

# Writing academic essays: tips and techniques

Kath Fisher & Jenny Pittman  
University of Sydney

## Introduction

In this discipline, as is the case with many other disciplines in the social sciences, the main form of assessment you will be required to undertake is the academic essay. Learning how to write a convincing, well-argued essay is one of the most important skills to acquire as part of developing a strong understanding of the disciplinary culture of political science. In essence, an essay requires that you *sell* your argument and *convince* the reader that you know what you are writing about. The following advice is intended to give clear direction to the process of academic essay writing, advice that can be applied to most discipline areas in the social sciences. We look first at how an essay should be structured, then we offer some tips for writing logically and persuasively, followed by how to structure paragraphs. A summary of the main elements of a well-written essay concludes the section. Clear instructions on how to reference your work appear in the final section.

## Essay Structure

There are three main elements of essay structure: the introduction to the essay (where you outline your argument), the body (where you develop your argument logically) and the conclusion (where you summarise your argument).

### ***Introduction ('this is where I stand and this is what I'm going to do')***

The purpose of the introduction is to give direction to the essay and state your argument clearly. This is usually done by telling the reader some of the decisions you have made about your essay, usually in one paragraph (4-6 sentences) for a 1500-2000 word essay, for example:

- your position or perspective that you will take in relation to the assignment task;
- the main ideas that will be covered;
- some indication of how you are limiting the topic, for example to a particular organisation, concept or time frame.

*Definitions*, or clarification of terms and concepts or ideas, are usually placed very early in the essay, as they are the foundation of the assignment. Avoid definitions from a standard dictionary because you are expected to have explored your terms beyond this. Definitions and clarifications let the reader know how you are interpreting the idea that is central to the essay. You cannot evaluate, or make judgements, about, for example, social status, equity, changing attitudes or policies until you have laid the groundwork by identifying some of the criteria that you will use to make such judgements. Those criteria will come from the theory, the definition or other writers' perspectives.

An introductory paragraph may have a structure that takes the following form:

- one sentence that introduces the assignment question (which usually asks you to take a position on a topic, e.g. *is federalism the most suitable political system for Australia?*);

- one (or more) sentences that define the terms and concepts you will be using (such as federalism);
- one or two sentences that put the issue in the broader context (e.g. how long the issue has been debated; the historical background of the debate); and
- a few brief sentences that state your argument clearly and outline the way your argument will proceed (e.g. *In this essay I will argue that .... I begin by .... In this context I demonstrate that .... By contrast, I show in the following section .... I then proceed to examine .... The essay concludes that ....*)

### **Body**

The body, or main part of the essay, is the development of your position/argument. There are many ways that you can do this, such as:

- organising your ideas around reasons you want to give for your stance;
- grouping together ideas from the most to least important;
- grouping similarities and then differences in compare and contrast essays.

Paragraph structure (outlined below) is the *most* important tool to help you develop the body of your essay.

### **Conclusion** (*'this is what I argued and why you should be convinced'*)

The purpose of your conclusion is to *answer* the question and pull together the various strands of your argument. Two important things to remember are: *do not bring any new information* into the conclusion and *do not simply summarise* your essay.

The following questions should help you to write your conclusion:

1. What's my answer to the assignment question?
2. If I had to answer the assignment question in 4–6 sentences what would I write?
3. What are the most significant points I have made in my essay?
4. Why should the reader be convinced by my argument?

Your sentences in the conclusion may take the following forms:

- *In this essay I have argued that ....*
- *The evidence from ... shows clearly that ....*
- *I have shown the weaknesses in alternative positions by demonstrating that ....*
- *To conclude, I contend ....*

### **Writing logically and convincingly**

Written expression is central to the way assessors will judge your work. While you may be able to think critically about ideas and take a position on an issue, if your ideas and sentences are not connected and do not flow logically one to the next, much of the impact of your good thinking will be lost and you are likely to be disappointed with your mark.

Techniques that can help you to connect your ideas and *to write logically* include:

- using a clear paragraph structure (see below);

- using ideas from the previous sentence to lead on to the next sentence;
- employing ‘connecting’ and ‘cueing’ words; and
- repeating words from the assignment task throughout your essay—they not only help you to stay on track but also give your reader that impression!

Techniques that should be used *to write convincingly* include:

- taking a stance in the essay and stating it clearly in advance in the introduction (as described above);
- explaining or defining terms to show your understanding and your perspective;
- giving details and explanation through asking the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions;
- using the literature (books and journal articles, especially beyond the set text and required reading) to demonstrate your knowledge and to support your perspective;
- using paragraphs to help to explain, to give details and to discuss or critique; and
- considering opposing arguments and showing their weaknesses.

### Paragraph structure

Paragraphs are several sentences written together that state and develop a point. There is a common pattern in the body of the essay for paragraphs that have the purpose of explaining, arguing and justifying. This pattern can be written as a series of questions as follows:

What is the point I want to make?	→	This is the <i>topic sentence</i> of the paragraph.
What do I mean by this?	→	Expand and explain, with examples.
So? Why have I written this?	→	How is it relevant to the assignment topic, the position I am taking, or to a sub-point that I am making?

The following sample paragraph demonstrates this pattern:

*The debate about the relative merits of federalism and its suitability as a political system for Australia has engaged political theorists and politicians since federation. [Topic sentence] For example, Galligan (1996: 35) puts forward the view that Australian federalism is essentially democratic, suggesting that devolution of power to the states ensures government ‘close to the people’, avoiding centralisation of power. [Expanding and explaining, using the tool of an example] However, this position does not take account of arguments by those such as Patience (1997) who suggest that more representation at different levels of government does not mean better democracy. [Giving more detail and also a critical comment] It would seem that what is at stake here is how democracy is understood in the Australian context and how the history of the federal compact is interpreted. [This sentence answers the ‘so?’ question]*

Thus, well developed paragraphs need to have a *minimum* of 3-4 sentences and should also contain *at least one reference*.

An important strategy to use when writing paragraphs is to *use ideas from the previous sentence to lead on to the next sentence*. Asking yourself questions after a sentence is a useful way to help develop your ideas and make connections. To illustrate, sample

questions from the above example have been inserted in the brackets below. Note how the sentence following answers the question posed by the previous one:

*The debate about the relative merits of federalism and its suitability as a political system for Australia has engaged political theorists and politicians since federation. [How?] For example, Galligan (1996: 35) puts forward the view that Australian federalism is essentially democratic, suggesting that devolution of power to the states ensures government 'close to the people', avoiding centralisation of power. [What is the strength or shortcoming of this view?] However, this position does not take account of arguments by those such as Patience (1997) who suggest that more representation at different levels of government does not mean better democracy. [So, what can I interpret or conclude from this?] It would seem that what is at stake here is how democracy is understood in the Australian context and how the history of the federal compact is interpreted.*

**Note:** The last sentence of one paragraph does not always lead on to the first sentence of the next paragraph. You might want to make a different point (and so you would begin with something like 'Another major issue in this debate is...') or move to another stage in the essay.

Using 'connecting' and 'cueing' words is another useful strategy in writing clear and logical paragraphs. These words are very helpful to tie ideas and to let the reader know the direction of your thinking. Examples include words to help you:

conclude (*thus, so, therefore ...*); add comparisons (*however, in contrast ...*); add sequences (*first, next, after, then ...*); and reason (*because, if, although ...*).

Using words from the assignment task throughout your essay is another way of connecting ideas. In the example paragraph above, the main topic of the paragraph is reflected in the key word, *debate*. Note where that word first appears—that is, very early in the topic sentence. The writer has then used language that tells the reader that the rest of the paragraph is still on the topic of the debate. Examples include *has engaged, puts forward, suggesting, does not take into account*.

### **What makes a well-written essay?**

To summarise, writing well involves combining the following elements:

- doing the reading and using a wide range of relevant literature;
- laying the groundwork at the beginning so that the context, position, boundaries or limitations are clear to the reader;
- defining terms so the reader understands where you're 'coming from';
- writing to convince the reader that you know what you are writing about (don't assume the reader will fill in gaps in your reasoning)—give details, explain and support your statements, using the literature as evidence;
- demonstrating the relevance of the theory to the concrete examples and practical situations you are using in your essay;
- identifying relationships between concepts or ideas;
- moving beyond simple descriptions to examine the knowledge through the 'how' and 'why' questions';
- using your conclusion to give your 'answer' to the essay question; and
- using a clear and logical paragraph structure.