



CeDAS

# Essay Writing Essentials 1: 'Decoding' the Assignment - Planning and Structuring your Essay

Centre for Development of Academic Skills (CeDAS)



ROYAL  
HOLLOWAY  
UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON

# Workshop aims:

1. To explore what effective academic writing looks like at university
2. Decoding essay and assignment questions / tasks
3. Structuring your essay
4. How to write and structure effective, compelling introductions, body paragraphs and conclusions

# Effective academic writing:

## What makes a piece of university level academic writing effective?

- 1) Logical, coherent **STRUCTURE**
- 2) Purposeful and has a clear sense of **DIRECTION**
- 3) Has **CLARITY**
- 4) Is as **CONCISE** as possible
- 5) Engages **CRITICALLY**
- 6) Articulates an **ARGUMENT**
- 7) Answers the question / fulfils the **requirements** of the task

**Writing essays and engaging in university level study is quite different from what you have encountered at school or college.**

- What challenges do you think you will face?
- In what ways might a university essay differ from those you did at school or college?

# Characteristics of 'A' level / access essays / assignments:

- 1) Prescriptive (essay title often chosen by teacher or exam board, student often 'coached' to use certain strategies / terminology / resources, subject often limited to pre-set set topics)
- 2) Focused on fulfilling the exam board's very precise criteria ('Assessment Objectives')
- 3) Limited engagement with secondary reading
- 4) Often focused on achieving a specific aim or demonstrating a specific acquisition of knowledge rather than exhibiting wide ranging, critically perceptive knowledge of the discipline

# University marking scheme (sample)

Category:	1st	2:2
Relevance:	Demonstrates an accurate grasp of the issues raised by the question or brief, and engages with them fully.	Demonstrates partial recognition of the issues, and the material presented may lose focus in places
Argument:	Elucidates a sustained, coherent, original and persuasive argument	Argument may not be fully sustained or relevant, may be over-general or oversimplified
Knowledge:	Demonstrates excellent skills in marshalling appropriate evidence; engages critically and creatively with a range of materials	Received ideas may be repeated or described rather than critically interrogated

# Making the transition:

- 1) It involves moving on from Assessment Objectives and 'jumping through hoops' towards a more independent, less structured approach
- 2) Making an argument
- 3) Critical thinking
- 4) Incorporating and engaging with research / secondary reading
- 5) Getting to grips with theory

**It involves weighing up the evidence...**

**Discuss**

**Evaluate**

**Assess**

**Consider**

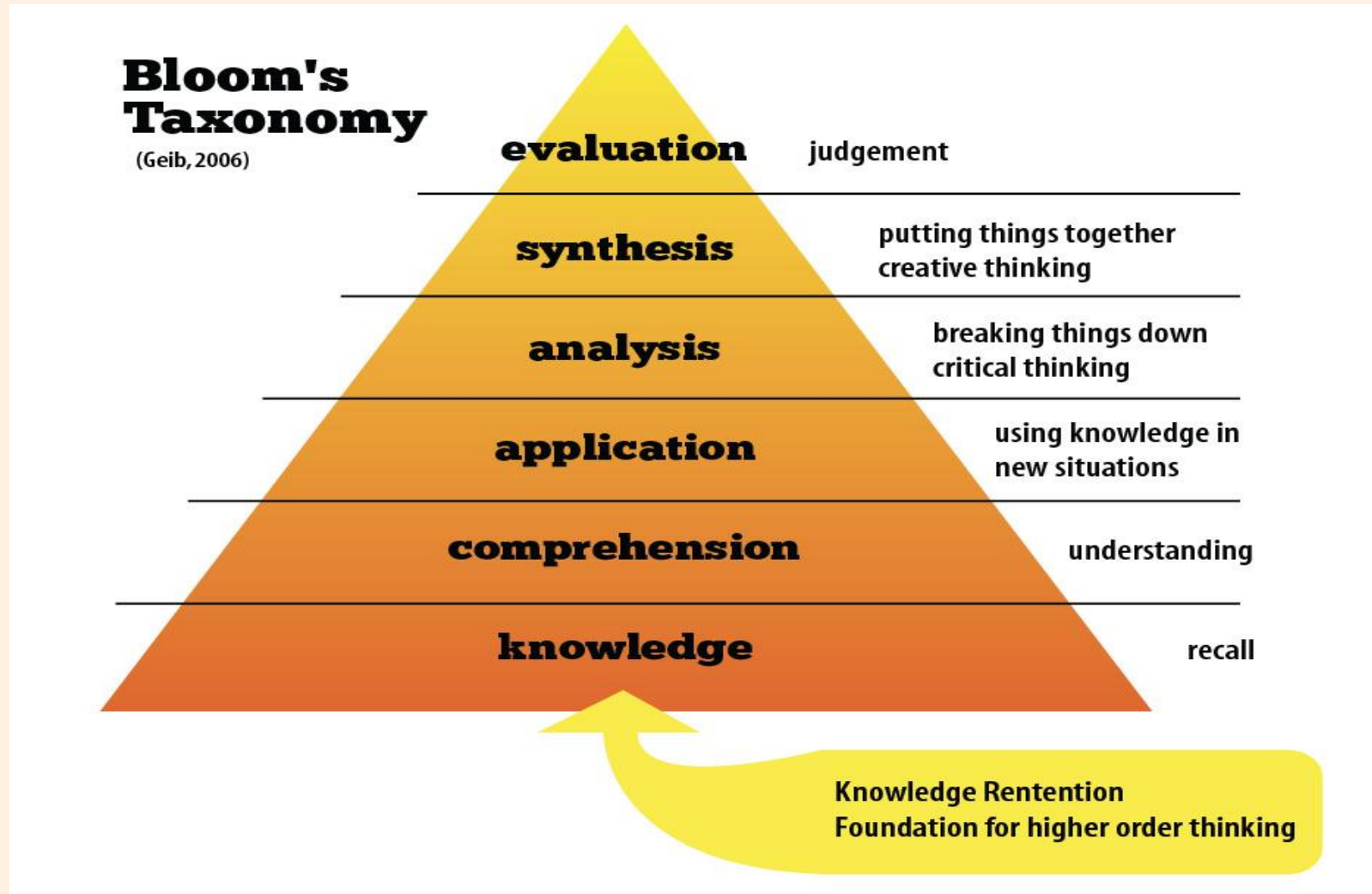
**How far is x true?**

**To what extent is x true**





It requires higher level thinking...



# What sort of language?

- 1) Passive voice, objective stance
- 2) Formal style: use of personal pronoun
- 3) Avoid *Daily Express / Daily Mail* language – superlatives
- 4) Don't use contractions (e.g. don't, can't, won't)
- 5) Avoid colloquialisms
- 6) Be gender neutral
- 7) Be SPECIFIC – avoid words like 'may', 'could', 'might', 'perhaps' etc unless you are being genuinely speculative. Make sure your pronouns refer clearly to their antecedent.

# What sort of genre? - Match the genres to the purposes:

## Genre Family:

- 1) Explanations
- 2) Exercises
- 3) Literature reviews
- 4) Methodology recounts
- 5) Research reports
- 6) Essays
- 7) Critiques
- 8) Narrative recounts
- 9) Empathy writing
- 10) Cases studies
- 11) Design specifications
- 12) Problem questions
- 13) Proposals
- 14) Reviews
- 15) Reflective writing

## Purposes / traits:

Prepare for professional practice

Build research skills

Test and demonstrate knowledge and understanding

Develop powers of independent thinking / critical analysis / reasoning

Critical evaluation

To write for oneself, or for non-specialists

# Titles and decoding questions:

## Considering the key terms and parameters of the question:

- 1) **Content / topic keywords:** these are the non-negotiable parameters of the subject, e.g. Data Protection Act, the European Union, Parliament, Freedom of Information Act, 1996, molecules, Shakespeare, feminism etc.
- 2) **Activity keywords:** these are what you have to do, e.g. explore, examine, consider, evaluate, assess, compare, interrogate etc.
- 3) **Focus or limitation keywords:** instruction words which restrict or focus your assignment, such as North America, two poems, material studied on the course etc.

# Activity 1:



Take a look at the 8 sample essay titles on the handout and decode them using the table provided. The handout can also be accessed via Padlet here: <http://padlet.com/cedas/EWE1>

# Essay structure (macro):

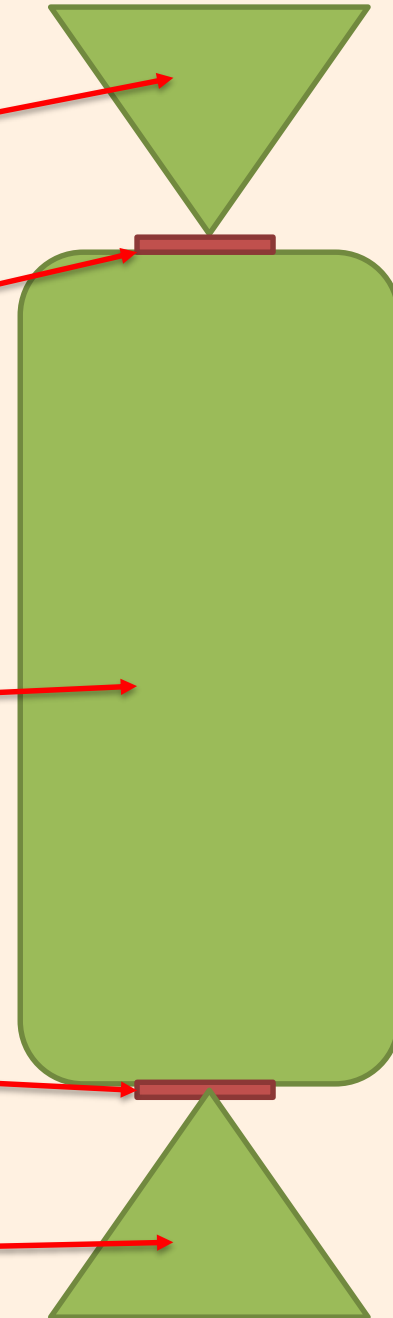
**Introduction**

**Thesis statement**

**Main  
body**  
(approx  
80% of  
word count)

**Thesis statement**

**Conclusion**



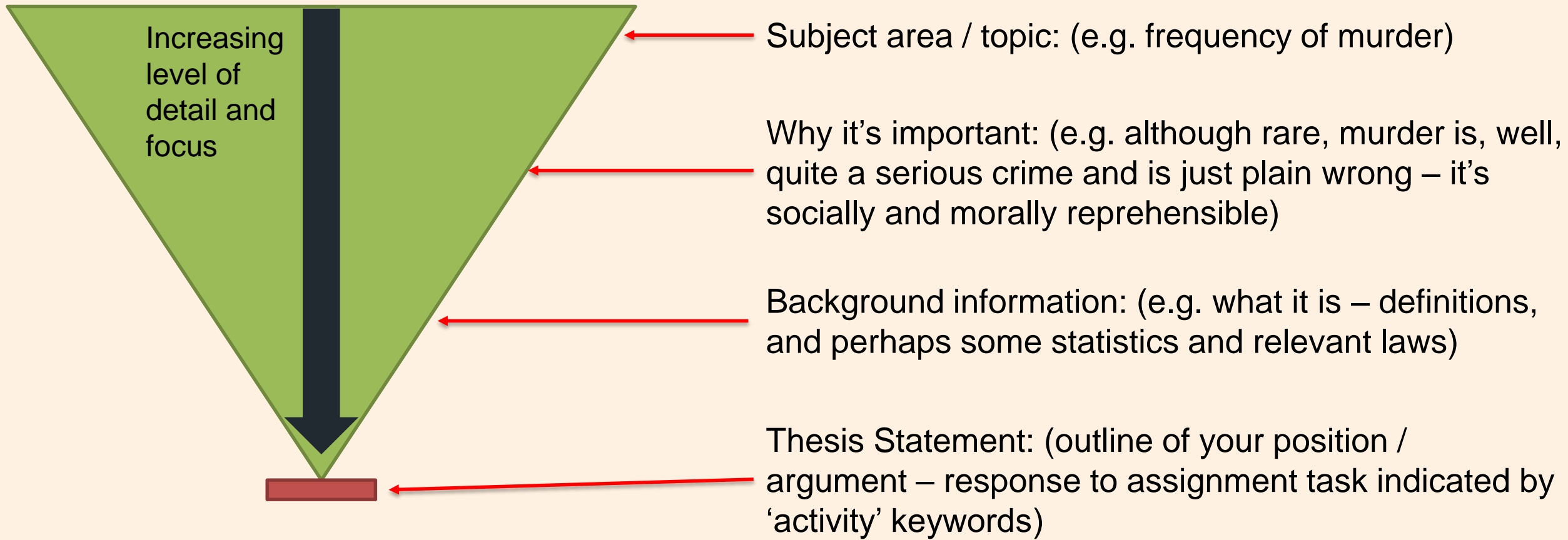
# Effective introductions:

The introduction should provide the reader with answers to the following:

- 1) What is it ABOUT?
- 2) Why it's IMPORTANT
- 3) The background KNOWLEDGE in order to UNDERSTAND what follows
- 4) The PURPOSE of the study (if relevant)
- 5) Thesis statement

# Big picture to focused argument:

In essence, an introduction requires you to go from big, general points which outline the subject to a specific point and argument which addresses the assignment task:





# What is a thesis statement?

"[T]he purpose of the thesis statement is to give order both to the reader and to the writer. It does this by clearly stating the central claim that a piece of writing will try to prove. The writer takes care in the **thesis statement** to articulate a paper's argument as precisely as possible, and this precision clarifies and focuses the direction of the paper".

(Kathleen Muller Moore and Susie Lan Cassel, *Techniques for College Writing: The Thesis Statement and Beyond*. Wadsworth, Cengage, 2011)

# Creating an effective thesis statement:

An effective thesis statement does three key things:

- 1) Summarises the aims of the assignment in one concise, powerful and informative sentence
- 2) Must directly address the assignment title by stating a position or making a claim
- 3) Directs your whole line of analysis, argument and thought

# Examples of thesis statements:

## Example 1

*The process for a college student working on a research paper in the 1960s was very different from the process used by most of today's college students.*

## Example 2

*Because of advances in technology, today's college student has many more resources for research papers than students had in the 1960s.*

## Example 3

*This essay argues that because of the advent of the Internet and other electronic sources, the research process utilized by today's college students for papers differs greatly from that of students in the 1960s.*

# Example of integrated thesis statement:

**Computer and network surveillance** is the monitoring of computer activity and data stored on a hard drive, or data being transferred over computer networks such as the Internet. The monitoring is often carried out covertly and may be completed by governments, corporations, criminal organizations, or individuals. It may or may not be legal and may or may not require authorization from a court or other independent government agency. Computer and network surveillance programs are widespread today and almost all Internet traffic can be monitored for illegal activity. It is argued that surveillance allows governments and other agencies to maintain social control, recognize and monitor threats, and prevent and investigate criminal activity. However, many civil rights and privacy groups, such as Reporters Without Borders, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and the American Civil Liberties Union have expressed concern that with increasing surveillance of citizens we will end up in or are even already in a mass surveillance society, with limited political and/or personal freedoms. Such fear has led to numerous lawsuits such as *Hepting v. AT&T*. **This essay argues that government surveillance programs such as the PRISM project operated by the NSA should be discontinued; they invade civil liberties, lead innocent people to suffer unfair punishments, and ultimately fail to protect the citizens that they are designed to safeguard.**

# Thesis statement dissected:

Clear, concise  
signposting

Clear subject area /  
engagement with question

Clear indication of implications /  
application of the argument

This essay argues that **government surveillance programs**, such as the PRISM project operated by the NSA, **should be discontinued** because they invade civil liberties, lead innocent people to suffer unfair punishments, and ultimately fail to protect the citizens that they are designed to safeguard.

Clear indication of essay structure /  
topics to be covered

Clear argument / opinion

# When to write the introduction / thesis statement:

“The reason for placing a **thesis statement** in the first paragraph of an essay or as soon after it as possible is that the sooner you state it the more likely you are to remain aware of your main idea and the less likely you are to wander from that idea as you write.”

(Morton A. Miller, *Reading and Writing Short Essays*. Random House, 1980)

# Evaluation activity:



Take a look at the introductions on the handout...

- Which is best?
- Do they have an effective thesis statement?
- Do they present a logical sequence of ideas?
- Discuss the flaws in those which are not so good and discuss how they could be improved

# Discussion and analysis:

- 1) Consistently refer back to the thesis statement in order to frame and structure your analysis
- 2) Critically evaluate the material / issues / literature, DON'T just describe them (the examiner / marker is likely to be a specialist and has probably read the material, so doesn't need it describing to them again)
- 3) Structure the analysis in a logical, compelling and persuasive manner
- 4) Don't try to cover everything – depth of critical analysis and perception beats descriptive breadth every time



# The challenge of linearity:

Creating an argument which is structured in a logical, linear manner is simple right? Not so... There are various challenges:

‘Everything about writing is deliberately fabricated...A key feature of conventional writing is its linearity...This linearity is of profound significance, because neither experience nor contemplative thought comes naturally in linear form. Contemplation and experience may have no beginning point and no orderly sequence: they can involve simultaneities unavailable on the written line and much more complex patterns of interconnection...Writing, then, is not the report of thought, but the production of a specific type of thought and a specific account of life. It is important not to lose sight of linearity’s artifice and cultural specificity...Writing is nothing but an invention, a concoction, an illusion...’

(Game and Metcalfe, 1996, p.109)

# The challenge of readability:

‘I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life: it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence...Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I’d like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.’

(Foucault, 1994, p.323)

# Logical structures:

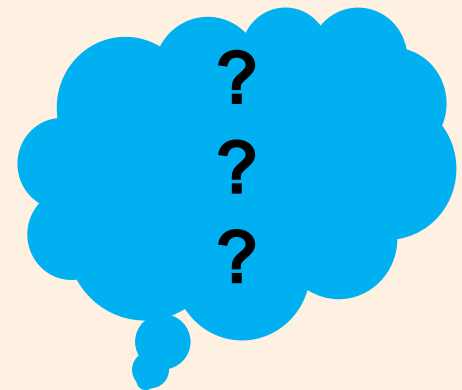


Structuring your essay in a logical, well-signposted (but not laboured) manner is essential. How might you go about structuring a response to the following essay titles?:

- 1) “The British Parliament was once supreme”. Discuss with reference to Britain’s membership of the EU and its obligations in relation to the European Convention on Human Rights.
- 2) In what ways has feminism challenged conventional thinking about politics?
- 3) To what extent does the rise of the ‘knowledge economy’ reflect fundamental changes in the nature of capitalism and work?
- 4) What is racism and how do you account for its persistence in modern society?

Think about:

- What are the content and activity keywords here?
- What topics do you need to discuss in order to provide a comprehensive response?
- What would be the best order in which to place the ideas and why?
- What information is vital and which could be optional?
- What would be your argument?
- Would you address issues which contradict your argument? If so, where would you do this?



# Using the question to structure your essay:

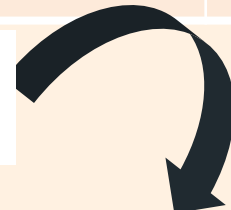
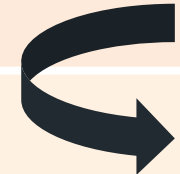
Critically evaluate the contention that cities are central to sustainable forms of development.

**Geography**



<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>FOCUS</u>	<u>INSTRUCTION</u>	<u>LIMITATION/SCOPE</u>
Sustainable Development	Cities as 'central' to	Critically evaluate	—

??!!



- ESSAY PLAN:**
- Intro
  - Background: Role of cities in today's society <-> sustainability
  - Local participation
  - Infrastructure
  - Technology
  - Collaboration btwn private & public sectors
  - Conclusion

# Using the question to structure your essay:

'Conflict is always a consideration in Managing Employment Relations (MER)'. Critically assess this statement in relation to different perspectives on the employment relationship and in relation to sectoral, labour force and unionisation issues.

## Management



<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>FOCUS</u>	<u>INSTRUCTION</u>	<u>LIMITATION/SCOPE</u>
Managing Employment Relations (MER)	Conflict	Assess in relation to (A) and in relation to (B)	<b>Different perspectives</b> on the employment relationship/ <b>sectoral, labour force &amp; unionisation</b> issues



**ESSAY PLAN:**

- Intro
- **Unitarian** perspective
- **Pluralist** perspective
- **Radical** perspective
- **Sectoral**
- **Labour**
- **Unionisation**
- Conclusion

# Logical structure for discussion essay

(main body paragraphs) :

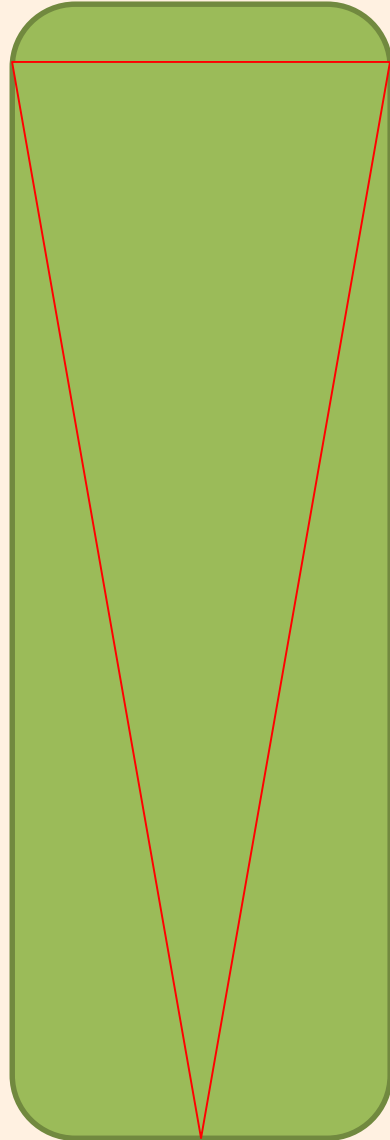
Foundations,  
definitions,  
principles, theories  
etc.



Evidence,  
discussion,  
consideration of  
alternative  
arguments, start to  
prove argument



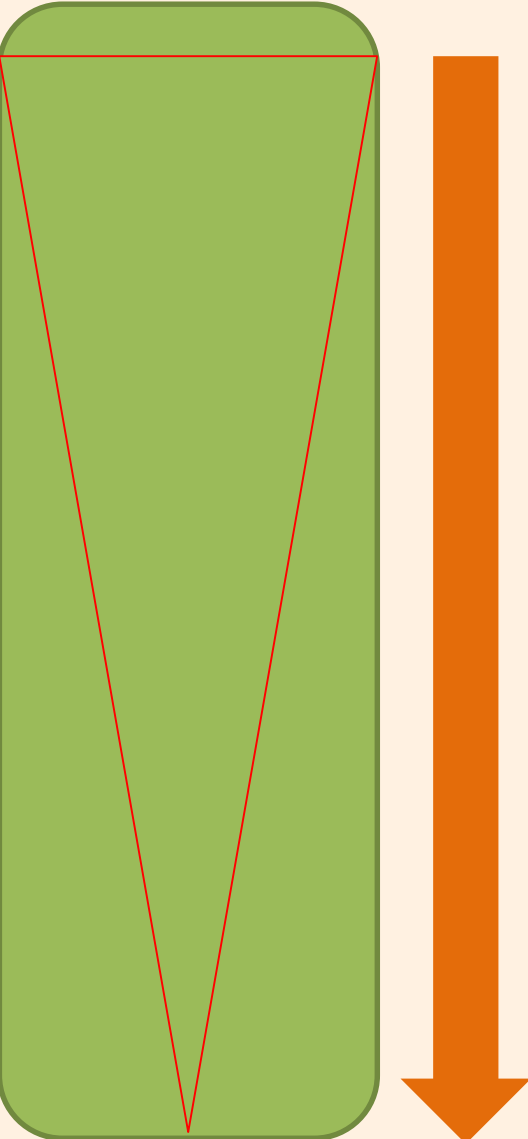
More specific  
evidence, focus  
and detail to prove  
argument



Increasing  
levels of  
focus and  
specificity

# Logical structure for discussion essay

(example):



Increasing levels of focus and specificity

Para:	Discussion: (essay about Elizabeth Inchbald's <i>Nature and Art</i> – was the island of Zocotora its inspiration?)
2:	Early European writers interested in Zocotora and its monsters (16 <sup>th</sup> century maps, drawings and various spellings – all of which imply wild, untamed territory)
3:	Inchbald more likely to have encountered contemporaneous histories and publications (examples and discussions)
4:	Inchbald interested in geography (evidence)
5:	Evidence that 2 contemporaneous religious books offered Inchbald inspiration
6:	No actual proof Inchbald was inspired by any of the above
7:	Cultural trends and why they point towards the attractiveness of Zocotora for both Inchbald and her readers
8:	Aesthetics of romanticism and why Zocotora is attractive

# Structuring comparison essays:



Comparison essays examine similarities / differences between two or more items from one or more perspectives, so organisation can be tricky. How would you go about structuring an essay response to the following assignment task?:

- **Psychology and psychiatry differ in several key respects. Compare and contrast these two forms of treatment from at least two different perspectives.**

Think about:

- What are the activity and content keywords?
- What 'key respects' do you want to focus upon?
- Which 'two perspectives' do you want to use?
- An argument
- How are you doing to manage and incorporate all the elements whilst also constructing an argument?





# Block vs point-by-point structure:

**Block Structure:** Takes each item to be examined in turn applying the themes or ‘perspectives’

**Point-by-Point Structure:** Takes each theme or ‘perspective’ and discusses them in relation to the items under consideration

Structure:	Block:	Point-by-Point:
Paragraph 1	Introduction (with Thesis Statement)	Introduction (with Thesis Statement)
Paragraphs 2-3	<b>Psychology</b> in relation to: 1) Origins of thought processes 2) Patient outcomes	<b>Origins of thought processes</b> in relation to: 1) Psychology 2) Psychiatry
Paragraphs 4-5	<b>Psychiatry</b> in relation to: 1) Origins of thought processes 2) Patient outcomes	<b>Patient outcomes</b> in relation to: 1) Psychology 2) Psychiatry
Paragraph 6	Conclusion	Conclusion

# Which is best? Activity 3:



Structure:	Pros	Cons
Block:	Clear and logical	The themes or 'perspectives' are discussed multiple times in relation to each point – can be repetitive
	Relatively easy to construct	Doesn't show sophisticated analysis and synthesis to the same extent as the point-by-point structure – too formulaic
	Fairly easy to incorporate all the features required without wandering off topic.	
Point-by-Point:	Allows for deeper, more incisive synthesis and analysis	Harder to manage and keep focus
	Avoids most duplication / repetition of key points	Key items can become 'lost' within the focus upon themes / perspectives
	Easier to forge an argument	

## Activity 4:



Take a look at the jumbled up essay on your handout. With a partner, have a go at:

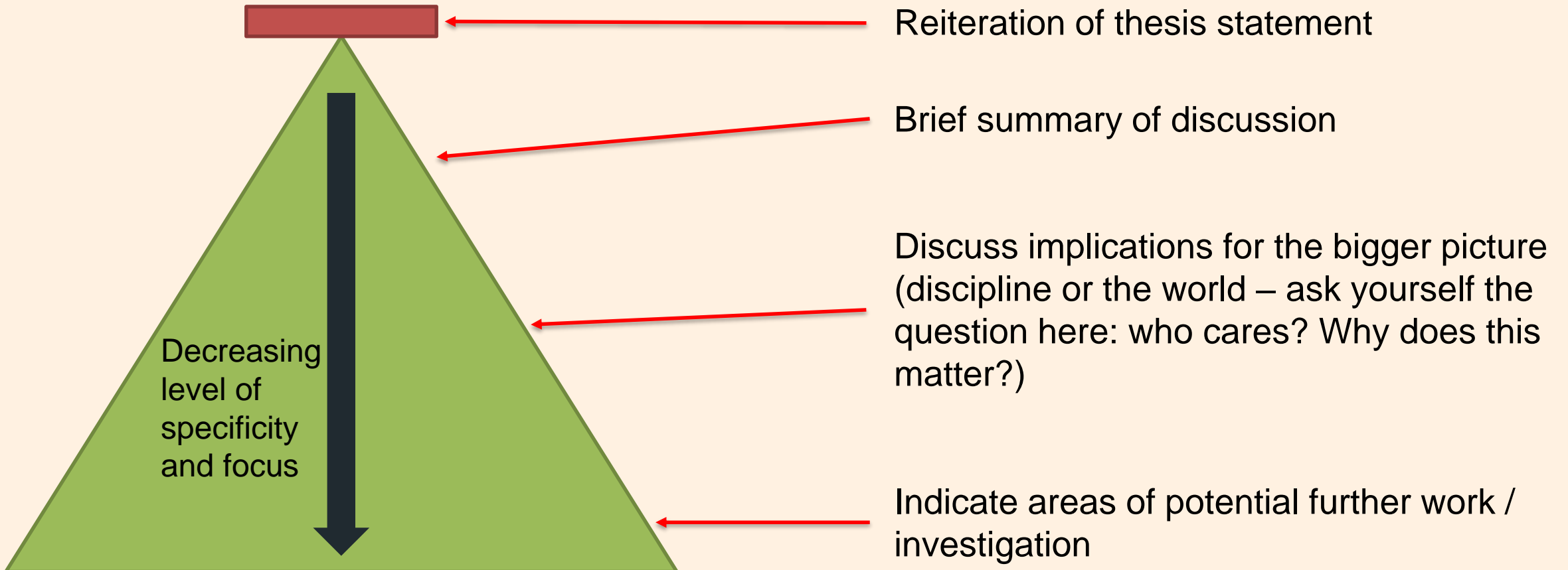
- 1) Putting the paragraphs into a logical order
- 2) Writing what you think might have been the essay title / question (including content and activity keywords)

# Effective conclusions:

- 1) Re-asserts the Thesis Statement at the outset
- 2) Try not to be boring by starting with 'In conclusion...' and do not simply summarise what you just wrote (the marker has just read it!)
- 3) Demonstrate how the foregoing ANALYSIS / DISCUSSION has proven or addressed the thesis statement
- 4) Situate the research within its wider scholarly context – what has this study contributed to our knowledge of... What are the implications of this topic / what you have discussed
- 5) Indicate potential future research

# Effective conclusions:

In effect, the conclusion is an inversion of the introduction – it goes from a narrow focus (the thesis statement) to the bigger picture / implications:



# Activity:



**Look at the sample conclusions on the handout and evaluate their effectiveness.**

- Which do you think is best?
- Do they reiterate the thesis statement and summarise how / why the argument is relevant / has been proven?
- Do they discuss the implications of the topic for the wider world / discipline?
- Do they indicate further areas of research?

# Summary:

- 1) Structure your essay in a logical, systematic manner which goes from solid foundations to increasing levels of sophistication
- 2) For comparison essays, use a structure which allows you to EVALUATE and SYNTHESISE the arguments / points in a logical manner (avoiding repetition / labouring the points).
- 3) Make your introductions effective by going from the big picture to specific detail (topic sentence / argument)
- 4) Support your ideas by embedding evidence and subjecting it to analysis
- 5) Make your conclusions count – don't simply repeat / summarise what you have said in the essay.

# What CeDAS can do for you:



- 1-to-1 writing advice
- Academic Writing and Communication
- Academic English courses for International Students
- Academic skills development in your department
- Maths and statistics support
- Online resources

To access CeDAS resources go to :  
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