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4.4 ESSAY PLANS AND ORGANIZERS

The next step is to produce a detailed plan of how your essay will be organized. Most people jot down a few points in advance of starting to write up their material. But by an 'essay plan' I mean something a good deal more organized and systematic. Two key questions are involved: What function will each paragraph fulfil? And how will you distribute across the paragraphs the ideas and materials generated earlier?

The Paragraph Structure

'The paragraph is a great art form,' said the novelist and

philosopher Iris Murdoch: 'I'm very interested in paragraphs and I write paragraphs very, very carefully.' Paragraphs are key organizing devices which signal to the reader how the author's ideas have been arranged. Starting a new paragraph is a sign that you are changing focus from one aspect of a topic to another. The first sentence of each paragraph is usually read more carefully as a clue to what the whole following chunk of text is about. In fictional material there are good reasons for making paragraphs almost the only organizing device used. The author is trying to persuade readers to 'suspend disbelief', and therefore wishes to avoid reminding you of her role. Even informative chapter headings may be jettisoned in search of a low author profile.

However, there is no very convincing reason why the paragraph is so important as a structuring device in many academic books. Frequent headings and subheadings can fulfil the same role more informatively, hence their use in textbooks and student-orientated materials, where authors are going out of their way to help readers follow their train of thought. Headings work well because they are deliberately obtrusive, rather forcefully reminding the reader of the author's intentions, and it is this quality which also accounts for their omission from other types of material. Academic authors writing primarily for other academics often cultivate a minimal presence merely because it looks conventionally elegant.

Why students rely so much on paragraphing in writing essays is harder to explain. Teachers of English in schools often cultivate a literary style derived from fictional materials, in which headings and subheadings are prohibited in favour of continuous text broken up only by paragraphs. Habits learned at school are then very difficult for people to shed in higher education. Many students are convinced that there is some rule in their subject which forbids using headings in essays. In many cases this view is fallacious. The golden rule is to use as many types of organizer as you need to structure your material clearly. But equally be careful not to overburden your essays with redundant organizers.

The decision about what types of organizers to use, and how many sections of material to distinguish, obviously depends on how long your essay will be. A short paper covering four A4

pages (about 1,200 words) should be structured quite satisfactorily by simply dividing it into around eight paragraphs. However, a longer tutorial essay of eight to ten pages (about 2,500 to 3,000 words) would probably benefit from using some headings to group paragraphs into sections. Obviously the key influence on defining the length of paragraphs is how the material in the essay argument can conveniently be grouped. You need only a manageable number of paragraphs in the essay. Each paragraph should be capable of being absorbed as a coherent unit of thought by the reader. Ideally a paragraph should include several sentences, and cover perhaps half an A4 page (that is, around 100 to 150 words). If a paragraph is longer than about two-thirds of a page, it becomes difficult for readers to grasp the argument in one go. At the same time, with long paragraphs your essay could begin to look understructured.

The two quickest ways to make an essay look completely disorganized are:

- (i) *Write without any paragraphs or headings at all.* The essay becomes a seamless web from which the reader must try to separate the main ideas without the help of any signals about the author's intentions. Alternatively,
- (ii) *Write each individual sentence as if it were a separate paragraph.* Here any reader will rapidly become bemused since a four-page essay will have perhaps 50 separate paragraphs, each of which looks as important as the next in signalling what the author judges to be a main idea.

Creating a structure of paragraphs and other organizers entails steering a careful course between these twin poles. The occasional long paragraph may be justified where it cannot conveniently be broken up. But one-sentence paragraphs should always be avoided if at all possible, since they simply devalue the usefulness of paragraphs as an essay organizer.

Sequencing Material

The next step is to take all the materials noted down at the stage

of generating ideas and to transfer them on to a reasonably detailed plan of your essay. Take a couple of sheets of paper and divide them up to create between six and ten boxes altogether (depending on how many paragraphs you anticipate in total). For each box, write down an informative heading which reminds you about that paragraph's basic role or purpose. Always avoid purely formal descriptions, such as 'Introduction' or 'Conclusion'. Every paragraph on your plan should be labelled in a way which describes the substantive ideas in that part of the essay.

Now number the paragraphs into a sequence, checking that there is a good reason why paragraph 1 follows paragraph 2 rather than vice versa, and so on through all the paragraphs. It is important not simply to arrange paragraphs in the order in which you first thought of them or already have them set out on your planning sheets. Try always explicitly to reappraise the existing order, asking what alternative arrangements would be feasible. Your earlier decision about what type of essay to write should greatly help to simplify these decisions about the sequencing of ideas. Wherever there remain a number of options, bear in mind that an essay should be cumulative in its impact, it should build an argument, with a clear beginning, middle and end which are easy to distinguish from one another. Maintaining a sense of progress and of development in the argument is essential.

Just as it is important to avoid going round in circles, so you should cover each point as completely as possible, without loose ends that involve you in cross-referencing or in reiterating explanatory material. Be on the look-out for repeated material or for the same basic point restated in different terminology. Always try to group similar or very closely connected points at the same location in the essay. Where three or four small aspects of a viewpoint, or criticisms of an approach, or facets of an example, are explained in the essay, their impact will be considerably reinforced if they are grouped together, and tend to be dissipated if they are made separately. The general rule is to say it once and say it right.

To maintain a sense of development in the argument, and to make each point once as effectively as possible, an essay plan has to build in a 'controlled release' of material. Each

paragraph needs to introduce something distinctive into the essay, whether its content consists of arguments, ideas, examples, or other applied analysis. This entails holding back on information until the stage at which it can be most fully presented and will best add to a coherent argument. For example, it is particularly important to avoid crudely summarizing or 'blurring out' key substantive arguments in your introduction, since this will create a sense of repetition when the same points are fully stated later on.

An introductory paragraph should be used only for three purposes.

(a) **To give essential definitions of key concepts** included in the essay question. Let me emphasize again that you should be very restrictive in incorporating definitional material from the question analysis stage into the essay itself. Work out the meaning of concepts for your own purposes, so that you can avoid making mistakes and can write in an informed way. But only a few bits of the work you do to clarify your own thinking will need to be explicitly defined in the essay itself.

(b) **To respecify the essay question somewhat**, if this is necessary. Where a question is so broad as to be potentially unanswerable, then you should explain explicitly how you have interpreted the question so as to make it more manageable. Similarly if a question could be open-ended (pp. 85-6, you should indicate what you see as the core problem to be tackled.

(c) **To signpost the sequence of material in the rest of the essay**. You should aim to orientate the reader to the framework of topics which you will be tackling. But do not summarize the substantive arguments given later. At degree level it is usually worth avoiding the heavy-handed philosophy of: 'Tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've told them.'

Essays written without advanced planning often feature very lengthy introductions, where the author engages in a kind of 'phoney war' of promising to tackle the question in just a minute or so. One way to avoid such protracted ground-clearing paragraphs is to set yourself a restrictive guideline, such as a personal rule of thumb that none of your introductory

paragraphs will be longer than half a page (about ten lines). Necessary material which cannot fit within such a limit (for example, lengthy definitions which really do have to be included) must then be treated not as part of the introduction but as part of the substantive argument. Some teachers even suggest avoiding introductions altogether, in favour of launching immediately into your core argument. This approach has the advantage of forcing you to work your definitions of concepts into the fabric of your main arguments. However, some signposts are always useful in any reasonably complex argument, and many essay questions do need some specification before you launch off in full flood. A short and punchy introduction can be very useful in setting an essay off on the right footing.

One final caveat on sequencing material may be useful. Controlled release of information does not mean that you should hold back unnecessarily on stating your central arguments, or that you should save up all your most original or substantive points until the end of the essay. Because most of your personal arguments will grow out of criticisms of the existing literature, there is a certain natural tendency for them to enter at a later stage. But you should beware of constructing essay plans which follow a 'dance of the seven veils' pattern, in which layers of irrelevance are progressively torn aside to reveal the core argument only in the conclusion. Getting into this habit of writing can be a liability in unseen written exams, where time constraints require you to move speedily into the core of an answer (pp. 157–60). It is possible to maintain momentum while yet moving into your major arguments early on in the essay.

4.5 COMPOSITION AND STYLE

Once you begin composing actual text new concerns come into focus, particularly difficulties of composition and of finding an appropriate writing style.

Writing-up Text

There is a very wide gap between planning an essay and writing out the argument in full. However effectively you generate ideas and analyse the question, whatever type of essay you choose to write, and however extensively you detail the organizing structure of the argument and the contents of each paragraph – converting these ideas into finished prose remains a major problem. Some common and intractable difficulties are motivational. Essay plans which seem competent and innovative on your advance sheets turn out to look routine or ordinary when written up in full. Difficult passages which seemed manageable on the outline become impassable roadblocks to further progress when you cannot express the essential points of an argument. If you get the impression that the essay is not going well, it may be difficult to nerve yourself to go on producing the appropriate quota of joined-up handwriting.

'I always write when I'm inspired,' remarked the author Peter de Vries: 'And I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning.' This philosophy perfectly expresses the point of extensive essay planning. However discouraging the task of converting a plan into text may seem, it is far less of a problem than sitting down with a blank sheet of paper to construct an essay argument in your head as you go along. Planning can never get rid of the uphill slog of writing up. But it does help greatly to reduce the 'threshold' you have to surmount in getting started, and to smooth over the 'hiccups' which will inevitably occur at one or more later stages in the composition.

A number of apparently trivial steps can greatly facilitate writing up.

(a) **Compose text in ways which you can change easily.**

Many students still write down essays in a 'neat', compressed format learned at school, for example, using single-spacing on both sides of the paper. This practice means that if you make a mistake or a wrong turning you may have to rewrite up to 500 words in order to put things right. Instead write or type drafts in double spacing (so you can insert small amounts of new material later using the alternate blank lines), and on one side

of the paper only (which reduces your words per page to perhaps 200, and hence makes it easier to revise paragraphs without rewriting preceding or succeeding material as well).

(b) **Do not be too obsessive about the finished appearance of your work.** Unlike schoolteachers, who can have fixed ideas about a 'neat' format in which written work should be produced, most lecturers in higher education will not mind reading essays in any format, so long as it is legible and makes clear the boundaries of paragraphs. They will always appreciate not having text presented in a dense mass of cramped handwriting, which is hard to read and hard to add comments to. So it is vital that you shed some of the worst inhibitions about handing in 'untidy work' which many schools spend years inculcating into their pupils, but which function chiefly to inhibit your readiness to revise anything once it is written out.

Of course, this is not to say that you should ignore opportunities to improve the presentation of your work if at all possible. Clear handwriting, or better still typed essays, neatly corrected mistakes, proper margins for comments – all of these help make a good impression on tutors. Accurate spelling is also important. Even the best planned argument can be made to look quite silly if key terms are constantly misspelled. But presentation should always take second place to securing the best substantive argument. You should never be put off rearranging paragraphs in a completed essay by a fear that lecturers will object to slight defects in presentation. Perhaps the best way to compose text is by using a word-processor, which allows you to rearrange and rephrase material at the touch of a button, and to print a 'clean' version (p. 127). Without such sophisticated tools, you can still make do by using correcting fluid and physically 'cutting and pasting' passages back together in a new sequence. The key thing is not to lock yourself into one sequence of presenting material, or to waste time trying to disguise or justify finished passages of text where the argument is defective.

(c) **Keep your essay plan under review as you write.** Converting any plan into text invariably raises some problems or avenues of development which you had not foreseen, so you should be prepared to change tack, or to discuss topics in a

slightly different order. For example, you will often find that material to which you allocated only one paragraph at the planning stage takes a good deal longer to set out, necessitating adding new paragraphs. Frequently the demands of writing finished prose stimulate further thought and digging among your sources, which in turn may trigger new insights. Similarly, some paragraphs which looked viable on the plan can end up looking weak in their full text form, and hence might be better assimilated into surrounding paragraphs.

Style

In much degree-level work achieving an effective writing style is a precondition for receiving high marks for essays or in exams. Only in the technical social sciences where mathematical or analytic ability is critical will a poor style cease to be a handicap. The converse of these propositions, of course, does not hold. Good style alone cannot suffice. It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of achieving a good degree.

What counts as 'good style'? There is a considerable range of opinion about this, both across disciplines and across individual teachers and students. Ultimately 'style' decisions are personal ones. But three generalizations can be made.

(a) **Picture your audience** and write in a manner appropriate to them. Just as pitching your essay at too basic a level involves you in redescribing material which could be taken as read, so there is no sense in which adding inappropriate phrasing at particular points will strengthen an argument. At degree level you need to avoid devaluing your presentation by including purple passages, exaggerated sentiments, or 'over the top' statements. This is not to prescribe deliberate blandness. But you should test each phrase or sentence as you write it – asking whether it advances the argument, whether you want to commit yourself fully to the viewpoint it expresses, whether it is accurate, whether it is fair, and what sort of reaction it is likely to produce. An 'extreme' statement of a view is perfectly acceptable, so long as it passes these tests. Be sure that you are

saying precisely what you want to say, and expressing views which you would be happy to support if queried.

(b) Other things being equal, **'good style' is concise, clear, and simple.** Good writers employ an extensive vocabulary, including technical terms where it is useful to do so. Necessary 'jargon' should not be avoided simply in search of a more traditionally literary appearance, since a technical vocabulary is usually much more precise than ordinary language equivalents. 'Good style' usually entails phrasing viewpoints in the most direct and accessible language, for example, by writing in short sentences. Short sentences can be more easily controlled and manipulated than those held together by complex grammatical devices. If qualifying clauses are necessary, they can be best accommodated by placing them either at the beginning or the end of sentences, where they will least disrupt the flow of language. Arguments are best presented using active rather than passive language, and verbs rather than nouns.

The key thing is to tailor your approach to the task in hand, and to avoid pretentiousness, 'contrived' phrasing, deliberate flamboyance or pomposity, and overwriting in general. There are occasions when a very studied style may be legitimate, particularly in those humanities disciplines where using the evocative or emotive power of language is most important. But in most cases the best way of expressing a point is to write it conversationally, as you might say it if the person for whom you are writing was in the room with you. If you would feel a bit unnatural saying what you have just written, then perhaps it is over-rhetorical?

Part of the push to overembellish writing is an anxiety to differentiate one's style, to add something more to the arguments derived from your sources, and to write up the essay in a way which is original. This anxiety is well grounded to the extent that many people find it difficult to re-express some of the materials they have read in a different manner from the initial author. Getting out from under the shadow of major thinkers and previous critics certainly requires that you set out the arguments involved in your own terms. But you can be confident that if you fully 'translate' other people's thinking,

you will also achieve an individual style of your own, without extra efforts being necessary.

As for a more thorough-going 'originality', stressing personal reactions to fundamental problems, this quality is a product of your whole way of approaching your course of study. There is no sense in which genuinely original insights can be added as a purely stylistic gloss to otherwise undistinguished materials. These knowledge or argumentative advances are conditioned far more by your success in gathering information, critically analysing concepts, and following through the early stages of essay planning than by the way in which you write up the finished essay.

Summary of Suggestions: Writing Essays

1. Write essays regularly, and do not delay completing an essay in a new subject for too long (p. 80).
2. Write in your own way, to maximize relevance to your essay question and to get more accurate feedback on how to improve your performance. Be persistent in seeking feedback from teachers on your writing (p. 80).
3. Always write essays in response to questions, rather than around a vague title (p. 82).
4. Write several short essays fairly quickly, rather than long ones, in order to cover more topics in a form less remote from exam answers (p. 82).
5. Beware of hypnotically repeating a question's phrasing without analysing the concepts involved (p. 83).
6. Apply techniques for analysing concepts to clarify all the ideas in the essay question. Do not focus just on the overtly technical concepts: pay attention also to the everyday linking words which make the question distinctive (p. 84).
7. 'Brainstorm' round the essay question for a short period,

- generating ideas without criticizing them. Eliminate ideas which are clearly irrelevant to the question later on, when you have generated a whole field of possible ideas (p. 84).
8. Try writing out the opposite of the question, or getting clear what it is *not* asking (p. 85).
 9. Make sure that you recognize open-ended questions which need to be limited in scope if relevance is to be maintained (p. 85).
 10. Try to avoid writing simply 'descriptive' essays – including chronologies, guidebook essays, or those which summarize the views of a random sequence of authors (p. 88).
 11. To write more analytic essays, use your own mental categories to subdivide material, and to select what is relevant for your argument. Use periodization to tackle chronological topics. Or divide a complex subject into systematic subsections, or separate causal processes – any of these devices can allow you to write analytic essays (p. 89).
 12. To write well-organized argumentative essays, ask what opposing or different views there could be of the subject. What kind of controversy could there be about it? (p. 92).
 13. In writing argumentative essays, take care to use accurate descriptions of the different viewpoints. Also make it quite clear when you are summarizing someone else's argument, and when you are stating your own views (p. 94).
 14. Combinations of argumentative and analytic dimensions can be used to generate a matrix structure for essays. Examine different ways of ordering paragraphs before you fix on an essay structure (p. 96).
 15. Use as many organizing devices as you need to structure an essay, but do not overburden it with unnecessary organizers. Paragraphs are the major essay organizers, but use headings in longer essays, or wherever they help to clarify the argument (p. 98).
 16. Write paragraphs as coherent units of thought. Avoid very short one- or two-sentence paragraphs, but equally keep paragraphs of manageable size (p. 99).

17. Sequence materials in your essay so as to make each major set of points at one particular stage, to avoid repetition, and to develop the argument cumulatively (p. 100).
 18. Use introductions only to give essential definitions, to respecify the essay question, and to give some signposts about the sequence of topics covered in the rest of the essay (p. 101).
 19. Keep introductions deliberately short. Keep definitions to the minimum needed. Get into the core arguments of your essay as early as possible (p. 102).
 20. Aim for a 'controlled release' of information throughout the essay. Avoid blurting out the substantive argument too early in a crude way. But equally, do not make your core arguments appear only in the conclusions (p. 100).
 21. Write up your essay text in a form which you can change easily. And do not worry so much about neatness that you are unwilling to cut up and resequence paragraphs when you have finished. Keep your essay plan under review as you write (p. 103).
 22. To achieve a good style in essay writing, picture your audience as you write, and choose the simplest, clearest and most concise way of expressing your arguments (p. 105).
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