

LECTURE SIX

THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF AN ACADEMIC PAPER

1.1 Objectives

By the end of this lecture, you should be:

- a) familiarized with the basic structure of an academic paper.
- b) Write a paper using this basic structure

1.2 Introduction

After you have gathered your information, you may wonder how to write it down so that your readers can follow. Khemer suggests that an academic paper should be structured in a similar way to demonstrate the logical order and coherence of different parts. It will, however, depend on your institution. If your institution does not provide a guideline, you can use the following, which is a standard way.

1.3 Selecting a topic

Your instructor will probably give you a topic to work on. Research students, especially postgraduate, are expected to come up with their own topics. Alternatively, your instructor may not give you a topic but may give you a broad subject area or guidelines on how to arrive at the topic. The following considerations can assist you arrive at a topic. They have been inspired by Kavulya (2007):

1. Passion

Never select a topic in a hurry for whatever reason. Ensure that the topic you select comes from a subject you are passionate about. In our first class, my academic writing lecturer asked us to write three to four paragraphs on any topic of our choice. He then asked us a few questions from our writings and told us that it's likely we chose a topic we were passionate about. If you are passionate about a topic, you will devote more time on your paper. You will give it your all. You will naturally focus and develop the paper.

2. A topic situated in your discipline/area

Choose a topic that is found within your discipline or subject area. Suppose you are a bachelor's student in the field of communication. Your topic must come from the field of communication. I have often seen students get confused and inadvertently find themselves crossing into another field. I would expect you as a communication student to come up with a topic in such areas: communication and terrorism, health communication, communicating policy, communication at the workplace, healthy communication in a children's home and so on. Those are broad areas that need narrowing to form a title which we will examine below.

3. The topic is researchable

You might make the mistake of selecting a topic which we call a dry topic. You will struggle with the topic then abandon it mid-way, and this can be costly if you are dealing with a thesis or dissertation. Hence, before you start working on a topic, make sure that your information sources are available in your library. Ensure also that you can access the relevant online resources. You can only assure the quality of your research by use of adequate and reputable sources.

4. The size of the topic should be manageable

Select a topic, yes, but ensure to narrow the title to a variable or two that you can handle. Look at the previous example of communication and terrorism. That's a very broad area that needs further breaking down. Within that broad area are specific areas such as how governments communicate on terrorism, how terrorists communicate, changes in terrorism communication and so on. It must be a topic that will fit into the allocated time and the recommended number of pages (Kavulya, 2007). The best way to determine if a topic is researchable, and how to narrow it down is to visit the library.

5. Shun controversial topics

Some topics are so controversial that you may be forced to stop midway. It could be that informants may turn down your request for an interview or may frustrate you by denying you access to critical information. For instance, if you are covering a highly sensitive political topic that has seen controversy time and again, you may encounter roadblocks. Or some topics may be controversial in the sense that they are highly argumentative so much that it involves your opinion. Research is based on objectivity, validity and reliability so personal opinions may blur that line.

6. Ensure your topic contributes to new knowledge

Sometimes students go for over-researched topics. The same topic has been done repeatedly so much that it has reached saturation. Simply put, there is no new knowledge you are contributing. Remember, research is all about adding to the scientific body of knowledge. This applies more to those coming up with a thesis or dissertation. At the term paper or project level, we expect you to provide fresh insights in your subject areas. Avoid a topic where all you can do is restate the facts.

7. Avoid trivial topics

Remember education is a serious affair. When given an assignment, you are expected to come up with a logical paper with content that is beneficial to humanity, however small your contribution. Hence, when given an opportunity to research on a topic and come up with findings, try and come up with beneficial topics. Or it could be that you want to sensationalize a topic, for example, celebrity gossip. The trouble is that you may lack serious, scholarly support material for your topic.

8. Do not recycle a topic

If you researched on a topic at degree level, why are you sticking to the same topic at masters and doctoral level? Now, it's possible to undertake research at the three levels with one broad area and still succeed. What is in dispute is using the same topic with the same variables. Or it could be an undergraduate student who recycles topics in different semesters. This only goes to show that you are not experiencing a fresh way of looking at things.

9. Difficult topics

Some topics are too technical, making them very difficult for your understanding. Why not settle for a topic that will lead to a strong output?

1.4 Developing a Title

After settling on a topic, you need to narrow it down to a title. Some people call it narrowing and focussing a topic. It's very important to narrow your focus so that you can manage it. Whitaker (2009) suggests that you look at the subject's smaller parts or simply choose a specific problem, time, period, or place to cover. Narrowing down will also help you complete your assignment within the given time. Kavulya (2007) posits thus:

Each subject has inexhaustible number of aspects which cannot be dealt with in one paper. You should narrow down your broad subject to a topic which you can treat thoroughly and to sufficient depth by identifying its various aspects, choosing to deal with some of these aspects and avoiding others. (p. 9).

Kavulya (2007) offers the following suggestions for narrowing your topic so that you come up with a clear title:

1. **Read widely.** Reading widely will generate ideas on what has been done and what hasn't. Consequently, you will narrow down to a researchable title. This is his advice:

Conduct a preliminary research by reading generally and widely to collect background information on your research topic. This will give you insight into

its various aspects as well as its history, major themes and principle figures. (p. 9).

2. **Identify and note down** the various divisions and sub-headings into which the topic can be divided.
3. **Select only those aspects** that are relevant and interesting.
4. **Examine the time span and geographical area** your topic covers.

In addition to the above, determine the purpose for which you are writing. Broadly speaking, purposes fall into: inform, educate and entertain. In academic writing, we aim largely to inform and educate. Kavulya (2007) suggests the following narrow purposes you can consider to further trim your topic and come up with a working title:

1. To come up with a new point of view, support a point of view or both
2. To make an existing point of view clearer
3. Criticise or dismiss a point of view
4. Reconcile two positions in opposition to each other

Let's apply the above to a scenario. Your broad area is mass media. Your specific area is gender and mass media. That is still too broad a topic. You should start by reading widely on gender and mass media. You will come across divisions like gender stereotyping; underrepresentation of women in media; misrepresentation of women in mass media and so on. Pick one that you think is relevant to your study, and interesting too. Look at the time span and geographical area. Does it provide a clue? Perhaps the study was done in Brazil. Can it be replicated in your country? Or can you do a comparative study? Also, consider your purpose. You might end up with the following titles:

- Bias against women sources in Electronic media forums
- Misrepresentation of women in Nigerian movies
- The portrayal of men in American films
- The participation and influence of young women in media

1.5 Introduction

Once you have settled on a working title and gathered your material, you are now ready to start writing your paper. The introduction is one of the most important parts of your paper. If you are engaging in research, you will need an abstract in addition to the introductory section. In a journal article, dissertation or thesis, an abstract succinctly summarizes the entire research in between 200-300 words. The abstract will capture the details in the title, the purpose of the study, the study design, the population, sample, sample size, sampling techniques, research instruments, findings and recommendations. The idea is that you give a snapshot of your entire research.

Generally, an introduction serves to open the window into your entire paper. Introduce your variables early into the paper. What Peter (1994) calls a lead, a beginning of beginnings. I often advise that it's the first thing I should read about. For example, if you are writing on 'bias against women sources in electronic media forums', your first sentence must contain the words 'bias' 'women sources' and 'electronic media forums.' Those words should not appear in the second paragraph because that is an indication that your paper has lost direction.

If you are doing a term paper, ensure you have about two to three paragraphs of the introduction where you tell the reader what your paper is about. Give a brief background to your study depending on the level of study, for example, thesis or dissertation. The material you gathered in your reading will assist you. The purpose of the background is to build a framework on which your paper is based. Here, you give the general overview of your paper in addition to the main points you will be covering in the rest of the paper. For example, what are the global trends? What effort was made to address your issue? Where did it succeed and

why? Your background pulls together information that is critical to convince the reader that your paper is justified and important. Include the statistics, the facts and so on. These can come from government reports, the experts, other research articles among others.

Peter (1994) posits that the length of an introduction must be proportionate to the rest of the work. If it's a thesis, an entire chapter may be dedicated to an introduction while a critical essay or research paper may require a page or two.

1.6 Thesis statement

In a term paper, it is recommended that you craft a strong thesis statement which you locate in the introduction. Some suggest that it should be placed right at the end of the first paragraph of the introduction. Kavulya (2007) defines a thesis statement as:

A declarative statement which indicates the underlying subject matter (content), and purpose of your paper and the conclusion (viewpoint) you have arrived at as a result of your research and which you will go ahead to prove in the body of your paper.

(p.10).

A thesis is also known as a hypothesis in social sciences which is often stated in different sentences (Kavulya, 2007). It makes a claim, directly responding to a question (Kavulya, 2007).

Hence, to come up with a thesis statement, you need to think about the main issues(sub-divisions) your paper discussed, your purpose and your point of view. Then come up with one statement comprising one to three sentences. Ensure to have a thesis statement that is specific (avoid general terms). This is your thesis statement. In a term paper or essay, the thesis statement can even be one sentence that you embed in your first introductory paragraph.

Let's work out an example of a thesis statement for an essay paper. You have been asked to write an essay on the effects of high-level alcohol consumption on a person's health. A not-so-good thesis statement will be general while a good one will be specific.

Bad: High-level alcohol consumption has negative effects on a person's health.

Good: Consuming high levels of alcohol have detrimental health effects such as liver complications, stroke, high blood pressure, heart disease and mental illness.

The second example is specific about the particular effects one is likely to suffer from. It is clear that each of the specific ailments will be discussed in separate paragraphs.

Body

Remember you wrote a thesis statement in the introduction. You now need to expand all the items you had introduced. The body is the largest part of your writing. This is where you put your evidence to convince the reader of your point of view or argument. The need for logical organisation cannot be overstated.

Structurally, create divisions and sub-divisions for your writing so that it's easy for the reader to follow. If it's an essay or a term paper, create headings and sub-headings according to the points that you want to make. For instance, supposing you are writing about the impact of Covid-19 on education in Africa. It's a term paper requiring you to write a minimum of ten pages. Your points might look like this:

1. Closure of schools and the resultant impact on finances
2. Disruption of classes (graduation, exams)
3. Digital divide (some classes moved online but poor people stagnated)
4. Psychological disturbances that may arise

Those suggested points may become your sub-headings which allow you to give details and evidences of each point.

Peter (1994) advises that the structure should be followed faithfully, and that equal justice should be administered to all the topics and sub-topics. Ensure to have unity and coherence in your writing so that your work reads as a whole, rather than jumbled-up ideas.

A second example can come from the example we discussed above on alcohol consumption. Suppose you are writing a 2 or 3-page essay assignment, your outline may look like this:

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Paragraph 2: Liver complications

Paragraph 3: Stroke

Paragraph 4: High blood pressure

Paragraph 5: Heart disease

Paragraph 6: Mental illness

Paragraph 7: Conclusion

If you are dealing with a longer-term paper, you can have the above points as your title sub-divisions and expound on each point using more paragraphs.

As you discuss your points under each sub-heading, remember to include facts and statistics to back your claims. This is where you provide evidence to further explain your thesis statement. You will need to include what other authors are saying about your topic from different parts of the world. For instance, what is the impact of Covid-19 on education in country A and B and how comparable is the situation there with your country? It is highly advisable to synthesize your points so that in the end, the reader is clearly following your line of argument. Never allow others to speak throughout your discussion. Even as you quote others, ensure that your voice runs from the beginning to the end of your discussion.

Peter (1994) says this about the body of the text: ‘the promises made in the introduction are fulfilled in the main text and the reader ushered into the conclusion.’ (p.227).

Remember to put in-text citations throughout if you use sources.

1.7 Conclusion

A conclusion serves to restate your main argument. The reader is able to understand why your paper is important to them (The Writing Centre, 2020). This is where you synthesise your key points and recommend how things ought to be or new areas for future research (The Writing Centre, 2020). You may briefly summarize your main points, but it shouldn’t sound repetitive (The Writing Centre, 2020). A reader should get a sense of closure after reading through your paper. The length will depend on what kind of paper you are writing. For instance, in an essay, one well-developed paragraph is sufficient. In longer writing, you will need two or more paragraphs.

1.8 Other Sections of the Paper

1.8.1 Preliminary pages

There are other important sections of a paper as well. They are considered part of formatting without which, you may have your marks reduced or even fail altogether. Depending on the type of assignment, **preliminary pages** are required. For instance, if you are writing a thesis, dissertation or project. These are the kinds of writing that come before you start with chapter one. These include:

1. Cover page

A cover page is a must for all essays and term papers. The cover page depends on which citation style you are following, and your specific university requirements. Generally, it can include:

- the name and sometimes logo of the university
- A running head (for some style guides like APA)
- The title of the paper
- Name of the instructor
- Name and admission number of the author
- The degree or diploma the student is studying
- The date

2. Abstract

An abstract summarises in about 300 words the entire document. It includes the problem, purpose, study design and method, data collection instruments, findings, conclusions and recommendations.

3. Declaration

Here, you declare that your work is original and not plagiarized. This section is signed by both you and the supervisor.

4. Dedication

You dedicate your work to people who occupy the core of your heart, people you love dearly, people you hold in high esteem like family.

5. Acknowledgement

You acknowledge all who assisted you to come up with this document. It could be your family, supervisors, academic fraternity, organisations, classmates and so on.

6. Table of content

This is an organised guide into your document in the form of a list of chapter or section titles. The section titles are written against corresponding page numbers.

7. List of tables and figures

If you used any tables and figures, you must designate a page where you list them down including the page number.

1.8.2 Other requirements

1. Line spacing

Your instructor will tell you what line spacing is required. Line spacing refers to the blank space between lines in a word document. The four types include: single spacing, 1.5 spacing, double spacing or a customized amount of spacing.

2. Page numbering

Again, your institution or style guide will specify how to number your pages. Are you required to insert your page number in the bottom or top? Examples include 'Header right' which means your number will appear on the top, extreme right. You can also use 'Footer middle' which means your page number will appear at the bottom, in the middle.

3. Appendices

Appendices are all the other material that assisted you in your research. These are detailed materials that may burden the reader if included in the main text. They may include:

- Research permit
- Questionnaire/interview protocol
- University research permit
- Maps and so on

After the reference section, start a new page with the title 'Appendices.' You will then copy them here, each starting on a new page and labelled Appendix I, II, III etc.

1.9 Conclusion

Any assignment you have been given needs a structure to make it easier for the reader. Use the structure provided by your instructor or university.

References

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