

# Functional Writing Tips for Undergrads

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In secondary school, you may have learned to write a five-paragraph essay, which includes an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. But 'good' writing, both academic and non-academic, is rarely so formulaic. As such, a different framework to guide writing best practices is needed. I suggest a 'function' based writing approach, in which the function of the work - and the audience for which a piece is written - structures the writing. While these tips may appear empirically similar to those in a five-paragraph essay, the theoretical mechanism - using psychology to write based on what will keep the reader engaged - is distinctive from the emphasis on copying the structure of the five-paragraph model. By adopting a function-based model instead of a five-paragraph model, students will be able to better engage their readers and adapt their writing to a wider range of contexts.

## General Writing Tips:

- All writing has a **function**: you should consider the purpose of your *paper as a whole*, the role of *each paragraph* within the paper, the role of *each sentence* within each paragraph, and each word within each sentence.
  - On a macro level, the primary function of a tutorial essay as a whole is to make an interesting analytical argument grounded in a debate experts care about.
- Think about your **audience** when you write.
  - Audience is important in writing in many contexts (e.g. writing an email to a professor or employer), and you should think about who you are writing *to* and the function of the *writing*.
  - In a tutorial essay, your audience will be a tutor or examiner with an expert background in your topic (though this is only true in Oxford tutorial writing and not in the real world).
- Your goal is to engage your audience and make them interested in you as a thinker. The easiest way to do this is to **set up a problem that your paper will then solve**.
  - Most exam markers can make a broad - but informed - decision on the quality of a paper based on your first paragraph. This may seem unfair given that the intro is such a small percentage of the paper, but it's reflective of real life: when we read in the real world, we make decisions about whether to read a piece in the first few sentences.
- Assume a **lazy reader**. Make your writing easy to follow. Reiterate key points throughout the essay to hammer it home.
- **Order matters**. Each paragraph should build on the previous. I shouldn't be able to jumble up the essay and have it read the same way.

## Creating Good Problems

- There are three steps to creating good problems:
  - **Stasis:** how your reader thinks the world is.
  - **Destabilising condition:** evidence that challenges the beliefs your reader has about the world. The stasis, along with the destabilising condition, together create a problem or tension that your paper will solve.
  - **Resolution:** a solution to the problem which forms the main argument of the essay.
- An example of this method:
  - **Stasis:** In secondary school, you may have learned to write a five-paragraph essay, including an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
  - **Destabilising condition:** But 'good' writing, both academic and non-academic, is rarely so formulaic. As such, a different framework to guide writing best practices is needed.
  - **Resolution:** I suggest a 'function' based writing approach, in which the function of the work - and the audience for which a piece is written - structures the writing. While these tips may appear empirically similar to those in a five-paragraph essay, the theoretical mechanism - focusing on what will keep the reader engaged - is distinctive from the emphasis on organisation in the five-paragraph model. By adopting a function-based model, students will be able to better engage their readers and adapt their writing to a wider range of contexts compared to the five-paragraph model.

## Nuts and Bolts

- Always start body paragraphs with **topic sentences**. These sentences should:
  - Make a sub-claim the rest of the paragraph will support AND
  - Explain how the sub-claim is connected to your overarching argument
- **Define** your key terms.
  - For example, 'power' could be understood through the number of nukes a state possesses, the level of GDP growth in the year prior, or the ability to convince another state to vote with them on a UN vote. Near the top of your essay (intro or first body paragraph), give us a definition (either your own or cite someone else) and justify it. A justification could be that the definition is widely used in the field, or, if you use your own, that a commonly used definition is otherwise lacking.
- Use **evidence** to support your claims.
  - This evidence could come from literature on the reading list or other empirical work. Don't assume the evidence is self-explanatory; connect the evidence to your key claims for your reader.
- **Cite** your sources. This means including both *in-text citations* and a *bibliography* which includes all of your sources. There are three reasons you should do this. First, citing existing literature shows that you are aware of the important debates from the reading and that you did, in fact, do the reading. Second, citing sources can (in certain contexts) allow you to build arguments without needing to reinvent an argument all over again. Finally, **plagiarism is a very serious offence in academic institutions. Avoid it at all costs. Do not do it. I beg you. It is never worth it.**

## Other Tips

- Be wary of **clutter words** like 'I think', 'I believe', 'I would add', 'It could be worth mentioning', etc. They distort your writing, suggest you're stating an uninformed opinion when you're actually developing an informed analysis, and make you sound less confident than you need to be. 'I argue' is okay to signal the beginning of your central argument, but it's not necessary by any means.
- Certain **syntax** is easier for the brain to process.
  - **Shorter** sentences are easier for the brain to process than longer ones.
  - **Active verbs** engage your reader.
  - **Parallel structure** is useful because the brain processes it faster than non-parallel sentences.
  - **Infinitives** (e.g. to be, to write, to read) are the easiest form of verb to understand.
  - There is certainly a time and place for non-parallel, long sentences that use the progressive form of verbs, but be mindful that they're harder on your reader's brain. A myth of academic writing is that long sentences imply intelligence.
- **Academic jargon**, which you will eventually become more familiar with in your time at Oxford, is wildly overrated. If you find you're over-reliant on it, it means you don't understand your own theory or methods well enough.