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What is it that you feel most  
unsure about when writing an  
essay?





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# Support Session 3: Essay Writing

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## Sources:

Camguides on Academic Writing:

- <https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/ugcamguides/skills/academic-writing>

Royal Literary Fund:

- <https://www.rlf.org.uk/resources/writing-essays/>

## In this session:

- What makes a good essay?
- Academic writing
- Breaking down the question
- Planning
- Writing
- Proofreading
- Final points





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# What makes a good essay?



# What should a good essay do?

Above all, a good essay needs to directly answer the question at hand! So...

- Provide us with a clear and logical development of your argument
- Show us your understanding of the topic and your own informed opinions

# What else makes for a good essay?

Writing with clear language and structure

No grammar, punctuation or spelling mistakes

Demonstrate your ability to **answer the question**

Precision not generalization

Evidence of reading around the subject, and that you know who and where your evidence and theories come from

Discussion of the issues and ideas that relate to the question

Evidence of **reflection**

Critical analysis rather than only description



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# Academic writing

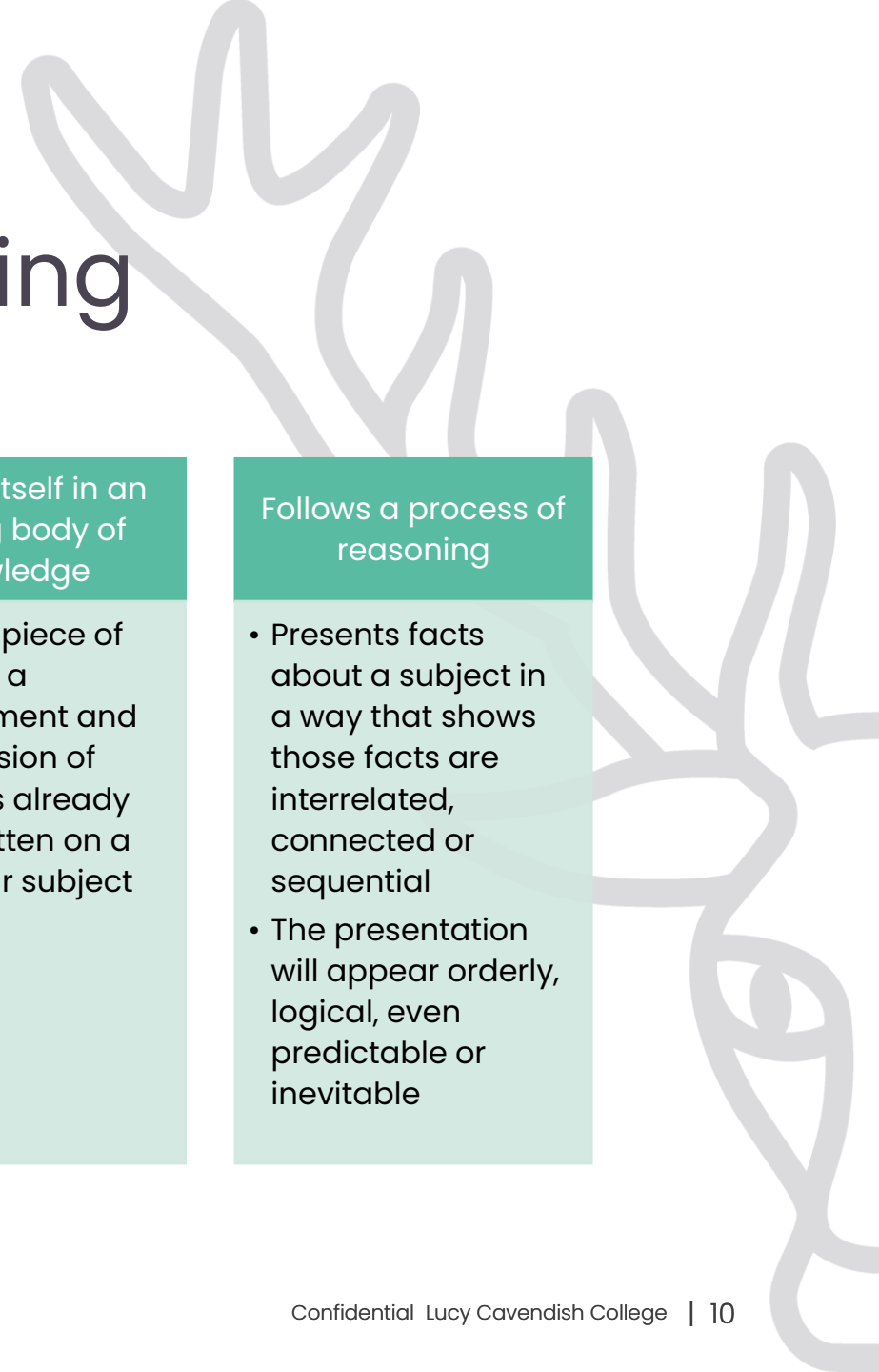




# Academic writing...

- shows evidence of learning
- considers a subject in its different aspects, relations, and implications
- reviews a subject with a sense of skeptical inquiry
- re-examines a subject in order to test and develop ideas or theories

# Key features of academic writing



Serious tone	Starts with an element of doubt	Objective and uses evidence	Locates itself in an existing body of knowledge	Follows a process of reasoning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The language used and the way writers approach their subjects are thoughtful and restrained</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tentative, exploratory, and doesn't make assumptions</li><li>• It does not start by claiming to be definitive or comprehensive</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This connects with being objective</li><li>• Academic writing isn't a place to express opinions or feelings without backing them up with facts or references</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Any new piece of writing is a development and an extension of what has already been written on a particular subject</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Presents facts about a subject in a way that shows those facts are interrelated, connected or sequential</li><li>• The presentation will appear orderly, logical, even predictable or inevitable</li></ul>



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# Breaking down the question



# Breaking down the question

Supervisor comment: 'good essays answer the question rather than being a memory dump'

# Breaking down the question

What are you  
being asked  
about?

What are you  
being asked to  
use?

What are you  
being asked to  
do?

## **Breaking down the question:** What are you being asked about?

- Identify the topics that you need to focus on It may be an open-ended task and you need to define the parameters
  - If this is the case, make sure that you explain why you have limited your answer in this way.
  - For example, you may choose to focus on a few examples
    - Why have you selected them?
    - Make clear that you understand the context in which these few examples sit

## Breaking down the question: What are you being asked to do?

Word	Definition
<b>Assess</b>	Estimate the importance or value of, judge.
<b>Consider</b>	Take into account, weigh up the advantages/disadvantages.
<b>Discuss</b>	Investigate and/or examine in detail, sift the argument or debate. Give reasons for and against.

## **Breaking down the question:** What are you being asked to do?

'Question the question' using these prompts:

- Are there any key terms that need to be clarified? How will you define them?
- Are there any false assumptions or ambiguities? Clarify how you will interpret anything ambiguous and deal with assumptions as you set out your answer.
- Are you asked to discuss a clear point of view? Hold your own position rather than adopting an 'either-or approach' or agreeing too completely.



# Don't lose sight of the title

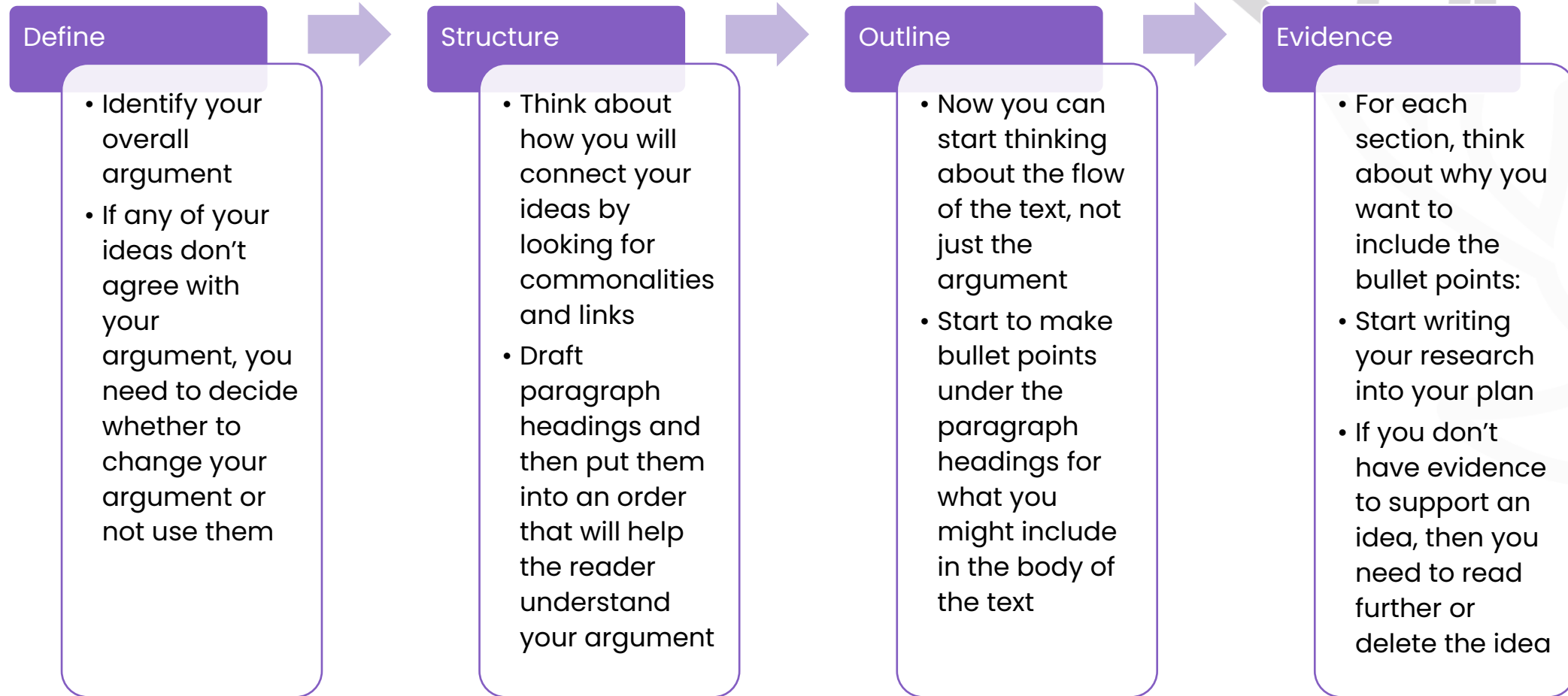
- Put the essay title into the header of your word processing document so that it's at the top of every page



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Plan your answer before you  
write!







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# Writing your essay





## Introduction

- Outline the shape of your answer and tell your reader what you will be arguing
- Explicitly address the question and tell the reader what to expect, and in what order
- Define your key terms and how you will be interpreting the essay question
- Present an overview of the essay's subject e.g., 'Scientific paradigms in psychology were first theorised in...'

## Main body

- 1 main idea per paragraph
- Ensure each paragraph leads on logically and clearly from the other – e.g., building on an idea and looking at another example which proves the same point, moving your argument to an opposing position

## Conclusion

- Opportunity to make final statements – not to summarise everything you have just written
- Confirm the overall argument and keep it relevant to the question
- Don't introduce any new main points, but you could refer to any outstanding issues which you have not had the chance to cover, or which could be remedied by further research

# Introductions: what they do

Present an overview of the essay's subject  
e.g., 'Scientific paradigms in psychology were first theorised in...'

Set out the main idea of the essay

Outline how the essay title will be interpreted

Define important terms  
e.g., 'This essay will use Professor Blogg's definition of X which states that...'

Outline the issues to be explored in the essay

# Introductions: first things last?

- You don't have to write your introduction first
- You should certainly start out with a clear idea of what you are going to do but this can be in draft or note form
- After all, you may start out thinking you are going to use the theories of Professor Bloggs and then, halfway through writing, come across the theories of Professor Smith which cast an interesting new light on your subject
- In fact, the ideal time to be thinking about your introduction is when you've finished writing your essay
- This might sound odd, but it's a good way to ensure consistency: a common problem with student essays is that they have introductions that announce X, Y and Z and then don't do them

# Transitioning your argument

When transitioning your argument, you want to introduce a new beginning while referring to what has gone before.

- Adding similar points or going into more detail:
  - also, moreover, in addition, furthermore, similarly, additionally, likewise, for instance, this
- Sequencing points:
  - firstly, secondly, thirdly, initially, finally, next
- Contrasting points:
  - however, yet, in contrast, but, although, alternatively, on the other hand, conversely, despite
- Giving causes, reasons or results:
  - accordingly, thus, therefore, as a result, because, due to, consequently, hence





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# Writing clearly



## Compare the examples below: which is clearer?

Actually, storage is a real pain in small rooms. Every year students have exams and when they are over they have a problem knowing what to do with old lecture and seminar notes and handouts because tutors tell them they might be useful in the future but they can't always see what to keep and so they just keep piling them up on their bookshelves.

At the end of every academic year, after exams are over, students have a problem knowing what to do with old lecture and seminar notes and handouts. Tutors tell students that some materials may be useful in the future, but students are often confused about what to keep. The result is that students just keep everything. The problem isn't helped by the fact that they often live in small rooms with limited storage space.

# Writing clearly

- The longer sentences are, the harder they are to follow: the ideal length for a sentence is 15–20 words
- Main clauses and subordinate clauses: try to avoid interrupting the main clause of the sentence with the subordinate clause
  - *Corporate espionage is on the increase because of the growing use of computers to store sensitive information.*
  - *Corporate espionage, because of the growing use of computers to store sensitive information, is on the increase.*
- Sentences in the active voice are much easier to read and understand than those in the passive voice
- Avoid ambiguous pronouns: the further away the pronoun is from who or what it refers to, the more confusing the sentence becomes



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# Proofreading



# Proofreading

- Checking your work is an equally important stage to make sure that you are communicating as clearly as possible
- It is best to leave some time between writing and re-reading so that you see what is written and not what you think is written
- If you have been writing on a screen, it may help to print out your work; it is often easier to read for flow when looking at a hard copy
- If you are not in an exam, then speaking it aloud is another good way of checking exactly what is on the screen or paper

## Accuracy

- Check for spelling and grammar mistakes



## Sense

- For each individual point, ask yourself the following questions:
  - Why are you including this?
  - Is there sufficient evidence and does it support your claim?
  - Is it clear how it relates to the question?



## Argument

- Does the structure of paragraphs and the connections between them flow?
- Is there ambiguity in the argument?
- Do you contradict yourself at any point?

# Checklist



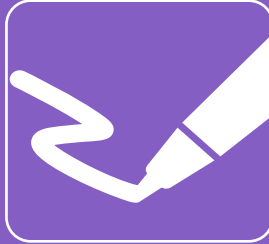
## Before you start writing:

1. I know what my overall answer to the question will be
2. I know which points I need to make in order to explain my overall answer
3. I have decided the order in which I will make my points
4. I have identified the evidence I will use to back up my points

## When you have finished:

5. The introduction to my essay indicates to the reader what I am going to argue, and how I'm going to do it
6. Every paragraph starts with a clear point which relates to the specific question I am answering
7. Every paragraph contains evidence to prove the point I am making
8. I have explained how evidence I am using proves my point
9. My conclusion gives a clear answer to the specific question I am answering
10. I have proof-read my essay

# Key points



Experiment with different approaches: essay prizes are a place to develop ideas and techniques. Some aspects will take practice!



Does the reader know from the very start what your answer is? Is this developed clearly and logically throughout the essay?



Are your main ideas backed up with well-chosen evidence?



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# Any questions?

Or you can always email us at [outreach@lucy.cam.ac.uk](mailto:outreach@lucy.cam.ac.uk)

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<https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/prospective-applicants>