

CHAPTER 7

Writing: getting started

Okay. Here we are. Finally. Chapter seven, and we start talking about writing. It's been a long time coming, but I promise you the six chapters before this will make everything much easier. So, if you skipped them, go back and take another look, they are the foundations of good writing. You have been waiting so long for this, so as a reward I am going to pack loads into this chapter, including: planning an essay, structuring your essay, writing your introduction, writing conclusions.

Staring at a blank page, or white screen, is a horrid and daunting prospect, so we are going to break down the process of writing an essay into some steps. The first thing is to make sure you have understood the question (that isn't as easy as you think), then the next thing to do in writing your essay is to state your objective, or thesis. This will tell the reader the viewpoint you are going to express and support in your paper. It will also give you a focus on what you are writing, because the rest of your essay will be to prove the validity of your *thesis statement*. This means a good thesis statement will keep you on topic with your writing, and this will help to focus your reading. Before we get to the rest of the essay, let's look at that more closely.

Understanding the question

It has happened to the best of us, you hand in an essay, quite possibly the best thing you have ever written; maybe even the best thing that has ever been written on the topic. It is full of amazing original ideas, unique insights and could well change the whole world. And then you get your feedback. The mark is low. Red ink (or the digital equivalent) is all over the page; 'not relevant'; 'unrelated'; 'off topic'. Oh no!! What has happened? Then you read to the end of the

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feedback and it says, ‘you didn’t answer the question.’ This is a disaster, and not an uncommon one, but it is also something that can be avoided quite easily by making sure we understand the question we are being asked.

It seems obvious, but ensuring that you are answering the right question is key to gaining the best marks for your work. Many mistakes are made in the understanding of key questioning verbs, and there is nothing more disappointing than pouring your heart and soul into an essay to get feedback that says, ‘you didn’t answer the question.’ So, let’s look at the semantics and phrasing of questions. Essay titles include key verbs and words which inform you of how the question must be answered. And if you understand these, then it becomes easy to avoid the scenario above. These key words also provide the framework for your answer and will also help you choose the right essay style. Let’s have a look at an example:

‘Discuss the relevance of the internet in the analysis of recent social movements in Latin America.’

In this example, there are a number of key words that we need to look out for, the table below breaks this question down:

Discuss	This word instructs you to investigate or examine by argument or debate.
Internet	This is the subject of the question; we need to ensure we understand what is meant by the term internet and need to make this the main focus of the essay.
Recent	Here the question gives us a timeframe. Recent is perhaps a little vague, we might need to consider what the word recent means within the context of other parts of the question.
Social Movements	This is our unit of analysis, or the people/object that we want to study. We must answer the question in relation to social movements.
Latin America	Here we are given the location that we should be focusing on. While other examples might have some relevance, the question should be primarily about Latin America.

As you can see, the question is really guiding the shape of our whole essay and we need to be careful to ensure that we are including all the aspects asked for, while also retaining a focus on those aspects. Perhaps the most important word is the instructional verb at the start of the question (although they can also appear in other places). This tells us the specifics of the shape of our essay. It is really important that you know what each verb means. Some of them have

very similar meanings, but your lecturer will have chosen carefully the one in the question, and so you need to be sure to keep them happy by checking what it means. To make this easier, here is a table of the most common instructional verbs that you might come across at university:

Account for	Give reasons for; explain (note: give an account of; describe).
Analyze	Break the information into constituent parts; examine the relationship between the parts; question the information.
Argue	Put the case for or against a view or idea giving evidence for your claims/reasons for or against; attempt to influence the reader to accept your view.
Balance	Look at two or more viewpoints or pieces of information; give each equal attention; look at good and bad points; take into account many aspects and give an appropriate weighting to those aspects.
Be critical	Identify what is good and bad about the information and why; probe, question, identify inaccuracies or shortcomings in the information; estimate the value of the material.
Clarify	Identify the components of an issue/topic/problem; make the meaning plain; remove misunderstandings.
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps conclude which is preferable; implies evaluation.
Conclude/draw conclusions	The end point of your critical thinking; what the results of an investigation indicate; arrive at a judgement by reasoning.
Contrast	Bring out the differences.
Criticise	Give your judgement on theories or opinions or facts and back this by discussing evidence or reasoning involved.
Deduce	Conclude; infer.
Define	Give the precise meaning. Examine the different possible or often used definitions.
Demonstrate	Show clearly by giving proof or evidence.
Describe	Give a detailed, full account of the topic.
Determine	Find out something; calculate.
Develop an opinion/ a view	Decide what you think (based on an argument or evidence).
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; debate; give reason for and against; examine the implications of the topic.
Elucidate	Explain and make clear.
Estimate	Calculate; judge; predict.
Evaluate/weigh up	Appraise the worth of something in the light of its truth or usefulness; assess and explain.

Examine	Look at carefully; consider.
Explain	Make plain and clear; give reasons for.
Give evidence	Provide evidence from your own work or that of others which could be checked by a third party to prove/ justify what you say.
Identify	Point out and describe.
Identify trends	Identify patterns/changes/ movements in certain directions (e.g. over time or across topics/ subjects).
Illustrate	Explain, clarify, make clear by the use of concrete examples.
Infer	Conclude something from facts or reasoning.
Interpret	Expound the meaning; make clear and explicit, giving your own judgement.
Justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions, a particular view or conclusions and answer main objections likely to be made to them.
Outline	Give a short description of the main points; give the main features or general principles; emphasize the structure, leaving out minor details.
Prove	Show that something is true or certain; provide strong evidence (and examples) for.
Review	Make a survey examining the subject carefully; similar to <i>summarize and evaluate</i> .
State	Present in a brief, clear form.
Summarize	Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, removing unnecessary detail.
Synthesize	Bring elements together to make a complex whole, draw together or integrate issues (e.g. theories or models can be created by synthesizing a number of elements).
Trace	Follow the development of topic from its origin.

Adapted (with thanks) from UELT (2008)

Knowing these verbs is only half the battle, there are some other things we also need to do.

1. Work out exactly what you're being asked

As we said above, you must take time to figure out exactly what you are being asked to do – *what is the question?* Avoid skim-reading and writing the essay you want to write. Instead, identify key words and phrases and write out a plan that covers them all. Don't rush this bit. You can't read the question too many times – oh, well 10,000 might be too many, but you know what I mean.

2. Be as explicit as possible

When you start writing use forceful, persuasive language to show how the points you've made *do* answer the question. Use the same terminology and words as the question. Restate the question as *thesis statement* (see below) and use the question to help you shape the concluding paragraph to ensure there is a very explicit answer that a reader can see without even reading the rest of the essay – Do, though be sure the whole essay helps get you to that answer, the conclusion has to match the essay.

3. Be honest about whether a point is needed

Sometimes we have some brilliant ideas, or read some amazing quotes, and we really want to get it into our essay, just to show how smart or well-read we are, but if the point isn't actually needed, or relevant to the essay, it can just become a distraction and leave your reader confused about the thread of your argument. Worse, they might miss some of the really good points that you have made. The key is to keep referring back to your plan to *make sure that what you are writing is relevant and answers the question*. When you have finished check the essay again against the question itself. Edit out anything irrelevant and strengthen your main points alongside your *proof reading*.

4. Choose the right shape for your essay

We will come to that in a moment but first ...

Defining a thesis statement

It seems obvious, but every paper you write should have a main point, a main idea, and everything in your essay should link back to this main point. As obvious as this might sound when you're reading this, this is often missing in student essays. To make the main point really clear it should be summarized in one or two sentences called a thesis statement. This statement should let the reader know the topic of your essay and also give your view on the topic, and this will also guide your writing to help you to keep your argument focused. Your thesis statement should come early in your essay – in the introduction, or in longer essays in the second paragraph. It's kind of a spoiler as to what is coming – but unlike *Game of Thrones*, we want to know from the outset your intentions – even if it is to kill all our favourite characters. You should try and be as clear and as specific as possible, but you should avoid boring and cliché sentence structures like, 'The point of my paper is...'. Instead take a look at our examples:

**Your idea:**

Many people think that modern zombie films are too violent or unpleasant.

Thesis statement:

Modern cinematic techniques mean that films have become more graphic, and this has led to the desensitization of young British filmgoers to violence.

or

The explicit violence in many mainstream zombie movies degrades both men and women.

or

Today's zombie movies fail to deliver the emotional engagement and social subtexts that 1970s zombie films contained.

Thesis statements are so important, we are going to spend a bit more time on them. You need to be as clear as you can, so that your reader understands exactly what you mean. You should avoid technical language and jargon – even if you see lots of this in the articles that you are reading (You can be better than them, remember how hard you found these articles to read? Make yours more readable).

You should also avoid vague words such as 'interesting,' 'negative,' 'exciting,' 'unusual,' and 'difficult.' And as with all your writing, don't use what are known as *abstract words* such as 'society,' 'values,' or 'culture.' These words are only useful if you have given a good explanation of that they mean to you and for your essay, you can't assume, for example, that you have the same understanding of what 'society' means as your reader.

You need to be as specific as possible so there can be no misunderstandings. You might have a nice professor who will give you the benefit of the doubt, but they might be having a bad day when marking, so don't risk it – instead, take a look at the examples of how to make a thesis statement clear:



Compare our first attempt at a thesis statement (not specific and clear enough) with the improved version (much more specific and clear):

- **Original thesis statement:** Although Facebook is an enjoyable and fun platform, users are leaving in droves. [if it's so enjoyable and fun, why are people leaving??]
- **Revised thesis statement:** Although Facebook is seen by many as an enjoyable and fun platform, users are leaving in droves over concerns around privacy and data sharing.



- ✓ A thesis statement is about more than just saying, here is my topic! It should also tell the reader what angle you are going to take, or your stance. And should tell the reader why it matters;
 - **Original thesis:** In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and modern cinema.
 - **Revised thesis:** Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales can help us understand the modern cinematic experience.
- ✓ Be careful not to oversimplify complex issues in your thesis statements;
 - **Original thesis:** We must save net neutrality.
 - **Revised thesis:** Because the internet was designed as an open platform on a basis of equal access and equality, net neutrality is seen as a crucial element of its infrastructure.
- ✓ If your thesis statement is more subjective (closer to an opinion) then you should give some reasoning for this.
 - **Original thesis:** Open Source Software is the best kind for people to use.
 - **Revised thesis:** If more software is made open source then developers will be able to more easily build upon ideas and better develop new products and tools.
- ✓ Don't just state a fact, or something that everyone already knows. Add something new to the debate within your thesis statement:
 - **Original thesis:** Facebook was rocked by scandal.
 - **Revised thesis:** The many scandals to hit Facebook revealed basic problems with the company's infrastructure and underlying design.

A few final words on thesis statements. Use your own words in thesis statements and avoid quoting. A well-crafted thesis statement reflects well-crafted ideas. It makes the reader believe you are intelligent, committed, and enthusiastic – and you definitely want them to think those things about you. While it's good to start with a reasonably well-formed statement, you will have to come back to this when the essay is finished and edit it a little bit to make sure it really matched what you have said, and the ideas you have. As we are writing our ideas can change, the secret to a good essay is to keep going back over the whole to text to make sure all the ideas still link together – and most important is the thesis statement.

Once you have a good draft thesis statement though, you can begin to map out your essay as a whole.

Preparing a working outline

So, you've read the question, you've done some reading and have a good draft of a thesis statement. It must be time to start writing, surely? Not so fast! One more step before we get into the first full draft. That is to draw up an outline. Many people try and skip this step, but a little thought here can help focus your reading, ensures you have all the information you need for the essay, helps to focus you towards answering the question – and can help you avoid plagiarism – pretty good huh?! They don't sound so bad now do they?

You will first need to decide what type of essay you are going to write, and what shape it will take. The question you have been set will help you do this, but here are some of the most common shapes of essays:

Definition Essay	Classification Essay
<p>A definition essay involves taking one idea or term and writing about what it is. They require you to give a considered, and clear definition of the term first, before going on to discuss any debates or disagreements in the rest of the essay.</p>	<p>Classification essays are about putting ideas into different categories so you can discuss them one at a time, defining each and then giving examples.</p>
<p><i>Example question:</i> Write an essay defining social media and discuss its different uses.</p>	<p><i>Example question:</i> Write an essay discussing the three types of software.</p>
<p><i>Introduction:</i> Define the key term social media.</p>	<p><i>Introduction:</i> Give background information about different software standards.</p>
<p><i>Supporting paragraphs:</i> 1. Define one type of social media: Whatsapp. 2. Define another type of social media: Twitter.</p>	<p><i>Supporting paragraphs:</i> 1. Define and describe open source software. 2. Define and describe freeware. 3. Define and describe closed code software.</p>
<p><i>Summary paragraph:</i> Summarize social media.</p>	<p><i>Summary paragraph:</i> Summarize the whole software landscape.</p>

Description Essay	Compare and Contrast Essay
<p>As the name suggests, description essays involve you describing a person, place, thing or concept. You should organize your essay to describe each feature in detail.</p>	<p>In a compare and contrast essay, you write about the similarities and differences between two or more people, places, or things. You can organize the essay by writing about one subject first and then comparing it with the second subject. A more effective way is to organize the essay by comparing each subject by category.</p>
<p><i>Example question:</i> Write an essay describing a specific newspaper.</p>	<p><i>Example question:</i> Write an essay comparing public relations to advertising.</p>
<p><i>Introduction:</i> Introduce the newspaper and what a newspaper is.</p>	<p><i>Introduction:</i> Introduce broad definitions of both PR and advertising.</p>
<p><i>Supporting paragraphs:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe where the newspaper is circulated. 2. Describe the politics and dynamics of the newspaper. 3. Describe who reads the newspaper. 	<p><i>Supporting paragraphs:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compare the internal operations of PR and of advertising. 2. Compare the outward facing operations of PR to advertising.
<p><i>Summary paragraph:</i> Summarize what the newspaper is.</p>	<p><i>Summary paragraph:</i> Summarize the similarities and differences.</p>

Explanation Essay	Evaluation Essay
<p>In an explanation essay, you explain how or why something happens or has happened. You need to explain different causes and effects. You should organize the essay by explaining each individual cause or effect.</p>	<p>In an evaluation essay, you make judgments about people, ideas, and possible actions. You make your evaluation based on certain criteria that you develop. Organize the essay by discussing the criteria you used to make your judgment.</p>
<p><i>Example question:</i> Write an essay explaining why newspaper circulation has declined in many Western countries.</p>	<p><i>Example question:</i> Write an essay evaluating the importance of social media in the Arab Spring.</p>
<p><i>Introduction:</i> Give background information on the rates of newspaper circulation.</p>	<p><i>Introduction:</i> Give your judgment on whether social media was important in the Arab Spring.</p>
<p><i>Supporting paragraphs:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain first reason: move to online news sources. 2. Explain second reason: changing printing costs. 	<p><i>Supporting paragraphs:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain first criteria: meeting place for activists. 2. Explain second criteria: activism v. clicktivism. 3. Explain third criteria: surveillance.
<p><i>Summary paragraph:</i> Summarize main reasons.</p>	<p><i>Summary paragraph:</i> Conclude with overall judgement on the role of social media in the Arab Spring.</p>

Once you know the rough shape of your essay, start by making a list of the topics you think you will need to include, or try creating a mind map such as discussed in notetaking in chapter four. These ideas should come from the reading you have done previously. Once you have that list, divide the ideas or topics on the list into major topics and subtopics following the shape of the essay you have chosen – it might be you decide a different essay shape is needed at this point, and that is okay, just make sure you use a type that helps answer the question. Draw or write these out either on your computer or on paper, but be sure to leave plenty of blank space for your notes. You can now start to sort

your notes according to the topics and subtopics in your outline. Once this is done you should have a well-organized plan, with a good structure, all your notes in place and an even better idea of your thesis statement. Don't worry if you need to add more later, this is just the start!

You are now ready to **write the rough draft**. We all like to think we can write perfectly the first time – but we really can't. The important thing in the draft is to get all your ideas down and in the right place, to build the argument, follow your outline and expand your ideas with information from your notes, and don't worry too much at the moment about spelling, punctuation or the formatting of the document – but do make sure you have enough time to come back and fix those things. As the science fiction writer Octavia Butler tells us:

You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it's good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That's why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence.

OCTAVIA BUTLER



When you have finished the rough draft, take a well-deserved break – a walk, sleep, Netflix, anything you like, but step away from the computer, then later come back and read through it again and revise it. When you are reading through your own work, be very careful to look both the content and the overall organisation of the work. Check that every paragraph has a sentence that links it back to your thesis statement. Then check that every paragraph contains some evidence to support that claim, and that it is properly cited. Check that you have made good transitions between paragraphs, and that they build up and argument, rather than feeling like separate ideas – we will cover how to do that in a later chapter. To do a good proofread of a work might require you to read it multiple times, and with different purposes in mind – first for ideas, then for structure, then for spelling for example – so make sure you leave plenty of time for this.

Remember:

Read – Think – Write – Re-write

first

about
your ideas

a draft

the essay
fixing errors
and adding details



Use the tools built into Word to help you ...

Programs like Word can help you lay out your work and build a structure, this can also become useful later if you need to add a contents page.

1. Add the main section titles to your paper. Select these as header 1 using Word's tools.
2. Add any sub-sections, and make these 'header 2' – it is recommended that you don't use any additional headers.
3. This will allow you to navigate through your document using the navigation pane on the left of the document
4. When you have finished writing, either delete the headings – this should be done on a short essay – or for a longer essay head to the front of the document and insert a table of contents from Word's options. This will automatically pick up all your headings.

Writing introductions

The beginning and end of your essay are the most important parts – obviously the middle is important, too. These are the parts that hook the reader in and then leave them with a sense of your work and definite answer to the essay question. The introduction should be a full paragraph that contains several sentences, beginning with a strong opening statement that makes the reader want to read the whole essay. A few more sentences should continue to draw in the reader and work towards the main point of the work, including a clear thesis statement (see above). There are many different ways we can open an essay, but as they say, first impressions count, so it is well worth considering how you will start. Here are some ideas for different ways to start an essay:

Fact opener

Introductions can grab the reader's attention by starting off with a surprising statement, unusual fact or startling statistic. An essay on the uses of the internet might begin with 'More than three billion people are now regular internet users, yet 10% of households in the United Kingdom do not have any access at all (ONS, 2018)'. Don't forget you must always credit the sources of statistics to avoid plagiarism and to maintain credibility.

Quotation opener

Starting an introduction with an insightful quotation relieves you of some of the pressure to be clever (not saying you're not clever, but nice to have a break sometimes). Well-chosen quotations pack a punch, relate clearly to the topic and generally do not exceed two sentences. For example, an essay about algorithms might start. '*Computers will talk to anyone*' stated Sean Cubitt in a recent conference, '*but only the rich teach them to speak*' (cited in Summerhayes, 2015); this tells us much of what we need to know about the power of algorithms ...' This hooks the reader in and tells them much of what the essay will be about. You still need a thesis statement though.

Definition opener

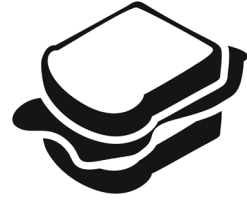
Definitions can be a really useful way of starting an essay, especially if you are writing about something controversial or that might not be commonly known about. You should be careful though, a dictionary definition doesn't work well for this; instead you should use a definition from an academic source that defines the term in the way you will use it in your essay. In this way it might be similar to the quote opener. Only use this if your essay requires it. There is no need to define common words, and that would be a weak opening. Yet where the main point of the essay revolves around a word that is ambiguous, then these openings are helpful. You will though still need a thesis statement too!



- ✗ Do not write, 'This essay is about...' or 'In this essay, I will discuss...' instead, just get right into essay using one of our suggested openers above.
- ✗ Do not write a brilliant introduction on the wrong topic. It seems obvious, but we can get caught up in an exciting opening, and then realize it wasn't quite the right topic, so make sure you know what you are writing about before you start writing.
- ✗ Do not use the same opening all the time, it gets boring. Mix it up a bit.
- ✗ Do not get yourself worked up or worried about trying to use the openers here. Trying to force one won't help at all, instead get the essay written, and then come back and make your opening more exciting at the end, this way you will know just what your essay is about.
- ✗ Don't use questions in your opener, or anywhere in your essay for that matter.

The middle

Like a good sandwich, your essay needs to have a good filling, the real meat (or vegetarian option) of your ideas. Your introduction has set the reader up to know what you plan to say. Now you must tell them, and you must convince them. To do this the central part of any essay should contain critical writing. Your professors probably talk about this a lot too, and you have probably had feedback that tells you to be more critical, but what does this really mean?



Well it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, not dissimilar to critical reading (see how the skills we learn are needed across all aspects, handy that). With critical writing you are telling the reader how much you accept or agree with the things you have read or watched before writing your essay. You are also telling us whether you think the other writers have offered enough evidence for their argument – or to be cleverer, you are evaluating their contribution to the field – fancy!

This is in contrast to descriptive writing, that just describes something. A certain amount of descriptive writing is needed in your essay, particularly in the introduction or background, in order to give the setting of the research, to discuss the measurements taken or timing of research in the methodology, or to give biographical details of a key figure or the history leading up to an event or decision. Descriptive writing is easy to do, and you can accidentally find yourself using up lots of words from your wordcount by just describing, and at first this might seem like a good idea, as you are asked to write longer and longer essays – but soon you will find comments that tell you to be more critical, and worse, grades that are going down, not up. If you only write descriptions, then you are not enhancing the information, you are just reporting on ideas, but we want to see you advance those ideas through critical writing.

Writing critically means that you are becoming part of the academic debate (ooow, fancy!). This though, is more challenging and risky (boo!). To do critical writing you need to be able to weigh up the quality of evidence and work presented by others, and to consider carefully how convincing you find the information in front of you. You need to make notes of the positive and negative parts of the argument, and also to think about which parts are relevant to your essay (either in support, or to show the other side of the debate). These ideas then need to be synthesized together (see chapter 8). All this takes a great deal more brain power, but it is the way to access the highest marks, and to avoid the ‘be more critical’ comment from your professor.

Let's now look now in more detail about how to do critical writing, paragraph by paragraph. Rather than just filling our essay with quotes, we want to work to build arguments and ideas using our own words. The best way to do this is to think about each paragraph as a miniature essay. Each paragraph is made up of four parts:

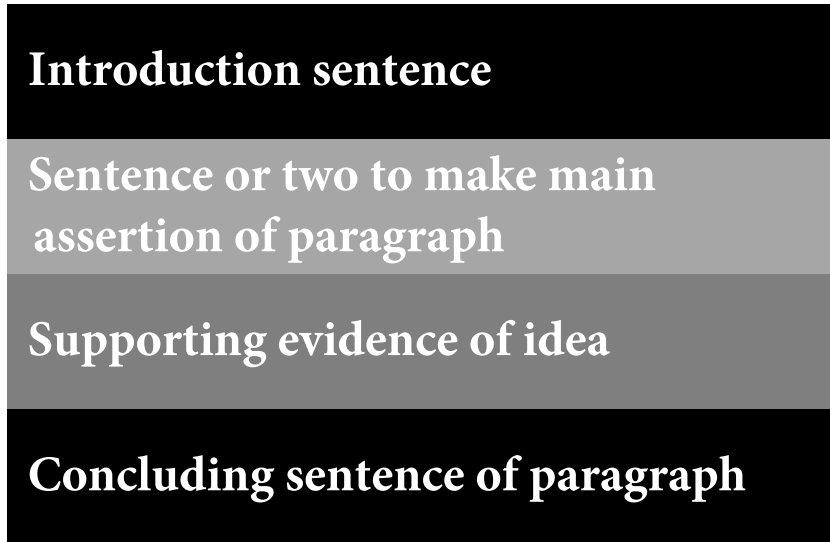


Figure 7.1: Paragraph structure.

Just like with your essay as a whole, the opening of a paragraph should, in one sentence, tell us what is about to happen, the main argument of the paragraph. This should be followed with a couple of sentences about why you make that assertion – with some references to the ideas you have used. Then give the reader some evidence, again this will be a thought or data from someone else's work, so make sure you reference it well. Finally, show the reader how the idea links to the main (thesis statement) of your essay, before linking this paragraph to the next one. You need to make each paragraph convincing to the reader, and the best way to do this is to reference your sources.

Even with excellent paragraphs, it is also important to consider the overall structure of your piece of writing. You should make sure that everything leads back to answering the question, but also that the whole essay has a logic. Using the essay shapes provided will help you with this too, but when you finish the essay you should also read it from beginning to end to make sure your argument and thoughts didn't get lost along the way, and that your readers will be able to follow what you are thinking.

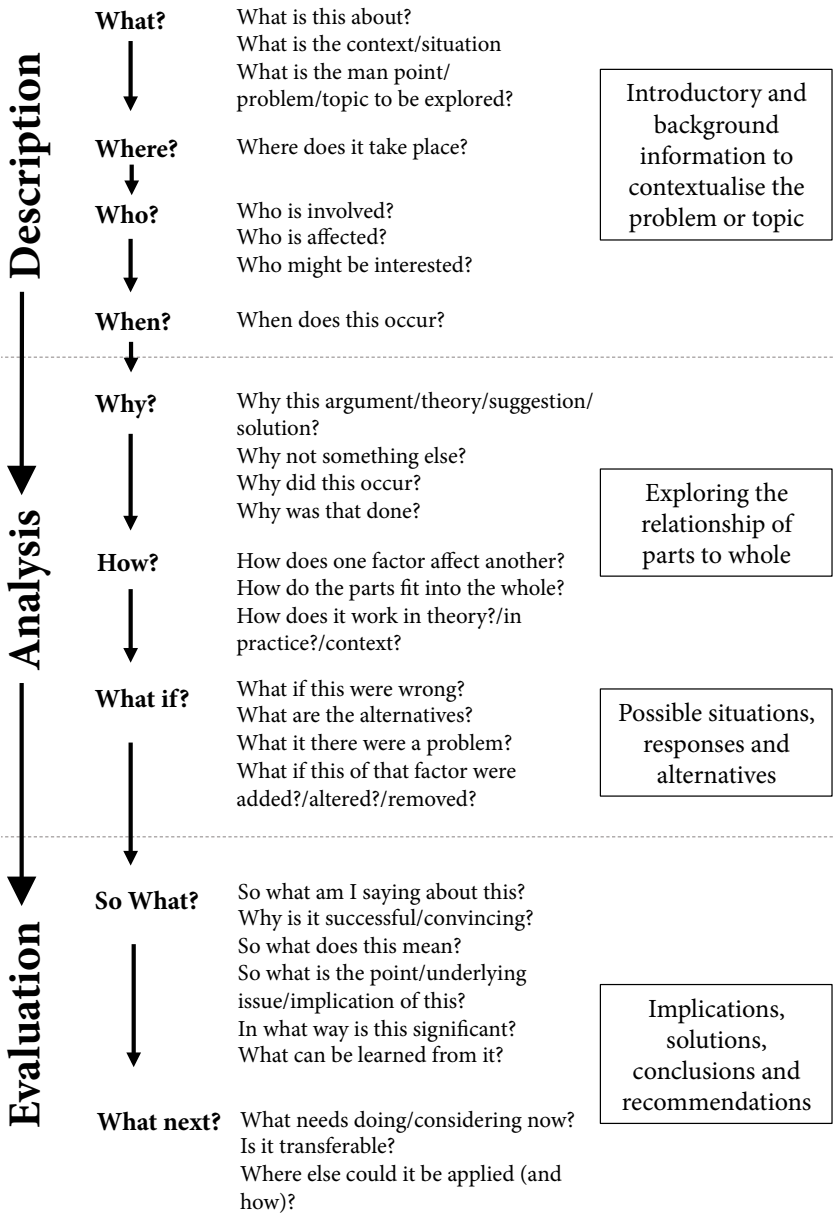


Figure 7.2: From description to evaluation; from Hilsden (2010).



Example of critical writing:

There are of course a wide range of perspectives about what technology is and its relation to society (Hutchby, 2001), what is of great concern though is the ease with which links are made both between the function of technology in producing poverty and de-worlding effects (Feenberg, 2005), and conversely its ability to solve issues of poverty through the production and analysis of data which can enable better targeting of poverty reduction schemes (Taylor and Broeders, 2015). In the last decade, these technologies have become increasingly prolific in nature and have been further and further integrated into the work of NGOs, development organizations and embodied within poor societies (Atzmanstorfer *et al.*, 2014). There is already a contradiction here, as some of the largest technology companies, and philanthropists engage in the fight against poverty, they are also pushing for the liberalization of public services and the virtues of neoliberalism (Zamora, 2014). Technologies corresponding to different civilizations have always co-existed (Feenberg, 1991), but as the juggernaut of neoliberal digital tools spreads across the world and the development sector, questions around what counts as data, and whose data counts are becoming increasingly urgent (Burns, 2015).

Authors own, in-text citations in references at end of chapter.

Writing conclusions

Generally speaking, conclusion paragraphs are about 5% of your essay word count and they should serve to ‘round-off’ the essay, remind the reader of the key points and to give an answer to the question posed. You should restate the thesis from your introduction (without repeating it word for word), make a brief summary of your evidence and finish with some sort of judgment about the topic. (See figure 7.3).

It’s a good idea to start your conclusion with transitional words (words like ‘In summary’, ‘To conclude’, ‘In conclusion’, ‘Finally’) as these help the reader to know that you about to give them your killer final point and they should wake up. We don’t add new ideas in the conclusion, so conclusions don’t usually have many citations, apart from maybe a great quote from someone special as a final word. The conclusion to an essay is rather like a formal social farewell, and you want to leave the party (I mean essay) in a dignified manner – Not in a horrible mess, unsure of what happened and not knowing why your significant other isn’t talking to you. Okay, that last part is just about parties, but with your essay,

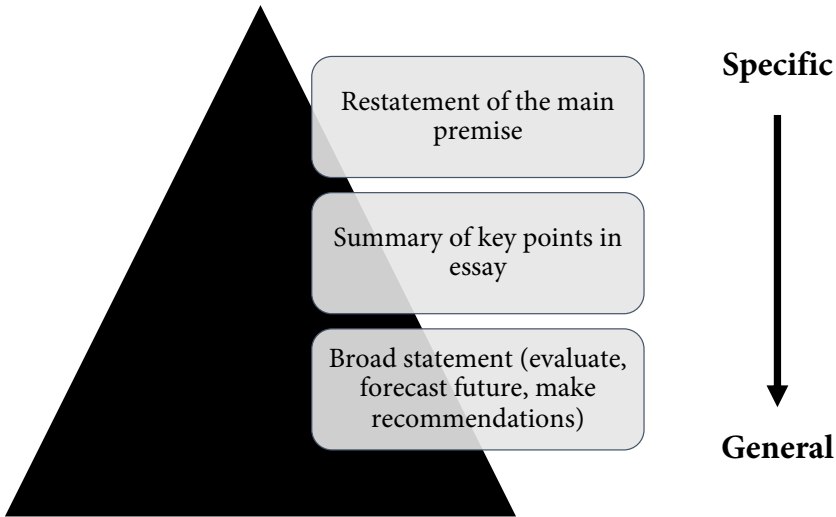


Figure 7.3: Conclusions.

you also don't want to leave things a mess. So, make it clear how they end – the essay, not the relationship with your significant other.



FINDING YOUR ACADEMIC VOICE

When you engage in critical writing you are developing your own academic voice within your subject. Wellington *et al.* (2005 p.84) offer some suggestions for distinguishing between the academic and the non-academic voice. They suggest that the academic voice will involve:

- ✓ healthy skepticism ... but not cynicism;
- ✓ confidence ... but not 'cockiness' or arrogance;
- ✓ judgement which is critical ... but not dismissive;
- ✓ opinions ... without being opinionated;
- ✓ careful evaluation of published work ... not serial shooting at random targets;
- ✓ being 'fair': assessing fairly the strengths and weaknesses of other people's ideas and writing ... without prejudice; and
- ✓ 'making judgements on the basis of considerable thought and all the available evidence ... as opposed to assertions without reason.'

(Wellington *et al.*, 2005)

Phew! That is a lot to get your head around. I would suggest reading through this section again before every essay, and then taking it one step at a time. Remember you need to know what the question is before you can start, then read around that topic for a while before drafting a thesis statement. You can then make a plan before doing targeted reading, and follow this up by arranging your notes into sections. Later we will look at some more advanced writing techniques, but remember all academic writing follows the same formula, so use the models in this chapter. Even your professors use these models, but they hold them in their head because they have been doing this (in some cases much) longer than you. Let's now move towards really advancing our skills through combining sources ... onwards to chapter 8!

A note on audio/visual assessments

Being a cool media and communications student, you might be asked to present your essay work in the form of a video, podcast or even a radio programme. While there will be specific instructions from your tutors about what they want, all the principles laid out above (and below actually) will also still count. You will still need to define the thesis, the main point of argument. You will still need to plan the shape of your argument, and the essay shapes can be adapted to audio or visual essays too. You still need to have good conclusions and a strong introduction. It is easy to get overexcited about the production of an audio/visual essay, so make sure you keep our essay principles in mind, even when the form of assessment is more exciting.

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