



Structuring your essay: video tutorial

<http://www.screencast.com/t/o9SsJ5eyv>

Transcript

Introduction: Welcome to this tutorial on structuring your essay from the University of Reading Study Advice team. The tutorial is designed for you to go through at your own pace and you can pause it at any time.

Slide 1: Structuring is one aspect of essay writing that often features in markers' comments. A structure that is easier to follow, a stronger argument, and clearer paragraphs will all get better marks - but how do you make sure you do this?

Slide 2: This tutorial will show you how to create an effective structure by looking at:

- Identifying your main message
- Planning to order your points
- The role of introductions and conclusions
- Signposting
- And clear paragraphing

Slide 3: Identifying your message:

A good flexible model for an essay structure is like a river. Your essay goes from the start point or introduction to the destination or conclusion, with your main message running throughout like the body of the river.

Then you have your paragraphs which are like the streams of the river. They all make different points but these points feed in and contribute to the overall message and move you further along to where you are trying to get to (your conclusion).

Slide 4: What you are trying to avoid is having lots of good individual points, but no clear direction for where they are heading. This confuses your reader and means they will lack confidence in your structure.

Slide 5: Planning can help identify your main message and find an order for the points you want to make. We all probably know someone like ‘Perfectly-Planned Polly’ who does the most incredibly detailed and neat plans, and we probably all know someone like ‘Jump-in Justin’ at the other extreme who just starts writing straight away.

Being somewhere in between these extremes is usually a good idea. There is no right or wrong way to plan your essay, but the act of planning is useful for developing a strong structure, as it enables you to:

- Do some of the higher level thinking and identify what you want to write before trying to express it in individual sentences
- Planning also helps you group similar ideas to avoid repetition
- Cut out irrelevant points that distract from your main message
- Find a logical order for your points
- Identify that main message that runs through your essay

Some people like to identify their main message first and then plan based on this, and other people find their main message emerges once they have thought of their individual points. Whichever way works for you is fine.

Slide 6: How might this look in practice? Here is an example essay question. You may have lots of ideas from your own thoughts and wider reading. Write all these down, and then the planning process enables you to group similar ideas together and cut out any irrelevant points.

Slide 7: Then as part of your planning, identify the main message that will provide the body of your river. Note down your introduction to help start you on the journey, and a logical order for the key points and examples, that act as the streams feeding into your river.

People often get worried by the idea of a ‘logical order’ for your points. There is no mystery to this, it just means a sensible order that takes your reader through step-by-step – what do they need to know first, and next, and then next?

Slide 8: People often find it difficult to know how to start and end their essays because they are not sure of the role of introductions and conclusions.

You can think of your introduction like a road map. It lets your reader know where you are headed in the essay and gives them confidence in your structure. An introduction often contains a ‘what, why and how’. You explain what your essay question is about and show how you are understanding and interpreting it. You briefly indicate why the question is important – this involves putting it in context

and looking at what is disputed, interesting or why we should care about the issues. Then you show how you will answer the question. This means your reader knows what is coming and involves some of the signposting we will look at in the next section of this tutorial.

If your introduction is like your road map, then your conclusion is like the snapshot you take to remember the journey. It summarises the key points, but it is more than a basic summary as the conclusion provides your final answer to your question that hopefully all your points have been contributing to.

Slide 9: Now to move on to signposting. A key aspect of having a good structure is letting your reader know what this structure is so they can easily follow it in your essay and give you credit for it.

Signposting simply means letting your reader know what you are covering in the order that you cover it. So you may use phrases like this in your introduction. And phrases like this to provide links or changes between different themes or sections.

Your essay doesn't have to have a beautifully linked and flowing structure, it just needs a functional structure that the reader knows about and can follow.

Slide 10: A good structure is supported by clear paragraphs. Each paragraph deals with a different point. You introduce the point, provide evidence to support the point, interpret the evidence to show how it supports the point, and link that point back to the overall question.

A paragraph is a unit of sense. When you move on to a different idea, you start a different paragraph. From this example you can see without having to read it that there is a lot of text. This probably suggests that there are too many ideas together at once. It would work better if this was divided into separate paragraphs. You can pause this tutorial to read the example in more detail to see why.

SLIDE 11

To recap.

For an effective essay structure:

- Identify your main message – that forms the body of the river
- Use planning to help order your points – like the streams flowing into the river
- Think of your introduction as your road map, and your conclusion as a snapshot
- Use signposting to make your structure clear to your reader
- And have one main point per paragraph.

If you do this you will have solidly structured essays to support your ideas.