Structuring your own writing

After the content, probably the most important aspect of your writing is the way you organise it. To be successful, the writing must be perceived as coherent: that is, readers must think the writing holds together and makes sense. We say that it "must be perceived" this way, because there is no single standard of coherence! You achieve coherence by organising your material in a way that your readers expect, and that varies with the type of text (essay? report? something else?) and the educational culture within which you are writing.

- Are you expected to provide lots of background and current information about your topic, and let your reader draw their own conclusions about how that answers your question? Or should you spell out, early and explicitly, what your reader ought to conclude from the information you are going to present?
- Are you meant to display vast knowledge about your topic, or present only what is needed to address a limited question?
- Should you enrich your reader's experience by using poetic language, or be direct and concise in your style?

There is no universal answer to these questions, but different educational cultures have strong preferences for one option or another! For each of the choices above, Australian academic readers are likely to prefer the second and may even judge the first incompetent. Australian academic readers expect the things they read to be structured so that **points are made first, and are then developed further**. You have seen how this works in an abstract or in the summary at the start of a report. In an essay, it means that the first, "introductory", paragraph should make the overall point the essay will develop. Then, in each "body" paragraph, the first ("topic") sentence should make the point of the paragraph, and then supporting sentences explain that point and illustrate it with evidence. The whole essay is closely focussed on the question and its context, and only material that is relevant to that is welcomed. And, as the essay unfolds, there are connecting words and phrases that show the reader how ideas relate to each other and to the main, organising idea of the essay. (See the diagram below.)

Structure a piece of academic writing	To answer these questions in a reader's mind
Introduction	
Topic ←	What's this about?
Context ←	What larger discussion does it relate to?
Question/problem ←	What is this writer asking?
Thesis ←	What does s/he think is the answer?
Signposting ←	How is s/he going to show it to me?
Point I ←	Why does s/he think this?
(explanation) ←	(what does this mean?)
Evidence/example ←	Based on what?
With reference(s) ←	Where did s/he learn this?
Point II (and so on) ←	(same questions again)
Conclusion ←	So what? How does all this relate to what s/he asked at the beginning?

This "deductive" structure is considered appropriate in Anglo-western academic culture, where it reflects the idea that each individual plays a role in the construction of knowledge and must be explicit and assertive in doing so. Meaning is the writer's responsibility, not the reader's. In some other academic cultures, where readers take more responsibility for deciding what the text conveys, people are made uncomfortable by a way of writing that insists upon its conclusions from the start. It seems to them more respectful to approach that conclusion indirectly, giving lots of background and allowing readers to do more of the thinking for themselves (as we do, for example, in detective stories). If you are used to that "inductive" structure, and the cultural values underpinning it, you need to know that Australian tutors will not think it disrespectful if you tell them what you want them to think right from the start. They will find it helpful, and feel confident that you know where you are going and will take them there!

When you have written a draft, you can check how coherent it is by making a new document and pasting into it;

- Your introductory paragraph
- The topic sentence of each paragraph after that
- Your concluding paragraph

That will give you a very short version of your whole essay. If the structure doesn't seem coherent, be ready to revise it. Most pieces of writing have to go through several drafts before they are good

enough to submit. You can feel free to make whatever mess you need to, in your first draft, because it's only for you, to get your ideas out where you can see them. Luckily, there is a good routine for revision that will help you to re-arrange them so that your reader can see them too!

Revising for structure: Steps in brief

Print out your assignment; get ready to literally cut and paste!
Label each paragraph in your draft with a few words in the margin, saying what it deals with. In this way, you can

- Make an outline of your whole draft
- See if you've dealt with any point in more than one place. If so, bring that material together, and weed out any repetition.
- See if any paragraph doesn't make any relevant point. If there *is* a point to be made, make it in the topic (first) sentence; if not, discard that material.
- See if any paragraph makes *more* than one point. If so, separate the material into two (or more) paragraphs, and write a topic sentence for each.
- See if the material flows logically; if not, try rearranging it till it does.
- See if you've shown connections between ideas, transitions from one section to the next. Write any missing links.
- Once you've got all that under control, you can go back to the beginning of your draft and check that the first paragraph introduces what you have now produced!

Language of coherence.

As you saw in that routine for revising, coherence has two aspects – arranging the text according to the relationships between your points, and showing your reader how you've arranged it. It's important to signpost, early in the text, how it is going to unfold. And, as it goes on, you should make the connections between ideas explicit as you move from one part of a paragraph to another, and as you move from one paragraph to the next. It's possible to overdo this, if the connection is so obvious that it doesn't need to be expressed. Often, however, a word or a phrase is needed to "glue" ideas together: *however, on the other hand, furthermore, in fact, for example, in the event*. (For a collection of useful words and phrases, go to http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/). Sometimes this may take a whole sentence, or, in a long and complex section, even a short paragraph. See below for an example of how this can work.

Example

The following are just the topic sentences from a series of paragraphs in A.D. Smith's book *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), in which he sets out "the elements of national identity". You can see how, with each new paragraph, Smith recalls the point of the previous paragraph (or paragraphs) and then adds something new, which he is going to discuss next. Each point is given a different colour below, to help you trace the development of this structure. At the same time, another use of language to signpost the structure of the text is highlighted in pink: *first, second, concurrent with, finally.*

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…what we mean by "national" identity involves some sense of political community, however tenuous.

This is, of course, a peculiarly Western conception of the nation.

It is worth spelling out this Western or "civic" model of the nation in more detail. It is, in the first place, a predominantly spatial or territorial conception.

A second element is the idea of a *patria*, a community of laws and institutions with a single political will.

Concurrent with the growth of a sense of legal and political community we may trace a sense of legal equality among the members of that community.

Finally, the legal equality of members of a political community in its demarcated homeland was felt to presuppose a measure of common values and traditions among the population, or at any rate its "core" community.

Historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of its members, and common civic culture and ideology; these are the components of the standard, Western model of the nation.

Structuring a "Minor Thesis"

In some courses, you are asked to write a minor thesis, which is a longer text comprising several chapters. This gives you scope to explore a topic in more depth and detail, and many students enjoy the freedom of a longer word limit. At the same time, you need to take care to keep this longer text coherent in the same ways that you have used in shorter assignments:

1. Mechanics of coherence at all levels:

   - Labelling – contents, titles and headings
   - Whole text – make main point in introduction
   - Each section(chapter) – make main point at beginning
   - Each paragraph – make main point in first sentence ("topic sentence")

2. Language of coherence – guide your reader through the text by "signposting": forecasting, linking, making transitions, recapping, and drawing conclusions. Some

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Function	Language
Introducing an idea	It is argued/ I argue that/ It is suggested/ I suggest It is arguable that/ It seems that/ It may be that This essay will ask/ argue/ explore/ analyse/ examine/ look at … the arguments/ evidence/ development of…
Building up an idea (explaining, giving examples, adding, bringing in another aspect):	For example/ To illustrate/ …such as…/ In other words/ In addition/ Another/ It is relevant to add/ It should be noted/ In this connection/ Similarly/ likewise/ Thus/ Moreover/furthermore,
Chronology (time order)	First/ Secondly/ After that/ Then/ Next,
Similarity	Similarly/ Likewise
Contrast	In contrast/ Conversely/ On the other hand/ While/ Although/ However/ Nevertheless/ Nonetheless/ Despite/in spite of/ Notwithstanding/ Whereas,
Cause & effect	With this in mind/ In view of this/ As a result/ Therefore/ Consequently,
Summary (not necessarily at the end of the essay; perhaps also between stages of the argument)	In conclusion/ To sum up/ In summary/ In short / In brief,
Evaluating	On balance / overall,

What the Parts of a Thesis Tell the Reader

In scientific disciplines, a thesis may follow the "IMRD" structure described for research articles (above), with Introduction; Method; Results; and Discussion. In humanities and social sciences, the thesis has no rigid boundaries between the literature, the facts, and the interpretation, but its structure covers roughly the same ground. In either case, your thesis needs to answer these questions in your examiner's mind:

- What current disciplinary/ professional conversation does your thesis relate to?
- How does it relate to that conversation?
- What problem/question does it address?
- How does it go about this?
- What do your findings suggest?
- What does this imply for practice in this field?

Managing a thesis

The University Library offers a range of training sessions on using the software program "Endnote" for managing notes and references, and on ways of "managing a long document". To find out what is on offer just now, go to http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/training/ and click on "by campus" or "by training session".