

Writing skills

Introduction

This guide covers the following areas:

- How does writing help my learning?
- What are the features of academic writing?
- Writing as a process.
- What is the style of academic writing?

How does writing help my learning?

Producing a written assignment (essay, report, research proposal, or dissertation) provides evidence of a variety of abilities:

- Research skills
- Weighing arguments
- Organising your thoughts in a logical manner
- Critical thinking
- Ability to be selective

Writing challenges you to synthesise a variety of ideas in a clear way. The process makes you check your understanding so that you convey your argument to your reader in a clear way. These are skills which you will find useful in other contexts throughout your life – be it writing reports at work, putting together research proposals or applying for funding grants for a charity you volunteer for.

What are the features of academic writing? (Newcastle University, 2015)

- Clearly structured according to the type of assignment you need to submit.
- Presents an argument which shows a logical line of reasoning so that your readers can understand your conclusions.
- Uses source materials as evidence, together with examples and case studies to develop your arguments and justify opinions.
- Critically analyses these source materials by comparing, contrasting and evaluating them.
- Is explicit so that the purpose, meaning and evidence is clear.

The writing process (adapted from Plymouth University, 2011)

Producing an effective piece of academic writing usual takes a number of steps.

1. Start by making sure you **understand what you need to do**.

Analyse the task you have been set – one method is the **TAP model** (Fig. 1).

- First, identify the **Topic** – what the main theme is;
- Second, the **Action(s)** – what you have to do;
- Finally, the **Parameters** – the scope or confines of the task

If you are still not clear, contact your tutor before you start work on your assignment.

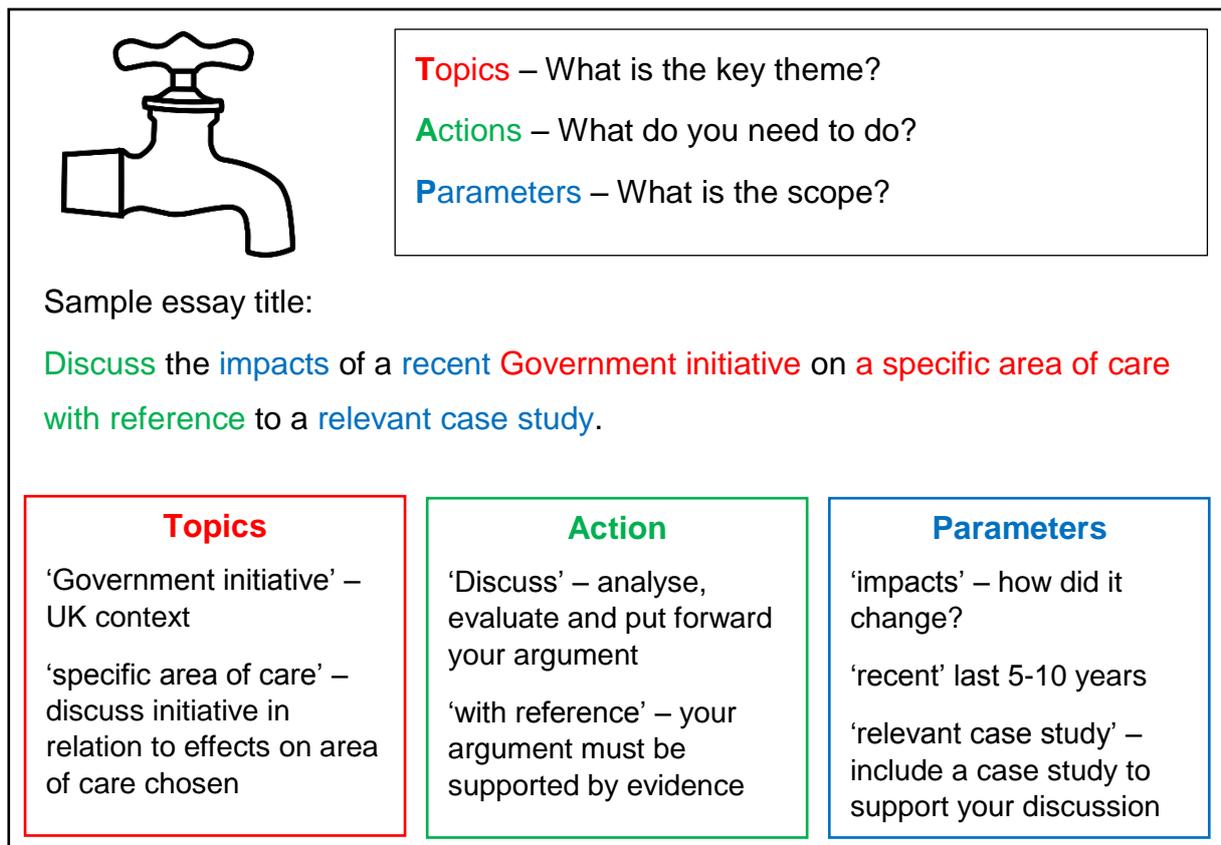


Figure 1: The TAP model (Adapted from - Plymouth University, 2011).

2. **Make an outline plan** to help you keep focused and organised.

- First, brainstorm your ideas for the assignment. You could use a mind map to help note down your thoughts.
- Second, plan your schedule. Note when the assignment is due and work backwards planning your time allowing for research, drafting, editing and proofreading.

3. **Do your research.** Make notes from the resources you need. Keep a careful track of the sources that you use so that your citations and references are accurate.

4. **Write your first draft.** At this stage of writing you are just trying to get your ideas and arguments clear to yourself.

To help structure your argument, you can use a framework for each paragraph such as '**Claim > Justify > Support > Implications**', (Mitchell and Riddle, 2000, cited in Plymouth University, 2011; see Figure 2).

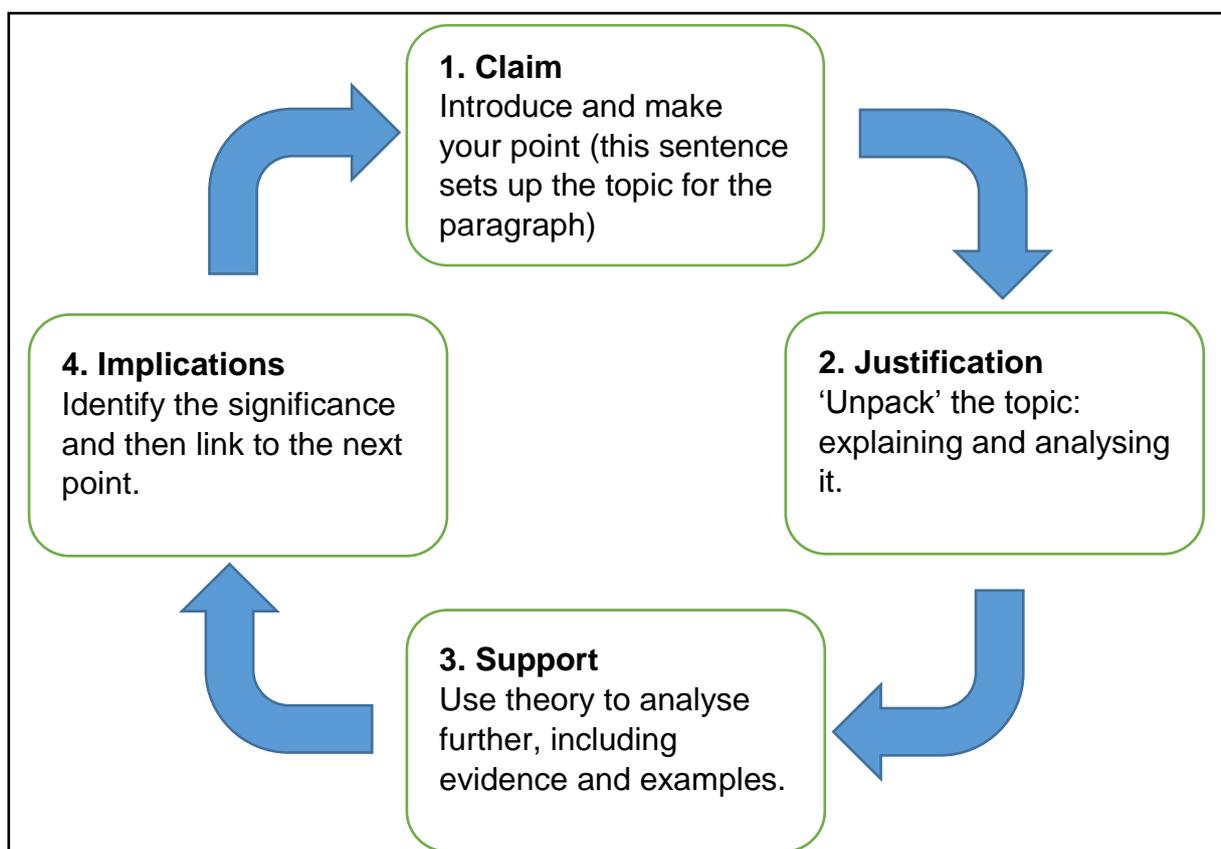


Figure 2: Framework for structuring paragraphs (Adapted from Plymouth University, 2011)

5. **Re work your draft.** Now you need to think about your reader so that your argument will be clear to another person.

6. **Edit and proofread** your final draft. Finish the assignment.

What is Academic Writing Style? (Adapted from Cottrell, 2008)

- **Use formal English**
Avoid slang and colloquialisms. Do not use contractions e.g. don't, can't.
- **Aim for clarity**
Check that your sentences are not too long and complicated that they are hard to follow. Also, do not use long words for the sake of it.
- **Be impersonal**
Avoid using personal pronouns (I, we, you).
- **Be objective**
Avoid using subjective words such as – nice, wonderful, usual or natural. Your reader may have a different understanding of them.
- **Be cautious**
Academic writing tends to use a cautious tone, this shows an awareness that nothing is completely certain.
- **Be concise**
When proofreading, edit out unnecessary words
- **Be precise**
Avoid being vague.

More advice from Academic Learning Support

For further study skills advice, and information on disability and specific learning differences such as dyslexia, enrol on the Learning Success Moodle page. Log into Moodle, go to tiny.cc/learningsuccess, and scroll down to click the enrol button.

To make an appointment for one-to-one study skills support:

- go to the Learning Success reception in the Student Centre (2nd floor, Northampton Square), or
- call us on 0207 040 0246

References

Cottrell, S. (2008) *The study skills handbook*. 3rd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Newcastle University (2015) *Features of academic writing*. Available at: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wdc/learning/academic/> (Accessed: 31 May 2017).

Plymouth University (2011) *Writing Essays*. Available at: https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/1/1723/Writing_Essays_Oct_2015.pdf (Accessed: 24 May 2017).