Essays are one of the most common forms of academic writing and can be quite easy to construct once the basic form is understood. When writing essays one must pay attention to overall essay structure, paragraph structure and sentence structure. While these may seem complicated at first, the patterns involved are easy to learn and provide a useful checklist for ensuring a well-crafted essay. This does not, however, ensure that the essay is actually good, as the content is also important. The combination of carefully considered research and attention to structure are vital for creating a quality essay.

The essay structure is very formulaic, which makes it easy to produce. While there are various essay formats that are acceptable, the five-paragraph structure is one of the most common taught in high schools, and is still frequently used at an undergraduate level (Cismas, 2010; Vardi, 1999). This style of essay consists of an introductory paragraph, three paragraphs that flesh out the ideas raised in the introduction and a concluding paragraph, which summarises the main points of the essay and reaffirms the thesis that was established in the introduction (Turner et al., 2011). The paragraphs also follow a particular structure. Each paragraph consists of a topic sentence, several points to explore the topic (and the references to support those points) and a clinching or concluding sentence, which is designed to tie the paragraph to the rest of the essay (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). For a well-written essay, it is important for the paragraphs to be coherent – not only in terms of making sense within themselves, but also by fitting coherently with the other paragraphs in the essay (Barnet et al., 2013). A good writer should also ensure that each sentence follows a clear and correct sentence structure, with a clear subject and verb in every sentence. There is a clear and simple structure at the heart of every sentence, paragraph and essay, and good writers must be aware of these structures in order to create well-written essays.

These structures can act as a checklist to assist writers with basic editing. If the writer knows every essay must contain an introduction, a body and a conclusion, he or she can quickly check to make sure the essay has a proper introduction or a complete conclusion. The knowledge that each paragraph must contain a topic sentence and a clincher sentence, and that each sentence within the paragraph should logically and coherently relate to the topic and clincher sentences, gives the author a framework to ensure that each paragraph is complete and makes sense. Since each complete sentence must make sense on its own and contain at least one verb and a clear subject for each verb, the writer can easily check each sentence to make sure it is following a correct structure (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Rose, 2007). Therefore, writers can use these structures to keep control over the mechanics of writing an essay. However, it is important to note that a perfectly structured essay can still be poorly written if equal care is not given to the content.

The purpose of an essay is to explore a given topic or answer a question, so the content must adequately fulfil this purpose. The writer needs to consider the audience for the paper, the task that has been set and the topic that needs to be covered (Soles & Soles, 2005). He or she needs to understand the topic well, through reading widely and critically, in order to write clearly and comfortable in an academic style (Caron, 2008). For a research essay, it is important to find a wide variety of information from various sources and to use it effectively in the body of the essay – as well as ensuring it has been cited correctly (Barnet et al., 2013; Drew & Bingham, 2010). Appropriate and correct referencing is important for avoiding plagiarism, which is a concern for undergraduate students and their markers (Löfström, 2011). A good writer must be critical and thoughtful in
regards to the research presented in his or her essay and present the best information that could be
found. While some essays may require the author to provide their own experiences and opinions,
for most academic essays it is normally expected that the writer will consider the topic objectively
(H. Hooper, personal communication, February 2013). One can conclude that choosing appropriate
academic language, as well as offering a well-researched and carefully considered argument, is
important. The composition of the essay relies as much on the content as it does on the structure.

A good essay is the combination of content and structure. It should consist of a reasoned and
considered argument that is supported by research and answers the question posed by the task. By
following simple, formulaic structures at the sentence, paragraph and essay level, a writer can
stay in control of the style and make sure the content is presented well. A writer must pay careful
consideration to the structure of the essay and the appropriateness of the content to ensure that
the essay is well written, well composed and worth reading.

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