Essay Writing Strategies

Academic writing is persuasive, so the most important requirement for your essay is to have an argument or position. At university, ‘argument’ has a very specific meaning. It means that you provide a reasoned and evidenced answer to the question asked. Having a well researched, reasoned argument is how you show your mastery of your discipline.

This booklet provides targeted strategies to help you find, structure and present your argument through an essay. The principles of persuasive writing presented here apply to most, if not all, forms of academic writing.

Finding an argument

The first step in writing an essay is deciding what you will argue and why. Remember that an argument in an academic context may also be referred to as your thesis or position. In order to find your argument, you’ll need to clearly understand what you are being asked to do in the essay question. This will guide your research and enable you to explore the different debates relevant to the question, as you formulate your argument.

Essay writing process

Break down the question

Prepare

Background reading

Identify the issue or debate

Research

Read more

Take a tentative position

ARGUMENT

ARGUMENT

ARGUMENT

ARGUMENT

ARGUMENT

Write

Essay plan

Draft and redraft

Edit

Structure
Breaking down the task
Essay questions/tasks may be worded in a variety of ways but regardless of how you are asked the question, you should always assume that you are required to make an argument. Some of the most commonly used ‘directional terms’ in essay questions include discuss, analyse, evaluate this claim, to what extent, and compare and contrast. While some level of description or explanation of the topic or issue is necessary, you must go beyond simply describing and summarising to take a position and explain why that position is logical (i.e. provide sound reasons) using supporting evidence.

To clearly understand what the question is asking you to do, break it down by analysing how many questions or tasks are involved and identifying any sub questions.

When considering the question or task you have been assigned, ask yourself how it fits into the course you are studying. How does it link to the key ideas, themes, concepts and theories that the course covers? What issues or ideas are you being asked to respond to? This will help you to begin the research process and identify the key scholars and debates.

An example: living in Canberra
To demonstrate the aspects of essay writing outlined in this booklet we will use a sample essay question: Canberra is the best place in the world to live. Discuss. This question is asking you to come up with a position on either side of a debate about the liveability of Canberra.

Research and finding the debate
Having an argument requires you to position yourself (express a viewpoint) on a debate in your discipline. When your lecturer sets an essay question, there are likely to be many different viewpoints on the issue within the literature. Background reading is important for gathering information about what is currently known, understood and done in the field so that you can identify the debate and the different arguments. Understanding this will allow you to come up with a strong argument that situates yourself within that debate.

After considering the background information and mapping aspects of the debate, it is useful to come up with a tentative position. It can be helpful to write that position down so that you can consider it as you do more research. As you read, test your thesis to ensure that it is balanced and well evidenced. Consider what arguments or points could be made against your argument and how might you refute them. What evidence from the research could you use?

Throughout this research process, certain themes and ideas will begin to emerge which will help you form your argument and supporting points.
Identify key ideas
In formulating a strong argument you need to persuade your marker that your position is reasonable. A reasoned argument both identifies the key reasons for your position (the ‘why’) and supports these reasons using evidence. Thus, even if your marker does not agree with your position, they should be persuaded that the argument is logical and rational.

To help find your argument from your research, you need to list and order your ideas. Ordering means identifying links between your ideas and ordering them around the central topic/question. This involves:

- grouping similar ideas together
- eliminating irrelevant or redundant ideas
- identifying common links between ideas
- identifying the meanings/relationships between groups of ideas.

It can be useful to ‘test’ and explain your ideas to someone to help you reach a deeper level of analysis, or prompt you in new directions. At the end of this process you should have identified the main themes and points.

Students adopt different approaches in how they order their ideas and come up with their argument. For example, some write lists and then move ideas around to find relationships and links. Others brainstorm all the ideas that come to mind. Mind-mapping takes the process a step further by using a diagram to visually order the ideas from a central point (as in the diagram above). The method you use is not crucial; what matters is that it works for you in finding your argument.

Having decided on your argument, you are now ready to write your thesis statement.

Thesis statement
Essential to every essay is the thesis statement. A thesis statement is a clear and concise articulation of the argument you will make in your essay. It states your position and is typically short – often only one sentence. Following that, the key reasons are also given—often in a few sentences. Every essay needs to have a thesis statement.
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A strong thesis statement
- gives a position that answers the question
- gives reasons for that position
- is clear and specific

Each student may come up with a very different argument and supporting reasons.

Think back to the essay question: *Canberra is the best place in the world to live. Discuss.* In the table below is a possible thesis statement in response to the question.

**Structuring your argument**

Having written your thesis statement, the next step is to formulate a structure that is persuasive, logical and coherent. The key reasons for your position (that you identified when ordering your ideas) will become the main points that you develop in your essay.

When determining a structure, think carefully about the order of your main points. Ask yourself, is the structure logical and persuasive? Don’t be afraid to experiment with alternative structures as this process may lead you to refine your argument. Just as each student will have a unique argument, each student will structure their argument in a different way.

To demonstrate the link between argument and structure, three alternate structures for the sample essay question are shown below. In all of these outlines, the argument is the same. The points are those that have emerged from the research process.

The first structure is very one-sided since it only considers Canberra’s problems. The author does not give a balanced argument. By ignoring Canberra’s positive qualities (the cons), the author does not convince the reader that the negative qualities (the pros) outweigh the positive ones.

The second structure does better than the first one, since it focuses on both sides of

| Argument: Although Canberra has many excellent qualities such as low pollution and a strong economy, I argue that Canberra is not the best place in the world to live. This is because Canberra’s inadequate public transport system leads to increases in pollution, it has large economic inequalities, and inflated housing prices contribute to high levels of homelessness. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure 1</th>
<th>Structure 2</th>
<th>Structure 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate services (con)</td>
<td>Low housing affordability (con)</td>
<td>Low pollution (pro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor housing affordability (con)</td>
<td>Inadequate public transport (con)</td>
<td>Inadequate public transport (con)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate public transport (con)</td>
<td>Low pollution (pro)</td>
<td>Strong economy (pro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness (con)</td>
<td>Strong economy (pro)</td>
<td>Low housing affordability (con)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the debate. But this outline is not very persuasive, because it spends the first half on the negative aspects of Canberra then finishes on the positive. This structure could undermine the argument and to repetition and an overly descriptive essay.

The final structure is more persuasive because it acknowledges the counterarguments. To have a strong argument, you need to consider the other sides to your argument and refute them where possible. Counterarguments should be addressed throughout the essay. In the final structure, the argument acknowledges multiple sides of the debate. By addressing the counterargument (Canberra has many positive qualities) before making the argument (why the problems with Canberra outweigh its benefits) the argument is strengthened.

**Essay plan**

Once you have the basic structure for your essay, you can start filling out your plan. This will provide a skeleton or outline of your essay based on your argument and structure. The number of points required will depend on the length of the essay. Typically, each paragraph will have 150-200 words. Estimate how many paragraphs you will need for the essay, and think about how your key points will fit within this limit.

The plan outlined below details the thesis statement and the main points the writer is going to make. The thesis statement is the key to the structure. It clearly gives the

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**Essay Plan**

**Introduction**

- Although Canberra has many excellent qualities such as low pollution and a strong economy, I argue that Canberra is not the best place in the world to live. This is because Canberra’s inadequate public transport system leads to increases in pollution, it has large economic inequalities, and inflated housing prices contribute to high levels of homelessness.

**Body**

- **Section 1 - Inadequate transport system therefore not liveable**
  - Paragraph - Canberra has low pollution therefore argued to be liveable.
    - OECD figures
    - Media articles
  - Paragraph - However Canberra is not ‘most liveable city’ because its inadequate public transport system for a growing population encourages people to use private transport that increases the city’s pollution levels.
    - Current state of Canberra transport (journal article)
    - Projections of transport use with rising population (journal article)

- **Section 2, Section 3, etc. as above.**

**Conclusion**

- Despite Canberra’s benefits, its ongoing problems mean that it is not worthy of the title ‘the best place in the world to live.’
writer’s position (Canberra is not the best place to live) and the three reasons for that position. Each of the reasons is then expanded. With this plan, the structure is persuasive because each part argues the position and gives reasons. Note that if you changed the order of the key reasons (e.g., if economic issues were first) then the thesis statement would need to be adjusted.

Sections can be useful for long essays when you’re writing about one point over a few paragraphs, then moving on to another point that requires a few paragraphs. For shorter essays (up to 2000 words) you may not need sections, as paragraphs may be sufficient.

**Presenting your argument**

Once you have a plan or an outline, you are ready to start drafting and redrafting the essay. The aim is to now convey your argument effectively through the introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. The essay hourglass diagram on this page demonstrates how this is achieved. The essay starts broadly in the introduction then narrows to the argument. The line of argument is developed through the topic sentences and supporting evidence in the paragraphs. Then the essay is drawn to a close in the conclusion which sums up your position and broadens back out to the original topic.

**Introductions**
The introduction is where you show that you have understood what the question is about and through your argument, show your direct response to that question. Before you can present your argument, you need to introduce the topic by providing the appropriate context and background. This will orient the reader. Keep the background material to a minimum (a sentence or two is usually sufficient for a shorter essay), focusing this material on contextualising the debate. Next you need to outline the issue or debate or why the topic is controversial. For example, you could (briefly) explain the main disagreement between relevant theorists in the field.

Once you have briefly mapped the debate you are ready to state your position within
that debate with your thesis statement. This provides a succinct answer to the essay question. Finally, give the reasons for your argument in a sentence or two. This indicates the key points and the order that you will raise them in the essay.

In practice, how you structure the introduction will differ from student to student and essay to essay. The aim is to ensure that your reader understands your argument and how your essay will proceed.

**Paragraphs**
The paragraphs form the body of the essay. Each paragraph contains one main idea, and develops that idea through three key steps: a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences and finishing up with a concluding or linking sentence.

**Topic Sentences**
Topic sentences show your position and create clarity and cohesion in the essay. Taken together, the topic sentences of a paper are like a skeleton for your essay.

When writing topic sentences, ask yourself two questions about the paragraph and incorporate both these elements into your topic sentences:

- what is this paragraph about?; and
- how does it develop my argument?

**Supporting sentences**
Supporting sentences reinforce and develop the main idea. Each sentence should connect to the others to allow a flow of ideas. The supporting sentences are where you strengthen your argument by incorporating your research and analysis. Evidence comes in the form of statistics, quotations, critics’ perspectives, or other documentary evidence.

Regardless of the type of evidence, make sure that you reference a source whenever you use it. Quote selectively; summarising and paraphrasing show that you have a deeper understanding of the evidence, and will leave you more room to analyse the evidence.

**Concluding/linking sentences**
The final sentence of your paragraph gives it a logical end. This sentence may summarise or conclude the idea introduced in the topic sentence or it might logically lead and link to the idea developed in the next paragraph.

**Conclusions**
While your task in the introduction was to move from the general (your field) to the specific (your response to the question), in the conclusion your task is to move from the specific back to the general. Start by summarising your position by drawing together each component of your argument in a logical and meaningful way. This will emphasise your argument and draw it to a close.

Finish the essay by considering the implications of your argument and findings.
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Think about what the argument you have presented implies for the topic or issue that you presented in the introduction. Answer the ‘so what?’ question.

After writing your conclusion, go back and read the question. Have you addressed the task? Re-read your introduction. Does your conclusion agree with your introduction? Have you done what you set out to do at the beginning of your essay?

Editing

The last step is to edit your essay. It is best to approach editing systematically, going from the big picture down to the details. The table below lists how you can edit your essay by firstly examining argument, then structure, paragraphing and evidence. Finally, focus on the details of expression and proofreading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Is your argument clearly stated in the introduction? Are the key reasons for your argument signposted in the introduction? Is the argument/key reasons summarised in the conclusion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Is your argument sustained throughout the essay body? Look at your topic sentences, do they clearly express your argument? Are your paragraphs presented in the most logical order? Does the order of the reasons in the introduction match the order of ideas in the essay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragrapging and evidence</td>
<td>Does each paragraph have a topic sentence and only one idea? Make sure quotes are accurate and the examples, evidence, and analysis come from reputable scholarly sources and support the points you want to make.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>Check sentence flow and length. Cut extraneous phrases and eliminate synonyms. Doing so will make your sentences easier to read and leave you more room to develop your ideas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This booklet has provided a brief overview of the essay writing process. More resources including samples can be found on our website. Additionally, we offer workshops and one-to-one appointments where you can learn the strategies outlined in this booklet in more detail.

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