Writing Skills: Organising Essays

Essays are organised differently according to their purpose. Essays can be divided into the following main types.

1. The descriptive essay
   a. Description of object or place
   b. Describing a sequence of events.
   c. Describing a process
   d. Describing and explaining

2. The argument essay
   a. The balanced view
   b. The persuasive essay
   c. The to what extent essay.

3. Compare and contrast essays
   a. The contrast essay
   b. The compare essay
   c. The compare and contrast essays

1. The descriptive essay
   a. Description of object or place
   Describe essays require you to state the appearance of something, or to state the major characteristics of it. Note the word state i.e. you are not asked to comment on the subject or to give your personal point of view on it. Questions are often introduced by:

   Describe ....
   Narrate...
   Tell....

   Introduction
   (major aspects of the subject)

   description of aspect A

   etc.

   Conclusion
c. Describing a process
This is like telling a story but here the connections between the facts must be clearly shown and explained. Group the events into steps or stages.

Examples of such questions are:
Explain/What is the connection between.... Describe the procedures by which...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of process</th>
<th>Main equipment/Main steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step One</td>
<td>leads to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Two</td>
<td>leads to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Three</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Summary of process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d. Describing and explaining
Some of the words and phrases which introduce this type of description are:
Explain the causes/reasons.... Account for.... Analyse the causes.... Comment on (the reasons for).... Show that.... Show why...
Examine the effect of.... Suggest reasons for.... Why did...?

What are the implications of...? Discuss the causes of.... Discuss the reasons for....

When we are asked to describe or explain causes, factors, functions or results, the purpose is to group the facts. Similar causes are put together, for instance the economic causes of a situation. There are basically two main ways to organise this type of essay.

The question is "Describe the causes of A. Illustrate your answer by specific examples."

Example 1:
2. The argument essay

There are two main methods of presenting an argument, and in general the one you choose will depend on exactly how the essay title is worded.

a. The balanced view

If the essay title begins with something like:

- Give the arguments for and against....
- Assess the importance of....
- Examine the arguments for and against....
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of...?
- Evaluate....
- Critically examine the statement that....
- To what extent is...true?
- Or even just the word Discuss....

Then it is clear that a balanced essay is required. That is to say you should present both sides of an argument, without necessarily committing yourself to any points of view, which should always be based on evidence, until the final paragraph. At its simplest your essay plan will be as follows:

Introduce the argument to the reader.

- e.g. why it is particularly relevant topic nowadays
- or refers directly to some comments that have been voiced on it recently.

Reasons against the argument

Reasons in favour of the argument

After summarising the two sides, state your own point of view, and explain why you think as you do

b. The persuasive essay

This second type of argumentative essay involves stating your own point of view immediately, and trying to convince the reader by reasoned argument that you are right. Perhaps the essay title will begin with something like:

- Give your views on....
- What do you think about....?
- Do you agree that....?
- Consider whether....

Or perhaps the title itself will be so controversial that everyone will hold a definite opinion in one direction or another. The form of the essay will be, in outline, as follows:

Introduce the topic briefly in general terms, and then state your own opinion.

- Explain what you plan to prove in the essay.

Reasons against the argument.

Dispose briefly of the main objections to
c. The to what extent essay
In this type of essay the topic is a statement. It is obviously true but truth is never 100%. You must decide how true it is? Are there some areas where you disagree with the statement? If so, describe how far you agree, and your points of agreement and disagreement. Words used in the question are:
To what extent....
How true....
How far do you agree....?
A possible answer structure is:

Introduction to problem
Aspect 1 - true
Aspect 1 - false
Aspect 2 - true
Aspect 2 - false
Aspect 3 - true

Conclusion - Do not repeat your point of view again.
End your essay with something memorable e.g. a quotation or a direct question.

3. Compare and contrast essays.
a. The Contrast essay

Contrast or distinguish between questions usually present you with two or more terms, instruments, concepts or procedures that are closely connected, and sometimes confused. The purpose of the essay is to explain the differences between them. The question may be of the form:
Contrast....
Distinguish between...
What is the difference between....?
What are the differences between....?
How are ... and ... different?
A suitable answer structure would be:

Introduction to differences between A and B
Contrast A & B in terms of first difference
Contrast A & B in terms of second difference
Contrast A & B in terms of third difference
etc
b. The Compare essay

*Compare* questions usually present you with two or more terms, instruments, concepts or procedures that are closely connected, and sometimes confused. The purpose of the essay is to explain the similarities between them. Words used are: *Compare... What features do ... and ... have in common? What are the similarities between....? How are ... and ... similar?*

A suitable answer structure would be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to similarities between A and B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare A &amp; B in terms of first similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare A &amp; B in terms of second similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare A &amp; B in terms of third similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to differences and similarities between A and B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difference 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c. The compare and contrast essay

Compare and contrast essays require you to indicate areas in which the things to be compared are similar and different. *Compare and contrast....* There are two main ways to answer such questions:
Example 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to differences and similarities between A and B</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspect 1 - similarities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect 1 - differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect 2 - similarities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect 2 - differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect 3 - similarities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect 3 - differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example of a Research Article Structure**

- Introduction
- Literature review
- Methodology (Research design, subjects)
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion

**Writing Skills: Paragraphs**

A paragraph usually contains a general idea in one sentence, and 4 - 5 supporting sentences which expand this idea by giving explanation, details and/or examples to support the main idea. Length can vary. On the page, the paragraph is a solid block of writing (like this!) To start a new paragraph, you should leave a whole line and start at the beginning of the line after.

Paragraphs are used to separate main ideas. A new paragraph signals to the reader that a new idea is about to be discussed. The break between paragraphs gives the reader time to take in each idea.

Having identified the components of your written text, use the resulting organisation of concepts to set up the best possible sequence for your text. Introduce each paragraph with a topic sentence which introduces the topic. There is a pattern to a series of paragraphs, which you will find in the diagram below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Preliminary topic sentence using key word(s) from the topic/question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What</strong></td>
<td>Identify the elements/issues that will be examined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why</strong></td>
<td>Explain why this combination of elements is significant, or why they are being examined together in this paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example of a Journal Article Structure**

- Introduction

**Topic/question: Discuss.....**

*Academic Research & Writing Skills Part II*
How
Prepare your reader for what is to come, by providing a brief outline of the way you have addressed the question, and touching on each of your main points in turn by ascribing them a key word or phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main point (Heading - optional)</th>
<th>Topic sentence</th>
<th>Support sentences</th>
<th>Concluding sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>incorporating the key word or phrase ascribed to the single main point covered in this paragraph.</td>
<td>which may be more complex but must relate in an obvious way to the single main point: - detail(s) - example(s) - explanation(s) - elaboration - illustration(s)</td>
<td>which 'wraps up' the examination of this particular point and moves towards the next (though you do not need to contrive a 'link sentence' if your paragraphs are already logically sequenced)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion
Concluding paragraph which 'wraps up' the examination of the topic or argument.

Writing Skills: Expressing Yourself

1. Practise using your own words in good English to express your thoughts.

2. Decide on a particular idea that you have in your mind eg:
   - your research topic (investigative)
   - a technical concept (scientific)
   - an observation about a person or event (detached)
   - your views on a current issue (critical)
   - your memories of an experience (experiential)
   - your feelings about a certain incident (personal)

3. Start writing immediately. Write only for yourself. Do not be concerned about grammar or structure, at this stage. Think of this as brainstorming - in sentences rather than diagrammatically. You can re-order the thoughts later, but now it is important to give words to what you are thinking. Write only until you feel you have no more to say right now.

4. If you have trouble with this stage try talking onto a tape recorder, then use any portions of the tape that you feel expresses your idea well, or closely.

5. Practise looking (or listening for) your most clearly expressed ideas. What is it that makes them clear? What makes them communicate? Try this feature again next time.

6. Read over what you have written. Keep the best and cross out the rest. Re-order the points if necessary. Go from step 2 again to fill in any gaps in the logical sequence of your idea.

7. Now you are ready to finally structure, edit, and polish your writing according to its purpose. For example:

   - Personal journal entry (informal, unstructured)
   - Academic journal article (formal, logical structure)
   - Report (formal, informative sequence)
   - Essay (formal, critical argument)
   - Thesis (different chapter, different purpose)
   - Review of literature (formal summary, critique and juxtaposition)
This is also a useful series of steps to go through if you are preparing a talk or presentation. Either write or use a cassette recorder. The value of this exercise is that, by putting your own words to an idea you reach a more thorough understanding of the idea, and can more easily express it again when required.

**A Variation for Non-English Speaking Writers**

Try the above steps using your own language, if other than English. Take notice of the differences in the process for each language. What exactly do you do in your mind when looking for words in each language? Once you have an idea of your own thinking methods, you will have better control over using words to express yourself in both languages.

**Reference List**

At the end of all pieces of academic writing, you need a list of materials that you have used or referred to. This usually has a heading: references but may be bibliography or works cited depending on the conventions of the system you use.

The object of your writing is for you to say something for yourself using the ideas of the subject, for you to present ideas you have learned in your own way. The emphasis should be on working with other people's ideas, rather than reproducing their words. The ideas and people that you refer to need to be made explicit by a system of referencing. This consists of a list of materials that you have used at the end of the piece of writing and references to this list at various points throughout the essay. The purpose of this is to supply the information needed to allow the reader user to find the sources used for the essay. Therefore, at the end of your assignment you need a list of the materials you have used - a bibliography or a reference list.

There are many ways of writing a list of references, which will vary according to the rules of the institution or journal that you are writing for. Some examples include the American Psychological Association (APA), Harvard and Vancouver.

**Useful Links**

http://www.ncistudent.net/StudySkills/WritingSkills/Introduction.htm

http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm

http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html

http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/library/instruction/researchinternet.html