

# Planning and Organising Academic Writing Tasks

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## Introduction

The main area of difficulty for students from the Pacific region who attend Massey University, as far as the use of English is concerned, is related to the preparation of written assignments. The writing of essays and reports at the university level are demanding tasks for all our students, whatever their language background. In addition to an expectation that the piece of work will show an acceptable level of expression as far as spelling and grammar are concerned, there is also:

- the need for careful organisation of the ideas that are presented
- the need for a precise and clear writing style
- the need to adopt an approach that is objective and impersonal rather than subjective and informal.

In this article we will look at the first requirement: the need for careful planning and organisation and give some idea of the ways in which students could be prepared in pre-university programmes to cope better with the demands of academic writing.

## The Importance of Structure

The structure of a written assignment is very important. If the organisation is faulty, the ideas will not be presented effectively and the tutor marking the piece of work will find it difficult to see how the points relate to each other and where the discussion is heading.

To develop skills in planning and organising written assignments, it is useful for students to study different kinds of structural plans and compare the plans most commonly used in writing of an academic, scientific or technical nature with those employed in other kinds of written discourse. For example, narratives, news reports and anecdotes usually employ a plan based on *chronological order* in which events are arranged in time sequence, describing what happened first, followed by what happened next, and so on.

This format may sometimes be appropriate in academic writing when historical events are being discussed or when a process is being described (for instance, the various steps taken in carrying out an experiment). However, other writing tasks may involve different frameworks, depending on whether the topic studied involves, description, evaluation or detailed analysis.

## Different Kinds of Writing Plans

As an exercise, students could examine the features of the following plans and discuss how they could be applied to a range of advanced writing tasks.

### i) General → Specific Plan

This kind of plan can be useful in descriptions of things. For example, if the task is to describe some piece of equipment such as a camera, one possibility is to begin with a general description of the item and then follow this with a description of the individual components.

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**Introduction** - general  
description of a camera (shape, size, etc.)

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**Parts of a camera 1** - the lens

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**Parts of a camera 2** - the shutter mechanism

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**Parts of a camera 3** - the film winding  
mechanism

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**Parts of a camera 4** - the camera case and  
attachments (flash, extra lenses, etc.)

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ii) **Specific —> General Plan**

The opposite kind of plan begins with the smallest details and then builds up to the overall picture. An example of this could be when instructions are given about how to do something, such as how to drive a car. Each step could be described until the whole process involved in driving a car has been explained.

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**First step** - starting the engine

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**Second step** - engaging first gear

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**Third step** - releasing the brake and  
pressing the accelerator

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**Fourth step** - steering the car,  
braking, etc.

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iii) **Problem —> Solution Plan**

In this kind of plan the writer begins with an analysis of the nature of a particular problem or issue and follows this up with a discussion of possible solutions.

For example, the task could be to write an essay on "The Problem of Pollution in Cities". The possible plan for this essay could be:

<b>Introduction</b>	- definition of pollution
<b>Kinds of pollution</b>	- traffic pollution - industrial pollution
<b>Results of pollution</b>	- destruction of vegetation - harm to people
<b>What should be done</b>	- laws to prevent industries polluting the environment - attempts to find ways to reduce pollution in cars, etc.

iv) **Comparison Plan**

Another type of plan could involve comparing two kinds of situations.

A typical topic that requires this kind of plan is:

"What are the advantages of life in the country compared with those of life in cities".

In planning this essay one must be careful to ensure that both areas are discussed fully.

<b>Introduction</b>
<b>Advantages of country life</b> - calm, slower pace of life, no pollution
<b>Advantages of town life</b> - more entertainment, more jobs available
<b>Summary:</b> (Your evaluation of whether or not the advantages of country life outweigh those of town life.)

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The summary provides the opportunity for the writer to compare the advantages of both and to state which one appears to have the major advantages.

## v) For—> Against Plan

This plan-type is suitable for essays that require a discussion of the pros and cons of certain issues.

**Example:** "Discuss the arguments for and against the death penalty for people who commit murder."

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### Introduction

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#### Arguments In favour of the death penalty

- to deter others
  - retribution for loss of a victim's life
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#### Arguments against the death penalty

- problem of putting to death a convicted person who may be innocent of the crime
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**Conclusion:** Your evaluation of whether or not the arguments in favour of the death penalty are more convincing than those against it

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## Follow-Up Activities

After discussing the different types of writing plans illustrated above the students could:

- (a) identify which kind of plan would be most suitable for each of the topics set out below.
- (b) use this selected plan in making a list of main points that could be included in an essay on the particular topic.

## Sample Topics

1. The problem of unemployment.
2. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of being the oldest or the youngest child in a family.
3. Should young people be permitted to hold a driver's licence?
4. Give the arguments for and against compulsory military training for all young people.

Other exercises might include

1. Examining model essays or reports and drawing up plans that show how they are planned and organised.
2. Using an outline plan as a guide in reassembling the paragraphs of an essay that have been placed in jumbled order.

## **Conclusion**

Exercises such as the ones outlined above could assist students from the Pacific region to prepare essays and reports that are logically organised and that present ideas clearly and effectively. As a result, activities such as these may be seen as playing an important role in preparing students for tertiary studies and enhancing their chances of success.