Structuring Written Assignments

This workshop will...

- Explain what ‘structure’ means
- Suggest the basic principles of providing a sound structure
- Introduce the ‘tools’ you need to manage structure within academic writing.

Teaching Points:

1. What ‘structure’ means
2. First steps to good structure
3. Macrostructure: your assignment as a whole
4. Microstructure: paragraphs
5. Improving the ‘flow’ of written assignments
1. What ‘structure’ means

When tutors talk about ‘structure’ they are talking about how ideas and material are organised in writing so that the reader can make complete sense of what is presented without having to question the writer. Tutors mention structure in different contexts, such as...

- the assignment as a whole
- individual sections (the introduction/main body/conclusion or different report elements)
- a logical order from one point to another
- the internal structure of paragraphs

Structure matters because a written paper is like a house...

Just as a house is made of building materials, so too is a written piece of work – made of materials, either from original work (e.g., design, experimentation or investigation), or from reading and gathering sources, and theoretical debate.

This is why there is no such thing as a single structure – especially if you are used to non-HE environments where this term might be used as a euphemism for ‘indicative content’, i.e. where a specialist says what to research, in what order and how to present it.

Most students are used to an essay structure, introduction, main body, conclusion, but there are other specialised structures.

TALKING POINT

As a group we will identify other types of written work found at university that require a different structure to that of essays.
2. First steps to good structure

Developing a good structure is about 2/3 of the way through the process of completing an assignment. If you complete each previous stage successfully, it will be easier for you to develop a good structure.

It can be difficult to know where to start when developing an initial structure. There are a number of techniques:

- Using PowerPoint to jot down ideas, with notes on evidence, etc., on individual slides which can then be moved around.
- Try writing down ideas on Post-it notes and move those around until happy.
- A whiteboard can be useful for producing structures.
- There are a number of software programmes to help build a structure; one of these is accessible on all computers on campus – Mind Genius 3. Simply click on the start icon, then Productivity Software, then Mind Genius 3.

3. **Macrostructure: your assignment as a whole**

Essay assignment structures usually work to ‘The Rule of 3’.

![TALKING POINT](image)

What percentage of the whole assignment does each section of an essay take up? Write your answers in the boxes below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Main body</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The main body is where you expand on the points you announced in your introduction. The reader has to be able to follow you argument in a logical way from one topic/point/section to the next. In turn, this means you need to be clear about what you are saying and in what order.
There are a number of formats you can use with just three of them shown below:

**The Switch**

1. Introduction
2. A change of direction, e.g. from paragraph 2 to 3, is often ‘signalled’ by using the word, ‘however’.
3. 1
4. 2
5. 3
6. 4
7. 5
8. Conclusion

**The Zig-zag**

1. Introduction
2. 1
3. 2
4. 3
5. 4
6. 5
7. 6
8. Conclusion

**The Snowball**

1. Introduction
2. 1
3. 2
4. 3
5. 4
6. 5
7. 6
8. Conclusion

Firstly, you argue from one point of view for approximately half of the text and then ‘switch’ to another viewpoint until your conclusion.

Your first paragraph makes one point of an argument, then you ‘zig’ to the next different (possibly opposing) point and argument, then you ‘zag’ back to your original argument with another point, and so on to the conclusion.

You come to a crescendo of one point building on another and another and so on until your conclusion.

Using ‘The Snowball’ format to argue for HE student loans for HE students to pay their fees:

A. It is the cheapest loan people can obtain
B. Individuals do not have to pay any money back until earning a certain amount
C. Having a loan teaches financial discipline
D. Reduces the number of people going to university because they ‘didn’t know what else to do’
E. It is less of a drain on taxes
F. It is fair that not all the tuition fees are paid, through taxes, by people who have not and will not attend university.
**Activity 2: Different structure formats**

In pairs, identify 4 or 5 points **against** HE loans and jot these down first. Then apply them and the earlier points **for** loans to either the Switch or Zig-zag formats.

Points against HE loans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Switch</th>
<th>The Zig-zag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Don’t forget to check with your school, tutor/supervisor or programme handbook about a preferred structure.

Quick tip to check the order of paragraphs:

Use ‘**reverse outlining**’: on completion of the assignment, make a short note (no more than a few words) at the side of each paragraph in the margin and check if it is relevant to the question/brief. Then check to see if they are in the right order.
Macrostructure is also about looking at how you physically organise your notes: will you use a mind or concept map, diagrams, flow charts, a computer or pieces of paper on a board?

(Potter, 2013)

4. Microstructure: paragraphs

There are two types of paragraphs, each with a particular job to perform in your writing. The first is a...

**substantive** paragraph. These contain one theme with each one helping to build your **argument**. If your assignment is a ‘filing cabinet’ which is full of information on one particular topic, a paragraph is an individual ‘drawer’ making a particular point on that topic. Each drawer contains ‘files’ with each one being an element in building up the point.

(Inspiration, 2013)

(University of Roehampton, 2013)
Filing cabinet = Assignment

| Entire assignment: essay or report from introduction to conclusion building argument or working through project |

File drawer = Paragraph

| One paragraph: makes **one theme** towards argument |

File = different element

| File 1. Introduces the paragraph topic  
File 2. Explains and clarifies  
File 3. **Identifies your theme**  
File 4. Gives (and comments on) the evidence  
File 5. Wrap-ups (concludes) and either links to the question/brief OR signposts to what is coming up next. |

The other type of paragraph is a...

**bridging** paragraph which does what you might expect. It...

- Offers a link when there is no easy-to-establish signpost to what is coming up next
- Can be shorter than regular paragraphs
- May be descriptive rather than substantive
- May still contain citations to reference any material used to establish a new ‘direction’.

**TALKING POINT**

Together we will read the following two paragraphs and decide which is ‘substantive’ and which is ‘bridging’, and identifying their features.

n.b. If you can spot it, your marker (with years of experience) can certainly find it in your writing.
On the other hand, justice can be defined from a cultural point of view. Some see crime as an action against the law of god regardless of whether it is against the statutory law or not. For instance in some world religions, abortion is a crime as it is against theological doctrine to have an abortion so someone may be seen as a criminal, as they are going against the law of god and justice must be done. Whereas, people who do not see crime as a cultural thing would not see abortion as a crime if legally it is the mother’s decision whether or not to have an abortion, so no justice is needed. Crime can, therefore, be seen from a different perspective: known as a ‘sin’. As such, sinning may not be seen as a crime but still may be seen as a wrongful act. For example, lying can be seen as only a sin but lying in court before a jury comprised of peers goes beyond merely being ‘sinful’ and instead, will be seen as a crime and justice must be done (Smith, 2012).

A. Type of paragraph:

In the western world, there have been shifts in the definition of justice over time. These shifts are often due to a differential focus on either of two elements of justice, i.e. ‘justice as fairness’ or ‘justice as alterity’ (Hudson, 2001). The concept of ‘justice as fairness’ has its roots in classical theory from the Enlightenment period. The central theme here is that people should be treated equally no matter what their social status, and hence there should be similar punishments for similar kinds of crimes (Lanier, 2010). However, this perspective has limitations; critics argue that it is unjust to treat people from different backgrounds and in different circumstances equally and that this leads to unfair discrimination (Lanier and Henry, 2004). The idea of ‘justice as alterity’ holds that consideration should be given to the personal circumstances of the offenders and thus punishment and rehabilitation could differ even if offenders have committed similar crimes (Jefferson, 2011). The rehabilitation model, which was applied in the UK and USA in the 1960s, is an example of the application of this concept (Hudson, 2001).

B. Type of paragraph:

Quick tip to check your paragraphs are well structured:

a. Write the **topic** of the paragraph in the margin and highlight it. In the same colour, highlight your topic sentence. (If it’s not at the start, reconsider its position).
b. Highlight the evidence in a different colour.
c. Highlight the summary or link sentence in another colour. Do they all say what they are supposed to?
Underline anything you are unsure of (could it go elsewhere, even in a different paragraph?)

5. Improving the ‘flow’ of written assignments

 Whilst your paragraphs may be in a logical order so readers can easily follow your argument, it may not ‘flow’ well. In effect, there is a chunk of information on one point and a chunk of information on the next point with no smooth transition.

Imagine a machine with lots of cogs all fitting together as they should. However, without the oil for smooth movement, the machine does not perform as well as it could. Transitional words and phrases are the oil.

Transition words and phrases are used...

- for establishing cohesion.
- for enhancing understandability
- for improving connection to your points and argument

One example of each type of phrase is listed below. As you read more sources, you can add more phrases/words to the right hand boxes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What you want to do</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To show addition</td>
<td>Coupled with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show time</td>
<td>Earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To compare</td>
<td>Likewise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give examples</td>
<td>For instance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show emphasis</td>
<td>Above all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show cause and effect</td>
<td>Therefore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To introduce conclusions</td>
<td>In conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To summarise</td>
<td>To sum up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Answers

Specialist structures
Scientific = laboratory report
Technical = design specification
Medical = case studies
Social work = critically reflective workbooks
Managerial/ Business/ Financial = feasibility studies
General = dissertations and final year reports

What percentage of the whole assignment does each section of an essay take up? Write your answers in the boxes below.

Intro: 5-8%       Main body: 82-87%       Conc: 8-10%

Activity 2: Different structure formats

Suggested points against HE loans:
- Graduates start their working life in debt
- Free education for all at all levels
- May put off some people from attending university

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Switch</th>
<th>Zig-zag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Against: Graduates start their working life in debt</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against: Free education for all at all levels</td>
<td>For: Individuals do not have to pay any money back until earning a certain amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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‘Substantive’ or ‘bridging’ paragraphs?

A. Type of paragraph: Substantive. The clue is the introductory phrase, ‘on the other hand’ which suggests an opposing point was being made in the previous paragraph and this will be a response. This paragraph deals with one point: that ‘justice can be defined from a cultural point of view’.

B. Type of paragraph: Bridging. This paragraph argues two opposing arguments relating to how offenders should be treated in relation to their background. It is being used to move the reader towards ‘(Hudson’s) rehabilitation model’.