

Essay structure: What you should do where

When we talk about essay structure, we are talking about a logical sequence of argument & analysis. An essay should have a beginning, a middle (body) & an end, with a clear line of argument running from beginning to end & giving coherence. You do not have to label the separate parts, but sometimes it can help in the preparatory stage by making you focus on the principal points or steps in your argument, indeed ensuring that there *is* a sequence of distinct points rather than an undifferentiated blob of text!

Introduction:

- Identify the question, theme or topic of the essay
- Give your answer, your opinion, or judgment
- Briefly outline your argument, the main points (reasons or sub-arguments) you will make
- Introduce the key terms or concepts of the discussion, e.g., nation, nation-state, nationalism
- If you are focusing on one aspect of the question, on particular text(s) or theoretical approaches, explain this

The body of the essay/the argument:

- Stick to the question & follow through on the introduction. Do not bring in anything that is not relevant to or necessary for answering the question. Observe the **word limit**.
- Don't overload on general background information.
- Remember that you are presenting an argument: you want to make a case & convince the reader. Your argument should consist of a sequence of distinct reasons or sub-arguments each one of which is clearly stated and supported by appropriate evidence. The evidence can be of different types:
 1. Theoretical/conceptual/logical: analysis of theories, concepts, e.g., the concepts of 'nation', 'nation-state'
 2. Historical/empirical: e.g., there has never been a socialist democracy
 3. Quantitative: statistics, graphs, tables
 4. Empirical case studies
 5. Comparative study
- Consider the counter-arguments, claims & evidence & give reasons for either rejecting or only partially (i.e., with qualifications) accepting any points.
- Some independent reflection on the issues, assessment of & imaginative response to the material, particularly in regard to its political relevance/implications.

Conclusion:

- Go back to the question or title & reaffirm your answer.
- Clearly & concisely summarise you're the main points of your argument.
- If applicable, state any reservations or qualifications to your answer. Suggest implications.

Some practical tips

1. Be assessment aware: be aware of & understand the assessment criteria & marking guidelines set out in the Undergraduate Handbook.
2. Writing is a craft; it involves skills that improve with practice. Take the time to draft & redraft. Think of writing 3 versions or drafts: one for the argument, one for clarification & strengthening, and one for editing/detail/grammar.
3. Make sure that every sentence you write has a precise meaning, that it makes sense. Especially if you are writing in English as a second language, and given that you are dealing with quite complex & sophisticated theories & arguments, keep sentences short: one sentence, one idea. Remember that every sentence requires a grammatical & logical structure. Use paragraphs. Do not submit an undifferentiated block of text. It is up to you to distinguish separate themes and points by using paragraphs: one paragraph, one theme.
4. Ask for advice & feedback. A good point at which to do this is when you have an introduction, outline or plan & a bibliography. The framework & logic of your essay will be clear from these. Take them along to your course supervisor, class teacher or study skills officer & ask for comment.
5. Proofread!