

The University of Southern Queensland
Faculty of Education
Applied Linguistics/TESOL

Guide to students of Applied Linguistics/TESOL at USQ when writing an essay assignment.

ESSAY WRITING

An essay is an extended piece of expository writing which presents an argument based on current research. The argument is developed through a thesis statement and a sequence of main points which are set out in the introduction.

The thesis tells the reader the position taken by the writer in response to a task or question about the discipline content. It is often introduced into the essay with expressions like "*This essay will argue.....*" or "*In this essay I argue.....*"

(note that this is one of the rare instances in which the first person is used in academic writing).

A thesis statement must make an assertion, so it is more than a description of what the essay will do.

The following statement is not a thesis statement because it does not assert anything: "This essay will outline the major ways in which speech is a form of social identity." In contrast this statement is a thesis statement because it states a position: "*This essay will argue that speech is the distinctive marker of group membership in different speech communities.*" The rest of the essay must then demonstrate that the literature on the topic eg. research into speech and group membership, supports the assertion made in the introduction.

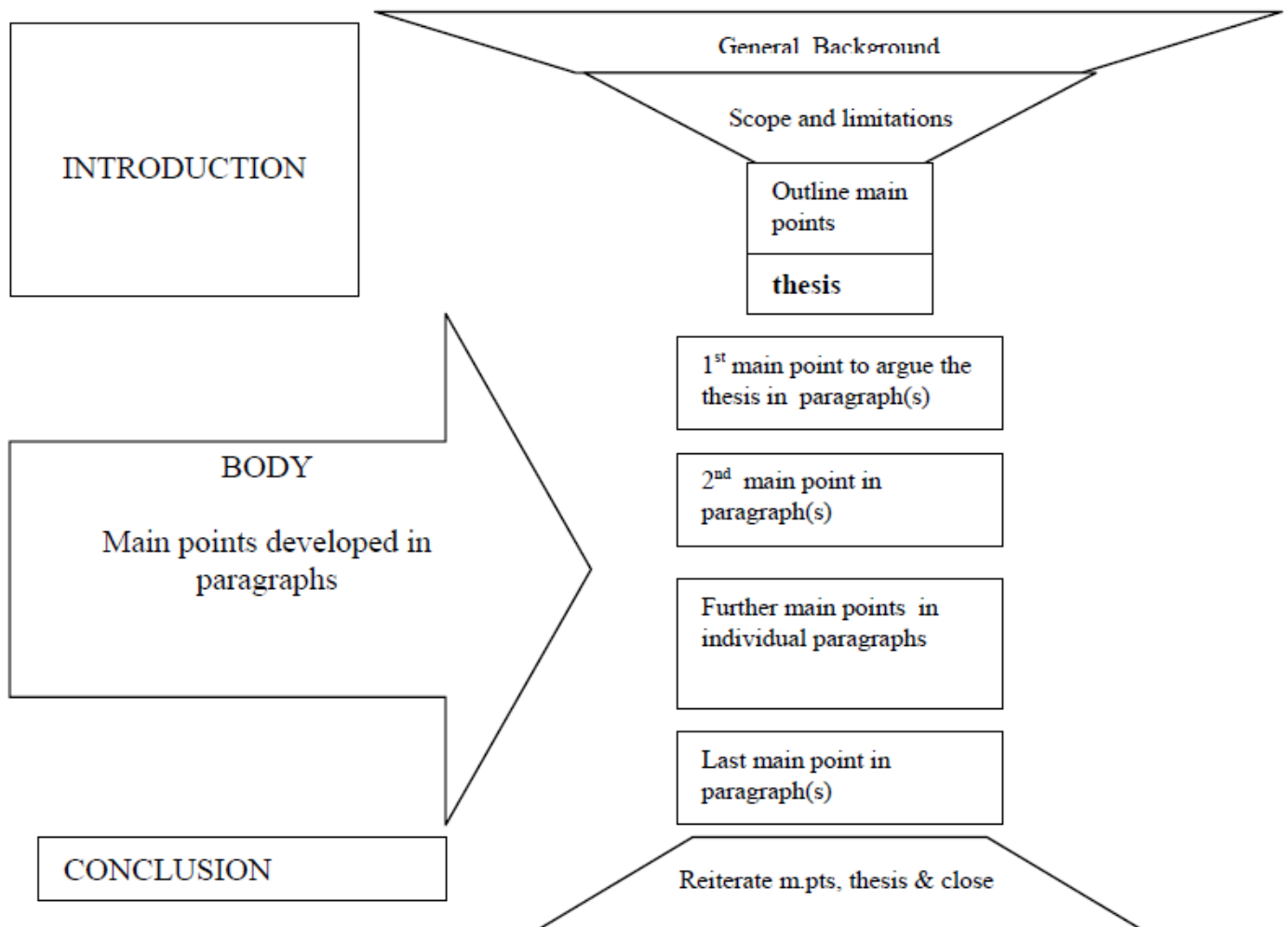
That is, the body of the essay, must demonstrate the developing argument point by point. The argument has to be structured so the reader can follow relationships between the concepts in a logical sequence.

The final part of an expository text is the conclusion. It reiterates the thesis and reviews the argument leaving a lasting impression of the writer's argument.

Examples: Here is another example of a thesis statement: "This essay maintains that a language teaching principle is best understood in terms of the pedagogy of best practice for enhancing language development of the learner."

Essay Structure

Here is a diagram of the typical structure of an essay:



Writing Introductions

The function of the introduction is three-fold:

1. provide the reader with incentive to read the whole essay;
2. give an orientation to the essay in the form of a clear, purposeful and detailed map of its contents;
3. give a statement of the writer's position, the *thesis* statement.

In order to achieve this function, introductions usually have several parts:

- The opening sentences draw the reader into the essay stating the importance of providing the context of the topic or issue, often providing background. *
- If the essay is going to deal with only some aspects of the topic, the writer usually explains the scope and limitations in the next sentences, showing a broad understanding of the topic and the reasons for dealing with only part of it.
- The next two, three or more sentences set out the main points, which are used to support the thesis statement. The thesis statement usually follows as the last sentence of the introduction.

* If short definitions are required, they are written early in the introduction often after the 'background'. However, if substantial definitions are required, for example, as part of an analysis of the topic, they should be allocated a distinct section of the essay and not simply be listed in the introduction.

General Background

Study the following two sample introductions:

Sample One:

Question : 'It is important not to overlook the social aspect of language, because in many ways, speech is a form of social identity, and is used, consciously and unconsciously, to indicate membership of different groups of different speech communities' (Yule, 1985) Discuss.

Introduction:

The social aspect of language has a major influence on people and the way they speak.¹ Although English is the majority language in Australia, the way people use English reflects their social group membership within different speech communities of Australian society.² ♦ **After a brief overview of terms used to identify language groups namely, dialect and accent, lingua franca,³ pidgins, creoles, the essay will examine** the origin and development of different speech communities. **It will then** analyse the micro social markers which indicate group membership in small units within existing speech communities.⁴ **The final section will deal with** language choices.⁵ **I will argue** that speech plays a major role in establishing group membership and social identity.

♦ The phrases in bold are simply for explanation in this guide. It is not appropriate for you to use 'bold' text in academic writing.

Notice how sentence¹ attracts the readers' attention and draws them in to read some background to the essay topic. The scope and limitations are identified in sentence². Sentences³⁻⁵ beginning 'After a brief overview'...and ending with 'language choices', outline the main points which will support the thesis statement. The final sentence is the essay's **thesis** beginning 'I will argue.....'

Sample Two:

There is flexibility in the way a writer constructs and writes an introduction. You will notice that the following example has included background to the topic, the scope and limitations of the essay, and an outline of the main points in the sequence in which they will be written in the body of the essay. In this introduction, the thesis appears earlier in the introduction, at sentence 4.

It is an introduction to a 2000-2500 word essay on the topic: *Introducing Second Language Studies in Elementary School*.

Introduction

The question of whether to introduce second language learning at elementary school level or at a later stage in the education system has long been a controversial issue among researchers and educators.¹ There are a number of factors that require investigation when examining the age at which second language study should begin.² Some of those issues relate to bilingualism and cognitive development, to the type of program offered and to the school setting.³ **I argue that** the early introduction of a second language program by partial immersion assists the promotion of second language proficiency quickly and has no detrimental effect on first language maintenance or students' academic development in other subjects.⁴ **After a discussion** on the nature of the controversy of bilingual education and cognitive development, **the essay presents** research evidence providing support for the benefits of a bilingual education on cognitive development, in terms of linguistic skills and general intellectual abilities.⁴ **This synthesis is followed** by a description of the St Lambert immersion program, introduced at kindergarten level.⁵ **Then the essay examines** advantages of commencing English language study early, such as through the Katoh Gakuen, Shizuoka immersion program.⁶ **The last section acknowledges** the outcomes of higher linguistic proficiency and of motivation levels achieved through early immersion programs.⁷ **Finally, the essay maintains** that early immersion programs enable children to develop second language proficiency while developing their cognitive abilities.⁸

◆ Note again, the phrases in bold are simply for explanation in this guide. It is not appropriate for you to use 'bold' text in academic writing.

Notice how sentence ¹ attracts the readers' attention and draws them in to read some background to the essay topic. The scope appears in sentence ² and limitations in sentence ³. Sentence ⁴ provides the thesis of the essay with the words 'I argue that...' Sentences ⁵⁻⁸ beginning 'After a discussion....' and ending with 'cognitive abilities', outline the main points which will support the thesis statement.

Writing Main Points in Paragraphs

Successful essays depend on building up the overall structure, through paragraphs which have a clearly defined main point. The main points of the essay are the main points of the outline given in the introduction. The body of an essay is built up in the form of a series of paragraphs which all contribute to establishing the writer's purpose. Each paragraph exposes the writer's argument or investigation and acts as the basic unit or building block of the extended piece of writing.

In academic writing, each paragraph. The idea is first stated using concepts
Each paragraph itself gains coherence from the series of sentences it contains. In academic expository writing, the paragraph develops one main idea. The idea is first **stated briefly** using concepts from the course. It is then **explained** and **elaborated**, then **drawing on the research literature**. Finally, where appropriate, **support is provided through the use of data, and/or quotation and illustrated** with an example.

Paragraphs in formal university work are characterised by moving from a general concept to more specific detail, and in so doing they refine the reader's understanding

A common structure for expository paragraphs academic writing is shown here:

<p style="text-align: center;">MAIN POINT Express the main idea of the paragraph as a generalisation often in the form of a topic sentence.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EXPLANATION, ELABORATION Explain the meaning of main idea and elaborate with content, characteristically becoming more specific.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SUPPORT, ILLUSTRATION Support the main idea with data or a quotation and illustrate with an example</p>

Study the next two sample paragraphs.

Sample paragraph one:

There are several benefits of bilingualism on cognitive development.¹ Bilinguals are familiar with two language systems so they have access to a wider range of situations and experiences through language than the monolingual can perceive.² They are likely to develop higher order linguistic skills and to be aware of the nature of language, even as young learners.³ The overall system of language use is more complex in bilinguals (Cook, 1997) and they can approach sentence structure analytically.⁴ As children they have a sensitivity to the semantic relationship between words finding similarity in the meaning of words hat and cap rather than relying on phonetic similarities with words such as cap and can. (Ianco-Warrel, 1972).⁵ Their level of social sensitivity in communicative situations is also advanced and they are able to perceive the needs of others and to act accordingly, providing assistance as needed (Genese, Tucker & Lambert, 1975).⁶ The more a child moves towards becoming a balanced bilingual, the greater the cognitive advances (Arnberg, 1981).⁷ One cognitive skill appears to enhance the next.⁸

Notice in sample paragraph one, sentence¹ states the main point; sentences²⁻³ explain the meaning of the idea and elaborate details. The next sentence⁴ provides support from a quotable source and the remaining sentences offer examples and in this case further research examples.

Sample paragraph two:

Starting language studies at an early stage of learning is an advantage.¹ An early start, at kindergarten level, means that the learner will have a longer period of time in school life to engage with the second language.² When the input is measured and directed at the student's level of comprehension, second language proficiency is expected to develop.³ Ellis (1977) maintains that by allowing younger students ample time to progress as they normally would do in their first language they will progress at a more individual pace than if second language learning began later in school.⁴ Aural/oral language skills are allowed to develop first in a natural way before corresponding skills in reading, writing and other literary skills are introduced..⁵

Notice how in sample paragraph two, sentence¹ states the main point, sentences²⁻³ explain and amplify the point. The final sentence supports the point by providing data from a quotable source⁴ Sentence⁵ illustrates with an example.

Writing Conclusions

The final part of an essay is the conclusion. It restates the thesis position and reminds the reader of the main points which provide the most important support for the argument, then brings the essay to a close.

Sample conclusion

Second language proficiency is enhanced by the early introduction of a second language program when young children can learn at a natural pace. ¹ Partial immersion assists the quick promotion of the second language. ² The literature and research confirm progress without damaging the learners' academic development in other subject disciplines. ³ Linguistic skills are likely to be more complex and general intellectual abilities accelerated in the partial immersion programs. ⁴ The St Lambert and Katroh Gakuen programs demonstrate the cognitive development which can be effected through kindergarten level partial immersion. ⁵ Their sensitivity to language itself as well as communication in the foreign language are enhanced while they are in a motivating learning ⁶ environment without the pressures of anxiety and self-consciousness which come with older students.

Notice that sentence ¹ restates the argument. Sentences ²⁻⁵ draw the readers' attention to the most important main points made in support of the argument, and the final sentence ⁶ brings the essay to a close.

CRITICAL ESSAYS

You may be asked to 'critically' analyse a statement or an article. The question means that you should develop an argument, one in support and one on the contrary. Develop your thesis being prepared to show two sides to the argument. You may find contrary evidence which should be discussed. Work through your argument step-by-step carefully sequencing evidence of support and of an opposing view.

HEADED ESSAYS

It is sometimes optional to put headings for groups of paragraphs which fulfil the essay task. Some writers choose to use headings as it is common in journal articles to signal the next section of the essay. However, try to move away from the use of headings in shorter pieces of academic writing as it may give the impression that you are not able to connect ideas within the appropriate academic discourse.

ON-LINE SITES

You might find the following sites helpful in your studies on writing

<http://cms.unimelb.edu.au/student-services/asu/writing>

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/writing/types/index.html>

<http://unillearning.uow.edu.au/>

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>

REFERENCING

Unless otherwise stated the assignments you are expected to write are academic essays in which expository writing is the genre.

Most of the reading you do in the university culture is based on research and other writers' ideas on the topic you are asked to read and write about. You are expected to cite relevant sources of information on the subject you are writing about, mostly from academic books and journals and from other publications to substantiate a point you are making. The fact that you use other people's ideas extensively does not mean

that your work is not your own. What makes your response to a task unique is firstly the particular ideas you select from the literature to use in your answer, and secondly, how you put those together in response to the question.

If you do not provide references to the source of the ideas you have used then you are presenting someone else's work as if it is your own. This is called **plagiarism** and is regarded by university academics as a form of cheating.

The reasons for quoting other writers or citing references are important:

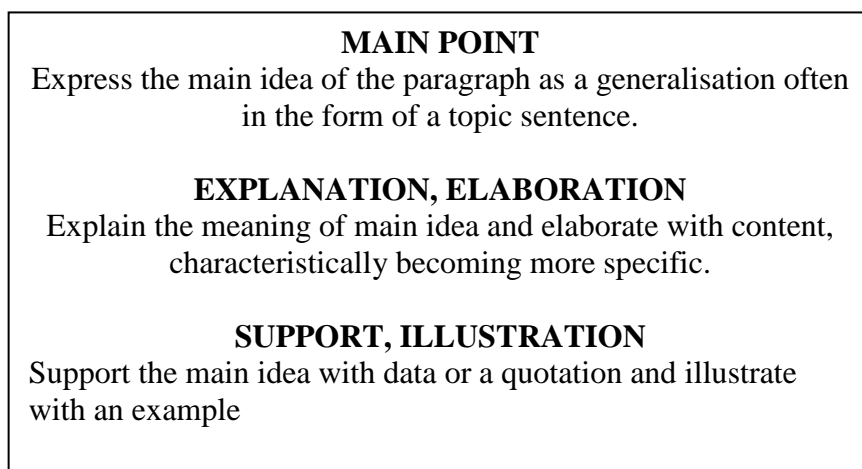
1. to acknowledge the published source of the ideas in your work;
2. to conform to academic convention;
3. to give credibility to your own work;
4. to enable the reader to follow up details of interest eg the research undertaken.

When you incorporate ideas that originate in your reading without using the exact words of the authors, this is called *indirect* quoting. You must acknowledge the writer, for example (Brown, 1997) inside the paragraph, close to the reference you have made. However, if the reference is specific to a concept, also quote the page number.

When you reproduce in your paragraphs the exact words or imported images from publications you have read, these are called *direct quotes*. They are marked using single quotation marks thus '....' And acknowledge for example (Brown 1997, p.223).

Numerical data often found in research results are also *direct* quotes. They are acknowledged by an in-text reference noting the page number as required in all references for direct quotes.

As a guide to paragraph writing with references, the same diagram of paragraph structure is used as previously.



The main point relates directly to the position you are taking in response to the assignment task. It should be written in your words and should not need to be referenced because it should be your idea.

Avoid beginning a paragraph with a direct quote. When students do this they often lose the thread of the argument they are trying to build up. Start each paragraph with a **topic** sentence of your own.

When you do explain, analyse or elaborate the main idea, you will probably need to paraphrase material you have found in books and journals. **Paraphrase** is the communication skill of using other people's ideas but writing them in your own words. If you paraphrase, you must provide a reference; it is an indirect quote.

When you **illustrate your main point with data or examples taken from the literature** you will also need to give a reference, a direct quote, because you are using both someone else's ideas and words. Direct quotes are best used to provide support for the main point of your paragraph.

Read the following paragraph and note

1. **use of paraphrase** to explain and elaborate the main point and
2. **use of a direct quote** to support the point.

One might reasonably expect that length of time on task equates with performance. In terms of second language learning, the length of time spent studying the second language should indicate language proficiency. There is mixed evidence available. Young children appear to acquire social and communicative language skills more effectively than older children (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979)¹ but they are disadvantaged by the limitations of their cognitive skills and experience in terms of the rate of acquisition. (Collier, 1987) Exposure is a necessary but not a sufficient predictor of second language proficiency. Young children need continued support of their first language in school settings, as Collier (1987) notes:

It may be, then, that when young children are asked to learn a second language for use at school before their first language has sufficiently matured to serve as a source of transferable skills, the learning task is very burdensome and requires more time than older children need- children whose first language skills are available for transfer. (p. 4)²

There is no optimal age for all aspects of second language learning. Each stage of human development appears to have advantages and disadvantages for the process. (Stern, 1987) This observation applies in comparisons between children and adults and between younger children and older children. Apart from the area of pronunciation, there is no complete evidence to support claims that young children have superiority in second language acquisition.

Referencing Systems

APA (American Psychological Association), Harvard and Oxford referencing systems are commonly used at university. In the Applied Linguistics courses use APA consistently for in-text referencing and for presenting the reference list at the end of the essay. Use alphabetical order for listing authors and those works you have cited in the essay.

The USQ library on-line access provides a thorough guide to the APA referencing system. You can find an up-to-date guide to APA through the library homepage and at:

<http://www.usq.edu.au/library/help/referencing/apa.htm>

http://cms.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/470205/Referencing_essentials_Update.pdf

Any queries should be directed to Ann Dashwood: dashwood@usq.edu.au

The guide has been compiled from three main sources of writing support in OPACS, ALS-online (Ann Firth), the Tertiary Preparation Program (Barbara Howard) and the on-line course Communication for Academic Purposes (CAP).