**TLC PODCASTS: Essay writing – planning and structure**

A good essay presents a clear, logical argument that flows coherently and culminates in a convincing way. Planning your essay early on and structuring the various parts of your argument can help you write a good essay. The key points from Friday’s podcast on basic principles of essay structure and planning are presented in this hand-out.

A straightforward way to think about essay structure is to organise your thoughts and present your reader with an text that has a clear introduction, main body, and conclusion.

**Introduction**

Introduce your essay to your reader by

* presenting the reader with the specific question you will be addressing,
* giving your concise answer to that question, and
* outlining briefly the plan for how you will answer the question in the rest of the essay.

For more advice on how to analyse your essay question, listen to Wednesday’s podcast. For guidance on writing an introduction, listen to Thursday’s podcast.

**Body**

The body of your essay is the core of your argument, ordered in a logical way. It should follow the plan that you set out at the end of your introduction.

**Conclusion**

In the conclusion of your essay

* re-iterate the question you were seeking to respond to, remind your reader “why are we here?”,
* re-state succinctly your response to this question–your main argument,
* give an indication of why the discussion was important–the implications or applications of your argument.

This type of structure allows you present your argument in “layers”. First you say what you’re doing and what you have to say (introduction). Then you say what you have to say, building each element carefully and in detail (body). Finally, you re-iterate what you had to say and give some indication of why it is important (conclusion).

This may seem repetitive. But remember that while your argument seems clear enough to you, your reader is discovering it for the first time. By saying what you have to say, saying it, the saying what you said, you can be assured that your reader can follow your thinking.

**Planning your essay**

* Be sure you know the word limit of your essay (and whether your marker has specified if this includes footnotes, bibliography, etc.) and think of the word count to plan the parts of your essay.
* There is no set rule, but a good guideline is about 10% of the word count for the introduction, 10% for the conclusion, and 80% for the body of your essay (e.g. for a 2000-word essay, budget around 200 words for the introduction, 200 for the conclusion, and 1600 words for the main body of the essay).
* Using the answer to your question, decide how many parts you will have in the main body, the main point you will make in each part, and allot an approximate word count for each part.
* Is one of the large parts of the body of your essay called “background” or “history”? Consider carefully whether such a section supports the argument you want to make and whether it merits an entire section.
* Dealing with the word limit is an important part of building a convincing argument. It obliges you to be succinct and to prioritise the ideas that are most crucial to your argument, leaving out what is less relevant.
* Thinking about how many words you have at your disposal helps you plan reading and writing, and keep track of your progress as you work on your essay.

**Paragraphs**

* Paragraphs are the building blocks of your argument! Each paragraph should present one main idea; this idea is usually made clear in the first sentence.
* Generally speaking, typical paragraphs are around 100-200 words. Of course there is no rule! If you’re paragraph is only one sentence long, check to see whether you’ve developed and supported the main idea. If it is one page long, check to see whether there is more than one main idea.
* For each main part you’ve planned in the body of your essay (and the number of words available), decide how many paragraphs you’ll use in each part and what the main point of each paragraph should be.
* Think about the order of the various parts and the order of the points you make. Changing the order can change the emphasis you choose to place on aspects of your argument.

**Using your time wisely**

Planning and structuring your essay takes time. But this investment of time early in the writing process is well worth it. Without an idea for how you will answer your question and develop your argument across the various sections of your essay (even just a good, preliminary idea), you may spend too much time and energy and write too much for one part, and run out of time for another part. By neglecting the overall structure of your essay, you also run the risk of ending up with a final text that lacks a coherent flow, leaving your reader to struggle to follow your thinking.

Giving thought to the structure and word count in advance is one way to take control of the argument – or the “message” – of your essay. Going straight to the readings before you have any idea of what you want to say or what you think of the question – greatly increases the likelihood that your essay will be a description of what your read rather than a logical argument that conveys a clear point.