

Structure and Planning

You should not feel that you *must*, somehow or other, squeeze your essay into a set structure, there can be reasons in particular cases for favouring a rather different structure. Nevertheless, in general terms, it is always worth having the following structure in mind even when you decide to deviate from it:

1. Introduction: what you will aim to prove. (Or: thesis to be considered.)
2. Arguments for your conclusion.
3. Arguments against your conclusion; with replies to them.
4. Conclusion: brief statement of what you hope to have proved.

Introduction

I will say little about this. There is a good discussion of it in chapter 8 of A.P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing*: I suggest that you look at this if you feel unclear about how to write an introduction, or have received critical comments on your introductions. My own main advice would be: *be brief*, and *don't write the introduction until you have a pretty good idea what you will be doing in the remainder of the essay*. I would say that, in most cases, the principle aims of the introduction are: (i) To catch the reader's attention, (ii) To tell her what you plan to do in the essay, (iii) To explain why (if it is not obvious) this is worth doing.

You may well find it best to write your introduction *last*. But, above all, do not think of 'writing the introduction' as being the first thing to do after you have chosen your title. If you do this, you are unlikely to produce anything but waffle; and, especially if you are nervous about getting down to the serious thinking, you may be tempted to keep the waffle going for a page or two. While the tutor marking your essay will read the whole thing however boring and long-winded your introduction - and so will find any nuggets of gold in later sections - any other reader is likely to give up very rapidly.

Arguments For and Against

Sections 2. and 3. in my schematic structure represent, of course, the core of the essay. As I have presented this core here, it has a very simple form; and while sometimes that simple form may be quite adequate, as often as not things will be rather more complicated. The complication is bound up with some crucial distinctions that you need to recognise in your writing:

(i) There is a crucial distinction between *presenting arguments against* a certain position and *attacking arguments for* that position. Suppose, for example, that you are trying to show that a certain view - the view, say, that all killing is morally wrong - is false. To do that, it will not be sufficient simply to attack a range of arguments *for* that view. If you consider all of the arguments that have been offered for that view, and show that none of them is successful, you will have shown that, as things stand now, we have no reason to believe that the view is true: no reason to believe that all killing is morally wrong. But you will not have shown that the view is *false*. The only way to do *that* is to provide arguments *against* it.

(ii) The other side of this is that there is a crucial distinction between *attacking arguments against* a certain position and *providing arguments for* it. If you have shown that none of the arguments *against* a view are acceptable – that none of the objections to it are good – you may have done something very worthwhile. But you will not, in simply doing that, have provided any reason for thinking that the view is *true*; you will have shown only that, as things now stand, we have no reason for thinking that it is false.

(iii) Once one has clearly made the above distinctions, it will be apparent that there are numerous possible permutations that need to be kept distinct. For example, you may read an article that is very critical of some arguments for a certain position: critical, say, of arguments for the claim that there is an important moral distinction between killing someone and letting someone die. You may decide that the criticisms are not cogent, and you may devote part of an essay to dismantling those criticisms. You will, in that case, be attacking certain *arguments against* certain *arguments for* the position in question: the position that holds that there is an important moral distinction between killing someone and letting someone die. If you are successful, you will have done something important (assuming that the criticisms you are attacking are interesting and influential.) But you will not have shown that the *arguments for* the view are good ones. For all that you have so far done, it could be that the arguments for the view really are very weak: it does not follow from the fact that *these particular criticisms* of those arguments are no good that there are not other possible criticisms that *are* good. And it certainly does not follow that the view under discussion – the view that there is an important moral distinction between killing someone and letting someone die – is *true*.

This may all sound a little complicated. But don't be alarmed! We are dealing here with permutations on three simple ingredients, which we might label: *arguments for*, *arguments against* and *a position* – where this last term covers both *a claim to be assessed as true or false* and *an argument to be assessed as good or bad*. Whenever you come across, or yourself present, an argument you need to ask yourself: what is the position that is being argued for or against?

So, a particular essay might look something like this:

1. Thesis to be considered:

There is an important moral distinction between killing and letting die

2. Arguments for thesis

(i) Objections to those arguments

(ii) Replies to those objections

If (ii) the replies to the objections are good, then (i) the 'objections to those arguments' don't stand, so the arguments for the thesis stand.

3. Arguments against thesis

(iii) Objections to those arguments

(iv) Replies to those objections

(v) Objections to those replies

If (v) the objections to the replies are good, then (iv) the replies to the ‘objections to those arguments’ don’t stand, so (iii) the ‘objections to those arguments’ (that is to say: the arguments against the thesis) stand, so the arguments against the thesis don’t stand. (*If you have trouble following this, keep trying: it is really not so difficult and is worth getting straight.*)

Conclusion: Since the arguments for the thesis seem to stand up, and those against it don’t, we should accept the thesis.

It is absolutely vital to clear thinking on any issue that one keeps these distinctions firmly in mind. It is, for example, all too common for someone to knock down a couple of patently bad objections to his own view, and then to speak as if, in doing that, he has established the truth of his view – when he has, of course, done nothing of the sort.

Returning, then, to my simple four-stage structure, there are a variety of ways in which your essay might deviate from this. For example, within the section in which you are presenting arguments for your conclusion you might well have sub-sections in which you consider possible replies to your arguments. Again, in a particular essay – for example, when you are defending a view to which many people feel there are obvious and overwhelming objections – you might consider dealing with the arguments *against* your conclusion before turning to the arguments *for* it. One way, however, in which you should never deviate from the structure proposed is this: you must always present both arguments for *and* arguments against your view. If you cannot think of, or find in the literature, any arguments against your view – or any arguments that you feel deserve serious consideration – then choose another topic: either the conclusion you were going to defend is trivially obvious, or you have failed to appreciate the force of the arguments against it. Either way, you will not write a good essay.

Conclusion

You should be honest in your conclusion: if you think your arguments fall short of a decisive proof of the conclusion you should say so. If there was a counter-argument that you are really not sure that you have answered adequately you should say so. And if you really can’t make up your mind *what* the correct view on the matter is, you should say so. While ‘I don’t know whether abortion is murder’ may sound like a rather lame conclusion, that outcome can, if you have followed the above structure, be presented in a rather better light. Perhaps what you have shown is this: ‘There are extremely powerful arguments for saying that abortion is murder, but also very substantial grounds for saying that it is not.’ *That*, if it is true, is a valuable conclusion. It implies, for example, that anyone who says that it is *obviously* not murder, on the grounds that the foetus does not have a desire to live, has missed some important arguments. If you have demonstrated *that*, you have demonstrated something worth recognising.