
Academic Writing and Dyslexia

This book presents a unique visual approach to academic writing and composition specifically tailored to the needs of dyslexic students in higher education. Readers will learn to successfully structure and articulate their ideas, get to grips with critical reading, thinking and writing, and fulfil their full academic potential.

The ‘writing process’ is demystified and techniques for writing compelling, insightful and mark generating essays are conveyed via innovative and meaningful representations, templates, images, icons and prompts, specifically designed to meet the visual and ‘big picture’ strengths of dyslexic learners. A companion website offers supplementary exercises, examples, videos and a full range of downloadable templates and bookmarks.

Written by a dyslexic for dyslexics, *Academic Writing and Dyslexia* is underpinned by extensive research. As a dyslexic student you will learn to present your thoughts with confidence, critically evaluate competing arguments and gain top marks. The book will help you bridge the gap between your existing coping strategies and the increased demands and rigours of academic writing at university. It will be an invaluable resource for dyslexic students, academics, dyslexia specialists, learning developers and writing tutors throughout the higher education sector.

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Academic Writing and Dyslexia

A Visual Guide to Writing at University

Adrian J. Wallbank

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In memory of Herbert Ward (1914–1995)

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Foreword

One picture is worth a thousand words.
(English idiom)

Sometime in the mid-1990s, filming was taking place for an ITV News report on the teaching strategies used with dyslexics at Maple Hayes School and Research Centre (where I was a pupil). During a break in filming, I vividly remember a reporter quizzing one of the students as to why using a visual system of icons to learn how to spell was effective. The reporter repeated the same comments and suspicions that many of us had heard before and which has plagued the reputation of its inventor and the school's principal, Dr E. Neville Brown. 'I don't get it', he quipped, 'I don't understand how words can have visual meanings!' 'You wouldn't', the student replied rather cheekily, 'you're not dyslexic!'

Despite this student's rather brazen dismissal of the reporter's questions, this memory has stayed with me ever since and I feel is central to understanding the rationale behind this book. Dyslexics are predominantly right brain, visual thinkers – words are secondary considerations. Dyslexics think holistically and visually, and this is why it is necessary to visualise the patterns and underlying meanings of writing as a means of understanding its content and structure. This is a different way of doing things to left brain thinkers, hence why the reporter mentioned above just didn't 'get it'. So while this book may be of considerable use to the non-dyslexic, the aim here is to tap into your visual strengths as a dyslexic and add additional coping/compensatory strategies to the ones that have brought you this far. If you are dyslexic, and you are reading this, you've undoubtedly done an excellent job of adjusting to, if not excelling within, a system that simply does not suit your right brain learning preferences and visual strengths. The next step, however, is a big one. 'Stepping up' from school/college to university, irrespective of your dyslexia, is a challenge, but is one that I guarantee you will succeed in providing you adjust and learn new, more sophisticated coping strategies. Your dyslexia will never go away; all we can do is find ever more inventive ways of working with or around it. You need better aids to help you succeed, and this is what this book aims to provide. But you also have an edge – dyslexics usually have high intelligence and a unique ability to discern patterns, connections and think holistically. It has brought you and sustained thus far, so with the guidance provided in this book, why not see where else it can take you?

This book is dedicated to dyslexics everywhere, with faith in the fact that success is obtainable, can be achieved, and is ours for the taking . . .

Dr Adrian J. Wallbank, Centre for the Development of Academic Skills
(CeDAS), Royal Holloway, University of London, April 2017

Acknowledgements

This book has been many years in the making. As a pupil at Maple Hayes School and Research Centre I was introduced to the concept of learning how to spell using visual icons through the pioneering work of Dr E. Neville Brown. I arrived at Maple Hayes as an underachieving dyslexic who had been placed in the lowest possible band at high school and told that although I'd 'never amount to much', one day I'd at 'least make someone a good husband'. Brown, along with his staff, formed the basis of my transformation into a successful academic, lecturer and researcher, and their influences lie behind much of this book. More recently, I have accrued numerous debts during the course of writing this textbook. I owe a great deal to my students, both at Warwick and Royal Holloway. Their difficulties and triumphs have frustrated and inspired me in equal measure, and without having read hundreds, if not thousands of their essays, I'd not have been able to formulate my ideas. At Warwick, the work and enthusiasm of Thomas Docherty has been a constant source of motivation and he was one of the first people to suggest that I write this book. At Royal Holloway, Jackie Knowles supported my ideas throughout, Silke Placzeck kindly re-arranged my teaching commitments to give me what she so managerially calls 'head space', and my colleague Gerard Clough has, in his own unique ways, been lurking in the background offering constant encouragement. But my greatest debt is to my wife, Mona Khatibshahidi, who is responsible for battling with the vagaries of technology and the murky depths of graphic design in order to painstakingly construct all of the visual elements of this book. This nearly killed both of us at times, not least because she has consistently challenged my thinking and my predilection for making 'piles' everywhere in ways that only married couples will know about and I'm sure she'll be heartily glad to see the back of this project. To her patience and design skills I owe more than words can say.

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‘Stepping up’ from school/college to university

Whenever people talk about dyslexia, it's important to know that some of the smartest people in the world, major owners of companies, are dyslexic. We just see things differently, so that's an advantage. I just learn a different way; there's nothing bad about it.

(Charlotte McKinney, American model and actress)

The potential to excel

In the Foreword to the third edition of Ronald D. Davis's famous book *The Gift of Dyslexia* (2010, p. xi), Linda Silverman highlights the ‘essential gifts of dyslexics’, these being:



As you have probably already noticed, however, the current pre-university education system (in the UK at least), with its focus on passing exams rather than learning, on hitting ‘Assessment Objectives’ and ‘Learning Outcomes’ rather than critical thinking and creativity, is simply not suited to the learning styles and ‘gifts’ of dyslexics. Indeed, you may well have had an enormous struggle to make it to university in the first place and feel as though your experience of education thus far has been stifling rather than enlightening. This is something that even Albert Einstein, himself a dyslexic, probably had in mind when he stated that ‘it is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education . . . Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in school’ (TheDyslexiaProject, 2017). Fortunately, university level study is rather different and gives you much more intellectual and creative space to spread your wings. Indeed, as Silverman points out, in today’s world student success (both within and beyond university), depends upon the

ability to see the big picture, to predict trends, to read customers, to think outside the box, to see patterns, to inspire collaboration among peers, to empathize, to synthesize information from a variety of sources, and to perceive possibilities from different perspectives. These are the natural talents of dyslexics.

(p. xi)

While these words are undoubtedly inspiring and hopeful, and have a profound relevance in a world which is seeing increasing amounts of complex and sometimes contradictory agendas, let us not get ahead of ourselves. A new battle awaits in the form of the higher intellectual demands associated with advanced study, whether this is as a first-year undergraduate, masters or doctoral student. Do not underestimate the challenges (which all students, not just those with dyslexia) face when ‘stepping up’ from ‘A’ levels, Access or International Baccalaureate to the first year of an undergraduate course. Indeed, you will need to ‘step up’ again as you transition from first year to second year, from second year to third year, from third year to masters, and from masters to doctorate. This may seem obvious, but in contrast to the non-dyslexic, this natural process of ‘stepping up’ also means that you need to develop increasingly sophisticated coping, learning and writing strategies so as to meet the higher demands placed on you as a result of your dyslexia (most notably in relation to difficulties associated with working memory, slower reading speeds and problems with sequencing and organising ideas). Unfortunately, nobody can wave a magic wand and make your dyslexia disappear. As such, what is required is the development and expansion of the coping strategies that have brought you this far to help you meet the new, advanced challenges. Remaining static, or relying on the coping strategies you have already developed are unlikely to work. Your dyslexia doesn’t mean that you cannot compete with your peers, or that the increasingly sophisticated coping strategies you need to develop mean that your progress will be slower or hindered in some way. Rather, the coping strategies proposed in this book harness and tap into your gifts as a visual and multidimensional thinker. By adopting them, you will not only cope at university but will thrive and excel.

Getting started – understanding the differences between writing at school/college and university

Studying and writing at university is very different from what you have probably encountered at school or college. While the International Baccalaureate does a better job of preparing students for university study, the traditional and currently more popular ‘A’ level or Access route is less helpful. Some of the key differences are as follows:

'A' level/Access	University
Taught, coached and mentored.	Emphasis is on independent learning.
Prescriptive (coursework titles are often chosen by the teacher or exam board, or if the student chooses it you are coached to create one which allows you to focus on meeting the exam boards' very precise criteria).	Student increasingly autonomous and independent, minimal coaching/guidance.
Focused on fulfilling the exam boards' very explicit criteria ('Assessment Objectives' – these are set in the UK by Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL)).	Focused on articulating an argument that is engaged critically and creatively with the question.
Limited engagement with secondary reading.	Extensive, critical and evaluative engagement with secondary materials and theories.
Focused on exhibiting or achieving a specific aim or demonstrating a specific acquisition of knowledge rather than exhibiting wide ranging, critically perceptive knowledge of the discipline.	Critical evaluation, analysis and creativity/independent thinking.

If you have studied for 'A' levels or an Access qualification, you'll probably have already seen how these priorities are mapped onto the assessment criteria. Exam boards have to adhere to 'Assessment Objectives' defined by OFQUAL, and these are designed to provide teachers and examiners with a framework for assessing work in a fair, transparent and rigorous manner. These aims are entirely understandable, but what this often leads to is the student being taught how to 'jump through hoops' rather than gaining an in-depth knowledge of the subject. Indeed, as a former teacher of 'A' level English, I probably spent 80 per cent of my time teaching students how to meet 'Assessment Objectives' rather than teaching them about English. This results in rather formulaic, precise writing that is obsessed with hitting targets rather than exploring ideas. Let's look at the following exemplar 'A' level literature essay that seeks to compare Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to see how this happens:

Exemplar paragraph	Assessment objectives
<p>One of the main themes around which the play pivots is Hamlet's despair and alleged madness. In <u>Act Three Scene One</u> we find him uttering the now famous and thought-provoking line 'To be, or not to be – that is the question;' which initiates a bout of <u>philosophical questioning</u> concerning life and death. The <u>definitive determiner</u> 'the' emphasises the level of despair that Hamlet feels as it is 'the question'; no other question matters. Moreover, 'is', the <u>third person singular</u> of 'be', reinforces the <u>definitive determiner</u> by preventing any possibility of modal questioning such as 'might be the question'. Hamlet's questions thus stand in sharp contrast to the rather more emotive, <u>rhetorical questions</u> Blake poses in relation to poverty, abuse and religion (such as 'Is that trembling cry a song?' in 'Holy Thursday' and in respect of child abuse, 'are such things done on Albion's shore?' in 'A Little Boy Lost'), although they clearly engage the reader in a similar form of self-examination as that encouraged by Hamlet and are perhaps intended to make the reader question not their life, but their conscience in relation to the ongoing suffering of children caught up in the exploitation of early industrial society.</p>	<p>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression <u>(Note – terminology is underlined)</u></p> <p>AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts</p> <p>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received</p> <p>AO4: Explore connections across literary texts</p>

As you can probably see by the sheer number of colours I've used here (and even this is not enough), there is an awful lot of thought gone into this extract to make it fit the assessment criteria. The fact that there is only limited analysis/evaluation and that comparing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with Blake is a very odd decision indeed is irrelevant. The main thing that matters is the student hitting the 'Assessment Objectives', which in this case they have done superbly.

Access assignments are similar. Access courses are marked as a pass, merit or distinction in accordance with the following criteria:

- 1) Understanding of the subject
- 2) Application of knowledge
- 3) Application of skills
- 4) Use of information
- 5) Communication and presentation
- 6) Autonomy/Independence
- 7) Quality

Again, note the emphasis here upon testing the acquisition, application and use of knowledge rather than wide-ranging analysis, independent thinking, critical analysis, evaluation and argumentation. These are assessed, but like in 'A' levels, they are not the driving factor. But additionally, the assessment criteria and assignment brief often dictate the sequence of ideas within the essay and, along with the tutor's guidance, this schema coaches the student towards responding in a set way. For example, take the following assignment for psychology:

Assignment title: Outline and evaluate the causes, effects and treatment of stress (1500 words)			
No.	Assessment criteria: the learner can	Achieved?	
		First submission	Second submission
1	Define the term stress and describe potential sources of stress (internal or external stressors) and their biological effects.		
2	Explain and evaluate some of the effects of chronic stress on the body and behaviour.		
3	Evaluate three different treatments/therapies for stress.		

(Openawards, 2016)

Notice that the student here is practically told what to write in their essay, and in what sequence. In fact, one could even match up the three aspects of the assessment criteria to the word count and simply allocate 500 words to each criterion. It is no surprise, therefore, that this incredibly

formulaic, assessment driven way of teaching results in extremely formulaic, assessment driven essays. Indeed, note the fact that two submissions are allowed – a situation that usually leads to the tutor ‘coaching’ their students towards fulfilling the assessment criteria rather than giving them the intellectual space and freedom to explore their own ideas. This level of intervention, coaching and prescriptiveness simply doesn’t happen at university. Take a look at the following extract from a typical university marking criteria. As you will see, it is rather less prescriptive and considerably vaguer:

Category	1st	2:2
Relevance:	Demonstrates an accurate grasp of the issues raised by the question or brief, and engages with them fully.	Demonstrates partial recognition of the issues, and the material presented may lose focus in places.
Argument:	Elucidates a sustained, coherent, original and persuasive argument.	Argument may not be fully sustained or relevant, may be over-general or oversimplified.
Knowledge:	Demonstrates excellent skills in marshalling appropriate evidence; engages critically and creatively with a range of materials.	Received ideas may be repeated or described rather than critically interrogated.

(Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017)

The vagueness within these descriptors may appear unsettling at first, and many students react with frustration as they simply do not know what is expected of them. This is understandable given that you are moving from an educational setting where you are coached and guided, to one where independence and autonomy are highly valued. If you try to follow the templates for hitting ‘Assessment Objectives’ that you used successfully at school or college, you simply won’t achieve good marks, no matter how hard you try, as the goals are completely different. Let’s examine this passage from an undergraduate law essay to see how different it is from the ‘A’ level literature exemplar:

Assignment Task: Despite many changes to law and policy relating to domestic violence, criminal justice responses still fail to provide adequate protection for those at risk. Discuss:	Descriptor from mark scheme:
Although CPS reports suggest that ‘highest volumes ever’ of domestic violence referrals were charged last year, totalling over 70,000 (CPS 2014b), there are numerous significant counter-arguments pointing out inadequacies in the legal framework and its ambiguous definitions. Despite repeated, valid attempts to create a definition of domestic violence which encompasses a wide array of actions (Smith, 1999 and Jones, 2001), the notion of domestic violence as meaning physical beating, and	Demonstrates an accurate grasp of the issues raised by the question or brief, and engages with them fully (notice how nearly all the words, sentences and ideas are specifically engaged with the assignment task)

nothing less, remains the ‘dominant view’ (Stark, 2007, p. 84). As Stark (2007) has testified, victims are reluctant to acknowledge their situation absent of physical violence (Stark, 2007, p. 111). Furthermore, no specific ‘domestic violence’ offence exists, with instances being artificially categorised as regular offences instead. Indeed, they are mostly classified as merely ‘common assault’ (Hester, 2006, p. 85), which does not accurately reflect the severity of domestic violence. State liability for failing to prevent domestic violence, though welcome, is set to a very high threshold (Osman v UK), and as such may not be robust enough to have much effect domestically save in exceptional circumstances (Burton, 2010, p. 134) and domestic case law interpreting the obligation has only watered down this obligation further (Burton, 2010, p. 292).

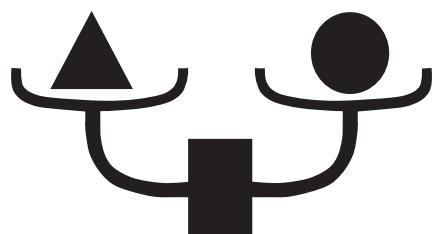
Elucidates a sustained, coherent, original and persuasive argument.

Demonstrates excellent skills in marshalling appropriate evidence; engages critically and creatively with a range of materials

As you can see, there is a considerable amount of primary and secondary source use here, but that doesn’t dominate what is said. The student drives an argument, with critical analysis and evaluation, through the entire passage and uses the sources either to support their points, or as a means of initiating critical engagement with the fact that the criminal justice system, even in its very definitions of what constitutes domestic violence, is flawed (and as a result, is failing those at risk). The passage is concise, focused and uses evidence in a sophisticated and thorough manner. Notice also that the student is not attempting to tick boxes and meet assessment criteria (simply because they are not specific enough for you to do this), but focuses on insightful argumentation, evaluation and answering the question. They are not setting out to merely exhibit knowledge in an attempt to acquire marks, but he/she is using that knowledge as the background to the analysis and argument.

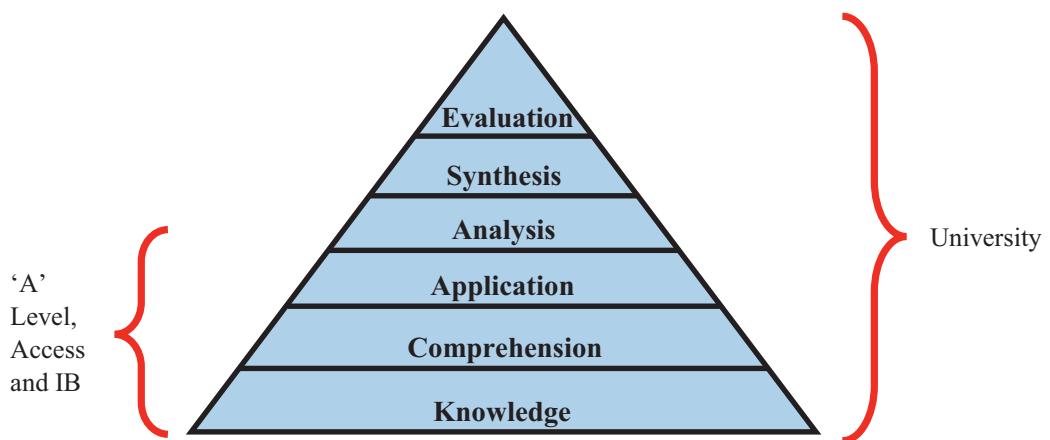
In making the transition from school/college to university, then, you need to adopt new approaches and techniques in your writing and engage in much more critical thinking. This involves:

- Moving on from ‘Assessment Objectives’ and ‘jumping through hoops’ towards a more independent, less structured approach.
- Creating an argument.
- Critical thinking, analysis and evaluation rather than simply displaying knowledge.
- Incorporating and engaging with secondary reading and theoretical perspectives.
- Weighing up the evidence (as is often indicated by key activity words in the assignment title) in order to make an argument amid considerable complexity, uncertainty and competing views/evidence:



**Discuss
Evaluate
Assess
Consider
How far is x true?
To what extent is x true?**

- Higher level thinking – as can be depicted on Bloom’s famous taxonomy of educational objectives:



These skills apply to all university students, but as a dyslexic, making this transition will necessitate using your dyslexia and ability to engage in ‘big picture’ thinking, synthesis, perceptiveness and making connections, and making these traits work for you rather than against you. This is precisely where this book comes in. This book presents a ‘process orientated’, step-by-step approach to academic writing and composition specifically tailored to the needs of dyslexic students in higher education. The writing ‘process’ (e.g. understanding the genre and style, reading, critical thinking, writing and proofreading/editing) is explored and demonstrated in detail, but the content is translated into meaningful visual representations in the form of templates, frameworks, images, icons and prompts. The purpose of this is to help you make sense of your ideas by harnessing your visual learning preferences and strengths and thus present your thoughts in a structured, sequenced and ordered manner (which is the predominant difficulty dyslexics encounter). The visual system presented here is intended to be used as a sophisticated ‘coping’ strategy to support you in bridging the gap between your existing ‘coping’ or ‘compensatory’ strategies and the heightened demands and rigours of academic writing in higher education settings while also acting as a system of prompts to enable you to write independently. This is undoubtedly a different way of doing things and will thus require perseverance in order to master it fully, but surely this is what has brought you to this point in the first place! Embrace the challenge! Embrace the greater freedom and autonomy associated with studying and writing at university. You are now largely free of the constrictions of ‘Assessment Objectives’ so take full advantage. University marking criteria give you more space to enable you to play to your dyslexic strengths, so keep fighting – there is no reason to let your dyslexia hold you back. Remember, many of the world’s most famous artists, thinkers, writers, philosophers and scientists are dyslexic – keep an eye out for some of their inspiring quotes as you proceed through the book.

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8 Stepping up to university

Openawards, (2016) Access to HE Psychology Exemplar Assignment. Available at: <http://openawards.org.uk/media/1818/access-to-he-psychology-exemplar-assignment-2016.pdf> (accessed: 30 March 2017).

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Reading to write

I had to train myself to focus my attention. I became very visual and learned how to create mental images in order to comprehend what I read.

(Tom Cruise, actor and dyslexic)

At university, you will be expected to undertake large amounts of reading, often in a very short space of time. This can be a daunting prospect (even for the non-dyslexic), and discussion forums, student blogs and feedback to tutors often highlight reading as being a major challenge, especially when first making the transition from school or college to university. Indeed, a 2014 survey in the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills at Royal Holloway, University of London revealed that students ranked reading as being their number one challenge during the first year of their degrees. So why is such extensive reading so important? What is its function?

The purpose of reading

Reading at university is essential for two primary reasons:

1) To expand your knowledge of the subject and its writing conventions.

Never lose sight of the fact that you came to university to learn, and not just to pass exams and gain a degree. Not all of your reading will be needed for your essay writing or exams – large quantities of it is simply to fill your brain with information, ideas, questions and skills which you hadn't previously encountered, and at a much higher level than that learned at school or college. But additionally, as Steven Pinker has pointed out,

good writers are avid readers. They have absorbed a vast inventory of words, idioms, constructions, tropes, and rhetorical tricks, and with them a sensitivity to how they mesh and how they clash. This is the elusive 'ear' of a skilled writer'.

(2015, p.11)

Wide reading, then, will help you to write well.

2) To find specific information for use in your academic writing (essays/exams).

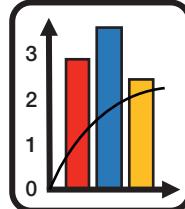
Here the purpose is driven entirely by what has been set by your lecturers in the assignment task/essay question. The task of finding and using specific information will largely be informed by the reading you have done to expand your knowledge, so it is essential you read with both of these purposes in mind, rather than just focusing on reading for essay writing as your only priority. The two main purposes of reading are interrelated and inseparable – reading for knowledge will enrich your essay writing, and reading for specific information will enrich your knowledge. Try to view reading as a holistic process and don't short change yourself by only reading in preparation for assignments.

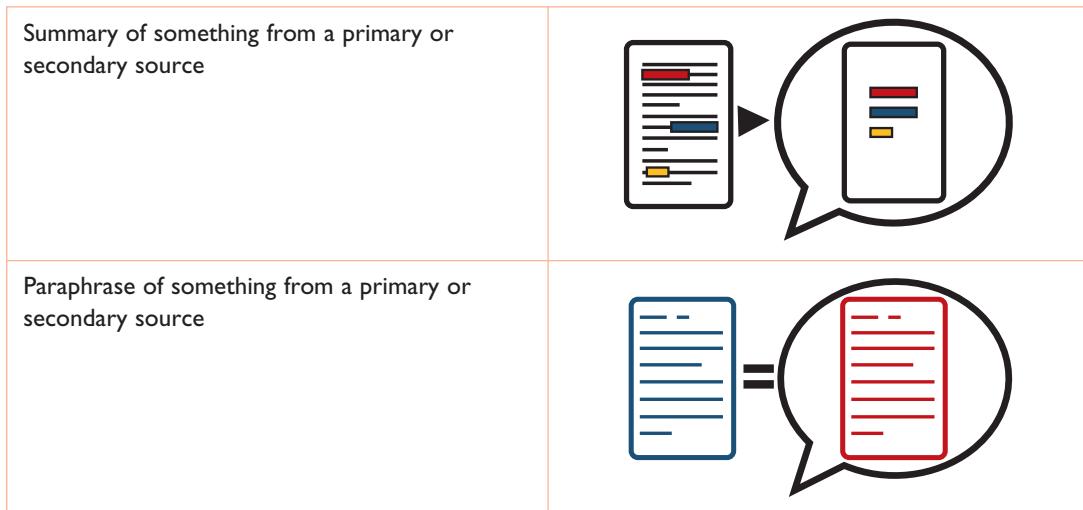
The reason you need to use sources in your writing is to demonstrate the following skills and abilities:

- That you have read around the subject and can conduct independent research.
- That you can select and prioritise appropriate sources and information, filtering out what is/is not needed.
- That you can harness evidence in support of your views/arguments. Throughout this book, evidence is visualised as a fingerprint, because like a lawyer or police officer, you need to present evidence for your case/argument.
- That you can consider and evaluate arguments/counterarguments and integrate these into your own argument.

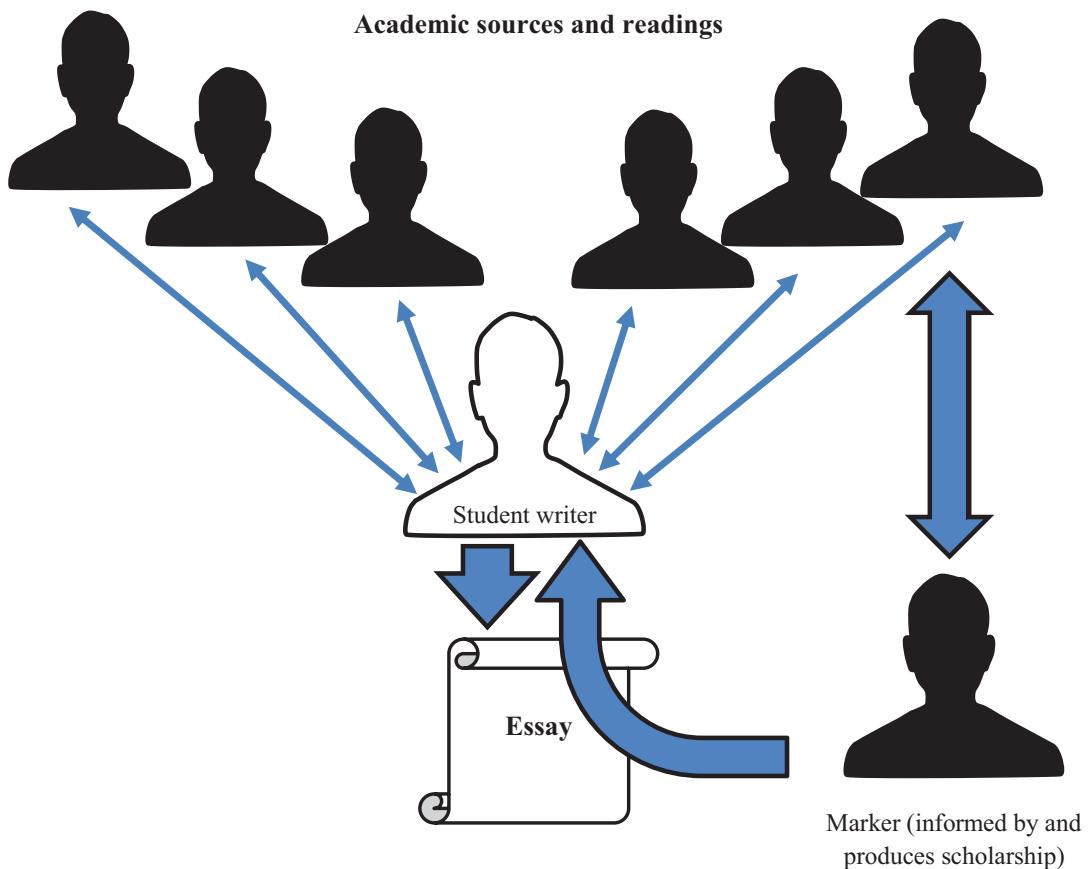


Evidence can take several forms, but the most common are as follows:

Evidence:	Symbolic representation used in this book:
Data and statistics	
Formulae	$E = MC^2$
Direct quotation from primary or secondary sources	



Without adequate sources and reading your essays and assignments are likely to score poor marks. This is because your essays need to show how your ideas enter into an intellectual conversation with, are informed by, or even challenge, the work of others. In other words, academic writing, and academia generally, is largely dialogic:



It is essential, therefore, that you spend time reading and enriching your knowledge.

Types of sources

Not all sources are created equally and some are more suitable than others. Let's compare some examples. Which of these sources do you think might be the most appropriate for an essay about global warming?



- 1) Global temperature is subject to short-term fluctuations that overlay long-term trends and can temporarily mask them. The relative stability in surface temperature from 2002 to 2009, which has been dubbed the global warming hiatus by the media and some scientists, is consistent with such an episode. 2015 updates to account for differing methods of measuring ocean surface temperature measurements show a positive trend over the recent decade.



- 2) A recent spate of shark attacks in North Carolina may have been partly caused by global warming, an expert has claimed. The warmer weather not only brings sharks further north, but also entices more people to get into the water. Coupled with other factors such as higher salinity and an increased number of 'bait fish', this has supposedly created a 'perfect storm' of conditions for shark attacks.



- 3) Model calculations have, for the last decade, suggested that a doubling of CO₂ will lead to increases in globally averaged temperature of 1.5 to 5 degrees (NRC 83) . . . However, such large predictions suggest that the changes in CO₂ that have occurred over the last 150 years should already have produced warmings of 0.5–2 degrees. Yet the warming effect is logarithmic and increases in CO₂ have become progressively less influential.

The first source looks very useful indeed, gives a good overview of the main issues at stake and is written in an accessible, yet authoritative manner. As such you'd be forgiven for thinking that it is an entirely suitable source to use. However, it is taken from Wikipedia (2017). Many students wrongly use Wikipedia and often either quote from it in their essays or even copy and paste from it and try and pass it off as their own work (plagiarism). One of the reasons the Wikipedia extract from above sounds so authoritative is because it is largely a patchwork of ideas, phrases and direct, but sometimes unattributed quotations from academic sources, most notably Marion Henkel's book, *21st Century Homestead: Sustainable Agriculture II* (2015). Wikipedia is undoubtedly a useful source of information, and it's a great place to go as a STARTING POINT for your research, particularly for the references at the end of each article. However, none of the material on Wikipedia is subjected to 'peer review' (the process by which material is assessed by experts in the field before publication). This means that its quality and accuracy has not been validated and cannot be relied upon. Furthermore, markers often think that using Wikipedia looks 'lazy', as it is clear that the student has not done their own research or read anything that was recommended on their reading lists.



The second source comes from the *Daily Mail* newspaper (O' Callaghan, 2015). Again, this is an unsuitable source. Although 'an expert' is cited, the article is merely a news report, and neither academic nor peer reviewed. Indeed, many newspapers resort to rhetorical strategies and sometimes deliberate misrepresentation of the facts to scare (hence the story about shark attacks), inspire or sway their readers, either politically or ideologically. They are, therefore, overtly biased rather than neutral and cannot be used as an authority in your reading and writing (except if you were perhaps citing a newspaper or other media production as evidence of bias or as cultural phenomenon).



The third source is taken from a journal article by Richard S. Lindzen, which appeared in the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* (1990, p.289). Although perhaps not as entertaining as stories about shark attacks, the source is authoritative (since it is written by an eminent professor) and has been subjected to peer review before publication. Furthermore, notice how the argument is balanced in that the author subjects the 'model calculations' to scrutiny and analysis based on evidence. Not all academic sources are unbiased or even-handed, but there is a noticeable degree of critical analysis within their arguments, unlike the openly biased or inflammatory publications produced by newspapers or other mass-media outlets.

TIPS



Use only peer-reviewed, quality academic sources.



Steer clear of mass-media publications and websites.



Avoid online revision guides (these are aimed at 'A' level or Access students, and are thus too basic for undergraduates/postgraduates).

When reading at university, then, use mostly textbooks, monographs, edited collections and journal articles (as recommended by your lecturers). Even some academic sources, however, are more useful than others, and textbooks in particular need to be read with a different purpose in mind. Let's have a look at how each can be used and why some might have distinct advantages and drawbacks.

Textbooks

What are they?

- Usually chronological or thematic introductory guides for students.
- Provide a synthesised summary of key events, topics or themes within an easily understood and accessible framework.
- Help students gain a sense of perspective and see the 'big picture'/how everything fits together.

Do you think, then, that textbooks are a suitable source to use in your essays?



You might be surprised to learn that the answer is essentially no! A student textbook is an introduction to the subject, rather than a piece of original, academic research. Although this can make textbooks a very useful, easily digestible source of information, they are a little too basic for use in essays. What you need is the ‘real deal’, the original academic source rather than merely a watered-down version or an introductory summary. By using journal articles and monographs, you will go deeper into the subject, use the original, authoritative sources, and impress your marker with your ability to conduct research and engage with complex, higher level thinking and theory. This will inevitably result in better marks.

TEXTBOOK TIPS

-  Use the bibliography as your cue to hit the library in search of the monographs and journal articles they recommend or cite.
-  Many textbooks provide quotes from and references to the key theorists or critics working in the field, and thus often highlight what is most important for you to read.
-  Textbooks are ideal for exam revision and for finding out about the main topics, key debates, who the key theorists are and what they said, and what the overall context of the field, topic or discipline looks like. This makes them an ideal starting point for your research and provides a good sense of perspective and the ‘big picture’ – precisely what dyslexic students find invaluable. Furthermore, as we shall see later, they can help you understand the complexities of monographs and journal articles if you alternate between reading materials (dual assistive reading).

Monographs

What are they?

- Extended investigations/research of 60,000 words or more on a specific topic.
- Written primarily for academics and subject-specific professionals.
- Undergo an extensive ‘peer-review’ process that guarantees academic integrity.

Pros



- Present up-to-date research when first published.
- Have convenient contents pages and indexes to help you find information quickly.
- Are academically robust and show that you have undertaken scholarly research.

Cons



- Obscurity (focus can be too narrow).
- Can be hard to read due to subject technicalities and length.

- ‘Date’ rapidly.
- Dyslexic students can easily become ‘lost’ while reading them as it’s difficult to keep sight of the ‘big picture’. This is particularly problematic if reading them online (i.e. via Google Books or from a publisher’s ‘open access’ portal).
- If borrowed from a library, you can’t make notes on them or highlight passages with a pen; only Post-it notes or bookmarks can be used.
- Often unfeasible to print out large sections of the text (this could also breach copyright laws).

Journal articles

What are they?

- Short essays written by academics that investigate a problem/issue or present the results of research.
- Written primarily for academics and subject-specific professionals.
- Undergo an extensive ‘peer-review’ process that guarantees academic integrity.

Pros



- Present up-to-date research.
- Usually have short abstracts providing a summary of the topic – this gives you a useful ‘snapshot’ of what the article is about and the main findings/argument.
- Are academically robust and show that you have undertaken scholarly research.
- Often accessible online through your university’s library catalogue, Google Scholar or the publisher’s website.
- Narrow focus.
- Easy to print out, make notes on and carry with you.

Cons



- Obscurity (focus can be too narrow).
- Can be hard to read due to subject technicalities.
- No index, so it can be harder to scan for specific information.

Edited collections

What are they?

- Short essays written by academics that investigate a problem/issue or present the results of research, but they are collected together by an academic editor around a core theme.

- Written primarily for academics and subject-specific professionals.
- Undergo an extensive ‘peer-review’ process that guarantees academic integrity.

Pros



- Academically robust and show that you have undertaken scholarly research.
- Narrow focus, but grouped around a core, general theme.
- Relatively easy to print out, make notes on and carry with you if you only require one or two chapters.

Cons



- Obscurity (focus can be too narrow).
- Can be hard to read due to subject technicalities.
- ‘Date’ rapidly.

The dyslexic experience of academic reading

For dyslexics, reading can be problematic, disorientating, frustrating and even demoralising. Dyslexic students typically experience the following issues:

- 1) Reading slowly and falling behind (the average non-dyslexic student can read approximately 200–250 words per minute as opposed to 90–120).
- 2) Having difficulty maintaining attention.
- 3) Losing sight of or completely forgetting what has just been read only a few pages previously.
- 4) Being unable to see the purpose of the reading.
- 5) Having difficulty following the argument advanced by the author.
- 6) Frustration at what has been termed ‘the paradox of dyslexia’ – namely that as a dyslexic you read slowly but your brain works extremely quickly (Shaywitz, 1996). This means that dyslexic readers can often ‘jump’ or anticipate what is going to be said on the next page but cannot remember what was said on the previous one. This can have a severe and negative impact upon your self-esteem.

One of the biggest differences between a dyslexic and non-dyslexic reader is that non-dyslexics read in a linear, sequential manner, taking one step/sentence/paragraph/section/chapter at a time. Dyslexics, on the other hand, need to see the ‘bigger picture’. In other words, because the dyslexic brain can think and form connections quickly, it needs to be at the end of the paragraph or chapter at the same time as being at the beginning, thus getting a picture of the full meaning in an instant. This is obviously impossible when reading word-by-word, line-by-line, and even chapter-by-chapter. The dyslexic brain, by preferring visual,

'big picture' thinking, is more than capable of seeing and comprehending the whole, but is constrained by the fact that the information is not present on the page in one, complete, entire and instantly comprehensible package. This can prove immensely frustrating and often leads to lapses in concentration and even boredom. But equally, some dyslexia and study skills specialists recommend strategies that make the problem even worse:



At school, teachers often get dyslexic students to read even more slowly, 'sounding out' or pronouncing individual words. This focus on 'vocalisation' divorces words (and particularly clusters of words) from their meaning, leading to a decrease in comprehension.



Being taught to slow down runs contrary to natural eye movements. By forcing yourself to read from left to right in a slow, careful and deliberate manner, you force the eyes out of their natural tendency to wander all over the page. Studies with high-speed cameras have proven that while reading the eyes can wander up to 18 times per minute (Toikka, 2008, p.4). Why not capitalise upon this tendency rather than forcing yourself to read more slowly and deliberately? By slowing down, you place greater visual stress upon your eyes, something that dyslexics often suffer from anyway.



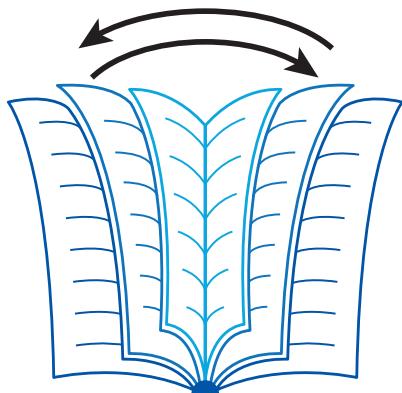
Dyslexics are often told to use a pencil, ruler, finger or even a card to point to or exclude sections of text to help them maintain focus on the sentences and words they are reading while blocking out what surrounds the words/sentences in question. This again slows the reader down and again runs counter to the tendency of the eyes to wander and our ability to use our 'peripheral' vision (which is capable of viewing between five to seven words at a time). In other words, such techniques prevent you from seeing the 'big picture' of the sentence or paragraph, especially if sentences or paragraphs straddle lines or pages.

As a dyslexic, then, what is needed is a reading strategy that allows you to grasp the 'big picture' while avoiding long, unproductive, frustrating and even demoralising reading sessions. A form of speed reading is the answer. Indeed, 'speed reading' as an activity that dyslexics can excel at. One prominent advocate of speed reading, George Stancliffe, claims that dyslexics are usually 'gifted' when it comes to rapid reading, primarily because the right brain is precisely where such rapid, holistic reading takes place (2003). The issue of time/speed here is crucial, and is something which, rather than causing anxiety, can be turned into a strength. For dyslexics, the reading process needs to be quick so as to tap into your brain's ability to form ideas rapidly while also minimising the risk of 'zoning out', reading on 'autopilot', and thus not understanding what is read.

One of the most effective ways of speed reading is to practise the skills and processes associated with what is known as skimming and scanning (some aspects of which are referred to as the SQ3R approach). In what follows, we will go through these skills in detail but relate the processes involved to visual icons which can act as quick references to/explanations of the activity being undertaken. Use these as 'big picture' prompts in order to keep focused on the different stages involved rather than getting bogged down with detailed, close, analytical reading and critical thinking (this will be covered in the next chapter).

Reading techniques: skimming and scanning for dyslexics

Skimming



As the name and the icon on the left suggests, skimming is a very superficial, fast activity that requires little depth. It is for this reason that we can visualise it as akin to flicking through the pages of a book. It is a great technique to use to acquire a sense of the ‘big picture’, overall structure and content of the text very quickly. Lecturers will sometimes recommend that you read an entire book or article, and thus it might seem as though there is little point in skimming, or that it is too superficial. Not so. Skimming gives you a good sense of the entire text, so it is a vital preparatory exercise for dyslexics to do so that when the text is read in depth, the various elements you read can be seen within the context of the whole.

In the case of extended reading lists or ‘recommended reading’, it is very tempting to think that you should read the texts from cover to cover. Indeed, sometimes it can feel like cheating not to do so. However, as a student, you are looking to find RELEVANT information QUICKLY, so skimming is an effective way of doing this and it can be a useful technique for very quickly assessing whether it’s going to be worth reading the text at all, or if so, which parts might be read or excluded. So, what sort of things are you looking for when you skim read a book or article? In order of importance, you should pay particular attention to the following:

1) Title and subtitle

Occasionally, titles can be a little cryptic or abstract, but generally the title and subtitle can give you valuable clues as to whether the book or article is worth reading. Let’s imagine you are researching the benefits of higher education on society in the UK for an assignment. A search in a library catalogue might offer the following results. Let’s decipher and evaluate the potential usefulness of each in turn:

The main title indicates three distinct, but possibly interrelated or competing aspects of the topic, all of which are relevant to the assignment task.

- 1) Ronald Barnett, ‘Knowledge, Higher Education, and Society: A Postmodern Problem’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 19:1 (1993), pp.33–46.

The subtitle narrows down the focus to the issue of postmodernism and the fact that the aforementioned issues are a ‘problem’. There could be tensions between the three aspects mentioned in the main title, which makes it seem not only relevant, but may present revealing and useful ideas about the drawbacks of considering higher education in respect of ‘benefits’. There is no mention of the UK, which, along with the ‘big’ issues identified in the main title, indicates that the book is theoretical or conceptual rather than focused on a specific context.

The word ‘review’ appears to indicate a possible emphasis upon critical approaches to education studies. The article is clearly somewhat dated, and this limits its applicability to today’s situation (especially if we are seeking data), although the indications of a philosophical approach may mean that it has ongoing relevance.

This author has used the question type main heading to pose a cryptic, contentious and thought-provoking topic. What is ‘integrity’, and in what context? How is it to be obtained and by whom? There are some potentially very interesting ideas here but it is not immediately clear what the article’s relevance is.

- 2) Adrianna Kezar, ‘*Obtaining Integrity?*

Reviewing and Examining the Charter between Higher Education and Society,
The Review of Higher Education, 27:4 (2004), pp.429–459.

Like the article above, the emphasis upon the word ‘review’ again indicates an approach which is underpinned by critical analysis, but the emphasis on ‘higher education’ narrows the focus and makes it immediately relevant. It is more up to date than the previous article so may be of more relevance to contemporary debates.

The subheading clarifies the problem and narrows the focus down to the supposed ‘charter’ between higher education and society. What is this ‘charter’? This looks immediately of interest, even if it raises more questions than it solves. The verbs ‘reviewing’ and ‘examining’ also seem useful because we may be able to gain some useful critical analysis in the light of current developments (as of 2004), or at the very least, the verbs indicate that such ‘reviewing’ and ‘examining’ needs to be done, thus highlighting underlying problems which may be useful for the assignment.

- 3) Thomas Docherty, *For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

The text is a monograph produced by a reputable publisher and as such it is clearly an authoritative and suitable source. Of the three texts under consideration it is the most up to date, which makes it even more useful for our assignment.

The main heading immediately identifies a political position, namely that the author is arguing ‘for’ the university and everything such establishments and their underlying principles stand for or represent. The fact that this author is arguing ‘for’ universities also hints at the possibility of an underlying problem or threat which needs to be countered. Although interesting, the main heading doesn’t seem of immediate relevance to our purposes.

The subheading seems far more relevant as it immediately identifies the issue of democracy and the future of universities, although at this stage it is not clear whether democracy refers to societal democracy or democracy within the institution itself.

They always say you should ‘never judge a book by its cover’, but as you can see here, you can get an awful lot of information from titles, and they can give you a good indication of how relevant they are to your task, so always pay attention to them.

2) Abstract or synopsis

As we have seen, some titles contain keywords or statements that are of immediate relevance to the topic under consideration, whereas others are more cryptic or ambiguous. To clarify whether these texts are likely to be useful, the next step is to look at the abstract or synopsis. Journal articles have abstracts (located at the beginning of the article), and monographs have a synopsis (usually either on the back cover or inside the front cover). In both cases, they consist of one or two short paragraphs that outline what the text is about. They usually identify:

- 1) The subject matter.
- 2) The research problem or context and why it matters.
- 3) The argument.
- 4) Methods or approach.
- 5) Key results or findings.
- 6) The implications of the research.

So, digging a little deeper, let's see if Roland Barnett's abstract can help us decide how useful his article may be for our assignment:

In modern society, knowledge, higher education and society act upon each other as separate forces. Two contemporary analytical frameworks help to illuminate this triangle of forces, but the stories they tell seem opposed to each other. Critical theory points up the skewed character of rationality in modern society: on this view, the changing definitions of knowledge in higher education can be said to be a shift in the direction of instrumental reason, with other (hermeneutic and critical) forms of reason being down-played. Postmodernism, on the other hand, argues not for any such one-dimensionality but underscores a heterogeneity of thought forms. Higher education can be viewed in this way, too: the university is a social institution which celebrates differentiation of forms of thought. Can the circle be squared? Can these differences between critical theory and postmodernism – as interpretations of higher education – be reconciled? This paper argues that they can be.

The subject matter and the 'problem' seem relevant but only from a strictly theoretical perspective. Questions about the interrelationships between society, knowledge and higher education are clarified through the fact that they are a 'triangle of forces'. This may be very relevant to our assignment.



Although the background to the two opposed theoretical approaches is illuminating, it may not be of relevance to our assignment, especially if we want to focus upon 'benefits' rather than getting into detail about theory.



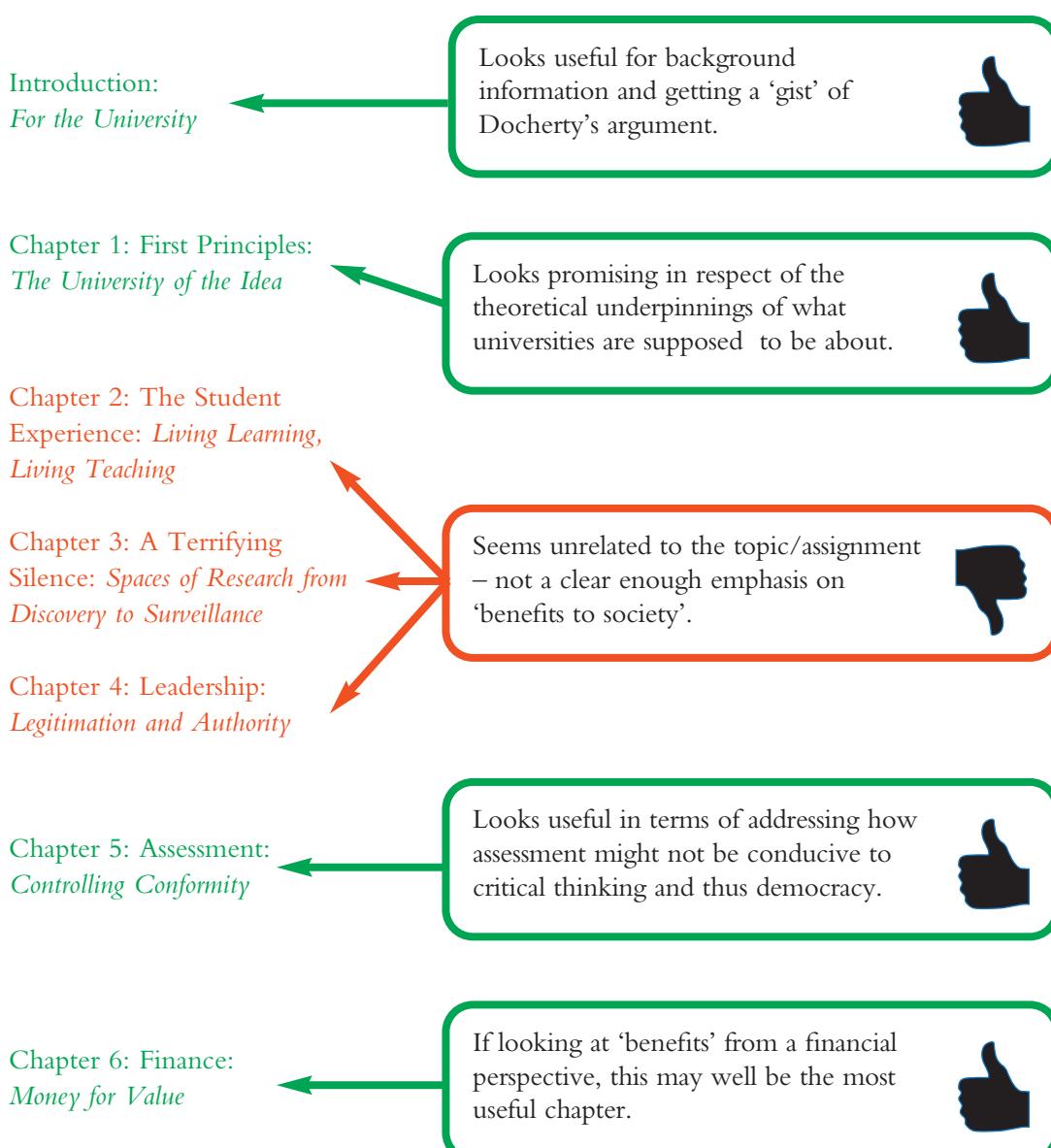
Clear identification of an argument, namely that the 'triangle of forces' can be reconciled within the modern university, thereby having a positive impact on society.



What is also important about abstracts and synopses is that they often contain keywords (as underlined above), so you can keep an eye out for these to see whether they match what you are looking for. If the abstract/synopsis looks of interest and is relevant then read further. If it does not, reject it in favour of more immediately useful material.

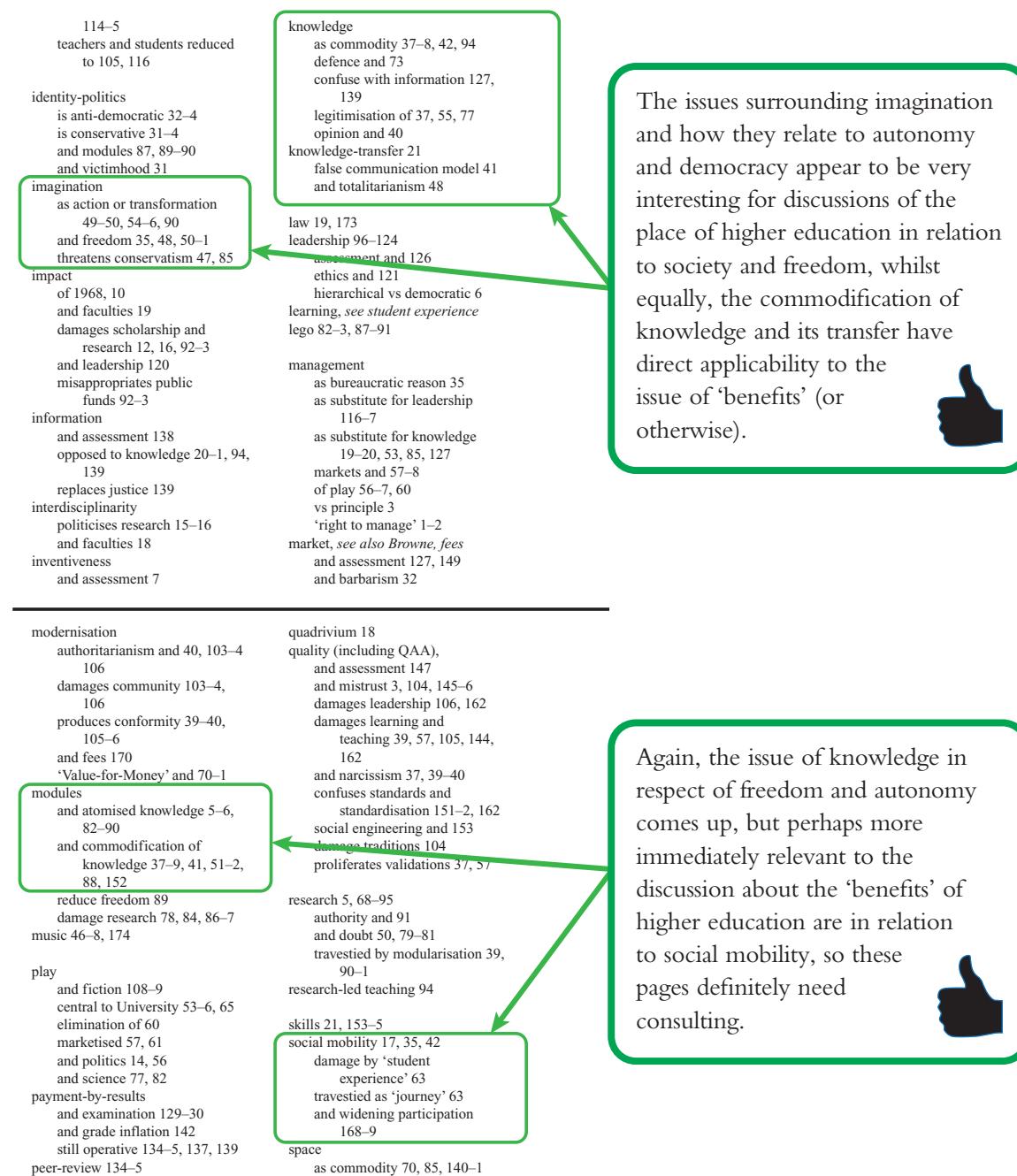
3) Contents page: chapter titles

Chapter titles can also sometimes be cryptic, but the contents page ought to be your next port of call when skimming a text. Look for keywords or phrases that are relevant in the titles and reject any chapters that do not appear to be immediately useful. Again, time is of the essence here – don't waste time reading chapters which might be interesting but ultimately irrelevant and don't waste time reading them because you feel not doing so will be cheating (especially if the text has appeared on a mandatory reading list). For example, in the case of Docherty's monograph, we can see that only around half of the book is of direct relevance to our purposes, even though the rest of the book may be very interesting indeed:



4) Index

The index is probably the most overlooked resource at your disposal. If you have access to a good index then finding the information you want can be very quick and efficient indeed. Some books have two indexes, one for key names, critics, authors or theorists and one for topics. Simply find the keyword or name you want and then look up the page number and find the issue/individual under consideration by scanning (more on scanning below). Let's have a look at snapshots from pages 196–197 from Docherty's topic index to see if there is anything that might relate specifically to our assignment:



TIP

The index can help you narrow down which aspects of the chapter identified in the contents page are relevant, so use them in conjunction with each other.

5) Subheadings

Skim through the text and look for subheadings (just like the ones used here!), which can be invaluable in helping you to navigate the chapters and sections and can help you decide which are worth reading. In particular, look out for keywords (e.g. multiculturalism, profiteering or European Convention on Human Rights), key names (e.g. Shakespeare, Einstein or Obama) and key verbs (e.g. analysis, processing or applying). These will give you an excellent indication of what the section is about, and like titles, an immediate impression of its usefulness and relevance.

6) Imagery

‘One picture is worth a thousand words’ may well be a popular English idiom but visual material really is an essential part of grasping meaning from a text quickly when scanning – especially given that dyslexics have particular strengths in visualising ideas. Skim the text for diagrams, photographs, maps, graphs, pie charts, icons, bullet points or any other visual indicators of meaning. Humanities subjects tend to have less visual material, but the sciences and social sciences use them frequently (depending on the subject). Obviously, some visuals may be too technical to understand, but generally any visual material, especially if it is accompanied by a brief written explanation or key, can help you to quickly get an impression of what the subject is about or what the key findings may be.

7) Introductions

Introductions can be a useful place to focus upon when skimming. Even if the text you are reading has an abstract, the introduction can still be a good place to start as it can provide valuable, immediate information about the study and its implications. Introductions are useful because they usually provide the reader with the following information:

- What the book/study/chapter is about.
- Why it’s important.
- Some background so as to ‘set the scene’ and give the study a context.
- The purpose of the study.
- An argument.

In other words, the introduction gives us a sense of the ‘big picture’ and additional context over and above that provided by the abstract or synopsis. For this reason, it is an invaluable tool in the task of assessing the usefulness and relevance of the text, and it can provide a snapshot of what we need to know about the subject and why it’s important. At that point, we can make an informed decision as to whether to continue reading or not.

8) Conclusions

Conclusions can also be a valuable source of immediate information, especially in the case of journal articles or essays in edited collections. They can sometimes be a little disorientating as obviously, you only have a limited idea of what the author has said throughout the rest of the text, but they can be an effective way of quickly finding out the following information:

- Whether the author's argument/thesis/research hypothesis has been proven or disproven (or was perhaps unsuccessful).
- The key, headline results.
- Why the study matters – how it has changed our understanding of the subject and its impact in relation to the world or the discipline.
- What further questions need answering or what further research needs undertaking.

In many respects, then, a good conclusion can again give us a snapshot of the 'big picture' (both of the research and its implications). This will give you a sense (in addition to that gleaned from the abstract, synopsis, introduction, imagery and subheadings) of whether it is relevant and useful and thus worth reading in more depth.

9) Topic sentences

A topic sentence is the first sentence you will come across when you read a new paragraph. You can find them by looking for indentations or spaces between the paragraphs. The significance of topic sentences for skimming is that:

- a) They are very easy to find.
- b) They should contain two core ingredients which will tell you an awful lot about the content of the paragraph as a whole.

We will look more closely at how to write topic sentences in Chapter 5, but the key thing to remember is that all good topic sentences should contain:

- 1) A clear identification of the topic.
- 2) An indication of an argument or provable opinion.

These two ingredients should give you a very clear and immediate idea of whether the paragraph is going to be useful or relevant. So, let's look at some examples. Imagine you need to write an essay about postwar British cinema and culture. Based on a cursory skim of the title, contents page and introduction, a book entitled *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945–1999* by Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield appears to be relevant, particularly the chapter 'A Cinema in Between: Postwar British Cinema', pp.110–123. Let's look at some topic sentences from this chapter so as to evaluate their usefulness and relevance:

Paragraph:	Topic sentence:	Core themes:	Relevance:	Topic sentence reflects paragraph content:
1	'Had matters taken a different course, Brighton and Hove (where some of the earliest British filmmakers were based) rather than Hollywood might now be the centre of world cinema.'	Background to the initial creativeness of British cinema, why it declined, and why Hollywood was so successful.		Yes
2	'Despite quotas, tariffs, tax advantages and subsidies to domestic producers, European national cinemas have been unable to reverse the domination of Hollywood.'	Background to the rise of Hollywood and falling cinema attendance.		Yes, mostly
3	'Until the 1950s, cinema-going had been for most British families their favourite form of entertainment, but with the advent of the television (Independent Television began to broadcast in 1955) they preferred to stay at home or to spend their disposable income on new consumer goods and on other leisure pursuits.'	Figures on falling cinema attendance and more recent rise in multiplexes as an outlet for Hollywood films.		Yes
4	'Nothing provides a more striking illustration of these issues than the British situation in the late 1940s.'	In-depth discussion of the British market, government subsidies, import duties on American films, pressures from the American government and the appeal of American glamour absent from postwar Britain due to austerity.		Yes

As you can see here, the topic sentences give a largely accurate summary of what is within the paragraph and so during skimming you can quickly narrow down which paragraphs are of relevance, which are perhaps of some use, and which are not worth reading. All the above paragraphs look entirely relevant to our topic and provide both good background information as well as specific time periods, trends and influences.

A note of caution

Textbooks, collected essays and introductory monographs are usually written with a student audience in mind and are thus fairly accessible. Topic sentences in some journal articles and monographs, on the other hand, are occasionally less clear. This can be owing to the obscurity and complexity of the issues discussed, because the writing itself is of dubious quality (even though the research may be groundbreaking!), or because the writer wrongly presumes that only specialists will read the work, so there is no need to make it accessible. Let's look at a slightly less student-friendly text to see how the topic sentences differ. Imagine you are researching the issue of freedom of speech in readiness for an essay on freedom and democracy in the UK. A book entitled *Extreme Speech and Democracy*, edited by Ivan Hare and James Weinstein looks useful, particularly the chapter 'Freedom of Speech in a Globalized World' by Dieter Grimm (2009), pp.11–22. Let's have a look at the first six topic sentences to see how well they reflect the content of the paragraph:

Paragraph:	Topic sentence:	Core themes:	Topic sentence reflects paragraph content:
1	'There is no democracy without public discourse and no public discourse without freedom of speech, freedom of the media, and freedom of information.'	Mutual links between freedom of speech and democracy.	
2	'Most socialist constitutions contained a right to free speech.'	Link between socialism and freedom of speech with examples. Specific case of Australia introduced.	
3	'The High Court reasoned that the Constitution declares Australia to be a democracy, and that there is no way to be a democracy without a recognition of freedom of speech.'	Specific example of the Australian legal framework guaranteeing freedom of speech and the mutual importance of democracy and freedom of speech.	
4	'This is of some importance because it shows that freedom of speech does not derive its raison d'être from democracy.'	Free speech a necessary element for individuality, yet it is not an absolute right since it can harm others.	Topic sentence and content misaligned and unclear. 

5	<p>'Even a country whose constitution reads "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech", as does the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, recognises that not all speech is protected.'</p>	<p>Not all speech is protected, and there is a difference in the purpose for which free speech is protected and its limitations – examples of Chinese vs. Canadian and South African Constitutions</p>	<p>Topic sentence seems to indicate a focus on US, but this is not really what the paragraph is about.</p> 
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So, as you can see, not all topic sentences, especially in academic monographs and journal articles, are accurate in mapping out what the rest of the paragraph will discuss, so while topic sentences are an extremely valuable tool in helping you skim for information, do not necessarily rely upon them. You may need to dig deeper to find the information you need.

Skimming in practice: time and making annotations

You should aim to skim as fast as you can (as a guide, a journal article of 5,000 words can be skimmed in a maximum of 8 minutes). If you start labouring the process, you will end up going too deep and will lose sight of the 'bigger picture' and overall impression of the text. The key thing to remember is that at this stage you are ONLY assessing the RELEVANCE of the text in relation to your PRIORITIES. In other words, if a quick skim of the text does not reveal material to be immediately applicable to your assignment or gaining specific information/knowledge, you need to move on to another text that is to avoid wasting valuable time that could be more usefully deployed reading something more productive. At this stage in the process you could start to annotate the text using a highlighter pen or use Post-it notes to draw your attention back to the relevant sections and paragraphs. By doing so you can easily return to them later, either to scan for specific information, or close read in order to understand and analyse the author's ideas, argument or theory.

TIP



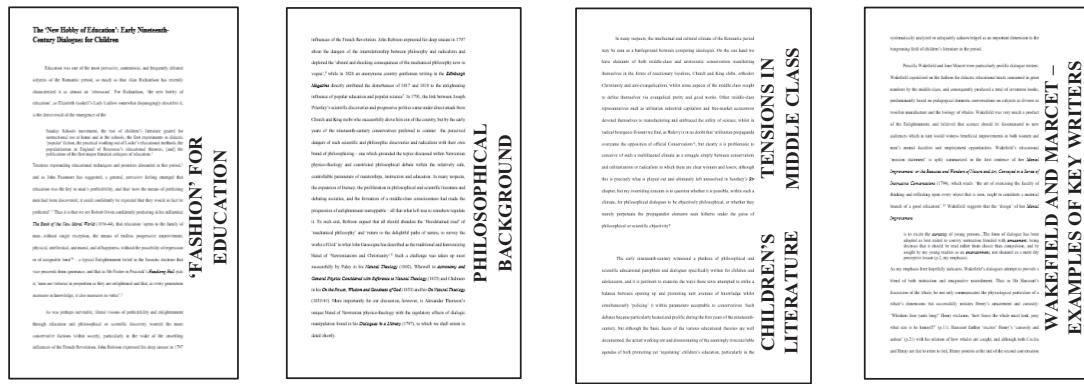
One method for enhancing comprehension, seeing its importance in relation to the 'big picture' and revising the material (perhaps in readiness for an exam or just for recalling important points), is to make a note at the side of the paragraph that reduces/summarises what the paragraph is about in just one or two words. This will jog the memory when you return to it later and helps you identify and visualise the 'big picture', especially if you are using the scroll/text-mapping technique outlined as follows.

Creating a scroll

If you can print out the material (individual chapters and journal articles are only really suitable for this), one method of skimming in order to see the ‘big picture’ is to produce a scroll. This is also known as ‘text-mapping’, and was devised by R. David Middlebrook in 1990. The scroll is an effective way of skimming backwards and forwards across the text so as to get an immediate, overall impression of the article, especially when you have marked up the text with your own very brief notes. The way to produce a scroll is to:

- 1) Print the article/chapter out on single sided paper.
- 2) Make notes on the text/highlight the main paragraphs, ideas or sections of relevance. These notes can often be one-word descriptions such as ‘introduction’, ‘background’, ‘data’, ‘theory’, or ‘benefits of consumerism’. You can add to these brief evaluations such as ‘useful’, not ‘useful’, ‘maybe useful’ depending on what works best for you.
- 3) Lay the papers out in order and Sellotape them together.

The complete scroll or ‘text-map’ might look something like this:



As you can see, one glance can quickly reveal the ‘big picture’ of the article/chapter and this makes it easy to quickly find the information you want while setting it within the context of the overall argument being advanced. For more details about ‘text-mapping’ see www.textmapping.org/.

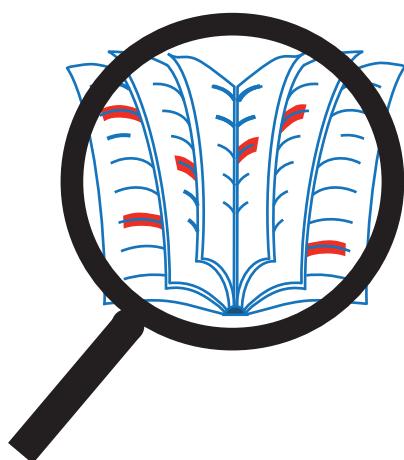
TIP



If you prefer looking at things from top to bottom rather than left to right, simply Sellotape the short edges of the papers instead of the long edges. Orientate the scroll in whatever way works best for you.

Once you have briefly skimmed the material and have ascertained that it is indeed worth reading in further depth, the next technique to use is scanning.

Scanning



Like skimming, the process of scanning a text is quick, but delves into the material at a deeper level. Here you are aiming to find specific pieces of information as quickly as possible. This information is usually something that you already know about (and you are looking for references to it through keywords, dates, names or data). For instance, you might want to know if the author discusses a specific author or theory, whether they refer to a specific Act of Parliament or legislation, or maybe you are looking for key phrases such as 'credit crunch', 'climate change' or 'zone of proximal development'.

A vital aid in this process is the use of a good index (possibly accompanied by the contents page). As we saw earlier, in many cases you can simply look up the keyword, author, theory or even phrase in the index and it will list all the pages on which those terms or pieces of information occur. This means that you can simply scan specific pages rather than entire chapters or sections, thus saving you both time and effort.

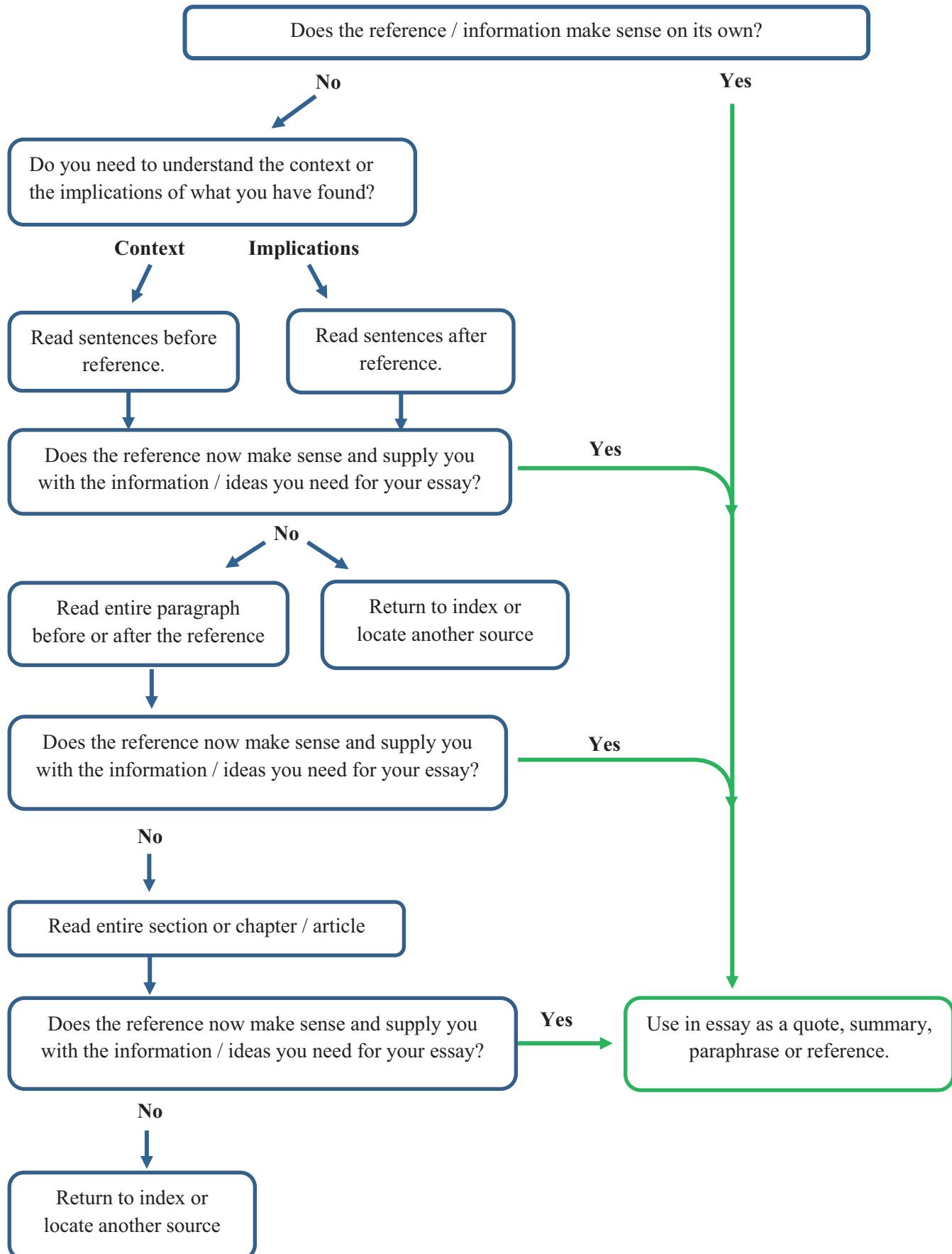
Not all indexes are good (and in some cases, such as in a journal article, there might not even be one), but they can be a vital tool to use when scanning. On occasions when the index is unhelpful or unavailable, you might need to scan larger sections of text (possibly with the help of the contents page). To avoid larger sections of text becoming confusing (perhaps even with words jumping around) you should use coloured overlays if you find them helpful (your dyslexia diagnosis should be able to advise on which colours are best for you). The key thing to remember is to keep scanning rather than getting bogged down in detail. One way of doing this is to use your finger to trace the sentences, but unlike what you may have been taught at school, DO NOT ALLOW YOUR FINGER TO STOP MOVING. Do not slow down – keep scanning the pages and keep the momentum, and do not start reading individual words or sentences. At this point you are merely looking for key words, facts or phrases and nothing more.

TIP

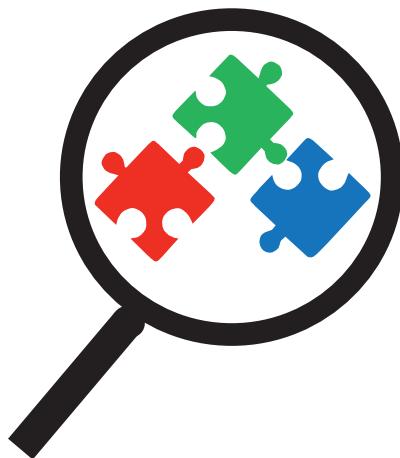


If there are lots of references to what you are looking for and they occur within a few pages of each other (e.g. 'materialism', pp.89, 91–92, 95–97), then it's probably worth just reading the entire section rather than looking up each individual reference.

Once you have arrived at the page referenced in the index, scan up and down looking for the keyword, term, date, fact or piece of information that you need. Once found, you have several options, which can be summarised like this:



Scanning for the ‘gist’: identifying key sites of meaning in sentences and clauses



Another aspect of scanning is to quickly look through paragraphs and particularly sentences, to understand the ‘gist’ of what is going on. To do this you need to be looking for and identifying key sites of meaning (this will again help you to identify the ‘big picture’ rather than identifying, reading and decoding every single word). Once you have identified the key ideas in each paragraph (via the topic sentence or by using the index), you can start looking for specific pieces of information. Begin by identifying individual sentences/clauses and where they begin and end. You should be able to spot them quite easily. The human eye uses what’s known as peripheral vision to see items either side of the main focus, and thus

we can see anywhere between five to seven words at any one time. Use this ability to get a sense of the various clusters of sentences quickly. The next task is to identify the key sites of meaning within individual sentences (particularly main clauses). This entails scanning for three elements, namely the topic, the action (usually in the form of a key verb or verb phrase) and specific detail (often in the form of keywords/dates/names). Subordinate clauses, as we shall see in Chapter 6, largely supply additional or clarifying information, and can thus be glossed over at this stage. These elements, as the icon above indicates, are like jigsaw pieces – separately they give an indication of the meaning but see them together (even if they are not actually slotted together), and you can immediately get a ‘gist’ of the overall picture and how it all fits together. Identifying these aspects will allow you to piece together the meaning and see how it all fits into the ‘big picture’ of the paragraph and then the chapter/article/section as a whole. Let’s take the following sentence by way of illustration:

Despite its popularity, **social media** has become an insidious, negative and highly addictive means of **disseminating** ‘fake news’.

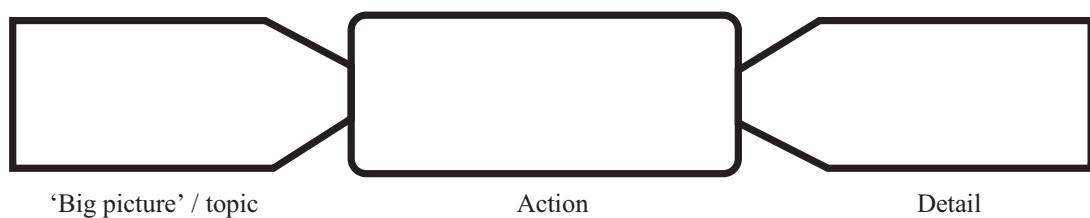
Here we have what’s known as a complex sentence (complex as it involves the dependent/subordinate clause ‘despite its popularity’), but there are only really three elements, three pieces of the jigsaw, which are of immediate interest. ‘**Social media**’ indicates the topic, ‘**disseminating**’ is the verb phrase or action part of the sentence, and ‘**fake news**’ denotes the primary object and detail of the sentence – its key purpose and argument. In other words, the sentence follows the standard subject, verb, object (SVO) sequence, which is considered to be the cornerstone of English written and spoken sentences, and is even thought to be the most inherently ‘obvious’ to human psychology (Diamond, 2002, p.143). So, irrespective of what type of sentence we are looking at (simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex – all of which we will examine in Chapter 6), the main clauses are a means of communicating a ‘big picture’ – action – detail sequence of ideas, and as such the topic, verb (action) and detail elements of sentence structures form the sites of the keywords and meaning. Indeed, if we strip away all the words in black in the sample sentence above and below (particularly in the subordinate clauses), you can still get a good ‘gist’ of what the sentence is about, including its key argument, just by scanning for, identifying and reading three key components. Let’s have a look at some typical sentences you may encounter in your reading to see how these elements can be identified:

- ‘The **culture industry** as a whole has **moulded men** as a type unfailingly **reproduced in every product**’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1999, p.35).
- ‘The **unconscious** – that is to say, the “repressed” – offers **no resistance** whatever to the efforts of the **treatment**’ (Freud, 2015, p.13).

In the case of compound sentences (two independent clauses), you can normally gloss over the second clause (even though it contains its own topic, verb and detail), as the first clause usually lays out the foundations and the second provides additional detail (as is often indicated by conjunctions – words such as ‘and’, ‘that’, ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘as’, ‘or’ – all of which indicate an additional level of detail or clarification). When scanning, you are only looking for the ‘gist’, so don’t worry too much about what comes after the comma – you can read this once you have identified whether it is worth looking at in further detail. For example:

- ‘The **importance of the role of the bioinformatician** as a **major player in modern biology** cannot be overstated, and it will only grow with the advent of next-generation sequencers and sequencing pipelines’ (Janitz, 2008, p.9).
- ‘Like most humanities scholars, **musicologists** are prone to **build interpretations** on **very small data sets** or even on single instances, and the less the evidence that has survived from the past, the stronger this tendency will be’ (Clarke and Cook, 2004, p.4).

Some reading guides recommend scanning for verbs and nouns as a means of increasing reading speed and comprehension, most notably Howard Stephen Berg’s *Super Reading Secrets* (1992). But you need to be able to find these elements in the first place. Where do nouns and verbs usually occur? How do you find them? As we shall see in Chapter 6, this is not an easy task for dyslexics since the rules of grammar are often too abstract to be easily understood. What is more, on their own, grammatical principles do not allow you to see how the individual elements fit into the ‘bigger picture’ of the sentence. The word ‘see’ here is used very deliberately, as an understanding of grammar, even if you are lucky enough to have grasped it, does not allow us to visualise the ‘big picture’ of the sentence and thus the units/key sites of meaning. This is where it is beneficial to conceive of the basic structure of sentences, and main clauses in particular, as like a Christmas Cracker:



When reading, then, visualise each sentence as a Christmas Cracker and look for the ‘big picture’ – action – detail sequence. Focus on these three elements as a means of locating the most valuable information (usually nouns and verbs) quickly. Once you have done that, you are ready to make the next step and start critically evaluating the material, which is the focus of the next chapter.

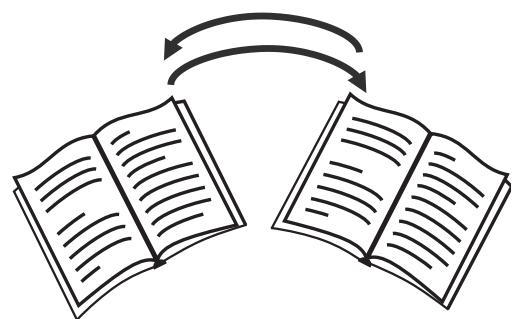
Maintaining focus and concentration

Many students feel that they need to spend long periods of time reading without taking regular breaks. However, studies have suggested that concentration declines markedly after 10–15 minutes, while recent research has rather controversially suggested that human beings have an attention span which barely rivals that of a goldfish (Wilson and Korn, 2007; Gausby, 2015). Another study has found that during lectures, attention spans wax and wane, with attention lapses occurring most notably after 4.5–5.5 minutes, 7–9 minutes and 9–10 minutes (Bunce, Flens and Neiles, 2010). Dyslexics, of course, fair even worse and it's a well-known fact that short attention spans are a tell-tale symptom of dyslexia. If you try to concentrate for long periods you will end up exhausted and overtired (yet another characteristic of dyslexia). It is best to have short, intense bursts of activity rather than persevering and ending up frustrated that either you have not fully understood everything, or that your mind has wandered off course. Try the following techniques to maintain and improve your concentration:

- 1) Never read for longer than 5 minutes before having a quick 1-minute break to 'reset' your mind. If necessary, do this at the end of every paragraph (this will also help if you suffer from visual stress as it will give your eyes a rest).
- 2) Try to summarise (in one or two words) each paragraph before your break, so that when you go back to it the note will jog your memory as to what you've just read.
- 3) After each break, take a few seconds to re-read the one or two word summaries you have written at the side of the preceding paragraphs so as to re-orientate yourself back into the 'big picture'. This also reinforces what you have learned.

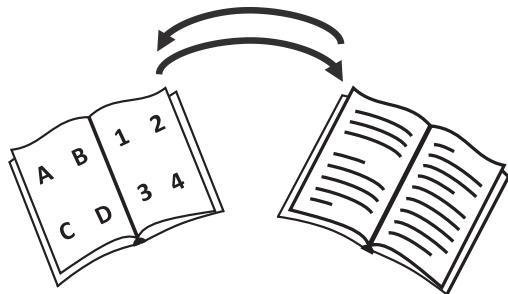
Using your difficulties in maintaining focus to your advantage: some advanced techniques

Dual reading



Dyslexics often have a short-term working memory, which means that if you read a text for too long you will lose focus, read on 'autopilot' (you are reading the words but you're actually just daydreaming), or give up entirely. And because dyslexics need quick, immediate, preferably visual gratification, they often get bored by persevering with one reading at a time. One way around this is to alternate between two chapters/books or articles. Read a paragraph,

summarise it, have a break and then flip to another text you are working on. This might sound confusing (and perhaps it is to the non-dyslexic), but dyslexics, as Eide and Eide have suggested, often excel at multidimensional or 'multiframework approaches' that 'engage their ability to see interconnections' (2011, p.174), so why not give it a go? It allows you to pursue multiple interests at once, 'resets' your concentration, and it helps you sustain focus while also covering a lot of ground.

Dual assistive reading

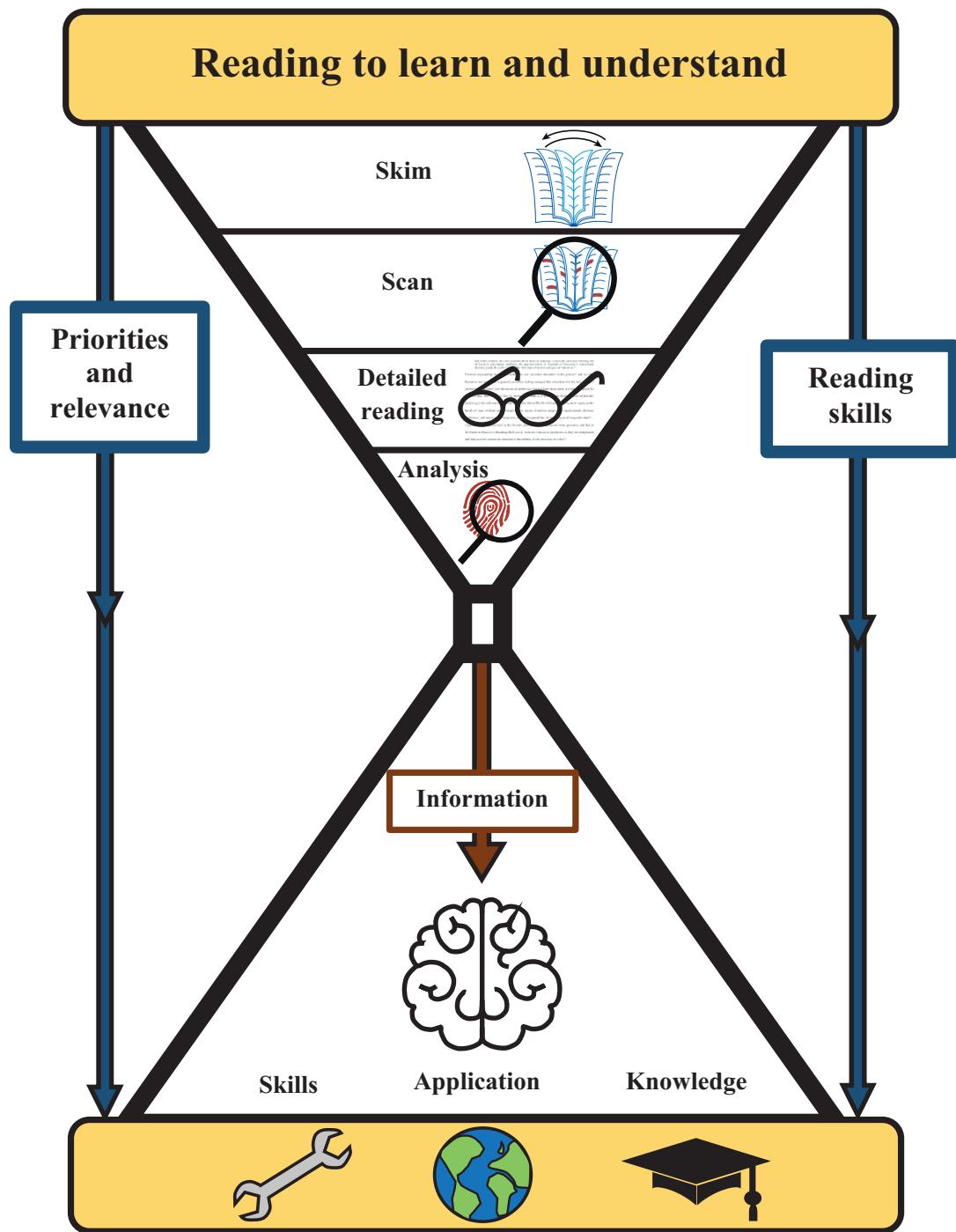
This is a very similar technique to that outlined above, but instead of alternating between two different academic texts, the aim here is to alternate between a textbook/study guide/introductory website and an academic text. This is a variation of a strategy that Eide and Eide accurately term ‘pre-equipping’, whereby students read sections of the textbook/study guide or introductory website first to get an accessible, student-friendly overview or ‘big picture’ of the subject (2011, p.177). Here, however, you alternate these readings with more in-depth academic texts on the same topic. This will allow you to flip between ‘big picture’ introductions and technical/scholarly detail so that you can situate the latter into its context more easily. Importantly, this technique also allows you to associate new information with what you already know from the textbook/study guide/introductory website. This has an important effect on reinforcing, consolidating and scaffolding learning. Again, try reading a paragraph or two, summarise it, and then flip texts – don’t get bogged down in reading too much from either text without flipping, or your attention will wane.

‘Big picture’ speed reading at university – bringing it all together

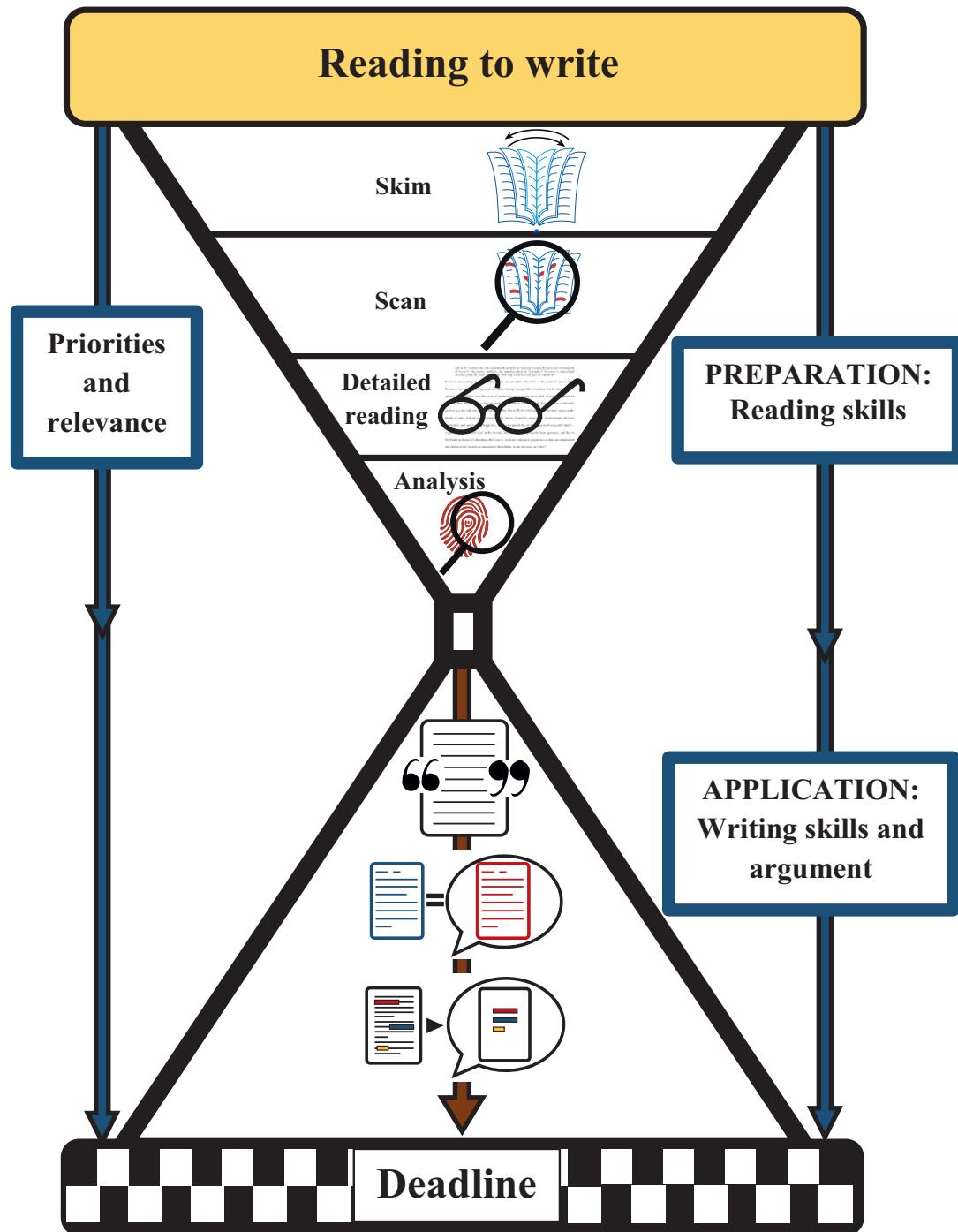
While reading to understand and reading to write remain central to why you should read at university, these purposes are largely governed by other issues and pressures, most notably:

- 1) Time (not only in terms of deadlines but also the need to read quickly).
- 2) Relevance (how relevant is what you are reading to the purposes outlined above?).
- 3) Priorities (what needs to be read first or most urgently to address the purposes above).

One way of bringing these competing, yet also complimentary aspects of university reading into an easily grasped process is to visualise the task of reading at university as like an old-fashioned egg timer – the shape of which indicates the depth of the reading and how it relates specifically to the pressures of time and the relevance of the material. Let’s return to and examine the two purposes of reading outlined at the beginning of this chapter to see how the skills that you need to be learning and practising can be brought together as a process and mapped onto a ‘big picture’, visual template:



As you can see by the shape of the upper half of the egg timer, the focus gets more specific but also more skilled and time-consuming as you work through the processes of skimming and scanning, but where the information is relevant to your priorities, it leads to understanding and knowledge. This understanding and knowledge can then be applied in a wide range of contexts within your discipline but also your life, hence why the second half of the timer broadens back out into the general, into the ‘bigger picture’ and its application to the world. In the case of reading for essay writing, meanwhile, the egg timer can be subdivided into preparation and application:



The process here is similar to reading to learn and understand (because without this you cannot use the source effectively in your writing), but then the second half shows how you can apply what you have learned in your writing. Quotation is specific and detailed, hence why it appears at the top, narrow or focused point of the triangle. Paraphrasing and summarising, meanwhile, get progressively less specific and more general in terms of the way they capture the original author's ideas, but also how you use them in your essays (we will look at quotation, paraphrasing, summarising and their visual icons in Chapter 5). Governing both reading frameworks, though, is the overarching issues of time, relevance and priorities and application. Time is possibly the most crucial factor here (hence why the reading process is depicted as an

egg timer), as even non-dyslexic students tend to get bogged down reading detail rather than skimming and scanning. Don't waste time – set yourself short time limits to read articles and chapters so as to avoid reading detail – you can go back to this later once you have a sense of the relevance of the material and the 'big picture'.

TIP



Keep referring to the two diagrams to remind yourself to stay on track with your reading. Skim and scan quickly and keep to your priorities. If what you are reading doesn't look relevant, either move on to a section that does or look at the next item on your reading list.

Summary

In the next chapter, we will consider how to subject the information you have found to scrutiny and critical analysis, but for now, practise and keep in mind the following key points – they may well save you an awful lot of time, energy and frustration:

- Read effectively, efficiently and strategically rather than trying to read everything.
- Read abstracts and contents pages first to check suitability and relevance before reading anything else – don't waste time.
- Skim and scan texts before reading in depth.
- Make uses of indexes to search for key terms, ideas or authors.
- Read in small doses, with plenty of breaks to 'reset' your concentration (quality is often better than quantity).
- Use online articles and guides for introductory or more accessible information (Dual Assistive Reading) but always reference, quote or summarise from academic, peer-reviewed sources so as to maintain academic credibility and integrity.
- Use textbooks that are laid out in a way that suits you – use them mainly as introductory guides or for revision.
- Read widely as a means of familiarising yourself with the academic community and the writing conventions/styles of the subject you are studying.
- Read to learn and expand your knowledge – not just to write essays.

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Critical reading and thinking for critical writing

We are the visionaries, inventors, and artists. We think differently, see the world differently, and solve problems differently. It is from this difference that the dyslexic brain derives its brilliance.

(Tiffany Sunday, author and expert on dyslexia and entrepreneurship)

After engaging in quick scanning and skimming to find specific details or pieces of relevant information, the next step is to read in more depth and subject the material to critical analysis and evaluation. The ability to subject material and ideas to critical analysis will enable you to score higher marks because rather than simply displaying knowledge, you'll be able to demonstrate a much higher level of skill, intellect, perceptiveness and originality.

What is critical reading and thinking?

Take a look at the following definition of critical thinking:



'Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked. They strive to diminish the power of their egocentric and sociocentric tendencies. They use the intellectual tools that critical thinking offers – concepts and principles that enable them to analyse, assess, and improve thinking . . . They realize that no matter how skilled they are as thinkers, they can always improve their reasoning abilities and they will always at times fall prey to mistakes in reasoning, human irrationality, prejudices, biases, distortions, uncritically accepted social rules and taboos, self-interest, and vested interest. They strive to improve the world in whatever ways they can and contribute to a more rational, civilized society. At the same time, they recognize the complexities often inherent in doing so . . . They strive never to think simplistically about complicated issues and always consider the rights and needs of relevant others . . . They embody the Socratic principle: The unexamined life is not worth living, because they realize that many unexamined lives together result in an uncritical, unjust, dangerous world' (Elder, 2015).

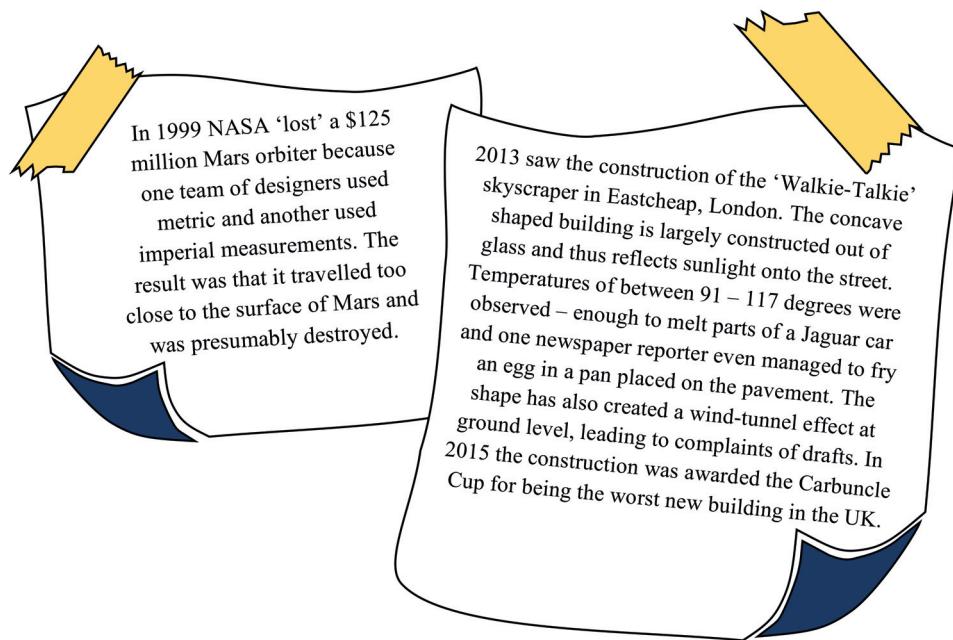
In essence, then, critical reading and thinking is the ability to subject ideas (written or otherwise) to:

- Analysis
- Criticism
- Evaluation
- Interrogation
- Questioning
- Healthy scepticism

Anything can, and probably should be critically analysed, so let's see if we can subject the definition above to analysis using precisely the form of critical thinking it prescribes. Is there anything Linda Elder says that you find problematic or questionable? Is it biased? Let's go through her statement and subject it to critique:



So, as you can see, almost anything (even critical thinking itself!) can be subjected to interrogation and critique. Indeed, it can be the most fun part of academic study. Human thinking and nature is indeed 'inherently flawed' as Elder suggests, especially when left 'unchecked'. The following examples illustrate precisely this problem:



These examples are all the more shocking given that mankind is now equipped with high-tech assistance in the form of computer-aided design, modern machinery and lessons learned from history, but they highlight the importance of critical thinking.

TIP



Before approaching the challenges of academic analysis, one way of approaching and practising critical thinking is to think about scams and satire. How many of you have received phone calls or texts informing you that you’re owed compensation due to an accident in your car or at work (yet you had no such accident and perhaps don’t even work or own a car!)? You use your critical thinking skills here automatically to dismiss such claims as a scam. Another way into critical thinking is by looking at satire. There are numerous websites and Facebook pages devoted to satire (political, religious, cultural) and they all use critical thinking skills to make fun out of the ‘inherently flawed’ nature of human thinking. Try watching programmes such as the BBC’s *Have I Got News for You* or read satirical magazines such as *Private Eye* to accustom yourself to thinking critically. This is a fun and amusing way of getting started.

Why do critical reading and thinking at university?

Critical thinking is a valuable skill to learn for university study as you need to be able to subject the ideas, opinions, arguments and sources you come across in your reading to scrutiny. Being able to spot inconsistencies, flaws, drawbacks and shortcomings and being able to critique and evaluate what you read will enable you to fulfil the national standards and frameworks laid out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2010). These descriptors are often translated into simplified, discipline-specific mark schemes which you should find in your departmental Student Handbook, but the main aims of university study can be summarised as follows (note the emphasis on critical thinking, which is underlined):

Bachelor's degree:	Master's degree:
The ability to deploy accurately established <u>techniques of analysis and enquiry</u> within a discipline.	A systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights.
To devise and sustain arguments.	Originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge.
To describe and <u>comment upon</u> particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship in the discipline.	<u>To evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline.</u>
<u>An appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.</u>	<u>To evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them</u> and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.
<u>To critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data ... to make judgements</u> , and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution.	<u>Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively. Make sound judgements in the absence of complete data.</u>
	Demonstrate <u>self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems</u> , and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level.

(QAA, 2008, pp.18–23)

Critical thinking, then is a vital, integral part of university study. While knowledge is undoubtedly the foundation, critical thinking is the key to unlocking good marks, and it will be what most of your lecturers will be looking for when they assess your work.

TIPS



Any text or idea/argument will have its strengths and weaknesses – analysing those will add marks to your assignment.



Not recognising flaws or weaknesses in other people's thoughts or writing means you might base your own analysis on a flawed argument.

So, what is the best way to approach and practise critical thinking?

How do you start the process of critical thinking? Where do you begin? First, do not be daunted by it. Dyslexics often excel at critical thinking and analysis. It is a well-known fact that while dyslexics struggle with procedural learning, rules, planning and sequencing, once they are 'off the leash' they can excel. Critical thinking is precisely one of those areas since it allows you to roam at will across ideas looking for what is hidden. As Eide and Eide (2011) have

suggested, dyslexics have the ‘ability to perceive relationships like analogies, metaphors, paradoxes, similarities, differences, implications, gaps and imbalances’, often from a multi-dimensional and ‘big picture’ perspective. This is why dyslexics often struggle with multiple choice tasks, because instead of playing by the rules and choosing the correct answer, they ‘excel in detecting secondary meanings or distant word relationships . . . finding loopholes, ambiguities, and potential exceptions where none are intended’ (pp.5 & 95). Critical thinking, then, is an area in which you have the potential to shine. So how do you get started? The following ‘critical questions’ framework is loosely adapted (and expanded) from M. Neil Browne’s *Asking the Right Questions* (2013), which has become an immensely popular student guide to critical thinking. However, given that dyslexics like to process ideas and see connections visually, and reference those ideas to the ‘big picture’, here each question has its own quick reference symbol which corresponds to the core critical activity and how this fits in with the overall, ‘big picture’ aims of critical thinking and reading. The framework is an ideal way of helping you to evaluate and critically analyse what you read, and the icons can be downloaded as bookmarks from the companion website so you can use them to mark specific pages in your texts.

Broadly speaking, critical thinking and reading involve looking at three key areas:

- a) The research background and motivations (the ‘big picture’).
- b) The authors’ methodology and evidence (the ‘big picture’ in respect of what they actually did).
- c) The argument (the reasoning involved and how the findings are presented).

In what follows each of these areas will be examined in turn, although in reality you ought to be asking all of these critical questions all the time (not only in your academic reading but in life generally so as to become a more critically aware citizen).

A) The research background and motivations

Critical question 1: what’s the issue or problem?



As you can see by the symbol/prompt on the left, this question entails going back and questioning what the original purpose of the research was and subjecting it to scrutiny, evaluation and analysis. When undertaking a piece of research (irrespective of the discipline), academics normally start from one of two positions. Either there is:

- 1) A problem/issue which is known about and the researcher is providing a solution to it (this is known as a ‘prescriptive’ piece of writing/research), OR
- 2) There is a new problem/issue which has previously been unexplored or insufficiently researched (this is known as a ‘descriptive’ piece of writing/research).

These two starting points dictate what type of literature researchers produce. The three main subgenres of literature you are likely to encounter are as follows:

- 1) Theoretical – approaches the ‘problem’/issue using theories and models instead of practical, ‘hands on’ research.
- 2) Research – writes up the results of actual experiments or enquiries involving ‘real’ situations.
- 3) Practice – approaches the ‘problem’/issue from the perspective of professional experience, evaluation and reflection.

None of this looks particularly contentious, but there are several areas here in need of interrogation. First, is the problem/issue under consideration a credible/worthy problem/issue in the first place? Let’s take the example of rising CO₂ levels in the atmosphere. This is clearly a valid problem as it has a direct impact on climate change, thereby endangering both ourselves and the world’s ecosystem. On the other hand, let’s take Dr Andrew Stapley, a chemical engineer at Loughborough University, who in 2003 conducted research into the question of how to make a perfect cup of tea (apparently, the secret is to add the milk before the tea bag rather than the other way around!). The underlying research question/problem/issue here is definitely dubious, and may well reflect Stapley’s love of tea rather than a more legitimate research ‘problem’. This may seem like a somewhat exaggerated example, but the underlying issue or ‘problem’ that the research is attempting to address is often worth subjecting to scrutiny. Let’s practise this by taking the following example, the topic of which is potentially very relevant to you as a student:



Chinny Nzekwe-Excel, Chinny. (2014) ‘Academic Writing Workshops: Impact of Attendance on Performance’, *Journal of Academic Writing*, 4:1, pp.12–25.

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore if academic writing workshops contribute to students’ learning and performance in assessment. Academic writing workshops provide an opportunity to discuss specific learning areas and promote student engagement. The results of an assessed essay for a group of 65 first-year mathematics students at Aston University, UK show that academic writing workshops have an association with students’ academic performance. An Independent Samples T-test was conducted to compare the mean performance of the students based on their attendance of academic writing workshops. The analyses reveal that students who attended 2–5 academic writing workshops had a far better performance (mean: 58.60%) in comparison to students who attended 0–1 workshop (mean: 46.37%). In addition, the analyses show a statistically significant difference in the mean performance of students who attended and of students who did not attend an academic writing workshop specifically relating to the assessment.

Can you spot whether this is descriptive or prescriptive? Is the problem/issue underlying this research valid? Is it explicit or unstated?

As you may have noted, the article is clearly prescriptive as the author appears to be advocating academic writing workshops as a way of improving student performance. But what exactly is the problem? Is there a problem or issue needing to be addressed? This brings us onto the second consideration you need to focus on when you are reading – namely, is the underlying problem/issue/motivation even stated? Is it hidden or unclear? In this case, it is somewhat unclear, but we can assume that poor grades or at least the desire to increase students' grades are the underlying problems. Or maybe it is a lack of student 'engagement'? But are these valid issues? They undoubtedly are, but given that they are somewhat hidden, I would suggest that the issue is more questionable than it would first appear. Could there be an underlying problem or motivation that the author is reluctant to reveal? This would require some research and subject knowledge on your part, so obviously, you need to use your reading and notes to help you. Using my knowledge of academic writing and writing centres, I would question the underlying motivation behind this research for several reasons:

- 1) Academic writing centres throughout the UK tend to experience low student take up, so a study that can show that the provision is effective could lead to greater enrollments or 'engagement' by the students. This means that the underlying motivation behind the study might not actually be improving student achievement.
- 2) Academic writing centres are under financial pressures and need to legitimise and bolster their existence (otherwise, staff might be made redundant), so again the motivation and underlying problem behind this research might not be all that it seems, and may have very little to do with helping students succeed.
- 3) The study looks at maths students, which are, in my experience, none too keen on writing essays! Maybe there is a particular problem with student take up of academic writing courses in this discipline and the academic writing centre at Aston wants to attract more maths students? Again, this throws into question the assumption that the underlying problem here is student performance.
- 4) The article appears in a journal dedicated to academic writing, so there is a vested interest here in promoting the benefits of academic writing. This again throws into some doubt the validity of the underlying problem or issue, or at least politicises it.

As this example has shown, then, you need to look carefully at the underlying problem/issue that is the motivation for the study you are reading. Question it, subject it to scrutiny, and never take things at face value.

TIPS



Identify whether the writer's position is prescriptive or descriptive. Ask yourself – are these valid positions based on what you know of the subject? Does the writer maintain this stance or change stance? If so, why? If they change stance, maybe the original problem/issue is not so clear-cut as it first seems.

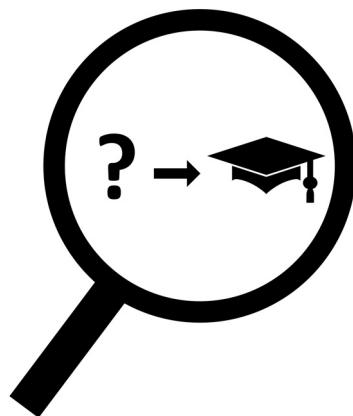


Pay particular attention to research in which the underlying problem/motivation is obscure or hidden. If the underlying problem/issue is not explicit, it may be because it is problematic.



Always question the validity of the problem/issue at stake – don't just assume that because it comes from an authoritative journal/monograph or that the author is a famous academic that its underlying motivations are valid or unproblematic.

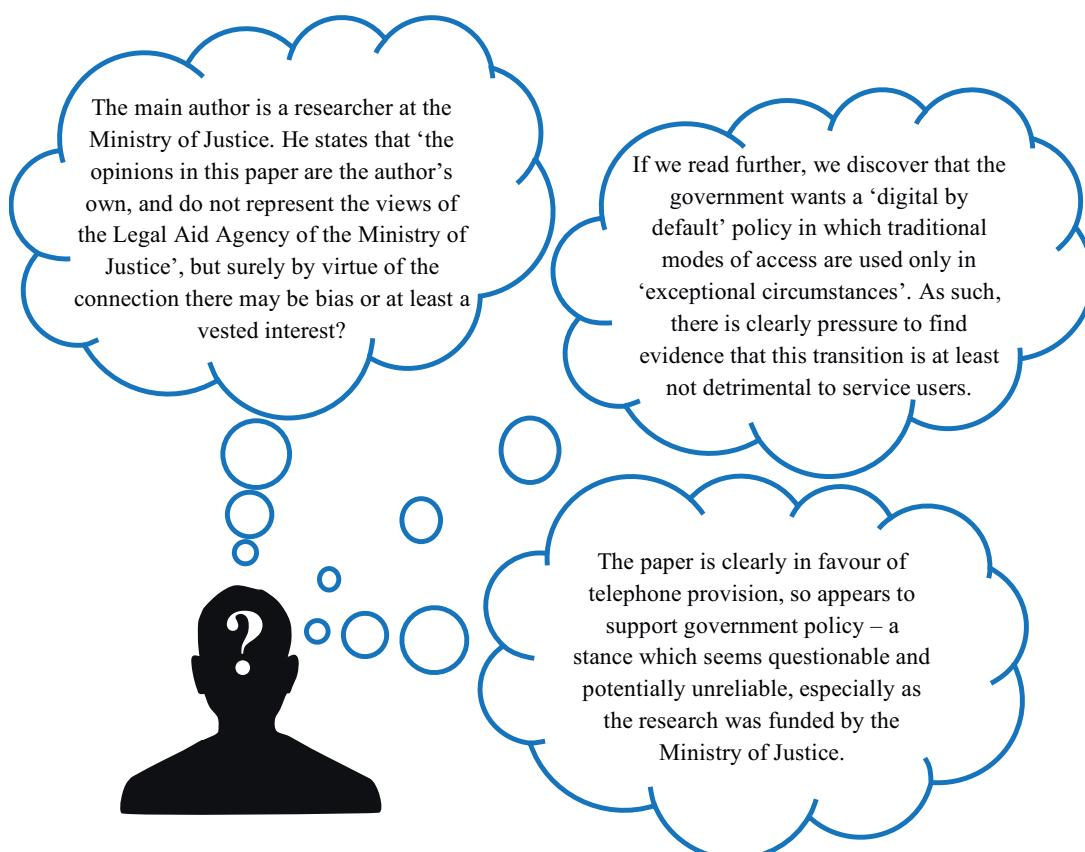
Critical question 2: what's the motive?



This question can be easily confused with critical question 1, but differs in the sense that, as the arrow in the icon indicates, it seeks to examine why the study was conducted in the first place. Key questions to consider here are what are the motivations behind the research? Why conduct the project in the first place? Why were specific specialists chosen to do the research and not others? Who funded the project and why? And why now? Why was the problem/issue not investigated earlier – are there contextual issues which are relevant? Let's examine the following article from family law as a way of illustrating how you can unpack the motivations behind research:

Balmer, Nigel, Denvir, Catrina, Miles, Joanna, Patel, Ash, and Smith, Marisol. (2013) 'In Scope but out of Reach? Examining Differences between Publically Funded Telephone and Face-to-face Family Law Advice', *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 25:3, pp.253–269.

Balmer *et al.* claim that 'this paper aims to address our lack of understanding about the provision of telephone-based legal advice in the area of legal law and compare its results with face-to-face legal advice' (p.256). Initially, the reasons for undertaking this research appear straightforward, useful and entirely reasonable, and there appears to be little to call into question. But let's dig a little deeper:



Suddenly, the motives behind this research seem to be political and economic rather than centring around the ‘lack of understanding about the provision of telephone-based legal advice’, and this exemplifies why it is often worth investigating and calling into question the motives behind a piece of research.

TIPS FOR FINDING MOTIVES



Look carefully at the footnotes/endnotes/preface and acknowledgements to see who funded the research, who influenced it and where it was undertaken. Authors can sometimes ‘bury’ small but potentially problematic details in their footnotes that can sometimes be very illuminating.



Don’t take the authors at face value – do some Googling to find out who they are, what their research interests are, who they work for, who funds them and what learned societies or interest groups they belong to.

Critical question 3: what’s the context?



Knowledge, the production of knowledge, and how knowledge is interpreted does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, knowledge is shaped and influenced, as is indicated in the icon, by the context and surroundings within which it is produced, whether this be:

- social
- political
- economic
- religious
- ideological
- cultural
- what is fashionable
- racial
- biological
- or even the priorities set within individual institutions.

For example, although Isaac Newton was a devout (albeit unorthodox) Christian, his ideas (mainly those associated with the idea that things happen because of laws that can be rationally understood), helped foster Enlightenment philosophies, which were increasingly challenging received knowledge and authority, especially religion. This resulted in numerous competing publications that sought to minimise any questioning of God’s authority and ‘design’ and thus harmonise Newtonian ideas with Christianity. The most notable of these was William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802), in which he argued that evidence of God could be found in the very fact that everything in the natural world had a design. This resulted in his famous ‘watchmaker

analogy', which argues that just as observing the rational laws and mechanics of a watch proves the existence of a watchmaker (a designer), the rational laws of nature prove the existence of God. But as we can see, Paley's ideas were not produced purely due to a desire to seek knowledge and understanding. Rather, his publication was anti-Newtonian/Enlightenment propaganda, and was very much motivated by a religious, if not political agenda. In turn, Enlightenment philosophers were not only seeking 'truth', but also wanted to seek and advocate a truth that legitimised their claims for a fairer, more enlightened, rational society. So, nothing, even today, occurs within a vacuum, and no matter how seemingly unbiased or abstract the ideas you come across may seem, they are shot through with influences from their content (present, past and even future). Your job, as a critical thinker, is to investigate or at least take into consideration those influences, whether they manifest themselves in trends, gaps, ambivalence or even silences. Indeed, what is not said is often as important, if not more important, than what is.

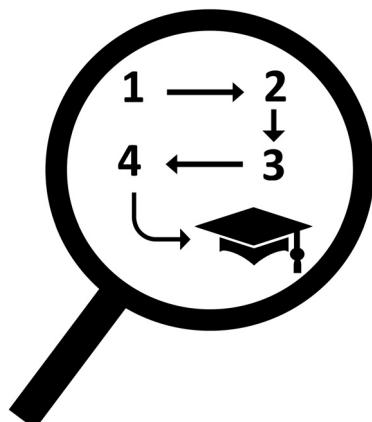
TIP



Always check the date and think about when the original research was conducted. Then consider what, if any key background events or pressures may have influenced the research and what the author's stance may have been. Use your subject knowledge to help you.

B) The methodology and evidence

Critical question 4: is the methodology sound?

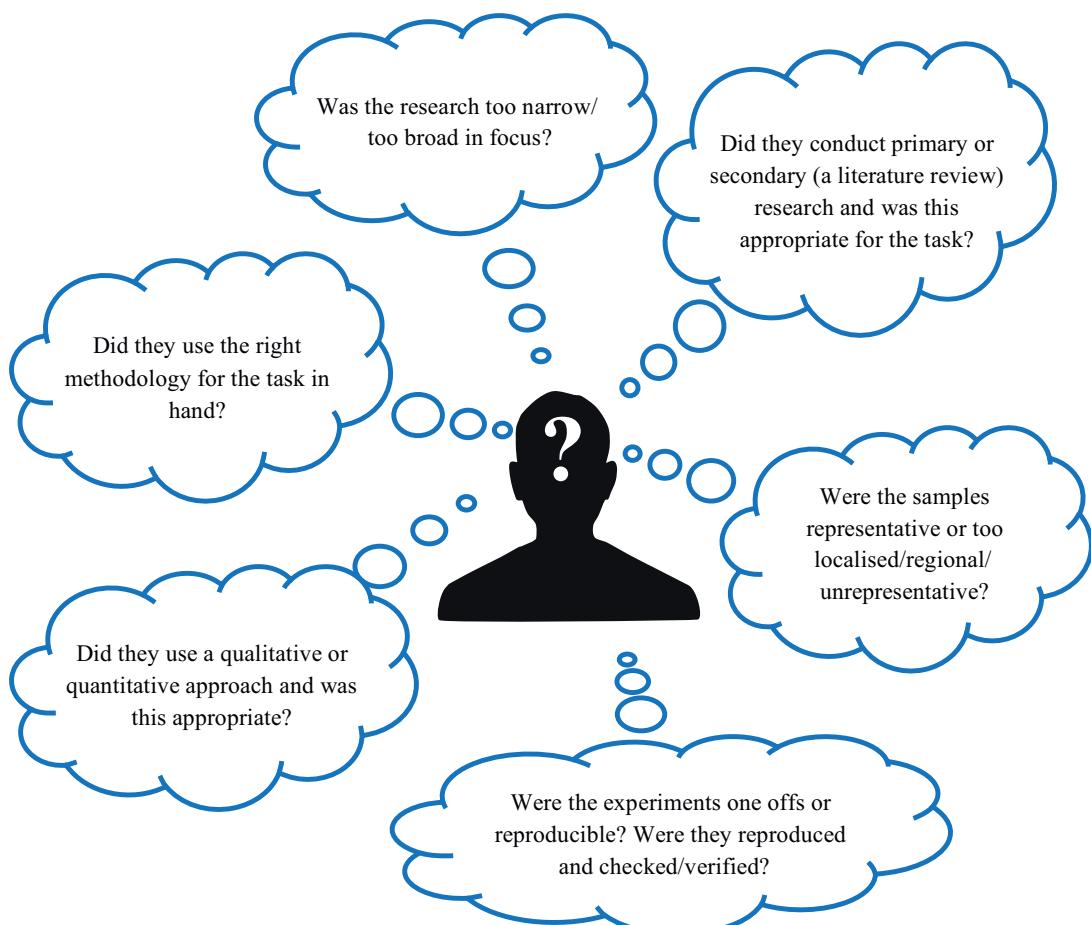


The methodology, as depicted in the icon on the left, is the process that the researcher undertook in order to carry out and produce their findings. This needs subjecting to scrutiny using your subject knowledge. You may be tempted to believe that all academics and experts use valid methodologies because they are experts in their field, but this is not necessarily the case. A good way to start thinking about and exploring methodologies is to first look at popular culture, particularly advertising. Have you ever noticed that television adverts for anti-ageing or anti-wrinkle creams always feature models who are young and free of wrinkles in the first place? Surely a better method would be to take someone who actually has wrinkles and

then show them after using the product in order to demonstrate how effective it actually is? The methodology behind the adverts is decidedly questionable. Academic articles and research are unlikely to have such glaring problems, but issues very often exist. A good starting point is to think about the potential problems or inadequacies that may arise from the type of literature that the research has resulted in. As we saw earlier, there are three main types of academic literature produced (which derive from their underlying methodologies). The areas you might want to explore here, according to Wallace and Wray (2011, pp.95–97), are as follows:

Literature type:	Typical methodologies:	Potential issues:
Theoretical	Theories, principles, concepts.	Too theoretical and abstract to be of practical use. Theories might be outdated. 'Real world' might not reflect or be compatible with the theory.
Research	Experiments, literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative data.	Might not have a clear theoretical perspective. Methodology might be flawed or unsuitable. Study might be too focused to be applicable to general situations and principles. Could be biased or prejudiced due to funding pressures/bodies, flawed data sampling etc. Literature might not be applicable, transferable or up-to-date.
Practice	Personal and professional, practice based reflections and evaluations.	Evidence might be too restricted to be applicable to general situations. Reflections might not have enough academic rigour and may not be underpinned by adequate theory or methodology. Personal/professional reflections might not be valid enough.

After considering the overarching, 'big picture' of the researcher's approach and methodology, it's time to dig deeper and consider the specifics of what they actually did. Some key questions to ask when assessing a methodology include:



With these questions in mind let's have a look at a couple of examples to illustrate how you can critique methodologies:



Example 1:

In comparison with other mammals, Badgers rarely appear outside their sets during the day. In 1996, a study by Jones found that, of the 8 different types of mammals observed, Badgers were primarily nocturnal (p.83). The project involved observing the 8 different types of mammal during 48 hours and noting their behaviours.



Example 2:

The dataset contained records for 226,279 family matters which were delivered under contract by solicitors and not for profit providers. Of these, 254, 328 (95.5%) consisted of face-to-face advice and 11,951 (4.5%) of telephone advice (Balmer et al, 2013, p.257).

In Example 1 the approach seems to be a literature review, the aim of which is to carry out a wide-ranging survey of the existing literature and pick out key, previously undiscovered or neglected trends or problems. There is a problem with this methodology in so much as it would probably have been better to have actually conducted some primary research in order to produce up-to-date data and results about badgers and nocturnal behaviour, and of course the source is decidedly out of date. But worryingly, the methodology of the original study is seriously flawed. Initially, eight different types of mammal sounds like a reasonable figure, but given that the UK alone has 101 different types of mammal, it needs to be questioned whether the eight was enough and whether they were even selected from a broad enough range of sub-species. The methodology of 'observing' these mammals is very unscientific indeed and 48 hours is nowhere near long enough to come to a reliable conclusion. It is also unclear where in the country the study took place, or even which country. There isn't a single aspect of the methodology which can reliably said to lead to the conclusion that 'badgers rarely appear outside their sets during the day'. It is also unclear what is actually meant by 'day' (this differs depending upon the time of the year and daylight hours) and 'rarely' (how rarely?).

Example 2 comes from the family law article we considered earlier. Here the aim was to 'address our lack of understanding about the provision of telephone-based legal advice in the area of legal law and compare its results with face-to-face legal advice'. The methodology is clearly appropriate as the data set is quantitative (thus hopefully yielding a large enough pool of evidence from which to come to some conclusions and 'understanding'). However, the fact that there is such a huge discrepancy between the data collected for face-to-face and telephone consultations surely has to be called into question and deemed both unrepresentative and unreliable. While it must be acknowledged that there are fewer telephone consultations from which to draw data, this still doesn't explain or justify the fundamental discrepancy between the two forms of delivery, thus rendering the methodology questionable. Indeed, it is unclear

why the area of ‘family matters’ was singled out for analysis – surely this in itself could skew the findings? Maybe other areas of legal advice are more likely to receive telephone enquiries, perhaps because the nature of those enquiries are more easily resolved (‘family matters’ seems to be a potentially complex area and perhaps difficult to resolve over the telephone). The researchers needed to have been more careful in designing a methodology which would have yielded a better range of data, although obviously if there is little data available, this ought to have been more carefully factored into the conclusions they reach (or some sort of comparative or comparable survey could have been cited to indicate possible patterns or results).

TIP



Not all disciplines or research outputs have a clear methodology, but that doesn’t mean to say that there isn’t one. Take literature for example. It might seem that analysing a text (especially one printed perhaps hundreds of years ago by a well-known author) doesn’t require a methodology. But EVERY publication and piece of research has a methodology, even if this is simply consulting primary texts or manuscripts in a dusty archive. So, dig a little deeper to find the methodology. Did the researcher use primary texts, and if so which editions? Were the texts published or unpublished? Did the researcher consult diaries, letters or personal anecdotes, and if so are they reliable? Which theoretical frameworks did the researcher use (e.g. linguistic, historical, Marxist, psychoanalysis, feminist etc.) and were these appropriate?

The methodology obviously has a direct correlation with the types and quality of evidence that the researcher(s) cite in support of their argument and findings, so this is the next aspect of your reading and your next line of critical thinking and evaluation.

Critical question 5: how good is the evidence?

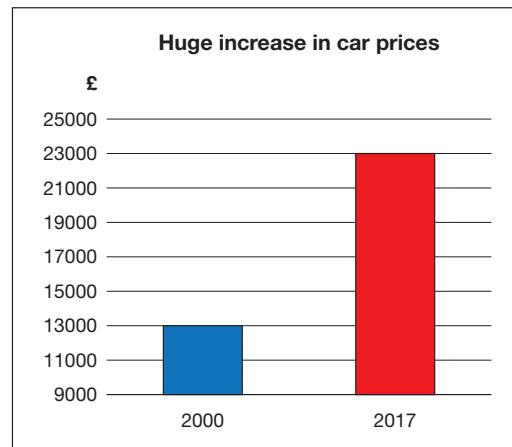
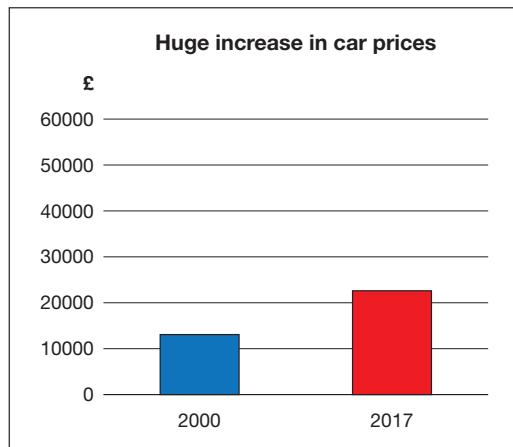


This is likely to be the biggest single area of critical analysis and evaluation, simply because it is likely to yield the most insights into the validity of the argument and findings being presented. After all, nobody can dispute the finding that $2 + 2 = 4$, but if the evidence is less clear-cut (as is often the case), then this can be subjected to critical analysis and interrogated. Indeed, even if the evidence appears compelling, we might still want to question it to see whether the means in which it was obtained (the methodology) was sound. Evidence can take numerous forms, but the most important (ranked from most reliable to least reliable) are as follows:

1) Primary evidence such as data, statistics, quotes from interviews, primary texts, archival material and the results of experiments

There are numerous questions that need to be asked here to assess the validity of what, on the face of it, might appear valid, indisputable evidence. Some key areas to think about include:

- Is the amount of data adequate? If the research is quantitative, is the sample big enough to be representative?
- Are the results compelling enough to lead to a sound conclusion? The closer you get to a 50:50 split in the results the more uncertain you can be as to what conclusions can be drawn, whereas something which is say 80:20 is much more compelling. For example, let's take the recent Brexit referendum in the UK. To claim that it is the 'will of the people' and a democratic choice to leave the European Union based on 52 per cent voting to leave is not compelling. Similarly, since only 66.1 per cent of those eligible actually voted in the 2015 UK General Election, and of those only 24.3 per cent voted Conservative (Ipsos MORI, 2015), it is surely untenable to say that the Conservative Party was democratically elected?
- Is the data presented in a way that is accurate and unbiased? For instance, take the following two graphs which illustrate the same increase in car prices. There is a clear authorial bias in the right graph in favour of exaggerating the increase, whereas the graph on the left is more neutral:



- In the case of data, quotes and interviews, has the author been very selective in 'cherry picking' what best suits their argument (less convincing material may be buried in the transcripts in the Appendix)? Are the questions deliberately constructed in order to lead the interviewees towards certain answers (problem with the methodology)? Is the sample size adequate? Has the researcher favoured particular participants from particular locations, professions, ethnicities, genders, classes or occupations, and if so is this problematic (again an underlying methodology problem)?
- When quoting from primary texts, are they in themselves unbiased and reliable? In some cases, quotes from primary sources, documents and witnesses might be unreliable due to censorship, press bias or other, personal, economic, social or cultural pressures.
- In the case of seemingly objective scientific experiments, were they conducted rigorously? Were the results reproducible or one-offs? Was enough data collected (again, underlying methodology issues here)?

2) Secondary evidence such as data, statistics, quotes and results from research undertaken by others in the past

- Old data, especially that which is significantly out of date, should be treated as above, but with additional suspicions regarding its relevance and applicability to contemporary situations. The world changes rapidly, and so data and results quickly ‘date’. For instance, in the field of economics and management, data which is pre-2008 should be treated with particular suspicion, as although it may have been rigorous at the time, its applicability post-credit crunch/global economic downturn is highly questionable. Similarly, in the world of politics and international relations, things move very quickly. When Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet on 24 November 2015, who could have foreseen that after a period of tension and animosity which some thought brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, Russia and Turkey should, a year later, be seeking greater economic and military ties? Even in disciplines that may be considered somewhat static (such as Greek philosophy or Shakespeare studies), old material and evidence should be treated with caution. Such disciplines are frequently subject to academic trends that may now be out of date, superseded or considered dubious. In literature, for example, scholarship has been informed by various ‘schools’ of thought such as Formalism, Structuralism, De-construction, Psychoanalysis, Feminism and New Historicism. As a consequence, some research may have been unnecessarily or detrimentally influenced by such approaches, the like of which may not, in hindsight, be the most productive or reliable. So, treat appeals to past evidence with caution, especially where it is used to inform the present (which may be a very different situation).
- Treat quotes, even from old primary sources and historical/literary texts with caution – they were written in the context of their own unique cultural, political and ideological circumstances, so these factors need to be taken into consideration when relying upon them to prove an argument in the present.
- Be wary of appeals to authorities. Just because some famous professor, renowned expert or revered text said it doesn’t make it right, especially if was said some time ago. The Bible and the Quran are cornerstones of religious culture and command the authority of supposedly being the word of God, yet that doesn’t make them infallible or true. Past scientists and key cultural or intellectual figures, meanwhile, have often been proven incorrect. For example, Darryl F. Zanuck, Head of Twentieth Century Fox Studios, claimed in 1946 that videos would only be popular for 6 months because people would become ‘tired’ of them and that even the ‘television won’t be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night’ (Pogue, 2012). Researchers will often venture into the realms of the theoretical and rely upon appeals to authorities when they either lack current data/information, or they are working very much on the boundaries of knowledge. Indeed, famous authorities may be appealed to despite their lack of knowledge in a specific area. Pythagoras, for instance, may be a key authority in respect of triangles, but he was no expert when it came to geography as he was a key advocate of the idea that the earth is flat. All appeals to authority, then, need to be treated with caution and a healthy scepticism.
- Check whether the research has been selective in what old studies they have cited. Has the study omitted research which contradicts their argument and if so why?

3) *Testimonials*

Testimonials are often viewed as convincing as they provide a seemingly impartial human touch. For instance, how many of us have looked at testimonials online before making a major purchase? Indeed, online shopping often puts a great deal of store in providing testimonials from previous shoppers, good or bad, to give the appearance of honesty and transparency – especially since this evidence is likely to be more believable than the usual ‘spin’ associated with marketing and advertising. But what place do testimonials have in academic articles and sources?

- Testimonials need to be treated with a great deal of suspicion as they are not necessarily based on objective truth and often provided a one-sided, biased or flawed opinion which lacks the robustness of data.
- Testimonials often omit key information, either because of bias or human emotions (e.g. prejudice, having an axe to grind, anger, hatred or even extreme satisfaction or approval), so they are not necessarily infallible or trustworthy sources.
- Testimonials can be an incredibly valuable source of evidence, especially in the humanities and social sciences, as they can often provide evidence that cuts through the ‘official’ version of events. However, do bear in mind the above caveats and think carefully about why the person may have offered their opinion in the first place. Did they have something to gain from it? Were they selective in discussing their experiences? How was their testimony elicited? Is the testimony from an expert or a witness? If so, these can be more valid, but still need to be treated with suspicion and critically evaluated.
- Be especially careful if the researcher bases their argument upon generalisations drawn from testimonies. This is an unlikely scenario as it is deeply flawed, but keep an eye out for it nonetheless.

4) *Theories*

If the researcher(s) adopted a purely theoretical approach it is worth interrogating the validity and applicability of these theories. One of the main problems with a theoretical approach is its lack of grounding in reality, but there may also be problems with the theories themselves. Freudian psychoanalysts, for instance, might be too preoccupied with the Oedipal complex to fully understand the causes of depression, while radical feminists might overlook the fact that a preoccupation with the ‘male gaze’ ignores or sidelines the existence of a ‘female gaze’. Further questions you may want to ask include:

- How open/explicit is the author about their theoretical perspective? Is it hidden, explicit or implied?
- Is the theory outdated/superseded by new theories?
- Has the theory been disproved via practical, ‘real world’ research?

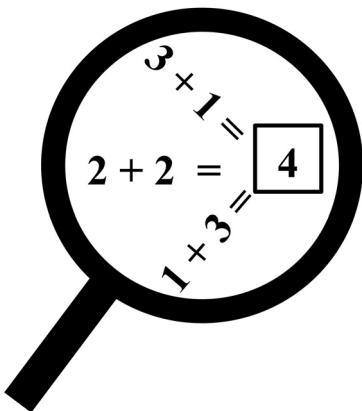
TIPS FOR ANALYSING EVIDENCE



Be wary of evidence which is especially striking, unusual or dramatic. Question whether it is really unusual or whether it is merely presented as such.

-  Be critical of arguments that rely too much on secondary evidence or theory, unless the purpose of the research is purely speculative or very much on the boundaries of what is known or feasible.
-  Always investigate where the evidence came from. Don't assume that it is the starting point for your analysis – go a little further back.
-  Have findings been replicated? Several studies broadly coming to the same conclusion are more convincing than a one off.

Critical question 6: are there any rival causes?



After considering the validity and soundness of the evidence, it's vital that you at least consider if those results could have been caused by, or arrived at, via an alternative route or phenomenon. As you can see in the icon on the left, at a most basic level, this is a little like acknowledging that while $2 + 2 = 4$, it is also entirely possible that $3 + 1$, or $1 + 3$ or even $5 - 1$ could also have accounted for the result being 4. But considering rival causes can be equally applied to some of the most significant, challenging and seemingly indisputable problems of our time. Let's take global warming. There is more or less a consensus now that the planet is indeed warming up, but what is causing this? Most

scientists point to increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (leading to the 'greenhouse effect'), but there are rival explanations such as increased solar activity (notably sunspots and solar radiation), changes in ocean currents and even cosmic rays. So always subject any results you find to analysis (using your knowledge of the subject) to see whether they could have been the result of something else. Some things to think about when considering rival causes include:

- Rival causes are a plausible interpretation, different from that of the original researcher, which could explain why a certain outcome occurred.
- Rival causes need to be plausible rather than improbable and need to be underpinned by subject knowledge/knowledge of methodologies.
- Try looking at the research and its findings from multiple perspectives. For instance, if the researcher explains that the heroine of the novel is driven mad because of being oppressed by her patriarchal husband, try also thinking that she may have been driven mad as a result of the inequalities in capitalist economies or wider patriarchal attitudes that oppressed the husband just as much as the wife. Maybe you could also explain her madness through a psychoanalytical perspective by examining the role of her abusive mother or father. There's rarely only one explanation or cause for anything, so always consider the alternatives. As Neil Browne observes, ensure that you consider whether the situation warrants consideration of 'the cause or a cause' (2013, p.142).
- Creating, explaining or at least considering rival causes is a valuable skill to acquire as it shows that you have a thorough, wide-ranging and perceptive knowledge of the subject and its implications and that you have the technical and/or theoretical/methodological knowledge of alternative approaches.

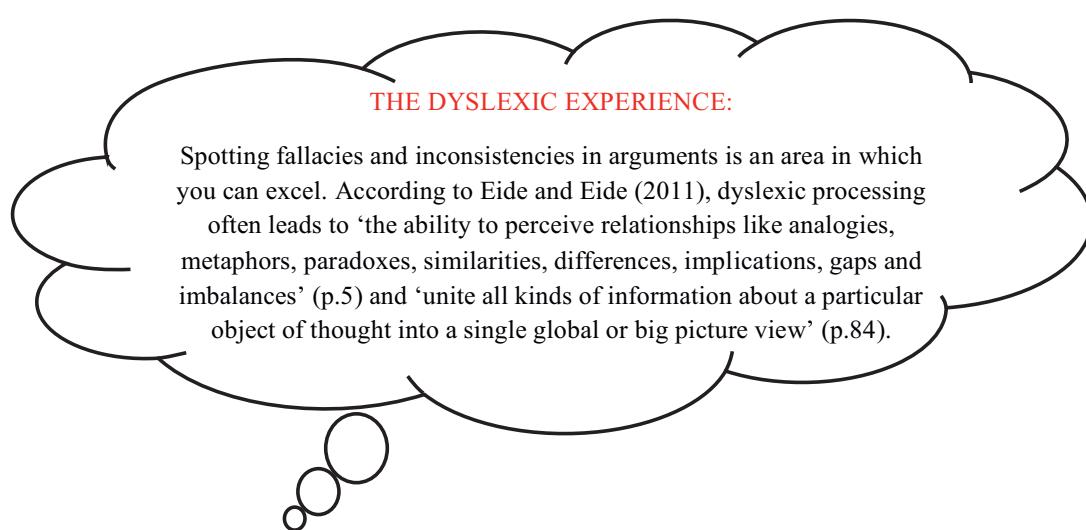
- The identification of rival causes illustrates flaws in the original argument, the methodology and the results so in theory the fewer you can find the better.

TIPS FOR CONSIDERING RIVAL CAUSES

-  Rival causes may be discussed by the researcher(s) themselves, either extensively or in a footnote. Check to see whether rival causes have been acknowledged.
-  If the author does not acknowledge any rival causes, that can be an oversight you can critique.
-  If the researcher does discuss rival causes, ask yourself whether their rejection of them is legitimate. Has the author discussed the rival causes openly, or have they been 'hidden' in a footnote? If so, why have they done this?
-  As a dyslexic, you should be able to excel at thinking about rival causes. As a 'big picture' thinker, your dyslexia will enable to make connections between ideas and recognise interconnections and 'unusual relationships' much more readily than the non-dyslexic, so play to this strength and get thinking about those alternative explanations (Eide and Eide, 2011, p.105).

C) The argument

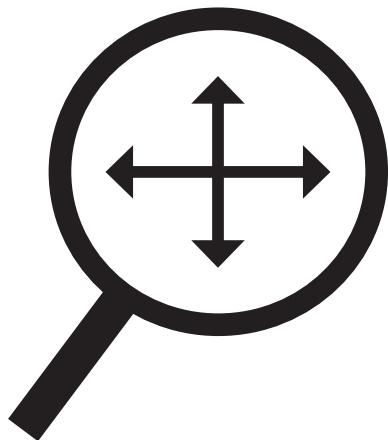
After considering the reasons, motivations, research problem, the methodology and the results, the next issue to consider is how valid the argument is and whether it is based on fallacies.



There are several questions you might want to ask in order to evaluate arguments critically. Some require subject specialist knowledge (which hopefully you will gain from your lectures and wider reading), but others are more concerned with the way in which the writer presents their ideas. Fallacies are flaws in an author's argument and reasoning, and there are many different types, each with variously impressive or catchy sounding names. The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, once suggested that 'it would be a very good thing if every trick could

receive some short and obviously appropriate name, so that when a man used this or that particular trick, he could at once be reproved for it' (Paul and Elder, 2012, p.6). This is what has happened, and as such, there exists a multitude of names for fallacies, and there are entire books and websites devoted to explaining and exploring them. There is simply not the room to delve into them too deeply here, and what is more, there are lots of often needless overlaps between fallacies. Some key questions and fallacies you need to consider when analysing an argument, however, are as follows:

Critical question 7: are there any areas of ambiguity?



Ambiguity leaves room for multiple interpretations, misinterpretations and a lack of clarity. This can be accidental (if the author has not been rigorous enough in their reasoning and editing), or deliberate (to obscure shortcomings in their ideas, research and argument). Your job is to keep an eye out for these and use them as openings for your critical analysis and evaluation of what you read. Ambiguity can arise because of a sloppy or misleading use of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, misplaced or inappropriate pronoun references, a lack of coherence, sloppy reasoning or a lack of justification for the ideas being advanced. Even things that appear to have great clarity and are seemingly unambiguous can actually be highly ambiguous.

For example, let's take Tony Blair's famous mantra of 'education, education, education', which was how he outlined his priorities for office in 1997. On the one hand the repetition seems to reinforce the centrality, precision and clarity of the message. It is surely unambiguous. But on the other hand, what does education actually mean? Yes, his priorities meant that spending on education rose by 5.1 per cent per year between 1999 and 2010 (Chowdry and Sibieta, 2011, p.1), and yes the numbers of teachers rose and exam results improved (Lupton and Obolenskaya, 2013). But the obsession with standards, frameworks and targets engendered a culture of teaching to the assessment, which is not necessarily education, and of course, the introduction of university tuition fees has turned students into consumers and education into a commercial marketplace. Indeed, what is education anyway? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines education in no less than four ways:

- The process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university.
- The theory and practice of teaching.
- A body of knowledge acquired while being educated.
- Information about or training in a particular subject.

Which of these definitions was Tony Blair referring to? Or was he referring to all of them? The mantra is ambiguous, despite his very deliberate attempt at not being so.

In *The Power of Babble* (1992), Norman Solomon gives a telling, insightful and even alphabetically structured parody of how ambiguous language can be used in an attempt to be persuasive. Can you see how many areas of ambiguity there are in this sample passage?



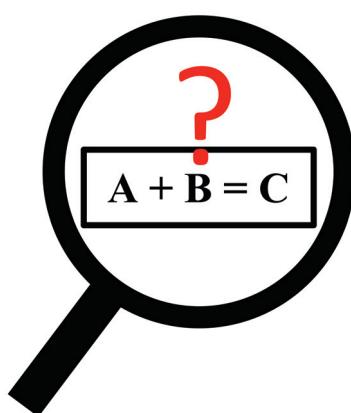
America is back, and bipartisan – biting the bullet with competitiveness, diplomacy, efficiency, empowerment, end games, and environmentalism, along with faith in the founding Fathers, freedom's blessings, free markets and free peoples, and most of all, God (quoted in Browne, 2012, p.47).

As you can probably see, nearly every single word here is ambiguous and open to innumerable interpretations. One person's competitiveness is another person's sloth, one country's notion of diplomacy is another country's idea of reckless unilateralism, so this passage has little to recommend it in terms of clarity and would certainly be unacceptable as a piece of academic writing. Obviously, not all of what you will read will be this problematic, but you will undoubtedly come across aspects of ambiguity, behind which the researchers might be hiding all sorts of holes in their argument. Keep an eye out for them, investigate them, and subject them to analysis and critique.

TIPS FOR IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL AMBIGUITIES

-  Identify and scrutinise key terms and phrases.
-  Which of these are adequately or inadequately defined?
-  Do they possess alternative, potentially problematic definitions?
-  Are they ambiguous within the specific context of the argument/subject?
-  Does equivocation occur – i.e. does the author use a key term or meaning of a word in one place but then change to an alternative meaning elsewhere, thus potentially changing the argument or interpretation?

Critical question 8: does the author rely upon assumptions or generalisations?



Making generalisations might seem rather vague and unscholarly but researchers often make them as a way of either exploring the implications of their research findings or as a way of proving their argument as a result of the necessarily restricted and representative nature of sampling and testing. It is, after all, impossible to seek everyone's opinion or test things hundreds or thousands of times, so informed generalisations sometimes have to be made, often as a result of having to make pragmatic decisions based on sample size, the breadth of the research and the randomness of the sampling pool. However, as indicated in the icon on the left, you need to question whether the generalisations the researcher(s) makes

are indeed valid – does A + B really equal C? Assumptions, meanwhile, occur when anything is taken for granted. Assumptions can be fairly obvious – like the assumption that education is a good thing (it might not be – it could be a form of indoctrination which instead of opening people's minds, it actually manipulates them), or that people use cars because public transport is inconvenient (maybe it's more the case that public transport is too expensive). But assumptions can be aligned with political, moral, ethical or religious considerations and beliefs or even as a result of biology or gender. For instance, there is often an assumption that girls like dolls and that the melting of the ice caps is a bad thing. Maybe some girls actually prefer model cars and maybe the melting of the icecaps is simply nature's way of rebalancing or compensating for the warming climate, and like in the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) it could reverse global warming and bring about a new ice age.

TIPS



Question whether the general conclusions reached are sound based on the sample size. There may be problems with the methodology, but moreover the author's argument will be flawed as it will be based on generalisations.



Keep an eye out for deflective language or diversions that indicate that there is no need to explore, interrogate or prove an argument because it is obvious. Examples of this often occur around words such as obviously, clearly, naturally, of course, appeals to common sense or what everyone is supposed to know (e.g. as we all know, as is well known etc.) or the superiority of modern thinking (e.g. clearly things have moved on, fortunately we are no longer in the dark ages etc.).

Critical question 9: are there appeals to popular opinion, beliefs or emotions?



Although often restricted to tabloid newspapers and the right-wing media, appeals to popular opinion can occasionally find their way into academic writing, so keep an eye out for them. Popular opinion is precisely that – opinion rather than fact – so unless it is the object of analysis, treat it with the healthy suspicion and scepticism it deserves. Anything that relies upon belief systems or emotions, meanwhile, ought to be treated with a similar degree of suspicion. This is most prevalent in historical documents or scholarship from the past, which may be entirely coloured by religious belief (either as a result of the beliefs of the author, because of censorship, or because of the beliefs of the intended audience). But even

today, as George Yancy has argued, religious bias has caused considerable problems in American scholarship (2011), particularly in respect of scientific rejections of creationism. But academics can also appeal to the emotions. For instance, if an author spends a great deal of time explaining and emphasising the atrocious conditions of refugees but offers little in the way of hard evidence or a solution to the problem, he/she could be accused of appealing to emotion rather than making a sound, logical and well-reasoned argument. Children and the elderly are easy targets because of their vulnerability, so keep this in mind if the author is dealing with these subjects.

Critical question 10: are there false causes or dilemmas?

A false cause occurs when a researcher assumes a cause–effect relationship (as indicated by the equals sign on the left), and yet the cause is not necessarily what led to the effect. For instance, an author could attribute the impressive sales of Byron's poems in the early nineteenth century to the way in which he became a celebrity and courted controversy so as to remain very much in the public eye. Yet this cause (publicity and celebrity) – effect (high sales) is dubious because Felicia Hemans, a contemporary of Byron whom very few people have even heard of today, often enjoyed higher sales, but without the fame and celebrity status. A false dilemma, meanwhile, presents a problem in which there appear to be only two alternatives (as indicated by the fork in the icon). Interrogate and subject to critique anything that seems to offer only two possibilities, as there is often a third or even fourth possibility (especially in the humanities). Use your subject knowledge to think of other avenues and possibilities. This is something which you may well excel in given that dyslexics are often talented in ‘see[ing]’ phenomena from multiple perspectives, using approaches and techniques borrowed from many disciplines’, figuring out problems, and perceiving ‘subtle patterns’ (Eide and Eide, 2011 p.84).

TIP

Fallacies such as false causes and dilemmas can very easily lead to another fallacy – the slippery slope. The slippery slope fallacy can occur when a chain reaction of erroneous reasoning results from an initial erroneous reason or fallacy. If an author bases their argument on an initial fallacy, the entire argument becomes fallacious, thus leading to a wrong conclusion. Slippery slope fallacies can also occur when authors make unjustified, unwarranted or even conjectural leaps from one point to another, even when the initial reason, cause or dilemma is valid.

Critical question 11: is the author biased?

Again, you might not think that academics would fall foul of this fallacy, but they sometimes do. Let's take the example of Duncan Wu, a respected academic and biographer of the essayist, critic, painter and philosopher, William Hazlitt. In his biography, *William Hazlitt, the First Modern Man* (where Wu's bias can be said to be indicated in the very title), Wu claims that Hazlitt is Romanticism's 'most articulate spokesman', 'a highly gifted percipient of political sketches', and 'by far the best prose stylist' of his age (p.xxii). These are very grand claims indeed, yet at the time Hazlitt was subjected to immense vilification, and he was repeatedly attacked throughout his life – with some justification. Between 1817 and 1830, as Wu himself concedes, 'there was not a single Tory journal that did not carry at least one article condemning him as an infidel, a Jacobin, and a whoremonger' (p.xxv). Yet Wu largely glosses over any criticism with praise, even at one

point seeming to excuse the fact that Hazlitt nearly allowed his son to drown because of his absentmindedness, and prefers to depict him as a ‘doting father’ instead (p.220). Elsewhere Wu appears to applaud Hazlitt’s rather unfair attacks on Coleridge (with typical gusto, he describes one of his most vicious as a ‘thumper’ and a ‘tour de force’ [p.222]). Wu’s bias towards Hazlitt seemingly knows no bounds and he frequently invents conversations for which there is no historical record. He is also far too forgiving of Hazlitt’s conduct. Martin (2010), for instance cites the example of ‘Hazlitt’s knocking down a better player at fives by way of smashing his head with his racket’, yet this behaviour ‘is airily implied to be a form of ‘release for a man who in the subsequent sentence is described as “sensitive”’ (p.323). As this rather extreme example illustrates, keep a look out for bias and subject it to criticism if you feel it undermines or jeopardises the credibility of the author’s argument and evidence.

This is a short example of the most common fallacies you might come across, but there are many more. Indeed, there are entire books and websites devoted to fallacies, the most useful and informative of which are:

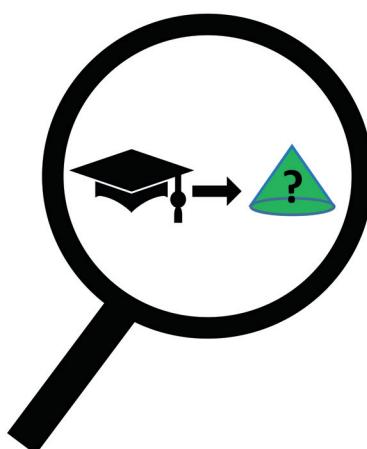
BOOKS

- Hansen, Hans V., and Pinto, Robert C., (1995) *Fallacies: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Paul, Richard, and Elder, Linda, (2012) *The Thinker’s Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation*. Sonoma: Foundation for Critical Thinking.
- Bennett, Bo, (2015) *Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of Over 300 Logical Fallacies*. Sudbury, MA: Archieboy Holding, LLC.

WEBSITES

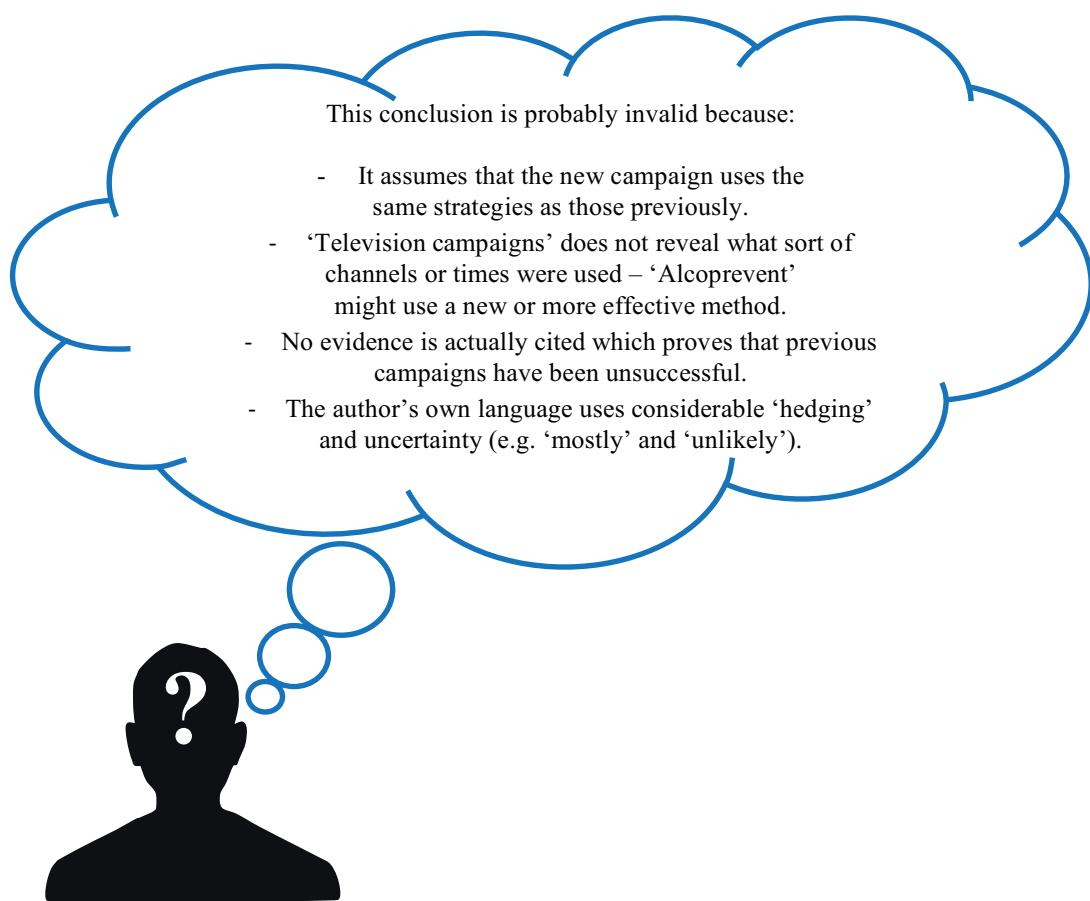
- <https://literarydevices.net/fallacy/>
- <http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/rgass/fallacy3211.htm>
- <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/fallacies/>
- http://changingminds.org/disciplines/argument/fallacies/fallacies_alpha.htm

Critical question 14: are the conclusions valid?

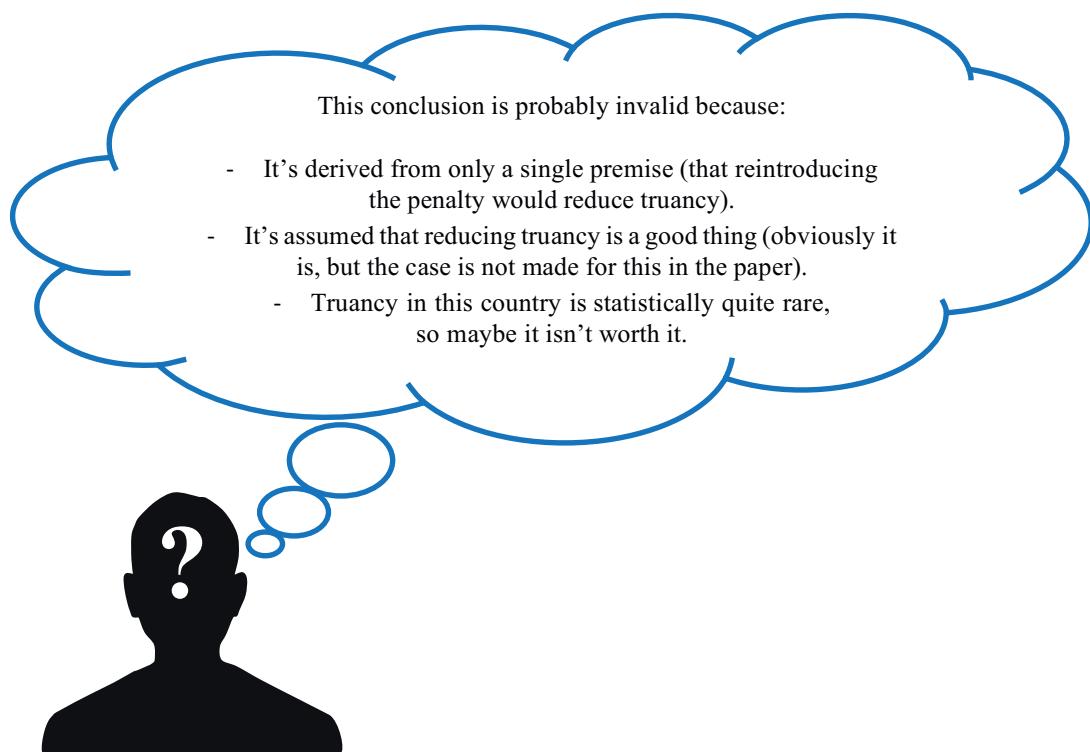


The conclusion is the main argument the author wants us to take away from the piece we have just read. But is the conclusion reached fully justified? Does the data or other evidence the author has cited back up the conclusion? Some conclusions are easy to spot as being questionable. Small samples or highly unrepresentative data collection, for example, lead to less than convincing conclusions, especially when there are narrow margins. However, some invalid or questionable conclusions are less easy to spot and can hinge upon flaws in the logic of the writer’s argument. Let’s have a look at two examples and examine each in turn:

- 1) Television campaigns aimed at reducing alcoholism have mostly failed. Therefore, a new campaign called ‘Alcoprevent’ is highly unlikely to be effective.



- 2) Reintroducing a penalty for truancy would reduce the number of school absences in this country. Therefore, we should reintroduce the penalty.



TIPS FOR LOCATING AND ASSESSING CONCLUSIONS



Be wary of inferred or speculative conclusions that are subtle and based on progressive (and possibly flawed) reasoning rather than explicit signposting. Some language to look out for in this category include words such as possibly, might, perhaps, we can surmise that, we may be able to, or even rhetorical questions which seem to place the burden of forming a conclusion on the reader.



When assessing the validity of a conclusion it is worth bearing in mind that there are likely to be a host of other complicating factors that lead to questionable conclusions, most of which can be identified using the previous critical questions.

Summary

- Remember, nothing is ever perfect – subject everything you read to scrutiny and interrogation.
- Don't feel you need to use all the critical questions above as some are more suited to specific disciplines than others. However, keep all of them in mind when reading so as to maintain an open, interrogative and perceptive mindset.
- Don't interrogate/critically evaluate everything – focus on what is relevant to your course/assignment task and only analyse what has been chosen as important and relevant based on your initial skimming and scanning activities.
- Practise makes perfect. If time allows, practise doing online critical thinking exercises.
- Remember – analysis and evaluation will enable you to get top marks. In university essays, depth of analysis beats breadth of knowledge every time, especially in the humanities.

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Essay genres and structures

Seeing the ‘big picture’

Trying harder is impossible when you’re already trying as hard as you can. But you can always try DIFFERENT.

(Seth Godin, author, entrepreneur and public speaker)

Essay genres

Depending upon which discipline you are studying you will be expected to write in a variety of genres. Overall, research into student work submitted to the Universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes has shown that the most popular genres are:

- 1) Essays – 43 per cent
- 2) Methodology recounts – 12 per cent
- 3) Critiques – 11 per cent
- 4) Explanations – 7 per cent
- 5) Case studies – 7 per cent

Given that the essay is by far the most popular genre students are asked to use (in the case of humanities subjects, essays account for 83 per cent of student writing and in the social sciences 56 per cent [Heuboeck, Holmes and Nesi, 2007, pp.7–10]), this book primarily considers essays. The core principles which follow, however, work just as well for the other genres you are likely to encounter, especially critiques, literature surveys, reports, case studies, problem questions and even methodology recounts (the basic structure of which – introduction, theory, design/methods, results, discussion and conclusion – map accurately onto the Christmas Cracker template). Before getting started on your essay, however, you need to figure out what it is you need to do and what your markers are looking for. Accurately decoding the assignment title/question is a crucial part of this.

Decoding the assignment task/question

A problem lots of students seem to encounter, irrespective of whether they are dyslexic or not, is difficulty accurately decoding the question/assignment task. This may sound very straightforward – just read and answer the question – but many students tend to either

misunderstand or even ignore key directions in the task, meaning that they don't fully answer the question and thus fail to get the marks they want or are capable of. The secret to accurately decoding an essay question or assignment task is to spend a good amount of time reading it and deciphering every single word.

TIP

Lecturers often spend a great deal of time agonising over the wording of assignment tasks and questions, so you should do the same.

When approaching your assignment task/question, try to break it down into three main components as a way of fully understanding what you are required to do. The three main components you need to keep a particular eye out for are as follows:

1) Content/topic keywords

These are the non-negotiable parameters of the subject and are key topics or themes that you simply have to include. Typical content/topic keywords might be things such as the Data Protection Act, global warming, the European Union, gravity, urban planning, 1956, feminism, Shakespeare, the Suffragette Movement etc. It may sound very surprising but lecturers frequently encounter essays which simply do not focus upon, or in some cases even include the key content or topics requested in the essay title. Make sure you identify these crucial keywords and topics first and never lose sight of them while writing and thinking about the essay.

2) Activity keywords

Put very simply; this is what you have to do. However, this is not as simple as it might look, as many of these keywords appear vague, do not seem to indicate what it is you are required to do accurately, or even overlap. Below is a table of common activity keywords and their meanings for guidance:

Keyword:	Meaning:	Position on Bloom's Taxonomy:
Analyse	Subject the topic(s) to scrutiny, identify strengths/weaknesses/flaws and possibly gaps in knowledge. Construct an argument based on the analysis.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Argue	Make a persuasive case for or against something.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Comment on	Identify and write about salient points and possibly criticise/evaluate.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Compare/contrast	Identify important points and highlight their similarities/differences through analysis. Construct an argument based on your observations.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Critique	Analyse, subject the topic(s) to scrutiny, identify strengths/weaknesses/flaws and possibly gaps in knowledge. Construct an argument based on the analysis.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation

Define	Identify and express the meaning of something, including the limitations of such definitions (be concise).	Knowledge/comprehension/application
Describe	Identify and outline the key points.	Knowledge
Discuss	Examine and analyse the issues, evaluate them and construct an argument which is critically perceptive.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Evaluate	Examine and discuss the pros and cons of something with a view to coming to a verdict, position and argument.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Examine	Subject the topic(s) to scrutiny, identify strengths/weaknesses/flaws and possibly gaps in knowledge. Construct an argument based on the analysis.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
Explain	Describe and give reasons for something.	Knowledge/comprehension/application
Illustrate	Find and use examples to explain something.	Knowledge/comprehension/application
Indicate	Identify and explain the important points and signal likely outcomes/reasons/conclusions/arguments.	Knowledge/comprehension/application
Justify	Provide reasons or evidence for a proposition or argument.	Knowledge/comprehension/application/
Outline	Identify and describe the main features of something.	Knowledge
Review	Critically examine something, usually something which has been done before, to appraise its strengths, weaknesses, limitations and arguments. Possibly recommend actions.	Analysis/synthesis/evaluation
State	Describe the main points.	Knowledge
Summarise	Identify and describe the main ideas.	Knowledge/comprehension/application

Notice the frequency with which the word ‘argument’ crops up here. Some students are unclear as to what an argument actually means. While it is true to say that an argument very often means a dispute, a row, or opposing ideas in conflict, in academic writing an argument means your point, contention or interpretation. The argument is what you want to prove.

TIP



It is critical that you understand what it is you should do in order to answer the question/assignment task properly. For example, if you take ‘discuss’ merely to mean talk about and describe rather than critically examine and evaluate/present an argument, you’re unlikely to score highly.

3) Focus or limitation keywords

These restrict your options and tighten the focus of the essay. Typical focus or limitation keywords might include things like contemporary, 1940–1980, two poems, any three plays of your choice, recent developments, North America, studied on this course etc. It's relatively easy to gloss over these words in favour of the activity or content keywords, but it's vital to take them into consideration if you are to get things right. Two examples from my own experience illustrate how things can go wrong if you neglect the focus or limitation keywords:



In my own 'A' Level Geography exam I had to write about a river delta. The focus/limitation keyword was 'UK river delta'. I overlooked this and wrote about the Mississippi river delta instead – with disastrous results.

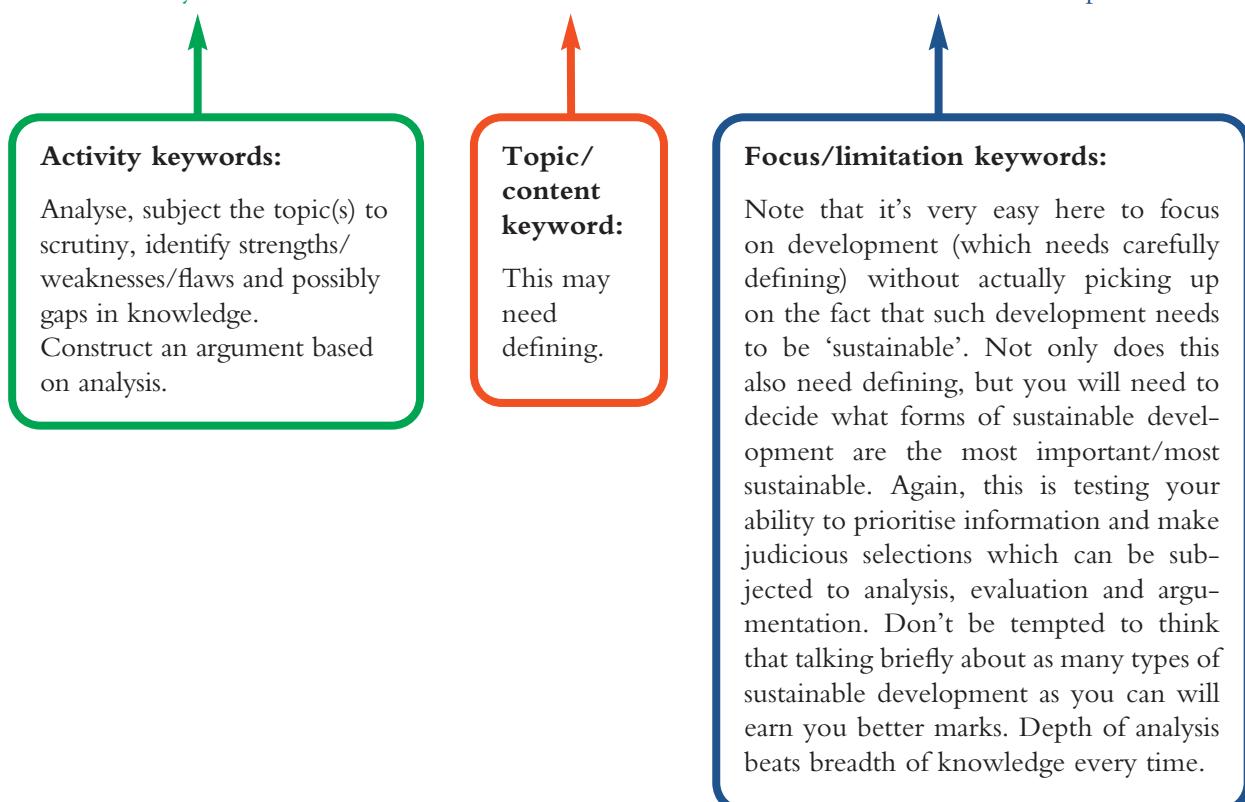


A student of mine recently scored poorly in their literature essay on the poet Philip Larkin. The question asked the students to refer to TWO poems of their choice. The student wrote about SIX poems, so was unable to go into the depth that was required to achieve good marks.

It can be tempting to overlook the focus or limitation keywords in an attempt to impress the marker with your breadth of knowledge. Take the example above of the student who wrote about six poems instead of two. This was highly commendable in terms of ambition, and the student clearly wanted to impress with their range of knowledge. But such breadth does not allow for depth, analysis and evaluation, which as we have seen, is more likely to score highly at university.

So, let's have a look at some sample assignment titles and decode them:

Critically evaluate the contention that **cities** are central to **sustainable forms of development**.



Using at least ONE theoretical framework, discuss some of the key challenges involved in implementing information systems.

Topic/content keywords:

Note that the task is looking at the implementation of information systems, not simply information systems.

Activity keyword:

Examine and analyse the issues, evaluate them and construct an argument which is critically perceptive.

Focus/limitation keywords:

The question requires just ONE theoretical framework, so don't be tempted into thinking that discussing two or more will impress your marker. They are testing your ability to consider one theoretical framework deeply and perceptively, but also to decide on which theoretical framework is most suited to this particular issue – so there are more skills tested here than you might think. Notice also that you are asked to discuss 'some' of the 'key challenges'. Again, this is not only testing your ability to present an analysis, argument and knowledge, but is testing your ability to decide on what the 'key challenges' are. This tests your judgement and ability to prioritise information.

TIPS



Try to match up the activity keywords to your mark scheme – this will give you an indication of the weighting of the assignment.



Don't be afraid to ask your lecturer, tutor or writing centre advisor for clarification.



If in doubt, go for analysis, evaluation and argument, as these are the highest scoring skills.

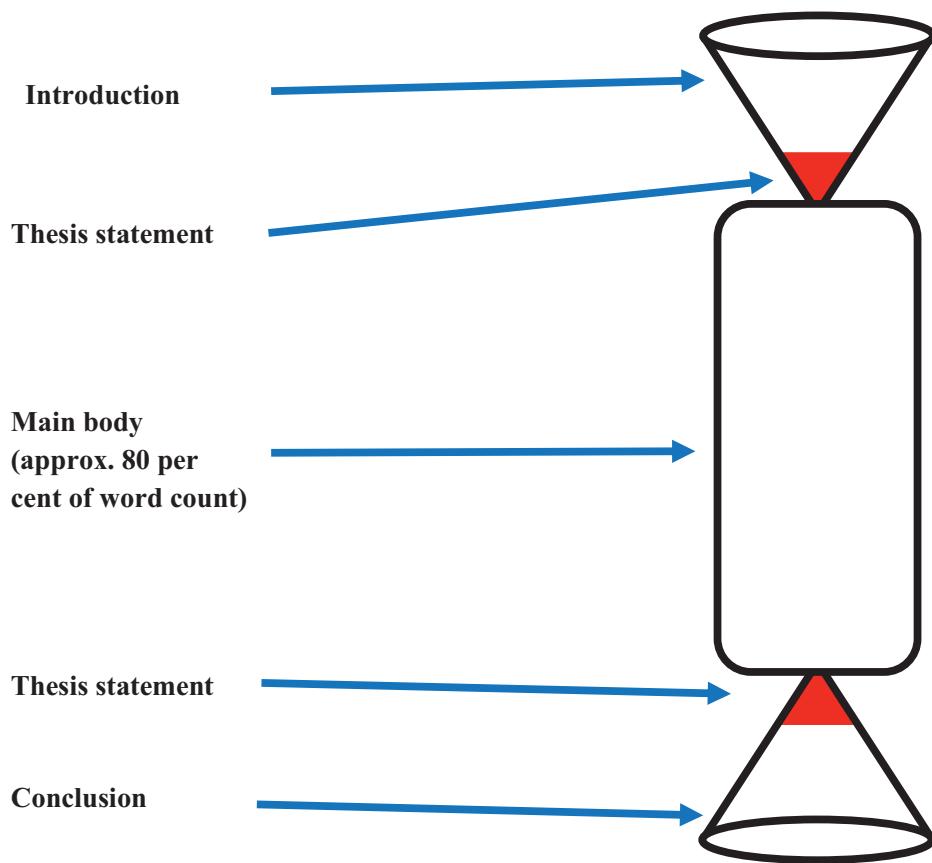


Keep description to a minimum – the first-class marks are at the top of Bloom's taxonomy.

Structuring your response: the Christmas Cracker

Having considered what you are required to do, let's turn our attention to structuring your response. One of the best ways of conceiving of the overall structure or 'big picture' of your essay is to think of it as resembling the shape of an upturned Christmas Cracker. This will enable you to think carefully about the overall aims of the various components of your essay and map these onto an easily memorised and recognisable shape – the outline of which provides you with a template for knowing what to write about, when, and where.

Most essays, irrespective of their genre, have the following components and shape:



The remainder of this chapter will consider each of these components in turn.

How to write effective introductions

The introduction is the ‘shop window’ of the essay, and it is essential to get right if you want to make a good first impression with your marker. Despite this, introductions are often the part of the essay that students tend to neglect, thinking that it doesn’t actually matter. While it is certainly true to say that introductions do not generate as many marks as the main body of the essay, a good introduction allows you to demonstrate your ability to:

- Get straight to the point.
- Write concisely.
- Immediately identify the most important issues or key problem.
- Identify and articulate, in a summarised form, an argument or stance.
- Identify the significance of the issue in relation to the discipline and the world.

These will all be credited.

So, what is the best way to structure your introduction? And when should you write it? One of the crucial things to get right when writing your introduction is to move from the

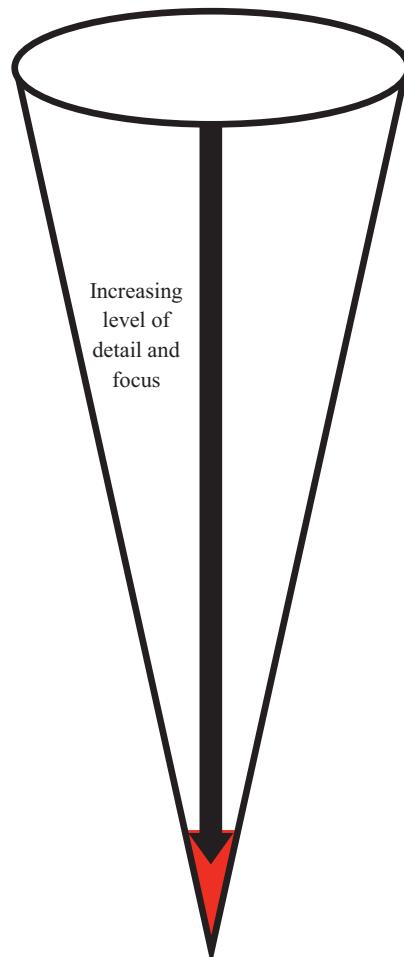
'big picture' to specific detail and an argument (the thesis statement). In other words, you should be able to map the progression of your ideas in your introduction onto the cone-shaped top of the Christmas Cracker template. The following four key elements will help you achieve this and can be mapped onto the template as follows:

Identify broad topic/subject area: demonstrate that you have accurately interpreted the essay question/assignment task and what it is asking you to do in relation to the topic. Provide an interesting 'hook' for the reader by integrating a 'headline grabbing' fact, quote or piece of data.

Why it's important/what's the problem? Ask yourself why this subject or question even matters. Being able to show that you have an appreciation of the significance of the topic in relation to its context, world events, research developments and alike will gain you marks.

Background: highlight major events, changes, significant laws, policies or research within which you are situating your argument. Indicate the major issues at stake and their areas of controversy/counter claims. Indicate the 'gap' in knowledge, especially if the introduction is to a research-based essay or dissertation.

Argument/thesis statement: articulate a clear, concise thesis statement which answers and addresses the key elements of the question or provides a solution while outlining the main structure of your argument.



With these points and principles in mind, let's evaluate the following introduction to an essay:

'Working-class culture was shaped predominantly by the factory, the pub and the housing estate.' Discuss.



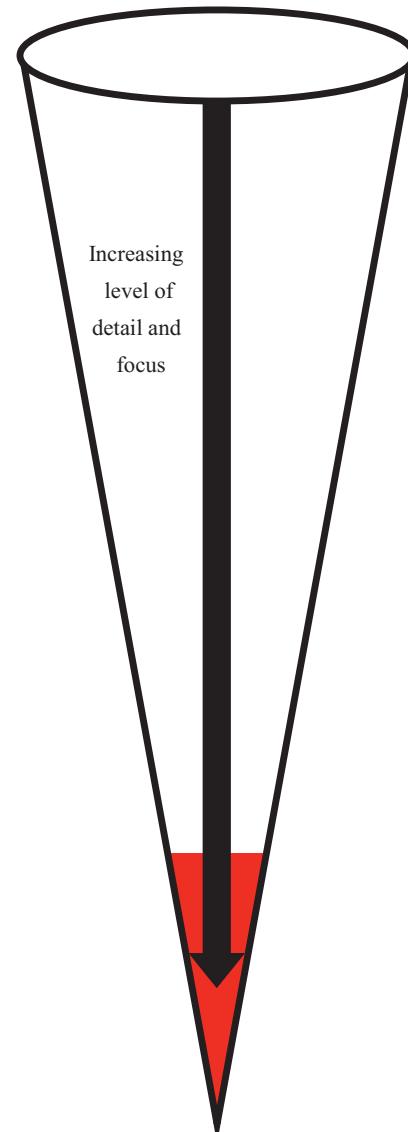
Eric Hobsbawm makes the point that before the advent of the new socialist parties, the working classes had always been referred to in the plural rather than singular. This essay will initially address the need for a plural term, address the lack of homogeneity, and the differing groups that constituted the 'working classes' (1987, p.118). It will examine how the factory, pub and housing estate shaped the culture of this non-generic group and broaden this investigation to include working conditions, entertainment and living conditions. It will end by looking at the increasing segregation from the bourgeoisie, the development of a political identity (engendered by self-help groups and Trades' Unions) and the emergence of a class struggle.

This introduction is obviously not without merits, especially in the sense that the structure of the essay is outlined well and there is a good use of vocabulary. However, what sense do we get of the importance of the issue and its background? Do we get an insight into whether the student agrees or disagrees with the statement in the assignment brief? And what is the significance of the fact that there is an issue surrounding whether the working classes are referred to as singular or plural? Is this even relevant? The student merely repeats a substantial amount of the assignment brief/title, and while they outline what they are going to talk about, there is no sense of an argument, direction, or an attempt at evaluating the original contention or the evidence. The introduction simply does not follow the Christmas Cracker framework.

Let's have a look at another introduction to see how it moves from the 'big picture' to a detailed focus/argument. In this example, you can clearly see how it maps onto the cone-shaped top of the Christmas Cracker template:

Despite many changes to law and policy relating to domestic violence, criminal justice responses still fail to provide adequate protection for those who are experiencing or are at risk of abuse. Discuss.

Domestic violence is a major problem in the UK, if not globally, and its prevalence is far from decreasing. National estimates as to the number of women who experience such abuse within the last year range from 7 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2014, p.1) to up to 10 per cent (Women's Aid, 2006). Seventy-seven women were killed by their partners or ex-partners in the UK in 2012–2013 (ONS, 2014) and as many as 63.4 per cent of separated women reported experiencing 'violence' from ex-husbands, with 59 per cent experiencing an 'assault' (Painter and Farringdon, 1998, p.263). Equally, data suggesting that 25 per cent to 30 per cent (ONS, 2014) of women suffer domestic violence in their lifetime, with up to one billion experiencing it internationally (United Nations, 2014), back up this trend. These statistics show that the continuing prevalence of domestic violence is incontestable – women are clearly not being protected from abuse in practice. Law and policy relating to domestic violence has running through it an explicit goal – protecting victims of abuse (Home Office, 2014, pp.3–6). Yet if these victims are receiving unsatisfactory protection, the adequacy of the criminal justice response to domestic violence must be called into question. This essay critically examines whether those who experience or are at risk of abuse are actually protected in practice. It argues that despite considerable changes in law and policy in this area, the criminal justice system's response is insufficient, despite there being multiple ideological, patriarchal and media driven forces that also contribute to the proliferation of domestic violence, and which are obviously altogether extraneous to the criminal justice system.



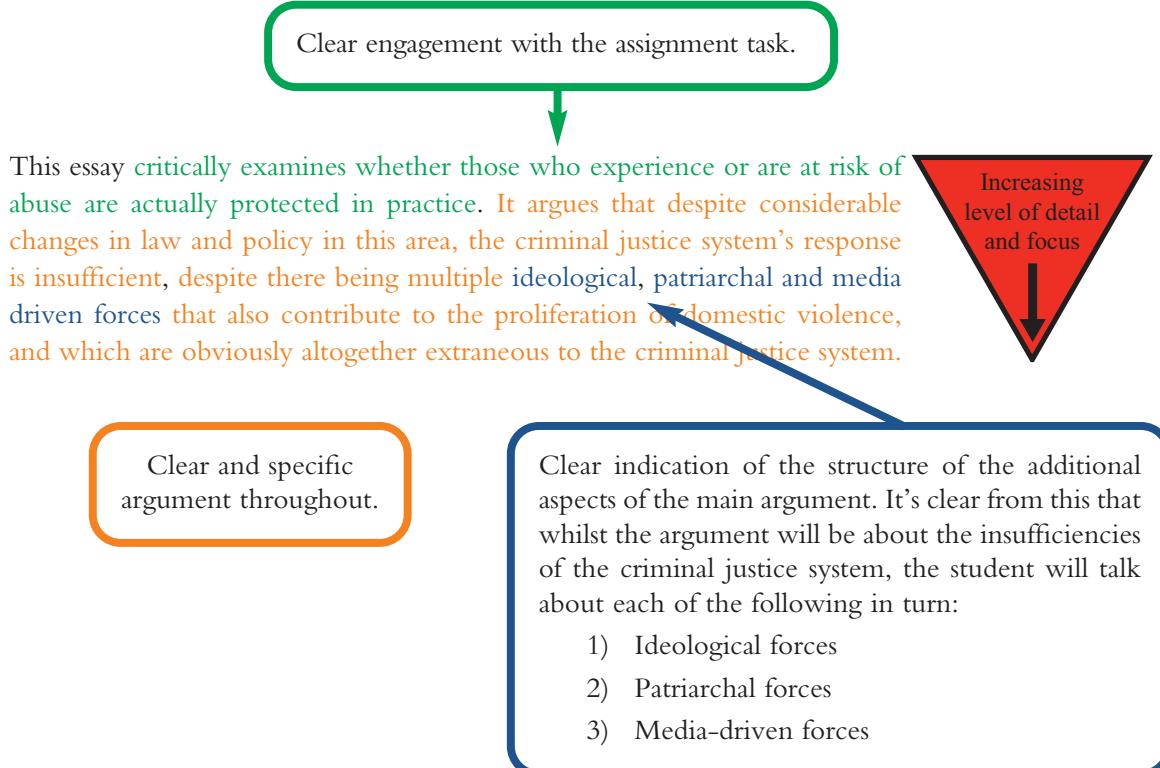
This is a much better introduction – it moves from the general (UK/global situation and national estimates of abuse) to the specific problem (deaths, violence and assault), highlighting the key issues at stake, why they are important, and how they relate to the law and policy. The student then specifically addresses the inadequacies of the present system. In other words, rather than talking in general, unspecific terms, they tackle the question head on by articulating a clear standpoint and argument. The thesis statement, as we shall see, specifies what that argument will consist of and how the essay will proceed.

Writing effective thesis statements

The thesis statement is a vital component of the introduction as it gives the reader/marker a clear sense of what your argument is and how you are going to address the question. An effective thesis statement does three key things:

- 1) Summarises the aims of the assignment in one or two concise, powerful and informative sentence(s).
- 2) Must directly address the assignment title by stating a position or making a claim.
- 3) Directs your whole line of analysis, argument and thought and clearly, yet concisely signposts the structure of your argument.

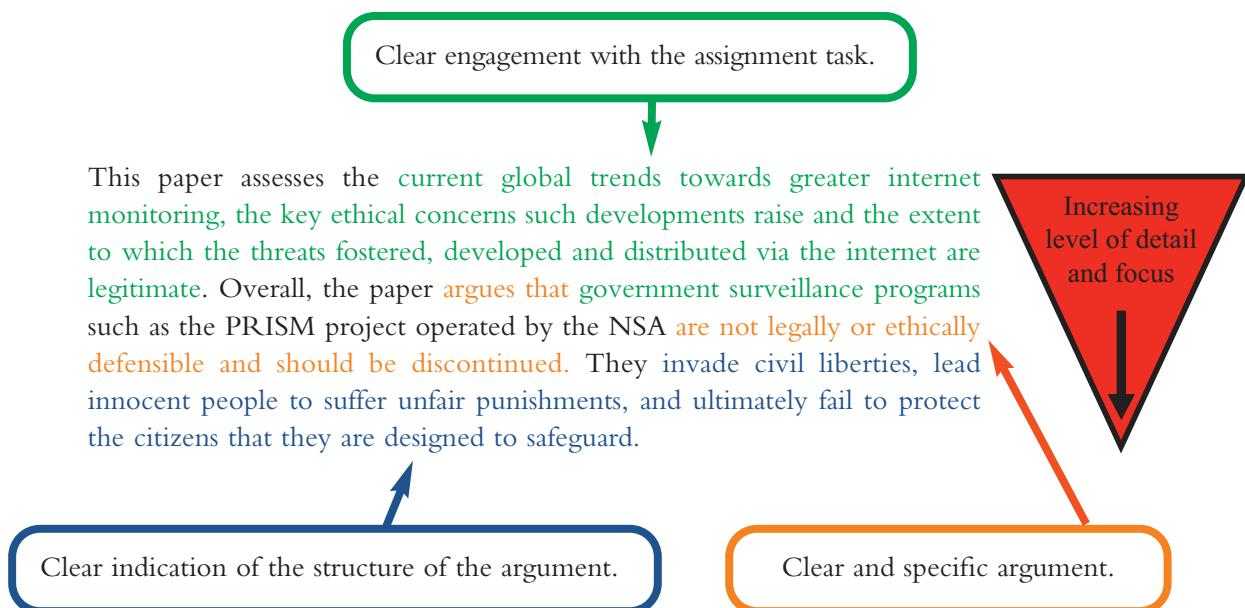
Students often write thesis statements that are far too long and descriptive. The example above on working-class culture is a prime example of this. Notice how the student spent quite a lot of time suggesting that ‘this essay will’, ‘it will’, and ‘it will end by’. While it is good to signpost to the reader what your argument is, it’s important not to over-signpost. Note how in the example on domestic violence the student does not waste time saying what the essay will discuss but simply incorporates it seamlessly into the argument:



This thesis statement provides a focused and concise argument which introduces a perceptive, relevant range of issues which not only address the assignment task, but goes beyond it by suggesting that there are other ‘forces’ which have a profound impact upon the problem of domestic violence. Notice too how even the thesis statement moves from the general ‘big picture’ (‘this essay critically examines’) to the specific areas of protection, the insufficiencies of the criminal justice system’s response, and the various forces which are external to the criminal justice system which exert influence on the growth in domestic violence.

In the following example, the structure of the argument and essay is even more evident:

Discuss whether internet surveillance is justifiable and to what extent it ought to be expanded, controlled or prohibited.



In this example, it's absolutely clear that the student will provide:

- 1) An assessment of current global trends and the key ethical concerns these raise.
- 2) An argument that government surveillance programs not defensible because:
 - They are an invasion of civil liberties.
 - They lead to unfair punishments of innocent people.
 - They fail to protect citizens.

The thesis statement is clear and precise, yet notice that at no point does the student resort to direct, inelegant signposting or detailed description such as ‘I will then consider’, ‘finally I will discuss’ or ‘in the second section of the essay’. If you embed your structure into the argument, there is simply no need for this sort of signposting, and it saves you valuable words that could be used more productively in analysing and evaluating the issues at stake.

Students often ask, when is the best time to write the introduction and thesis statement? The obvious answer is to write it first. Indeed, given that dyslexics often struggle with organising their thoughts, there seems to be compelling reasons why introductions, and particularly thesis statements ought to be written first:

‘[T]he purpose of the thesis statement is to give order both to the reader and to the writer. It does this by clearly stating the central claim that a piece of writing will try to prove. The writer takes care in the thesis statement to articulate a paper’s argument as precisely as possible, and this precision clarifies and focuses the direction of the paper’ (Moore and Cassel, 2011, p.8).

‘The reason for placing a thesis statement in the first paragraph of an essay or as soon after it as possible is that the sooner you state it the more likely you are to remain aware of your main idea and the less likely you are to wander from that idea as you write’
(Miller, 1980, p.6).

While it is certainly true that a thesis statement will prevent you from ‘wandering’, it’s not necessary to write the entire introduction first, as you may not know the full significance of the topic or its background until you are some way through the essay. It’s often better to write the introduction at the end (at the same time as the conclusion) and have a very rough, draft or even bullet-pointed thesis statement to work from so that you have a plan that you can stick to.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE INTRODUCTIONS



In your opening sentence get straight to the heart of the matter by identifying the key aspects of the topic and what the question/assignment task is asking you to do. Don’t use long winded, predictable or narrator-like openings such as ‘the existence of the solar system has fascinated mankind since the dawn of time’. Instead, get straight to the point by saying something like ‘the extent of the solar system and its development since the “big bang” is controversial and many scientists dispute whether God or the “God particle” had any involvement in its creation’.



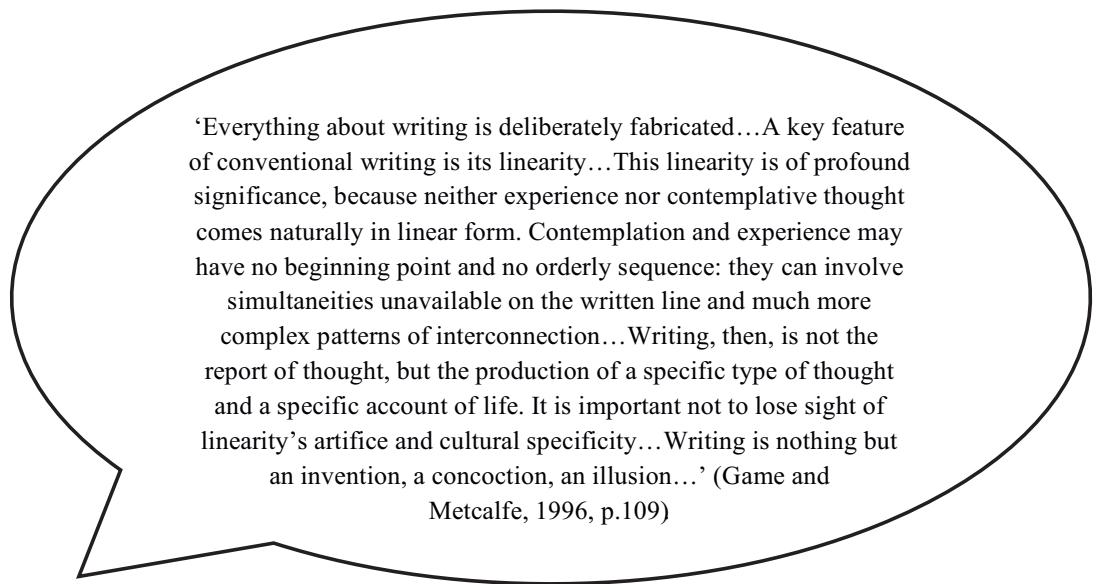
Don’t copy and paste or repeat words or phrases in the introduction directly from the question/assignment task. Instead, show how you are addressing the question/assignment.

-  Keep your introductions short and concise – aim for around 5–10 per cent of your total word count.
-  Double check that what you say and promise to do in your thesis statement actually matches the argument and key points you make in the main body of the essay.
-  Avoid giving lengthy definitions in your introduction and unless they are significant for understanding the background, avoid putting in too many quotes or references from secondary sources.

The main body

Having thought about the introduction, the next section of the Christmas Cracker essay structure is the main body. This should comprise of around 80 per cent of your word length and is the most significant section of the essay in terms of generating marks, articulating your argument, and critically analysing and evaluating your material. The main body consists of paragraphs, each of which make one key point which addresses the assignment task/question. But with so much material to work with, how do you organise your thoughts, paragraphs and key points? Which do you put first and why? How do you prioritise information and arguments? And even more problematically, how do you structure an essay that requires you to compare ideas? How can you avoid ‘wandering’ off course, repeating ideas, or even going around in a circle, even though you may have a thesis statement that provides you with a loose direction?

One of the first problems you come across when writing the main body of an essay is the challenge of linearity. While good writing needs to be linear and clearly organised, our thoughts are not!



‘Everything about writing is deliberately fabricated...A key feature of conventional writing is its linearity...This linearity is of profound significance, because neither experience nor contemplative thought comes naturally in linear form. Contemplation and experience may have no beginning point and no orderly sequence: they can involve simultaneities unavailable on the written line and much more complex patterns of interconnection...Writing, then, is not the report of thought, but the production of a specific type of thought and a specific account of life. It is important not to lose sight of linearity’s artifice and cultural specificity...Writing is nothing but an invention, a concoction, an illusion...’ (Game and Metcalfe, 1996, p.109)

Nobody’s thoughts, then, come out in a ‘linear form’ and being dyslexic compounds this problem further. Thoughts, especially dyslexic thoughts, tend to dart around all over the place, and dyslexics are the masters of going off on tangents – only returning to (or even remembering!) the main point or idea perhaps hours or even days later! A further challenge to any sense of

linearity and structure is actually the technology we use. Irrespective of whether you type or use speech recognition software, computer screens only allow us to see one or two pages of the essay at any one time, and thus the overall structure or ‘big picture’ simply disappears either above or below the screen. Obviously, you can scroll up or down, but that means that the section you were previously working on has now also disappeared, so again the ‘big picture’ simply cannot be viewed in its entirety.

One way of keeping your thoughts on track and thus structure your essay in a logical, sequential manner is to use the Christmas Cracker template. The best way of presenting a logical, compelling argument is to start with principles, definitions and foundations (much as you would if you were building a house) before moving onto specific detail. In trying to prove your argument, then, you move from the general to the specific, from the basics to the more advanced, and from what is known to what is new. This can be mapped onto the main body of the Christmas Cracker as follows:

‘Big picture’:

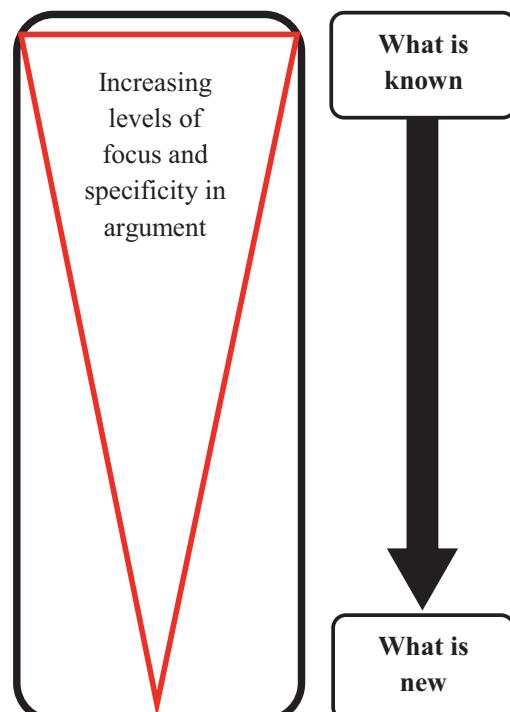
Foundations, definitions, principles, theories, key background data etc.

Building the argument:

Evidence, discussion, analysis, and consideration of counterarguments.

Argument increasingly specific and proven:

More specific evidence and analysis leading to overall evaluation.



‘Communicative dynamism’:

In 1988 Nigel J. Bruce coined the term ‘communicative dynamism’ as a way of showing how ideas move in a wave pattern from the given to the new across sentences (more on this later). By moving from the given to the new, communication becomes effective and compelling and this transition of ideas can also be applied to the essay structure as a whole. By moving from what is known to what is new (your argument and analysis) your ideas will not only come across in a logical manner, but they will have ‘dynamism’ and persuasiveness (Bruce, 1988).

This overall structure holds true for the two key types of discursive essay you are likely to encounter, namely the discussion essay and the comparative essay. We will look at each in turn to demonstrate how the Christmas Cracker template can help keep your thoughts and argument on track:

1) Logical structure for a discussion essay

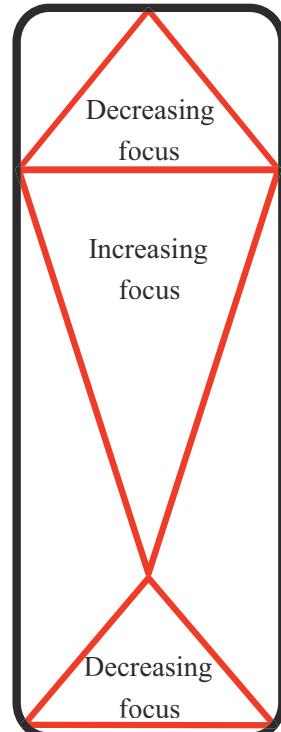
In a discussion essay, one of the things being assessed is your ability to construct an argument that weaves a logical and coherent course through what may seem like a maze of information and ideas. It can seem difficult to know what to discuss first. Let's take the following as an example:

Assignment task: People respond to trauma in various ways. Discuss and explain why some individuals seem resilient while others develop severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Is it possible to predict how people will respond to trauma?

Possible topics for consideration:		
Theories concerning biological differences (between men and women).	Theories relating to individual genetics.	Type of event.
Case studies of victims of 9/11.	Theories of psychological vulnerability.	Not possible to predict how people will respond to trauma – thesis statement.
Competing definitions of trauma.	Family and social networks of support.	Case studies of rape victims.

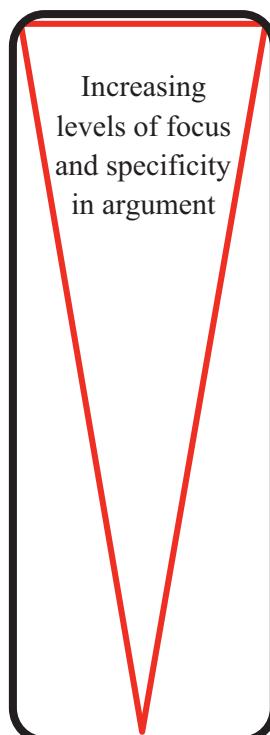
There are clearly lots of possibilities here, and it would be very easy to lose a sense of overall direction and structure. This is precisely what happens in the following essay plan:

Paragraph 1:	Theories concerning type of event (case studies of 9/11 and rape victims).
Paragraph 2:	Critique of studying event type as a predictor of PTSD.
Paragraph 3:	Theories of psychological vulnerability.
Paragraph 4:	Critique of theories of psychological vulnerability.
Paragraph 5:	Theories concerning biological differences (gender).
Paragraph 6:	Critique of theories concerning biological differences.
Paragraph 7:	Role of family and social networks of support.
Paragraph 8:	Not possible to predict how people will respond to trauma.
Paragraph 9:	Competing definitions of trauma.



As you can see by the shape of the corresponding red triangles, there are several sequencing and coherence issues here. The student leaps into detailed, specific theory first, but then completely separates off the sections that subject the theories to analysis and evaluation. This needed incorporating into the sections that discuss the theories more carefully and smoothly. By structuring the essay as above, it appears very ‘blocky’ and fragmented, the overall sequence of ideas is haphazard and illogical, and what is perhaps more crucial, the argument and its direction is unclear and not well signposted. So, let’s try and map these same ideas onto the Christmas Cracker template by moving from ‘big picture’ foundations to specific detail:

Paragraph 1:	Competing definitions of trauma = not possible to predict how people will respond to trauma because definitions themselves are unclear and disputed.
Paragraphs 2–3:	Theories concerning biological differences (gender) and critique/evaluation = not possible to predict how people will respond to trauma.
Paragraphs 4–5:	Theories of psychological vulnerability and critique/evaluation = not possible to predict how people will respond to trauma.
Paragraphs 6–7:	Theories concerning type of event (case studies of 9/11 and rape victims) and critique/evaluation = not possible to predict how people will respond to trauma.
Paragraphs 8–9:	Role of family and social networks of support = the only plausible theory which can help predict how people will respond to trauma.



In this version, the structure is much clearer because the analysis, evaluation and argument run throughout each paragraph, building in focus and specificity and moving from the foundations to the specifics. This presents the ideas in a much more logical, less disjointed manner, which slowly adds layers of detail and complexity which render the argument much more thorough and convincing.

TIPS

-  When writing an essay plan, ensure that your ideas follow the ‘big picture’ (given) to detail (new) sequence and present a clear argument that addresses the question.
-  When editing and proofreading your essay, read the topic sentences of each paragraph to see if you can identify the point each paragraph is making. Do the points move gradually from the general (given) to the specific (new)? If not, re-order them.
-  Use the Christmas Cracker template to help keep you on track. By writing with the template alongside your essay (or even writing the essay inside the template which you can download from the companion website), the gradual narrowing of the red triangle should encourage you to tighten your focus.

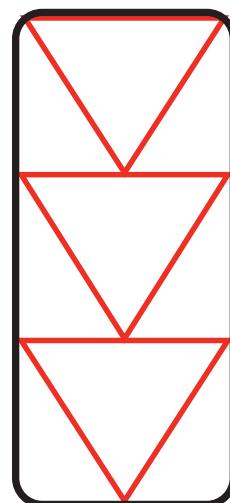
2) Logical structure for a comparison essay

Comparison essays require you to evaluate and synthesise competing or different issues and/or two or more pieces of literature. As such they are much trickier to construct and require considerable concentration and planning to get them right. The temptation with a comparison essay is to deal first with one side of the argument/issue/piece of literature and then the other before arriving at a conclusion in which you present your overall argument, evaluation and conclusion. This is called a block structure, and while it may appear logical, and is a style frequently taught by English for Academic Purposes instructors, this format is fraught with problems. Let's take another essay from the field of psychology to see how the block structure would work:

Assignment task: Psychology and psychiatry differ in several key respects. Compare and evaluate these two forms of treatment from at least two different perspectives.

Possible essay plan for a block structure:

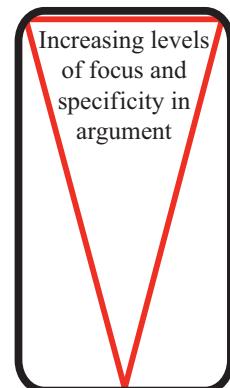
Structure:	Block:
Paragraphs 1–2	Psychology in relation to: 1) Origins of thought processes. 2) Patient outcomes.
Paragraphs 3–4	Psychiatry in relation to: 1) Origins of thought processes. 2) Patient outcomes.
Paragraph 5	Argument and evaluation – which discipline is the best/most successful.



As you can see, this structure is very logical and clear, but in terms of the overall sequence of ideas, and, perhaps more crucially, the argument, it is somewhat repetitive and clumsy. It alternates between disciplines and goes back and forth between 'big picture' ideas and detail, thereby failing to synthesise and evaluate the issues holistically. In other words, the 'flow' of the ideas is repeatedly interrupted. The point-by-point or thematic structure is a much better option.

Possible essay plan for a point-by-point/thematic structure:

Structure:	Point-by-point/thematic:
Paragraphs 1–2	Origins of thought processes in relation to: 1) Psychology AND psychiatry: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Incorporate evaluation, analysis and argument.
Paragraphs 3–4	Patient outcomes in relation to: 1) Psychology AND psychiatry: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Incorporate evaluation, analysis and argument.

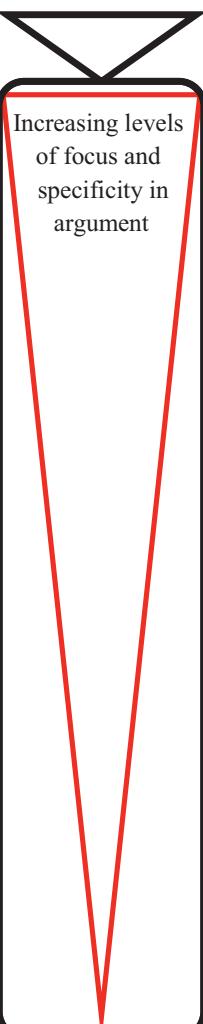


The sequence of ideas here ‘flows’ much more smoothly. Notice that the all-important analysis, argument and evaluation is integrated throughout because what drives the structure is not a ‘one step at a time’ block consideration of the two forms of treatment, but a thematic appraisal and evaluation through two themes or perspectives. This structure builds a comparative argument into its core, and unlike in the block structure, the direction of travel is always forwards. It moves from the ‘big picture’ (the origins of thought processes) and then gets more specific and detailed in relation to patient outcomes. It also eliminates needless repetition since the block structure would require you to talk about thought processes and patient outcomes twice (one in relation to each form of treatment) and it eliminates the need for a concluding, evaluative paragraph as the perspectives have been synthesised and evaluated comparatively rather than separated. The point-by-point or thematic structure requires more skill, but it allows for deeper, more incisive analysis and argumentation, the result of which will be higher marks. Let’s see what this approach/structure might look like in a sample paragraph that synthesises and critically evaluates two perspectives.



Describe and examine the differences between interpretive and objectivist approaches to social science and evaluate the extent to which these competing schools of thought can be integrated.

While both approaches aim to analyse social behaviour scientifically, seeking integration seems fraught with methodological difficulties that are irreconcilable. In terms of methodologies, interpretive approaches examine and emphasise the importance of subjective individual experience of the world, and as such they take an anti-positivist stance, use qualitative data and argue that the social world cannot be interpreted in the same way as the physical environment (Saunders et al., 2016; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Researchers with this approach maintain that investigations should be driven by situations rather than theory (Cohen et al., 2000). Objectivists, on the other hand, believe that there is only one true reality and that the world around them is made of ‘concrete, factual things’ which can be understood through quantitative research (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p.45). In this sense, objectivists use a similar approach as that of a natural scientist because they both believe that the nature of social and physical phenomena is independent of what Saunders et al. call ‘social actors’ (Saunders et al., 2016, p.722). Yet arguably it is precisely these ‘social actors’ which are at the heart of social science as a discipline, and unlike the subjects of ‘pure’ sciences, they necessarily have values, feelings and other emotional attributes which cannot be measured in the same way as the physical environment (measuring, assessing and understanding the social effects of domestic abuse, for instance, is vastly different to measuring a ‘concrete, factual thing’ such as divorce rates). Both approaches undoubtedly have benefits and are of value. Yet because of their vastly different underlying methodologies, it appears difficult to see how they can be integrated into the same research project without considerable tensions, since the objectivist approach takes a reductive view of the individual and their experience of society and the other is fraught with concerns over authenticity, replicability and its inherently descriptive as opposed to explanatory findings. ...



Commentary

- Clear, direct topic sentence which addresses the question, signposts the argument and clearly identifies methodologies as the theme around which the structure of the paragraph will revolve.
- Good evidence relating to methodologies. The phrase ‘on the other hand’ clearly signposts the differences. Descriptions of the approaches are synthesised around the core issue of methodological differences.
- The analysis and evaluation section deals with methodologies. Note the synthesis – the student compares, contrasts, argues and evaluates around the core theme of methodologies rather than dealing with first one, then the other approach (as in the block structure). This is unfinished here due to limitations of space, but you can see that the general direction of travel is logical and compelling while synthesising the ‘approaches’ within an overall evaluation.

The pros and cons of the block vs. point-by-point structures can be summarised thus:

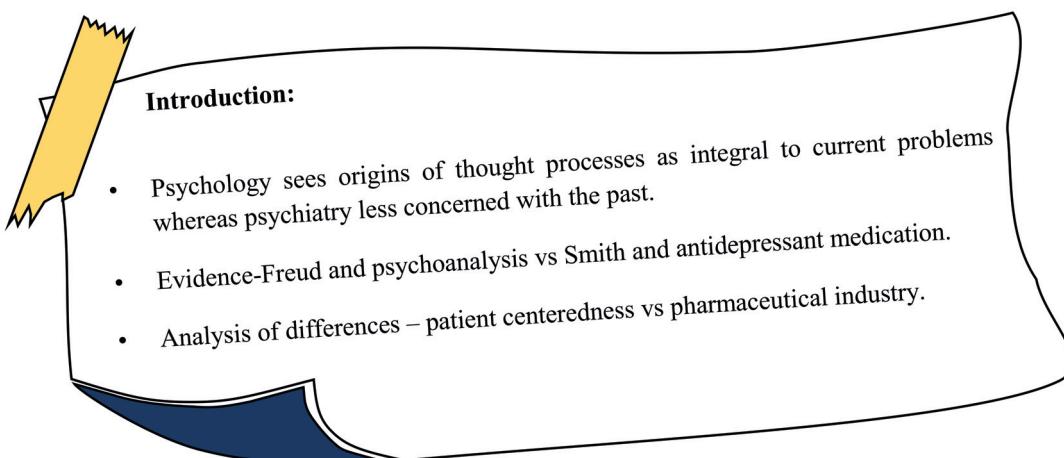
Structure:	Pros:	Cons:
Block:	Clear and logical.	The themes or ‘perspectives’ are discussed multiple times in relation to each point – can be repetitive.
	Relatively easy to construct.	Doesn’t show sophisticated analysis and synthesis to the same extent as the point-by-point structure.
	Fairly easy to incorporate all the features required without wandering off topic.	Too formulaic – lacks ‘style’.
Point-by-Point:	Allows for deeper, more incisive synthesis and analysis.	Harder to manage and keep focus.
	Avoids duplication/repetition of key points.	Key items can become ‘lost’ within the focus upon themes/perspectives.
	Easier to forge an argument.	

In summary, then, avoid the temptation to adopt a block structure and aim for the greater depth and sophistication offered by the point-by-point/thematic structure. It will be harder to manage, but it will result in higher marks if you handle it correctly. Keep in mind the ‘big picture’ to detail sequence of ideas/topics and synthesise the opposing perspectives or different subjects into a thematic interrogation and analysis of the issues and embed a clear argument throughout. Use the main body section of the Christmas Cracker template to guide you.

Planning the main body

Irrespective of whether your essay or dissertation needs a linear or point-by-point structure, careful planning is essential in order to construct and articulate a clear sequence of ideas. As illustrated below, some students just produce a bullet point list of ideas they want to discuss,

and providing it follows the given to new, ‘big picture’ to detail sequence outlined previously, this can work well. A plan for the psychology essay outlined earlier, then, might look like this:



Another technique you could try is to use PowerPoint or Prezi to construct a slideshow of your ideas/paragraphs. Use one slide per paragraph and outline the key points, the key pieces of evidence, and the key aspects of the argument/critical analysis:

The screenshot shows a Microsoft PowerPoint slide with the following content:

File Home Insert Design Transitions Animations Slide Show Review View Tell me what you want to do

2 Paragraph 1: Origins of thought processes

- Psychology sees origins of thought processes as integral to current problems whereas psychiatry less concerned with the past
- Evidence – Freud and psychoanalysis vs Smith and antidepressant medication
- Analysis of differences – patient centredness vs pharmaceutical industry.

3 Paragraph 2: Origins of thought processes

- Questions about ethics and fashions
- Evidence of popularity and trends – US influences, pressure from pharmaceutical industry
- Analysis of external pressures and ethics – not about patient outcomes but about money

4 Paragraph 3: Patient Outcomes

- Psychiatry largely ‘buys’ the patient doesn’t solve problems – doesn’t necessarily help them, but contrary to Freud; does not necessarily enable effective recovery, so patients end up resorting to psychiatry.
- Data and evidence from Smith, Jones and Adam, especially in relation to methodology
- Discussion and analysis – mixed pictures and lots of complicating factors, including placebo effect.

Paragraph 1: Origins of thought processes

- Psychology sees origins of thought processes as integral to current problems whereas psychiatry less concerned with the past
- Evidence – Freud and psychoanalysis vs Smith and antidepressant medication
- Analysis of differences – patient centredness vs pharmaceutical industry.

One benefit of using PowerPoint or Prezi is that the slideshow can help you to see if the overall structure makes sense. If it doesn’t, you can easily move slides around and replay them until you are happy with the structure. Indeed, you could even try writing the paragraphs themselves onto the PowerPoint and then play them as a slideshow. At the draft/planning stage, this provides a good alternative to ‘text-mapping’, which I will discuss later in Chapter 7.

Writing effective conclusions

Conclusions are often thought of as something which has to be included just because you can’t stop an essay randomly and hope for the best. A little like a handshake at the end of a

formal conversation, students often perceive the conclusion as fairly pointless in terms of generating marks but something one has to do so as not to appear rude. Consequently, students often pay little attention to conclusions and invariably just summarise what they have previously said. Conclusions will never generate the same amount of marks as a paragraph within the main body of the essay, but you can make them count by demonstrating how what you have just argued intersects with, challenges or complements current thinking and trends in the field, the discipline or even the world.

TIP

Remember, there is no need to simply summarise what you have already just said in your conclusion. The marker has just read the essay so knows what you have just said!

In many respects, a good way of thinking about your conclusion is to think of it as an inversion of the introduction. In other words, rather than moving from the ‘big picture’ to the details and an argument, in the conclusion you do the opposite by going from the argument back out into the ‘big picture’ – hence the cone shape at the bottom of the Christmas Cracker we saw earlier. An ideal conclusion, then, covers the following key points and looks a little like this:

Reiteration of thesis statement:

This doesn’t mean simply copying and pasting the thesis statement from the introduction – you need to reword it from the perspective of the argument having been proven.

Summary of discussion:

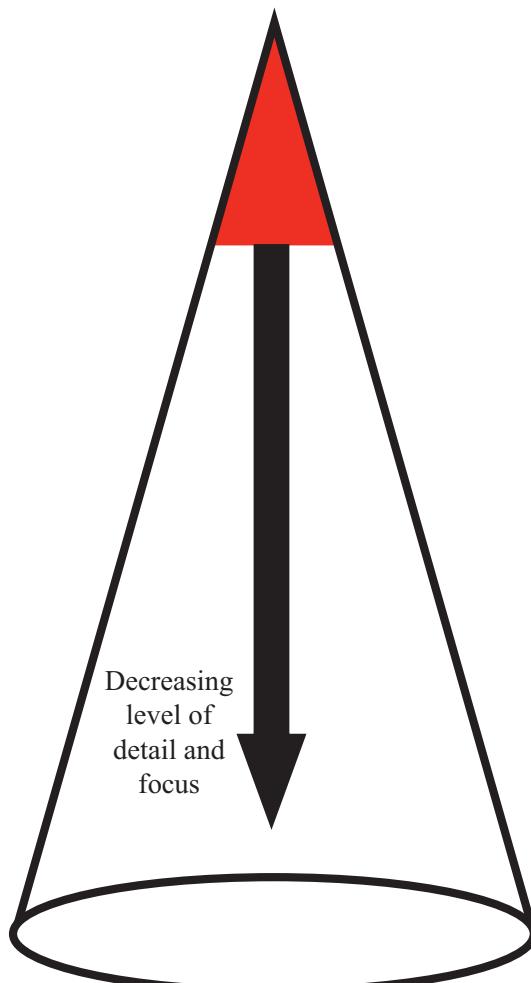
Don’t labour this – remember the marker has just read the essay. Simply remind your reader what you have proven.

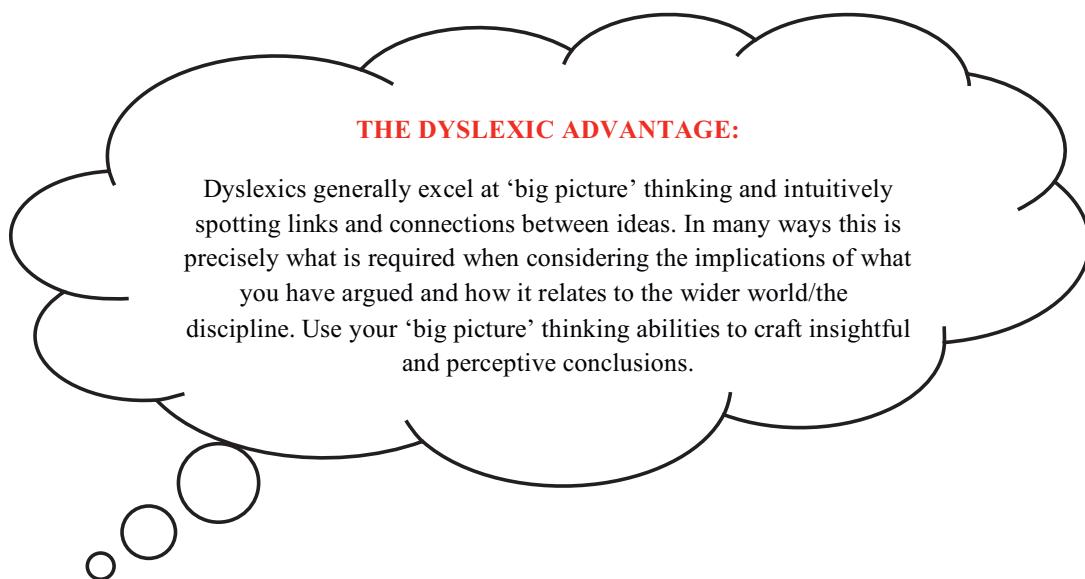
Discuss implications:

Here you start to broaden out into the ‘big picture’. Indicate why what you have just discussed matters (to the world or the discipline). Ask yourself, who cares? What needs to change and why?

Signal the future:

Point to where things might go next, even if this is merely that more research needs to be done.





Take a look at this conclusion to an essay answering the following assignment task:

An individual’s work achievement can be best predicted by their intelligence. Discuss.



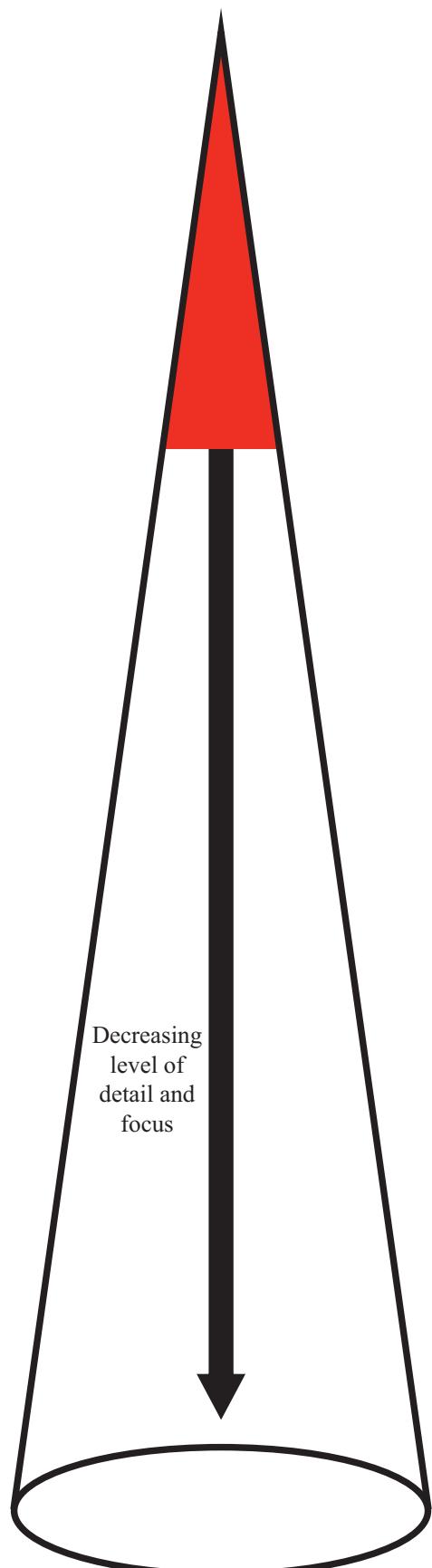
In conclusion, it would appear that an individual’s work achievement can not only be determined by the individual themselves, but also by many aspects of their working environment. This essay has examined the issues relating to work achievement in three different industries and by making reference to appropriate literature. The essay concludes that it is arguable that intelligence is the most important influence on workplace achievement, as it defines the realms of a person’s comprehension and therefore the limit of their progress in a professional hierarchy. Nevertheless, current theories on intelligence are so diverse that it is impossible to categorically state its correlation, if any, with work achievement. Therefore, it may be more accurate to suggest that intelligence can best predict the potential an individual has for work achievement, rather than its realisation.

What do you think of it? Is it good or bad? Does it articulate an argument? Does the conclusion have a logical and compelling structure? Does it follow the guidelines outlined previously?

In general, this is a poor conclusion, and while it accurately summarises and describes what has been discussed in the essay, it does nothing to explore the implications of this for industry, the discipline, or the world. Note also that it repeats too many words from the actual assignment title, which shows that the student has not put a great deal of effort into the conclusion and doesn’t really know what to say other than to summarise the content of the main body. Take a look at the following conclusion which articulates the implications of the argument and the topic much more successfully and can be mapped onto the cone-shaped bottom of the Christmas Cracker template far more clearly:

To what extent does the rise of the ‘knowledge economy’ reflect fundamental changes in the nature of capitalism and work?

It is clear that in relation to the ‘knowledge economy’ and its intersection with commodity production, there has been a crisis of mass production and that flexible specialisation is emerging in its place. This essay has argued that a new form of mass market has emerged with ‘the fragmentation of style rather than any real “paradigmatic” or fundamental change in consumption which implies a change in production’ (Curry 1993, p.108). It appears that mass commodity production and Fordist labour processes are still evident, but production is being relocated to non-western countries to allow advanced economies to concentrate on developing high-technology, knowledge sectors (Giddens 2000). This is a highly contentious issue and has led to suggestions of an international division of labour (Thurrow 1997, p.78), which is evidence of capitalist development towards increasing global inequality (May 2000). Thus, the idea that flexible specialisation and the ‘knowledge economy’ are generalised trends ‘obscures the real processes of capitalist development’ and, in this instance, commodity production (Curry 1993, p.118). Hence, it seems that theorists supporting shifts in the nature of capitalism are ‘merely apologists for the continuing exploitation of the poor in the global capitalist system’ (Hull 2000, p.148). In advanced economies, therefore, high technology manufacturing industries constitute ‘a declining minority of employment’ (Hyman 1991, p.272) and it is evident that these firms ‘are capitalist and locked into the imperatives of capitalist accumulation’ (Curry 1993, p.119). This phenomenon has been introduced by, and perpetuated by neoliberal politicians, particularly in America, and it can be suggested that globalisation has left many disenfranchised. It is a damning indictment of such processes that many have been left dispossessed and unengaged, and this is largely reflected in recent developments in politics (which is increasingly putting nationalist rhetoric at the fore in response to the perceived threat from the very economic systems neoliberalism has put into place). Understanding this is of paramount importance for global and national security given the rise in rhetoric not seen since the 1930s, and as such clearly more research and understanding is required in the interests of global security and wider economic sustainability.



Notice how the student wastes little time here summarising what has been discussed and quickly proceeds to highlight how contentious the issue is while linking this to changes in the capitalist economy and the continuing exploitation of the poor. The student then broadens out even further to consider the significance of the issue given that globalisation has left many ‘dispossessed and unengaged’, thereby linking to contemporaneous political changes, nationalism and global security. In other words, having examined the issues relating to the ‘knowledge economy’, capitalism and work, the student has stood back from the argument and asked (and then addressed) the ‘big picture’ questions mentioned earlier – namely ‘who cares?’ And ‘why does any of this matter?’ By considering these issues rather than merely summarising what you have already said, you will show a greater awareness of the implications of what you have argued, and this will be credited.

TIPS



Use the cone shape template of the Christmas Cracker to remind you of the general movement from the argument to the ‘big picture’ and implications of what you have said.



Do not copy and paste the thesis statement directly from the introduction.



Try not to repeat/copy and paste phrases from the assignment title/question – use your own words to phrase the key issues under consideration.



Don’t describe what the essay has said or overly signpost how it answers the question – keep the focus on the key issues at stake and their wider implications.

Summary

This brings us to the end of considering the ‘macro’ structure of a typical essay. The Christmas Cracker template works just as well with a 1000-word essay or exam paper as it does with something of 10,000 words, so irrespective of your word length, discipline or even the genre, the overall structure of your response should resemble the shape of a Christmas Cracker. Plan your essay along these lines and gradually move from the ‘big picture’ to narrow, new detail as a way of articulating and driving forward your argument. Use the sample template planner provided or download it from the companion website, then write your plan or even your sections into the template. In the next chapter, we will consider how to use the Christmas Cracker as an effective way of structuring your main body paragraphs so that you can sequence the various parts of your argument and your evidence in a logical and compelling manner, but for now, keep in mind the following points:

- Structure your essay in a logical, systematic manner that goes from solid foundations to increasing levels of sophistication.
- Make your introductions effective by moving from the ‘big picture’ to specific detail. End the introduction with a clear and compelling thesis statement which directs and articulates an argument (which clearly responds to the assignment task/question).
- In the main body of your essays, move from the given to the new, from the foundations to detail, and from the general to the specific.

- For comparison essays, try to use the point-by-point/thematic structure as this allows you to EVALUATE and SYNTHESISE the arguments/points in a logical manner while avoiding repetition and labouring the ideas.
- Make your conclusions count – don't simply repeat/summarise what you have said in the essay.

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Visualising effective paragraphs

Presenting your point and supporting evidence

My school career was dismal. I had a very hyperactive mind, so my focus was just not there. My mind just tended to wander . . . My mind is very visual: I can see anything in pictures, and I always visualize things . . . It's how I'm wired. So, whatever you talk about, I'll see pictures in my head.

(Glenn Bailey, dyslexic entrepreneur)

Research and surveys with dyslexic students have shown that dyslexics like and need to see the ‘big picture’, yet this can easily become obscured within paragraphs given the complexity and nuances of academic arguments. Competing or interrelated ideas can often seem equally important and inseparable, and therefore difficult to treat systematically. This is a challenge for most students, but given that dyslexics often excel at multidimensional thinking it can be doubly difficult to see how points can be separated and then re-sequenced into a whole that makes logical sense. Below is an example of a paragraph that illustrates well how the sequence of ideas and main thread of an argument can become lost amid a haze of detail:



With the onset of recession in the early 1970s, most Western European states abandoned their ‘open door’ immigration policies of the post-war reconstruction and economic boom period and resorted to tough and restrictive immigration controls. The 1951 Convention does not set out an unconditional ‘right to asylum’ because states would not have agreed this extent of loss of sovereignty over the asylum issue and thus their borders. At that time, asylum-seekers were, coincidentally, starting to arrive at unprecedented levels and continued to do so in the following decades. However, states cannot simply deport those seeking refuge within their territory without due process, to ensure that refusal of protection and deportation do not violate the Convention’s *non-refoulement* principle. Asylum-seekers are thus safeguarded from unsafe deportation. The Convention became important for the prospects of refugees to Western Europe when asylum applications made in Western Europe increased from 104,000 in 1984 to 692,000 in 1992, thereafter declining, only to rise to 350,000 in 1998 and about 400,000 in 1999. Western European states, therefore, were eager to keep them, just like other immigrants, out.

There are clearly some good ideas here, but they are organised in an incoherent manner. Particular problems and issues include:

- The statistics are useful, but they needed to have been cited earlier in order to introduce, contextualise and prove the scale of the issue.
- The overall ‘importance’ of the 1951 Convention is mentioned towards the end of the paragraph – wouldn’t it have been more logical to outline this nearer the beginning?
- There are too many issues being dealt with here. There is contextual detail concerning the early 1970s, a rather simplistic and problematic conflation of the issues associated with immigration and asylum seeking, and an outline of the principles of the 1951 Convention and its significance for refugees. The student is clearly trying to do too much and has become confused. This has led to a rather disjointed paragraph in which the ideas are presented not only in an illogical order, but there are simply too many of them. It would have been better to have articulated these ideas in separate paragraphs, each with its own argument builds upon the ideas expressed in those which precede it.

What is a paragraph?

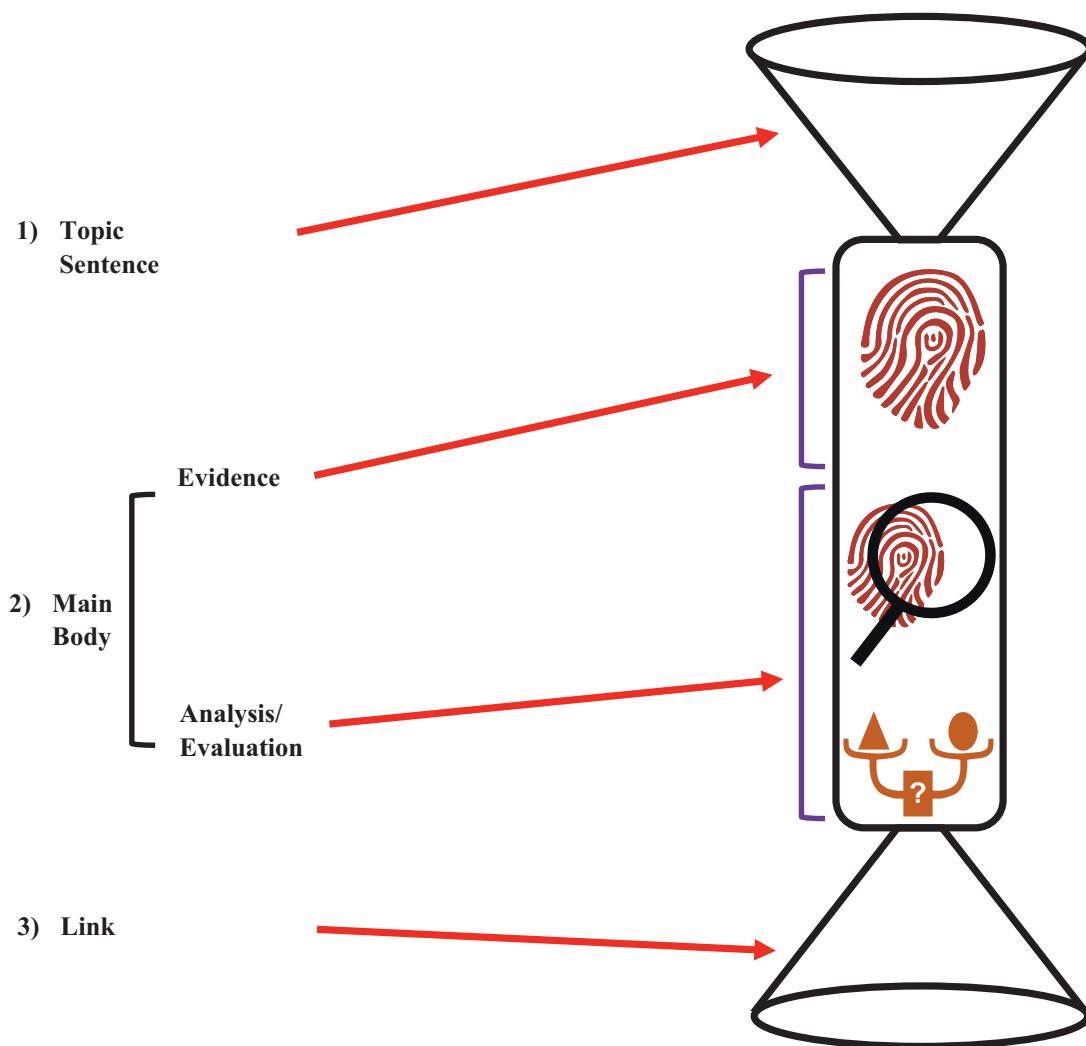
Before we consider how visualising a paragraph can help, it’s worth going back to basics. Here are some overriding principles that are worth remembering:

- A paragraph is an examination or discussion of ONE idea, and ONE idea only. Adherence to this principle is vital if you are to present your ideas in a logical, sequential manner, and it is a helpful way of translating the bullet point essay plans we considered in the last chapter onto the paragraph structure.
- The one idea per paragraph principle is also essential if you are to maintain clarity throughout a discussion which, in academic writing, often contains discrete, yet complex and interrelated (or even overlapping) ideas. This is often where dyslexic students tend to get a little ‘lost’.
- There is no hard and fast rule as to how long/short a paragraph can be. The main thing to remember is that it examines and presents an argument about ONE key point relating to your assignment task/question.
- Paragraphs should be clearly visible on the page. Indent the first line of your paragraphs and perhaps even add an extra space so that both you and your marker can very clearly see where paragraphs begin and end.

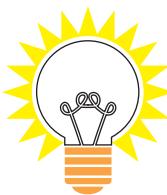
Even if the one point per paragraph rule is known, in attempting to execute the task (particularly in exam conditions), dyslexics often produce disjointed (yet highly perceptive) essays at best or become frustrated and unproductive at worst. Added to this problem is the additional challenge of aligning the topic with a critically perceptive ARGUMENT (which is the next parameter governing the construction of paragraphs). In most academic paragraphs, you need to express an argument which centres around a single topic/idea. Given these competing demands on your sequencing abilities, how can you ensure that you stay on track and not veer off on tangents? How can you harness the power of your multidimensional thinking and preference for seeing the ‘big picture’ in order to create a really effective academic paragraph which presents a logical sequence of ideas AND an argument?

'Big picture' thinking

The most helpful way of thinking about a paragraph is to visualise it in a 'big picture' format in the same way as we did in respect of structuring the entire essay. In essence, the ideas and grammatical units contained within an ideal paragraph, like the essay as a whole, should resemble an upturned Christmas Cracker. Indeed, like an essay, a paragraph ought to have three main components, and each is shaped specifically to indicate what you need to be saying and when so as to help you structure your thoughts in a coherent, sequential and logical manner. The three main components can be visualised like this:



Some of you may already have come across a version of this that is frequently taught at 'A' level, and is often referred to as the 'PEAL' (point, evidence, analysis, link), 'PEEL' (point, evidence, evaluation, link) or 'PEA' (point, evidence, analysis) framework. Whichever way you prefer to think of it, or whichever acronym you choose, all academic paragraphs can be visualised as an upturned Christmas Cracker, the shape of which has a direct and meaningful correlation with the PURPOSE of each component. In what follows we take each of these components in turn to see how they can be constructed and how they contribute to the forward momentum/sequence of ideas.

REMEMBER

For dyslexics, disjointed paragraphs mostly derive from your difficulties with sequencing rather than the complexity of the subject or any lack of intelligence, so don't be deterred and never doubt yourself!

The topic sentence

The topic sentence is the first sentence of each paragraph and is a crucial tool to use if you want to structure your essay in a logical manner. The topic sentence provides direction and a framework for ordering and signposting the ideas to both yourself and the reader. This is because it introduces new ideas and aligns those ideas with the overall aims of the argument, the assignment task and what has been discussed previously. Indeed, academic writing stylists such as Joseph M. Williams see the topic sentence as a vital because it aligns the paragraph with the 'basic principle of clarity' (2007, p.207), not least because, as Steven Pinker has noted, 'human comprehension demands topic before comment and given before new' (2015, p.131). To achieve this, as well as providing an interesting 'hook' that draws your reader in, the topic sentence should contain two core ingredients:

- 1) the topic
- 2) a provable opinion (or argument)

So, looking back at the first sentence of this paragraph, we can see those two ingredients quite clearly:

The topic sentence is the first sentence of each paragraph and is a vital tool to use if you want to structure your essay in a logical manner.

The red here indicates the topic under consideration, namely topic sentences. The second part of the sentence (in green) tells you what the argument is (in this case the idea that a topic sentence should form the first sentence of each paragraph if you want to present ideas in a logical manner). Academic topic sentences tend to be more sophisticated in terms of articulating an argument, but the basic formulation is the same for all types of topic sentences.

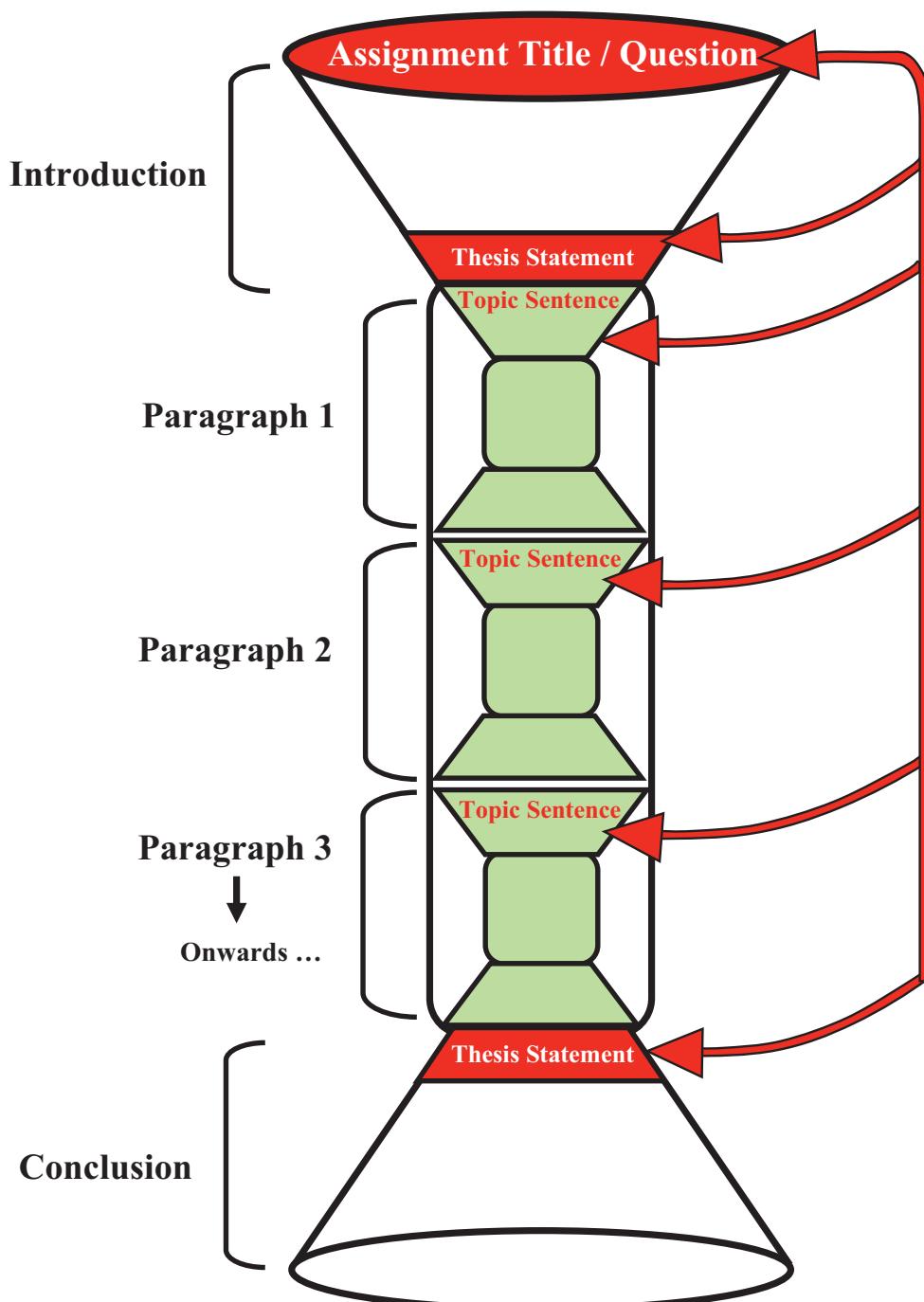
Common problems

Lots of students get their topic sentence wrong because they either have:

- a topic and no provable opinion, or
- a provable opinion and no topic.

In both cases this means that the reader/marker has no immediate sense of what the paragraph is going to be about and no sense of how, or even if the student is answering the question/assignment task. The reason that the marker needs to be able to identify an argument is so they can see how what you are saying is answering the question/assignment task. Obviously, every paragraph ought to be directly contributing to answering the question and gaining marks,

so it needs to be clear how it does this. In other words, each topic sentence ought to be addressing some aspect of the thesis statement, which in turn is answering and addressing the assignment question/task. All three aspects interlink and are mutually dependent upon each other in such a way that, taken together, they should enable you to construct a coherent, focused response to the task. The entire process, the ‘big picture’, can be visualised thus:



Without this interlinking of ideas/topics and arguments the essay is likely to wander off course, fail to address the question/assignment task and leave your reader/marker feeling confused. By visualising and mapping the ideas and arguments of your essay onto the ‘big picture’ Christmas Cracker structure from the outset, and by linking your topic sentences to your thesis statement and essay plan, you are much more likely to produce a coherent and logical essay that retains a clear focus.

Topic sentence activity

Take a look at the sample topic sentences below. Can you identify what the paragraph may be talking about and arguing from these topic sentences? Can you identify a topic and a provable opinion/argument in each one? Can you guess what the assignment question/title may have been about? Can you even identify the discipline?

- 1) The benefits to science are immense.
- 2) The first of these is atmosphere.
- 3) Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011) have provided recommendations on investing in law textbooks, formed from research they have conducted.
- 4) Research on law advisory services has existed for decades, yet none of it has adequately addressed the existence of online forums.
- 5) A particular difficulty in English criminal law is that many serious offences such as murder, manslaughter and conspiracy to defraud derive from common law rather than statutes.

The chances are that you can only identify a clear, unambiguous topic and provable opinion/argument in numbers four and five, because the others lack either a topic or an argument. Let us examine each in turn:

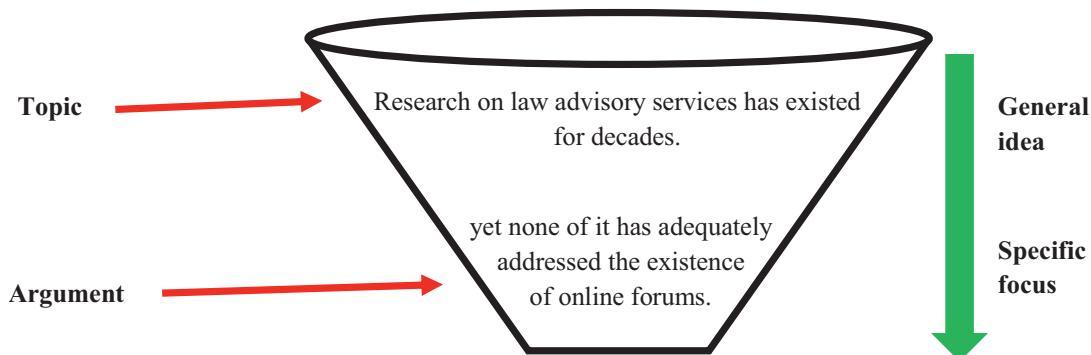
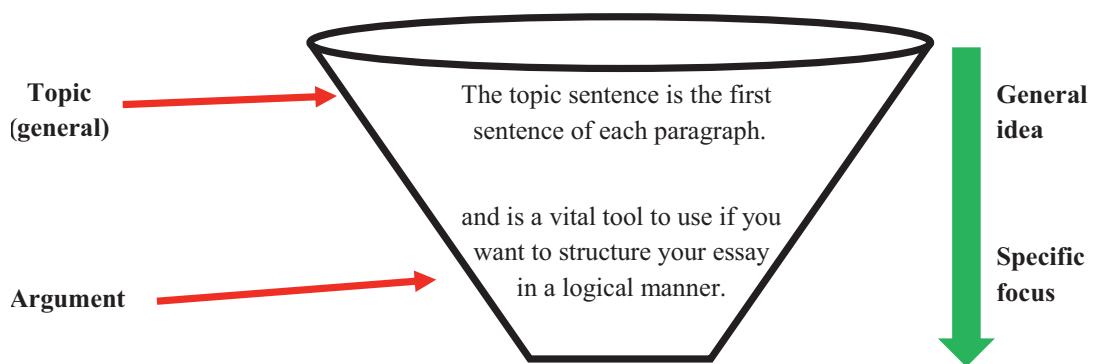
- 1) The sentence contains a provable opinion/argument but it is totally unclear what the topic is. The benefits to science of what, areimmense? 
- 2) This is no clearer as it too contains a provable opinion but no topic. Could you guess what this paragraph may have been about? Like number one, it actually comes from a student essay about spacecraft propulsion systems and this paragraph states why propellers are unsuitable (due to the lack of atmosphere). Could you see that in the topic sentence? Could you see how the student was constructing an argument in answer to a question about spacecraft propulsion systems? Probably not. 
- 3) This example contains a reasonably clear topic, namely the recommendations provided by Weinberg and Pehlivan, but there does not appear to be any form of argument about their research. Is it useful? Is it outdated? Is it biased? The sentence, by only articulating a topic, immediately indicates that the paragraph that follows will be descriptive rather than analytical, and as such is likely to score poorly when marked. 
- 4) The sentence contains a clear topic (research on law advisory services) and makes a clear claim that none of it has adequately addressed online forums, so this is an excellent example. 

- 5) This example also contains both a topic (English criminal law) and an argument – the student tries to claim that there is a ‘particular difficulty’ in so far as the law is based on common law rather than statutes, thereby opening up the possibility of disputed meanings. In terms of readability, however, this sentence lacks clarity since the provable opinion is placed before the topic. The sentence would be more logical, readable and clear if the topic to provable opinion/argument sequence was observed. In other words, a better version of the sentence would be written thus:

English criminal law represents a particular difficulty since many serious offences such as murder, manslaughter and conspiracy to defraud derive from common law rather than statutes.



The reason that topic sentences are clearer when observing the topic to provable opinion/argument sequence is that the reader is led, much like in the introduction, from the general to the specific, from the given information to the new (it thus has ‘communicative dynamism’). Indeed, it provides the reader with a ‘hook’ that draws them in and captures their interest. It is for this reason that the topic sentence, again like the introduction, is best conceived as being triangular (as the handle for the Christmas Cracker), with the general point at the beginning of the sentence (as is represented by the broad, general, wide opening at the top), followed by a specific argument and detail (as is represented by the much narrower, focused section of the handle). A ‘big picture’ representation of a couple of the topic sentence examples highlighted earlier, then, can be visualised and mapped onto the Cracker as follows:



Integrating evidence

After outlining your topic and argument in the topic sentence, the next task is to integrate some evidence that will ultimately prove your argument. As we have already seen, evidence can take the form of data, statistics and formulae, but the most frequently used types of evidence come in the form of quotation, summaries, or paraphrasing.

Quotations, summarising and paraphrasing

Quotations



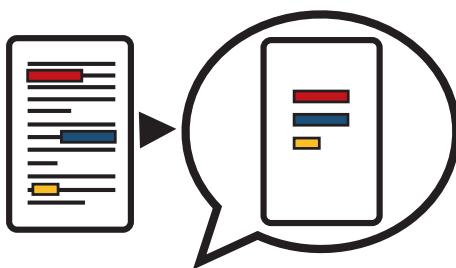
Quotations are an effective way of proving your point, particularly in disciplines and arguments where the meaning of words is of crucial importance. Meaning can be ambiguous, contentious, highly disputed or pivotal for providing precise understanding, particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences. An example of this is the meaning of the word ‘epidemic’. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as meaning ‘a large number of cases of a particular disease happening at the same time in a particular community’, but it can also mean ‘a sudden increase in how often something bad happens’. At first

glance these definitions appear fairly uncontroversial, but like most things studied at university they are open to interpretation and dispute. For example, what does ‘sudden increase’ actually mean? Can a number be put upon it? Clearly not. Similarly, what constitutes ‘a large number of cases’? Surely this is entirely relative? Ambiguity also arises with the terms ‘same time’ and ‘particular community’. If a writer uses one of these terms in a specific way, and you are interrogating or disputing their use of the term, you would need to quote from them to demonstrate precisely how and where their argument/use of the term is flawed or legitimate. Similarly, if your argument hinges upon what was said (in a novel, play, law court, interview or political speech for example), then the passage or at least extracts from it need to be quoted and integrated into the analysis. More general ideas or arguments, however, do not need to be quoted in detail. For instance, if we return to the law advisory services example I gave earlier, Jones’s research, which revealed that 53 per cent of people seeking legal advice for employment related issues say they now acquire advice via the internet, does not need to be quoted. Rather, it can be summarised, as meaning does not hinge upon a precise and perhaps disputed use of language or terminology.

TIPS

-  Remember, long quotations will eat into your word count without necessarily gaining you marks so it’s often preferable to either summarise or paraphrase.
-  For quotations that exceed two lines, indent the entire quote (usually 1.2cm from the left margin).
-  Always reference the quotation using the appropriate referencing conventions.

Summarising



Summarising involves taking the main ideas from a text and re-writing them in your own words. Crucially, however, the summary needs to be significantly shorter than the original and gives merely an overview of the topic area. In the case of Jones mentioned earlier, then, the headline or summary of his/her research is that 53 per cent of people seeking legal advice for employment related

issues say they now acquire advice via the internet. There is undoubtedly a great deal more detail behind this summary, including a sophisticated research methodology, rationale, justification for the research and a thorough description of its implications in relation to the discipline, government policy and socio-economic considerations. The original research probably took many years to complete, yet for the purposes of your essay and argument, it is sufficient just to cite the main headline – any extra detail would be unnecessary and would not generate marks. Here's some guidance on how to identify the main headlines from a source:

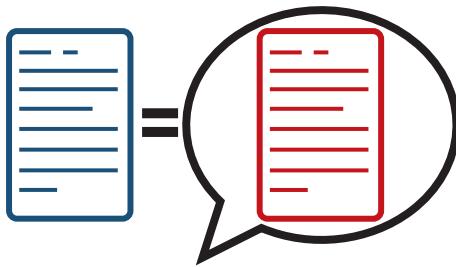
- Highlight the main ideas in the text by focusing upon crucial data, formula, dates and word use. Make use of the index, contents pages, subheadings, topic sentences and key verbs/terminology to help you locate these.
- Extract the main idea(s) and write them on a separate piece of paper to form a list (if required).
- Put the list into a logical order (if required).
- Write the summary in your own words rather than those of the original author (although it is fine to quote some words or phrases if needed).
- Check that your summary/headline points accurately reflect the main ideas of the source.
- Ensure that you reference using the correct referencing style.

TIP



Summarising is a little like reducing the main ideas into key headlines, so pretend you are a journalist – how would you write a headline for what you have just read?

Paraphrasing



Paraphrasing is somewhat more complex than summarising and does not involve identifying and pulling out the main headlines from the original. Rather, paraphrasing is re-writing the original in your own words, changing the text so that it is dissimilar to the original yet retains all the meaning. Paraphrasing thus allows you to explore and interrogate

individual ideas at a deeper level. Thus, you can summarise a journal article or even a monograph, but it would be impossible to paraphrase such material. Paraphrasing is best used, then, for smaller sections of writing where detail rather than the wider picture is needed. Here's some guidance for successful paraphrasing:

- Having identified the passage needing to be paraphrased, re-read it several times to ensure you understand the meaning.
- Extract and write down the meaning of each sentence and think about it in isolation.
- Articulate each idea/sentence in your own words (you may wish to use a Thesaurus to help you).
- Think about how you could change the structure of the ideas presented in the original – you could restructure it so as to highlight an idea that you are particularly interested in drawing to the marker's attention.
- Draft, re-draft and edit.
- Compare alongside the original and ensure that you haven't inadvertently changed the meaning.
- Compare with the original to ensure that the vocabulary has been changed.
- Ensure that you reference using the correct referencing style.



Students often ask, if paraphrasing is merely putting an original source into your own words, without necessarily reducing the word length, why not just quote it? This can seem a little confusing. However, the extensive use of quotations is undesirable for two reasons:

- 1) Direct quotations do not allow you to demonstrate that you have understood what is being said. Paraphrasing, however, illustrates your ability to understand, interpret, apply and analyse the original source and demonstrate its importance for your argument/discussion by selecting, prioritising and highlighting key points.
- 2) Direct quotations are included in your word count; using too many limits your personal written contribution and this will be reflected in your marks.

Paraphrasing uses YOUR OWN words; this shows your marker that you have understood and correctly interpreted what you have read. As such it is seen by lecturers as a higher skill than simply quoting.

Example of summarising/paraphrasing

Let's see how a passage about the punishment of crime and the motivations behind criminal activity could be summarised and paraphrased.

Original passage

Lawyers should resist the desire to find some single concept or value that will capture the essence or the essential characteristic in virtue of which crimes are properly punished . . . in favour of a pluralism that recognises a diversity of reasons for criminalisation, matching the diversity of kinds of wrongdoing which can legitimately be the criminal lawyer's business.

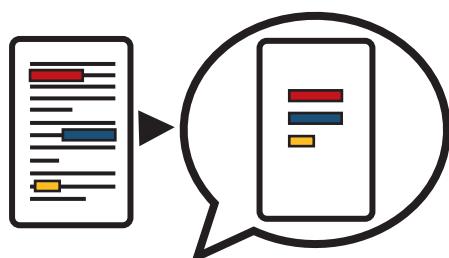
(Duff, 2007, p.139) 57 words

This passage, however interesting it may be, is a little too long to be quoted in its entirety, so summarising it would be a sensible option. The key ideas here, the headlines, can be highlighted thus:

Lawyers should resist the desire to find some **single concept** or value that will capture the essence or the essential characteristic in virtue of which **crimes** are **properly punished** . . . in favour of a **pluralism** that recognises a **diversity of reasons for criminalisation**, matching the diversity of kinds of wrongdoing which can legitimately be the criminal lawyer's business.

- 1) Lawyers
- 2) Single concept
- 3) Crimes
- 4) Punishment
- 5) Pluralism
- 6) Diversity of reasons for criminalisation

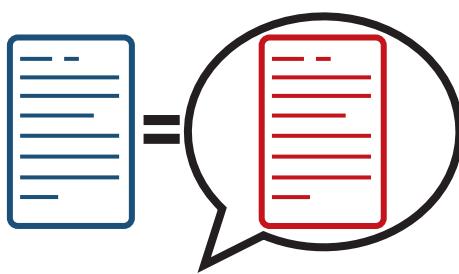
These ideas, if expressed in this order, appear a little laboured and repetitive, mainly because we move from a general idea (lawyers) to a specific idea (single concept of crime and punishment), then general (pluralism) to another general idea (diversity of reasons for criminalisation). Furthermore, the duplication of the issues relating to crime can be eliminated by restricting it to only one mention (a headline), and the issue of 'proper punishment' is a little too detailed and specific for a summary aiming to highlight merely the main message. The main ideas, then, can be re-ordered and summarised in a way that moves from the general to the specific in a more succinct manner. For example:



Lawyers ought to consider multiple reasons for criminality rather than searching for an elusive single definition.

(Duff, 2007, p.139) 16 words

A paraphrase of the above passage, meanwhile, would seek to reword and express all the key ideas Duff mentions. Again, the ideas could be restructured so as to articulate the core message more obviously and purposefully (thus showing initiative and analysis/interpretation skills). A paraphrased version of Duff's passage, then, could look like this:



Criminal lawyers ought to avoid searching for an overarching definition of criminality that encapsulates the core concepts of transgression, wrongdoing and its appropriate reprimand. Rather, they ought to favour a multiplicity of ideas that more accurately reflects the disparate range of crimes and their many underlying motivations.

(Duff, 2007, p.139) 47 words

Note here that the original passage has been converted into two distinct sentences to avoid any unnecessary duplication. Additionally, the structure of the ideas has again been adjusted so as to get to the main point more quickly, and the vocabulary has been changed by deploying synonyms ('diversity of kinds of wrongdoing' has become 'disparate range of crimes' and 'properly punished' has become 'appropriate reprimand'). There has also been a saving of ten words, which frees up room for words to be used for the analysis and evaluation, which is more productive in terms of mark generation.

TIP

 The best way of incorporating evidence is to use a mix of quotation, summarising and paraphrasing. This allows you to demonstrate three discrete skills.

Which technique you use for integrating your evidence is obviously entirely dependent upon what you wish to achieve, but to summarise (forgive the pun), the following pro and con checklist can help you decide which to use and where:

	Pros:	Cons:
Quotation:	<p>Proves beyond doubt the original words.</p> <p>Great for accuracy/clarity where meaning centres around a scholar's interpretation or where meaning is disputed.</p>	<p>Doesn't show originality or interpretation.</p> <p>Doesn't necessarily show that you've correctly understood the meaning/significance of the quote.</p> <p>Uses valuable words that are not your OWN, so not marked as highly.</p>
Summarising:	<p>Short, gets to the point quickly.</p> <p>Shows you've understood what's been said.</p> <p>Fairly easy to synthesise with other ideas/sources.</p> <p>Shows that you can select, prioritise and evaluate the relative importance/significance of key ideas.</p>	<p>Important information can be accidentally omitted.</p> <p>Meaning can be inadvertently changed.</p> <p>Can appear a little superficial or reductive.</p>
Paraphrasing:	<p>Shows full understanding of the original text, thus demonstrating sound interpretation skills.</p> <p>Uses your own words so can be marked.</p> <p>Can show your ability to prioritise and select key ideas.</p>	<p>Meaning can be inadvertently changed.</p> <p>Not as easy to synthesise with other sources as it requires deeper explanation.</p>

Integrating evidence

The evidence, whether in the form of a quotation, summary or paraphrase, needs to be introduced and integrated so that the paragraph presents a smooth, logical sequence and progression of ideas. A frequent problem in student writing is the tendency to ‘parachute’ quotations and evidence into the paragraph and assume that it a) contextualises itself, and b) does the work of proving the argument without further explanation.

Parachuting

Instances of ‘parachuting’ can take several forms. Some students place the evidence where the topic sentence ought to be and then proceed to examine and discuss it without it being clear what the evidence is being used for. Others neglect to contextualise or indicate the significance of their evidence, so it remains unclear who said it, when, and what its relevance to the argument really is. For example, let us take the following sample cited earlier from law. An instance of ‘parachuting’ might look like this:



Research on law advisory services has existed for decades, yet none of it has adequately addressed the existence of online forums. Fifty-three per cent of people now say they seek advice via the internet, so law advisory services are no longer as popular.



The evidence here is ‘parachuted’ into the paragraph in the sense that the statistic is not contextualised. Who was questioned in order to get this figure? Where were they questioned? When were they questioned? What is meant by ‘now’? Who conducted the research? And what is its relevance to the longstanding existence of ‘research on law advisory services’? None of these issues are introduced or explained and it is unclear how the evidence supports the argument contained within the topic sentence. In other words, the evidence needs the context and relevance briefly signposting to the reader. A better, more integrated example might look like this:



Research on law advisory services has existed for decades, yet none of it has adequately addressed the existence of online forums. Online modes of seeking advice are becoming increasingly popular, and as Jones (2015) has demonstrated, 53 per cent of people seeking legal advice for employment related issues say they acquire advice via the internet following recent cutbacks in face-to-face provision and the subsequent lack of accessibility.

This example is undoubtedly longer, but gives a more comprehensive account of the significance of the data, who said it, what it relates to, and what caused it. This sets the background before the writer explains its implications for the research. Let us look at another example from literature, which here shows some of the perils associated with long quotations:



Iago uses the soliloquy as a dramatic technique to engage the audience when thinking about his secret plot against Othello:

‘... let me see now;
To get his place and to plume up my will
In double knavery. How? How? Let’s see . . .
I have it! It is engendered.’



The soliloquy thus reveals to the audience his true intentions.

Notice here that the student has ‘parachuted’ the quotation into the paragraph without contextualising it. Where in the play does this occur and what is its significance for the plot? Crucially, they also assume that the quotation has done the important, mark generating work of analysis for them. A better version of how this evidence could be introduced and contextualised might look like this:



Iago uses the soliloquy as a dramatic technique to engage the audience when thinking about his secret plot against Othello. For example, in Act 1 Scene 3, Iago turns to the audience for the first time and carefully delineates and shares his active thought process by pondering ‘let me see now; to get his place and plume up my will in double knavery. How? How? Let’s see’. The soliloquy thus reveals to the audience his true intentions.

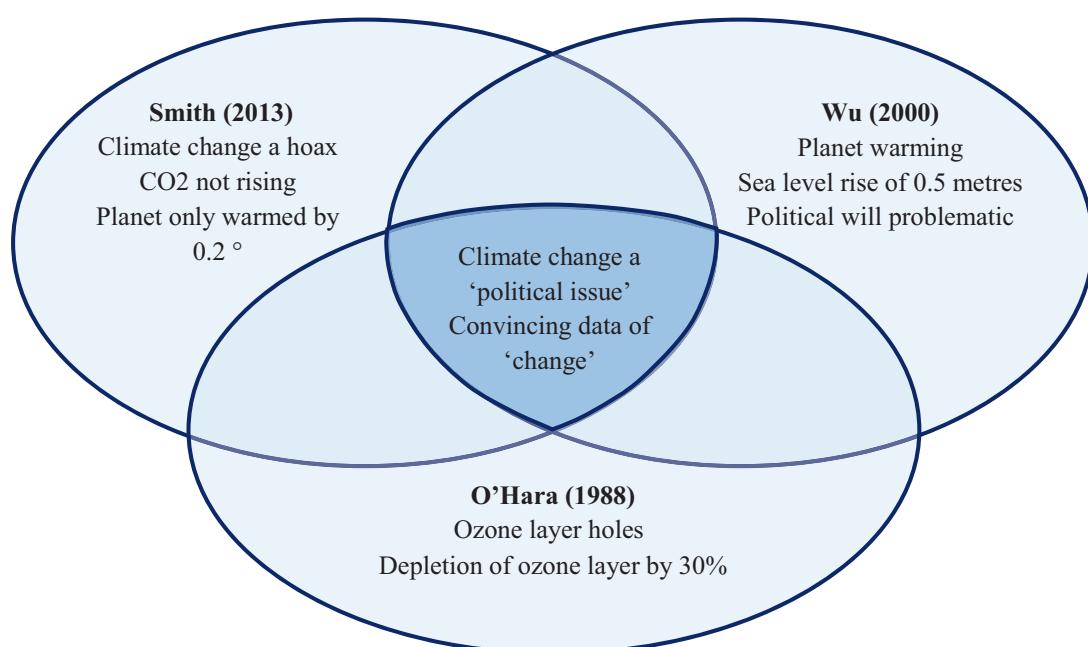
Notice that this example does not waste words by quoting extensively (20 quoted words embedded into the sentence as opposed to 27 which appear somewhat in isolation). What is more, the student has introduced the significance of the soliloquy (namely that it is Iago’s first direct communication with the audience) and its location within the play. By introducing the quote as exemplifying an ‘active thought process’ the student has drawn attention to the idea that the soliloquy is an effective, evolving and ‘live’ method for sharing a secret plot with the audience, thus signposting the detailed analysis and explanations which are to follow.

Synthesising evidence from multiple sources

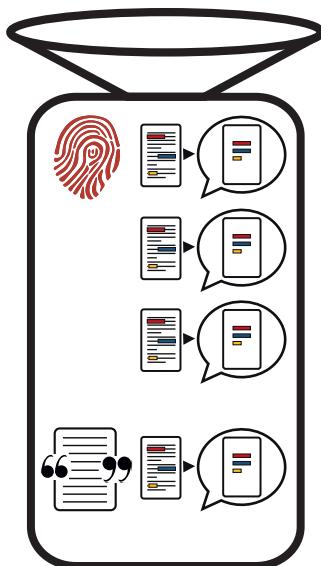
Often you will need to introduce and incorporate evidence from multiple sources in your paragraphs to demonstrate your thorough knowledge of the subject, your ability to synthesise information, and your engagement with key debates in the field. The key here is to sift through the material to identify points of similarity and contrast and then prioritise and select which are the most relevant and important for your argument. One way of doing this is to use a ‘synthesis grid’, which will enable you to compare and contrast sources and map the key ideas. For example:

	Source 1: (Smith, 2013)	Source 2: (Wu, 2000)	Source 3: (O'Hara, 1988)
Main argument:	Climate change a hoax	Planet is warming	Holes in ozone layer
Key points/quotes/ evidence:	CO2 not rising Planet only warmed by 0.2 degrees	Sea level rise of 0.5 metres CO2 up by 40ppm Political will problematic	Depletion of ozone layer by 30%
Similarities:	All agree that climate change is a 'political issue'. Sources 2 and 3 both agree on climate change.		
Differences:	Source 1 claims that climate change is a hoax. Sources 2 and 3 offer different types of effects (sea levels and ozone). Source 3 is out of date. Source 2 takes a political stance.		

If you find the synthesis grid too confusing, try what's known as a Venn diagram. This can be a very effective tool for mapping and seeing ideas and how they interconnect, overlap or agree:



The additional challenge with synthesising sources, however, is writing them up – particularly in respect of deciding upon a logical and coherent structure. Again, visualising the paragraph and sequence of ideas as a Christmas Cracker can help. Let's take the following paragraph from a business studies essay to see how the sources have been synthesised, structured and managed:

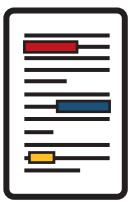
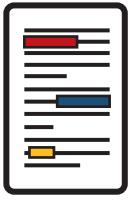
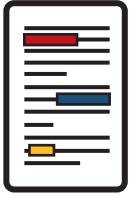
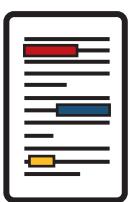


Although somewhat contentious, it is possible that arranging workforces into teams may lead to high levels of employee performance. It has been claimed that when an individual worker is positioned in a team, they can draw on the knowledge and skills of their peers and thus maximise their ability to function effectively (Fenwick 2006; Landri 2014). Organising a workforce into teams may also encourage workers to transcend their own self-interest and prioritise the collective good of the organisation (Guzzo and Ditson, 2012). Moreover, as Polanyi (2010) argues, if team members are able to participate in joint decision-making, then task motivation may increase. However, Hockman (1990) suggests that a high level of employee performance is 'not inevitable' when a workforce is organised into teams. He claims that there is a tendency to 'romanticise' the idea of the team and suggests that there is little empirical evidence to support the widespread belief that team-working is the most effective way of organising a workforce.

Key:

- Purple: Summary of two sources for first piece of supporting evidence.
- Green: Summary of source for second piece of supporting evidence.
- Orange: Summary of source for third piece of supporting evidence.
- Blue: Summary of source (with quotation) to introduce counterargument.

In this example, only the most important headlines or key ideas have been included (using good summarising skills). But they have been synthesised and incorporated in a manner that tells a story and outlines the background to the core issue of employee performance in teams and the degree to which the relationship between teamwork and performance is contentious. This sequence is vital as it lays the foundation for the student's own 'voice', argument and analysis that follows. Each source also has a specific function in laying the foundation for the contention expressed in the topic sentence as follows:

Source:	Quotation, summary or paraphrase:	Function:
Fenwick and Landri		Outlines the basic premise that it can be beneficial for individuals to work in a team as they can draw upon the skills of others, thereby maximising their own performance.
Guzzo and Ditsos		Builds upon the previous basic premise by outlining that teamwork can help people 'transcend self-interest'. The discussion is now beginning to get more detailed and specific.
Polanyi		Increases the level of detail and specificity by linking teamwork decision-making to motivation.
Hockman	 	Introduces a specific counterview to those expressed previously so as to introduce the idea of the issue being contentious. This provides a crucial platform from which the student can now develop their own specific argument and subject the sources to critical analysis and evaluation.

Paragraph body:
increasing levels
of focus and
specificity

By breaking down the structure of the above example of synthesis and mapping it onto a visual framework that indicates the transition from the 'big picture' to specific details or areas of contention, you can clearly see that the sequence of ideas is logical. Without this structure the synthesis is likely to appear somewhat random and haphazard and will not build a platform

from which you can develop your own argument and analysis. A lack of direction when synthesising evidence/ideas will also render it unclear in respect of how it is addressing the assignment task/question.

Checklist for successfully synthesising sources

- Extract from the sources all of the main ‘headlines’ that are relevant to YOUR argument and analysis (whether proving or disproving it) and identify points of similarity/contrast.
- Choose the most appropriate form of incorporating the evidence (quotation, summary or paraphrase). To show sophistication and gain higher marks, try to use a combination of these skills and techniques.
- Organise the ideas contained in your ‘headline’ details into a logical order depending on what suits your purpose (again a ‘synthesis grid’ can help with this). The most common ways of ordering this information is to tell a ‘story’ in one of the following ways:
 - 1) General ideas to specific detail
 - 2) Chronological (dates/developments in the field)
 - 3) Thematic
 - 4) Methodology types
 - 5) Trends
- The overriding aim of synthesising and presenting the sources is to build a platform from which you can develop YOUR argument and critical analysis, so keep that end goal constantly in mind when combining sources. Again, remember that it’s YOUR voice and argument the marker is looking for, not the voice and argument of others.

Presenting an argument and incorporating criticality

After you have incorporated your evidence, the next part of the paragraph ought to be devoted to analysis, argument and evaluation. This is the most productive part of the paragraph in terms of generating marks and answering the question/addressing the assignment task, so it’s important to get it right and devote plenty of time to it.

Analysis and evaluation versus description

It’s important to remember that descriptive writing aligns your work with the third and lower second class degree descriptors in the marking scheme. Some students (such as the one we will see below) do a superb job of describing the issues at stake and telling the story of what has happened so far. No matter how well this is done, however, you will never achieve excellent marks – you need to go beyond description and into the realms of analysis and evaluation. A lot of students I have seen over the years have often said that they thought they were doing analysis, and struggled to see the difference between what they had written and analysis/argument, so let’s have a look at some general rules and pointers, followed by some examples. In general, the differences between writing that is descriptive and that which is argumentative and analytical can be summarised as follows:

Descriptive writing:	Critical, analytical writing:
States what happened, describes developments, gives the story so far.	Identifies the significance of the issue and weighs up one piece of information against another while forging an argument. Considers and interrogates counterarguments/causes/perspectives.
Explains how to do something.	Argues a case according to the evidence while also interrogating the validity of that evidence.
States the link between things.	Shows, evaluates and interrogates the links (and validity of those links) between pieces of evidence and ideas.
Describes the facts.	Evaluates and critically interrogates the relevance, significance or validity of the facts while presenting an argument.

To demonstrate how this might look in a piece of writing, let's take a look at the following two examples:



Assignment task: Discuss the main factors responsible for the shift from Wilhelm Wundt's introspection method of psychological inquiry to behaviourism.

Functionalism was an approach brought about by William James (1842–1910) who was interested in the practical functions of the mind (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2009). James believed that it was more important to understand these functions than look at the mind's structure (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2009). James used the method of introspection as a research method and viewed it as the first and foremost method to use despite its limitation (James, 2015). However, James was heavily influenced by evolutionary psychology and its view on how survival relates to certain by evolutionary psychology and its view on how survival relates to certain 2009). Richards (1996) believed the early development of psychology was greatly influenced by James and that evolutionary theory was crucial in the formation of influenced by James and that evolutionary theory was crucial in the formation of the mind and the great deal of emphasis put on it by James led to a new area of study called comparative psychology (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2009). Comparative psychologists were interested in questions on cognitive abilities and behavioural traits of animals (McMillan and Sturdy, 2015). Edward Lee Thorndike (1874–1949) is an example of a psychologist who was interested in the cognitive abilities of different animal species (Brysbaert and Rastle, 2009). Through this link with evolutionary psychology and Darwin's theory of evolution, functionalism gave rise to behaviourism in the form of animal research to try and study the functions of the human mind and therefore human behaviour through observations.

This paragraph does a superb job of describing functionalism and describes a wide variety of developments that are supported through reference to an impressive range of literature. However, the essay only just scraped a mark of 60 (right at the bottom end of a 2:1). This is because:

- Instead of offering a brief definition of functionalism, the student charts the ‘story’ of its rising popularity.
- The student discusses and describes developments but there is no critical engagement or argument.
- Text in red** indicates particular areas where the marker might ask – so what? Why does this matter?
- The student has assumed that the examples and evidence proves the point being made. He/she has supplied lots of evidence but there is no sense of how, why or even if these were ‘the main factors’ being asked for, which are the most important, or why they were ‘responsible’.

Let’s now compare this extract with the one below:



Assignment task: To what extent can it be argued that music is effective in facilitating the negotiation of group and individual identities?

Commercial success for some Roma groups in the West in the last 30 years has been double-edged in terms of identity creation and agency. The growing market for world music has supported the commercialisation of Roma music, but has not necessarily facilitated identity negotiation. Their music has become another product marketed into the mainstream, with limited agency for musicians. In some cases, this encourages stereotyping; in others, individual musicians have become successful abroad rather than in their native countries (Szeman, 2009). Popular history, which has recently emphasised Roma links to India, has provided an exotic backstory for some Roma groups, particularly when coupled with Turkish-inspired motifs (Silverman, 1996). This has been commercially successful, and some musicians such as Florica have made a positive choice in favour of hybridisation. However, this can involve imposed rather than self-created identities (Jones, 2008). Conscious boundary narratives, emphasising the ‘other’, have also been imposed on Roma groups for commercial purposes, extending the fashion for Western travellers to ‘discover’ gypsy music, which began in the eighteenth century. For example, Taraf de Haidouks, one of the most popular gypsy ensembles in the West, is often presented through such a discovery narrative, although they came from Clejani, a village only 30km outside Bucharest (Szeman, 2009). A particularly controversial case, meanwhile, is the manele music of the Romanian Roma, which features Eastern elements and lyrics focusing on money, cars and women (Szeman, 2009). This has clearly diluted authenticity. It has also involved deliberate construction of the ‘other’ and Orientalisation, and an imposed rather than self-created identity for the musicians. Sell believes that in such music a real Roma identity is replaced by one that suits Western constructions (2007). The extent to which Roma musicians have real agency, then, varies, as in some cases they are complicit in such negotiations as it provides a legitimate living. However, it is strongly arguable that such positive effects are confined to particular musicians, with no broader benefit for other Roma or their sense either individual or collective identity.

As you can see here, the student does not waste time telling the ‘story’ of ‘commercial success’, but after a brief definition/explanation immediately gets to work on analysing its significance for the question/issue under consideration. The paragraph has a sound topic sentence, offers a

brief context, and the student addresses the ‘so what?’ questions that the marker might have, and were in abundance in the previous example. Like many academic topics, the matter is highly debatable and contested, and the student does justice to this by briefly introducing and summarising alternative perspectives. However, rather than getting bogged down in descriptive detail, the student evaluates their relevance and usefulness for the issue under consideration and drives forward the argument that Roma success in music is ‘double-edged’ for issues of identity. The final sentence finishes the evaluation and returns to the question, arguing that the core issue of identity creation is unclear, disputed and not applicable to all. All in all, this essay is much more focused, far more critical/evaluative and perceptive, and would likely receive a very good mark.

Introducing criticality

In tackling the analysis and evaluation section of the paragraph, you need to draw upon the critical thinking skills covered in Chapter 3 in order to fully interrogate the evidence in a manner which proves and demonstrates the validity of your argument. This takes practice, perception (the latter of which dyslexics tend to have in abundance), and subject knowledge – all of which will result in higher marks. But students often wonder how to introduce criticality into their writing in the first place, even when they have spotted opportunities for analysis. Some students are wary of being too bold, while others go to the opposite extreme and offer sweeping, almost arrogant dismissals of the arguments of others. The key is to strike a balance and ensure that you base your critiques and evaluations on evidence and sound, informed reasoning rather than resorting to the kinds of fallacies we considered earlier.

There are numerous ways of introducing criticality and there are a range of books and online resources available that provide templates and models, although the best is Luiz Otávio Barros’s *The Only Academic Phrasebook You’ll Ever Need* (2016). We will look at advanced techniques concerning how to structure and compose analytical sentences in the following chapter, but for now let us concentrate on the ‘big picture’ and the overall strategies you can use for being critical. These broadly fall into the following categories:

1) Attack the specifics

In this approach, you directly challenge the core methodology, results, facts or arguments of others. As such it is the most specific and creditable form of introducing critical analysis. For example:

- This methodology is flawed owing to the inclusion of . . .
- Smith’s account fails to resolve the contradiction between . . .

2) Describe the criticisms of others

Although this approach is not using your voice (and as such is less creditable), by highlighting the criticisms that others have made you demonstrate your awareness of the field, that you have researched the topic thoroughly, and that you are aware of counterarguments and problems with the key issues at stake. Some ways in which you can introduce alternative perspectives might look like this:

- Williams (2009) has questioned the validity of Jones’s results on the basis that . . .
- This idea has come under fire from various quarters (Smith, 2009; Jones, 2012; Proudfoot, 2013) owing to . . .

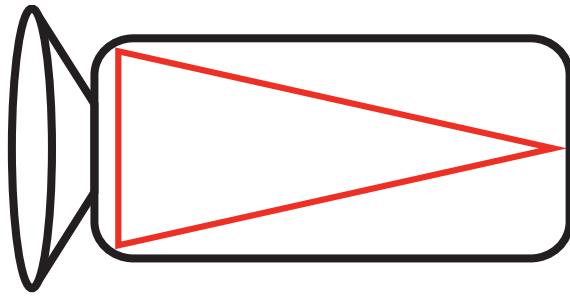
Incorporating criticality and evaluation – structuring your argument

Never assume that your evidence proves your argument. You need to show how it proves your points by subjecting it to analysis. When analysing and evaluating, it is important to do so in a logical, coherent manner. To do this, the analysis and evaluation section needs to follow on from, yet constantly refer back to the evidence (whether this be a single piece of evidence or a synthesis of several) in a manner which moves from the general to the specific.

For example:



Iago uses the soliloquy as a dramatic technique to engage the audience and share his thought processes when thinking about his secret plot against Othello. For example, in Act 1 Scene 3, Iago turns to the audience and carefully delineates his active thought process by pondering ‘let me see now; to get his place and plume up my will in double knavery. How? How? Let’s see’. Smith (2000) has contended that Shakespeare’s soliloquies are largely ineffective in ‘galvanising’ or including the audience (p.23), but the repetition here draws in the audience and focuses their attention on the fact that what he is thinking about is ‘live’, dynamic and inclusive. The repeated questions and shift from the personal declarative ‘let me’ to the more inclusive ‘let’s see’, not only indicates an uncertainty with which the audience can surely empathise but invites them to participate in and share in Iago’s devious scheming. Indeed, the exclamation ‘I have it!’ again reinforces the notion that the process is a live, unrehearsed, shared mental act rather than a premeditated speech. This is clearly a scenario Shakespeare invented to encourage us to ask to what extent we are troublingly implicated within the plot, and although the audience may not be ‘galvanised’, it is certainly intended to ‘include’ them, if only at the level of empathy with his decision-making process.

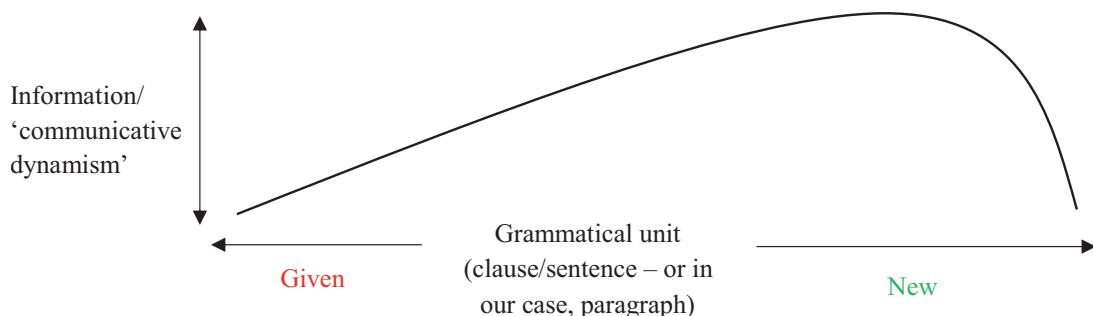


This example is analytical, challenges the opinion of a critic, and does not waste words by quoting extensively. Furthermore, rather than assuming that the reader can see ‘how’ the quotation proves the argument, the argument is proven through thorough discussion, dissection and analysis. As such, it is much more likely to gain high marks.

You can also see:

- 1) The gradual shift from the general to the specific, as is indicated by the red triangle within the Cracker on the right.
- 2) That the analysis moves from highlighting and analysing the significance of repetition (which is more general) to focusing in upon specific issues embedded within it (namely the way the language attempts to include the audience in his decision-making) in order to prove the central claim made by the topic sentence.
- 3) That the analysis also follows a roughly chronological order by ending with Iago's final exclamation 'I have it!' As such, the sequence of ideas is logical and compelling, and the reader/marker is led through the ideas, analysis and argument in a manner which builds in detail, specificity and depth and concludes with a brief evaluation of whether the audience is 'galvanised' or 'included'.

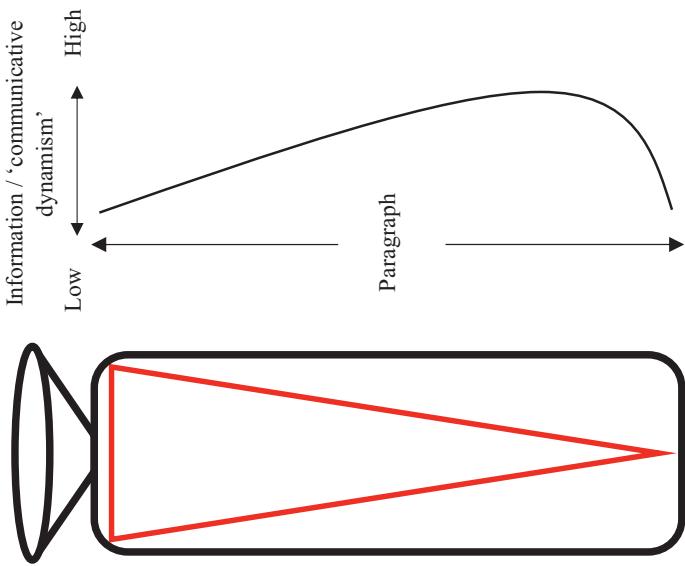
The sequence of ideas in the above example, however, also moves not only from the general to the specific, but from the given to the new. We saw in Chapter 4 how moving from the given to the new within the macrostructure of an essay can constitute what Bruce (1988) has called 'communicative dynamism', but we can also now begin to understand how the same rule applies within individual paragraphs. Bruce proposed that as you progress through a unit of communication (primarily sentences, to which we will return later), the energy or 'dynamism' of the communication steadily increases before decreasing towards the end – hence his 'wave model' of 'communicative dynamism':



We can see in the *Othello* example, then, that the discussion moves from:

- the 'given' (the evidence) to
- the 'new':
 - analysis,
 - interpretation
 - implications/evaluation.

In other words, the argument develops and evolves, becoming deeper and more specific as the paragraph progresses. Now let us return to the law essay from earlier to see how this all works over the course of an extract that incorporates multiple sources. The analysis of the evidence might look like this:



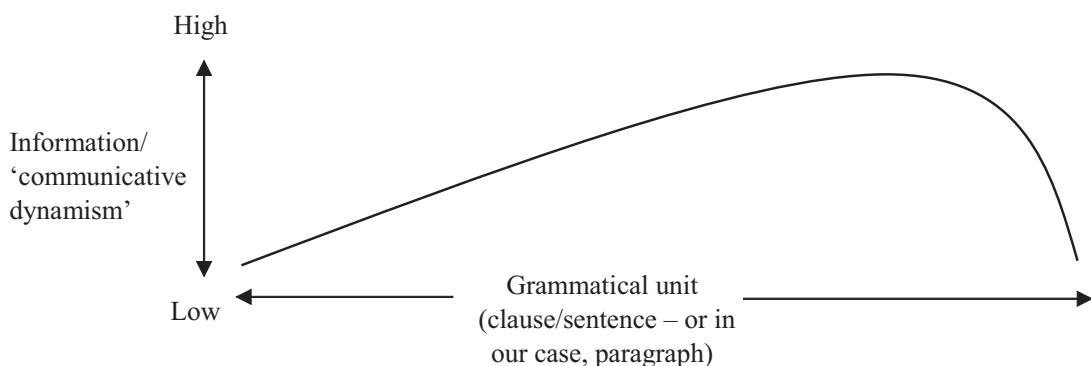
Research on law advisory services has existed for decades, yet none of it has adequately addressed the existence of online forums. Online modes of seeking advice are becoming increasingly popular, and as Jones (2015) has demonstrated, 53 per cent of people seeking legal advice for employment related issues say they acquire advice via the internet following recent cutbacks in face-to-face provision. But none of the most prominent recent examinations of law advisory services (Smith, 2014; Evans, 2013 and Whittaker, 2013) have examined online forums, and have chosen instead to focus upon issues relating to gender, disability and government austerity measures. Evans did consider the implications of what he terms 'the Facebook generation' (p.38), but given that his sample size was only 98 participants, his conclusion that online forums do not present a threat to face-to-face provision is to be treated with caution. Indeed, the research is now significantly out of date given recent changes in government policies, all of which have resulted in further cutbacks to law services, and his focus upon issues pertaining to land law is too restrictive to give us any real sense of the overall picture concerning legal online forums. As a consequence, research on law advisory services needs to shift its attention to online mediums if it is to understand today's service implications.



Again, note here:

- 1) The gradual transition in the analysis from the general to the specific, from the given to the new (even though the student is discussing several pieces of literature) and as such the sequence of ideas is clear and logical.
- 2) Following the evidence, the student analyses and evaluates the general picture of current knowledge by stating that none of the recent studies have examined online forums. The student then discusses which issues academic studies have focused upon instead and cites specific research that relates to the issue in question before providing a critique of their findings and a justification for their unsuitability.

Indeed, if we count the number of words in each sentence of the above paragraphs we can clearly see how this increased depth and the transition from the given to the new in the argument develops and can be mapped onto both sentence length (complexity) and 'dynamism'/the 'wave model':



Words per sentence	Topic sentence:	Evidence:	Analysis/interpretation/development of argument	Evaluation/implications:
Shakespeare paragraph extract:	25	39	107	49
Law paragraph extract:	21	71	93	24

In both cases, the argument (with its accompanying depth/complexity) builds in intensity before declining again towards the end in the form of a brief sentence explaining or evaluating the implications/significance of what has been said (in relation to the topic sentence, the thesis statement and the assignment task/question). The sentences that drive forwards the argument (labelled above as ‘analysis/interpretation/development of argument’), take up the most amount of words and this is because there is an increase in what Kamler and Thomson have called ‘a layering of meaning’. Following the evidence, each sentence is not only longer, but ‘builds on the previous one . . . literally piling on explanation and example’, thus resulting in greater analysis and criticality (mark generation). The result, according to Kamler and Thomson, ‘is a rhetoric that is both confronting and vivid’ (2014, p.135). This is an ideal way of presenting your arguments, and by adhering to the Christmas Cracker model, particularly in respect of the narrowing of focus through the main body of the paragraph and imagining Bruce’s notion of a ‘wave’, the templates will help you to keep your ideas on track and discourage your dyslexia from making you veer off on tangents.

Dealing with counterarguments

Students often ask how they can introduce counterarguments into their essays while still driving forward with an argument. Some students think that if they come across something that contradicts or problematises their argument the best thing is to pretend it doesn’t exist. That way it doesn’t interfere with your argument, right? Wrong! You need to tackle counterarguments and problems head on while demonstrating that your argument is, on balance, more valid. A common way of doing this is to argue your case and then add the counterargument/problematic information onto the end of the paragraph/section. However, this can cause problems as it interrupts the flow of the argument and can make the essay go off on tangents. It can also make the essay seem as though you can’t decide what your argument actually is.

A better way of integrating counterarguments/problems is to put them at or near the beginning of your paragraphs. Indeed, you can even put them into your topic sentences. Here's how:

Refutation

Describe/summarise the opposing argument first and then hit your reader with an explanation as to why this argument is incorrect/flawed, weak or misleading. For example:

Jones and Smith (2016) have suggested that declining bee populations are directly attributable to loss of suitable habitats, especially wildflower meadows (which have declined by 70% since 1990). However, a far more plausible and compelling explanation for the reduction in bees in recent years has been the widespread introduction and indiscriminate use of neonicotinoid pesticides, which, despite a partial, temporary ban by the EU in April 2013, have had a devastating effect upon populations, especially in relation to the recent phenomena of Honeybee Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), which is not the result of habitat destruction (as Jones and Smith contend) as this effects existing, previously healthy colonies.

Opposing argument

Student argument/
voice/
refutation

Concession

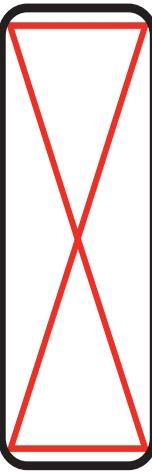
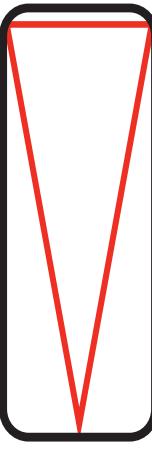
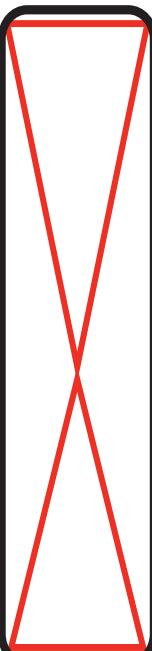
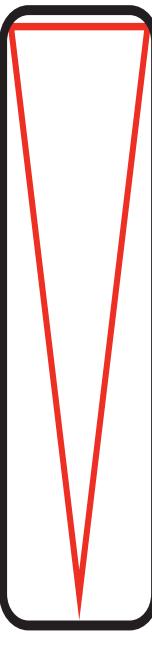
Concession is subtly different to refutation as it concedes the strengths of the opposing argument before refuting it. This demonstrates greater critical awareness, sophistication and skill as you are going deeper with your evaluation rather than simply dismissing the opposing argument. Indeed, by crediting and evaluating the opposing view you illustrate that you 'empathise' with it (this is known as 'Rogerian rhetoric'), and can pre-empt objections that the reader/marker might have, thereby making them more liable to agree with your point of view (Teich, 1996, p.635–636). For example:

The issues raised by Jones (2014) were once economically valid and they were exonerated by the increases (in some cases of more than 25%) seen across all aspects of the oil industry. However, downward trends in productivity since January 2016 (–10% in some circumstances) as a result of the declining price of oil has had a profound impact upon economic models of the type proposed by Jones and they are now in urgent need of reassessment.

Concession

Student argument/
voice

Notice what happens to the structure and forwards momentum of ideas (given to new) if we do not refute or concede the opposing view first:

Opposing argument refuted/conceded at the end:	Sequence of ideas:	Opposing argument refuted/conceded first (concession):	Sequence of ideas:
Refutation:			
<p>The recent discovery of a third mutation of Antarctic slime clearly shows that evolution is increasing rather than slowing at its secondary stage. This seems to disprove McNally's theory of evolution, in which she states that the existence of secondary slime shows that evolution is decelerating.</p>		<p>McNally's theory of evolution as decelerating hinges upon the existence of secondary slime (1990). However, the recent discovery of a third mutation of Antarctic slime clearly disproves this and shows that evolution is increasing rather than slowing at its secondary stage.</p>	
Concession:			
<p>The defendant was absent from the scene and had not authorised military force using the approved communication channels, so it seems plausible that Section 6 of the War Crimes Act would apply and he would be acquitted of the charge. This is despite the fact that the precedent set by Hiscock and Hassle (2003) rightly indicates that the defendant could be legitimately held liable for war crimes.</p>		<p>Although the precedent set by Hiscock and Hassle (2003) rightly indicates that the defendant could be held liable for war crimes, he was absent from the scene and had not authorised military force using the approved communication channels. It seems plausible, therefore, that Section 6 of the War Crimes Act would apply and he would be acquitted of the charge.</p>	

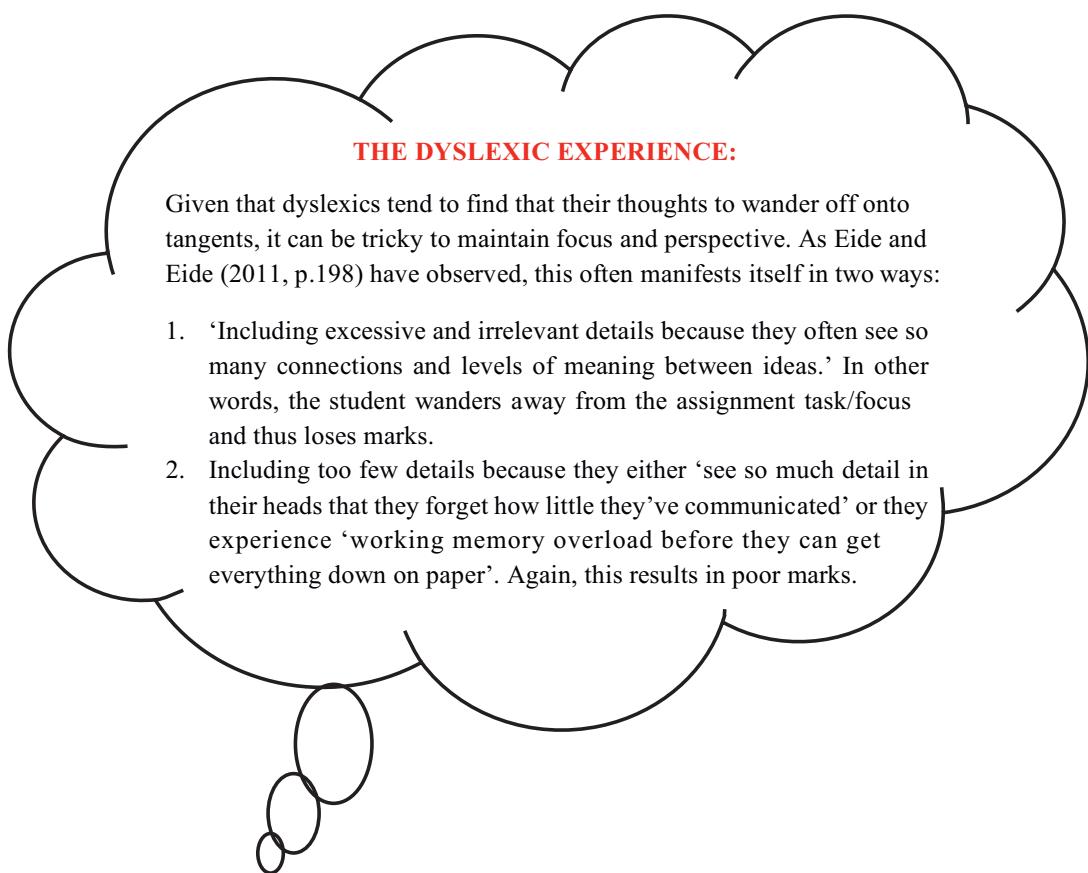
As you can see, by tagging the opposing views onto the end of sections and paragraphs, the transition of ideas from 'big picture' to detail, from the given to the new, is disrupted, which makes the sequence of ideas illogical and confusing. By stating or conceding opposing ideas first you maintain momentum and a forwards movement within the argument. This not only makes the structure of your work more logical but shows greater confidence, analysis and evaluation, all of which will lead to greater marks.

TIP

The art of concession and refutation can also be incorporated into single sentences, although this requires more skill owing to the need to be very concise. We will examine how to do this in the following chapter.

Keeping on track – how deep do you need to go?

When it comes to gaining top marks, depth of analysis, perception and criticality beats breadth of knowledge and description. However, how deep do you need to go? How much do you need to include and how do you stay on track?



There are several remedies for these problems:

- 1) Think about the purpose of the essay. Why are you doing it (look back at the assignment question, the assessment criteria and module handbook/specification/learning outcomes)? This will give you a sense of perspective and refresh your memory as to what the ‘big picture’ and end goal actually is.
- 2) Ensure all your topic sentences are relevant to the thesis statement and assignment task and are specifically answering the question in some way (or addressing some aspect of the content, activity or focus/limitation keywords). Topic sentences are often good markers of your focus and if you can’t see how they are directly answering the assignment task then you have probably gone off track.

TIP

Keep an eye out for sentences in the middle of paragraphs that look like topic sentences. This may indicate that you are drifting onto a new topic that is either irrelevant or perhaps needs a new paragraph.

- 3) Ensure your evidence is relevant to the assignment task and its keywords.
- 4) Check that your evidence has a purpose – make sure that it is not just there because you think your marker wants to see x amount of quotes or secondary sources. It needs to be fulfilling some sort of function in terms of proving your argument (or providing a platform for critique/a new perspective).
- 5) Use what is known as the 5W/H approach. This involves zooming out from the detail and ensuring that you can see:
 - who
 - what
 - when
 - where
 - why or
 - how
 something is going on (the ‘big picture’). This works well for ensuring that it is clear what you are talking about, but you can also add purpose to this list. Ask yourself, what is the purpose of what I have just written? How does it answer the question/assignment task? If it doesn’t, delete it or re-write it.
- 6) Check that your analysis section of the paragraph is actually analysing and evaluating the evidence within that paragraph rather than evidence that is either somewhere else in the essay or is not mentioned/relevant. Ensure that your analysis matches up with and proves what you promised in the topic sentence.
- 7) Make sure that your analysis moves from the general to the specific, from the given to the new, but that each transition.
 - Is relevant to the assignment keywords (don’t introduce new ideas or get bogged down with contextual detail or perhaps unnecessary descriptive explanations).
 - Is answering or addressing the underlying problem or argument (go back to your overall thesis statement and check that everything feeds back into the argument that it articulates – keep to hand the template on page 93 or download the template from the companion website).
 - Incorporates criticality, analysis and evaluation rather than description.
- 8) Check that your overall direction of travel aligns with the main body/analysis section of the Christmas Cracker (ensure that your discussion goes from the ‘big picture’ to the specifics in accordance with the red triangle).

- 9) Depth of analysis is essential, but only go as deep as is needed to answer the question/assignment task. Remember, you are being assessed on your ability to combine analysis and perception into a focused argument (within a specific word count). Although less of a box-ticking exercise than ‘A’ levels and Access assignments, you still have to play the game to some extent and give the marker what they want. Planning, therefore, is key – carefully choose a few, focused aspects of the topic and stick to them.

Links

The final section of the paragraph is the link. The purpose of this is to signal to the reader either

- 1) what will be discussed or developed in the next paragraph and how this relates logically to the preceding analysis and argument; or
- 2) the implications of what you have just discussed in relation to either the wider argument, the discipline or the world.

As such (following the shape of the bottom section of the Christmas Cracker) in both cases you move from the specific to the general. As you can see below, this is essentially an inversion of the topic sentence. In the first example from David P. Christopher’s *British Culture: An Introduction* (2015) we see an example of the first function of the link, and it clearly provides a transition to what will be discussed in the paragraph that follows:



Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) gave popular literary expression to feminist theory. Its provocative and outspoken text offered a clear, untheoretical manifesto that was accessible to everyone. Its impact was enormous, and soon afterwards a significant body of new women’s literature emerged. This contained powerful descriptions of women’s experience, and feminist writing quickly became an influential new genre.



Literature had been a male-dominated field, but new feminist publishing houses opened to energetically encourage women’s writing. Virago, the Women’s Press and Pandora contracted new feminist authors and began promoting others, such as Stevie Smith, Storm Jameson, Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, Barbara Pym. . . (p.90).

The link here helps to shift the focus of attention (which was on feminist theory) back out to the broader issue of women’s writing and its emergence as an ‘influential new genre’ – precisely what will then be elaborated upon in the following paragraph. It should be noted that the link section of the paragraph is optional, but if it is excluded, the topic sentence of the subsequent paragraph will need to explain how what follows ties in with the preceding paragraph. The extract from a student essay is an example of the second function of the link – namely to signal how what has just been discussed relates to the ‘bigger picture’ of the argument:



Along these lines, then, it may be a biological fact that some people cannot naturally yield power over other individuals and have to rely on authority and the voluntary compliance on the part of their subordinates. It is interesting, however, that one of the leadership qualities listed by Stogdill is that of intelligence, which suggests that even though other factors may be important, intelligence is still fundamental to the prediction of work achievement.

Here the student has used the link to move from the specifics of biology in relation to leadership back to the core issue of intelligence (which, one assumes, was one of the parameters indicated in the assignment question/title). Again, it is all about signposting to the marker/reader the structure of the argument and how it is relevant to, and addressing the thesis statement/assignment task/question, and the bigger implications of what you are discussing.

Final tips

The ‘big picture’ framework, when visualised as a Christmas Cracker, provides you with an ideal template for structuring the ideas and arguments within your paragraphs in a logical manner. However, the template is not merely theoretical. If you try to write your paragraphs with a view to sequencing your ideas according to the Cracker, the template will undoubtedly help, but the chances are you might still find yourself wandering a little. The best way of using the Cracker template, therefore, is to:

-  Have an image of it by the side of your writing, either on paper or within your word processor. That way you can effectively map and cross reference the ideas to the shape of the Cracker, much in the same way as the examples presented above.
-  Write your paragraph WITHIN the body of the Cracker if you so wish by downloading it from the companion website. This can be an effective way of practising as the shape of the Cracker literally forces your writing to adhere to the shape and thus the purpose of the paragraph section.
-  Consider drafting your paragraphs in your own way but then edit and restructure them later by copying and pasting the sentences around so that they fit the Cracker template.

Whatever method you use, the Christmas Cracker should enable to you to see, use and exploit the ‘big picture’ of what the paragraph is all about – a strategy that dyslexics tend to find invaluable. It can be a vital aid in your quest to present complex ideas in a logical and compelling manner.

Summary

- Keep in mind the ‘big picture’ of what you are trying to achieve and tap into your strengths as a dyslexic (visual/multidimensional) learner in order to visualise your paragraphs as Christmas Crackers. This will help you to produce a clear, logical sequence of ideas that address the question/assignment task.

- Make sure your topic sentences address some aspect of the thesis statement and assignment task/question.
- Check that your topic sentences have both a TOPIC and a PROVABLE OPINION and that they display a progression of ideas from the general (topic) to the specific (argument).
- Following the topic sentence, move from the evidence and the ‘big picture’ to detail, from the given to the new.
- Use a mixture of techniques to incorporate your evidence (quotation, summarising and paraphrasing) so as to demonstrate a range of skills.
- Integrate and embed your evidence carefully to avoid ‘parachuting’.
- Don’t assume that the evidence proves your argument, it needs interrogating and analysing to show the marker how it validates your argument.
- Deal with counterarguments near or even at the beginning of paragraphs (incorporate them into your topic sentences).
- Use links at the end of your paragraphs to signal either the next idea to be discussed or indicate the significance of the foregoing analysis/discussion.

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Presenting your argument

Writing and structuring clear, effective sentences

I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I see and I understand.

(Confucius, Chinese teacher, politician and philosopher)

If we think back to the activity keywords table in Chapter 4, we noticed how frequently the word ‘argument’ cropped up. An argument is an essential component of academic writing, yet it is often misunderstood. In academic writing, presenting an argument means articulating your point, your interpretation and what you are trying to prove in a considered, but persuasive manner.

TIP



While an academic argument is essentially YOUR point and interpretation, avoid lapsing into informality by using the first-person pronoun ‘I’. While some academics like and accept the use of ‘I’ in essays, lots don’t, as it appears too casual (and in some circumstances, presumptuous). If in doubt, leave it out.

Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher and rhetorician, said that there are three essential components to get right when presenting an argument:

- 1) Logos – reasoning and the argument itself.
- 2) Ethos – the ability of the writer to articulate themselves well.
- 3) Pathos – empathy with the audience.

(Aristotle, 2004, Book 1, Part 2)

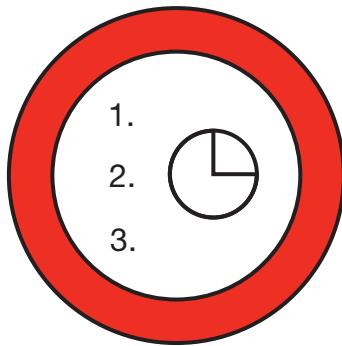
In academic writing, pathos is seldom used, but rhetorical strategies and discourse markers such as refutation, the art of concession, signallers, boosting and hedging are a vital part of logos and ethos as they give the argument a structure. Without them your ideas and argument will lack any sense of coherence, clarity and persuasiveness.

In this chapter, we will look at how you can articulate your argument in a clear, confident and logical manner by examining what happens at a sentence level. First, we will look at signposting your argument, rhetorical strategies and writing with clarity, and then we will explore the purpose of sentences and examine how you can use the Christmas Cracker template to forge logical, persuasive syntax.

Signallers, discourse markers and rhetorical strategies

Signallers and discourse markers are essential components of your sentences, paragraphs and essays. Remember, your reader/marker does not have an inbuilt ‘Satnav’ system that allows them to navigate your work (what may appear logical and coherent to you might not seem so to the outside reader), so you need to provide direction. There are five main categories of signallers and discourse markers you ought to be using (although as we shall see, there are significant overlaps between them). They will not only guide your reader through your ideas, but will allow you to forge a stronger argument by introducing rhetorical strategies that indicate your stance (i.e. your level of commitment, agreement, uncertainty or disagreement with the ideas or evidence being discussed). Each signaller and marker is contained within an icon resembling a road sign, thus highlighting its function as a means of providing direction.

1) Sequences, enumeration and time



As indicated by the icon on the left, enumeration refers to sequences of events or phenomena that can be numbered. As such, they provide the reader with a clear framework, direction and even a narrative. For example, I used enumeration (and advance labelling, which we will look at shortly) to indicate that there are five main categories of signallers and discourse markers and to signal that these will be discussed. Signallers and discourse markers of time, meanwhile, refer to words or phrases that indicate the future, the past or relationships between time periods (as is indicated by the clock within the icon). Again, these orientate both you and the reader, provide a narrative framework to the discussion/argument, and again gives the work clarity. Common signallers of sequences, enumeration and time include:

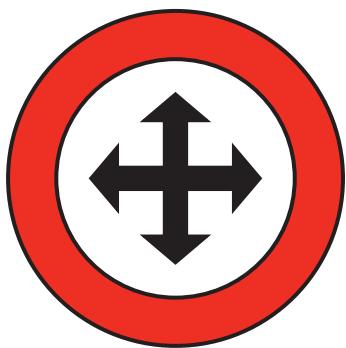
- **Sequences:** (e.g. subsequently, lastly, before, then, previously, formerly, presently, currently, now, simultaneously, after, afterwards, later, soon, former/latter, afterwards, subsequently, prior to, to start with, finally, repeatedly).
- **Enumeration:** (e.g. firstly, secondly, thirdly, fourthly, five main categories etc.).
- **Time:** (e.g. now, slowly, immediately, quickly, periodically, gradually, rarely, during, eventually, repeatedly, suddenly, initially, temporarily).

TIP



When using enumeration and sequence markers, double check that you deliver on what you promise – I have marked many essays that say they are going to discuss three issues but then only discuss two, or essays that start sections with an adverb such as ‘firstly’, but then there is no sign of a second, third or fourth point.

2) Relation (e.g. reinforcement, comparison, cause and effect, process, conjunctions)



As indicated by the arrows in the icon, relational signallers enable you to point out relationships between ideas, theorists, objects, processes or even time periods. However, unlike signallers of time (which are mostly descriptive and lend structure to your thoughts/argument), relational signallers can be used to drive forward and articulate your argument. Words and phrases such as ‘similarly’, ‘however’ and ‘in contrast’, then, not only signal and structure your thoughts but allow you to emphasise relationships and build evidence in support of your argument. Signallers such as ‘additionally’ and ‘furthermore’, meanwhile, can be used to reinforce your point and signallers such as ‘although’ and ‘despite’ set up alternative lines of argument. In other words, they are part and parcel of your reasoning and logic. Common relational signallers include:

- **Reinforcements:** (e.g. additionally, likewise, consequently, because, since, despite, even though, also, besides, furthermore, as well as, equally, exactly, similarly).
- **Similarities:** (e.g. similarly, equally, identically, likewise).
- **Contrasts:** (e.g. however, although, whereas, yet, unlike, but, despite, in contrast, on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, still, otherwise, opposite, versus).
- **Comparisons:** (e.g. resembling, parallel to, same as, identically, equally, matching, exactly, similarly, in comparison, in relation to).
- **Cause and effect:** (e.g. consequently, as a result, because, since).
- **Generalisations:** (e.g. in general, ordinarily, normally, on the whole, as a rule, mostly).
- **Results:** (e.g. consequently, therefore, as such, as a result).
- **Explanations:** (e.g. because, owing to, since, thus).
- **Conjunctions:** you use conjunctions all the time, probably without realising it. These words join sentences and ideas and again show how ideas relate to one another. The most commonly used conjunctions are; and, that, but, or, as, if, when, then, because, while and however.

TIP



Use markers of relation with care. Contrary to what you might think, they are not neutral and can often indicate your attitude, agreement or disagreement. ‘And’ is fairly neutral, for example, but ‘however’ (and even the word ‘but’ as I have just used it here) indicate a significant alternative and even your attitude towards it. Use this to your advantage to not only signal your ideas but to ‘establish a slant’ and drive forward your argument (Cooper and Patton, 2004, p.106).

3) Recapitulation/reformulation



Recapitulation (or repeating/summarising) needs to be used sparingly – after all, why would you say something twice that can be said once? However, careful use of recapitulation can add valuable clarity to your writing and make your ideas stronger and more compelling, especially when you are dealing with complex ideas. Popular forms of introducing or signposting recapitulation include using phrases and words such as:

- in brief, in simple terms, in other words, to repeat, to rephrase, to paraphrase, to clarify, to summarise, that is to say, as we saw in, and as we have seen.

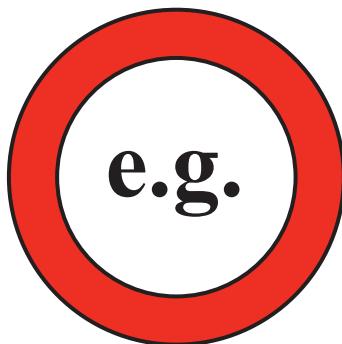
These can be effective ways of signposting back to your previous arguments and points without repeating them in full, and they have the effect of adding additional ‘layering of meaning’ to your argument, thus making it more persuasive. A particularly useful form of recapitulation, however, is actually to repeat or reformulate what you have just said, but in a new, perhaps simpler way. This is often introduced by a phrase such as ‘in other words’, which signals that you are going to repeat or provide a summary of what you have just said. One advantage of putting it ‘in other words’ is that it draws the reader’s attention back to the original passage/idea and makes them think about it afresh. But additionally, by repeating the preceding idea in simpler words, or by aligning it with a real-world example, you also demonstrate in greater depth that you understand what you have just said and can either apply it to an example or can see its implications. A good place to use recapitulation is when quoting from complex theory or jargon. Take the following as an example:



For Bakhtin, ‘internally persuasive discourse – as opposed to one that is externally authoritative – is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with “one’s own word”’ (1981, pp.345–46). In other words, the more a writer can relate ideas to the reader’s own world and experiences, the better.

This recapitulation not only summarises Bakhtin’s ideas and demonstrates that the core idea has been understood, but relates it specifically to the issue at stake (namely writing persuasively) – something which can become lost amid the complexity of the initial sentence or idea.

4) Examples



As we shall see later, your argument can be reinforced and rendered more coherent and convincing by showing how the main points you make ‘touch base’ with reality through specific examples. Nobody is going to believe that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that Shakespeare was a misogynist unless you show them, so by using concrete examples to either illustrate your points, or show similarities between ideas and reality, the reader will be left in

no doubt of the validity of what you are saying. Reinforce your argument by using signallers that enable you to:

- **Elaborate:** (e.g. that is, in other words, notice that, as we can see, also).
- **Exemplify:** (e.g. for example, such as, for instance, in this case, to illustrate, to show, to demonstrate).

TIP



Don't make unsubstantiated claims – the most compelling arguments are those which are backed up with specific examples. Use the discourse markers above to introduce your evidence. Using them will also help you to avoid 'parachuting'.

5) Reporting



Reporting is a device used when introducing (hence the arrow in the icon on the left) evidence from others. This is a vital component of your argument because when you attribute ideas or claims to others, you either reinforce your ideas or provide opportunities to refute or concede opposing views. In other words, they are a crucial way of setting the background/scene, thereby establishing a platform from which to develop your argument (Hyland, 2002, p.115). Reporting signallers also play a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing the clarity of your writing, as it is vital to be clear about who said what, when, and how.

Typical phrases that incorporate reporting signallers include:

- Smith argues/states/suggests/maintains/proposes that . . .
- The articles suggests/proposes that . . .
- Jones also believes/argues that . . .
- Williams goes on to say that . . .
- In . . . it was decided that . . .

TIPS



Again, reporting is a vital way of preventing your evidence from being 'parachuted' into your paragraphs, but be careful to ensure that you don't lapse into description – set out what others have said but use this as a platform from which to develop your own argument and analysis.

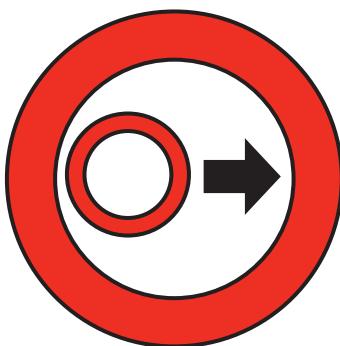


Ensure that your reporting verbs are formal. Avoid using words like 'say', 'mention', 'reckon' or 'feel' as they are not only too informal but they lack specificity.



As with relation markers, choose your reporting verbs so as to indicate your attitude towards the evidence (i.e. agreement/disagreement). Use boosting and hedging to help with this (see below). For instance, the verbs ‘argue’ and ‘state’ show neutrality while verbs such as ‘prove’ and ‘demonstrate’ indicate agreement. On the other hand, hedging language such as ‘suggest’ or ‘imply’ show less certainty and opens up what Thompson and Ye (1991) usefully call ‘evaluative space’ (p.369).

6) Advance labelling



Advance labelling consists of describing or indicating to the reader what will follow. In many ways, the thesis statement and topic sentences do a perfectly good job of this, but sometimes you need to indicate what will follow more explicitly. This is particularly useful when you might need to head off potential criticisms that the marker may have at that point in the essay. For example, if you are discussing genetic engineering and its use in producing ‘designer babies’, you have two main issues to consider, one scientific and the other ethical. To signal that you are not overlooking the ethical arguments, you may want to state something like ‘the ethical implications of these developments will be considered later, but for now it is important to focus on the genetic problems associated with . . .’. This tells the marker that you haven’t overlooked the ethical issues, but that you want to develop your argument one stage at a time. Typical advance labelling phrases include:

- As we shall see later . . .
- This issue will be explored in section/chapter x . . .
- These issues raise fundamental questions about . . . and they will be examined later, but for now it is important to define . . .

TIP



Be careful not to overdo advance labelling and do not resort to narrating the structure of the essay (e.g. ‘the first chapter will . . . This will be followed by the second chapter where we will examine . . . The essay will end with a conclusion’). For the most part, instead of telling the reader what you are going to do, just do it.

Additional rhetorical strategies

I) Boosting



Boosting, as suggested by the icon on the left, is a way of strengthening or emphasising your case. You need to be careful here that you don’t jeopardise your logic and reasoning by lapsing into journalistic or unsubstantiated appeals to the reader and their emotions (this would commit a fallacy of the type we looked at in the critical thinking chapter). However, boosting can enhance the persuasiveness of your writing.

Common examples of boosting language (many of which incorporate relational discourse markers) include words and phrases such as:

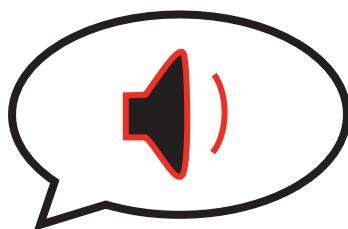
Persuasive:	Full volume persuasive:
Also, too, as well as, besides, equally, furthermore, additionally, moreover, yet, but, still, indeed, actually.	Most of all, least of all, clearly, evidently, obviously, above all, after all, chiefly, especially, more importantly, significantly, surely, absolutely, without a doubt, in truth, without question, unquestionably.

TIP



Use boosting carefully. It's very easy to place boosting words together (e.g. extremely successful, significantly enhance) and thereby create redundancies (which we will examine in the next chapter).

2) Hedges and qualifiers



Hedging and qualifying, as indicated on the left, involves turning down the volume a little, or *perhaps* reining in your enthusiasm and conviction (note my use of hedging here). Hedging is most useful when you are making suggestions or proposing arguments that are speculative, mainly because of a lack of knowledge/research, or perhaps the topic/idea being referred to is a new and developing field that has not received much critical attention. Qualifiers, meanwhile, make more general, 'big picture' claims. Typical words that you can use include:

- **Hedging:** (e.g. can, could, perhaps, might, possibly, should, probably, little, chance, indicate).
- **Qualifiers:** (e.g. usually, sometimes, mostly, generally, some, tend, most, often).

FINAL TIPS



Be careful not to over-signpost your argument. While signposting is invaluable for promoting cohesion and articulating your voice, too much will betray a lack of confidence in your ideas, eat up valuable words that could be used for analysis, and will prevent you from getting straight to the point.



Students often use hedging language (or 'wads of fluff' as Steven Pinker calls it) to cover the fact that they have either not thoroughly researched the topic or are reluctant to commit to what they are saying (2015, p.43). Reserve hedging for purely speculative or conjectural situations. If something is or is not true or proven, say so, don't hide behind hedging due to insufficient reading.



According to Ken Hyland (2000), writers ‘need to invest a convincing degree of assurance in their propositions, yet must avoid overstating their case and risk inviting the rejection of their arguments’ (p.87). The same thing could be said of hedging – too much of it will also risk ‘inviting rejection’, and you can come across as lacking in confidence. At the same time, as Hyland notes, you need to also show a degree of ‘deference, modesty or respect’ for the opinions of others (p.88). You need to strike a balance between boosting and hedging and use them only in appropriate circumstances (i.e. when something is either entirely compelling or is speculative/on the boundaries of what is known or provable).

A note of caution: rhetorical questions

Some students incorporate rhetorical questions into their assignments. This can be a useful way of stimulating the reader and encouraging them to think deeply about the wider issues at stake. As such, it is a great tool to use in persuasive writing, and can be used very effectively in oral presentations, but they are often too rhetorical for academic writing because:

- They raise questions you may not be answering.
- They can mask knowledge and act as a way of trying to deflect the marker’s attention away from the fact that fundamentally, you are not answering the question or have not researched/thought deeply enough about the assignment.
- Can potentially lead you to veer off on new, unplanned and perhaps irrelevant tangents – something you need to avoid as a dyslexic.

Clarity: writing with images and realities

Whatever your assignment title or genre may be, clarity is all. One way of making your writing both clear and readable is to minimise the use of abstractions and incorporate concrete, tangible facts, examples, images and references to reality. To demonstrate the difference, let’s examine two pieces of writing. The first text is a piece of journalism by the late A. A. Gill, here writing about his experiences as a dyslexic and how people might be amused if they saw what his writing was like before it was polished by an editor and a scribe:



It was suggested that we should print this the way I write it, just so you could see, get some idea of the mess, the infantilely random alphabetti muesli of my 55-year-old writing. You’d get a kick out of it. No, it would really amuse you.

People still laugh at me on paper: ‘Oh my god, is that real? Is that how you write? You’ve got to be joking.’ I’m not immune, but I’ve grown thick-skinned, if a little defensive. After all the awards, the pats on the back, the gimpy words that put the kids through school and put a chicken in the pot, you can scoff all you like. You can scoff for free. I get paid for these words, and I gave up caring when I discovered the rest of you spell phonetic with a ‘ph’ (Gill, 2010).

Now compare this extract with the following from a well-known book about Romantic-period women writers. The author, Professor Anne Janowitz, is writing here with the aim of ‘introduc(ing) readers to the lives and works of Anna Letitia Barbauld and Mary Robinson’ (2004, p.1), and as such we must assume that the book is intended to be introductory and accessible. But take a look at the writing style. Is it clear and accessible? How does it compare with the A. A. Gill extract?



In this atmosphere of political retrenchment, Barbauld began a new phase of her intellectual life, codifying a tradition of literary value, and reinforcing the ethical codes she had believed in all her life. Barbauld developed her role as literary arbiter, using her power as an editor to produce editions of Collins' poems, a collection of essays from the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, and Richardson's *Letters*. Her great contribution to formulating both a tradition and contemporary taste was her edition of the *British Novelists*, for which she wrote long prefaces, and which she accomplished in less than two years, the full set completed in 1810 (Janowitz, 2004, p.99).

Both of these passages express very simple ideas. In the case of Gill, he is simply talking about his experiences of writing as a dyslexic and Janowitz is simply telling us that Barbauld started editing the works of others, but the way these ideas are expressed and their subsequent clarity is vastly different. Gill uses images and tangible realities with which the reader is likely to be familiar so as to paint a visual picture as to what it is like to write like a dyslexic, whereas Janowitz, particularly in the first and last sentences, resorts to abstractions and nominalisations the reader simply cannot visualise. For example, when reading these passages, we are likely to find ourselves imagining or visualising the following:

Passage:	Images:
A. A. Gill:	Print, some sort of mess, an infant, alphabet muesli, a 55-year-old, people laughing, someone speaking, thick skin, awards, pats on back, ‘gimpy words’, children, a school, a chicken cooking, someone scoffing, and money/words (all of which are mediated via various references to ‘you’ – the reader).
Anne Janowitz:	Barbauld, an editor, some books, ‘long prefaces’ (what these might look like or how long they are is unclear).

As you can see, Gill’s writing is full of things we can visualise – real things that we can see, hear, hold, smell or may even have experienced ourselves. As such, the writing is clearer, more emphatic and more persuasive. Janowitz’s passage, on the other hand, is decidedly lacking in these traits. We, the reader, cannot see/visualise ‘political retrenchment’, Barbauld’s ‘intellectual life’ (which lacks specificity), her ‘codifying a tradition of literary value’ (which is again unspecific) or her ‘ethical codes’ and ‘role as literary arbiter’. Even when things get a little more specific, we are still unable to visualise, for instance, how ‘long’ her ‘long prefaces’ actually were. Admittedly the extracts are very different and have very different purposes (journalism vs. academic writing), but the message should be clear – if you want to make your ideas compelling, paint

them in pictures, give your sentences some basis in reality; give them meaning that is clear. This is not the same thing as making them immature and childlike – they will still be academic. Indeed, academic writing can be just as stimulating, visual and tangible as that illustrated in the A. A. Gill extract. Let's have a brief look at the following passage by John Barrell. Here we have an extract from a huge 754-page history monograph about 'imagining the King's death' (in other words, there's not even a real execution of a monarch to get our teeth into). You can hear the yawns developing already, yet take a look at the writing style below. What images and tangible realities can you see?



The notion that the political conflict of the period was to be regarded as a conflict . . . about the meanings of words, was a theme of numerous liberal or radical texts of the 1790s, from Elizabeth Inchbald's novel *Nature and Art*, for example, to a report of the committee of constitution of the London Corresponding Society, which proposed fixing the meanings of the words 'Republican', 'Democrat', 'Aristocrat', 'Royalist', 'Loyalist', 'Citizen', and 'Subject' as they were to be used in the society's debates and discussions. This last is one of several publications concerned to reappropriate the words in the vocabulary of reformers, which, they claim, have been deliberately distorted by the supporters of the Government, have become 'scare-crow words' in what Coleridge described as 'the Dictionary of Aristocratic Prejudice' – by which, added John Thelwall, 'the English turned inside out' (2000, p.2).

Although not as eclectic as the A. A. Gill passage, here we can see how a debate about the 'meanings of words' has been enriched and rendered convincing/engaging by referencing the core ideas to concrete examples and images such as:

- 'liberal or radical texts of the 1790s', a range of material which provides a perspective, Inchbald's novel, a report by the London Corresponding Society, various labels that conjure up images of character types/political positions, society debates, reformers, the Government, 'scare-crow words', Coleridge, a dictionary, Thelwall, and an illustrative quotation.

Not only do we have conflict, prejudice and government censorship (one could imagine these being the core ingredients of a gripping novel!), but the passage is packed with detail and examples – no stone is left unturned or unrelated to specifics. This makes the writing compelling, engaging and persuasive. Try to adopt a similar approach. As this passage surely proves, academic writing doesn't have to be dry or boring.

TIPS



As Steven Pinker (an authority on stylish writing) points out, 'a third of our brains [are] dedicated to vision . . . Many experiments have shown that readers understand and remember material far better when it is expressed in concrete language that allows them to form visual images' (2015, p.72). As dyslexics, you already have the edge here (just as A. A. Gill did); harness your visual strengths to produce memorable, accessible and compelling writing by ensuring that your sentences contain 'concrete', real things that you can visualise.



When reading, find an academic writer who uses lots of examples, images and tangible realities to illustrate and prove their points. Then spend some time looking at how they organise their thoughts and present their case – use it as inspiration for your own writing.

Putting it all together – writing effective sentences

Structuring sentences and understanding the rules of grammar are probably the most difficult challenges dyslexics face. This is partly because until recently, grammar was simply not taught in many UK schools. But additionally, it is often very difficult to see/visualise, let alone understand, a direct correlation between grammatical rules and meaning, something dyslexics often cite as needing. For example, the advice in Strunk and White's famous and immensely popular book, *The Elements of Style*, that 'a noun in apposition may come between antecedent and relative' (2000, p.30), means very little, precisely because it is difficult to visualise or conceptualise. In addition, there appears to be little connection between the rule and the meaning. One may well ask, why a noun in apposition may come between antecedent and relative? The answer is that it's less ambiguous, but why is it less ambiguous? Without a visual or material explanation that can be seen or touched, these abstractions will remain abstract, and dyslexics are likely to remain entirely confused. In what follows, then, we will examine some basic academic sentence structures, not from the perspective of grammatical rules, but from the perspective of visual frameworks, the shape of which explain the purpose of the sentences and why the sequence of ideas are best in particular orders. You can then use these templates to help you visualise and see the 'big picture' of your own sentences so that you can understand how to write with confidence, direction and clarity.

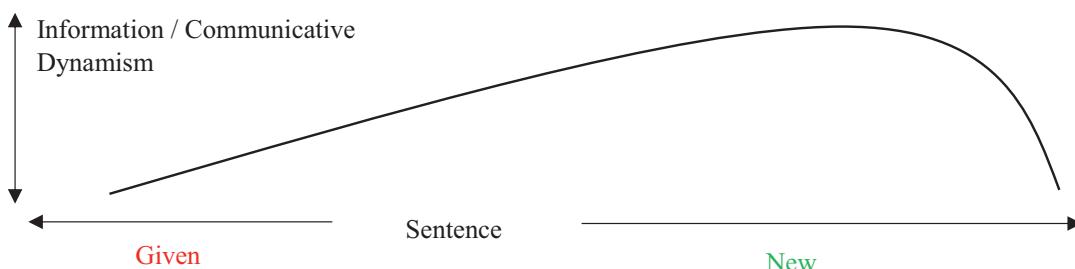
The purpose of sentences

Before going any further, it is worth asking the question, what is a sentence? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a sentence is a 'set of words that is complete in itself and held together with grammatical rules'. In English, as alluded to in Chapter 2, sentences usually fall into four distinct categories: simple, compound, complex and compound-complex. Each of these sentence categories have their own distinct rules in relation to clauses, predicates, subjects, objects and verbs but none of this tells us what they are actually for. Research has shown that dyslexics need to understand and see the overarching purpose, aim or 'big picture' of a sentence before looking at the detail. This is a requirement that is opposite to traditional approaches that start with sentence construction (nouns, verbs etc.) and then work towards the purpose and aims (Eide and Eide, 2011, pp.192–193). Before starting your sentences, then, it is worth thinking about what sort of idea you want to express. What is your end goal and what do you want to achieve? What is the key message you want the reader to take from the sentence?

Obviously, a sentence is much more than merely a 'set of words . . . held together with grammatical rules' – it is a means of communicating ideas, usually new ideas. As such, it is worth once again returning to Bruce's (1988) concept of 'communicative dynamism', which is the underlying principle which all sentences have in common and which ought to be your main priority when writing.

'Communicative dynamism'

We saw in Chapters 4 and 5 how Bruce's model of 'communicative dynamism' could enliven your essay and paragraph structures so as to help you forge an argument, but Bruce's 'wave model' was originally intended for mapping the transitions between ideas within sentences. For Bruce, a sentence is a means of guiding the reader from what they already know to a new piece of information (and 'dynamism' increases in a wave pattern along the way). One way of making ALL your sentences contribute to advancing your argument, then, is to follow the given to new pattern. For example:



The defendant's claim is clearly inadmissible due to the specifications outlined in Clause 2:1.

Shakespeare's treatment of race has been problematised given the discovery of the Othello manuscript.

Sudden Ash dieback is increasing, but in laboratory tests, Ye (2017) has successfully halted its mutation.

This sequence enables the reader to start with information and topics that are familiar to them before being guided towards new, detailed information (the argument). The golden rule here is to ensure that the most prominent, important information is at the end of each sentence, as in the three examples above. Indeed, by ensuring that you place the most important, new information at the end, you will find that you write more concisely. Compare these sentences, and it will easily be seen which are more emphatic and concise:

Sample sentence:	Comments:
This paper argues that due to the lack of media frames in social and political spheres there is a difficulty measuring the media's power currently (25 words).	The sentence ends awkwardly with an adverb and puts what is already known/given (methodological difficulties) in the priority position. Because of the awkwardness, the student has signposted the argument at the outset in an attempt to compensate for the lack of clarity/precision. This increases the word count unnecessarily.
Amended version with key/new information at the end: The power of the media is currently difficult to measure due to the lack of media frames in social and political spheres (22 words).	This example starts from what we already know and puts the new information at the end. The student has also moved the previously oddly placed adverb into the middle of the sentence along with the key verb/action (measure), and because everything is clearer there is no need for the previous signposting. As such the sentence is more direct and emphatic, and clearly indicates greater student confidence.

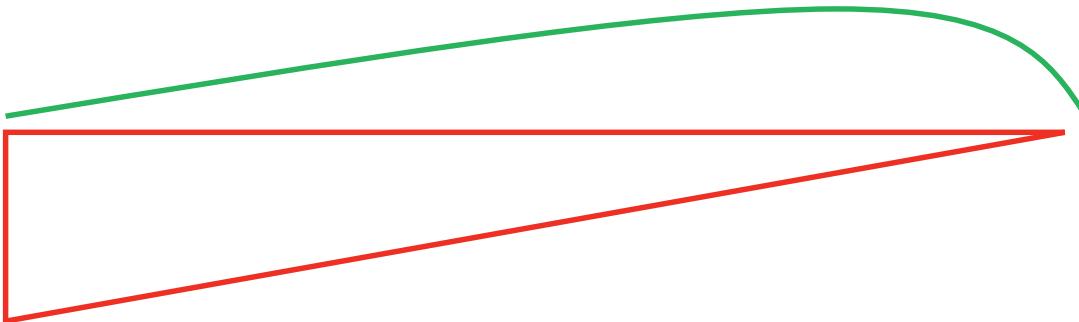
<p>The reliability and quality of the evidence used when investigating the effects of media outputs represents a further problem for political communication research (23 words).</p>	<p>Here the issue of reliability and quality is placed first, yet this is the new, detailed information. The phrase ‘further problem’ indicates that the student has been talking about problems previously, so rather than clearly building upon the previous discussion and offering new insights, the sentence has to clumsily return to the problems at the end for it to make sense. There is also unnecessary repetition here. To make the context of the evidence clear the student has to introduce the idea of ‘investigating the effects of media outputs’, but then this is effectively repeated at the end since surely this is what ‘political communication research’ is all about.</p>
<p>Amended version with key/new information at the end:</p> <p>A further problem for political communication research is the nature and quality of the evidence (15 words).</p>	<p>In this example, the background/given information is at the beginning and thus smoothly leads the reader on from the previous discussion. The new, detailed ‘problem’ is specified at the end. There is no need for additional explanation or context because it is immediately clear that we are still talking about political communication research. Again, the sentence is much more direct and emphatic, thus indicating greater student confidence.</p>

While the core principle of a sentence is to transition from the given to the new, sentences have additional goals that relate specifically to their purpose or overarching aim. In academic writing, there are seven main types of sentence, each of which has a specific goal that can be mapped onto a visual template, the shape of which marries the purpose with Bruce’s underlying principle of moving from the given to the new.

The seven main types of academic sentence

I) Descriptive, narrative and explanatory sentences

As we have seen previously, you should avoid too much description in favour of criticality, evaluation and argument, but there are times when you will need to describe, narrate or explain in order to introduce ideas or set out the background. The main purpose of a descriptive sentence is to inform rather than advance an argument. As such, the given to new sequence is still important, and there is an obvious narrowing of focus from the topic (or ‘big picture’) to detail (hence the triangle shape in the template below and the green ‘wave’ indicating ‘communicative dynamism’). However, given that there is very little criticality, evaluation or argument, the triangle is red to indicate caution. We can see below how the ideas contained within two simple descriptive sentences map onto the template:

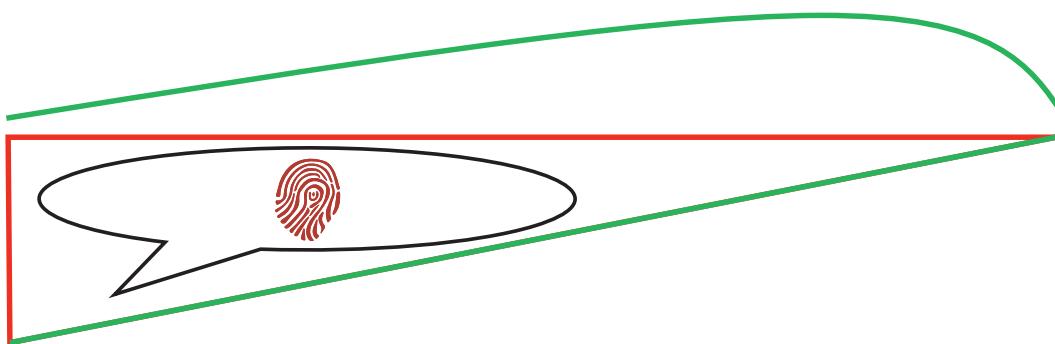


An electron is a fermion, so only a single electron can occupy a specific quantum state in a system.

Auschwitz Museum is a hugely valuable educational resource, attracting 1.4 million visits annually.

2) Reporting sentences

These sentences are mostly used to introduce the ideas of others. They start with a reporting signaller/discourse marker (as we saw earlier on p. 125), which as you can see from the template below, introduces the ‘big picture’. The sentence then hands over the rest of the words to others, either in the form of a short quotation, some data, or perhaps a summary/paraphrase of their ideas (hence the use of the evidence fingerprint within the speech bubble in the template below). The top section of the template is red with a green narrowing of focus to indicate that although you are merely introducing/describing rather than analysing (and thus demonstrating knowledge), you are helping to drive forward your argument and lay out the foundations of your analysis/critical evaluation:



According to Smith (1998), electrons suitable for coupling must have critical value momenta.

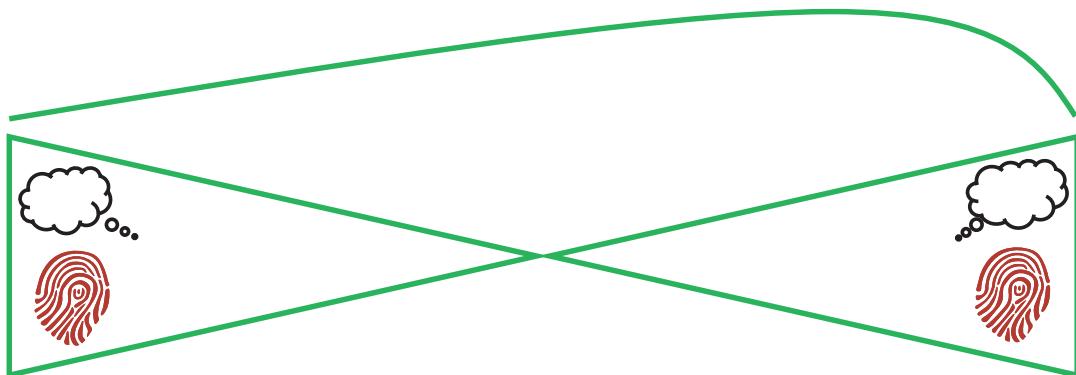
Hockman (1990) suggests that better employee performance is ‘not inevitable’ during teamwork (p.2).

3) Evaluative sentences

Evaluation, as we saw in Chapter 5, often takes place at a paragraph level (or even at an essay level), but individual sentences can also offer important evaluative comments. Because evaluation is so important for scoring high marks, the template is green throughout. An evaluative sentence aims to consider either two ideas or two clusters of evidence/information. In considering the first idea/cluster you start with the ‘big picture’ or given information and then quickly outline the new information or detail. For the second part of the sentence, you basically invert this sequence and pick up from either the same narrow detail (which they usually have

in common) or new details (the specifics of the issue at stake), before moving back out into the ‘big picture’, as can be seen in the shape of the templates below. An evaluative sentence can do this in an even-handed manner, or it can evaluate with a view to demonstrating a preference and conceding the strengths of an opposing argument. In both cases this can be very useful for showing the marker that you have considered all the angles and can skilfully weigh up pros and cons. The examples below indicate this and how they can be mapped onto the two templates:

a) Even-handed evaluation

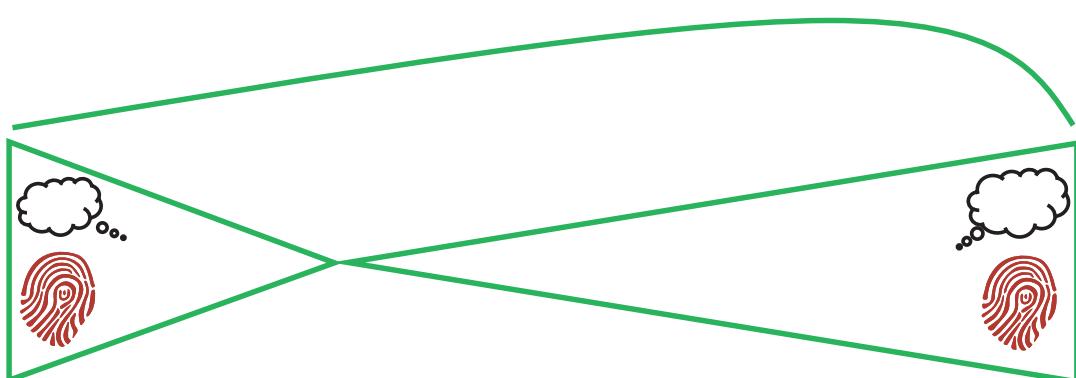


Profitability can derive from strategic risk taking, but it can also cause serious financial deficits.

Crop yield was high due to above average rainfall, but better pesticide use may also be a factor.

b) Preferential evaluation/the art of concession

For preferential evaluation and concession, use the template below to briefly summarise, empathise with, highlight and concede the strengths of the opposing ideas/evidence before outlining your position/evidence, again moving from the specific point of detail/divergence/principle objection out to the ‘big picture’. This technique demonstrates that you have anticipated possible objections/counterarguments on the part of the reader/marker but can still forge an argument. As can be seen in the examples below, one of the best ways of doing this is to put your concessions in a subordinate clause, thereby putting the most crucial, new parts of the argument at the end:



Although CO₂ has increased, it would appear that levels of NO₂ give far greater cause for concern.

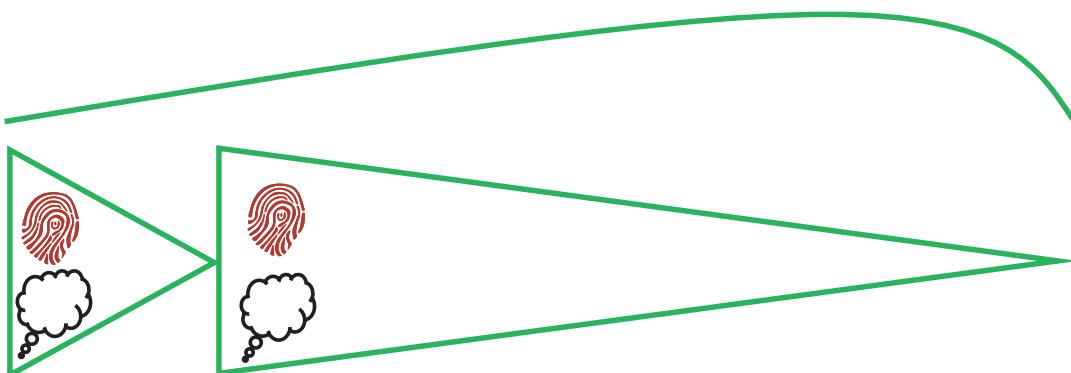
Despite Wu’s suggestions, it is the authoritarian nature of patriarchy itself which needs addressing.

TIPS

-  Note that unlike concession, preferential evaluation is somewhat muted. It is not as forceful/argumentative as concession, and certainly not as forceful as refutation. Indeed, note the use of hedging ('appear') in the example above.
-  As is indicated on the template above, in both sections of the sentence the key point can be made by making reference to either ideas or evidence. Remember, always be as specific and clear as possible and paint a picture for your reader by avoiding abstractions.

4) Refutation

Refutation is used when you want to explicitly disagree with the views or ideas of another/another piece of evidence. Unlike concession/evaluation, you do not credit or assess the validity of the opposing view. Rather, you briefly make reference to the main 'big picture' idea/evidence you are refuting and then state your specific, detailed objection based on what your research/knowledge has shown to be more compelling. It is for this reason that unlike above, the template is shaped so as to encourage you to move very quickly from summarising the 'big picture' and detail of the idea you want to refute to introducing your own, alternative perspective. Rather than starting from the specifics, however, here you repeat the 'big picture' to detail sequence in order to show greater forwards momentum, argumentation and 'communicative dynamism':



Yu's primary data is unconvincing, since genetics do play a pivotal role in child development.

Social buffering is inaccurate; upper echelons theory is considerably better at explaining success.

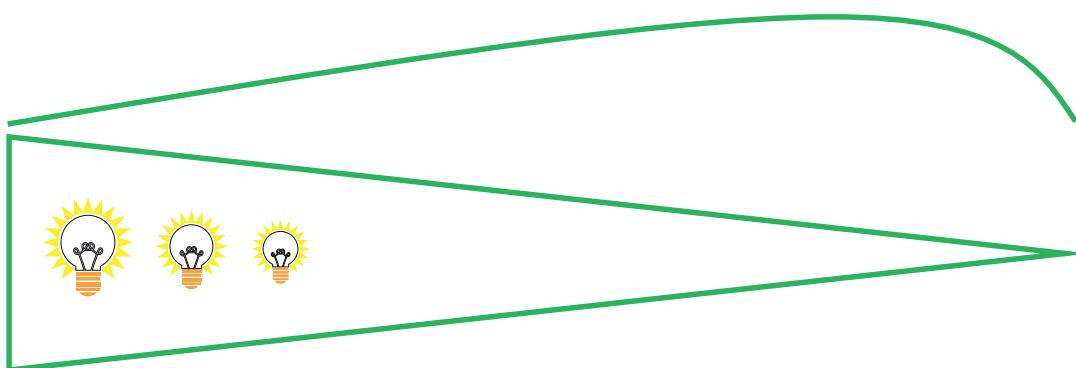
TIPS

-  Note the use of boosting ('do' and 'considerably') in the examples above. This strengthens your refutation but be careful not to overdo it. The evidence/point itself ought to convince the reader more than the rhetoric.
-  To make your refutations and concessions more persuasive and credible, make the next sentence a persuasive sentence. This will allow you to develop your objections by introducing the optimum number of counter ideas/pieces of evidence (which you will then explore further in your analytical sentences).

5) Persuasive sentences

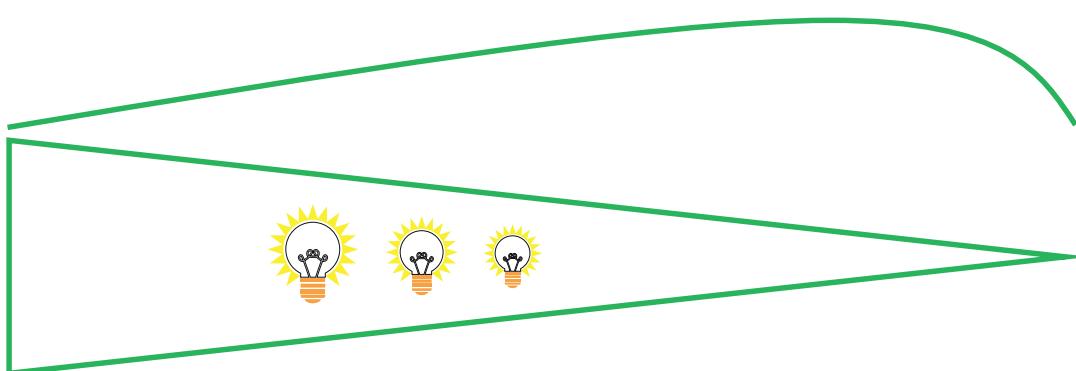
Persuasive sentences aim to convince your reader of the validity of your ideas. One of the most effective ways of being persuasive is to use what's known as 'the rule of three'. In rhetoric it is thought that using three pieces of evidence is the optimum number to be convincing (one simply not being enough, two looks a little weak and four seems to be trying too hard), so incorporating three key ideas/points into your sentences is the ideal number for being persuasive. Depending on where you want the focus to be, the three ideas can come anywhere within the sentence. However, the order in which you place the three ideas ought to either mirror their importance or their specificity. In other words, start with the least compelling idea or 'big picture' and end with that which is the most detailed and persuasive (as can be seen in the relative sizes of the light bulb icons in the templates below):

Rule of three at the beginning

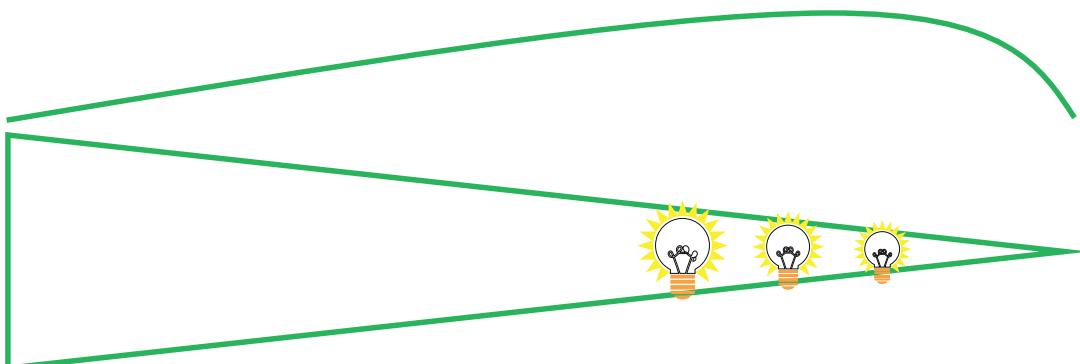


Drought, pestilence and fire are disasters that can all be overcome if we embrace genetic modification.
Emphasis, confidence and persuasiveness are all evident if you use the rule of three when writing essays.

Rule of three in the middle



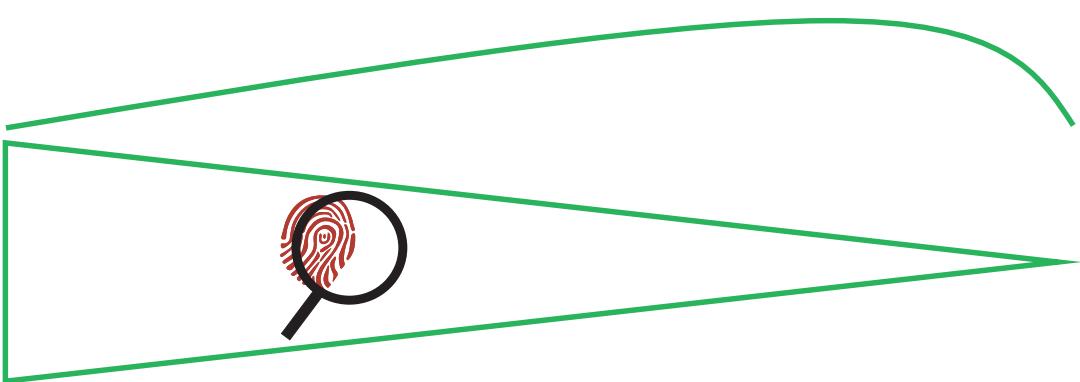
In the field of accounting, integrity, honesty and perseverance are the most essential traits in employees.
Increased levels of deforestation, mainly in China, Japan and Malaysia, is causing global warming.

Rule of three at end

The study of history should be compulsory as it allows pupils to understand facts, fictions and values.
Genetic modification ought to play a vital role in overcoming disasters like drought, pestilence and fire.

6) Argumentative/analytical sentences

Argumentative and analytical sentences are probably the most important as they directly show the marker that you are critiquing and interrogating ideas and proving your point. These sentences often follow descriptive, narrative, evaluative, concessional, refutational and persuasive sentences and justify/provide depth to the views expressed therein. These sentences are likely to be significantly longer than those we have seen so far (as was mapped onto the table in the previous chapter), simply because analysis requires a layering of depth and the consideration of multiple issues. There are likely to be numerous issues you want to interrogate, and it can be difficult to know how to sequence them (or even if a sequence is needed). The best way to present your analysis in a compelling, confident and clear manner is to either again move from the ‘big picture’ to specific detail, or present things chronologically. Some examples/extracts from argumentative sentences can be mapped onto the template as follows:



State liability is too arbitrary to have any effect domestically, let alone internationally, because . . .
The limitation of synthesising these hypotheses is the failure to implement a mediating variable, since . . .
Yet ‘common assault’ cannot accurately reflect the particular severity of domestic violence because . . .

TIPS



Variety is the spice of life. Although you'll probably find that you'll use mostly reporting sentences near the beginning of your paragraphs (to introduce the evidence) and evaluative, persuasive and argumentative/analytical sentences towards the end, use combinations of the above sentences to make your writing interesting, readable and thought-provoking. Although you need to stick to the point (topic sentence), evidence/analysis and link Christmas Cracker structure, you can use the above sentences in various places. Indeed, it's often a good idea to do so, particularly with reporting/descriptive/persuasive sentences, so as to hit your reader with new, confident insights.



Vary the sentence length. Although argumentative/analytical sentences are likely to be the longest and most complex, and although it has been suggested that the 'overwhelming majority' of academic sentences are 'at least 12 words long' (Sowton, 2012, p.113), experiment with different length sentences. Short, emphatic sentences can be a useful way of drawing the marker's attention to significant information and it can inspire confidence. However, don't overdo this. Lots of short sentences, particularly when close to each other, can sound awkward and simplistic.

Putting it all together

Obviously, over the course of an essay you will use combinations of the sentence types to express your argument. Together they combine to form your analysis and your paragraphs. Let's look at the law extract from the previous chapter to see how the sentences are combined to provide rich and insightful analysis while driving forward from the given to the new:

Law and domestic violence	
Sentence:	Sentence type/template:
Legal responses to the issue of domestic violence are far from satisfactory.	Topic sentence:
Although CPS reports suggest that 'highest volumes ever' of domestic violence referrals were charged last year (over 70,000 [CPS 2014b]), there are numerous significant counterarguments that point out inadequacies in the legal framework and its ambiguous definitions.	Preferential evaluation/concession:
Despite repeated, valid attempts to create a definition of domestic violence that encompasses a wide array of actions (Smith, 1999 and Jones, 2001), the notion of domestic violence as meaning physical beating, remains the 'dominant view' (Stark, 2007, p.84).	Preferential evaluation/concession:

Law and domestic violence	
Sentence:	Sentence type/template:
As Stark (2007) has testified, victims are reluctant to acknowledge their situation absent of physical violence (p.111).	Reporting sentence: 
Furthermore, no specific 'domestic violence' offence exists, with instances being artificially categorised as regular offences instead.	Argumentative/analytical: 
Indeed, they are mostly categorised as 'common assault', which does not accurately reflect the severity of domestic violence (Hester, 2006, p.85).	Argumentative/analytical: 
Additionally, state liability for failing to prevent domestic violence, though welcome, is set to a very high threshold (<i>Osman v UK</i>), and as such may not be robust enough to have much effect domestically save in exceptional circumstances (Burton, 2010, p.134).	Argumentative/analytical: 

Note how the student has moved from preferential evaluation/concession sentences and reporting to argumentative/analytical sentences, thus adhering to the template of the main body of paragraphs demonstrated in Chapter 4 (i.e. moving from a topic sentence to evidence to analysis). Furthermore, notice also how frequently we see signposting (usually at the beginning of the sentences) to indicate that arguments are building upon each other and intersect. As such, this piece of writing is very compelling.

Sentence construction

Now that we have considered the overall/'big picture' aims of academic sentences and mapped them onto templates, we need to dig a little deeper and consider some of the most common sentence structures (syntax). This is not intended to be a comprehensive account of grammar and doesn't consider all the possible sentences you may come across or write, but seeing the overall 'big picture' of sentence construction will help you to organise your thoughts and express them clearly and logically.

Syntax refers to the overarching rules or principles that govern sentence construction, particularly in respect of word ordering. The main principle you need to keep in mind here

(and which maps nicely onto Bruce's wave model of 'communicative dynamism'), is the transition from subject → verb → object or, much less frequently, subject → object → verb. Although other structures exist, these two sentence structures form the basis of over 87 per cent of world languages (Tomlin, 1986, p.22). The subject → verb → object sequence is predominant in English, so we will focus on this basic structure for the remainder of the chapter.

For dyslexics, all this talk of subjects, verbs and objects might seem confusing and too abstract to be properly understood. It can be made clearer if we:

- 1) Hone in the fact that most sentences have three basic components.
- 2) Rename the core components so that their labels more accurately describe what they do.

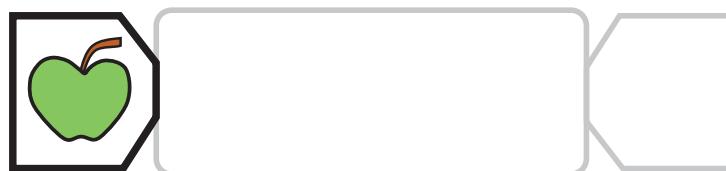
Instead of thinking of the standard sentence structure in terms of subject, verb, object (SVO), it's more easily understood (and memorable) if we think of it as TOPIC, ACTION, DETAIL, or 'TAD'. Fortunately, 'TAD' can be made even more accessible and understandable if we map it visually, onto the Christmas Cracker template, as we shall see below.

• **Subject > TOPIC**

The subject position tells us what the sentence is about, so a less abstract way of putting this might be to think of it as the TOPIC. The best way to make your sentences clear and emphatic is to ensure that the topic is not only mentioned as near to the beginning of the sentence as possible, but to make your topics as concrete, tangible and 'real' as possible (much in the same way as A. A. Gill did in the example from earlier). If you bury your topics in abstractions or vague/fuzzy language (providing your topic isn't actually an abstract idea) your writing will lack the precision required of academic writing. For example, wherever possible avoid abstractions (such as 'society', 'media', 'internationalisation' or 'evolution') in favour of being specific:

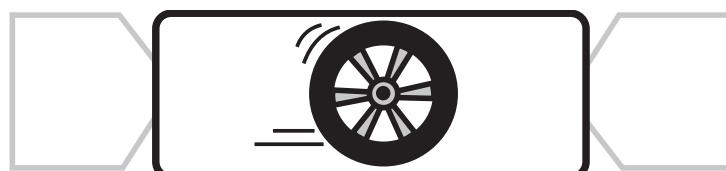
Topic as abstraction:	Topic specific or clarified:
Society	Working-class culture in ... Social inaduality has become ...
Media	Television adverts ... The media, in particular television commercials ...
Internationalisation	The 30 per cent increase in students from China ... Internationalisation, especially the disproportionate number of Chinese students ...
Evolution	The genome sequence has doubled in size since ... Evolution, especially in relation to slimes and moulds in southern Africa ...

The need to be specific from the outset, or at least clarify/specify as quickly as possible, is why the topic section of the Christmas Cracker sentence template below narrows in focus, much in the same way as we saw in respect of topic sentences and introductions. The apple is used to symbolise the topic because of its association with knowledge and the pursuit of ideas/wisdom (Eve famously picked and ate an apple from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden and of course Newton came up with his theory of gravity, apparently because an apple fell on his head):



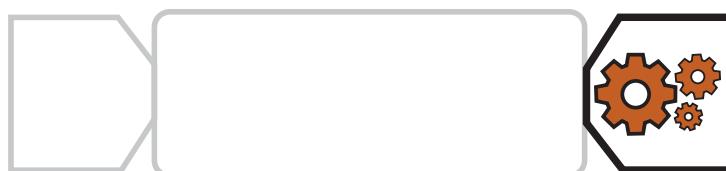
- **Verb > ACTION**

Verbs are ‘doing words’ and often explain what is happening to the subject (topic). If the verb is aligned with an adjective (e.g. old, new, large, small, economic, political) or an adverb (e.g. quickly, slowly, usually, precisely, eventually), they indicate processes, change and types of movement. There may be other verbs in the sentence (e.g. auxiliary verbs, phrasal verbs and modal verbs), but what we are interested in here is the main verb/action in the sentence, the focal point around which the meaning and action of the sentence revolves. Consequently, it is easier to think of the verb section of the sentence as the ACTION section. This section is a crucial part of communicating a clear and compelling argument, and again it needs to be as precise as possible (avoid nominalisations – see below), and needs to have action at its core. It is for this reason we can visualise the action section as like a moving wheel, and its location at the centre of the Christmas Cracker template highlights its significance as a driver of the argument:



- **Object > DETAIL**

The object of the sentence is the thing that is ‘acted upon’ by the topic and the verb, and it provides explicit new detail regarding what the sentence is about. It is the main point of the sentence and adds new information, so a better label for this is DETAIL. The detail section drives forward and clarifies the argument, and since it contains the new information, ‘communicative dynamism’ often peaks in this part of the sentence. The best way of visualising this part of the sentence, then, is as a set of consecutively smaller cogs (this an especially relevant image to think about given that this part of the sentence not only provides new detail but explanations as to why things are as they are):



Again, ensure that you don't deprive your sentences of clarity, detail, emphasis and argument by burying detail in abstractions.

TIPS FOR THE ENDS OF SENTENCES



Place the emphasis of your argument at the end of your sentences.



Put the new, complex detail of the topics at the ends of sentences.



Use the very last word of sentences carefully – this is where you should place your greatest emphasis and most insightful new ideas. In the case of using the rule of three at the end of the sentence, end with the most important/significant.



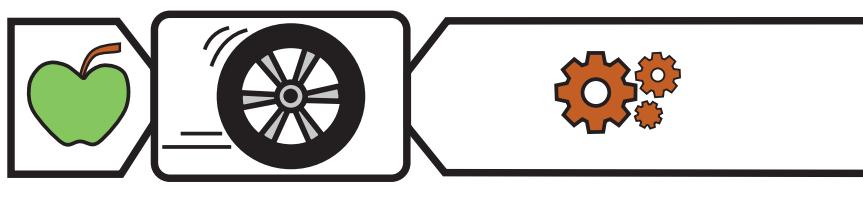
You can also think of the last words of sentences as a little like signallers and discourse markers. The last words often indicate what the next sentence will be about or what the next sentence will build upon, so ensure that the final word of your sentences express clear, concrete ideas and thoughts (a little like in the A. A. Gill extract).

Common sentence structures

As we have already seen, the English language contains four main sentence structures that comprise of clauses. Let's examine each in turn and map them onto the Christmas Cracker templates:

1) Simple sentences

These express a complete thought (independent clause) that can stand on its own without the assistance of other sentences or clauses (e.g. Freud had a huge impact on psychoanalysis). Here we have a TOPIC (Freud), ACTION in the form of a verb (impact), and a new piece of information or DETAIL (psychoanalysis). This type of sentence can be visualised thus:



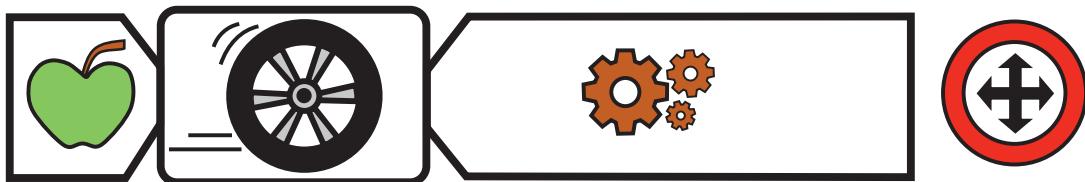
Freud

had a huge impact

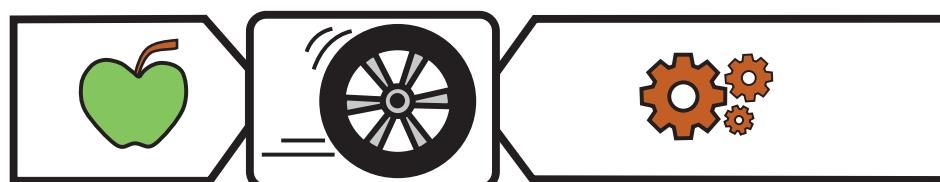
on psychoanalysis.

2) Compound sentences

These sentences express two independent, but related, complete thoughts/clauses that are joined using a conjunction (e.g. Freud had a huge impact on the field and his theory of dreams remains the cornerstone of psychoanalysis). Both parts of the sentence, either side of the conjunction 'and', can stand alone and still make sense as complete thoughts. This type of sentence can be visualised like this:



Freud had a huge impact on the field and



his theory of dreams remains the cornerstone of psychoanalysis.

3) Complex sentences

This type of sentence expresses an independent, complete thought/clause and a dependent, incomplete thought/subordinate or relative clause. Subordinate/relative clauses cannot stand on their own as they do not express a complete thought. Often they contain only a topic and a verb, and will be connected to a main clause via a conjunction (subordinate clauses) or a relative pronoun/adverb (relative clauses). Subordinate/relative clauses add supplementary and possibly non-essential detail to the main clause and qualify ideas. As such they act as additional thoughts, and can thus be represented as a thought bubble. Complex sentences, then, can be visualised in the same way as the simple sentence, but with the addition of a ‘floating’, dependent thought (thought bubble), which can appear anywhere within the sentence. Here are some examples:

Example a)



Freud's conception of dreams, despite being superseded, is still a valid psychoanalytical tool.

Example b)

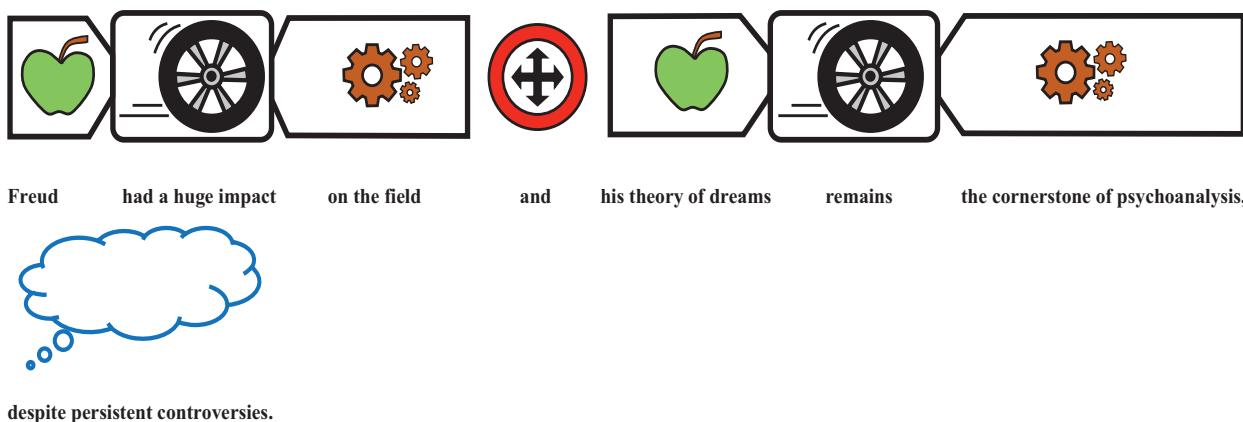


Despite being superseded, Freud's conception of dreams is still a valid psychoanalytical tool.

Note: the subordinate/relative clause can appear anywhere within the sentence and you must ensure that they are surrounded by commas to mark them off from the main clause.

4) Compound – complex sentences

These sentences express two independent, complete thoughts and one dependent, incomplete thought/subordinate/relative clause (e.g. Freud had a huge impact on conventional thought and his theory of dreams remains the cornerstone of psychoanalysis, despite persistent controversies). Again, the dependent clause can again appear (or ‘float’) anywhere, but in this version, it can be visualised thus:



TIP



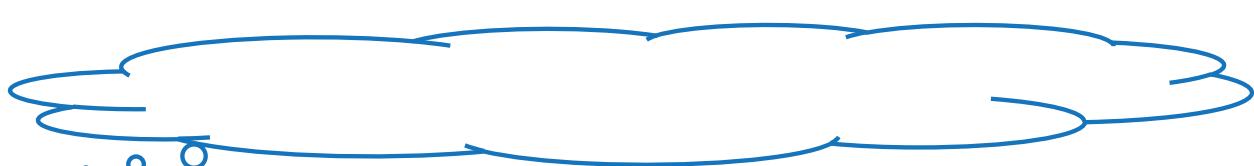
Use a subordinate/relative clause as a summative modifier. As you can see in the example above, the second main clause ends with detail (psychoanalysis) and can end there, but the final three words clarify the situation by adding the caveat that there were controversies. In other words, it sums up the situation and modifies/clarifies it by adding an additional level of detail. As such, the given to new, ‘big picture’ to detail sequence is maintained, and if anything enhanced. This can be a useful strategy for demonstrating that you know more than you are really saying, but in only a few words.

Putting it all together

Let’s take a look at the academic sentences from the domestic violence example from earlier and see how they can be mapped onto these Christmas Cracker templates:



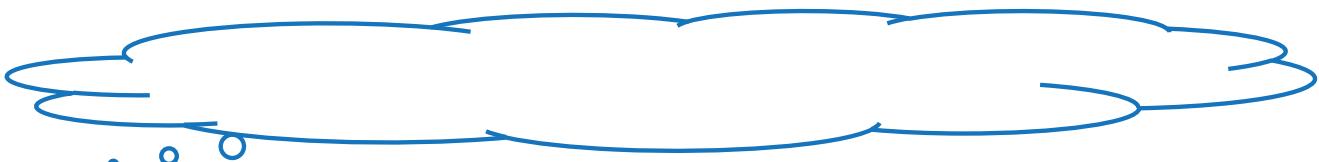
Legal responses to the issue of domestic violence are far from satisfactory.



Although CPS reports suggest that ‘highest volumes ever’ of domestic violence referrals were charged last year (over 70,000 [CPS 2014b]),



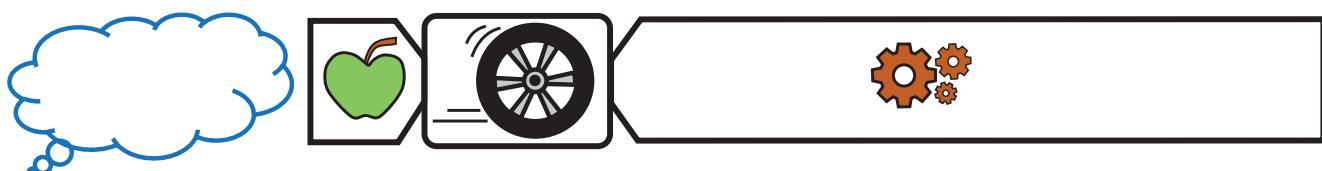
there are numerous significant counterarguments which point out inadequacies in the legal framework and its ambiguous definitions.



Despite repeated, valid attempts to create a definition of domestic violence which encompasses a wide array of actions (Smith, 1999 and Jones, 2001)



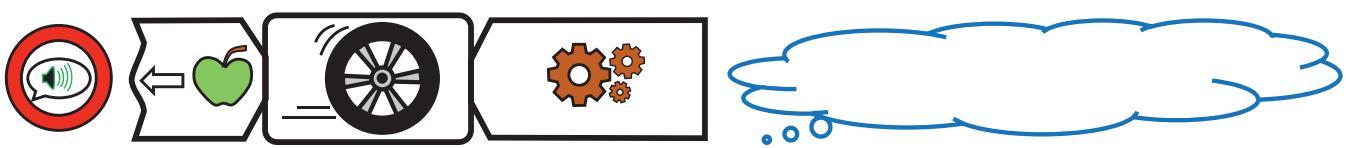
the notion of domestic violence as meaning physical beating, remains the 'dominant view' (Stark, 2007, p.84).



As Stark (2007) has testified, victims are reluctant to acknowledge their situation absent of physical violence (p.111).



Furthermore, no specific 'domestic violence' offence exists, with instances being artificially categorised as regular offences instead.



Indeed, they are mostly classified as 'common assault', which does not accurately reflect the severity of domestic violence.

Now it's your turn

Use the templates covered in this chapter to map out the remainder of the extract:

Additionally, state liability for failing to prevent domestic violence, though welcome, is set to a very high threshold (*Osman v UK*),

and as such may not be robust enough to have much effect domestically save in exceptional circumstances (Burton, 2910, p. 134).

Common problems with sentence structures

Despite your best efforts, and despite using the templates recommended here, you could find that because of your dyslexia your sentences may still wander and perhaps be grammatically incorrect. Remedyng this will require practice, perseverance and extensive editing (perhaps with the help of your dyslexia tutor or Learning Support Advisor), but this is something that every writer, irrespective of dyslexia, encounters. The editing and proofreading process is covered in the next chapter, but regarding sentence structures, it is worth looking at some of the most common sequencing or grammatical mistakes here so as to reinforce and further demonstrate the function of sentences as a means of driving forward your argument and presenting new ideas.

Problem 1): taking too long to get to the topic

Readers need to be able to get to the topic of the sentence and see what it is about as soon as possible. If you take a long time to get to the topic the reader will become disorientated or bored and your sentence will lack clarity and confidence (the argument will also be more obscure). For example:

Problematic sentence:	Commentary:
<p>Notwithstanding multiple controversies and disputes, it can be argued that the claim that global warming is responsible for increased rainfall is largely a myth.</p>	<p>Here, the topic is <u>global warming</u>, but the writer takes us on a circuitous and somewhat repetitive journey through various details and no less than 13 words before actually even mentioning it. The writer needed to have been far more explicit, upfront and confident in getting to the topic.</p>

Amended sentence	
The premise that global warming is responsible for increased rainfall, although controversial, is largely a myth.	This version not only eliminates needless repetition but gets to the topic far more quickly (3 words). This makes the sentence clearer and shorter, and it also sounds far more confident and emphatic.
Problematic sentence (topic as pronoun):	Commentary:
Despite claims to the contrary, and notwithstanding detailed longitudinal studies, <u>this</u> has become increasingly accepted as the dominant view.	There is again a long build up in the form of subordinate clauses here, but the lack of clarity and directness is exacerbated because the topic ('this') is not immediately referred to and is too far away from the detail provided by the previous sentence.
Amended sentence:	
Indeed, <u>this</u> has become increasingly accepted as the dominant view, despite claims to the contrary and detailed longitudinal studies	Here the topic ('this'), more immediately refers to the previous sentence and as such its meaning is more easily perceived.

Problem 2): topic and verb/action too far apart

Having introduced the topic, readers also need to get to the action as quickly as possible. Try not to separate the topic and the action or again you will not only make your sentences unclear, but you will disorientate, frustrate or even bore your readers. For example:

Disjointed/unclear sentence (topic and action separated):	Commentary:
Hambrick, in 'Upper Echelons Theory' (2007), <u>proposes</u> that executive decision-making is a crucial factor in determining the performance of businesses.	Here, the main verb/action ('proposes') is separated from the individual doing the proposing (Hambrick), which makes the sentence awkward and interrupts the flow of ideas.
Amended version:	Commentary:
In 'Upper Echelons Theory' (2007), <u>Hambrick proposes</u> that executive decision-making is a crucial factor in determining the performance of businesses. OR PREFERABLY <u>Hambrick (2007) proposes</u> that executive decision-making is a crucial factor in determining the performance of businesses.	In this version, we move more specifically from the topic/given ('Upper Echelons Theory'/ Hambrick) to the action rather than that transition being interrupted by backtracking in order to clarify where Hambrick said it. However, we are now back to the problem outlined above, namely that we take too long to get to the topic. We could just get to the point even more swiftly by omitting the detail about the publication – this can simply go in the bibliography and it saves words. Again, notice how the amended sentences are much more confident and emphatic.

Disjointed/unclear sentence (topic and action separated):	Commentary:
<p>In Jones's 'employment anxiety' hypothesis, the idea that it will induce greater social buffering in perceived loss contexts compared to perceived gain contexts, represents a key <u>oversimplification</u>.</p>	<p>In this sentence, the given/subject (Jones's 'employment anxiety' hypothesis) is separated from the principle action ('represents a key oversimplification') by the detail (21 words separate them). The sentence has also ended with a verb, which not only sounds awkward, but does not adhere to the subject → action → detail Christmas Cracker template.</p>
Amended version:	Commentary:
<p>Jones's 'employment anxiety' hypothesis <u>oversimplifies</u> the issue because of his presumption that it induces greater social buffering in perceived loss contexts compared to perceived gain contexts.</p>	<p>In this version, the student has grouped the topic at the start, and it is quickly followed by a definite verb as opposed to a nominalisation ('oversimplification'), thus getting to the action more swiftly and making the sentence sound more emphatic and confident. The transition from given/subject to new information is also far more explicit.</p>

TIP



Avoid slow build ups – you're not a creative writer trying to build suspense! Get to the topic and the action as quickly as possible. Don't labour the obvious and avoid excessive 'throat clearing' words such as 'actually', 'basically', 'generally', 'practically', 'really' and 'certain'.

Problem 3): using nominalisations rather than verbs

Nominalisations, or 'zombie nouns' as Helen Sword (2012) calls them, obscure clarity and impede upon 'communicative dynamism' by turning action into abstract ideas and things (nouns). While some academics might like them as a way of sounding impenetrably intelligent, and while they can be useful for expressing complex ideas, it is best to use them sparingly. You can often spot nominalisations because they are words that typically end in 'tion', 'ance', 'ence', 'ment', 'ness' or 'ity'. Try to strike a balance between using nominalisations to show sophistication, depth and concision (as I have just done here!), and using plenty of verbs (action) to drive your argument forward, articulate your voice and give your writing clarity. Remember, readers expect actions to be in verbs.

Action buried in nominalisations:	Commentary:
<p>The <u>assumption</u> within this model that all RNAs are inherently problematic is an <u>oversimplification</u> of the transcription process.</p>	<p>The nominalisations here are highlighted in red but also notice that because of the use of nominalisations, the main action (oversimplification) is some distance away from its topic (this model). Notice that the nominalisation, 'transcription', is not highlighted. This is because it accurately describes a technical/scientific, complex process, and as such it should remain.</p>

Amended sentence (action in verbs):	
This model oversimplifies the transcription process, because it assumes that all RNAs are inherently problematic.	In this version, the nominalisations have been turned into verbs, thus rendering the action of the sentence much more emphatic. The whole sentence is thus clearer, more confident and has more energy. Note also that the sequence of ideas has been altered to eliminate the gap between the topic and the action, which again improves readability and directness.

TIP

Be careful to keep nominalisations that condense or clarify complex meaning and encompass big issues (e.g. acculturation, fermentation, interdisciplinarity, clarity, decision, argument). In these cases, consider making the nominalisation the topic or detail of your sentence rather than the action.

For everything you could want to know about nominalisations and ‘zombie nouns’, see Helen Sword’s fantastic video which will give you an excellent insight into how they work and how they rob your sentences of action: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNlkHtMgcPQ.

Problem 4): action and detail too far apart

This advice is similar to that regarding long build ups and long distances between the topic and the action but here we are considering one of the most important parts of the sentence because it is here that ‘communicative dynamism’ is supposed to peak. Once you have given the sentence action, don’t waste time getting to the detail by adding unnecessary or distracting material (such as non-essential subordinate/relative clauses or excessive wordiness). For example:

Distance between action and detail too great:	Commentary:
Atomic potential has been oversimplified because RNAs, the like of which may or may not have relatively little bearing on defunct models, are inherently problematic.	The subordinate clause here (15 words) splits the action (oversimplified — which is clearly a critical part of the argument) and the detail (inherently problematic). It distracts the reader with largely unnecessary detail and ‘waffle’.
Amended version:	
Atomic potential has been oversimplified because RNAs are inherently problematic.	Here the writer wastes no time in getting from the action to the detail (they are barely separated at all). As such it again sounds far more compelling, emphatic, confident and clear. If necessary, the omitted detail can be added onto the end, either in brackets, as a new sentence, or as a summative clause.

Problem 5): sentence fragments

Each sentence/main clause ought to be grammatically complete and capable of standing alone as a self-contained thought (usually containing a topic, action, detail, main clause/subordinate clause). However, if you try turning subordinate clauses into complete sentences/independent clauses they become sentence fragments because something will be missing (e.g. the topic, action or detail). For example:

Disjointed/unclear sentence (sentence fragment):	Commentary:
Tests on the subject's DNA profile have produced some unusual findings. Traces of genome strands from Latin America and Sri Lanka.	The first sentence is fine, as it contains a topic (tests on the subject's DNA profile), action (produced) and detail (unusual findings). However, the second sentence lacks both a topic and a verb (action). The topic is clearly the same as the previous sentence, but having ended that sentence and started a new one, the student has broken the bond between them and the second sentence cannot stand alone as a complete idea. It needs to be a subordinate clause.
Amended version:	
Tests on the subject's DNA profile have produced some unusual findings, such as traces of genome strands from Latin America and Sri Lanka.	In this version, the sentences are connected via the conjunction 'such as', and the second part of the sentence becomes a subordinate clause.

Problem 6): sentence sprawls

With sentence sprawls, students can go in the opposite direction to that of sentence fragments and have too many equally weighted/important phrases joined by commas. For example:

Disjointed/unclear sentence (sentence sprawl):	Commentary:
The exhibition of Blake's engravings was to be held at the Bodleian Library in January, but not all the keynote speakers could attend, so it was rescheduled for February at the Ashmolean instead.	There are simply too many independent clauses bolted together here, and the poor reader hardly has a chance to catch a breath or collect their thoughts. The sentence needs breaking up so that the topics, actions and details are clearly separated and the appropriate structure (simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex) is followed.
Amended version:	
The exhibition of Blake's engravings was to be held at the Bodleian Library in January. Not all the keynote speakers could attend, so it was rescheduled for February at the Ashmolean instead.	This is much clearer as the ideas have been broken up into a simple sentence and a complex sentence. It is easier for the reader to decipher what is going on and sounds more emphatic.

TIP

Ensure all your sentences express complete ideas. Follow one of the main sentence structures (simple, compound, complex, compound-complex) and make sure that you incorporate all the core ingredients (topic, action and detail). If you can't see these, check/amend your sentence structure. Use the templates to help you.

Problem 7): misplaced or dangling modifiers

Your marker might well write the word 'dangling' next to some of your sentences, which can be very puzzling. A dangling modifier is a phrase or word that modifies something not clearly expressed within the sentence. They usually take the form of adjectives/adjectival phrases and adverbs/adverbial phrases. For example:

Misplaced/dangling modifier:	Commentary:
Upon conduced the research, genetic modification still seemed confusing.	<p>The opening phrase here modifies something that is simply not stated in the sentence – namely the student doing the research into genetic modification. The main 'doer' of the action is absent, and as such it almost sounds as though it is genetic modification that is confused, not the student. One of the best ways around the problem of writing dangling modifiers is to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) the sentence has a clear 'doer'/subject of the action; and b) the 'doer'/subject is placed in the opening of the sentence or main clause so that they become the topic.
Amended version:	
<p>a) Upon conducting the research, the student found that genetic modification still seemed confusing.</p> <p>b) The student, upon conducting the research, still found genetic modification confusing.</p>	<p>In a) the 'doer'/subject/topic has been placed after the subordinate clause, thus making the main clause follow the topic (the student), action (found) and detail (genetic modification still confusing) sequence. It's now clear that it is the student, rather than genetic modification, which is confused.</p> <p>In b) the subordinate clause has been shifted to the middle so as to put the student into the topic position. All in all, this makes the sentence clearer and more focused.</p>

Summary

- For dyslexics, sentences and grammar are two of the hardest aspects of writing. This is partly because it involves sequencing, but also because the rules of grammar are so abstract. Use the templates as a starting point to help you understand the ‘bigger picture’. Understanding why sentences are structured in the way they are will help you to write them.
- Practice makes perfect. Use the templates and keep practising by writing random academic sentences. Try writing with the templates initially (these can be downloaded from the companion website), and then put them to one side as you build skill and confidence.
- Initially, don’t get bogged down trying to make every sentence perfect. Depending on how you work best, you could just write down your thoughts as fast as possible (this is known as ‘free writing’) and then re-organise them later using the templates. Try different techniques and ways of working to see what’s most effective for you.

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Proofreading and editing

Dyslexia, for me, is rather like being a six-fingered typist on LSD.

(Stephen Richards, prolific author, director and owner of Mirage Publishing)

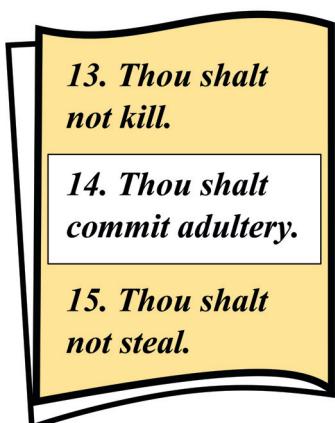
If you have had a dyslexia assessment, then it is likely that when your work is marked allowances will be made for spelling and grammatical errors. Students are often given stickers to attach to their assignment requesting that the assessor mark sympathetically and focus on content and argument/ideas rather than the surface errors dyslexics typically make. However, this is not to say that you shouldn't make every effort to get your work right and to eliminate as many errors as possible. This is not only important because funding for proofreading through the Disabled Students' Allowance is increasingly rare, but because practising proofreading and editing will set you up well for future employability and will help you avoid any slip-ups that may impact upon your chosen career, irrespective of what 'reasonable adjustments' employers are legally obliged to make.

Famous proofreading and editing gaffs

There have been numerous famous instances of even non-dyslexics failing to proofread or edit their work. This can cause immense problems and embarrassment and highlights why proofreading and editing is so important. Some well-known examples include:

- 1) In 1988, the University of Wisconsin handed out more than 4,000 graduate diplomas with the incorrect spelling 'Wisconson' typed at the top of every certificate! The error was finally spotted 6 months later. Officials denied that the university had failed to proofread, claiming that they had checked all the certificates, but only to verify the spelling of the students' names and degree subjects!





- 2) In 1631, a printer in London produced 1000 copies of the Bible with a crucial mistake in the Ten Commandments. King Charles I fined the printers and demanded that all 1000 copies be burnt, although seven copies survived!

- 3) Early in 2010, Gregorio Iniguez, director of the Chilean mint, was fired after he authorised the production of 1.5 million 50-peso coins that incorrectly spelt the country's name as 'Chiiie'. Unfortunately, by this point it was too late, and the coins are still in circulation!

(Vappingo, 2017)



Grammar and spell-checkers – help or hindrance?

One of the problems today's students face is an overreliance on technology. There is often an assumption that word processors, voice recognition software and grammar-checkers will eliminate all of your mistakes and 'typos'. They DO NOT! Indeed, they can often be the cause of them. The following sentence was once submitted to me in a student essay:

The effects of depression can be very decapitating.

What the student meant was 'debilitating', but the word processor autocorrected it to 'decapitating', which obviously means something very different indeed.

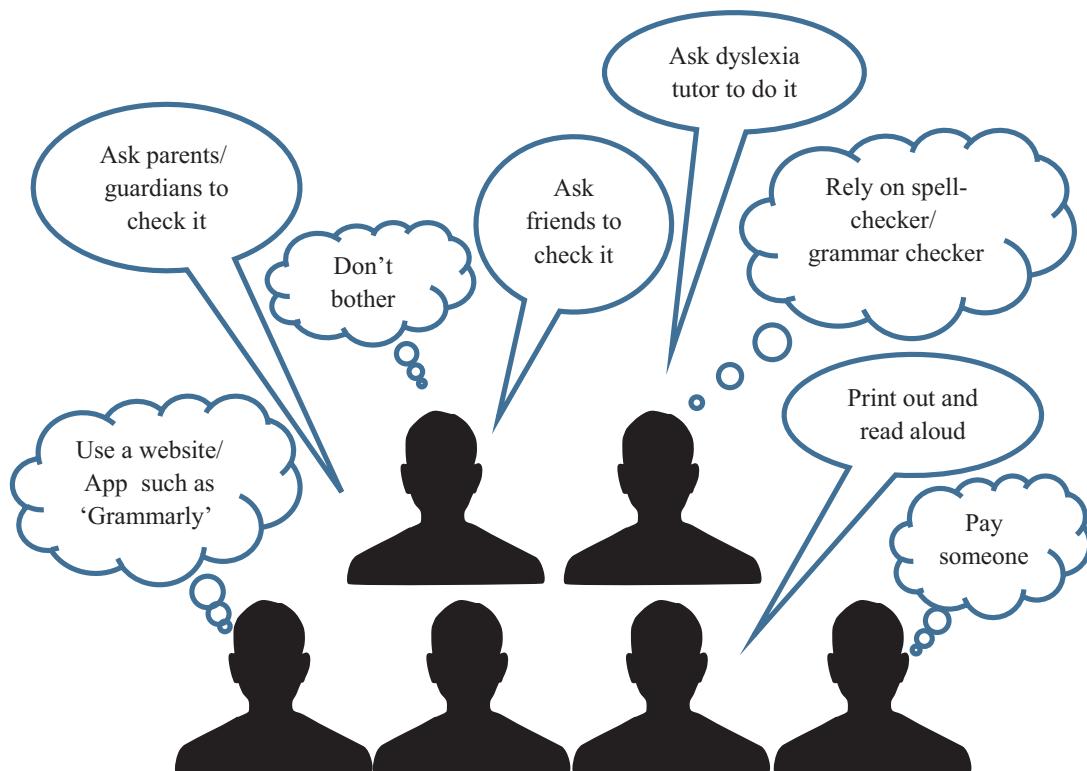
Similar problems blighted the life of the dyslexic writer, A. A. Gill, and for this reason he rarely communicated to his editors and publishers via email or computer. In an interview on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme on 12 December 2016, Helen Hawkins, Gill's editor at the *Sunday Times*, revealed how she had found a rare email from him in which he had typed 'intestine' instead of 'interesting' (BBC, 2017). This is undoubtedly an example of the auto-correct function or the spellchecker in action, and because dyslexics often mix up the ordering of letters, it's very easy to see why an automated computer predict function should confuse 'intestine' with 'interesting', as many of the letters are the same. But even non-dyslexic, professional writers, editors and publishers can be caught out. For example, the website www.bookerrata.com (which specialises and delights in charting errors in published works) brands the novel *Under the Volcano* by the acclaimed author Malcolm Lowry (as published by Perennial Classics in 2000), as 'horrendous' as it contains 39 errors, of which the following is merely a sample:

Page Number:	Error:	Correction:
ix	'not jut of himself but of a phase of history'	just
16	'he lit a new cigarette form the one he'd been smoking'	from
22	'but he waiter . . . refused to serve them'	the
54	'his feet barley touching the ground'	barely
72	'She was sitting on the parapet gazing over the valley with ever semblance of interested enjoyment'	every
157	'Better too let them have their way'	to
158	'how could he expect to see anything so revolutionary as a hot dog in Oxford Street? He might as well try ice cream at the South Pole'	sell and on

According to Bookerrata, the ‘re-proofed’ version is only marginally better, and still only gets a rating of ‘sloppy’ (Bookerrata, 2017).

Editing and proofreading strategies

So, what exactly is editing and proofreading and how do you do it? Most students adopt one of the following approaches:



As you can see, quite a few of these clearly rely upon others, but there are many things you can do yourself to iron out ‘typos’, spelling errors and grammatical problems, as we shall throughout this chapter. It’s not easy, particularly as a dyslexic, but here are some ideas and techniques to help draw upon your visual strengths and get your dyslexia working for you, rather than against you.

Editing

According to Susan Bell (2007), editing occurs at two levels:

- 1) The ongoing edit – this is where you edit as you write. In fact, editing is often writing. It consists of the ongoing deleting, re-phrasing, copying, pasting and re-reading that occurs as you are actually composing.

For Bell, ‘you’re writing, you change a word in a sentence, write three sentences more, then back up a clause to change that semicolon to a dash; or you edit a sentence and a new idea suddenly spins out from a word change, so you write a new paragraph where until that moment nothing else was needed. That is the ongoing edit’ (2007, pp.44–5).

- 2) The draft edit – this is where you have largely completed the assignment (or perhaps a section of it), and you stop writing, take a step back, and revise what you have done, taking in the sense of the whole and the ‘big picture’.

Whichever type of editing you do, the point is that writing involves lots of revision and ‘tinkering’. As William Zinsser has advised:

‘Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it’s where the game is won or lost... Most writers don’t initially say what they want to say, or say it as well as they could. The newly hatched sentence almost always has something wrong with it. It’s not clear. It’s not logical. It’s verbose. It’s clunky. It’s pretentious. It’s boring. It’s full of clutter. It’s full of clichés. It lacks rhythm. It can be read in several different ways. It doesn’t lead out of the previous sentence . . . The point is that clear writing is the result of a lot of tinkering’ (2006, p.83).

In other words, writing is not something that can or should be left until the last minute, so time management is essential here. Forget the all-nighters dosed up on caffeine, writing frantically before a 9 am deadline. If you are dyslexic, you need to start writing early, get yourself organised and start writing little bits at a time, making gradual inroads into the word count so as to give yourself enough time for extensive revisions and checking.

TIP

Don't think of writing and editing separately. Writing is recursive, involves many revisions, reconsiderations and even new positions, even at the editing and proofreading stage. Think of the 'writing process itself', of which editing and proofreading is a part, as 'a process of discovery' (Rectenwald and Carl, 2016, p.38).

What sort of things need checking when you edit your work?

Unlike proofreading, editing involves looking at the 'big picture'. Rather than getting bogged down with spelling and punctuation errors, stick to the 'macro' level, making sure to check:

Structure and coherence – does the flow of ideas make sense? Can you map your ideas and arguments onto the Christmas Cracker templates?	/
Signposting and linking of ideas.	/
Appropriate register and vocabulary – no casual language.	/
Adherence to the question/assignment task.	/
Argument – ensure you have one, that it is well signposted and has a logical structure.	/
Concision – are you using too many words? Could you say the same thing more directly or quickly? According to Elizabeth Lyon, 'some of the most effective editing involves tightening ... Shorten a work and it becomes better' (2000, p.237).	/
Clarity – is what you are saying clear and understandable?	/
Content. Is it in the correct place and under the correct headings/subheadings?	/
Academic rigour – will it stand up to the marker's scrutiny?	/

What sort of things need checking when you proofread your work?

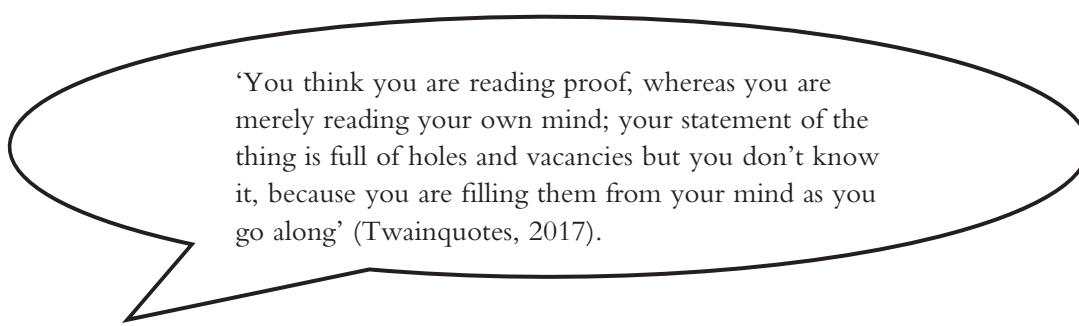
Proofreading, as already indicated, looks at the micro detail and involves very careful reading and re-reading to eliminate spelling, punctuation, grammatical or mechanical errors. Typical issues you may want to keep an eye out for include:

Spelling errors – pay particular attention to key terms and names (I once had a batch of essays on the poet, Percy Shelley, but only a couple of students managed to spell Shelley correctly throughout their essays, despite spell checking and despite having the poet's name in front of them on their books!).	/
Use of contractions or faulty abbreviations – eliminate abbreviations such as 'isn't' for 'is not' (the former is too casual) and double check acronyms for accuracy and consistency.	/

Duplication of words – don't use the same words too frequently across the same sentence or nearby sentences. Use your Thesaurus to show a broad vocabulary range.	/
Formatting – ensure the mechanics are correct (if the marker wants it double-spaced and stapled together, make sure it is).	/
References – check their accuracy and that you are using the correct style/conventions.	/
Inaccurate cross-referencing (especially of page numbers) – ensure that during editing, if you move text or ideas around you amend and check whenever you refer backwards or forwards that these signallers are correct.	/
Singular/plural mix-ups – ensure that you are consistent (e.g. 'are' is plural and 'is' is singular).	/
Tenses – ensure consistency and make sure the past remains the past and doesn't suddenly become the present.	/
Punctuation – check your apostrophes are in the correct places and that full stops indicate the end of a sentence (check for comma splices and run-on sentences).	/

Techniques for effective editing and proofreading

The problem all of us face when editing and proofreading is that we are familiar with our own work. As such, rather than re-reading the text and being able to spot the errors, what often happens is that our brain and eyes know what ought to be there, and thus see what should be there rather than what is. In other words, our eyes and brain play tricks on us. As the famous American author Mark Twain wrote in 1898:



'You think you are reading proof, whereas you are merely reading your own mind; your statement of the thing is full of holes and vacancies but you don't know it, because you are filling them from your mind as you go along' (Twainquotes, 2017).

This is doubly problematic for the dyslexic student, however, as you are likely to have made errors in the first place because of having difficulty with spelling and sequencing, without the additional tricks the mind can play on even the best of us. But additionally, the brain also tends to skip chunks of text, even if you are not 'reading your own mind'. Research has shown that the mind can skip over letters, incorrectly placed letters and even words without losing any sense of meaning. There is little scientific explanation as to why this happens, but the brain seems to prefer seeing larger units of meaning rather than small errors and can be inefficient at recognising words, possibly as a result of prediction (Davis, 2012). Indeed, we all tend to

predict text as we read (I even encouraged this in the reading chapter earlier), even if there are mistakes. This is precisely

why your Barin can Raed this

despite the obvious errors and incorrect capitalisation! Your brain simply fills in the gaps and automatically predicts what is there and what is meant. Indeed, this represents a further problem you may face as a dyslexic. As mentioned in Chapter 2, dyslexics can often lapse into a sort of semi-daydream state of ‘autopilot’ while reading, so you end up not actually taking anything in, whether this be the meaning or the mistakes.

For you to be able to edit and proofread effectively, then, you need to be able to defamiliarise the familiar – make what you have written look different, or approach it from a different angle so as to trick the brain and your eyes into thinking that you are reading it for the first time. Some ways in which you can do this are as follows:

1) Distance yourself and take a break

By not looking at your script for a day, or even an hour or so, you can come to it with a fresh pair of eyes and a more considered perspective. Dyslexics often get easily tired, so by taking regular breaks you can renew your energy and see things differently. Don’t leave it too long between writing and editing/proofreading though – the short-term memory associated with dyslexia will mean that you might forget too much of the material, which can often result in you being so fresh that you can’t remember what you were supposed to be arguing. The trick is to refresh the brain and the eyes without falling out of the ‘groove’.

2) Break the task into manageable chunks

The dyslexic brain only likes short, intense bursts of activity, so only look at short blocks of text at a time to avoid losing concentration and reading on ‘autopilot’. Indeed, this approach can be extended to editing and proofreading for specific errors. Try reading for one type of problem at a time rather than attempting to identify every single error as you read. One way of doing this is to read the script (or perhaps even sections of the script) multiple times. For example:

- First reading: check for clarity and appropriate style/register.
- Second reading: check for academic rigour.
- Third reading: check for consistency and appropriate structure (hold the Christmas Cracker templates against the paragraphs/overall essay to see if the flow of ideas align).
- Forth reading: check for adequate signposting.
- Fifth reading: check references.
- Sixth reading: check for and eliminate repetition and redundancies – tighten/shorten the essay.
- Seventh reading: check punctuation and spellings/grammar (hold Christmas Cracker templates against your sentences and see if the sequence/flow of ideas aligns).

Try various approaches and see which works best for you, and mix and match as you see fit.

3) Look for and check the action

Much of the action of your essay and its argument takes place in the topic sentences, verbs and evaluative/critical language, which are mostly found in the evaluative, persuasive, analytical and argumentative sentences. Go through the script highlighting these (perhaps in different colours) to check the logic, structure and forwards momentum of your argument. This will also allow you to cross reference key sentences and phrases with the assignment task/question to see if you are actually answering it and giving the marker what they want.

4) Focus on punctuation

Circle or highlight all punctuation marks. This will encourage you to see the structure of your sentences. Perhaps highlight commas in orange (to indicate a pause) and full stops in red. This way the colours match those of traffic lights and indicate similar functions. Then check that each punctuation mark is being used correctly and that you have enough to render your ideas clear and readable.

5) Read slowly, word by word

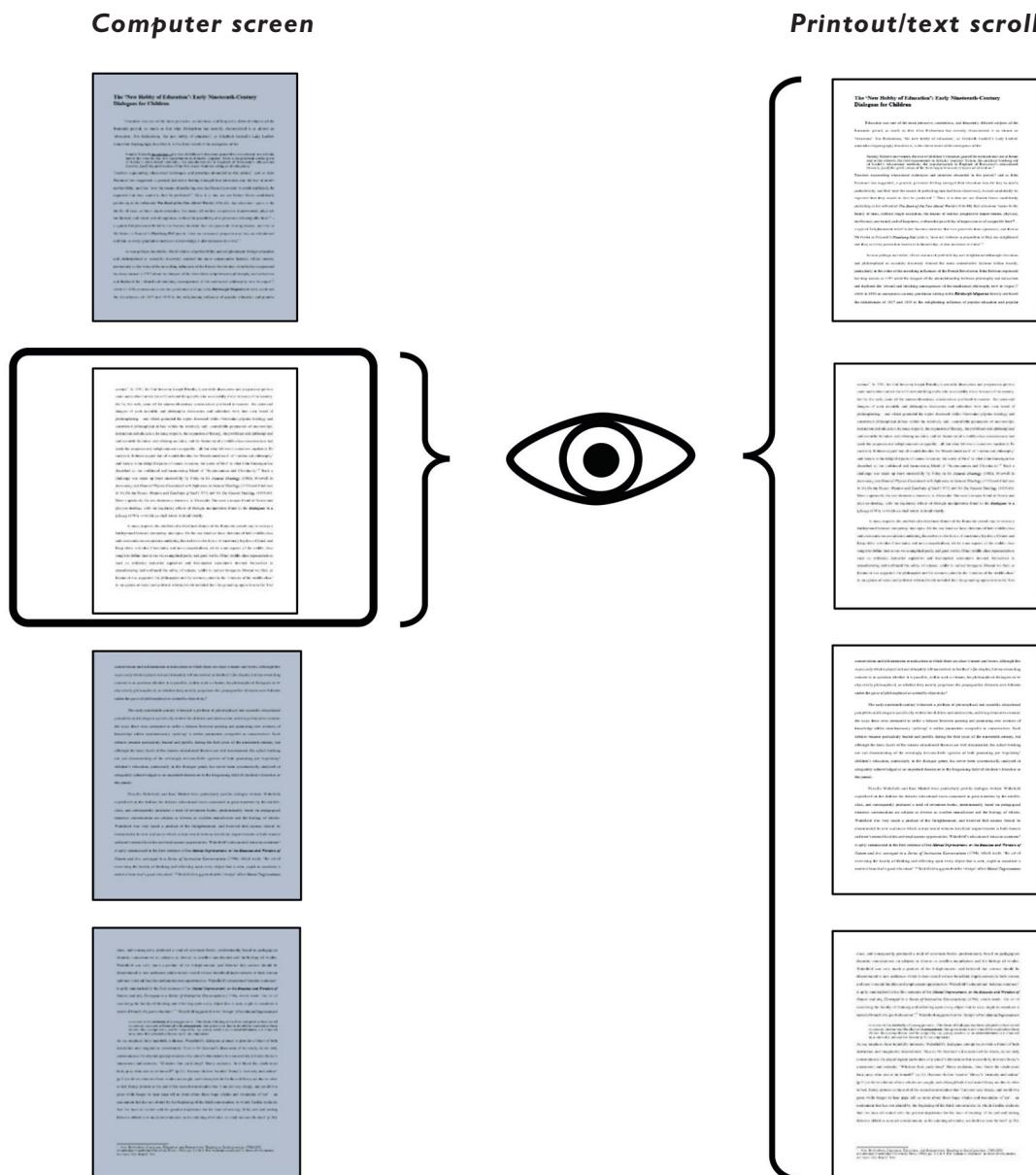
This will enable you to concentrate on looking for errors and ‘typos’ rather than taking in content. This is an intense form of reading for anyone, let alone a dyslexic, so be prepared to take very regular breaks to ‘reset’ your concentration.

6) Change the look

You need to try and trick your brain into thinking that you are reading the script as a stranger would, so an effective way of defamiliarising the familiar is to change the appearance. This can be done in numerous ways:

- Most people write directly onto a computer (either typing or using voice recognition software), so print it out. The very fact that it is on paper rather than the computer screen makes it look different and can really help you identify surprisingly obvious errors and ‘typos’. Your dyslexia/DSA advisor should be able to advise on whether there are funds available to help with the printing costs associated with this.
- Print the script out on different coloured paper (anything that suits other than white). Perhaps use coloured overlays. Some dyslexics find these very useful, particularly in respect of reducing visual stress and they can be readily purchased from online vendors such as www.crossboweducation.com/articles/dyslexia-coloured-overlays-and-visual-stress and www.thedyslexiashop.co.uk/coloured-overlays.html.
- Print out in a different font. If you typed it in Times New Roman, change it to Calibri or Rockwell (anything that takes your fancy providing it is readable). This can again trick your brain and eyes into seeing the script afresh, especially in respect of spotting spelling errors or ‘typos’. Converting a document to PDF format can also help, and it looks much more professional and again cons your brain into thinking you are reading something new.

- Lay the text out differently by creating a text scroll. One of the biggest problems with working on a computer screen, as is illustrated in the image below, is the inability to see the ‘big picture’. If you scroll up or down to check something, the passage you were just working on disappears off the screen and is ‘lost’. Using two screens can certainly help, especially if working with different documents, but the most effective way of seeing the structure, coherence and argument is to see it all at the same time. As indicated below, print out the script on single sided paper and lay it out either horizontally or vertically so that you can skim and scan both backwards and forwards for structural errors, logic and inconsistencies. You will also find that you can instantly see the ‘big picture’ and literally see the beginning and end more or less simultaneously:

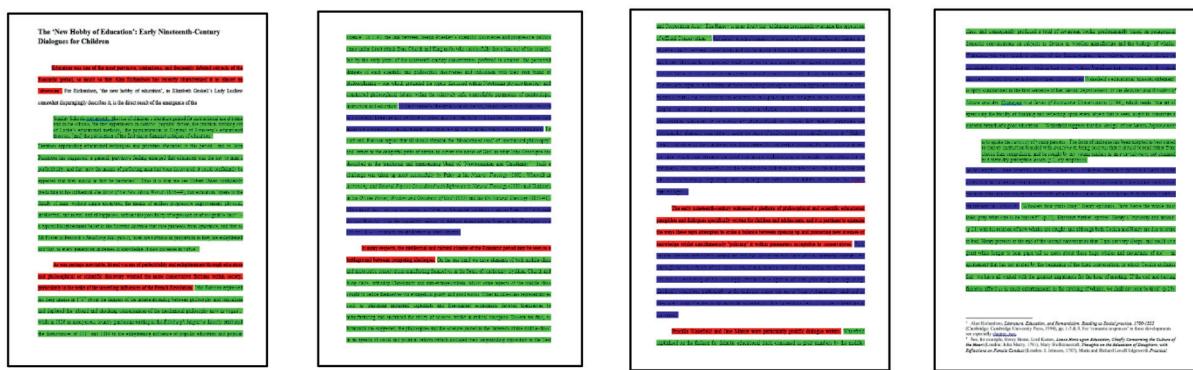


Experiment to see whether you prefer reading vertically or horizontally and lay the papers out accordingly (you may find that because you read vertically on the computer screen, reading horizontally, as in the example below, provides an additional level of defamiliarisation, so it can be more effective). You can even print out the Christmas Cracker templates and place them onto the papers to check the logic, consistency, cohesion and structure. Text scrolls can work particularly well if you highlight the topic sentences, action (verbs), evaluative/critical language and even the evidence (although you might find this disorientating if you highlight too many things at once). Below I have highlighted the following:

Red = topic sentences

Green = evidence

Blue = argument and analysis



As you can see, the topic sentences here are fine, but there is possibly too much evidence. More specifically, it can clearly be seen that the fourth paragraph contains some good analysis/evaluation but no evidence, and the final paragraph ends with evidence and no sense of final evaluation/analysis, which may need attention and modifying. If necessary, literally cut the pages, paragraphs or even sections up and try them in different places. Then amend the version on the computer, re-print and try again until you are satisfied.

7) Change the sound

Instead of reading silently, read aloud (perhaps even with a funny accent!). As Steven Pinker has noted, ‘the rhythm of speech’ will help you to identify problems, because

if you stumble as you recite a sentence, it may mean you’re tripping on your own treacherous syntax. Reading a draft, even in a mumble, also forces you to anticipate what your readers will be doing as they understand your prose.

(2015, p.115)

So, if you find yourself running out of breath, your sentences are probably too long, but also listen to the sounds and the rhythm. Obviously, your writing is not intended to be sung, or to rival the melodious sounds of a lullaby, but listen for awkwardness, lack of cohesion, flow and rhythm.

8) Try dual editing/proofreading

Like with dual reading/dual assistive reading, if you find your mind wandering and you are working on two (or perhaps even more) essays at the same time, try swapping between them so as to sustain interest and trick your mind out of the familiar.

9) Cut the waste

As already mentioned, since ‘some of the most effective editing involves tightening’, try reducing your word count by eliminating unnecessary words. Sometimes this can be difficult to do (not least because it is somewhat soul destroying pressing the delete button after spending so many hours carefully crafting your sentences). But it is often difficult to identify what is unnecessary. There is a new function in Microsoft Word that highlights certain words and recommends that you ‘consider using concise language’, but here again this can be unreliable/inaccurate. The ‘Paramedic Method’ devised by Richard Lanham (2006) is more dependable and can help you to identify unnecessary words. The Paramedic Method involves:

- a) Identifying and then eliminating too many prepositions (e.g. words such as: of, in, about, for, onto, into) and ‘throat clearing’ words. Get to the point as quickly as possible. For example, instead of
 - In Jones’s theory, income from land ownership ought to be in the region of about 12 per cent per annum (19 words), try
 - Jones argues that land ownership revenues should be roughly 12 per cent per annum (13 words).

(Note how the second example is not only more concise but more emphatic and confident).

- b) Identifying and eliminating ‘is’ verb forms. For example, instead of writing
 - This essay is an analysis of John Keats’s poem ‘Ode to Psyche’ (12 words), try
 - This essay analyses John Keats’s poem ‘Ode to Psyche’ (9 words).

(Again, note how the second example is not only more concise but more emphatic and confident).

- c) Check to ensure that the ‘action’ of the sentence is expressed in a simple verb and that it has a clear, close connection with the subject. Additionally, check for unclear or unnecessary nominalisations. As we saw earlier in Chapter 6, one way of making your sentences have more action (which makes them more readable) is to ensure that you don’t turn verbs into nominalisations or abstractions. Take a look at these examples:

Verb buried in a nominalisation/abstraction:	Simpler verb – more action:
Demonstration	Demonstrates
Suggestion	Suggests
Expansion	Expands
Proliferation	Proliferates

During editing and proofreading, check that you haven't relied too heavily on abstractions and nominalisations and make your sentences have clear action which is close to the doer/subject of that action.

- d) Make sure you are getting to the point as quickly as possible. Check to ensure that 'build ups'/'throat clearing' (introductory/contextual comments) and 'wind ups' (closing, concluding remarks) are as short as possible. Even question whether they are necessary at all. Take a look at the following example:

In terms of the research methods the authors basically used primary source data, collecting the data themselves in physics laboratories (20 words).

The 'build up' here is not strictly necessary (also note that the subject of the sentence is a little unclear) and the adverb 'basically' adds nothing of any value to the meaning/argument. The sentence would be far more concise, confident and readable if both the build-up and unnecessary 'throat clearing' were eliminated and the 'doer' of the sentence was moved into the subject position within the sentence:

The authors used their own primary source data collected from physics laboratories (12 words).

- e) The final aspect of the 'Paramedic Method' is to eliminate redundancies (pairs of words that basically say the same thing). Redundancies often occur either because they creep into the writing from outside influences in popular culture (television, advertising, journalism etc.) or as a way of trying to mask an underlying lack of confidence through unnecessary boosting. For instance,
- 'absolutely essential' sounds more convincing than 'essential'
 - 'completely eliminate' sounds better than 'eliminate'.

Redundancies can be an effective way of boosting in oral presentations, but in writing they are completely unnecessary (or should I have just written unnecessary?). Take a look at the following sentences and see if you can eliminate the redundancies – the first three have been done for you:

Redundancy:	Corrected version:
At the present time the law is vague	<i>At present the law is vague</i>
European poetry continues to remain the focus	<i>European poetry remains the focus</i>
A review is currently underway	<i>A review is underway</i>
The lecture theatre was an empty space	
The draft essay is currently being written	
This interpretation offers alternative choices	
The legislation introduced a new precedent	
The visitor will be a famous celebrity	
The village is absolutely full of wealthy millionaires	

As you will seen here, eliminating redundancies, particularly in respect of investigating the precise meaning of words, can take some thought. For example, in the case of ‘empty space’, the word ‘empty’ does not refer to anything in particular (and certainly not space), but ‘space’ is by definition, ‘empty’, but defines the emptiness as existing in some sort of area. In this case, then, you would keep space, as this is more specific and gives the reader more information. In essence, then, you need to think very carefully about the words and choose the one which contains the most meaning, detail and clarity.

10) Eliminate needless repetition

Some repetition can reinforce your point (as in recapitulation, see p.124), but elsewhere it can eat into your word count without gaining you any extra marks. It can also make your writing look laboured or clumsy. Take the following as an example:

The poem illustrates a remarkable absence of feeling. For example, in line two of the poem there is virtually no feeling, as is illustrated by the bleak description of the colours. The use of colour in the poem is bland and contains no detail to enliven it or imagery to make the poem come alive for the reader (58 words).

There are two problems here:

- 1) Needless repetition of the same words due to a lack of synonyms – this makes the passage stylistically awkward and inelegant (as highlighted in corresponding colours), and
- 2) Needless repetition of similar points/words (as is emphasised in corresponding colours and underlined).

By eliminating needless repetition the passage could be made shorter (thereby increasing room for more words dedicated to generating new points, analysis and marks), and it would sound more confident/emphatic. For example, a better version might look like this:

The poem illustrates a remarkable absence of feeling. For example, in line two there is virtually none, as is illustrated by the bleak description of the colours and the lack of imagery. This fails to make the text come alive for the reader (43 words).

Through careful editing we have saved 15 words here – 15 words that could easily be used to compose a short analytical, evaluative or argumentative sentence or introduce concession or refutation – any of which would help to increase the mark. This really highlights the extent to which ‘tightening’ through editing can make a difference to the quality your work, providing you devote some time to it before submission.

Common errors

As you can probably see, there are lots of things to look out for when editing and proofreading your work and individuals are likely to have different recurring errors needing attention. However, some of the most common mistakes that occur in student writing are as follows, so it’s worth keeping an eye out for them:



1) Unclear pronoun references/agreements:

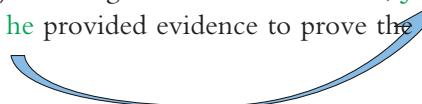
Ensure your pronouns refer to their referents (nouns). Words such as ‘this’ and ‘they’, ‘he’ and ‘she’ for instance, need to link back to their subjects/topics clearly.

For example, how clear is this sentence?

In the experiment, the presence of particles was not demonstrated, but Jones (1999) and Smith (2000) have argued otherwise. Indeed, **he** claims that their presence was self-evident, and **he** provided evidence to prove the matter.

The problems here are the references to ‘he’. Does ‘he’ refer to Jones or Smith? Does the first ‘he’ refer to Jones and the second to Smith, or do they both refer to Jones? Or Smith? A better, clearer version of the sentence might look like this:

In the experiment, the presence of particles was not demonstrated, but Jones (1999) and Smith (2000) have argued otherwise. Indeed, **Jones** claims that their presence was self-evident, and **he** provided evidence to prove the matter.



Note the fact that the ‘he’ now clearly refers back to Jones and there is no room for ambiguity.

TIP



As a final check, try looking for words such as ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’ and ‘they’ in the search facility of your word processor. Then check that what they refer to is clear.



2) Easily confused words:

Ensure that easily confused words are correct – common errors revolve around words such as affect/effect, advice/advise, their/there, and practice/practise. For example, can you spot the errors in this sentence?

Lecturers, it is claimed, enjoy the opportunity to effect student achievement positively, although **there** actual **affect** on student’s learning and future professional **practise** is hotly disputed.

The correct version of this sentence should look like this:

Lecturers, it is claimed, enjoy the opportunity to **affect** student achievement positively, although **their** actual **effect** on student’s learning and future professional **practice** is hotly disputed.

A spell-checker/grammar-checker might not identify these up so you need to pay particular attention to them. Check your dictionary if you are unsure which version of the word to use as they often have subtle differences in meaning.



3) Apostrophe errors:

Apostrophes indicate either possession or contractions. Be careful of words such as will not, cannot, your, it is and there (no contraction) and won't, can't, you're, it's and they're (contractions). Contractions are too casual for academic writing, so make sure you check for them and convert them into their more formal version. With apostrophes indicating possession, ensure that:

- The apostrophe is placed before the 's' when the noun is singular (e.g. Anna's essay, Joe's party, Smith's theory, Jones's matrix).
- The apostrophe is placed after the 's' when the noun is plural (e.g. the conference starts in 2 weeks' time, the researchers' results, the students' housing).

There are some exceptions to these rules (such as if there are more than one Jones possession becomes Joneses') so if you're unsure it's always best to check a good resource such as:

www.apostrophe.org.uk/page2.html

www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/apstro.asp



4) Misplaced commas/comma splices:

Commas indicate relationships between parts and signal the commencement of a new clause, a subordinate clause and the beginning of non-essential information. They are especially handy when making lists or using the rule of three. Without them, you can accidentally end up sounding like a psychopath. Compare the following well-known examples of comma usage:

- a) Some people enjoy cooking, their families, and their dogs.
- b) Some people enjoy cooking their families and their dogs.

In a) we have a relationship between parts and a clear list, whereas in b) no such relationship exists. As such, it sounds as though some people actually cook and eat their families and their pets . . .

Comma splices, meanwhile, are very common in students' writing and it happens when you try to join two independent clauses with a comma rather than a conjunction or a semi-colon (or by starting a new sentence). As we saw in the previous chapter, conjunctions bolt independent clauses together in a seamless manner, and often explain the relationship between the ideas expressed in each clause. Compare these examples:

- a) At the commencement of World War One the British army consisted of 400,000 soldiers, by the end of 1918 it had totalled over 4,000,000.
- b) At the commencement of World War One the British army consisted of 400,000 soldiers, **but** by the end of 1918 it had totalled over 4,000,000.

Notice how the conjunction 'but' not only welds the two independent clauses together, but clearly signposts the relationship between them (it indicates not only the contrast/increase but also its immensity). Alternatively, you could just start a new sentence. For example:

- c) At the commencement of World War One the British army consisted of 400,000 soldiers. However, by the end of 1918 it had expanded to over 4,000,000.



5) Plural/singular mix-ups:

Double check that your words are singular when they need to be and plural when they refer to more than one object/issue. It is very easy for spell-checkers, grammar-checkers and auto-predictive functions to use or recommend the incorrect version. For example, despite talking about technology and its recommendations in general (plural rather than singular), my spelling and grammar-checker can identify absolutely nothing wrong with the following version of the previous sentence and my clarifying comment at the end:

Incorrect version: It is very easy for spell-checkers, grammar-checkers and auto-predictive function to use or recommends the incorrect versions, yet obviously, there are more than one function mentioned here.

Correct version: It is very easy for spell-checkers, grammar-checkers and auto-predictive functions to use or recommend the incorrect version, yet obviously, there is more than one function mentioned here.

Even ‘Grammarly’, which is a highly rated spelling and grammar checking App, only identifies the ‘are/is’ mistake in this sentence.



6) Topic (subject) – action (verb) disagreements:

This is a problem very much related to the one above and occurs when the verb or action part of the sentence is plural and the topic or subject/noun is singular OR when the topic/subject/noun is plural, and the action/verb is singular. For example:

The genome mutate very quickly (singular topic, plural action)

The genomes mutate very quickly (plural topic, plural action)

Deforestation are exceptionally damaging to air quality (singular topic, plural action)

Deforestation is exceptionally damaging to air quality (singular topic, singular action)



7) Casual, informal or imprecise language:

Avoid the type of language you’d use in emails, text messages, or Facebook/Twitter posts. This includes not only contractions but also:

- **Slang:** (e.g. ‘kids’ instead of ‘children’, ‘nowadays’ instead of ‘currently’, ‘gutted’ instead of ‘disappointed’).

- **Clichés:** (e.g. ‘over the moon’, ‘this day and age’, ‘a level playing field’, ‘when all is said and done’).
- **Imprecision:** (e.g. ‘stuff’, ‘a bit of’, ‘really’, ‘quite’). Imprecision is also closely associated with hedging language, which needs to be used very carefully.



8) Over hedging/compound hedging:

Hedging, as we saw earlier, can have useful applications, but run through your text to ensure that you haven’t overdone it or used hedging where you can be certain of the facts/arguments. Always see if you can fill in any hedging with certainties in the form of examples, facts, data or references as hedging can often mask a lack of reading, knowledge, or understanding. Be particularly aware of the following common mistakes:

- **Compound hedging:** (using two or more hedging or qualifying words in the same sentence – this will make your sentences sound very unconfident, and it will undermine your argument). For example:

Overly hedged: The reduction in the number of Jellyfish in **some** UK waters **may** be due to global warming.

Amended version: The **20 per cent** reduction in the number of Jellyfish around **Scotland** (Jones, 2016), may be due to global warming.

(Note that ‘some UK waters’ has been replaced by a specific location and the ‘reduction’ has now been specified. The hedging regarding global warming has been retained due to lack of scientific understanding in this area).

- **Contradictory hedging:** (boosting in one part of the sentence but hedging in another). This will make your writing sound as if you can’t make up your mind! For example:

Contradiction: The 20 per cent reduction in the number of Jellyfish around Scotland (Jones, 2016), it would **seem**, is **undoubtedly** due to global warming.

Ensure that you are consistent. For example:

Amended version 1 (boosting): It is **clear** that the 20 per cent reduction in the number of Jellyfish around Scotland (Jones, 2016), **is** due to global warming. OR

Amended version 2 (hedging): It is **suggested** that the 20 per cent reduction in the number of Jellyfish around Scotland (Jones, 2016), **may** be due to global warming.

This is far from being a comprehensive list of possible mistakes in your writing, but they are certainly very common, and thus you’d be wise to keep an eye out for them. Look at feedback from your markers and previous essays. You may find that you have particular proofreading and editing errors that appear repeatedly, so hone in on those mistakes and practise identifying and correcting them.

Summary

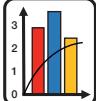
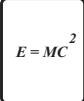
- Don't leave editing and proofreading to the last minute – making time to re-draft, polish and check your work will reap dividends. You will need to proofread and edit several times to iron out all the mistakes.
- While it is true that if you have a dyslexia assessment, markers will be sympathetic towards spelling, grammar, sequencing and punctuation errors, try to present a piece of work which is as polished as possible. Aim high.
- Proofreading and editing are vital skills to learn for when you face the world of work – employers are unlikely to be as sympathetic to your dyslexia as university lecturers, despite their legal requirement to make 'reasonable adjustments'.
- DON'T rely upon your spell-checker/grammar-checker/auto-predict function – they can sometimes help but sometimes get you into real trouble. Always use a 'human eye' for checking your work.
- Ensure that your spell-checker/grammar-checker is set to the appropriate language/country! In the UK, for example, lots of students find themselves making basic spelling errors simply because the default setting of their spell-checker is US English, not UK English, thus resulting in mistakes such as 'color' instead of 'colour' and 'behavior' instead of 'behaviour'.
- Always check the overall structure of the essay (effective introduction, strong thesis statement and topic sentences, evidence is relevant and embedded effectively and analysis and argumentation which answers the question/assignment task).

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Quick reference guide

Reading skills and finding evidence

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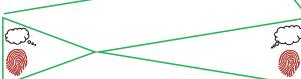
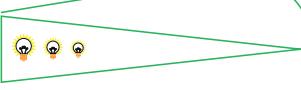
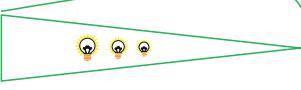
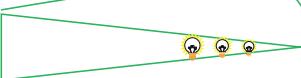
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