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

So far this week, we started by talking about writing in general, then more specifically, how to approach the question Wed , and how to develop your introduction, yesterday. In today’s podcast, I’d like to shift the attention back to the essay as a whole and how you can go about planning and structuring your work overall. First I’ll talk about the structure of an essay. Then I’ll propose two approaches to planning your essay and building your argument.

**Essay structure**

A very basic way to consider the structure of an essay is that it should comprise an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. None of these three elements are optional! In Thursday’s podcast, we spoke in detail about the introduction.

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.

In the **conclusion** of your essay, you re-iterate the question you were seeking to respond to. Remember, this comes after a set of detailed points and evidence… -- in essence, reminding your reader “why are we here?”. Then you go on to re-state your response to this question. Finally, you give some indication of why the discussion was important. Why does your answer to this question matter? To whom does it matter? This might include the implications or the applications what you are proposing. While the introduction features “the question, the answer, and the plan”, then the conclusion should include “the question, the answer, and ‘who cares?’/’so what’?”.

Some students are worried about being excessively repetitive. After all, you gave a concise response to the question in the introduction, you developed it further throughout the body of the essay, and now, in the conclusion, it appears again. Remember though that it seems repetitive to you because you have crafted the argument. Your reader, on the other hand, is discovering your argument–the point you are trying to make–for the first time. By letting the reader know what to prepare for, developing the points in detail, then providing a re-cap of your argument, you are helping ensure that the reader follows your thinking without struggling to understand what you are trying to say.

This is a very general overview of the finished product, and I hope you can use this as a general guideline as you write to check how your essay is coming together. But I’d also like to propose two tips to plan and build your essay.

**Using your word limit to plan your essay**

The first approach I’d like to suggest involves using the word limit of your essay to help you plan the various parts. The advantage here is that you can do this work very early in the essay-writing process – just after you have analysed and appropriated your question (as we discussed in Wednesday’s podcast) and before you begin reading for your essay.

Considering your word limit helps you structure your essay and use your time and energy wisely. This is how it works. First, be sure you know the word limit of your essay (and whether your marker has specified if this includes footnotes, bibliography, etc.). There is no set formula, but a helpful guideline to consider for the length of your introduction and conclusion parts is about 10% of the total word count for each. So, if you’re working on a 2,000 word essay, allot about 200 words for the introduction and 200 for the conclusion. With the remainder–1,600 words in this case–consider how many main parts there will be in your essay. Three or four could work well, giving you a “budget” of around 400-500 for each section.

Remember from Wednesday’s podcast that part of questioning your question involves developing at least a preliminary position on the question or issue. Each part of the body of your essay should directly link to that position. Once you’ve begun to identify what each main part of your essay will be about, and that you have, say, 450 words to devote to that aspect of your argument, you can use this information to help choose and prioritise the readings that you will explore to develop your essay. This helps prevent a situation where you have reviewed several articles and chapters, made several pages of notes, only to discover that you only have space for 2 or 3 paragraphs about that subject, given the overall plan and balance of your essay.

Word limits are part of the constraints that all academics (and most other writers) have to work with. Part of the challenge is realising what is essential to the argument and what is not. Having only 2,000 or 5,000 or 10,000 words to use to make your point can be limiting, but it can also help you focus your attention and prioritise what is really important to include compared to what is only partially relevant to the argument.

You’ll find a worksheet, together with the file and transcript of this podcast, where you can do your own calculations using your word limit and the parts of the essay you are currently planning. Using word limits, though, is not as easy as filling in a few word counts and simply writing them up. Like I said earlier, there is no set formula to building an argument in writing. That said, thinking about how many words you have at your disposal can help you plan your reading and writing, and keep track of your progress as you work on your essay.

The second step to planning and structuring your essay involves thinking about your argument and the way you use paragraphs.

**Structure, arguments, and paragraphs**

At this stage, you’ve interpreted your essay question and formulated a position that you would like to try to take with respect to that question. Once you found some initial ideas and information in your class notes, reading notes, and exploratory readings, it is time begin to plan for the content of your essay. What I mean by this to organise the various ideas you want to use to build your argument and think about how to present them in paragraphs.

Here we should say a few things about what a paragraph is. A paragraph is a unit of text, a set of sentences that is visually indicated by an extra line space, possibly indentation (and in some official documents or special cases, a number – but not usually in academic essays). More important than its appearance though, think of a paragraph as a set of sentences that presents *a single idea*; this idea is usually made clear in the first sentence. The following sentences then go on to develop and support that idea. This could be by defining or refining, or by demonstrating the point through examples. The paragraph might even conclude the idea and help make a transition to the next idea.

There is certainly no rule about how many words a paragraph should be; yet markers comment on paragraphs being too short or too long. This has to do with the content of the paragraph. Remember that a paragraph should present and develop one idea. If there is only one sentence, an idea might be presented – but it’s probably not supported or developed very well. Conversely, if your paragraph is an entire page long, it is likely that it contains more than one idea, which makes it difficult for your reader to follow your thinking. Again, there is no fixed rule, but depending on the writer and on the type of text, a paragraph could be around 100-200 words.

With this understanding of how paragraphs can be building blocks of argument, one idea at a time, and given a very approximate length of typical paragraphs, you can begin to estimate how many ideas you can use to develop your argument. Thinking back to the body of your essay, consider the main ideas that you will need to propose and develop in order to formulate and support the argument you would like to make.

Have another look at the draft structure you have developed for your essay. For each large section of the body of your essay, try to articulate the main ideas you will need to develop in each of those sections. You can use the planning worksheet that accompanies this podcast. For each section,

write a concise sentence or two that completes the statement “This section is about”. This is a writing prompt and doesn’t go in the essay. This can help clarify your thinking and keep your writing on track. This way, you decide which elements go into your essay and in which order.

Also think about the order of the points you make. Changing the order can change the emphasis you choose to place on aspects of your argument.

You can make lists of the various elements you might like to include within each section: definitions, quotes, data, examples, or references to essential texts, for example. Consider listing them separately in the first instance. Then think about where they best fit; how they support your argument. If there is not an obvious place for some items – it could be because it is not relevant to the point you are trying to make. Ask yourself whether that element–as interesting as it might be–actually belongs in your essay.

When you make this kind of list, using your essay structure to help you find places for the various elements, you may find that you have more material for one section compared to the others. In this case you might decide that you have enough for a particular them and that it is time to move to another theme. Or, you might have tapped into a particularly rich facet of the question you are answering. In this case, you might decide that what was formerly one of three parts becomes the broader scope of the essay, which will then be elaborated into two or three sub-sections. This is fine! Just be sure that you re-work the scope of your question and your response to it in the introduction.

Have you labelled one of your main sections as “background” or “history”? Be aware of how many items fall into this section and ask yourself whether it is all necessary. Of course, you’ll need to read about the background of the matter, and probably make yourself some notes on it – but does it need to appear in your essay or is it detracting from the space you could use for your own argument?

Ultimately, working through your essay plan this way will help you arrive at a “table of contents” or a detailed structure. Ideally, you want to know what the various parts of the essay will be, and what will be included in each part. The more you can plan and develop your argument in advance, the easier the research and drafting will be.

**Using your time wisely**

This kind of planning may not be for everyone! Some people can write clear, concise arguments that flow convincingly, in a balanced way in one draft. Most people cannot!

As you plan your essay writing, taking your deadline and other commitments into account, I suggest investing time at the very beginning for this kind of planning work. Neglecting the overall structure of your essay can result in your reading too much overall or too much on one topic at the expense of another. In terms of the essay, you also run the risk of writing an unbalanced essay or a text that doesn’t flow well.

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.

To re-cap the main points, in planning and structuring your essay, be sure to plan for three main parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. In the body of your essay, use your word count carefully to develop balanced sections that are directly related to your main argument. Finally, use paragraphs – with the first sentence that announces the main idea of the paragraph – to build your argument, in a clear and logical way.

As always, there are many resources and sources of support available related to planning and structuring your essays. Check the list of resources that is provided together with this podcast; and remember, you can always call in to your teachers’ or advisers’ office hours with questions about your writing. Also, support is available at the Teaching and Learning Centre from the Royal Literary Fund Fellows and the qualitative study adviser.

This marks the end of our reading week podcast series. I hope they have been useful for you. You can listen to them again at any point in the year, and use the various hand-outs and worksheets as you receive feedback and new assignments. If you have any questions, please do feel free to get in touch with us at the Teaching and Learning Centre. We would also like to hear your feedback on these podcasts.

We hope you’ve had a good week and wish you the best for the second half of Michaelmas Term!