



Essay writing

2. The argument: development and structure

Unit 1 of this module dealt with the process involved in writing an essay. This unit looks in more detail at the development of an argument or point of view and the structure of an essay.

What is an argument?

In the context of a university essay an argument is a well researched and logically structured answer to a particular question, or questions. It is a point of view formulated by critically assessing the information or ideas relevant to the essay topic. It is presented in the form of a series of main points which support your direct answer to the question. Each of these points is addressed in a separate paragraph and is supported with evidence, explanation and/or examples. It is supported by referencing authorities in the relevant field. An argument should also form a cohesive whole: this means the paragraphs need to be logically ordered and connections made between the points presented in those paragraphs.

How is an essay structured?

In order for your argument to be convincing and make sense, it needs to be presented inside a well structured piece of writing. How do you do this within the framework of an essay's general structure of Introduction, Body, Conclusion? Firstly, you need to be clear about what elements you should include within these three sections of an essay. The table below outlines these elements.

Introduction	General statement or orientation to topic Thesis statement Brief summary of the main topics/arguments/points made in the essay
Body paragraphs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Topic sentence A <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. supporting sentence ← These sentences support, expand or explain the point made in the topic sentence 2. supporting sentence 3. supporting sentence 2. Topic sentence B <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. supporting sentence 2. supporting sentence 3. supporting sentence 3. Topic sentence C <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. supporting sentence 2. supporting sentence 3. supporting sentence
Conclusion paragraphs	Restatement or summary of the main points in the body and a final comment (if appropriate)



1. The process: the multi-faceted nature of essay writing



2. The argument: development and structure



3. The mechanics of essay writing

Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the process involved in writing a university essay
- research the topic
- write analytically
- structure and develop an academic argument
- write in an academic style
- present evidence and reference correctly



You also need to be clear about the function of each of these sections. Let's start off with discussing the purpose of the Introduction. Its function is to serve as a 'map' of the essay, outlining to your reader the main argument and points which you develop in your essay. Most introductions begin with an orientation in the form of a brief general statement that leads the reader into the topic. This is followed by your

Example of an essay Conclusion	
<p>Thus, the concept of culture contributes greatly to our understanding of society. With this concept, a greater understanding maybe reached of how order is maintained in society and how the behaviour of a society is learned. It also allows an understanding of why there are so many societies operating in different ways and, on the other hand, why societies are so similar.</p>	<p>reiteration of thesis point <i>recap of main points in the argument</i></p>

Argumentation within paragraphs

A closer look at a paragraph in the body section of the essay allows us to see how a main point is established then supported with evidence from the literature. This paragraph develops the point that the existence of universals of culture help to explain that similar behaviours are necessary for cultures to exist. Notice how paraphrased information from source material is used to develop and to provide support for the idea presented in the topic sentence.

(Body) The structure of the paragraph	
<p>Finally, the existence of universals of culture, those practices found in every culture, helps to explain that there are similar behaviour requirements if a society is to exist. These universals are practices such as bodily adornment, education, music, religious ritual, trade, sociolinguistic variation and many others (Robertson, 1987: 72). With a proper understanding of culture, one can see, as Hallinan claims, that the basic behavioural requirements of all societies are essentially the same, ie. using technology, forming co-operative relations and communicating symbolically through language (1984:77). If a society's common practices, ie. their culture, are taken away from them that society will undoubtedly fall apart.</p>	<p>topic sentence <i>explanation</i> <i>expansion</i> <i>link to next paragraph</i></p>

Beginning student writers often rely too heavily on quotes to introduce ideas and theories. It is important to try and avoid this because your argument may be lost amongst the quotes and your argument will not be clear. Quotes should be used only when you want to provide extra support in the actual words of an established authority for the point you are making in your topic sentence.

Topic sentences should clearly signal to your reader the main idea in the paragraph. Following sentences should provide the explanation and expansion of the point being made and help to establish the sources and support necessary to strengthen your argument. This means that in the body section of a good essay, you should be able to get a sense of the overall argument by reading only the topic sentences. Try this when editing your drafts – you will get a sense of whether your argument and ideas are flowing logically, or need to be re-ordered.

When the argument isn't clear

We haven't yet provided you with the essay question for the essay on culture. However, by reading the introductory paragraph again you can probably predict what the question was. The student's thesis was that the concept of culture is able to contribute to our understanding of society in a number of ways, so if you said the question was something along the lines of What can the concept of culture contribute to our understanding of society, you would be right. In the paragraphs which formed the body of the essay (skeleton framework) we saw that these paragraphs argued the number of ways the concept of culture could contribute to our understanding of society. Each paragraph discussed one way. Let's now compare the structure of this essay's argument to another essay written in response to the same question. Can you see this essay's weaknesses? The comments in the right hand side column highlight what is wrong with this example essay.

