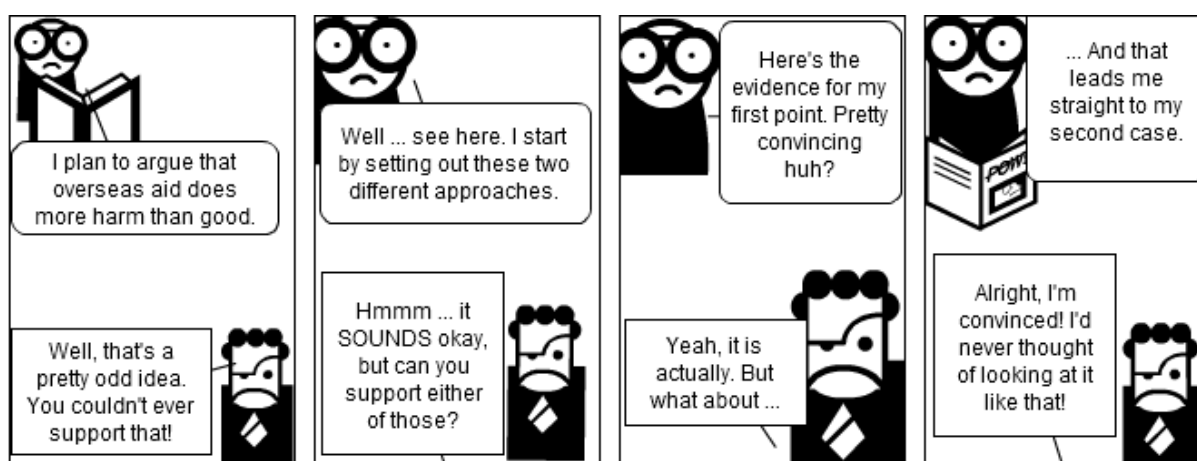


Organising your writing

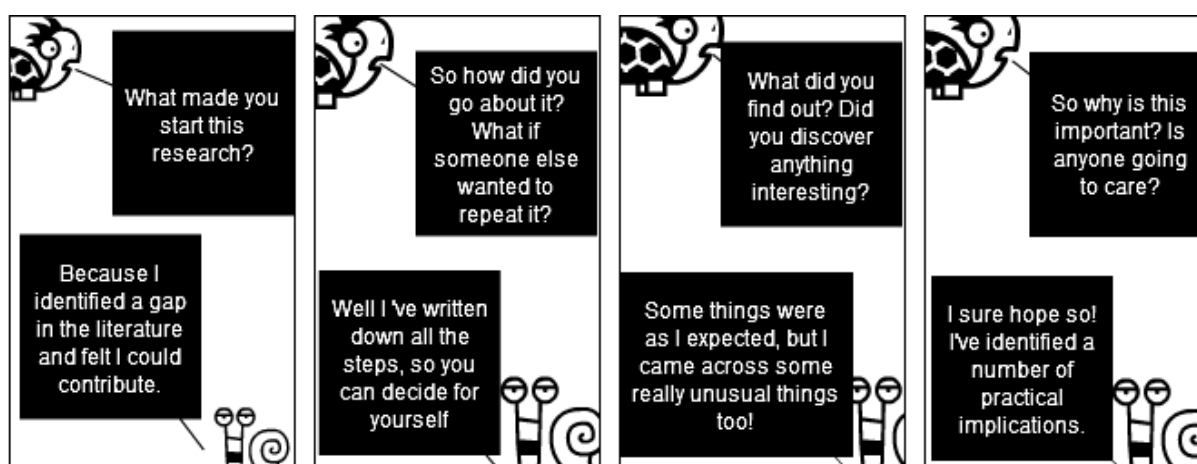
1 Be clear about your main purpose in writing this text

Every text you write has a purpose. Make sure you know WHAT it is that you are trying to achieve.

For example, in a discursive essay, you are trying to put forward an argument, and then support this argument so that your reader will be full convinced. The reasoning might be something like this:



In a research report or dissertation, you are trying to justify why the study was worth doing, explain what you did, present what you found, and say why the findings are significant:



Once you have established the purpose of your text, it will help you to

- research your topic, noting down information that fits *this purpose*;
- plan your written text, so that each section will help you to achieve *this purpose*;
- write individual sections, *so that every paragraph and sentence is relevant to your purpose*.

2 Tips for organising the sections of a text

There are three common issues that can cause a written text to appear disorganised:

Firstly, topics suddenly pop up later in the text, when they've already been dealt with earlier on. It appears that the writer forgot something, and has decided to add it in later. A strategy to help you solve this problem is to read through your finished text, using a different colour to highlight each main idea that you encounter. You should find that all sections on the same idea are located together but, if this is not the case, it is a simple matter to move things around.

This strategy is also useful if you change your mind later and decide to reorganise your sections into a new structure. For example, you might have originally ordered your ideas chronologically, but you now feel that it would make more sense to group different themes together. By highlighting different themes in different colours, and then dragging similar colours together, this can be easy to do. (NB: It is a good idea to save the text as a new document first, so that you can always go back to the original if you realise that your rearrangement hasn't helped!)

Secondly, it can sometimes be difficult for the reader to find your own contributions to what you've written. An academic text usually requires some element of critical discussion or evaluation in addition to the presentation of facts and background information that you have researched. If there is too much background description, then the flow of your ideas may appear disorganised, even if you feel that you have arranged your information in a logical order.

Once again, using different colours to highlight the text can help: this time, use one colour for everything that you consider to be description (historical or theoretical background, presentation of facts, information taken directly from sources, and so on) and another colour for everything that you consider to be discussion (analysis, evaluation, critique, and so on). Check the balance between the two colours when you have done this. In order for your writing to flow together coherently, you will need a sufficient amount of discussion of the material you use.

Thirdly, a very simple problem can be the length of paragraphs. If you present your reader with very long paragraphs that run over several page breaks, your work can become daunting to read. Now that we are often encouraged to use double or 1.5 spacing, our paragraphs can appear longer than they actually are. It is worth running your eye over the complete text when you finish, and just checking how readable it looks. If necessary, add a paragraph break and carry straight on.

3 Writing a clear introduction

The introduction is likely to be the first thing your tutors will read. It can convince them to keep reading your work, or it can cause them to put your work to the bottom of the pile and pick a more interesting one! Make your opening count.



The most important thing to do is make sure that your reader knows where they will be going - give them a rough idea of the journey in store. Imagine, you are taking somebody on a walk. If they are going to enjoy walking along with you, they will find it helpful to have an outline of the route.



Your fellow walker might like to know why you have chosen this particular area. If you feel it is important, you might give a little bit of the history, or explain about an interesting controversy in the area. However, if you tell them everything you have ever read about the area, their interest will fade pretty quickly! Just give them the relevant information that you think will help them to enjoy your walk.



Your companion also needs to know what kind of equipment you will be using – it gives them an idea of the terrain they will encounter. In exactly the same way, a companion that you invite along to read your essay will appreciate knowing what frameworks and perspectives you will be using. Don't surprise them by bringing out grand theories and the like halfway through the journey, if they had thought they were embarking on a gentle stroll!



Journeys are often completed in stages. It helps to tell your companion that you will begin by following the path through the forest, before taking a steep climb up to the ridge, and then descending into the valley. However, you obviously won't tell them about every bend and every tree that they will come across. Treat your reader in the same way: give them an outline of the stages of the journey, just to whet their appetite and persuade them to come along.

NB: It is often best to rewrite the introduction once you have finished writing the essay. This will ensure that it really does map out exactly what the essay covers, rather than what you had originally thought it might cover!

4 Finishing with a strong conclusion

This element sometimes seems to be the hardest to write, but it can ruin an otherwise good essay if it is neglected.

When students come and see us about their work, they often haven't got around to writing the conclusion yet. Sometimes, they have budgeted time to add this section later, but it sometimes seems that they are not actually sure what they should be writing in this part.

So what does it mean to CONCLUDE?

A conclusion is more than an ending. It's an arrival.

Step back from what you've been writing, and ask yourself, "Where has this discussion led me? What position do I now hold in relation to everything I've considered?"

This final section is your chance to demonstrate YOUR way of weighing up the evidence. You may now hold a very strong position within the debate, or you may have some reservations, but you should be able to explain why you have ended up where you are now. Importantly, the position you have reached shouldn't come as a surprise to the reader, because you should have been moving in this direction all the way through the essay.

Key ingredients

The structure of conclusions will vary widely, depending on the type of text. However, it is likely that you would:

- begin with a very brief recap of what the essay or research has explored, and a summary of the main findings you want the reader to take away with them;
- focus the main part of this section on the position you have reached, explaining why you have ended up here;
- end by drawing out the implications of your conclusion – Why does all this matter?