

Structuring and Organising an Essay

Essay Structure

Among the varying recommendation for good organisation in academic writing the following essay structure is a very common and reliable pattern.

Introduction

- Give background information
- Explain how you interpret the question & identify issues you are going to explore
- State your main thesis (i.e. your proposal or claim to be argued)
- Give a brief outline of the sequence of content in the main body

Main body

- **Review**
what theoretical foundations do you need to review in relation to your topic/thesis? What does the literature say on this issue? What do the experts say?

- **Practice**
In the light of the theoretical review can you identify a real situation where these principles can be exemplified? (both positive and negative)

What concrete examples/statistics can you find to evaluate the theoretical arguments? (This could be considered from numerous perspectives, e.g. personal, cultural, historical, etc).

- **Discussion**
How can these examples and/or statistics be used to illustrate and prove your main argument/thesis?

What are the overall implications for the academic or professional field for further theoretical and/or practical development?

Conclusion

- Summarise your argument and main themes
- State your general conclusions
- Make it clear why those conclusions are important or significant
- Give a final solution (or lack of solution) and/or recommendations
- Do not introduce new material.

References/Bibliography

Introductions and conclusions

The main purpose of an introduction is to give the reader a clear indication of what the paper is going to be about. If you can read the introduction alone and know this, you are moving in the right direction. Likewise the conclusion should tell the reader what the paper ~~was~~ about. In either case if the introduction or conclusion is not clear, it is easy to edit them after you have completed the main body of the essay. However, it is not recommended that you edit the body to suit the introduction or conclusion.

The introductory sequence is a good method for planning, ^{order of arguments} but will almost certainly need to be adapted or rewritten at the end.

The introduction and the conclusion should each be about one tenth of the total essay length. 1/10

The main body of the essay

Creating the main thread of ~~an argument~~ in writing that can be used to inform the main problem and aims in your introduction can be a problematic process, as it involves assessing the level of criticality required in your review and practical aspects of what you want to exemplify and prove in your essay.

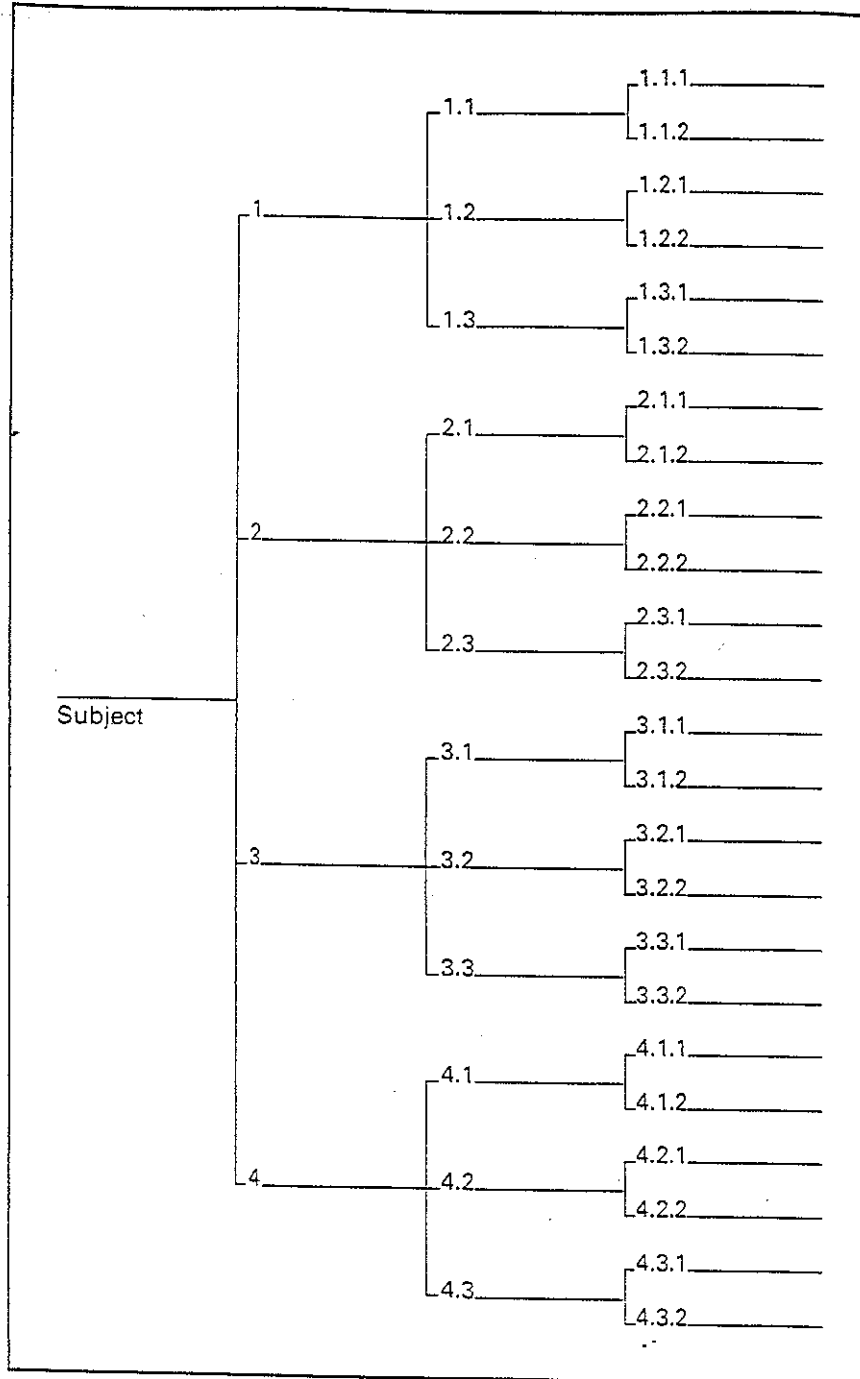
The first stage in this will be to choose reference sources that you will work with in your essay. These sources (journal paper, book, etc.) should be something that informs (positively or negatively) your argument and which you will ~~paraphrase or quote~~ in your essay. Care should be taken here with the types of resources you are using as it is the primary reference sources (books and journals) that are of importance rather than web-based resources and media articles that are increasingly being used. The problem here is that many of the web and media resources have not been edited as critically as the primary published sources.

When you have a reference source, the next thing to do, after reading all of it, or relevant sections, is to identify the main claim in each argument you are reviewing. It would be very useful at this stage to be able to identify (if not work with) relevant contemporary arguments from other writers (both for and against) to be able to ~~analyse one author's perspective~~ (the main argument that you are working with) against the perspectives of others. You will also need to consider the practical implications of the various perspectives and apply them to your topic in a critical manner.

Essay Organisation

The process of constructing an essay involves organising ideas and information in a coherent fashion. The following diagram promotes a useful way for organising information.

WORKSHEET: SUB-HEADINGS EXERCISE A



Referencing

The Harvard referencing system for writing a bibliography

Bibliographies are absolutely essential and follow fixed patterns. There have been a number of different styles of referencing and in reality, different publishers require slightly different formats (e.g. whether the date is at the beginning or at the end, whether the initials of a second author come before or after the surname). The important factor though, is to be consistent with your bibliographic style. If you ever submit a paper to a journal or editor they will provide a reference stylesheet in advance.

BOOKS (2 formats)

Surname, initial/s. (Editor where appropriate) (date). *Title of Book: And Subtitles where Appropriate (including 2nd or 3rd Edition, etc.).* City of publication: Publishers name (may be abbreviated).

Surname, initial/s. (Editor where appropriate) (date). Title of Book: And Subtitles where Appropriate (including 2nd or 3rd Edition, etc.). City of publication: Publishers name (may be abbreviated).

Brumfit, C. & Johnson, K. (Eds.) (1979). *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching.* Oxford: OUP.

Brumfit, C. & Johnson, K. (Eds.) (1979). The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching. Oxford: OUP.

ARTICLES IN BOOKS

Surname, initial/s. (date). "Title of Article: And Subtitles where Appropriate." In Surname, initial/s. (Editor where appropriate) (date).

Hymes, D. (1971) "On Communicative Competence." In Brumfit, C. & Johnson, K. (Eds.) (1979).

JOURNAL PAPERS

Surname, initials. (date). "Title of Article: And Subtitles where Appropriate."
Journal Title Edition: page numbers.

Sheldon, L.E. (1998). "Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials." *ELT Journal* 42/4:
237-46.

INTERNET

Surname, initials. (date). "Title of article: And Subtitles where Appropriate." [On-
line]. URL (date accessed).

Morkes, J. & Nielsen, J. (1997). "Concise, SCANNABLE and Objective: How to
Write for the Web." [On-line]. <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>
(accessed 1/1/2000).

NOTE: With internet references, the URL (web-site address) replaces the publisher, unless a dual source is available. And even though punctuation is an essential feature of keeping a standardised format for your bibliography, don't use a full stop at the end of the URL as you would at the end of a sentence. It will look like it is supposed to be part of the URL.

INTERNET and PUBLISHED SOURCE

Many internet resources do not indicate a specific author, especially if the source is a government document or some other public information report or organisational guidelines, etc. The next example uses such a reference, where the organisation acts as the author's name.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1997) *Take Charge of your Diabetes* (2nd Edition). Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [Also available on-line]. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ddt/ddthome> (accessed 1/1/2000).

Transferable Skills Task

- Select a question that you are working on for your course
- Consider how to plan/organise your information using the essay structure pattern on the first page and construct an organisation diagram (p.3) to record your information.
- Discuss your ideas with others working on the same assignment question.