

ESSAY WRITING

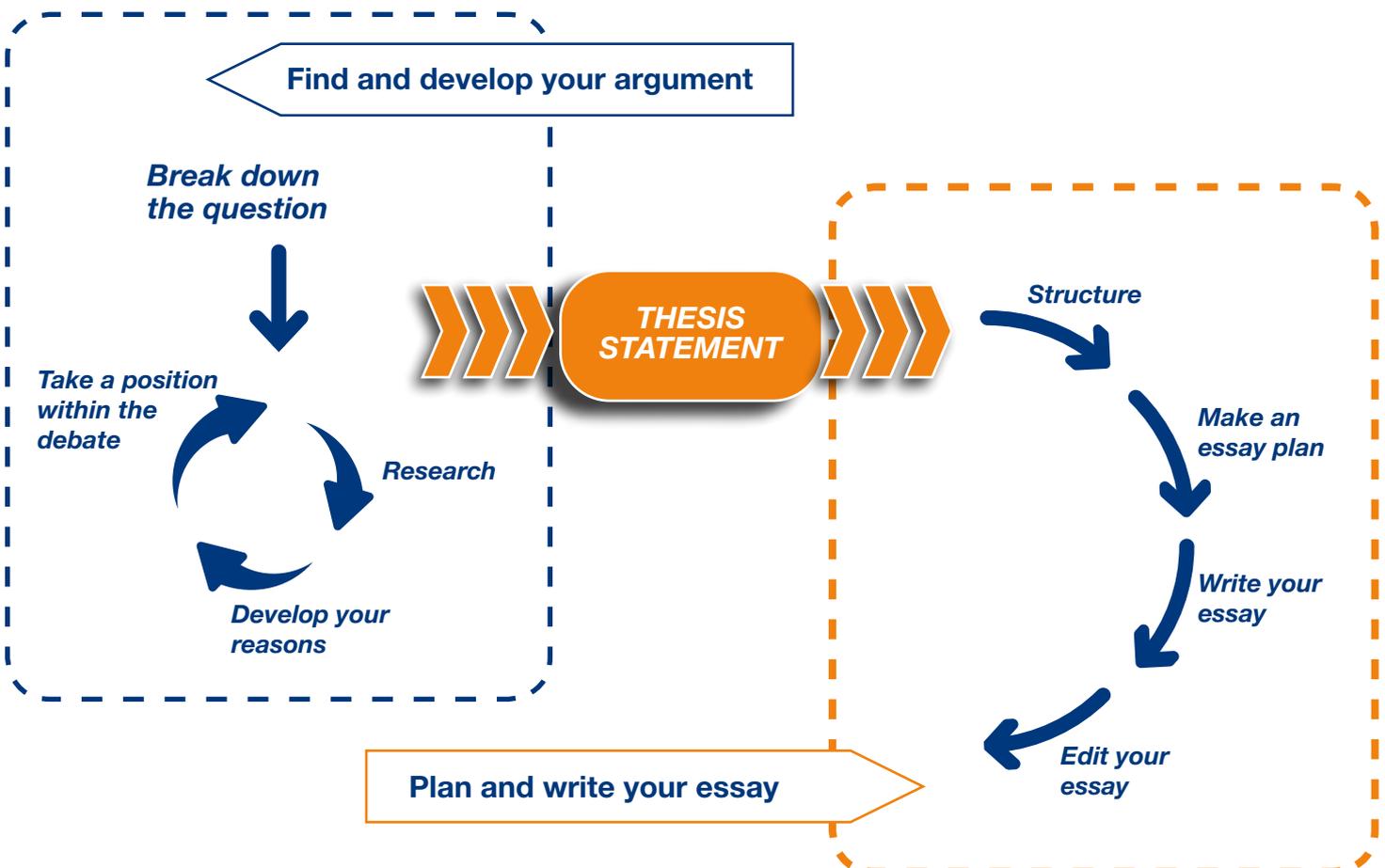
For the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

Academic essay writing is persuasive. You are expected to take a position and present an argument in order to convince the reader of your views. Arguing for a position goes beyond simple description or the presentation of a series of facts. It means understanding the question, engaging with the debate and using evidence critically.

This booklet provides strategies you can use to help refine, structure and present your position and argument throughout a written essay. The following diagram outlines the essay writing process as it is presented in this booklet.

The principles of persuasive writing presented here apply to most forms of academic writing and can be adapted to all disciplines.

A position refers to taking a stance on a question or an issue. An argument is a list of reasons, supported by evidence, that are used to persuade readers of that position.



Understand the question

The first step in writing an essay is to understand the question or task. Regardless of its wording, you should assume that you are required to take a position and present an argument.

One way to break down the question is to look at its main ideas. How do they link to the key themes, concepts and theories you have been studying in your course? This contextual information helps you to formulate your position and argument in reference to the course objectives.

The Koori Court topic used throughout this booklet may not be relevant to you or your courses. However, if you take your time to work through the example, it should become easier for you to apply these strategies to your own essays.

The beauty of an essay at university is that you can take any position and present any argument, so long as it is reasonable, logical and supported by suitable and relevant evidence.

Naturally, there may be a viewpoint that you agree with early on, perhaps not long after you first read the question. However, you may not be able to take a strong position supported by evidence until you spend more time engaging with the debate.

The way the essay question is worded can provide many clues as to how you should proceed. Close reading of the question and referring back to it throughout the essay writing process is critical to ensuring that you are answering it properly.

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An essay question

Consider the following essay question:

In Victoria, Indigenous Australians who plead guilty to some offences can choose to be sentenced by the Koori Court rather than the Magistrates Court. The purpose of these Koori courts is to make the legal system less alienating and more culturally appropriate for Aboriginal communities. Is there a place for programs such as the Koori Court in the Australian legal system? Should there be courts for other groups in our society?

This essay question actually asks you two separate questions. The first is whether there is a place for the Koori Court in Australia. The second is whether this should be extended to other groups.

There are a number of positions you could take in answer to this question. For example:

- > Yes, there is a place for the Koori Court and it should be extended to other groups.
- > Yes, there is a place for the Koori Court but it should not be extended to other groups.
- > No, there is no place for specialist programs such as the Koori Court (the argument against extension would be therefore assumed).

However, it is also possible to take a more nuanced approach to answering this question, such as:

The Koori Court should be limited to youth and first offenders. This model should be extended more broadly to these groups.

Understand the debate

In order to be persuasive, you need to be familiar with all sides of the debate, not just that which supports your view.

There are likely to be many viewpoints on any given topic within the academic literature. To become familiar with the arguments made by those on both (or multiple) sides of a debate, you need to carry out research.

Reading is central to research. Reading widely helps you to find information about what is currently known about the topic. It helps you to understand its background context and underlying theories. It also shows you the varied lines of argument that exist.

The research process helps you to refine and strengthen your own position.

Research strategies

- > Research and read with a purpose. Seek out information that answers a specific question you have. For example, you may ask yourself, 'I want to understand this theory more' or 'I want to know more about the historical context.' This will help to focus each stage of your literature search and make the process more manageable. The questions you ask will change as you progress.
- > Look for evidence in the readings that you think may support your position. Engage with evidence that you think contradicts your position.
- > Read strategically at the early stages of research. This means skimming rather than reading entire journal articles or chapters. For example, read the abstract, introduction, conclusion and topic sentences of a journal article. Later on, you can return to key readings and re-read them in-depth.

- > Judicious highlighting can help to identify key ideas when you return to a reading.
- > Have a systematic approach to your notetaking. For example, you may like to make margin notes while reading then rewrite or summarise them in a new document.

Remember that the research process is cyclical, meaning that you may return to your position and the readings many times before you feel that you have a clear argument.

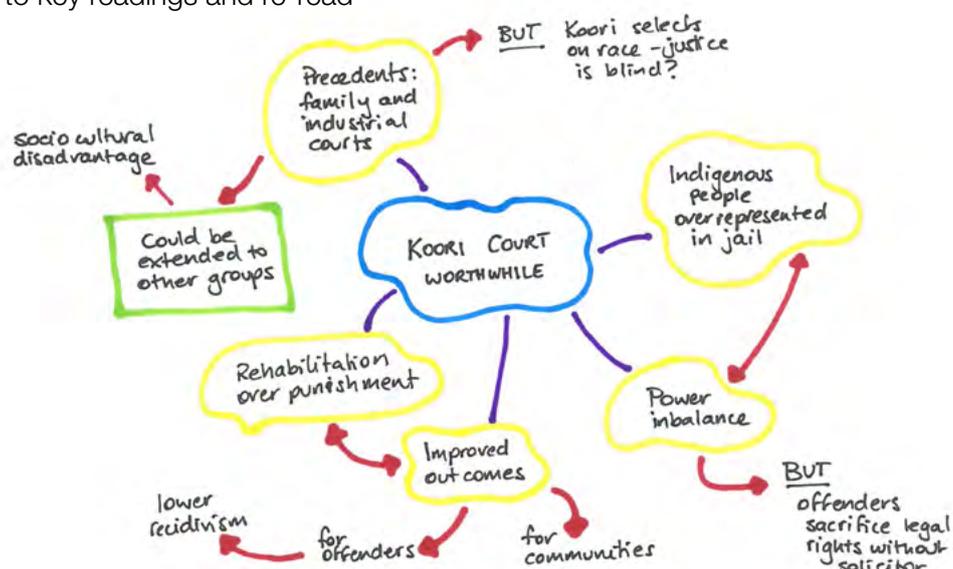
Develop your reasons

At this point you should develop the reasons in support of your position. Evidence is central to showing that your reasons are legitimate. Your argument is strengthened when it is supported by evidence that you have interpreted critically.

Think about arguments that could be made against your position. How could you rebut them? What evidence from the research could you use to support your view? Presenting counterarguments and rebutting them helps to strengthen your position.

A brainstorm or mind-map may help you to come up with your reasons. Brainstorming helps link main ideas, group ideas together and eliminate those that may be irrelevant. It can help you to identify the main themes and the points you are going to make. This can be useful when you come to structure your essay.

The following diagram shows how a brainstorm may look for the Koori Court essay question. After brainstorming, you may like to convert your diagram into a list of reasons. If brainstorming does not appeal to you, you may prefer to start with a simple list of your ideas.



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Possible arguments

Research indicates the following arguments for and against the Koori Court:

Possible arguments for

1. Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group and there is an urgent need to address this
2. The Koori Court addresses the power imbalance between the legal system and Indigenous Australians
 - a. Refer to the 'Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody' and 'Bringing them Home' reports
3. The Koori Court provides improved outcomes for both the offenders and the community
 - a. Lower rates of recidivism
 - b. Shaming offenders by Elders is more effective than the prison system
 - c. Encourages the offender to deal with underlying problems through rehabilitation
 - d. Greater acceptance by the Aboriginal community
4. Other specialist courts exist in Australia, providing precedent for the Koori Court
 - a. Family Court (jurisdiction on the basis of kin relations)
 - b. Industrial Relations Commission (jurisdiction on the basis of common interest)
5. The Koori Court model is relevant to other groups
 - a. For example, socially or culturally disadvantaged
 - b. Similar arguments can be made

Possible arguments against

1. The sacrifice of rights by offenders further disadvantages Indigenous Australians
 - a. The role of the offender's solicitor is marginalised
 - b. A move from formal processes may threaten the impartiality of outcomes
2. The Koori Court undermines the notion that justice is blind and all people are equal
 - a. Based on an inherent characteristic (race)
 - b. Other special courts are potentially open to all
 - c. Court is not the place to address inequality

Write a thesis statement

As you research, you will likely have many ideas and a lot of evidence you think may be relevant to your argument. It is common for arguments to be overwhelmed by the detail at this stage. Sometimes arguments try to cover too much and lose focus, becoming ambiguous and vague.

As difficult as it may be, you need to produce a concise summary of your position and its supporting argument. Sometimes you will hear this referred to as a 'thesis statement'. It states your position and your argument in a few sentences. Every essay needs a clear thesis statement, and it is usually presented in the introduction.

To clarify your thesis statement, think about how you would explain your position and argument to an educated non-expert, like a friend or family member, in only a few sentences.

Check that your thesis statement addresses all of the essay question. If not, go back and revise your thesis statement. Remember to be as specific as you can in your wording. There should be no ambiguity—if there is, then the resulting essay may be unclear and confusing.

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Thesis statement

Based on the research, the evidence for was stronger than against. This led to the following position and argument:

Yes, there is a place for the Koori Court and it should be extended to other disadvantaged groups.

There are four main reasons for this position:

1. Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group and there is an urgent need to address this imbalance
2. There are precedents for special courts which rebuts the counterargument of special pleading or bias
3. The Koori Court does have limitations but it provides better outcomes
4. Its successes provide a model for the broader legal system

This can be refined into the following thesis statement:

There is a place for such programs because, while creating a separate court appears culturally divisive, Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group and there is an urgent need to address this imbalance. There are numerous precedents for special courts in Australia which addresses the argument for special pleading. Although the Koori Court has its limitations, its successes provide a model for the broader Australian legal system.

Note that counterarguments and their rebuttals are signalled in the wording of this statement.

Argument determines structure

Now you have written your thesis statement and have carried out preliminary research, the next step is to formulate an essay structure that is logical, coherent and maximally persuasive.

The argument you make determines your structure. The key reasons for your position form the main points that are developed in your essay. If you change your argument, you will likely need to change your essay structure in order to better support the new argument.

At this stage, write down the basic structure as a list. Think of each line as a new heading or section of your essay. Arrange these main points in a way that you think is most logical and where the ideas flow together well. Do not be afraid to experiment with alternative structures, as this process may lead you to refine your argument further.



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Preliminary structures

A potential structure for an essay for the Koori Court may be as follows:

Introduction

Indigenous people are disadvantaged and this must be addressed

Other specialist courts already exist, providing precedent for the Koori Court model

The Koori Court of Victoria has limitations but provides better outcomes for offenders

Extending the Koori Court model can improve justice for all Australians

Conclusion

If you change the argument, then the structure will change. For example, if you want to take the position against the Koori Court, your thesis statement and resulting structure will change.

New thesis statement:

There is no place for programs such as the Koori Court as justice should be independent of race; all people should be equal before the law. Other specialist courts, such as the Family Court, are potentially open to all and do not select on inherent characteristics such as race or sex. The courts are not the place to address inequality; instead, measures that look at the underlying causes are needed.

New essay structure:

Introduction

Justice should be independent of race

Other specialist courts do not select on inherent characteristics

Courts are not the place to address inequality; it is better done by examining the underlying causes

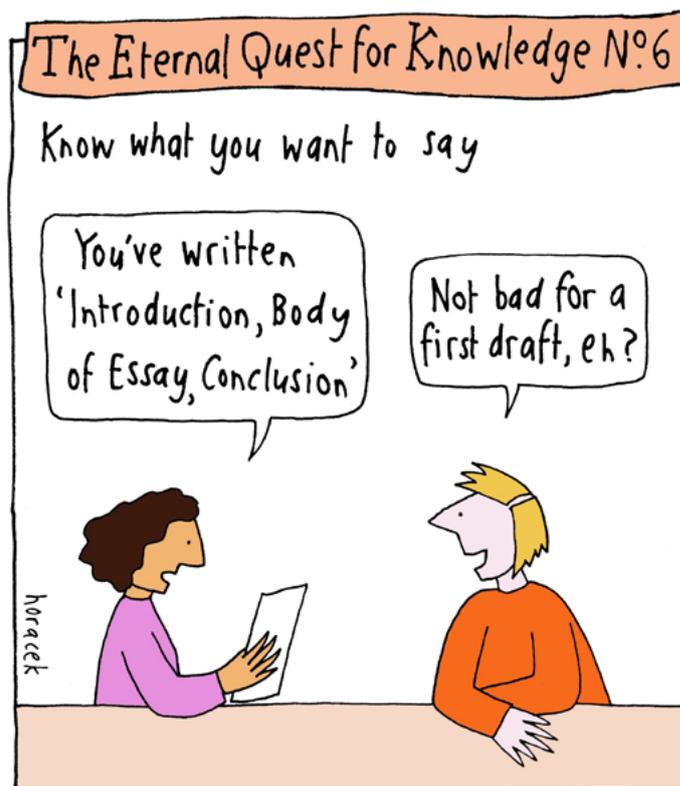
Conclusion

Make an essay plan

Once you have a clear thesis statement and a rough structure, you are ready to make an essay plan. This is a more detailed breakdown of your essay that helps guide you as you write.

The length of the essay limits the number of points you can make. Typically, each paragraph contains one main idea and is around 150 to 200 words long.

Most essay word limits in undergraduate humanities, arts and social science courses are between 1000 and 4000 words. Longer essays can benefit from clearly defined sections with headings, though structuring and formatting conventions may differ between disciplines. It is important to check the course requirements.



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Essay plan

The following plan is for a 1500 word essay divided into nine paragraphs.

The first section makes the argument that the legal system needs to adapt to overcome disadvantage. The second section goes on to argue that this has worked with other specialist courts and does not undermine the Australian legal system, despite some counter examples. The third section highlights the improved outcomes from the Koori Court, and then acknowledges that there are limitations that have to be carefully managed. Finally, the essay concludes by saying that the Koori Court model should be extended to other groups.

Notice how counterarguments and sources are included in this essay plan.

Introduction

Para. 1	Includes the thesis statement: <i>There is a place for such programs because, while creating a separate court appears culturally divisive, Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group and there is an urgent need to address this imbalance. There are numerous precedents for special courts in Australia which addresses the argument for special pleading. Although the Koori Court has its limitations, its successes provide a model for the broader Australian legal system.</i>
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Body

SECTION 1	Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group and there is an urgent need to address this imbalance
Para. 2	Australia's first people are one of the most disadvantaged in the country <i>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Bringing them Home report</i>
Para. 3	Need to address the power imbalance between the legal system and Indigenous Australians <i>Reports listed above; Smith and Crowe (2012)</i>
SECTION 2	Other specialist courts already exist and do not undermine the justice system
Para. 4	Other specialist courts provide precedent for the Koori Court model <i>Family Court: jurisdiction on basis of kin relations Industrial Relations Commission: on basis of common interest</i>
Para. 5	Even though Koori Court selects on race, it does not undermine the impartiality of justice as the legal system already discriminates <i>Legal system discriminates against low education and income</i>
SECTION 3	The Koori Court of Victoria has limitations but provides better outcomes for offenders
Para. 6	Provides better outcomes as it addresses underlying problems <i>Lower rates of recidivism Shaming offenders by Elders is more effective than prison Encourages the offender to deal with underlying problems through rehabilitation Greater acceptance by the Aboriginal community</i>
Para. 7	Constant review is needed to ensure that offenders are not disenfranchised <i>Limit the marginalisation of the offender's solicitor Be careful that the move from formal processes does not threaten impartiality of outcomes</i>
SECTION 4	Extending the Koori Court model can improve justice for all Australians
Para. 8	It can be extended to other disadvantaged groups who are suffering from imbalance of power <i>For example, other groups facing social or cultural disadvantage</i>

Conclusion

Para. 9	Wrap up the essay
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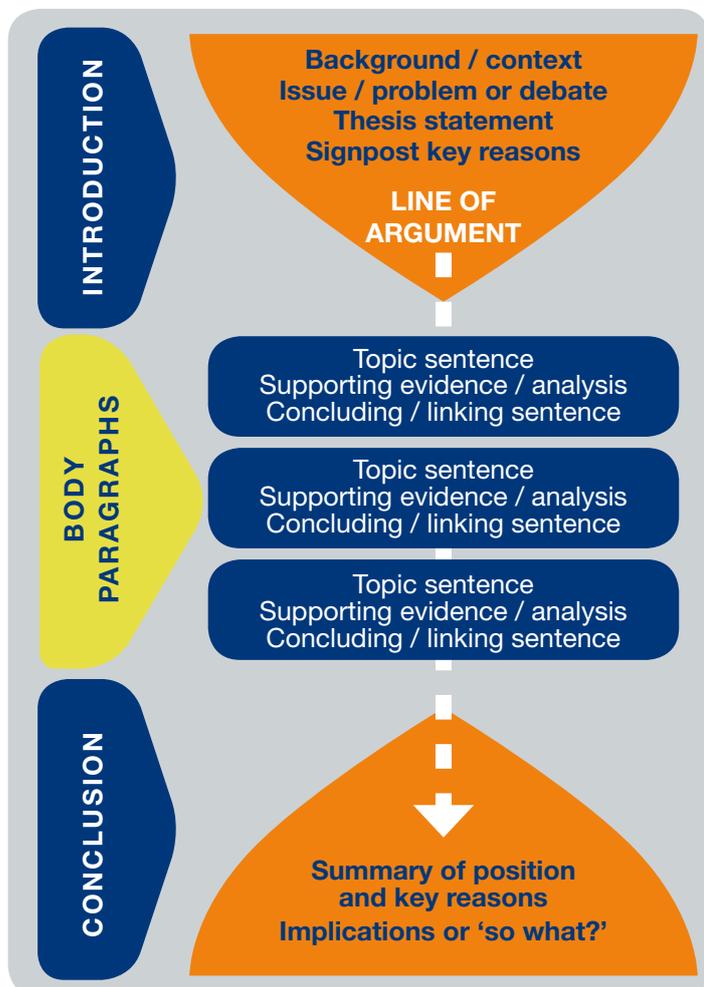
Write your essay

Ideally you have already done some writing throughout the research process, perhaps by taking notes or listing relevant points under section headings. Your notes can make a good starting place for your writing.

Writing is a process that takes time. It is important to allow enough time to draft, redraft and edit your writing. Be sure to start writing early in order to give yourself time to reflect and improve on your essay.

The following diagram outlines the parts of an essay. At the very minimum you will need an introduction, body and conclusion. Your line of argument should run through the entire essay, as it links all of your main points and evidence to your central position.

You do not need to write your essay in the order of the diagram. Some people start by writing the body of their essay, as notes they have made during research can help kick-start this section. Others like to start at the introduction in order to make it clear where the essay is going. There is no 'right' order of writing an essay. Experiment and find out what works best for you.



The introduction

The introduction is the opening to your essay and therefore it should be clear, strong and persuasive. You need to show that you have understood the question and that you are taking a clear position and presenting a logical argument to support it. The introduction starts broadly then narrows down to your specific focus—hence the hourglass shape to the diagram.

The first thing to do is give the appropriate level of background or context to the topic. This helps to orient the reader and lays the groundwork for your position and argument. Keep the background material to a minimum by focusing on contextualising the debate rather than giving an exhaustive outline of the topic.

Next, outline the issue or debate that you will engage with. This could include mentioning why it is controversial. For example, you could briefly explain the main disagreement between relevant theorists in the field.

Then you are ready to state your position and the key points of the argument that you will use to support it. In other words, this is the place for your thesis statement. Again, make sure that it answers all of the essay question.

By presenting your whole argument in the introduction, the reader now knows what to expect. This is called 'signposting'—planting signs that help to guide the reader through your writing. Signposting helps to signal your argument in your essay and avoids the reader having to 'hunt' for it within the body. An essay without a clear thesis statement and signposting in the introduction can be frustrating to read, as the author's position is difficult to discern.

In shorter essays, the thesis statement can act as a signpost, laying out the key reasons that you will explore in the body. In longer essays, a paragraph of explicit signposting may be required in the introduction, e.g. 'Firstly, this essay argues...'

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An introduction

A possible introduction to the Koori Court essay could read as follows:

The Koori Court is a Victorian initiative that seeks more appropriate legal processes and outcomes for Indigenous people. Poor legal outcomes are reflected in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the Australian prison system. The Koori Court redresses this imbalance through a more culturally sensitive approach to sentencing **[Context]**.

*The Koori Court's model appears to some to undermine Australia's universal justice system (see Kahler 2012) **[Debate]**. However, there is a place for such programs because, while creating a separate court appears culturally divisive, Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged group and there is an urgent need to address this imbalance. Numerous precedents for special courts exist which addresses the argument for special pleading; although the Koori Court has its limitations, its successes provide a model for the broader legal system **[Thesis Statement/Signposting]**.*

The body paragraphs

Paragraphs form the body of the essay. They are its 'building blocks' and it is important to structure them well. Each paragraph should contain one main idea. It develops that idea in three parts, with a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding or linking sentence.

Topic sentences

The first sentence of a paragraph is usually the topic sentence. It should indicate your position and encapsulate the argument that you make in that paragraph. To help write the topic sentence, ask yourself, 'What is this paragraph about?' and 'How does it develop my argument?' If you cannot answer these questions clearly, then the paragraph could be cut or revised.

The topic sentence needs to be clear and unambiguous because it acts like a signpost that tells the reader what to expect next.

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Topic sentences

The main point of the paragraph is captured in the topic sentence. Each of the points in your essay plan would need to be developed into a topic sentence.

Essay plan point:

Other specialist courts provide precedent for the Koori Court model.

Topic sentence:

Australia has a long history of specialist courts, including both the Family Court and the Industrial Relations Commission, which provide precedent for the Koori Court model within the Australian legal system.

Essay plan point:

Provides better outcomes as it addresses underlying problems.

Topic sentence:

The Koori Court provides better outcomes for offenders and their communities by addressing underlying problems in a culturally sensitive manner, leading to lower rates of recidivism and greater community acceptance.

Supporting sentences

The sentences in the main part of the paragraph support and develop the main idea. Each sentence should connect to the others to create a logical flow. This is where you incorporate your research and analysis and support it with evidence, such as quotations or statistics.

Whenever you use an idea that is not yours, whether quoted or paraphrased, you must cite its source. Referencing is central to academic integrity, which means that you must acknowledge when you have built your argument on the work of other scholars.

Concluding and linking sentences

The final sentence of your paragraph should summarise or conclude the idea that you introduced in the topic sentence. It can also lead on to the next paragraph by developing a logical link to the next main idea.

Good transitions at the end of paragraphs help the essay to feel more coherent. If you have trouble linking the main ideas across your paragraphs, consider reordering them.

The conclusion

The final section of your essay is where you move the focus outwards from your specific topic to a question about its wider relevance.

You should first summarise your position and the key points you made throughout your essay. This reorients the reader and reminds them of what you have argued.

No new points should be made in the conclusion. It is also best to avoid introducing new sources of evidence.

The next part of a conclusion considers the implications of your argument. Think about what it means for the topic or the wider field. It is also possible to include some brief speculation about the implications for the future.

Ending your essay with a strong and memorable sentence can help to leave the reader satisfied that you have answered the question well.

Finishing up

When you have written your draft, re-read the essay question to ensure that you have addressed the task. Have you covered every part of the question? Have you done what you set out to do when you came up with your thesis statement?

It is also a good idea to re-read your introduction and conclusion to ensure that they match. Ask yourself whether your argument is the same at the beginning and the end. If not, you may need to revise your thesis statement and reconsider your structure.



Edit your essay

Now you have written a draft of your essay, you are ready to edit it. Editing is best carried out in stages from argument through to expression. The approach outlined in the following diagram comprises a series of questions that you can ask yourself to help with the editing process.

ARGUMENT

- Is your thesis statement clear?
- Does it take a position and outline your supporting argument?
- Does it answer the essay question?
- Are your key reasons signposted in the introduction?
- Are they summarised in the conclusion?

STRUCTURE

- Is your argument sustained through the essay body?
- Do your topic sentences contribute to your argument?
- Are your paragraphs in a logical order?
- Does the order of your reasons in the introduction match the order of your paragraphs in the body?

PARAGRAPHING

- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence and one main idea?
- Do your paragraphs have too much evidence and analysis? If so, should they be split?
- Are your quotations accurate?
- Is the evidence you use correctly cited?

EXPRESSION

- Do your sentences flow together?
- Are there any long sentences that could be shortened?
- Are there any redundant phrases or areas of repetition that could be cut?
- Have you used synonyms to create variety in your writing?
- Have you eliminated spelling and grammatical errors?
- Is the essay formatted according to the course requirements?



Further information

This booklet has provided a brief overview of strategies you can use to write an essay in the humanities, arts and social sciences.

For more resources, please see our website.

Academic Skills and Learning Centre

ASLC Learning Advisers assist students to develop the core academic skills and communication strategies that are foundational to all academic activity.

ASLC provides:

- > Booked and drop-in appointments: personalised advice to assist students with academic writing or other study-related issues.
- > A Turnitin practice site to use before submission.
- > Workshops run during O-Week or within a course.
- > Self-help resources: referencing and academic integrity, writing and assessment, and adjusting to university.

Level 2, John Yencken Building
45 Sullivans Creek Road
The Australian National University
Acton ACT 2601 Australia

T +61 2 6125 2972

E academicskills@anu.edu.au

W anu.edu.au/students/contacts/academic-skills-learning-centre

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