

[Report Writing](#)/ [Referencing](#)/ Guide to structuring your writing

Guide to structuring your writing

Writing can be a daunting prospect, but this brief guide is intended to help you through some of the steps that are involved in producing a good piece of writing.

Some steps in the process

1. **Initial Planning.** Identify your subject. What is it about this person / topic that interests you? This might help you to focus your writing - so that it tells a story rather than simply listing a series of events. You may also find that coming up with a good title helps you to focus (and vice versa).
2. **Research.** You will need to do some reading. Some of this will be online, but it is also a good idea to spend a few hours in the library sifting through relevant books. Try to be a critical reader. Particularly with online sources, you should not take everything you read at face value. Some sources are more authoritative than others. Wikipedia is great, but anyone can edit it. Other sites are more opinion pieces. This doesn't make them worthless, but it's good to know what you are reading, and how reliable you think it is likely to be. You can be a little more confident that published books are reliable sources, but you may still find that different sources contradict each other. It is ok to say in your writing that you found conflicting information in different places.
3. **Keep a record!** Take notes. It is a good idea to have a dedicated notebook or a file on your computer, into which you can take brief notes on everything you read. And remember to keep a record of all the details you will need for referencing. There is nothing more frustrating, when you come to write up, than to have a vague memory of something really interesting and relevant that you read, but no idea where to find it again. Your notes can also include references to particularly relevant passages

that you may want to quote directly - e.g. "see page 9 for a great quote on the significance of x".

4. **Synthesise.** One of the hardest parts of your task is to take all the things that you read that other people have written, and turn it into something of your own. This is one way in which your notes are very useful - the process of taking notes involves selecting the most relevant sections of a source. A good exercise, once you have done some reading and have lots of information swimming around in your head, is to regroup it by theme. For example, take all the sections, from all your notes on different sources, that relate to particular topics, and group them together. This will help you, when you come to write your piece, to discuss one idea at a time, rather than one reading at a time. In other words, it will help you to make it your own, picking and choosing the relevant parts of the different things you have, rather than simply being a summary of the things that you have read.
5. **Plan.** Start to map out what you are writing. What are the main points? What is a logical order for saying things? Which quotes will go where? (quotes are good, but should be used sparingly - nothing too long, and not too many of them). Will you use subheadings? (again, this is a good idea, but be sparing).
6. **Write!** Once you have the text mapped out, you can start to fill in the gaps. You should expect to write several drafts before the writing is in its final form.

This outline above gives a suggestion of how you might go about preparing for writing, but it is a little misleading, in that it suggests that these things happen in a neat sequence. In reality, most people find that these steps are often happening all at once - that through planning you realise there are gaps in your reading, and that when you start to write you suddenly realise what the title and focus of your writing should be. This is normal, and although you will roughly start at step 1 and work through to step 6, try to get into the habit of regularly moving between the steps and checking that you are on track and you don't want to change things.

Anatomy of a piece of writing

It is often said that a story should have three parts. In the first part you tell the reader what it is that you are going to say, in the second part you say it and in

reader what it is that you are going to say, in the second part you say it and in the third part you tell them what you have just said. It might not be sensible to go quite that far, but there is a lot of sense in this.

Your writing should start with an **introduction**. This shouldn't exactly tell the reader everything, but it should aim to capture the reader's interest, by introducing the topic and saying why it is worth writing about. It is not the place for lots of detail, but you should aim to indicate in the first paragraph or two what the main themes are.

The main body is where you get into the detail. Think about the order you tell us things (not necessarily chronological) and your use of **subheadings**. Ideally these should help the reader to make sense of the structure of what you are saying without breaking it up too much. You should also think about how you link ideas. Try to write it so that sentences / paragraphs flow naturally together. Good **signposting** can help here: phrases like "as I said above..." or "I will discuss this point further in the next section" really help the reader to 'navigate' around the writing, and to get a sense of the piece as a whole.

Finally, the **conclusion** should sum up the main points and, ideally, bring together some of the points that you made earlier in the piece. You might refer back to a question you posed in the introduction (and even answer it in the light of what you said in the main part).

It can be hard to achieve all of this, and this is where redrafting your work comes in. It really pays to read through what you have written, and check that it flows correctly. Is there enough signposting? Is it repetitive? Does it feel jumpy when I read it? Are the paragraphs in the right order? It goes without saying that you should also be checking your work for correct spelling and grammar. It can help to read your work out loud - check that it is written in sentences!