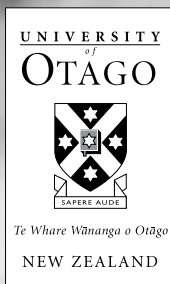




Planning and Writing University Assignments

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AN OTAGO STUDY GUIDE



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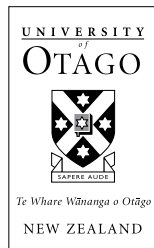
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PREFACE

The Otago Study Guides are intended as self-help tutorials to assist you in developing the various skills required to learn at university. *Planning and Writing University Assignments* is the third in the series, following *Using the APA Referencing Style*, and *Guidelines for Writing and Editing*.

It's not the intention of this Guide to offer prescriptive models to follow: there's always more than one right way to write any assignment, and different courses have different requirements. However, we cover here the fundamentals to help get you started.

If you wish to follow up any points in the Guide, please contact the Student Learning Centre. Advisers are available at the Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington campuses, so please do not hesitate to contact us for advice. We are happy to assist distance students by phone or email. Other writing resources are on our website, and in hard copy on request.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that students new to university feel somewhat apprehensive when faced with their first writing assignments. Assignments take many shapes, from the narrative essay to the structured report – not to mention the case analysis, reflective journal, editorial, or critique. Each of these has its peculiar characteristics and requirements, and for many students, producing a successful assignment depends to a large extent on knowing what's expected. The intention of this Guide is to shed light on some of those expectations, and to help students feel confident about tackling assignments and completing them to the best of their ability.

Well-written assignments are not normally produced overnight, so we start with the important stages of planning and pre-writing. These sections while relevant to all students will, I hope, particularly help those who might ask: “*How do I get started?*” Tips are included on gathering information, reading, and making notes.

Essays can be particularly challenging, so we cover planning and writing an essay in some detail. We then look in turn at a critique, research report, and business report, and while requirements will almost certainly vary considerably from course to course, these general guidelines and examples provide a starting point.

Then there are aspects of “academic” language to consider: formality, tone, and style. You'll find answers to such questions as: “*Can I say ‘I’ in an essay?*”; “*I know what I want to say, but how can I link my ideas?*”; “*How formal does my writing have to be when I’m giving my opinion?*”; or, indeed, “*Can I give my opinion?*”.

We also look at important steps to produce a polished product: referencing, proofreading and editing, format and presentation.

Writing, like any craft, is a developmental process – most students will undoubtedly become more competent and confident as their studies progress, and as they take on board feedback from tutors and lecturers. So don't worry if you feel you have some way to go before you find your “writing feet”.

Throughout the guide exercises are included to reinforce some of the main ideas. Answers to the exercises are provided in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER 1: PLANNING AND PRE-WRITING

PLANNING YOUR TIME

Producing an assignment to a high standard takes time. And the process is usually a circular one – researching the topic, thinking about what it all means, deciding what information to include, putting ideas together, then back to more research, thinking, and so on. So, while it's not usually a matter of, “*First I'll do this, then I'll do that*”, it nevertheless helps to focus the task by drawing up a timeline for the essential stages, not only to make sure that you are realistic about how long things take, but to overcome any feeling of being overwhelmed and not knowing where to start. The basic steps to allow for in your time plan include –

- finding information
- reading and taking notes
- grouping, sorting and ordering information
- developing an outline
- putting together a first draft
- redrafting and writing the final version
- checking references
- compiling the reference list
- editing and proofreading

The last three stages are particularly important and shouldn't be rushed. Sloppy work with careless mistakes and incorrect referencing affect the quality of your work and cost valuable marks.

The amount of time spent on an assignment should to a degree depend on its value: clearly, more time should be spent on an assignment worth 35% than one worth 10%.

A time-saver is to start thinking about assignments as soon as you receive your course information: keep topics in mind as you attend lectures and tutorials and do background reading, noting areas to return to for the assignment.

COLLECTING INFORMATION

A good place to start gathering information for your assignment is to revisit your lecture and tutorial notes, and other course material. Which of those key ideas, concepts, principles, and theories that you've been learning about relate to the assignment topic?

You will more than likely need to extend your research beyond lecture notes and set readings. Knowing how to find information quickly and efficiently is a key skill – as soon as possible learn how to use library databases and catalogues.

Follow the tips for gathering information set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Tips for gathering information

Take a Library tour, or seek a one on one tutorial	Check the Central Library for details: http://www.library.otago.ac.nz . Distance students can contact the Remote Librarian.
Use only authoritative sources	Information used in university assignments must be from reputable authors and publishers, such as universities, government departments or corporations. Avoid websites such as Wikipedia, where authors are unknown and information is often unreliable.
Choose journal articles over textbooks	Textbooks are good for a general overview but take longer to read, and also may be out of date. On the other hand, journal articles are usually easier to read because they have a specific focus, and are also likely to be more up-to-date.
Use a starter reference	If possible, identify a relevant, up-to-date journal article on your topic and find further sources from its reference list. This will save a lot of time in catalogue searching.
Know the major journals	Every subject of study has its prominent journals. Identify these from your reading list, or ask your tutor. Check out recent volumes and scan tables of contents – titles of journal articles closely reflect their content so you'll readily identify those relevant to your assignment.
Identify key authors	Certain authors will repeatedly crop up in your readings and in other authors' reference lists. Check databases for what else they have written on your topic.
Know how much is enough	Assignment instructions sometimes mention how many sources must be consulted for an assignment, but if you're not sure, ask your tutor or lecturer. There's frequently the temptation to keep looking for more material: conscientious students can over-research and become submerged in a mountain of information to the point of not being able to deal with the assignment.

READING AND MAKING NOTES

Reading and making notes in preparation for writing an assignment will be more effective when you keep in mind the information you're looking for and the purpose for which you need it. Undirected reading takes time away from more productive activities. The following are some general tips for managing your reading load and making notes.

Table 2: Tips for effective reading and note-making

Read selectively	You're not usually expected to read everything in a course reading list, especially in the first few weeks of your course. Select what you need, when you need it, and read for background as time allows.
Read critically	Approach all reading with an enquiring mind. Avoid accepting ideas or opinions as universal truths. Look for author bias, and be open to different perspectives.
First, gain an overview	Before close reading, get the "big picture". Look at tables of contents, chapter and section headings, tables, and graphs; read abstracts, introductions and conclusions. What can you tell from how the text is divided, the various sections and their headings? For example, bold, upper case, lower case, etc., distinguish major points from sub points.
As you read, ask yourself questions	There's no point proceeding with a reading if you're not understanding it. Stop and ask, "What does the author mean by this?" If you can't provide the answer, re-read the text. Clarify your understanding by discussing with other students, or with your lecturer or tutor.
If necessary, take a step back	It's not unusual for some academic texts to be quite difficult to understand, which is often more to do with the language and style of the writer than the subject itself. If after two or three readings you're still finding a text hard- going, take one step back and follow up a couple of publications from its reference list. Reading what others say can make a difficult text easier to understand.

Avoid the “technicolour terror”	Resist highlighting “key” points on first reading. A sea of multi-coloured stripes is not helpful, and what seem key points at first, may not be. Highlight only information to return to later for your assignment.
Don’t waste time copying blocks of text	Think about why you need the information: ask yourself, “what’s the point I want to make?”. Then summarise the idea in your own words. Check the original to make sure you haven’t changed the meaning. (You still must reference the source.)
Keep full referencing details	Carefully record all reference details, including publisher, place of publication, etc. A lot of time can be wasted trying to track down these details later.
Note <i>who said what</i>	Mark notes to distinguish between direct quotes, paraphrases, and your own ideas. Confusing these in your assignment may lead to incorrect referencing or unintentional plagiarism.

CHAPTER 2: WRITING AN ESSAY

WHAT IS AN “ESSAY”?

Students possibly worry more about writing an essay than they do a report because they see reports as structured with clearly defined sections, and perceive essays as not quite so clear-cut. And this is true – there is no precise definition of an essay, no prescription for what an essay *should* look like in terms of structure or content.

You may hear an essay described as an “argument” – this does not necessarily mean that you must defend one point of view over another, although it might well involve that. But you can *argue*, for example, that dental decay is a pathway of infection, that tourism brings both benefits and costs to island nations, or that Chaucer had a major influence on the English language. So an “argument” might be factual and non-contentious, but nevertheless will involve a well-thought out and researched line of reasoning. Mostly that line of reasoning will be based on your research of scholarly material, but at times might involve self-reflection or personal experience.

WHY ESSAYS ARE IMPORTANT

Essays play a pivotal role in helping students to build knowledge. After writing an essay, you will almost certainly understand a topic at a deeper level than previously. Also, the process of filtering and sifting, interpreting and analysing information, develops research skills and promotes critical thinking – important qualities for university and beyond. And essays undoubtedly help students to write well – another extremely valuable attribute.

FEATURES OF A “GOOD” ESSAY

Lecturers’ opinions vary to some extent on what they look for when marking essays, but the best essays have some qualities in common. Some of these qualities are quite abstract, such as enthusiasm for the topic that comes through in the writing, while others, to do with structure and technique, are more concrete and explicit. The features of a good essay are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Features of a good essay

Correctly interprets the essay question or topic, and answers it fully.
Puts forward a well-thought-out argument and line of reasoning, rather than merely reproducing information from source material.
Treats the topic in sufficient depth, with evidence of thorough research.
Demonstrates understanding of key principles, theories, and concepts, and builds these into the discussion.
Maintains focus, keeping relevant to the question.
Is cohesive, i.e., “hangs together” as a whole, and logically structured.
Expresses ideas clearly; is free of clumsy or awkward phrasing, and errors in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary.
Provides references for source material, in the required referencing style.
Keeps to the word limit, without being substantially under or over.
Demonstrates interest in, and enthusiasm for, the topic.

If you feel that your essays meet the above criteria but that your grades do not reflect the amount of work you put in, consider whether any of the following might apply:

Table 4: Essay pitfalls

Did you address the essay question or topic, without going off-track or missing some important aspect?
Did you use obscure or out-of-date publications, or non-authoritative sources (e.g., Wikipedia or similar)?
Did you include too many direct quotations? An overuse of quotes – the “cut and paste” essay – suggests a lack of understanding of the topic. Quotes should be used infrequently, and only for special effect or to emphasise a point.
Did your essay lack <i>structure</i> or <i>flow</i> , drifting from one point to another, seemingly without direction?
Was your argument based on generalisations, sweeping statements, or unsupported claims?

The following sections aim to help you to achieve the good features and avoid the pitfalls.

STEPS TO PRODUCE A GOOD ESSAY

When I ask students what they think is important in an essay, they invariably refer to *structure* and *flow*, but are not sure what these concepts mean in terms of their own writing. If we consider the essay like any other type of construction, we see that the fundamental requirements are a *strong foundation*, *solid framework*, and *interlinking parts* – without these the whole would collapse. So how are *foundation*, *framework* and *interlinking* achieved in an essay? As with any construction, there's *the planning*, *the building*, and *the finishing-off*. We'll look at each of these in turn.

Previous sections have already addressed some of the planning steps – drawing up a time plan and gathering information. Now we'll look at further steps in planning the essay.

INTERPRETING THE QUESTION OR TOPIC

It should go without saying that a crucial first step to a good essay is correctly interpreting the essay question, but it's easy to go astray even with relatively simply worded questions, let alone more complex ones.

First, consider how the topic should be dealt with. For example, if the instruction is to *compare and contrast* Theory Y with Theory X, you would need to more than just *describe* the two theories – the main focus would be on drawing out their *similarities* and *differences*. Similarly, if the instruction is to *assess* or *explore*, and your response is restricted to a *summary* or *outline*, you have missed the point of the assignment.

Table 5 below sets out a range of assignment instructions and how they might be interpreted, but note that the definitions provided are not intended to be precise, and that some terms are used interchangeably (e.g., *analyse* and *discuss*). If you're not sure how to approach the essay, check with your tutor or lecturer.

Table 5: Interpreting essay instructions

Instruction	Suggested interpretation
<i>analyse</i> <i>discuss</i> <i>consider</i>	Treat the topic in some depth, examining all relevant issues. Identify key components, theories, principles, or concepts. After considering all perspectives, develop a viewpoint in response to the essay question, and support your reasoning with evidence as appropriate.
<i>assess</i>	Examine all aspects and make a judgement as to quality or attributes. May involve identifying cause and effect, implications and impacts, or strengths and weaknesses.
<i>compare and contrast</i>	Analyse all issues, but focus on similarities and differences. Identify major underlying concepts or themes and discuss where they agree or disagree, what they have in common and where they diverge.
<i>critique</i> <i>review</i> <i>evaluate</i>	Treat in a detailed and analytical way. Will involve some description but most importantly a judgement as to quality, highlighting strengths or weaknesses, advantages or disadvantages.
<i>define</i>	Give precise meaning. Describe and clarify. May involve showing different interpretations, or explaining boundaries or limitations. Provide example/s if appropriate.
<i>describe</i>	Provide accurate and precise information; illustrate with example/s where appropriate.
<i>examine</i> <i>explore</i>	Inspect in detail, investigate thoroughly. Identify all important aspects.
<i>outline</i>	Briefly describe, summarise main features or principles. Clearly define stages in a process. Omit lesser detail.
<i>questions, e.g.:</i> <i>how?</i> <i>why?</i> <i>what?</i>	Specify details, give precise, accurate information. Analyse all relevant perspectives, issues. Answer must show conviction, supported by example/s if appropriate.
<i>summarise</i>	Provide a shortened version in your own words, highlighting major points and omitting less important detail.

ESTABLISHING FOCUS AND SCOPE

An essay topic or question will touch on a relatively narrow area within the wider general context of your programme of study, so deciding what is relevant to the question requires careful judgement. It's important to clarify the range of the question, as well as the boundaries. It helps to break the question into its component parts. We'll work through this process using the following essay question as an example¹.

In recent years, many New Zealand tourist operators have been using the "eco" label to market their ventures, claiming responsible environmental and conservation practices. However, there is some argument over whether such claims can be justified. Discuss the current debate involving New Zealand's ecotourism industry. What role, if any, should government play in respect to ecotourism? Is there a role for the tourism industry itself?

Box 1: Breaking down the essay question or topic

Instruction word/s	"Discuss" and "What?" (See Table 5)
Focus	Claims made by ecotourism operators. Counter claims by opponents. Two sides to the debate – whose side does the evidence support? Should the government play a role? Should the tourism industry be involved?
Range and boundaries	Ecotourism. New Zealand. Central government? Local government? Regional councils? Tourism industry.

Therefore, the direction of the essay is: (a) the *New Zealand* context (although the course of study may have included other countries' operations); (b), *ecotourism* (as opposed to *nature* tourism or *adventure* tourism, although there may well be overlaps); (c) the debate – the claims of eco practitioners versus the counter claims of their critics; (d) the role of various government agencies; and (e) the role of the tourism industry itself.

In deconstructing and rewording the question in this way, other questions emerge, issues are clarified, and a research direction becomes clearer.

¹ The essay topic and content used in examples are fictitious, including the situations and names of organisations.

Use a similar process to break down your essay questions. A template is provided in Box 2 below.

Box 2: Template for breaking down an essay question or topic

Instruction word/s	
Focus	
Range and boundaries	

PLANNING AN ESSAY FRAMEWORK

Before starting to write the essay, shape your notes and ideas into a framework in which you decide and arrange in order, the points for your discussion. This process has a number of advantages:

- Helps to decide the points for discussion.
- Shows how these can be most logically organised.
- Weeds out irrelevant information.
- Identifies overlaps and repetition.
- Further refines the research direction.
- Prompts thinking when it's difficult to "get into" an assignment.
- Makes it easier to put ideas on paper (points can readily be developed into sentences and paragraphs).

Table 6 provides an example of a framework for our ecotourism essay. How much detail you include in your framework is a matter of preference. Here, supporting evidence is included (column 3), but not details of the introduction. On the other hand, the conclusion is quite specific.

Table 6: Example of an essay framework

Major points (Introduction)	Sub-points	Supporting material
Claim 1	Activities are sustainable because there is no damage to native flora or fauna.	Wildlife Tour Company Ltd Adventure Tours Ltd Highlander Small Group Tours (brochures & websites)
Counter claim	(i) Damage to kaka beak, native flax, & kowhai from 4WDs. (ii) Depleted kakapo and kea numbers.	Friends of the Highlands January 2008 report Ministry of Sustainable Impact report June 2008 Clark & Jones, 2007
Claim 2	Accommodation built to green building standards is more ecologically sound than non-green accommodation: solar energy heating, wind farms.	Serendipity Lodge, Kaikoura Seven Hills Spa and Resort, Alexandra (brochures and websites)
Counter claim	High fossil fuel usage (to run power boats, whitewater rafting, jet-skiing) counteracts green initiatives.	Sustainable Tourism 2008 report Alexandra Protection Society website
Claim 3	Less carbon emission from 4WDs as opposed to larger coach transport.	Robbie's Small Group Get-a-way brochure Drive'n'Ski, Wanaka, website
Counter claim	4WDs not fuel effective, and not able to transport as many people as large coaches, so more needed. 4WDs cover off-road terrains so damage more native wildlife and vegetation.	Ministry of Sustainable Impact report Oct. 08 Brown, Johnston, Haggarty, 2007
Summing up of claims/counter claims: what evidence shows	Ecotourism principles do have some positive influences, but in some areas these are over-stated. Native bird life and vegetation undoubtedly incur some damage, therefore some claims misleading. Green accommodation claims exaggerated.	

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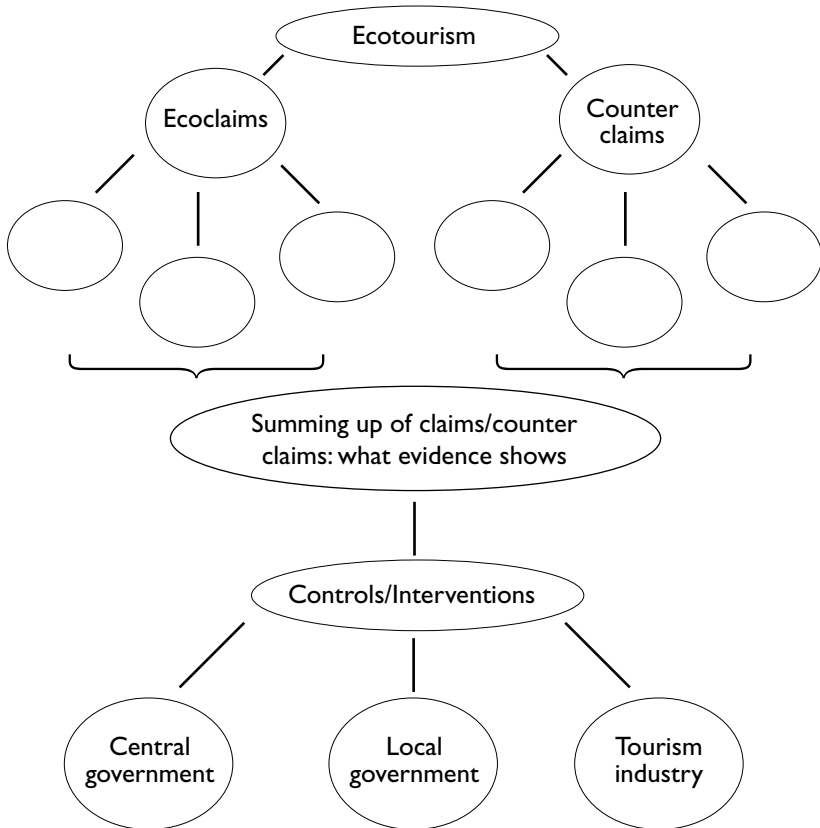
Major points (Introduction)	Sub-points	Supporting material
Role of central government	<p>Make conditions to qualify for “eco” label.</p> <p>Department of Tourist Activities to set policy and procedures, and clear standards.</p> <p>Offer set-up grants to operators to meet standards.</p> <p>Responsible for monitoring carbon emissions.</p>	<p>Department of Environment report June 2008</p> <p>Gordon, 2008</p> <p>Dickey, 2006</p>
Role of local government	<p>Resource planning departments to set standards and monitor effects on native wildlife, vegetation and waterways.</p>	<p>Sustainable Impact report 2008</p> <p>Environment NZ Impact Report 2007</p>
Role of tourism industry	<p>Help government establish standards.</p> <p>Advise operators.</p> <p>Monitor operator compliance.</p>	<p>Tourism Industry Annual Reports 2006, 2007, 2008</p>
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operators using “eco” label too loosely; this term needs to be precisely defined. • Both national and local government have responsibility to initiate and enforce appropriate legislation and set and monitor standards. Tourism industry has responsibility here also. 	

(Note: All information and organisations are fictitious.)

While the above framework takes the form of a three-column table, you might prefer a diagram such as a flow chart or concept map as shown in Table 7 below.

Note that there’s always more than one way to organise information for effective structure and flow. For example, in the framework in Table 6 above, the claims and counter claims are dealt with separately, while the framework in Table 7 below organises the information so that the claims are grouped and discussed, and then the counter claims are addressed.

Table 7: An alternative framework



Then again, not everyone likes this type of framework building: some students prefer to plan an essay as a linear list of main points and sub-points, or perhaps as a series of key points straight into a word-processing document. Choose whichever form suits you best.

Deciding on a framework you're happy with will likely be a matter of trial and error, but better to spend time on this at the planning stage, than in constant re-writing. Although your initial framework can be refined as your direction becomes clearer, once you have something you're reasonably happy with, it's best to get on with the essay, keeping as closely as possible to your framework. The alternative is continual rehashing with the possibility of running out of time and/or energy.

DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT

Some lecturers want an essay to show a clear “thesis statement”. This term refers to one or more sentences that capture an essay’s central proposition, and which form part of the introduction.

The following are examples of a thesis statement:

The usefulness of smoking cessation programmes is difficult to establish, as evidence of their success remains inconclusive.

In the foreseeable future, New Zealand’s tourist industry will, like tourism worldwide, be subject to a number of political, social and economic influences.

And a thesis statement for our ecotourism essay—

Claims of “ecotourism” must be tested. If indeed false, then not only are local public and overseas visitors misled, New Zealand’s “clean, green” image is seriously compromised.

Some people prefer an introduction to include a thesis statement that explicitly states a conclusion to the essay question. For example:

Many claims of ecotourism operators are misleading the local public and overseas visitors, and putting New Zealand’s “clean, green” image at serious risk. Legislation and monitoring by government agencies, and the industry itself, are pivotal to protecting the environment, the public, and the industry.

As mentioned earlier in this section, some essays will be mainly descriptive (e.g., *Discuss cross-infection in a medical setting*). Nevertheless, even a descriptive essay should be analytic, in that it presents a strong, evidence-based line of reasoning, with a central thesis; for example:

Cross-infection has serious implications for both patient and medical staff, thus effective prevention is vital to ensure that sources of possible infection are dealt with effectively.

A thesis statement helps to maintain focus and direction. As you introduce each point in your discussion, check if it relates to and supports your thesis statement; if not, you might need to change the direction of your argument, or re-think your thesis.

Kirszner and Mandell (2001) make the point that a thesis statement should avoid vague expressions, such as *centers on*, *deals with*, *involves*, *has a lot to do with*, and so on. They say, “be direct and clear” (p. 15). In light of their advice, see how you can improve the thesis statement below.

Exercise 1: Improve the following thesis statement to be more “direct and clear”:

The real problem in our schools does not revolve around the absence of nationwide goals and standards; the problem is primarily concerned with the absence of resources with which to implement them.

Answer in Appendix 1.

STRUCTURING THE ESSAY

In terms of overall structure, different subjects have different requirements: the History Department will want their essays one way, Education, another, Tourism a third, and possibly Surveying and Dentistry a fourth and a fifth. But in broad terms, there are two distinct essay styles, the “traditional” and “non-traditional”. Neville (2007) describes these as follows:

Table 8: “Traditional” and “non-traditional” essay structures (Neville, 2007)

Traditional essay	Non-traditional essay
Follows a “continuous narrative” –	Might be similar to a report format and –
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas are broken up into paragraphs: a single idea is presented and developed in each paragraph; • no sub-headings; • no bullet points; • limited use of diagrams & tables; • sources are included, properly cited and referenced. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can include sub-headings to unite a cluster of related paragraphs; • might include some bullet points; • can include diagrams & tables; • is likely to include sources, properly cited and referenced

Whichever structure you adopt should be in line with your course instructions, or the advice of your tutor or lecturer. Longer essays, say 3,000 or more words, are normally divided into at least some sections for the benefit of both writer and reader.

Regardless of overall structure, all essays must have a clearly recognisable *introduction* and a *conclusion*, and we'll look at these and their respective functions next.

WRITING THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction should lead the reader into the discussion, setting the scene for what follows. It should be concise, without too much background detail (further background can be provided after the introduction), and state the precise focus of the essay. Table 9 sets out the features of a good introduction.

Table 9: Features of a good introduction

- ~ Provides a brief context for the essay question.
- ~ Clearly states what the essay is about (without repeating the essay question).
- ~ Tells the reader why the topic is important and/or interesting.
- ~ Gives a clear central argument, or thesis (see *Developing a thesis statement* above).
- ~ Indicates the scope of the discussion.
- ~ Outlines how the essay will develop.

As a rule of thumb, the introduction should be no more than one-tenth of the overall word count. In a short essay, 500 to 750 words, the introduction should be one paragraph. In a longer essay, from 1500 words upwards, the introduction could be one or two paragraphs.

Box 3 below gives an example of an introduction for our ecotourism essay. For the purposes of the exercise, it is annotated to reflect the criteria in Table 9 above. This introduction is 156 words, about right for a 1500-word essay. Note how it picks up the major points from the essay plan in Table 6.

Box 3: Example of an introduction

Since the 1980s, ecotourism in New Zealand has become a burgeoning industry. Ministry of Tourism figures released in 2007 record 453 tourist operators registered under the “ecotourism” category. When tourism companies use the description “eco”, they are claiming a neutral impact on the environment. However, investigations show that some so-called “eco” practices are in fact harming native flora and fauna, polluting waterways, and causing other environmental damage. **Claims of “ecotourism” must be tested. If indeed false, then not only are local public and overseas visitors misled, New Zealand’s “clean, green” image is seriously compromised.** This essay explores the major issues in the ecotourism debate, weighing claims of low impact and sustainable practices against evidence that suggests otherwise. It also discusses ways in which ecotourism operations might be guided and monitored by both central and local governments, and the responsibility of the industry itself. A central issue in the debate is defining just what “ecotourism” entails.

Brief context; sets the scene.

States what the essay is about

Central argument (thesis statement)

Shows how the essay will develop, scope and focus

Exercise 2: *Do you think either of the following examples meets the criteria for a good introduction as set out in Table 9?*

Example a) (Kirszner & Mandell, 2001, p. 71):

After graduating from high school, young people must decide what they want to do with the rest of their lives. Many graduates (often without much thought) decide to continue their education uninterrupted, and they go on to college. This group of teenagers makes up what many see as the typical first-year college student. Recently, however, this stereotype has been challenged by an influx of older students into American colleges and universities. Not only do these students make a valuable contribution to the schools they attend, but they also present an alternative to young people who go to college simply because it is the thing to do. A few years off between high school and college can give many – perhaps most – students the life experience they need to appreciate the value of higher education.

Example b) (Bate & Sharpe, 1996, p. 20):

In broad terms the study of this subject has looked at the history of the family from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century in Europe. We have looked at the social values prevailing throughout this period and specifically the social and cultural changes that have occurred. The aim of this essay is to discuss, firstly, the role of the family, and secondly, the significance of childhood from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century in Europe.

Answers in Appendix 1.

WRITING THE DISCUSSION

If, as suggested above, you begin with a detailed outline of your essay before beginning to write, you will be well on the way to constructing a cohesive discussion, as you will already have arranged the points for discussion in a logical order. A well-written discussion should meet the criteria set out in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Criteria for a well-written discussion

- ~ The writer presents a well-researched and sound line of reasoning, supported from the literature or other sources where appropriate.
- ~ The writer's *voice* and *perspective* are clearly evident, even if the discussion is largely based on source material (see *Writing with conviction*, and *Paraphrasing* below).
- ~ Structurally, the discussion is based on a series of paragraphs. Each paragraph should develop the central idea, adding to, and advancing, the central argument. Follow the techniques for paragraph development on p. 29. In this section, you'll notice that every paragraph should have a topic sentence that expresses the central idea of the paragraph.
- ~ All content should relate to and support the central argument. (If not, question whether it belongs in the essay.)
- ~ The discussion follows the most logical order for the nature of the topic (e.g., by importance, chronologically, stages in a process).
- ~ Main ideas stand out from supporting ideas.
- ~ All ideas link cohesively, rather than appear as isolated units.
- ~ The reader is readily able to follow the discussion, and grasp the relationships and connections the writer intends.
- ~ All source material is properly referenced (see *Referencing* below).

As you write the essay, revisit your question regularly to ensure that you stay on track.

Now, for that other essential element of the essay – the conclusion.

WRITING THE CONCLUSION

Just as in your introduction you tell the reader where your discussion is heading, so in the conclusion you tell them where you've arrived. The conclusion should be a concise one or two paragraphs, and as with the introduction no more than one-tenth of the overall word count. Table 11 sets out the features of a good conclusion.

Table 11: Features of a good conclusion

- ~ Gives a clear and unambiguous conclusion to the essay topic.
- ~ Briefly summaries the major discussion points.
- ~ Gives finality to the discussion, drawing the essay to a close.

The conclusion does not usually include information not covered in the discussion, but it might be appropriate to mention areas that could have been addressed but were outside the scope of the essay, or where further investigation would be useful.

Box 4 provides an example of a conclusion to our ecotourism essay. It is 141 words, a good length for a 1500-word essay. Note how it picks up those main points of the discussion as outlined in Table 6, rounds out the key issues mentioned in the introduction, and gives a clear and direct summing up in response to the essay task.

Box 4: Example of a conclusion

There can be no doubt that many “eco” claims are largely unsubstantiated. Some activities involving nature reserves and sanctuaries have unquestionably damaged plant life and contaminated waterways. Of concern also are misplaced promises of low impact, sustainable accommodation. There is no suggestion that operators are being deliberately dishonest, but until “ecotourism” is clearly defined and guidelines and standards established, people are able to use the “eco” label to suit their own purposes. Both national and local governments have a responsibility to institute and monitor standards, even though this will undoubtedly involve some cost – but profitability and sustainability need not be in opposition. Furthermore, the industry itself must play its part in promoting ecologically sound ventures and ensuring standards are met. Without practical and timely intervention, operators are able to continue to make misleading claims, but more seriously, contribute to irreversible environmental damage.

Exercise 3: Do you think the following example meets the criteria for a good conclusion as set out in Table 11? (Adapted from Oshima & Hogue, 1991, p. 83).

In conclusion, although recent advances have indeed given us a lot of advantages by making us richer, healthier, and freer to enjoy our lives, they have, in my opinion, not made us wiser. In the past few decades, our Earth has become dirtier; our people less humane, and our spiritual lives poorer. We should continue to enjoy the benefits of technological advancement because they free us to pursue our interests and goals. However, we must make a concerted effort to preserve our natural environment for future generations. Moreover, we should take the time now to make our lives more meaningful in an increasingly impersonal, mechanised world.

Answer in Appendix 1.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT ESSAYS

To test the effectiveness of an introduction and conclusion, ask yourself: *Could a reader gain a good idea of what my essay is about just from reading the introduction and conclusion?* If not, consider how you might improve them to meet this criterion.

To test structure and flow, read just the first sentence of each paragraph and judge whether these alone give a good sense of what the essay is about, and lead the reader from one point to the next in a logical fashion. If not, consider how you might tweak your topic sentences (see p. 34).

In any essay, and certainly in our ecotourism example, different writers will undoubtedly argue a different line, but as long as sound research and sources underpin and support their ideas, their arguments will be equally valid.

I've mentioned already that good essays should demonstrate *structure, flow, a clear, strong argument, and enthusiasm*, and the best essays will achieve these qualities to a high level. But there's also the indefinable quality of *stylish prose* – the turn of phrase, the sheer readability – that makes some essays stand out and a pleasure to read. The best way to improve your writing in this respect is to become an observant reader of other good writing: when you come across authors whose style you admire, pay attention to the way they express ideas and information. What techniques of language, style and tone can you can adapt to improve *your* writing?

Finally, good essays normally require drafting through several stages. Leave plenty of time for the finishing touches – the “topping off” (as outlined in Chapter 6, *Producing a Polished Product*).

CHAPTER 3: WRITING A CRITIQUE

Critique, criticism, critical review are just some of the terms used for the process of commenting on and evaluating another's work. Here, we're looking specifically at critiquing a **journal article**. In a university context, journal articles mostly set out to convince, persuade, or inform the reader of a particular point of view based on the author's research. Such research takes various forms – for example, fieldwork, laboratory experiment, observational study, or literature survey. Thus, the nature of a critique will depend on the nature of the study being reviewed.

The reason teachers assign critiques is *to get students to think*. Remember that all research is open to question and should be approached with an enquiring mind, and this approach should be evident in your critique.

To get started on your critique, put yourself in the place of a reader who hasn't read the article. You need to give some descriptive information about the article's content, such as what the author set out to investigate, how they went about it, and what they found. But most importantly, you need to offer the reader some *assessment* of the work; for example, whether or not the author's arguments are convincing, and how the study contributes to current understanding.

To critique an article effectively you need an in-depth understanding of its content. As with any university reading, first establish the main thrust of the article, the author's aims, objectives, and conclusions: these will be summed up in the **abstract**, **introduction** and **conclusion** sections, so I suggest you read these first. Next, note the other sections and sub-sections into which the article has been structured. It helps to identify major themes from sub-themes (you can distinguish these by whether the headings appear in upper case, bold, lower case, etc). Once you have a handle on the main themes, it's surprising how much easier it is to "get into" a text. Scan also through graphs or tables: what do these tell you? Only when you have a good sense of what the study is about should you follow with a closer reading.

When reading in preparation for a critique, have in mind questions that will help your analysis, such as those listed in Table 12 below.

Table 12: Questions for critiquing text

What did the author set out to achieve, the aims and objectives of the research?

Why was this an important or significant area to investigate?

What audience is the article aimed at?

How was the research carried out (study design and methods)?

What conclusions does the author arrive at? Are they convincing?

Do you consider that the study design was appropriate for the author's objectives?

Can you identify any weaknesses in such areas as methods or data analysis?

Could any assumptions on the part of the author be interpreted differently?

How does the study tie in with those of other authors?

How do the findings here fit in with what you already know of the topic?

Do you think the study adds to current knowledge? If so, how?

Do you think the article makes a useful resource? If so, how and why?

What is your overall response to the article from your personal perspective?

CREATING A CRITIQUE FRAMEWORK

As with an essay, before starting to write your critique, work out a framework for organising your discussion.

As stated above, the point of a critique is to inform a reader of (a) what the study is about, (b) its major findings and implications, and (c) your general reactions to it. You should not attempt to comment on each section in the article, or organise your discussion in the same way as the article itself is organised, as this could lead to unnecessary detail, as well as the impression of a lack of analysis.

Table 12 provides a framework for organising a critique, but use this as a guide only. The amount of information you include will, of course, need to be in line with your assignment instructions and your word limit. While the questions in Table 11 and the details in Table 12 suggest areas you could comment on, without sufficient word count you should not attempt such a wide-ranging approach.

Table 13: Suggested framework for an article critique

Introduction	State name of article and the author. (If word count allows, comment on author's background and credentials.) Briefly state what the author set out to investigate, the study aims and objectives.
Background and context	Briefly situate the study in its wider context. Highlight main issues or problems to be addressed. State why the author thinks this area is important or significant.
Study design	Give a brief description of study methods and procedures. Perhaps mention method of data analysis.
Summary of key findings	Highlight major findings. Summarise key implications. (Be concise, focusing on key points only, and omitting lesser detail.)
Assess the strength of argument and evidence Mention any limitations/weaknesses in study objectives or design	Were the conclusions supported? Were the conclusions convincing? Were there any assumptions that you would query? Can you comment on whether the study design (e.g., methodology, data analysis) was suitable for the author's aims and objectives? (See * below.)
Key insights, implications	What are the key insights this study provides? How do these add to current understanding and knowledge in the field generally? What ideas or knowledge did you personally gain from reading the article?
Relation to other similar investigations (?)	You would not normally be expected to study other works to make comparisons unless the assignment asks you to do so, but the author might make comparisons on which you could comment.
Conclusion	Sum up your overall reaction to the work. Why did you find it useful/interesting/valuable – or not? Were there areas that the study did not address and could/should have?

***Undergraduate students, especially in their first or second year, are not expected to be experts on research methods, but there may be aspects of study design on which you can comment. For example, did the methods appear suitable for the author's purpose, or adequate for a convincing conclusion?**

WRITING THE CRITIQUE

Write the critique in essay form as outlined in Chapter 2, and follow the writing techniques in Chapter 6. Remember that a sense of *critical analysis* needs to come through in your writing, thus pay particular attention to the way in which you express your ideas and your language choices. In addition to the tips in *Writing with conviction* in Chapter 6, refer to the handy “critical” language examples in Table 14 below.

Table 14: Examples of “critical” language

<p>Introducing the article</p>	<p>The author set out to ... The author investigated ... The purpose of this study was to ... The author argues that ... The perspective presented here is that ... The point of view argued here is that ... Henry’s objective was to ... Henry’s main argument was that ... The author’s intention was to ... The hypothesis underpinning the study was that ...</p>
<p>Commenting on strengths</p>	<p>The author convinces us that ... The study sheds light on ... The study highlights the importance of ... It is clear how ... The study reminds us of the importance of ... The study reflects the significance of ...</p>
<p>Raising questions, commenting on weaknesses</p>	<p>It does not seem to follow that ... Henry’s argument seems to be that ... The author’s argument falls down in that .. Henry’s argument is less than convincing because ... The argument that ... does not hold because ... The assumption that ... The study is based on an assumption that ... The author assumes that ... Questions must be raised in relation to ... The author’s claim that ... needs to be questioned because ... Care is needed when drawing conclusions from ...</p>

Table continued over page

Drawing implications

As a consequence of Henry's work we see that ...
 Henry highlights the importance of ...
 Henry draws connections between ... and ...
 The major implications of Henry's findings are ...
 Henry concluded that ...
 The connection emerges between ... and ...
 The author makes an important distinction between ...
 and ...
 A major outcome from these findings is that ...
 These results have implications for ...
 The finding that ... has implications for ...
 The finding that ... means that ...
 Taking into account the finding that ... means that
 attention should be given to ...
 These results show that care needs to be taken
 when ...
 Henry's findings remove any doubt that ...

Exercise 4: *If you were critiquing a study that contained the following descriptions of methods, what might you comment on?*

Example (a)

Jones (2005) claims that teenagers are spending more time on computers and less time on sport. Her study comprised five 15 year-olds living in Invercargill.

Example (b)

According to Gordon and Brown (2005), New Zealand teenagers are spending more time on computers and less time on sport. They interviewed 500 teenagers in a variety of socio-economic, cultural, and geographical settings throughout New Zealand, over five years, from ages 13 to 18.

Answers in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER 4: WRITING A RESEARCH REPORT

As there are different types of research, so there are different types of report structures. We look here at a report suitable for a typical undergraduate research project.

Research reports are always divided into sections, with each section having a specific function. First, check your assignment instructions for any directions on how to section your report and what to include in each section, but if you have not been provided with such guidelines, follow the divisions as set out below.

The standard sections for a research report are –

- Introduction
- Background (including literature survey)
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion

However, there may be some variation across sections: for example, you might have a separate Literature Review section, or sub-sections within main sections; for example, *Methods* could be divided into *Procedures*, *Data Analysis*, and so forth. Distinguish main heading from sub-headings by font style and size (e.g., UPPER CASE, lower case, bold, *italics*).

Table 15 below provides a template for a research report showing sections and the type of content to include in each section. Adapt this to suit your purposes: for example, some students find it preferable to combine the *Results* and *Discussion* sections, analysing the findings as they report them.

Table 15: Suggested framework and content for a research report

Section	Content
Cover page	Your name and assignment details.
Table of contents	List of main sections and sub-sections, with page numbers, including tables, illustrations, reference list, and appendices.
Abstract <i>(not always required in an undergraduate report)</i>	Usually a one-paragraph overview of aims, methods, results, and conclusions, but some science departments require one or more pages divided into the same sections as the report.
Introduction	State research aims and objectives, including any hypothesis. Describe the rationale for the study, i.e., why the issues for investigation were important or significant. Might define technical or specialist terms. Outline the scope of the report. Briefly state how report is organised.
Background to study <i>Literature Review</i> <i>How your study fits in</i>	Survey key literature: summarise major themes, concepts and/or trends. Situate your research in relation to existing literature; e.g., how it will add to current knowledge, or address any existing gap.
Methods How the study was carried out; how data was analysed	Give precise details of your methods and procedures, e.g., <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • study's participants, and how they were chosen; • data collection methods (e.g. surveys, interviews, questionnaires, personal observation, case study); • process of ethical consent if applicable. Data analysis methods.
Results*	Present results objectively, without discussion. Can include explanatory or supporting data (e.g., extracts from interviews). Include illustrations, figures or tables.

Section	Content
Discussion* (*Results and Discussion might be combined)	Evaluate and discuss results. Comment on significant findings, and their implications. Might also include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whether any initial hypothesis was supported; • whether or not the findings met the aims of the study; • a comparison of your findings with other research; • limitations, flaws or problems in study design or methods.
Conclusion	Give conclusions clearly and concisely. If your results were inconclusive, say so. Briefly re-state how well the study design met the study's aims. Emphasise major findings and implications of findings as addressed in the discussion section. Briefly re-cap any faults or limitations covered in full in the discussion section. If applicable, suggest future research directions.
Recommendations (if applicable)	Summarise and list in order of importance. Might also be numbered.
References	Alphabetical list of references. Start on new page, attach to end of report, before appendices.
Appendices	Include relevant and necessary material not included elsewhere, e.g., copy of questionnaires or survey forms; participant consent form; large tables referred to but not included in the body of report; raw data. Number appendices (e.g. Appendix 1, Appendix 2, etc). Start each appendix on a new page.

Although the various sections form a report's *overall* structure, within sections it's important to follow the same paragraph development techniques as set out in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5: WRITING A BUSINESS REPORT

Business reports are written for a variety of purposes, thus their structure and content depend on the nature and purpose of the investigation being reported. However, business reports are always divided into sections. Each section should be headed with a title descriptive of the section's content. Sections might also be numbered. For example:

-
- I. Internal communications
 - I.1 Formal internal communication structures
 - I.2 Informal internal communication structures
-

Within sections, follow the same techniques for paragraph development, linking, etc, as outlined in Chapter 6.

Table 16 below provides guidelines on organisation and content that you can use or adapt as required.

Table 16: Suggested framework and content for a business report

Covering letter	Address letter to person who requested report (e.g., company manager). Explain purpose and objectives of report. Briefly mention major issues identified, and how the recommendations in the report could address these. Sign with your name, position and organisation.
Title page	Set out title of report and date. State name of the organisation that requested report, your name, position, and organisation.
Table of contents	Include sections, tables, appendices, and reference list.
Introduction	Give a clear account of the purpose of report (e.g., the problems or issues identified for investigation). Outline what the report set out to achieve. Explain how report is structured.

Background	Depending on the length and type of report, you could briefly overview details of company or organisation: staffing levels, structure, etc. This might include historical context, i.e., how the organisation developed.
Problems or issues investigated	Discuss current practices or situations that led to issues under investigation, their effects and implications. State what needs to change.
Recommendations	Put forward solutions/recommendations: mention advantages and/or disadvantages of each, including resource implications, etc. Relate to relevant theories, concepts and principles as appropriate.
Summary of Recommendations	If required, summarise recommendations into a numbered list.
Conclusion	Highlight main findings; mention any limitations to your investigation.
Executive summary (not always required: check with your tutor)	Summarise the report in its entirety, not just the recommendations. Can be placed at either the beginning or end of the report.
Reference list	Provide an alphabetical list of references. Start on new page, attach to end of report, before appendices.
Appendices	Include raw data, figures, tables, or diagrams that are too unwieldy to go into the main part of the report. Each appendix should be numbered (e.g., Appendix 1, Appendix 2) as referred to in the body of the report, and as listed in Table of Contents.

CHAPTER 6: PRODUCING A POLISHED PRODUCT

STRUCTURING AND DEVELOPING PARAGRAPHS

In most forms of university writing, the paragraph is a key element. Paragraphs should be *conceptual units*, in that each paragraph focuses on one central concept or theme, as well as *visual units*, in that each paragraph is clearly separated from another, either with extra line spacing or indentation.

Paragraph structure is demonstrated in the following table (adapted from Oshima and Hogue, 1991, p. 34; 2007, p. 147):

Table 17: Paragraph structure and development

First sentence	Introduces the main topic of the paragraph.
A. First supporting point	An explanation, or expansion of the main idea.
B. Second supporting point	Further expansion of the main idea – for example, evidence from your reading that supports your explanation.
C. Third supporting point	This may include further evidence, an example, or other detail.
D. Concluding sentence	Restatement or summary of main points or a final comment. (<i>Concluding sentences for body paragraphs are not always appropriate or necessary.</i>)

The number of supporting points (A, B, C) will, of course, vary from paragraph to paragraph.

The length of a paragraph is typically about four to seven sentences, around 70 to 200 words. Where a “central idea” needs further treatment than, say, 220 words, the paragraph should be broken at a logical point and the idea reintroduced in the first sentence of a new paragraph.

LINKING

While paragraphs deal with one idea at a time, those ideas should link into a unified whole. Linking is important, too, between the elements within a paragraph. Three techniques to achieve effective linking – “**Signposts**”, **Sequencing**, and **Repetition of a key word** – are described below. These techniques are useful to show how one concept relates to another, to provide a bridge between similar ideas, or to introduce a new point into the discussion.

I. “Signposts”

Certain words and phrases act as “signposts” because they give clues about direction, prevent the reader from getting lost, and keep a discussion on track. Compare the following two passages, one without signposts (Example a), and one with signposts (Example b). (Examples adapted from University of New England Teaching and Learning Centre, 2000.)

Example a):

Malinowski proposed a classification for folktales, and distinguished between myth, legend, and fairy story. Myth represents a statement of a higher or more important truth of a primeval reality. It is regarded as sacred. Fairy stories are entertainment. Nobody attaches any special significance to them. Nobody believes them to be true. Legends are believed to be true historical accounts.

Now, note how the addition of signposts in Example b) (as underlined) improves clarity, style, emphasis, and general readability:

Example b):

Malinowski proposed a three-way classification for folktales, and distinguished between myth, legend, and fairy story. The first of these, he suggested, represents a statement of a higher and more important truth of a primeval reality. As such, it is regarded as sacred. Fairy stories, on the other hand, are simply entertainment and nobody attaches any special significance to them, and nobody believes them to be true. Legends, however, are believed to be true historical accounts.

Signposts serve many different functions, just some of which are set out in Table 18.

Table 18: “Signposts” and their function (Compiled from sources including Bright [2002] and Bate and Sharpe [1996].)

<p>To add to a point already made; or to introduce a new point also; moreover; further; furthermore; again; what is more; then again; in addition; following this; besides; above all; too; as well (as); subsequently; consequently; as a consequence; in the meantime; neither ... nor; not only ... but also; similarly; correspondingly; in the same way; indeed; in fact; really; in reality; as for; as to; in respect to; respecting; in regard to; regarding</p>
<p>To reinforce a point, or state it in a different way in other words; that is to say; to put it (more) simply; with this in mind; in view of this</p>
<p>To indicate stages in a process first; second; third; to begin with; next; following this; another; in addition; concurrently; simultaneously; meanwhile; in the meantime; moreover; subsequently; consequently; before that; earlier; previously; by that time; at last; after that; at length; finally; in conclusion; to conclude</p>
<p>To explain; to introduce an example that is to say; in other words; for example; for instance; namely; an example of this is; as in the following examples; such as; particularly; in particular; especially; notably; chiefly; mainly</p>
<p>To show cause and effect therefore; accordingly; as a result; from this it can be seen that; it is evident; because of this; thus; hence; for this reason; owing to; this suggests that; it follows that; it must then follow that; in other words; otherwise; in that case; this implies; unfortunately</p>
<p>To show concession admittedly; after all; all the same; at any rate; granted; however; in any case; in spite of; it is true that; nevertheless; still; to be sure</p>
<p>To show conditions in this event; in these circumstances; this being so; provided that; in spite of; nonetheless; nevertheless; at the same time; even if; unless; otherwise; although; even though; despite; possibly; probably; apparently; presumably</p>

To compare/contrast

in contrast; in comparison; on the one hand; on the other hand; here again; in the same way; conversely; on the contrary; alternatively; although; neither ... nor; however; instead; in spite of; despite; otherwise; rather than; still; yet; yet again

To emphasise, show conviction

after all; at least; evidently; certainly; conceivably; conclusively; doubtless; no doubt; surely; undoubtedly; unfortunately

To sum up; to conclude

therefore; my conclusion is; in short; in conclusion; to conclude; in all; on the whole; to summarise; to sum up; in brief; altogether

To show time-frame

now; since that time; during the past decade; at the same time; concurrently; during the 1960s; from the beginning of the 20th Century

Exercise 5: *Circle all the “signposts” in the following paragraph, and use correct punctuation (Oshima & Hogue, 1991, p. 83).*

Genetic research has produced both exciting and frightening possibilities. Scientists are now able to create new forms of life in the laboratory due to the development of gene splicing. On the one hand the ability to create life in the laboratory could greatly benefit mankind. For example, because insulin is very expensive to obtain from natural sources, scientists have developed a method to manufacture it inexpensively in the laboratory. Another beneficial application of gene splicing is in agriculture. Scientists foresee the day when new plants will be developed using nitrogen from the air instead of from fertiliser, therefore food production could be increased. In addition, entirely new plants could be developed to feed the world’s hungry people.

Answer in Appendix 1.

2. Sequencing

Another linking technique relates to the way components of a sentence are ordered in relation to each other. For maximum effect and flow, place the least important element at the beginning of the sentence, and the main point at the end of the sentence.

Say that we want to combine the following pieces of information into one sentence:

- (i) *Clause petitioned Parliament for longer prison sentences for sub-standard building practices.*
- (ii) *The Government Report on building codes was released in 2004.*

If the main point of the sentence is sub-standard practices, the most logical sequence is –

After the Government Report on building codes was released in 2004, Clause petitioned Parliament for longer prison sentences for sub-standard practices.

As well as placing the stress where we want it, this arrangement also allows a smooth and logical lead-in to the next sentence which expands the point:

After the Government Report on building codes was released in 2004, Clause called for Parliament to impose longer prison sentences for sub-standard practices. Such practices had led to hundreds of complaints from homeowners, many of whom would face severe financial losses.

On the other hand, if the point for stress and expansion was longer prison sentences, that is the element to place at the end of the sentence:

After the Government Report on building codes was released in 2004, Clause called for Parliament to penalise sub-standard practices by imposing longer prison sentences. Only the full weight of the law, he argued, could bring offending developers into line.

Exercise 6: *Improve sequencing in the first sentence of the following short passage (adjust wording as required). (Example adapted from Oshima & Hogue, 1991.)*

A completely new culture was encountered by the first Europeans to settle the North American continent: the native American tribes of North America. Native Americans, who had a highly developed culture in many respects, must have been as curious about the strange European manners and customs as were the Europeans about native Americans.

Answer in Appendix 1.

3. Repetition of a key term

A third linking technique is to repeat a key word or phrase from one sentence to the next, or from one paragraph to the next:

After the Government Report on building codes was released in 2004, Clause called for Parliament to impose longer prison sentences for sub-standard practices. Such practices had led to many complaints from homeowners, many of whom would face severe financial losses.

The major problem to arise from sub-standard practices was "leaky home syndrome". To label a home "leaky", three key criteria must be met. First, ...

WRITING WITH CONVICTION

Even though an assignment might be based largely on ideas and information from various sources, avoid the impression that you are merely reproducing facts or the statements of others. This can, of course, be a challenge when all you know about a topic comes only from what you've read. However, the key is to use information to form a position and to support that position.

This idea is explored in the following two examples. They demonstrate the difference between effective and ineffective handling of source material. (Examples from *Essay module: Writing practice for university students, University of Sydney, 1995.*)

Example a):

Dickson (1984) maintains that television violence has a marked effect on the development of the child. Brown (1985) says that children who watch a great deal of televised violence could be affected for many years. The Television Broadcasting Tribunal (1982, p. 16) recommends that we should "limit the number of hours per week of programmes showing violence during children's viewing times".

Example b):

That television violence has a considerable effect on the development of the child is not disputed. Both Dickson (1984) and Brown (1985) have shown through extensive experiments that the majority of children are affected by television violence, Brown having extended the base of her research to longitudinal studies which reveal that this effect is quite long-term. In the face of such convincing evidence, The Television Broadcasting Tribunal has been compelled to act in order to reduce the impact that increased television viewing could have on children. The Tribunal has recommended (1982) that the number of hours per week of violent programs should be limited during children's viewing times. In spite of these recommendations, however, there continues to be a significant level of violence in programmes which are broadcast at prime viewing times for children.

Whereas the writer of example (a) merely reports studies without analysis or emphasis, the writer of example (b), using the same information, effectively formulates and supports a convincing argument, not just reporting the facts but drawing connections – Dickson's and Brown's *extensive experiments*; Brown's *longitudinal studies*; the Television Broadcasting Tribunal's being *compelled to act*; Writer b) also uses "signposts" effectively (*in spite of; however*).

Exercise 7: Refer to the conclusion to the ecotourism essay in Table 11, p. 22, and underline expressions that you consider convey *analysis*, *emphasis* and *conviction*.

Answer in Appendix 1.

Supporting opinion with evidence

While it's important your voice and perspective emerge in your writing, you need to ensure that you support your opinions with appropriate evidence, and that you avoid unsubstantiated claims, sweeping statements, or generalisations. If, for example, you write that *violence occurs regularly on our television screens*, you would not need to include supporting evidence, as such a proposition comes into the realm of general knowledge: one need only turn on the television any night of the week to observe a considerable amount of violence. If, however, you state that *87% of prime time television programming contains violent episodes*, or that *the high level of violence on New Zealand television is leading to increased youth violence*, you would need to cite the evidence from relevant recent and reputable studies.

Exercise 8: *Identify which of the following statements require supporting evidence.*

- (a) Measles is a potentially deadly disease.
- (b) All children should be vaccinated against measles.
- (c) As fluoride prevents tooth decay, water supplies with poor natural levels should be supplemented.
- (d) Children benefit from preschool education.
- (e) Teachers find mixed classes more difficult to manage than same-sex classes.

If you think any of the above statements require supporting evidence, how could you fix them to be acceptable in a university assignment? (Use pretend references where necessary.)

Answers in Appendix 1.

Paraphrasing

It cannot be stressed too strongly that writing a convincing argument is closely related to *paraphrasing* source information effectively (to *paraphrase* means to put in your own words something said or written by someone else). This is an important skill to acquire in university writing, as a lot of what you write will be based on various source materials. Paraphrasing is necessary also to avoid using too many direct quotations, which can give the impression that the writer does not sufficiently understand the topic to form an opinion.

Paraphrased information must always reference the original source (see *Referencing*, p46), and should not be too close to the original wording, either in vocabulary or sentence structure, otherwise it could be considered plagiarism even if a reference is included.

An example of paraphrasing is shown in Table 19. The point the writer wants to make is that *there is no agreed definition of "ecotourism"*. Clearly, the paraphrase expresses the writer's voice far more than the quotes do, not to mention being more concise and readable:

Table 19: An example of a paraphrase¹

Directed quotations from source	Paraphrased version
<p>According to Ecotourism NZ (2008): ... the lack of a precise, commonly agreed definition of 'ecotourism' was a common cause of misunderstanding, argument, and made many doubt that it was a genuine topic in itself (as something significantly different from, for example, adventure or nature tourism or, more importantly, sustainable tourism).</p> <p>Ecotourism NZ (2008) also notes that: An examination of the literature shows that this problem is not confined to the West Coast, and that there are literally hundreds of definitions of ecotourism. The fact is that people tend to customize their own definitions to suit their interests or situation.</p>	<p>Unfortunately, New Zealand has no definitive interpretation of "ecotourism" so people are able to use the term to suit their own purposes, leading to misunderstanding and confusion (Ecotourism NZ, 2008).</p>

¹ Source: Ecotourism NZ (2008).

If you use the same idea from a number of sources, include all the sources in one reference.

Example:

Unfortunately, New Zealand has no definitive interpretation of “ecotourism” so people are able to use the term to suit their own purposes, leading to misunderstanding and confusion (Hillary, 2006; Brady & Collins, 2007; Ecotourism NZ, 2008; Jones & Guthrie, 2008).

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND TONE

Students sometimes wonder if their language is “academic” enough. It’s true that academic writing calls for a degree of formality, but that does not mean it should be unnaturally stiff, complex or unwieldy.

Strive to write in your natural writing voice but according to what is appropriate for the context. For example, an essay, report or critique would normally be rather more formal and less personal than the conversational style I’ve adopted for this handout, where I’ve used informal expressions (e.g., *keep on track*), contractions (*don’t*; *it’s*), and started sentences with the more informal *And* or *But*.

Also, I use the first person singular (*I*), whereas in your assignments, apart perhaps from reflective writing or, say, a reading journal, it’s generally safer not to use “*I*” (unless your tutor or lecturer tells you differently). The first person plural (*we*) might be acceptable even in more formal contexts, but not all markers of your work will agree.

But in formal writing do not do as I’ve done here and address the reader as *you*. For example, instead of: “*You can see how this leads to ...*”, say: “*One can see how this leads to ...*”, or better still, “*This leads to ...*”.

And please, in any context, avoid jargon and clichés (e.g., *planning forward*, *at this point in time*, *think outside the square*, *ticks all the boxes*).

Finally, every academic field has a language of its own – terms for theories and concepts, or technical or specialist terminology. Aim to know the language of your field and use it confidently in your writing.

PROOFREADING AND EDITING

Careful proofreading and editing of your work is essential. A message I frequently preach is that if we don't care enough about our writing to make it error-free, we can't expect a reader to take it seriously, let alone award it high marks.

Organise your time for a major assignment to have at least a couple of days before giving it a final once-over. Coming back to our work with "a fresh eye" allows us to more easily spot errors or omissions.

Always check your work in hard copy, not just on the computer screen – screen checking is far less effective in detecting errors or lapses of style.

By all means, use a computer spell check and grammar check, but do not accept a change without double-checking as these tools are notorious for suggesting changes that are simply wrong.

Before handing in your work, run it through the checklist set out in Table 20 below.

Table 20: Editing checklist

Should you need to familiarise yourself with points of grammar mentioned (e.g., *subject, verb, tense*, etc.), the Student Learning Centre has a comprehensive guide, *Guidelines for Writing and Editing*, available as a downloadable PDF on our website, or in hard copy on request. This covers these and other aspects of language and writing technique.

Spelling	Have you checked all words you're unsure of in a dictionary (especially commonly confused words such as: <i>all right, all together, definitely, persuade</i>).
Grammar	Are sentences grammatical? Does every sentence have at least a subject and a verb? Are there any comma splices or sentence fragments? Do nouns and verbs agree (e.g., singular with singular, plural with plural)?
Tense	Are tenses consistent (e.g., present or past, not inappropriately mixed)?

Punctuation	<p>Are commas correctly placed? Have you used too many?</p> <p>Have you used apostrophes correctly?</p> <p>Have you used a semi-colon instead of a colon, or vice versa?</p> <p>Have you divided a sentence with a semi-colon instead of a comma?</p>
Vocabulary	<p>Have you used unfamiliar terms in their correct context?</p> <p>Are there any slang terms or contractions?</p> <p>Have you used the specialist terms for your subject?</p>
Expression	<p>Can you identify any clumsy wording?</p> <p>Are any sentences too long? Too complex?</p>
Clarity	<p>Will the reader be able to easily follow your line of reasoning?</p> <p>Are your ideas expressed clearly?</p> <p>Is there a clear and logical progression from one point to the next?</p> <p>Are there enough <i>signposts</i> within and between paragraphs?</p>
Paragraphs	<p>Does each paragraph focus on <i>one central idea</i> easily identified by the reader? Is the idea sufficiently expanded?</p>
Overall structure	<p>Do paragraphs link? Does the text flow smoothly and logically from one paragraph to the next?</p>
Strength of argument	<p>Have you avoided making unsubstantiated claims or generalisations?</p>
Overlaps/repetition	<p>Is any idea or information mentioned more than once?</p>
Referencing	<p>Is all source material fully and correctly cited?</p> <p>Have you avoided too many direct quotations?</p>

REFERENCING

All the sources of ideas or information used in an assignment need to be acknowledged in the body of the assignment, and in an alphabetical list at the end of the assignment.

References can take two broad forms: *footnotes* or *endnotes* (e.g.,^{1,2}) which appear at the bottom of a page or end of a section, or *author/date* entries which appear in the body of the assignment (e.g., Jones, 2005). Within these two broad systems are a number of different styles (e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago). Ensure that you use the style required by your department (check your course information, or with your tutor).

If your department does not stipulate a referencing system, I suggest APA, as comprehensive guidelines are available from the Student Learning Centre, in either hard copy or on our website (www.otago.ac.nz/SLC). For guidelines on other referencing systems, refer to the University of Otago Library website.

Where you have read material but not referred to it in your assignment and wonder if you should include it in your reference list, the answer depends on the extent to which it influenced your thinking. If you do include it, head your reference list *Bibliography* (as opposed to *References*) to indicate that the list includes material not directly referred to in the assignment. (Note that this distinction is not universally accepted, so check with your tutor or lecturer.)

HANDING IN YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Presentation can count for as much as 10% of an assignment grade. It is not expected that your assignment be bound or placed in a plastic cover, but do ensure that it is formatted neatly, preferably typed. Margins and spacing should be consistent. Usual formatting conventions are:

- Typed if possible.
- One and a-half or double line spacing
- Extra spaces between paragraphs, or indented first line.
- 4cm left-hand margin
- Pages are numbered

References/ Bibliography	Start on a separate page Format in the referencing style required by department. Attach to the back of assignment
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Some departments provide cover sheets to be attached to the front of assignments, some departments ask that cover sheets not be used (in the interests of the environment), and, of course, some assignments are submitted electronically. But in any case, the following information should be provided:

Front page Name and I.D. number (or just ID number if so instructed)
 Date assignment is due
 Name of paper; tutor or lecturer
 Tutorial group
 Name of your essay (either the question itself, or a suitable title)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX I: ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Fine-tuning a thesis statement

is

The real problem in our schools ~~does not revolve around~~ the absence of nationwide goals and standards; the problem is ~~primarily concerned with~~ the absence of resources with which to implement them.

Exercise 2: Essay introduction

Example a):

This is a reasonable introduction because it gives the reader a good idea of what the essay is about without restating the essay question, and briefly indicates the issues and wider context. It also provides a clear thesis statement. However, there is no direction to the reader on how the essay will develop.

Example b):

Bate and Sharp (1996, p. 200) comment on example b) as follows:

The introduction begins with an unnecessary reference to the general focus of the course and with a statement of the theme.... Generally, this introduction is ineffective because it is repetitive; it strays from the topic; it lacks a clear thesis to set up the argument; and it gives an impression of conceptual confusion and stalling.

Exercise 3: Essay conclusion

In conclusion, although recent advances have indeed given us a lot of advantages by making us richer; healthier, and freer to enjoy our lives, they have, in my opinion, not made us wiser. In the past few decades, our Earth has become dirtier; our people less humane, and our spiritual lives poorer. We should continue to enjoy the benefits of technological advancement because they free us to pursue our interests and goals. However, we must make a concerted effort to preserve our natural environment for future generations. Moreover, we should take the time now to make our lives more meaningful in an increasingly impersonal, mechanised world.

The above example is effective because it clearly states the writer's conclusion. "Signposts" (as underlined) have been used effectively: *indeed* creates emphasis; *however* qualifies the previous point and indicates to the reader that a counter argument will follow; *moreover* adds emphasis to another important point in the writer's conclusion. However, the qualification, *in my opinion* (line 2), weakens the writer's argument – the whole is the writer's opinion.

Exercise 4: Assessing methods and procedures

- a) Jones (2005) claims that teenagers are spending more time on computers and less time on sport. Her study comprised five 15 year-olds living in Invercargill.
- b) According to Gordon and Brown (2005) New Zealand teenagers are spending more time on computers and less time on sport. They interviewed 500 teenagers in a variety of socio-economic, cultural, and geographical settings throughout New Zealand, over five years, from ages 13 to 18.

A critique of the first study might comment on its limitations in sample size and location, whereas one of the second study might comment on its extensive and longitudinal nature. This is not to say that the first author's findings should be regarded as less important or significant – the objective of that research might have been to identify a trend in a particular location.

Exercise 5: Signposts have been underlined and punctuation added

Genetic research has produced both exciting and frightening possibilities. Scientists are now able to create new forms of life in the laboratory due to the development of gene splicing. On the one hand, the ability to create life in the laboratory could greatly benefit mankind. For example, because insulin is very expensive to obtain from natural sources, scientists have developed a method to manufacture it inexpensively in the laboratory. Another beneficial application of gene splicing is in agriculture. Scientists foresee the day when new plants will be developed using nitrogen from the air instead of from fertiliser; therefore food production could be increased. In addition, entirely new plants could be developed to feed the world's hungry people.

Exercise 6: Sequence is improved if the first sentence is re-arranged as follows:

When the first Europeans began to settle the North American continent, they encountered a completely new culture: the native American tribes of North America. Native Americans, who had a highly developed culture in many respects, must have been as curious about the strange European manners and customs as were the Europeans about native Americans.

Exercise 7: The expressions that particularly convey a sense of the writer's *analysis*, *emphasis* and *conviction* are underlined:

There can be no doubt that many "eco" claims are largely unsubstantiated. Some activities involving nature reserves and sanctuaries have unquestionably damaged plant life and contaminated waterways. Of concern also are misplaced promises of low impact, sustainable accommodation. There is no suggestion that operators are being deliberately dishonest, but until "ecotourism" is clearly defined and guidelines and standards established, people are able to use the "eco" label to suit their own purposes. Both national and local governments have a responsibility to institute and monitor standards, even though this will undoubtedly involve some cost—but profitability and sustainability need not be in opposition. Furthermore, the industry itself must play its part in promoting ecologically sound ventures and ensuring standards are met. Without practical and timely intervention, operators are able to continue to make misleading claims, but more seriously, contribute to irreversible environmental damage.

Exercise: 8

The statements can be classified as follows:

a) Measles is a potentially deadly disease.	<i>Fact, doesn't require evidence</i>
b) All children should be vaccinated against measles.	<i>Requires evidence</i>
c) As fluoride prevents tooth decay, water supplies with poor natural levels should be supplemented.	<i>Requires evidence</i>
d) Children benefit from preschool education.	<i>Requires evidence</i>
e) Teachers find mixed classes more difficult to manage than same-sex classes.	<i>Requires evidence</i>

Examples b) c), d) and e) are unacceptable in a university essay. Such statements need to be less emphatic and supported by evidence. Table 8 provides examples of acceptable alternatives.

Examples of supporting evidence (Note: all sources are fictitious)

b) Some medical experts argue that all students should be vaccinated against measles (e.g., Department of Teaching, 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Brown, 2009).
c) Fluoride added to water supplies has been shown to prevent tooth decay (Cameron, 2005), but there is much debate over whether the benefits of supplementing water supplies are outweighed by other factors (Sullivan & Clancy, 2006).
d) Preschool education promotes valuable social skills, and helps children integrate smoothly into primary school (Jones, 2000; Brown & Johnston, 2001; Smith, 2005). Another advantage of preschool education is ... (Gordon, 2006).
e) According to the 2006 survey of secondary school teachers in New Zealand, the majority believes that mixed classes are more difficult to manage than same-sex classes (Department of Teaching, 2006).



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Student Learning Centre