assessment criteria and clarify any specific expectations with your Lecturer/Tutor.

Writing Clearly

Unity and **Coherence** are two key aspects of an excellent essay. Your essay must stay ‘on-task’ (do not lose your reader by going off on tangents) and it must ‘stick together’ (do not lose your reader by throwing lots of poorly connected bits of information at them).

Logical sequencing of information is often determined by the nature of the essay. Here are some possible options for a short essay:

- Temporal (eg. 18th C, 19th C, 20th C...)
- Geographic (eg. continent, country, state, town...)
- Scale (eg. World Economy, Australian Economy, QLD Economy...)
- Thematic (eg. government, education, society)
- Compare and contrast (eg. each paragraph, or each alternate paragraph,

focusing on positive and negative effects)

- Importance (eg. most important focal point to least important – or reverse)
- Simple to complex (eg. starting with the concept of ‘power’ and progressing through to the concept of ‘hegemony’)

Signposts also help the reader to successfully navigate their way through an essay. Signposts are connecting words or phrases (first, second, and, however, in contrast, for example, similarly, whereas...).

Essay Structure

Introduction

The introduction tells the reader what your essay is about; what your position is on the issue/s discussed and in what logical order you will be discussing these issues.

One recommended approach to writing an introduction is to use the ‘funnel approach’. This approach involves starting off your introduction with more broad statements about the topic/issue and increasingly narrowing this down to a very specific statement at the end of the paragraph.

Body

The body of your essay is made up of paragraphs that support the position you have taken up in your introduction. These paragraphs should be logically sequenced and thoroughly address your assignment question.

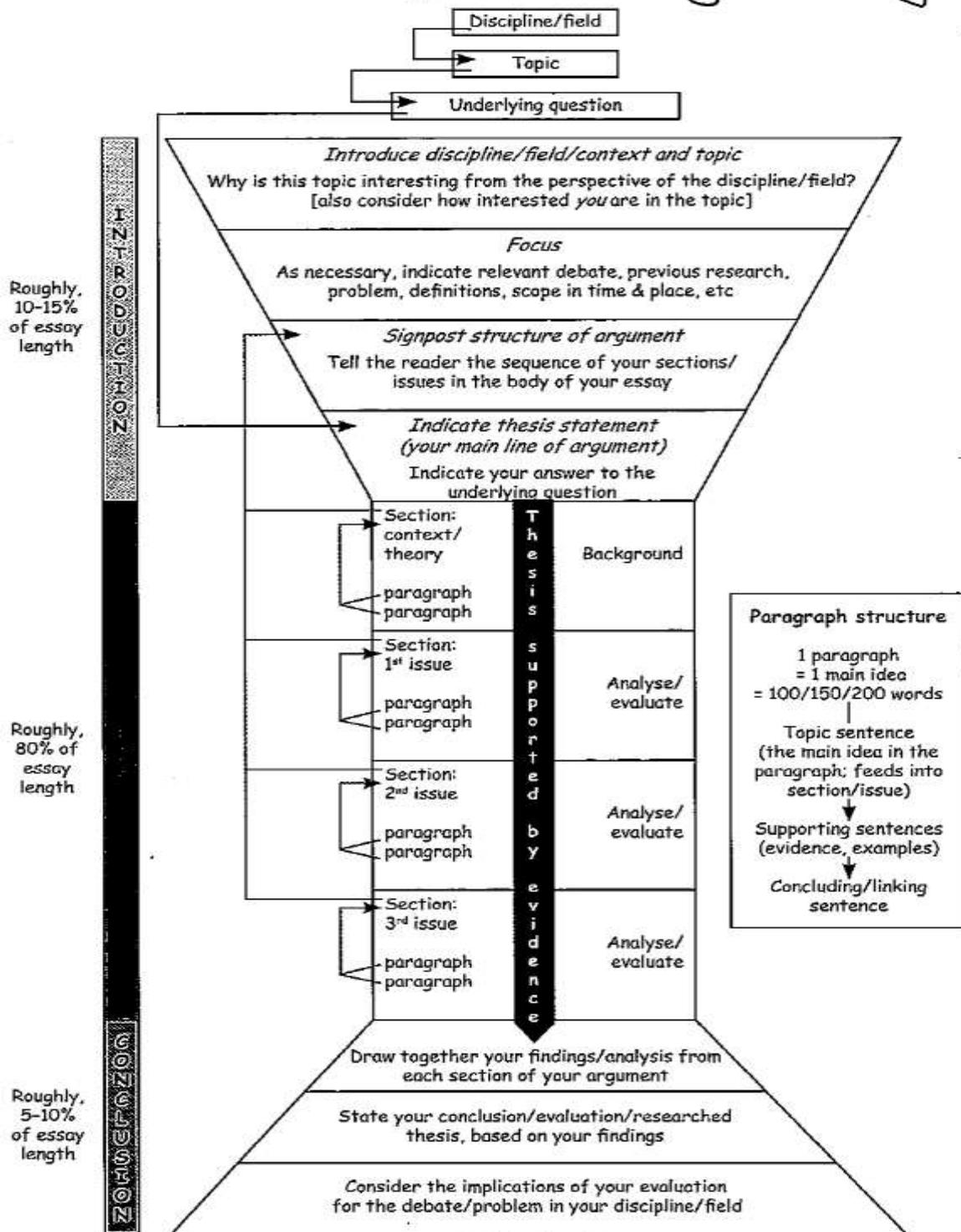
Conclusion

Some writers like to reverse the ‘funnel’ used in the introduction: they start with more specific statements summarising the issues discussed in the main body of the essay and increasingly broaden this until they have successfully rounded off the essay.

Essay Writing Process is covered in another Learning Skills Workshop. Check out *Learning Skills Online* on the JCU website.

Essay Structure: Visual Representation¹

How effective structure supports reasoned argument in essays¹



¹ Read the assessment task carefully because a topic or discipline often requires a different structure. And always remember the golden 'creativity rule' — all rules are meant to be broken, it's just that you first need to know them!

¹ From Rao, V., Chanock, C. & Krishnan, L. (2007). *A Visual Guide to Essay Writing*. AALL: Sydney, Australia.

Your Turn – Essay Detective

- 1. The following essay has at least 5 characteristics of an excellent essay. How many characteristics can you find?**

Essay writing is a common form of assignment at university that students can find challenging. First-year students are particularly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy in regards to essay writing as they are often unfamiliar with essay writing structure and style. Confusion in regards to assignment expectations and how these assignments will be graded often compounds these feelings of inadequacy. There are several steps a first-year student can take to build confidence in essay writing: a student can familiarise themselves with the essay writing process as well as structure and style; and, a student can seek feedback and support from peers as well as their lecturer/tutor and other staff at the university.

An understanding of the essay writing process is a first critical step in essay writing as it helps a student to know how to prepare, plan and get started on their assignment.

..... [Supporting evidence/facts – about 5 lines]

In addition to a knowledge of process, structure and style are also important elements of essay writing and further help the student build their writing confidence.

..... [supporting evidence/facts – about 5 lines].....

Feedback and support are an often underestimated aspect of writing an assignment at university but can be critical for the first-year student who is still developing a sense of identity as an academic writer.

..... [supporting evidence/facts – about 5 lines]

In summary, therefore, essay writing often presents a challenge for first-year university students but feelings of inadequacy can be mitigated in several ways. A student can acquire a knowledge of the essay writing process, structure and style through face-to-face or online workshops at the university. A student can also apply this knowledge amidst a supportive network of peers and relevant university staff. Essay writing is an important skill to develop as this genre is often utilised for major assessment tasks, across disciplines and faculties. The early building of student knowledge and confidence in this area, as well as supportive application, is an important part of university life.

Essay Detective – Answers (don't look until after you have completed the first activity!)

A funnel introduction [essay writing → 1st year students → steps to build writing confidence]

There are a number of cohesive devices used to help the essay 'flow'.

Repetition:
eg. "feelings of inadequacy", & "these feelings of inadequacy"

Signposts: eg. "In addition to..."
"In summary, ..."
"Therefore"
"but"
"also"

Referring backwards:
Eg. "in this area" (what area? The area mentioned in the previous sentence – "essay writing")

Essay writing is a common form of assignment at university that students can find challenging. First-year students are particularly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy in regards to essay writing as they are often unfamiliar with essay writing structure and style. Confusion in regards to assignment expectations and how these assignments will be graded often compounds these feelings of inadequacy. There are several steps a first-year student can take to build confidence in essay writing: ① a student can familiarise themselves with the essay writing process as well as ② structure and style; and, a student can seek ③ feedback and support from peers as well as their lecturer/tutor and other staff at the university.

The introduction indicates the order of the information discussed in the essay.

An understanding of the essay writing process is a first critical step in essay writing as it helps a student to know how to prepare, plan and get started on their assignment.

..... [Supporting evidence/facts – about 5 lines]

Clear topic sentences for each paragraph.

In addition to a knowledge of process, structure and style are also important elements of essay writing and further help the student build their writing confidence.

..... [Supporting evidence/facts – about 5 lines]

The topic sentences/ paragraphs stay 'on-track' so the essay has unity.

Feedback and support are an often underestimated aspect of writing an assignment at university but can be critical for the first-year student who is still developing a sense of identity as an academic writer.

..... [supporting evidence/facts – about 5 lines]

Good paragraph length.

In summary, therefore, essay writing often presents a challenge for first-year university students but feelings of inadequacy can be mitigated in several ways. A student can acquire a knowledge of the essay writing process, structure and style through face-to-face or online workshops at the university. A student can also apply this knowledge amidst a supportive network of peers and relevant university staff. Essay writing is an important skill to develop as this genre is often utilised for major assessment tasks, across disciplines and faculties. The early building of student knowledge and confidence in this area, as well as supportive application, is an important part of university life.

The conclusion summarises the main points in the essay. No new information is introduced.

Essay Jumble

- 2. The following essay has become 'jumbled'. There are 3 topic sentences and 3 linking/concluding sentences that need to be put back into a logical order. Number the topic sentences and concluding sentences in the order you think is most effective for this essay.**

INTRODUCTION:

Essay writing is a challenging but common part of university life. Essays usually need to be written in a formal academic style. One important aspect of writing in an academic style is the logical and clear organisation of information. Information must be structured into three sections: introduction, main body and conclusion. Within these sections, information must be logically organised into a series of connected paragraphs. Each paragraph in an essay must discuss only one main idea. Paragraphs are also expected to follow a clearly discernible structure: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding or linking sentence. These elements of structure and organisation, at both the broader level of the whole essay and the smaller level of each paragraph, are critical to the effective writing of an essay at university.

A paragraph that is carefully structured in this manner makes an important contribution to the effectiveness of the essay as a whole.

With such knowledge of writing structure, a student is more likely to succeed with what is a common part of life at university.

In order to write effectively at university, therefore, an understanding of structure and organisation is important. This understanding must encompass the broader level structural organisation of an essay as well as the smaller level structural organisation of each paragraph within that essay.

There are three broad units of organisation in essay writing at university: an introduction, main body and conclusion.

In formal academic writing, paragraphs must be structured so that each has a topic sentence, followed by supporting sentences and concluding with a linking sentence.

In addition to these three broader levels of essay organisation, each section itself must also have paragraphs with a distinct structure.

Essay Jumble – Answers (don't look until after you have tried the second activity!)

Essay writing is a challenging but common part of university life. Essays usually need to be written in a formal academic style. One important aspect of writing in an academic style is the logical and clear organisation of information. Information must be structured into three sections: introduction, main body and conclusion. Within these sections, information must be logically organised into a series of connected paragraphs. Each paragraph in an essay must discuss only one main idea. Paragraphs are also expected to follow a clearly discernible structure: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding or linking sentence. These elements of structure and organisation, at both the broader level of the whole essay and the smaller level of each paragraph, are critical to the effective writing of an essay at university.

There are three broad units of organisation in essay writing at university: an introduction, main body and conclusion.

...

In addition to these three broader levels of essay organisation, each section itself must also have paragraphs with a distinct structure.

In formal academic writing, paragraphs must be structured so that each has a topic sentence, followed by supporting sentences and concluding with a linking sentence.

...

A paragraph that is carefully structured in this manner makes an important contribution to the effectiveness of the essay as a whole.

In order to write effectively at university, therefore, an understanding of structure and organisation is important. This understanding must encompass the broader level structural organisation of an essay as well as the smaller level structural organisation of each paragraph within that essay.

...

With such knowledge of writing structure, a student is more likely to succeed with what is a common part of life at university.

Optional Extra Challenge!

- 3. Now that you are aware of how an essay should be structured - and the importance of topic sentences and linking sentences in connecting the main ideas (paragraphs) in your essay – it is a good chance for you to have a go at writing an essay. A whole essay? Maybe not! Save that for your assignment/s! But how about writing an additional paragraph for the essay in the second activity (“essay jumble”)? You could write a topic sentence relevant to the essay topic (essay writing structure) and include a linking sentence that connects your paragraph with another paragraph in the “essay jumble”. Go on - have a try!**