

Planning your writing

There are two main approaches to organising and analysing information for academic writing.

- The planning approach: spend a lot of time on different types of planning before you begin writing. Only start writing when you know what you will write in each paragraph.
- The drafting approach: start writing early, while you are still developing your ideas. Write many drafts and gradually re-organise your text until your ideas are clear and your paragraphs are well structured.

Both of these approaches can be successful. However, if your writing needs to be more logical, clear or analytical, focus more on your planning. Creating a good plan is a very positive early step towards writing a good assignment.

Know what's expected

While some types of written work are the same in many disciplines, such as essays, there are also some kinds that only belong to a particular discipline. Sometimes even in the same discipline area, different lecturers will have different expectations about a particular type of assignment.

It's therefore important you understand exactly what type of assignment you're expected to write. For example, it could be an essay, report, case study, reflection or critical review.

You can find out what is expected by looking at key sources of information including:

- written assignment instructions
- grade descriptors, rubrics or marking guides. These list the parts of the assignment, how many marks each part is worth, and/or list the qualities in the assignment that will achieve certain grades.
- advice from your lecturer or tutor
- the unit of study outline

- discussion with other students
- general assignment guidelines prepared by some schools, departments or faculties
- model assignments. Some lecturers, departments or schools keep copies of good assignments done by previous students, as models of the right style and structure
- the Learning Centre's resources.

Make a task list

You should identify all the things you need to do to write your paper. This could include:

a library database search and catalogue search to find relevant journal articles or books

- reading and note-taking
- brainstorming
- analysing data
- planning the structure of your assignment
- drafting
- discussion
- editing and proofreading.
- Estimate the time you need for each task and make a realistic plan based on how you work. Some people spend longer reading and analysing before they start writing, while others start writing earlier and write several drafts.
- Find out ways to manage your time.

Early planning

Initially capture as many ideas as possible, without worrying about structure. For example:

- carefully read and think about the assignment or task, and its purpose
- brainstorm lists of key words and topics, to give direction to your reading and research
- draw mindmaps, diagrams and flowcharts
- discuss your ideas with someone else
- list all the readings you could use
- read the abstracts for the relevant sources and make notes on how each article could be useful
- for a large task like a thesis or dissertation, use EndNote, or similar software, to save your references and notes.
- After this initial planning, you can start working out the structure of your assignment.

Structuring written work

Some assignments have a standard format, such as lab reports or case studies, and these will normally be explained in your course materials. For other assignments, you will have to come up with your own structure.

Your structure might be guided by:

the assignment question. For example, it may list topics or use wording such as ‘compare and contrast’

the subject matter itself, which may suggest a structure based on chronology, process or location

your interpretation of the subject matter. For example, problem/solution, argument/counter-argument or sub-topics in order of importance

the structure of other texts you've read in your discipline. Look at how the information is organised and sequenced. Make sure you modify the structure to suit your purpose to avoid plagiarism.

Essays

Essays are a very common form of academic writing. Like most of the texts you write at university, all essays have the same basic three-part structure: introduction, main body and conclusion. However, the main body can be structured in many different ways.

To write a good essay:

know if you're expected to write an analytical, persuasive or critical essay

clearly structure your main body and paragraphs

use appropriate referencing

use academic language.

Reports

Reports generally have the same basic structure as essays, with an introduction, body and conclusion. However, the main body structure can vary widely, as the term 'report' is used for many types of texts and purposes in different disciplines.

Find out as much as possible about what type of report is expected.

How to plan your structure

There are many ways to come up with a structure for your work. If you're not sure how to approach it, try some of the strategies below.

During and after reading your sources, take notes and start thinking about ways to structure the ideas and facts into groups. For example:

- look for similarities, differences, patterns, themes or other ways of grouping and dividing the ideas under headings. This could include advantages, disadvantages, causes, effects, problems, solutions or types of theory
- use coloured highlighters or symbols to tag themes or categories of information in your readings or notes
- cut and paste notes in a document
- physically group your readings or notes into piles.

It's a good idea to brainstorm a few different ways of structuring your assignment once you have a rough idea of the main issues. Do this in outline form before you start writing – it's much easier to re-structure an outline than a half-finished essay. For example:

- draw some tree diagrams, mind-maps or flowcharts showing which ideas, facts and references would be included under each heading
- discard ideas that don't fit into your overall purpose, and facts or references that are not useful for what you want to discuss
- if you have a lot of information, such as for a thesis or dissertation, create some tables to show how each theory or reading relates to each heading (this is often called a 'synthesis grid')
- plan the number of paragraphs you need, the topic heading for each one, and dot points for each piece of information and reference needed
- try a few different possible structures until you find the one that works best.

Eventually, you'll have a plan that is detailed enough for you to start writing. You'll know which ideas go into each section and, ideally, each paragraph. You will also know where to find evidence for those ideas in your notes and the sources of that evidence.

If you're having difficulties with the process of planning the structure of your assignment, consider trying a different strategy for grouping and organising your information.

Making the structure clear

Your writing will be clear and logical to read if it's easy to see the structure and how it fits together. You can achieve this in several ways.

- Use the end of the introduction to show the reader what structure to expect.
- Use headings and sub-headings to clearly mark the sections (if these are acceptable for your discipline and assignment type).
- Use topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph, to show the reader what the main idea is, and to link back to the introduction and/or headings and sub-headings.
- Show the connections between sentences. The beginning of each sentence should link back to the main idea of the paragraph or a previous sentence.
- Use conjunctions and linking words to show the structure of relationships between ideas. Examples of conjunctions include: however, similarly, in contrast, for this reason, as a result and moreover.

Introductions

Most of the types of texts you write for university need to have an introduction. Its purpose is to clearly tell the reader the topic, purpose and structure of the paper.

As a rough guide, an introduction might be between 10 and 20 percent of the length of the whole paper and has three main parts.

1. The most general information, such as background and/or definitions.
2. The core of the introduction, where you show the overall topic, purpose, your point of view, hypotheses and/or research questions (depending on what kind of paper it is).
3. The most specific information, describing the scope and structure of your paper.

If the main body of your paper follows a predictable template, such as the method, results and discussion stages of a report in the sciences, you generally don't need to include a guide to the structure in your introduction.

You should write your introduction after you know both your overall point of view (if it is a persuasive paper) and the whole structure of your paper. You should then revise the introduction when you have completed the main body.

Paragraphs

Most academic writing is structured into paragraphs. It is helpful to think about each paragraph as a mini essay with a three-part structure:

- topic sentence (also known as introductory sentence)
- body of the paragraph
- concluding sentence (necessary for long paragraphs but otherwise optional).

The topic sentence introduces a general overview of the topic and the purpose of the paragraph. Depending on the length of the paragraph, this may be more than one sentence. The topic sentence answers the question 'what's the paragraph about?'.

The body of the paragraph develops this topic. It may elaborate directly on the topic sentence by giving definitions, classifications, explanations, contrasts, examples and evidence.

The final sentence in many, but not all, paragraphs is the concluding sentence. It does not present new information, but often either summarises or comments on the paragraph content. It can also provide a link, by showing how the paragraph links to the topic sentence of the next paragraph. The concluding sentence often answers the question 'so what?', by explaining how this paragraph relates back to the main topic.

You don't have to write all your paragraphs using this structure. For example, there are paragraphs with no topic sentence, or the topic is mentioned near the end of the paragraph. However, this is a clear and common structure that makes it easy for the reader to follow.

Conclusions

The conclusion is closely related to the introduction and is often described as its 'mirror image'. This means that if the introduction begins with general information and ends with specific information, the conclusion moves in the opposite direction.

The conclusion usually:

- begins by briefly summarising the main scope or structure of the paper
- confirms the topic that was given in the introduction. This may take the form of the aims of the paper, a thesis statement (point of view) or a research question/hypothesis and its answer/outcome.
- ends with a more general statement about how this topic relates to its context. This may take the form of an evaluation of the importance of the topic, implications for future research or a recommendation about theory or practice.