

“ASK THE PROFESSOR” about ... STRUCTURING AN ARGUMENT

Pātai: (Question)

What is the best way to structure an argument in an academic thesis, and is it the same as for an academic article?

Professor Alison Jones replies:

Structure is of extreme importance to any argument. You may have some good ideas and some good data and even a good argument, but unless you can get all these lined up in a nice relationship to each other, the thesis is not going to work. The same goes for an article. The structure of a convincing argument is fairly standard – and completely logical, when you think about it. Whether you have empirical data or not, the overall logic will be more or less the same.

A good argument typically has four basic elements, and is usually structured like this:

1. The **introductory** element (includes a literature review): *What is my problem or question in this research? Why is it important?(may be 25%)*
2. The **methodology** element: *How did I address my problem or question, and why did I approach it in that way? (method and methodology)(may be 10%)*
3. The **substance** element: *Here is my evidence and argument about this question (may be 55%)*
4. The **conclusion**: *These are my conclusions about this problem (may be 10%)*

You need to know **how many words** are required for the thesis or article FIRST. Then you will be able to work out approximately how many words are required for each element of the thesis or article. A doctoral thesis chapter should not be longer than 10,000 words; a doctoral thesis is usually maximum 100,000 words and a masters thesis may be 40,000 words; journal articles will vary, usually between 5,000–7,000 words (but check in the Notes for Contributors. Don't just guess!).

Let's deal with these one at a time, and then add a further element which is also crucial.

1. The **introductory** element (includes a literature review): *What is my problem or question? Why is it important?(may be 2-3 chapters of a thesis)*

Your question must be found in the first sections of the thesis or article, so the reader quickly knows what you are focused on. **Avoid** the tendency to go for the general, global ideas in your introduction. You do not need to write a History of the Forest to introduce your little Nut (unless your project is all about the Forest-History-Nut relationship!). Keep the introductory section/s tight, and **focused immediately** on your particular question.

An outline of your argument should also be found your first section/s so the reader becomes interested. This first element of your written project should include these:

- ◆ the theoretical, empirical or methodological **problem/question to be addressed** (your problem or question may be a tension between two things, for instance: a contradiction between say, policy and practice, or between intentions and actions/outcomes, or between lack of knowledge about something and its importance)
- ◆ **the significance of your work**, and your question: why is it important? Could someone say 'so what?' about your question?
- ◆ a form of **literature review** which sets up your question (and maybe your methodology), and its rationale. Remember your work is about entering a conversation with other scholars. How has the existing literature addressed your problem? And what will your work contribute to this existing work? Will you show how existing research is problematic? Does it have significant gaps that you address?
- ◆ an explanation, with reference to literature, of your selection and use of **key ideas** or **concepts**
- ◆ comment about what you are *not* doing, as well as what you *are* doing. Indications of the **boundaries** or limits of your argument will avoid accusations that you have not covered certain material.

2. The **methodology** element: *How did I address my problem or question, and why did I approach it in that way? (method and methodology)(may be one chapter of a thesis)*

Method is about the **techniques** you used to collect information and data (for instance, interviews, document analysis) and from whom, how they were selected.

Methodology is about the **logic** of your approach to your question, why you did it that way, as well as the justification for why you collected THAT information/data and not other information – and what effects this had on your overall story. Include ethical matters where necessary.

Explain briefly, with reference to literature, your **key methodological terms**, indicating how *you* use them, but do not write an abstracted section on these; each paragraph should contain explicit or implicit reference to *your* project.

3. The **substance** element: *Here is my evidence and argument about this question (may be four chapters of a thesis)*

This is where the evidence / data / illustration of your argument is presented under themes or headings which each take one aspect of the argument. From the very *beginning* sentence of each section, the reader should know why the section is relevant to the overall argument, and to the question outlined in the Introduction.

4. The **conclusion**: *These are my conclusions about this problem (may be one chapter of a thesis)*

The conclusion should not introduce any new material. It should summarise your key findings and argument and the significance of your work. It might also be the place to suggest your work's weaknesses. Some people like to read only the introduction and the conclusion sections, so you should make sure that these follow each other!

Some people find it helpful not to leave writing the conclusion until the end. Rather, they write a draft conclusion as they go through the research process, revising as they revise the question, and as they refine their thinking. This way, they make sure that the question and the conclusion are always connected.

Finally, a fifth element is the **thread** element: *'Does the whole thing hang together as one story?'* (100%)

As you write, constantly make sure that you are **pulling the thread of the problem through the article**. Ask yourself how **each** paragraph, sub-section and chapter explicitly addresses the problem – which you have set up in the Introductory chapters. If you can't see the thread, work on the paragraph or section until the thread is evident (or get rid of it!).

In other words: if you connect the Introduction (question/problem) with the Conclusion by a robust thread, all the chapters or sections in between should connect to that thread, explicitly and strongly.

REMEMBER: my comments are all based on approximations. Rules for thesis-writing and article-writing differ between disciplines. You must ask your supervisor and take their advice for structuring your work.

Then, of course, are the references, which we will discuss in another MAI Review. Happy structuring!

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