

# **Academic writing: Structure, language and style**

## **Structure**

The specific structure of your writing will be determined by the type of assignment you have been asked to produce (essay, report etc). However, most writing will still follow the same overall structure: a beginning, middle and end - the introduction, main body and conclusion.

The introduction outlines the main direction the writing will take, giving any necessary background information and context, defining any specific terms and indicating any boundaries the content will operate within.

In the main body each point is presented, explored and developed. This must be set out in a logical order, to make it easier for the reader to follow and understand.

The conclusion brings together the main points, highlighting the most important. This should be the key message or argument you want the reader to take away. It may also identify any gaps or weaknesses in the arguments or ideas presented, and can recommend further research or investigation where appropriate.

## **Structuring your paragraphs**

As well as the overall writing structure, you need to think about the structure of each sentence and paragraph. You can use paragraphs to build and structure your argument, separating each of your points into a different paragraph. Your point should be made clear in the first or second sentence of the paragraph to make it easier for the reader to follow the line of reasoning.

The rest of the paragraph should explain the point in greater detail, providing relevant evidence and examples where necessary or useful, (where relevant, in reflective and journal writing for instance. At the end of the paragraph you should show the significance of the point you have made to the overall argument or point you are trying to convey in the assignment or link to the next paragraph.

## **Organize the Points**

To decide how to arrange the content of your writing, try using the following steps:

- Know what you want to say before you start writing.
- Create a list of your main points.
- Link the facts, evidence and data you have with each point.
- Revise, edit and proofread your work.

## **Be concise**

In formal academic writing it is important to be concise. This helps your reader to understand the points you are making. Here are some tips to help you:

- Only include one main idea per sentence
- Keep your sentences to a reasonable length (generally not more than 25 words). Long sentences can be difficult to follow and this may distract from your point
- Avoid repetition

## **Use formal language**

In academic writing you are expected to use formal language as opposed to colloquial or informal language:

- Avoid using colloquialisms or slang terms such as 'sort of' or 'basically'. Instead you could use 'somewhat' or 'fundamentally'
- Write words out in full rather than contracting (or shortening) them. For example, instead of writing 'don't' or 'isn't' you would be expected to write 'do not' or 'is not'
- The use of clichés is not appropriate in academic writing. These are phrases such as 'at the end of the day' or 'in the nick of time.' Instead of this you might write finally or at the critical moment

## **Active vs Passive voice**

The passive voice is often used in academic writing as it is seen as more impersonal and therefore more objective. The passive voice is more formal than the active voice but because it is not often used in everyday speech. It is usually appropriate to use a mixture of passive and active forms within academic writing.

## **Tenses**

It is important to use the correct tense in your written work. You will probably need to use different tenses throughout depending upon the context.

If you are writing about established knowledge then use the present tense. For example, "Diabetes is a condition where the amount of glucose in the blood is too high"

If you are writing about an experiment you carried out or a method you used then use the past tense. For example: "Our experiment showed ..."

When you are reporting on the findings or research of others then you should use the present tense.

When you are writing about your conclusions or what you have found then use the present tense.