

SWOT Lecture Series: LEARNING TO LEARN

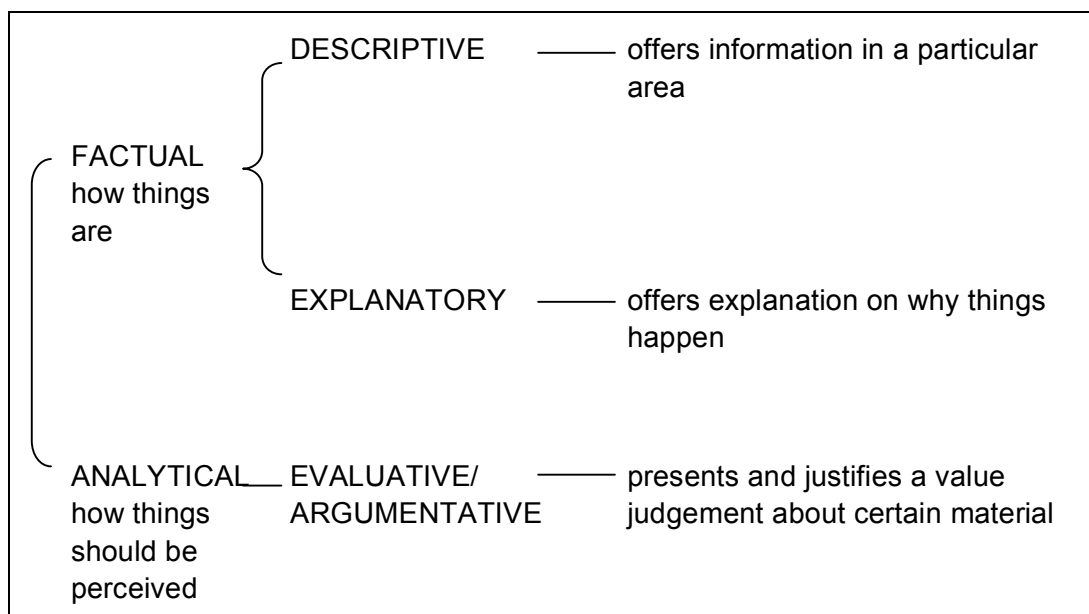
Successful essay writing at university

Introduction

There are many different types of written assignments that you might have to write during your academic career, including case studies, literary criticisms, seminar and tutorial papers, literature reviews and so on. Each one of these might be referred to as "an essay" and yet each one is obviously different. Some of them have a clearly defined and well-known structure which you can see at a glance, such as case studies. However, many essay writing tasks do not provide you with such a clearly defined structure, and so a very large part of your task is to create your own structure. This lecture is mainly about those types of essay-writing tasks for which you have to work out the structure yourself.

Types of essays

Essays can be divided into the following general types according to their purpose; many essays involve more than one type



(adapted from Martin J R & P Peters (1985) "On the analysis of exposition" in Hasan R (Ed) *Discourse on Discourse*. ALAA Occasional Papers No 7 p88)

Markers Comments on essays

One of the most valuable ways of developing your essay writing skills is from the feedback given from the teachers who mark your essays in particular disciplines. Different subjects and markers often have different expectations regarding writing so it is important to understand the comments and criticisms they make on your essays. The most common criticisms of markers often focus on the five broad skills below:

- ◆ Students need to be analytical
- ◆ Students need to use evidence effectively
- ◆ Students need to structure their essays logically
- ◆ Students need to be critical and persuasive
- ◆ Students need to write in an academic style

In this lecture, we will look briefly at these skills to investigate what they mean and how to develop them in your own writing. Firstly though look at the typical markers comments which are listed on the next page. Read through each comment and tick the 'Yes' box if you think the comment could be relevant to your essay writing; tick the 'No' box if you don't think it is an issue for you and tick the 'Unsure' box if you aren't sure what the comment means.

Many of the terms used by teachers about writing and about learning are difficult for students who are beginning university. It is important not to just assume that you should already know what they mean and already to be able to write successfully in an academic context - the skills and knowledge we need to write essays are always developing and, in any case, are often very different in different subjects. Many of you are taking subjects which you've never done before. It is not unreasonable to need some support in learning about the expectations of writing in the different subjects. In this lecture we won't have time to talk at depth about all the skills and knowledge you will need for successful essay writing but we will at least try to give you an overview of the main skill areas, to define a few key terms and to give you some examples of what we mean. Each of these areas is dealt with in more detail in the central workshops offered at the Learning Centre.

Typical Markers Comments and Concerns

Below are some typical comments made by markers on essays at University. Indicate whether these comments are relevant to you by ticking the appropriate box

| Typical Markers Comments and Concerns | Y | N | Unsure of Meaning |
|--|---|---|-------------------|
| Students need to be analytical <i>You need less description and more analysis</i> | | | |
| <i>You've given lots of information about the topic but you haven't really answered the question.</i> | | | |
| Students need to use evidence effectively <i>Please use appropriate referencing conventions!</i> | | | |
| <i>You have made some good points but not substantiated them.</i> | | | |
| <i>There is evidence of plagiarism in your essay.</i> | | | |
| <i>Don't rely on the evidence to do your arguing for you!</i> | | | |
| Students need to structure their essays logically <i>The parts of your essay do not seem to fit together very well</i> | | | |
| <i>You did not do what you said you were going to do in your introduction</i> | | | |
| <i>Where is the conclusion?</i> | | | |
| <i>Your writing does not flow smoothly</i> | | | |
| Students need to be critical and persuasive <i>What is your thesis?</i> | | | |
| <i>Your argument is not convincing</i> | | | |
| <i>Your essay lacks critical analysis</i> | | | |
| Students need to write in an academic style <i>Your writing is too subjective and personal</i> | | | |
| <i>You need to write in a more formal and abstract style</i> | | | |

Analytical Writing

By analytical writing we mean the reorganisation of information so that it can be related to other information in a way which is valued in the discipline. It is analytical writing, rather than descriptive writing which is valued in most disciplines at University. For example, in History a description of the events of a war may be reorganised so that the causes can be explained or so that some events may be compared to events in another war. In Biology birds or prey are generally organised according to their scientific family, genus and species rather than according to more common sense taxonomies such as what they look like.

Lets have a look at some examples of descriptive and analytical writing using everyday topics. Have a look at texts A and B below. Take a minute to read them through briefly and then decide which you think is more analytical.

Text A:

A car is a machine for transporting people. Cars usually can carry a maximum of 5 or 6 people. They use petroleum or diesel fuel although there are also some electric cars. Many people are killed or injured each year in car accidents. In Australia, most people drive cars and the roads of many urban centres are choked with this form of private transport.

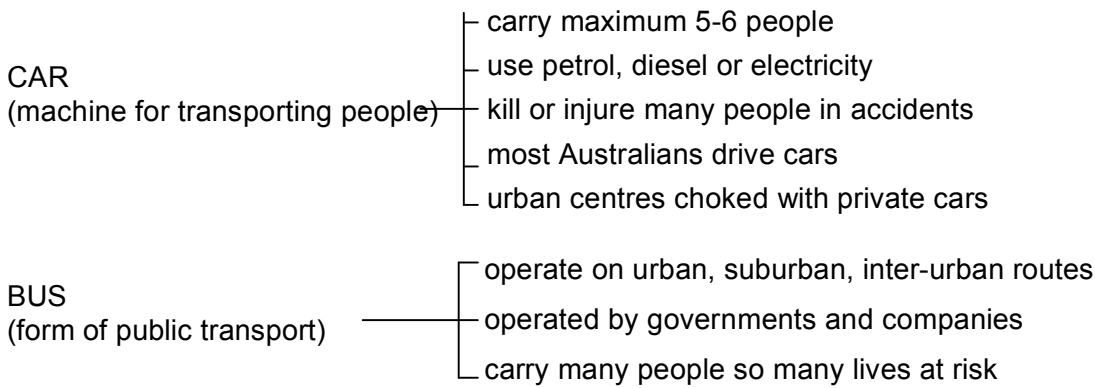
A bus is a form of public transport. Buses generally operate on urban, suburban, or inter-urban routes. As well as buses operated by the government, there are some private bus companies, particularly for long distance travel. Many people can be transported in one bus, and so just one serious accident can claim many lives.

Text B:

Two of the most common vehicles for transporting people are cars and buses. Whereas the capacity of the car is usually limited to about 5 or 6 people, the greater passenger capacity of the bus brings savings on fuel and other costs as well as reducing the amounts of traffic on the road. The ownership of buses is usually governmental or business which ensures that bus travel is generally safer than travel by privately owned cars, although just one serious accident can claim many lives. However, public ownership also means that buses are often not as convenient as private cars in terms of their accessibility to all areas.

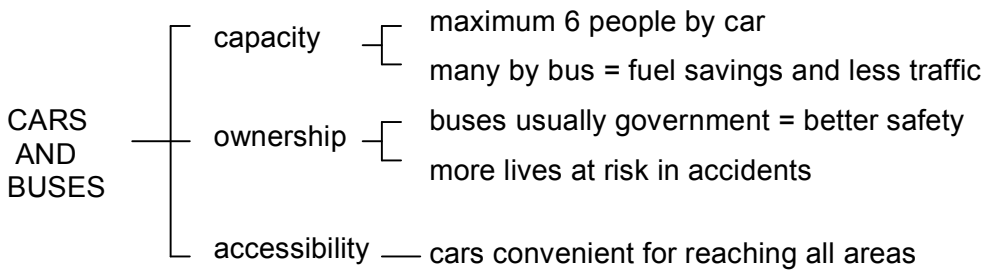
Text A is organised into two distinct sections - cars and buses. Each section makes a list of their characteristics, with no relationships shown between cars and buses. This text is a descriptive piece of writing because the basic information has not been restructured in any way.

Diagram of Text A's structure: Descriptive writing



Text B is analytical in its structure. It is not organised into distinct paragraphs about cars and buses. Instead it is organised into some analytical categories. These can be seen by the diagram below.

Diagram of Text B's structure: Analytical writing



Using Evidence Effectively

Why do we use evidence?

We use evidence in essays for two main reasons

- ◆ to learn about the topic so that we can develop a point of view
- ◆ to persuade the reader that our point of view is justifiable

Types of evidence

| | |
|---|---|
| Where from? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• personal experience• others' experience | What for? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• academic purposes• non-academic purposes |
| How presented? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• in print• not in print | How close? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• primary source• secondary source• tertiary source |

What is appropriate evidence for academic essays?

- ◆ from the experience of others rather than from personal experience;
- ◆ from printed rather than non-printed publications;
- ◆ from academic press rather than those for a non-academic audience.

Plagiarism

The act of quoting or paraphrasing somebody else's idea without saying where it came from.

Referencing conventions

The typical ways in which information taken from other sources is acknowledged in written academic texts.

Referencing conventions include things such as references, footnotes and bibliographies.

The most common referencing conventions which are used at this university are the Harvard system and the Footnote System.

Developing an Essay Structure

The fundamental structure of all essays is composed of an introduction, followed by a body, followed by a conclusion. The diagram below summarises the purpose of each part of the essay and lists some of the stages within each part.

| ESSAY PART | PURPOSE | STAGES (EXAMPLES) |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Introduction | To tell the reader what the essay is going to be about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ background ◆ thesis or position ◆ outline of arguments |
| Body | To tell the reader what the essay is about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ arguments and evidence to support thesis in relation to particular areas |
| Conclusion | To tell the reader what the essay has been about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ summary of arguments ◆ reinforcement of thesis ◆ recommendations |

Being critical and persuasive

Adding argument to analysis

As we saw earlier, most types of academic writing require you to be analytical rather than simply descriptive. They will also require you to use evidence to support your points. Finally, in most essays you will also need to develop a particular point of view which is your way of seeing the topic.

Look again at the analytical piece of writing we examined earlier. Is it a very convincing comparison of cars and buses? Is it a persuasive piece of writing?

Text B

Two of the most common vehicles for transporting people are cars and buses. Whereas the capacity of the car is usually limited to about 5 or 6 people, the greater passenger capacity of the bus brings savings on fuel and other costs as well as reducing the amounts of traffic on the road. The ownership of buses is usually governmental or business which ensures that bus travel is generally safer than travel by privately owned cars, although just one serious accident can claim many lives. However, public ownership also means that buses are often not as convenient as private cars in terms of their accessibility to all areas.

Although Text B provides an analysis of the topic, by contrasting cars and buses in terms of some significant categories (capacity, ownership and accessibility), there is still not a

particular point of view being expressed. We only find out the objective analysis, in answer to the question “how are cars and buses different? But we do not find out what the writer’s judgement is, in answer to the question “which is better for an urban transport system - cars or buses?”

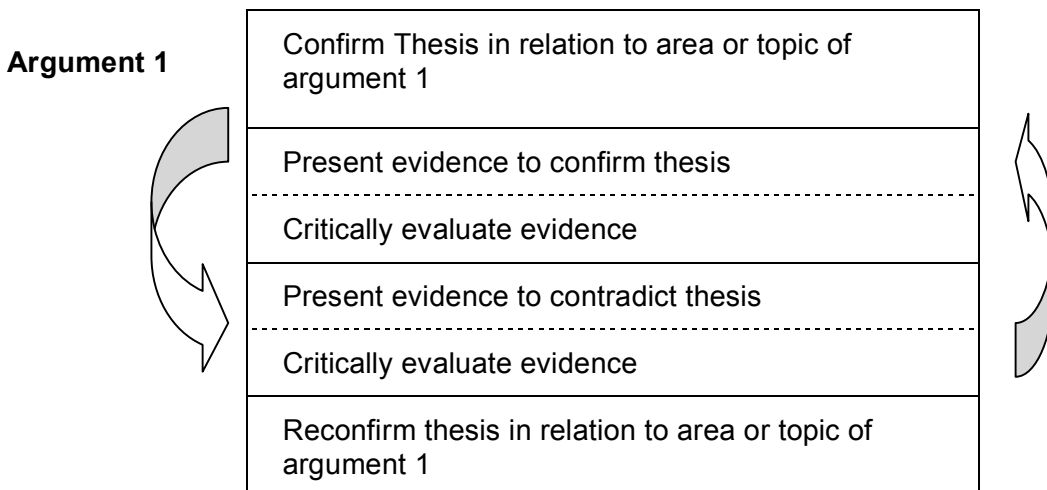
Look at text C. In this text the writer has used the analysis provided in Text B in order to persuade the reader to agree with a particular point of view

Text C

Of the two main forms of transport for people, buses are more effective than cars for a number of reasons. The greater passenger capacity of the bus ensures savings on fuel and other costs as well as reducing the amounts of traffic on the road. Secondly, the increased safety of bus travel as a result of ownership being governmental or business ensures that deaths and injuries from accidents are minimal, compared with the numerous deaths and injuries from car accidents. Finally, the accessibility of buses to most areas is strategically possible because buses use the established road system, so that little development is needed in order to extend a new bus route. Indeed, the potential for a bus transport system to be as convenient as private cars, combined with the other advantages of buses over cars, provides a convincing argument for the expansion of the bus transport system, rather than the continuation of a costly, inefficient and unsafe system based on privately owned vehicles.

A critical approach to evidence

a critical approach is one which questions or evaluates the information in a way which is valued in the particular discipline. It is particularly important to take a critical approach to the evidence you use to answer the question in an essay. The following table demonstrates how evidence might be presented and critically evaluated within one argument of an essay. On the following page is one argument of a Humanities essay. It has been annotated to show how the writer has used the evidence to develop an argument.



Using evidence to build an argument

Essay question:

What if any benefits does Reconciliation bring to Aboriginal Communities?

Argument 2: Benefits in Political area

Stages

Reconciliation has also had far reaching political ramifications for Aboriginal people.

Confirm Thesis in relation to political area

As a consequence of the Mabo decision, the federal government was compelled to negotiate legislation which would clarify the issues and give formal recognition of rights (Dodson, M 1994:71).

Present evidence to confirm thesis

While the resulting Commonwealth's Native Title Act of 1995 was important in its own right, an additional benefit in terms of the issues raised by the Council for Reconciliation was that Aboriginal people were key participants in the negotiations. The process of negotiation represented a key shift of political power in relationships between the government and Aboriginal people, with Aboriginal people actively engaged in determining their destinies rather than being given a token voice in the process (p.72).

Evaluate Evidence

Some people have argued that the reconciliation process has been set back since the Liberal/National Party came to power in 1995 (Tatz 1998). While leaders such as John Howard and Tim Fisher have been reluctant to take leadership roles in the reconciliation process,

Present evidence to contradict thesis

it is significant that Howard's re-election speech in 1998 included reconciliation as a major goal for his second term. It is equally significant that the Coalition did not have the numbers to pass the 1998 Wik legislation without considerable concessions being made to Aboriginal people.

Critically evaluate evidence

adapted from Reading and Writing 2 course notes Koori Centre 1999 Univeristy of Sydney

Key terms used to describe academic language and learning

| Term | Meaning and examples |
|-------------------------|--|
| abstract language | refers to things which are not easily observed. In History these are usually ideas, institutions and general concepts rather than concrete things or specific events. |
| analysis | reorganisation of information so that it can be related to other information in some way. For example, a description of the events of a war may be reorganised so that the causes can be explained or so that some events may be compared to events in another war. |
| a critical approach | to question the information in a way which is valued in the particular discipline. For example, in History, you might question whether a supposed eyewitness could really have been present at an event which is described. You might also question the background of the writer in terms of their political or cultural affiliations. |
| cohesive writing | when the text flows smoothly from one idea to another rather than reading like a disjointed set of ideas. |
| an argument | a type of writing where a position is put forward and supported by a train of reasons. These reasons are based on evidence from authoritative sources. |
| a formal style | a type of writing style which is authoritative. Formal texts have a clear structure and use specialised rather than colloquial vocabulary. |
| a logical structure | writing which puts forward grounds or reasons to explain an outcome or to justify a conclusion |
| plagiarism | the act of quoting or paraphrasing somebody else's idea without saying where it came from. |
| referencing conventions | these are the typical ways in which information taken from other sources is acknowledged in written academic texts. Referencing conventions include things such as references, footnotes and bibliographies. The referencing convention which is used in History is called the Footnote System, |

LEARNING CENTRE WORKSHOPS WHICH WILL SUPPORT YOU WITH SOME OF THE ISSUES RAISED IN THIS LECTURE:

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Essay Writing (and essay skills workshops) ◆ Introduction to Critical Writing ◆ Clearer Writing ◆ Writing in an Academic Style ◆ Quoting, Summarising and Paraphrasing Evidence ◆ Language Strategies for Referring to Evidence |
|--|

Details of workshop blocks and programs can be found at <http://www.usyd.edu.au/lc>