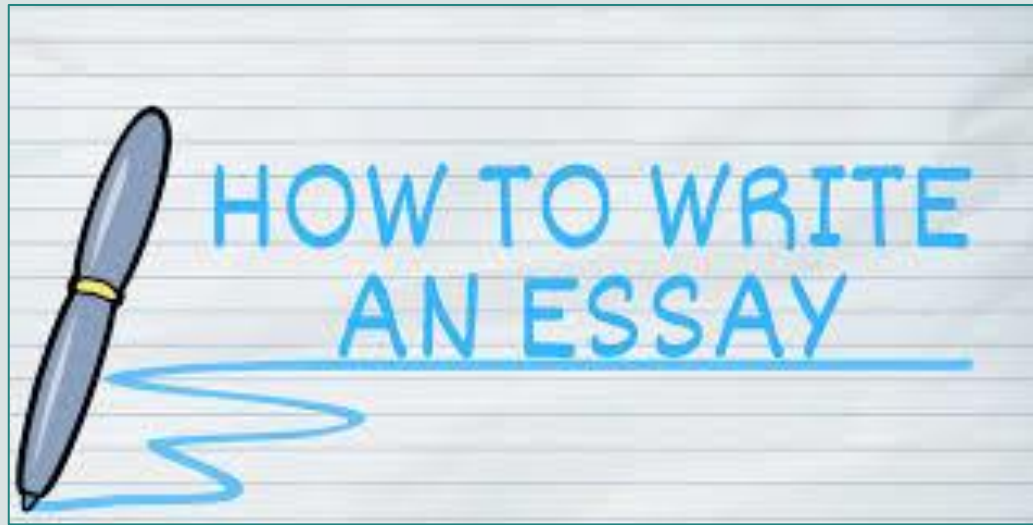


Academic Writing (including essays) in Psychology



Writing a `good essay`



Most degree programmes include essays. They are the most common form of written assignment and so for most students, being good at essays is essential to gaining good marks, which lead to good grades, which lead to the degree classification desired.

Essays are both a particular method of writing and a collection of sub-skills that students need to master during degree studies.

Have you ever considered exactly what an essay is? This is a big question, and one that is not often asked.

Typical answers might include:

Something I have to do.

A task students complete as part of a degree.

A type of academic writing.

An activity that induces dread, panic and unhappiness.

Something I gained a high mark for, or a low mark for!

This PPT will help you to produce essays more successfully, improve your grades, which will help in your studies.

An essay is:



A method of communicating thoughts from yourself to another.



A one-way conversation with your reader that sets out your thinking in relation to the question posed.



A piece of writing that uses academic and credible evidence to provide a defensible answer to the question posed.



A piece of formal academic writing, in English.



Usually an assessment that is written according to the instructions given in the assessment brief and graded using a designated mark scheme.



A piece of writing which accurately uses the relevant referencing system demanded by the university department that has set the essay task.



A logical, structured and evidenced argument leading to a conclusion that addresses the question posed.

DO NOT!

- Google the essay question.
- Search essay websites for something similar.
- Rely on Google Scholar for all of your academic source materials.
- Try to modify an essay you have already written to save time.
- Start writing before you know what the conclusion will be.
- Plagiarise - meaning to present the thoughts and others as your own (this can lead to academic misconduct charges).

- Begin the essay the night before the deadline.
- Write the essay before you have attended relevant lectures and seminars in a module.
- Ignore instructions regarding content and formatting.
- Copy a friend's essay, or someone's who did it last year (this would be plagiarism).
- Write purely descriptively without analysis/evaluation/explanation.
- Leave out references or ignore referencing conventions.
- Answer the question you wish you had been asked!

How long does it take to write an essay?



Give as much time as you can!



Starting early and setting time aside to devote to reading, thinking and then writing over a period of days or weeks results in higher grades for most people. This is because it encourages more learning of concepts, theories and ideas before writing about them. Typically, a 5000-word essay would require activity over a period of 6 weeks.



Last-minute essay writing usually results in lower grades, due to the fact it limits the amount of thinking that the essay contains and also typically means the writing is lower quality. There are some students who can gain high grades from last minute writing, but they are rare!

Do I just write or think and write?

- An essay is the written record of your thinking. Most of the time spent on an essay (up to ~80%) should be reading and thinking about the theories, ideas and understanding in your essay.
- Writing involves some thinking but should mainly involve committing the ideas you have already formed to a clear written record.

- Reading leads to thinking and all of the evidence from your reading needs to be referenced.
- Keeping a record of the sources of your reading as you prepare for your essay saves a lot of time and enables you to reference accurately when you are writing.

Basic essay structure



A **title** - This is usually the question that is being answered.



An **introduction** - Here, the main ideas are introduced, as is the structure that you will follow so the reader know what to expect.



A **main body** - This is where the argument is formed. There should be a logical sequence of **paragraphs**, all based on evidence, that show the reader the argument and that leads towards answering the question in the conclusion.



A **conclusion** - This is where the question is answered and sometimes the implications of the answer are explored.



References - Using the specified referencing style, a list of sources used in the essay should be provided.

Stages in (general) assignment writing



1. Read the assignment instructions thoroughly. What exactly do you need to do?



2. Read, make notes, think critically, repeat. This is a crucial step!



3. Make a general plan with the main points.

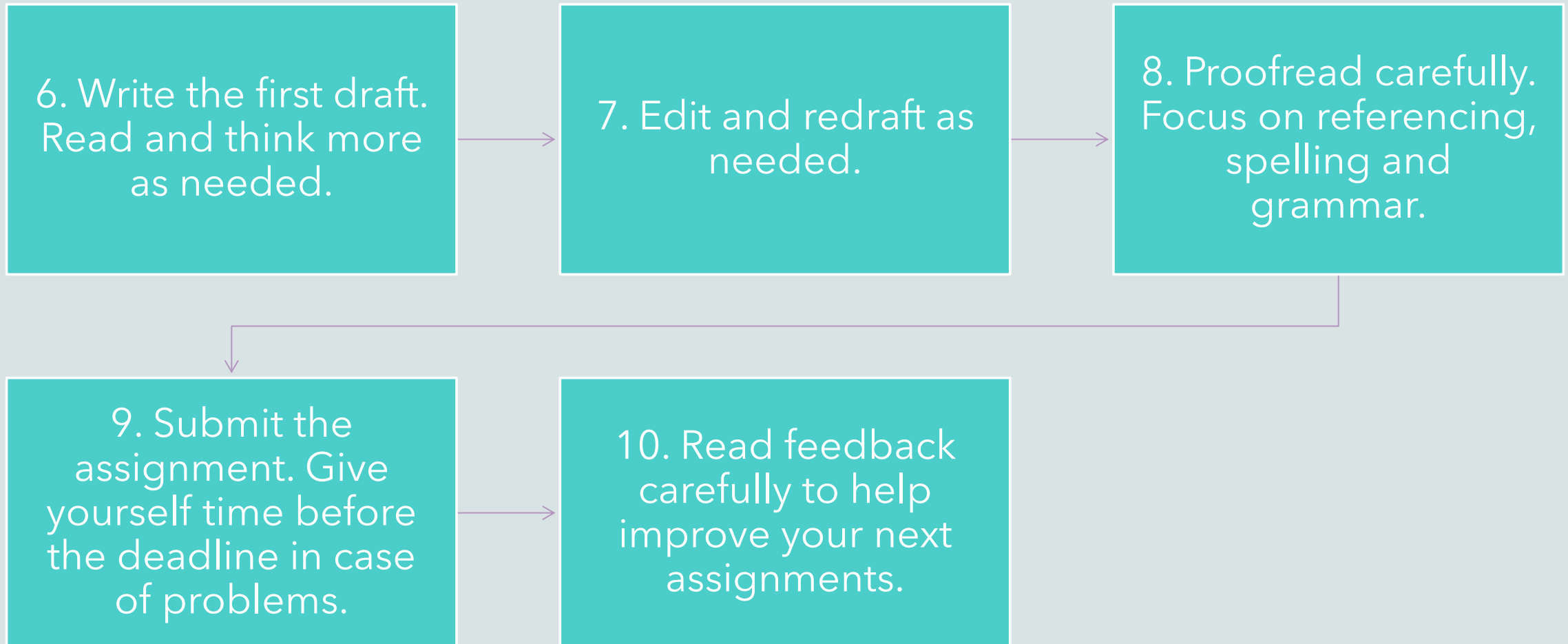


4. Make a detailed plan, focusing on creating a clear structure.



5. Check the plan. Is the task addressed fully? Are you being critical?

Stages in (general) assignment writing



Planning Structure

Once you've understood the task requirements, done some reading and come up with some ideas for what to include, you can start mapping out your assignment structure.



A good plan is key for a well-structured assignment - don't just launch into writing with no idea of where you're going!



This planning stage can also be a useful opportunity to think more deeply about the assignment and consider how the different ideas fit together, so it can help you develop your argument.



It's ok to make changes to your plan later - you might come up with more ideas, or another line of argumentation while writing. Make sure that you check the structure is still logical though!

Planning Structure

- The best way to write a well-structured assignment is to have a good plan before you start writing. What's your argument? What are the main points you want to include? What's a logical way to order these points? Don't just launch into writing with no idea of where you're going!
- To make a general plan:
 - Make a list of the information and points to include.
 - Organise similar points into groups.
 - Put the groups in a logical order.
 - Within each group, organise the points logically.
 - Check the plan to make sure it meets task requirements.

Cohesion

- If the structure is the order of your points, cohesion is what ties them together and guides the reader through your argument.
- Create cohesion using words and phrases that show the relationships between points. For example:
- **basic connectives**: and, or, but, so
- **giving more detail**: for example, to illustrate, an example of this is
- **showing contrast**: however, although, while, conversely, alternatively
- **showing similarity**: another, also, similarly, collectively, taken together
- **cause/effect**: leading to, the effect of this is, therefore, this may stem from
- **referencing words**: this/that, who, which/that, the groups, these findings
- **showing implications**: this suggests that these findings may mean that, based on this
- Cohesive words and phrases are shown in bold in this example paragraph about how language background affects maths skills development:

Example of Cohesive Words.

- The time taken to pronounce number words is **another** linguistic factor **that** could affect children's arithmetical development. If number words take longer to pronounce, fewer items can be held in working memory, **which** could affect the strategies used to solve arithmetic problems (Geary et al., 1993; Geary et al., 1996). In East Asian languages, number words are generally short, one-syllable words, **while** in English and other languages **they** can be much longer. **The effect of this** on working memory is seen in Chinese children's longer digit span memory **compared to their** American peers (Geary et al., 1993). **It also** seems to influence the choice of strategies used by **the two groups** to solve arithmetic problems, **with** Chinese children using faster processes than American children (Geary et al., 1996).

Example of what NOT to do!

- Dear Minister of Education,
- Lectures are really hard to follow, my eyes wander off and notice ceiling tiles that are not fitted correctly. I met my best friend at school, it was good for socialising and we always had a laugh. The food in my university canteen is not vegan friendly and we don't have a say on changing it. I got a 52 for my first year, this was a lot less than the three As I received for A Level.
- I am not happy at university; it is not what I thought; they said it would be like a bigger version of school. School holidays were fun, you didn't have much to do, but university holidays are not because I have to work and do essays.

Linear Academic Writing



Academic writing starts from a beginning and works through to an end. In between it will do what is required of it, like explaining an argument within an essay, or set out particular information within a report, or as in the sample below, examine an article in detail.

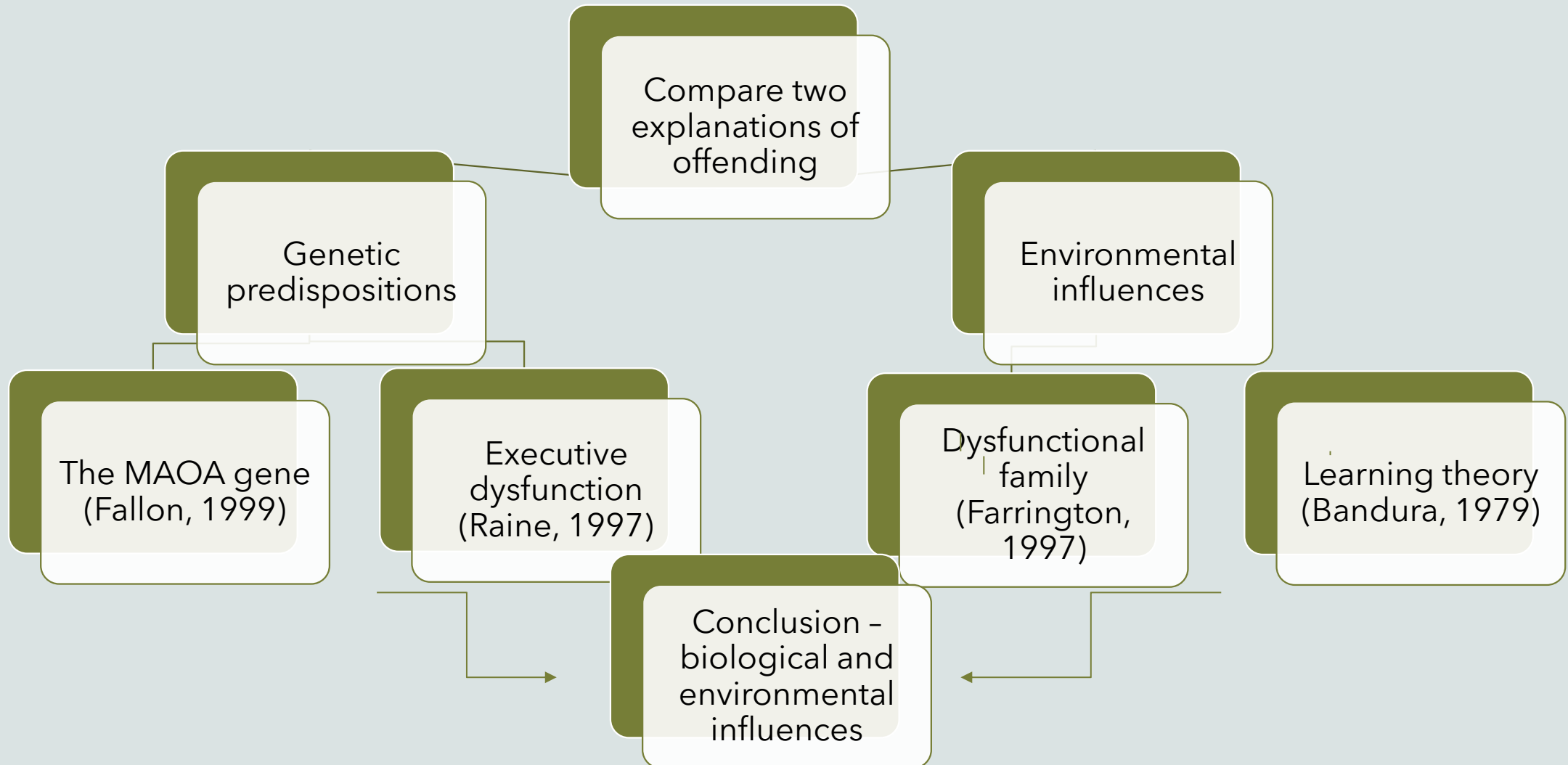


Having a linear structure marks out academic writing from some other types of writing, like diary entries or a news report, which are less likely to take the reader from a beginning to an end, but instead can be relatively unordered and haphazard in nature.



Below, there is an example of an essay plan based on linear academic writing. It should be concise, precise and written in a dispassionate way. It should take the reader from the conceptual background of the article, to the content and finish with an overall opinion (based on the evidence presented) from the author.

Example: Essay Plan based upon Linear Academic Writing



Paragraph Structure

- Essays/assignments contain paragraphs.
- A well-structured paragraph contains **one main point or idea** - all the information included is relevant to this point.
- There are many ways to structure a paragraph, but they generally all include:
- **A topic sentence**
- Development of the point
- Evidence from sources to support the point
- Critical analysis
- A final wrap-up
- (The middle features aren't necessarily sequential; they can be integrated).

Identifying an `effective topic sentence` - which of these are?

School-based counselling services may also support the wellbeing of students with dyslexia.

Gender differences in aggression have been reported since the 1920s, and findings were first summarized in narrative reviews, followed by meta-analyses (Archer, 2004).

Aggression which occurs early in life is likely to have a range of negative consequences throughout adolescence and adulthood.

This paragraph will critically analyse the limitations of the research.

A variety of targeted approaches for children considered at risk of developing poor mental health have been implemented within schools across the UK.

There are many distinctions between varying forms of aggression: reactive and proactive, and verbal, physical, and relational.

Developing your paragraph from your topic sentence

- After the topic sentence you need to expand on the point:
- explain concepts
- give more detail or examples
- clarify any required information
- This is often integrated with evidence from sources

- E.g. Gender differences in aggression are commonly reported (Archer, 2004). For instance, in adolescence boys will turn to physical aggression to solve a dispute, whilst girls are more likely to engage in emotional aggression (Davies et al., 2014). However, research conducted in youth offending populations found very little difference between the levels of aggression displayed among male or female youths (Farrington, 2007). Clearly, as Stone et al. (2016) argues, there is more to the picture than simply 'differences'. It would appear that levels of aggression between males and females are partially dependent on the situation or environment.

Remember the PEE acronym:
Point (make your point)
Evidence (to support)
Evaluate (implications)

Critical Analysis and a Final Wrap-up

To access higher grades, you also need to critically analyse the evidence.

What does the evidence mean in relation to the main point?

What are the reasons for or implications of evidence?

Why did these findings occur?

Critical comments can be sprinkled throughout a paragraph and form the basis of discussion and conclusion sections.

A final wrap-up is useful to show the reader that the point is complete and how it links to the rest of the assignment.

This could be:

A final summary linking back to the assignment title

A link showing how this point relates to the next paragraph

It might not be needed - it depends on the paragraph and how it fits into the assignment.

More on Academic Writing

The purpose of academic writing can be to...

Answer a question

Explore a statement

Present information to the reader

Explore a process

Argue towards a conclusion

The assessment brief tells you what your purpose is. You may have choices but will always have guidance as to what your writing needs to contain.

It is all about your audience – who will be reading/assessing your work?



When writing you should always think about the reader or audience.



What are you telling them overall? This may be your overall argument or the required items in a report etc.



What order does the reader need the information to be in? Is there a specific structure?



What level of detail does the reader need, to see your thinking?



What signalling language does the reader need to navigate through your writing?



What choices are you allowed to make for the reader? (What choices are made by the assessment brief).



Successful academic writing clearly communicates your thinking to your reader, and your structure and language choices are key element of this.

The beginning (Introduction)

The introduction should prime the reader for what is to come. Possible elements of an introduction are to:

Present the ideas, concepts and theories to the reader that the following writing will rely upon.

Tell the reader what the purpose of the piece of writing is.

Tell the reader what the structure of the writing will be.

Tell the reader the key questions and ideas they will need to consider.

Tell the reader what the conclusion will be (this may not always be appropriate?).

At the end of the introduction the reader should have a clear idea of what the writing will be about and how it is structured. They should be ready to read the rest.

Usually about 5% -10% of the word count/time allocation.

The `Main Body`



The 'middle' of your academic writing can be the 'main body' or an essay, or the sections of a report; it depends on the task. It has the following possible purposes.



To form a pathway for your reader, from the introduction, to the conclusion, using logical argumentation.



To include sections and content demanded by the assessment brief.



To present information in an order that supports the purpose of the writing.



You should think carefully about:

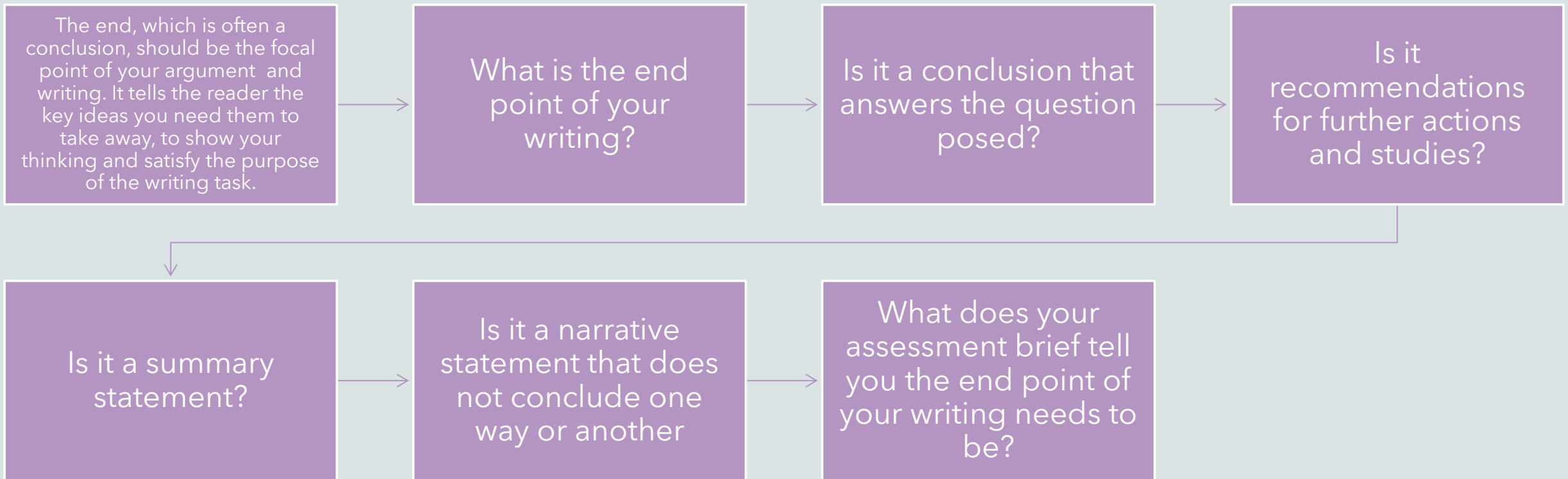


The order the reader needs the writing to be in, to show your thinking to them and to enable them to gain the information they need from each section.



What exactly you need the reader to take away from each section. What facts, information, thinking and steps towards your endpoint do they need?

The end (Conclusion).



Questions?

