

second edition

Writing at University

a guide for students



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assignments and is relevant at every stage, and secondly, that reading does not have to be a solitary activity. Talk about your reading with other students whenever possible; in the long run, doing so will help you to understand more fully what you have read. Other students will have read other things from the same text. Pooling your ideas and thoughts on complicated academic texts can help you make more sense of them. Your ideas will still be your own when you come to write them into your assignment, but sharing them helps you with interpretation.

We hope that by the time you have finished this chapter you will feel less daunted at the idea of reading for your assignments and will have had the time to experiment with some of the approaches that we suggest. If you have been working through this book from the beginning, you should now have a clear sense of what is involved in the early stages of the process of writing your assignment.

Notes

- Remember to be strategic in your reading for an assignment by establishing what you know already and where you are likely to be going.
- Be discriminating in your reading for an assignment. Remember that making good use of what you know is more important than acquiring a mass of material that you can't digest.
- There is no one right way of reading; the strategies that you adopt and the routes that you take will depend upon the type of reading that you are dealing with.
- It is best to use a quote to support what you have said or are intending to say. It is unwise to let the quote do the work for you.
- Remember that reading and writing are an integral part of the same process.
- Keep a record of your reading on your computer to make it easier to build up lists of references.

6

Organizing and shaping your writing

It needs an argument.

It needs to flow.

It needs to be coherent.

It needs to be logical.

The reader needs to be given a sense of direction and 'signposts.'

Don't just write about what happened.

Getting the assignment into shape

In this chapter we will be discussing the structure or shape of your assignment – how it is organized. We are assuming that you have already done a lot of work for your assignment. You have worked on the title and have begun to get a sense of where you will be going, and of your argument. You have gathered together a good deal of information from books, lectures and other relevant sources. You have done various kinds of preparatory writing. You may have made some kind of plan and have done pieces of various kinds of writing towards the assignment. But now, probably with the deadline looming, you wonder how you are going to get it into shape as a finished product to hand in to your tutor.

It is true that this can be a very difficult point for the writer. However, we think that if you go through the work we have suggested in other chapters, this part, getting it into shape, will be easier for you, because you will have done a good deal of the ordering already. As we proceed in this chapter, we will consider in more detail what we mean by 'well-shaped' writing, when a lot of different pieces have been put together to make a complete piece.

It is important to realize that planning and shaping your writing happen at different phases in the writing process and in different ways. You continually move back and forth between planning and thinking, as you think new thoughts and write down 'old' ones. As you think and gather information you are also planning and writing bits as you go. Similarly, you can find that even as you are working on a piece that you thought was nearly finished, you realize that you need a bit more information. Sometimes, you may find that you have gone in a slightly different direction from the one you had planned so that now you need to revisit material you have already looked at, or even find some new information. Beware though, this can just be a delaying tactic for not getting on to the next hard phase of completing the assignment, on the grounds that it could always be better. At some point you simply need to make the best of what you have got and just finish this particular piece of work.

You may remember that in Chapter 3, we introduced the idea of 'building blocks' as a way of thinking about constructing a piece of writing. We can also compare the 'shaping' process with how a child makes a building with bricks. One child might have some idea of the overall structure she wants but she may have to try out different ways of getting there using different arrangements of bricks. She may start off with no idea at all, yet in the end she gets a building she likes. One child might hesitate a lot as she builds; another may just plunge into it. This illustrates that everybody works differently. You will need to try out different ways of planning and writing to find out what works best for you.

The quotes below illustrate different writers' approaches to organizing and shaping their writing. These writers all have some useful ideas that are worth considering when you are thinking about shaping your own writing. In practice, you may of course vary your approach for different purposes and for different kinds of assignment. As with all aspects of writing, it is a good idea to be aware of different methods and to try them out.

The diver writer (see Figure 6.1)

For years I was confused about my writing because I simply could not carry out my teachers' instructions to 'make a plan' and they were always telling me that my essays should 'be more organized'. I found it very difficult to make an outline and then stick to it. My mind didn't seem to work that way. I always had to start writing and sometimes write quite a lot before I knew where I might be going. That meant I had to cut and do different drafts. Sometimes I would find that I had to start writing one section even if it was in the middle of the assignment, and then build up the whole thing slowly, in bits. In the end it worked out and now I seem to have found my own mix of a method.

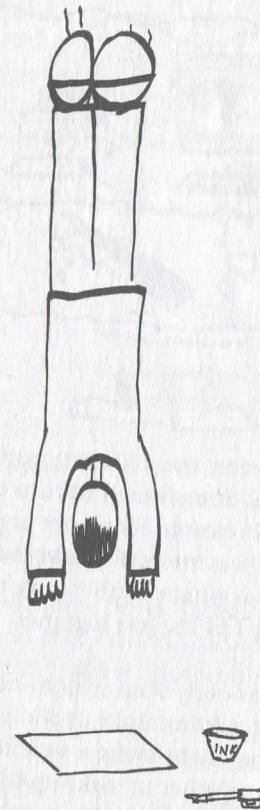


Figure 6.1 The diver writer

This writer just plunges in to her work. She always finds that she has to do some writing before she knows what she wants to say and in order to find out. She might use practice writing (see Chapter 2) for this purpose. Only then can she begin to build up a plan. If she were the child building her house with bricks she would get started and see what kind of building emerged from how she moved around the bricks. She would start to 'just build' her house.

The patchwork writer (see Figure 6.2)

When I write I try to get down some headings that seem to relate to the question. At least they give me an idea of what topics and divisions my writing will have. But I am not yet sure exactly if I have an argument. I start to write what I can under these headings and as I go I am trying to find a way of making these fit together. When I have got my first draft like this I will go back and put in bits that will

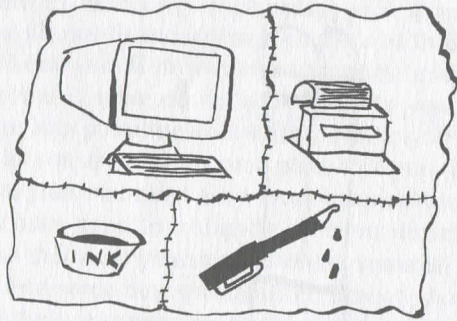


Figure 6.2 The patchwork writer

show the links between the different parts. I may have to move around some material. Sometimes I have to cut out quite a lot because now that I am much clearer about my argument I realize that not everything I thought was interesting is actually relevant or important. I still have to work out what exactly I have to leave out, add, or move around but gradually I fit the bits together.

This writer writes sections at an early stage which she then has to fit together to make the whole assignment, adding links as she goes. If she were the child building a house of bricks she might make a series of different 'rooms' which she would then need to join together to make up the whole house.

The grand plan writer (see Figure 6.3)

I spend a great deal of time reading and making notes – I try to absorb it all thoroughly. I have to read much more than I need. Then I think about it a lot. I can think as I'm doing other things. Finally, I just sit down and write it out in longhand and it's as though it has all come together in my inner mind. Sometimes I add an introduction once I have finished and I will read the whole assignment through, but really I have never found I could write down a plan and my work hardly ever needs redrafting.

This is a writer who doesn't seem to make an outline at all: she has a 'grand plan' in her 'inner mind'. In fact, she must have a structure in her mind before she begins to write but she can't quite say what it is until she writes it down. Then it comes out nearly complete. The child builder with a grand plan would have a clear picture in her mind of the house she was going to build before she began and would build quickly without getting diverted.

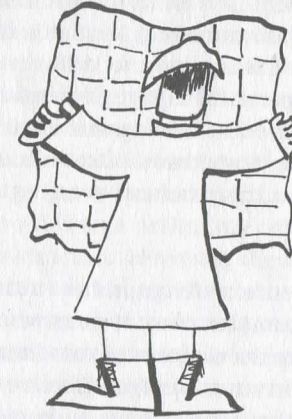


Figure 6.3 The grand plan writer

The architect writer (see Figure 6.4)

First I wrote down some notes – ideas for headings. I used the space of a whole page so that I could space out my ideas in a diagram-like fashion. Sometimes I had a column on one side to note down ideas

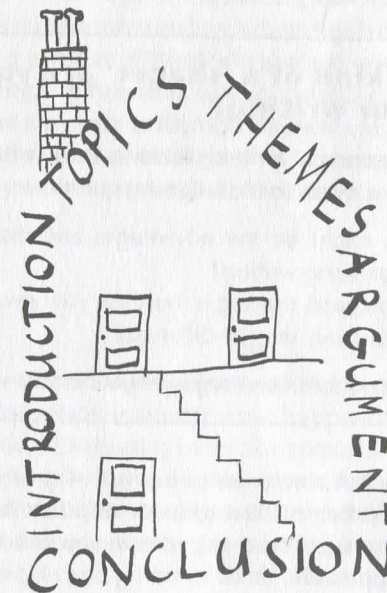


Figure 6.4 The architect writer

that I might use later on or for jobs I would need to do before I could begin writing the assignment. I kept this list to one side so that I could add to it as I was trying to develop my central overarching idea on the main part of the page. When I had finished I had some notes which all related to this 'central idea' so that I had an outline for the whole piece. Sometimes I like to use visual diagrams for my planning. I think and plan before I even begin to think about starting to write.

The architect writer has a sense of design in her writing. She would not find it too difficult to produce a complex plan. Writers who find it easy to put their thoughts in the form of a spider diagram or mind map are this kind of writer. They have a sense of a broad structure almost before they know what content will go into it, whereas other writers have to know what they have to say before they can make a plan. The 'architect' child building a brick house might start with an outer structure for her building, which she would then fill in to make all her rooms.

What kind of writer are you?

Have you related yourself to one of these types of shaping writing? Try the following task.

TASK 6.1: What kind of a 'shaper' are you? How do you organize your writing?

Reread the above descriptions of writers planning their writing. When you have finished note down your answers to the following questions:

- What do you think might be the advantages and disadvantages of these different ways of organizing writing?
- Which way of planning and shaping is most like your own approach?
- How do you think your way may be different?

Now try to describe how you plan and organize your work.

Of course, you may not always adopt just one way of shaping writing. You may in practice adopt different strategies for different kinds of writing that you have to do, and as you get more experience you will find you can become more flexible in your approach.

The writers quoted above demonstrate that the process of shaping their writing is not simple. They all stress that they have found their own way

that works for them even if it seems messy and time-consuming. Therefore, although advice on writing an assignment usually emphasizes the need to 'make a plan', these writers, all of whom have some experience, don't follow this advice in any simple way. Some writers do seem to be able to get an outline easily at an early stage, and we suggested one way of working towards this in Chapter 4. There is no doubt that this is useful if you can do it, and it is certainly necessary to try to get a clear shape at some stage, but, as we have seen, many writers have to do more preliminary thinking or practice writing before they can get a clear structure. However, they do all know that their aim is to get a well-shaped piece of writing in the end.

All this means that there is not just one way to organize a piece of writing. It is important that you do not try to follow someone else's advice slavishly, because it can dry up your own thought processes. Even when you have been able to plan what you want to say there are often some points in writing an assignment when you don't know what to say next, and most people find that their original plan gets changed as they are writing.

Some structures used in university writing

We have just looked at examples of how writers put together their written assignments. Now let us now consider the shape of the work from a different angle by looking at some ways of organizing material into different kinds of structure that are commonly used in university writing. By 'structure' we mean both the way a piece of writing is organized and – more importantly – what work it is doing: its function in the assignment. We are particularly interested in how the structure constructs the relationships between different ideas. Here are examples of some structures commonly used in university writing, followed by an illustration of how they might be used for one assignment.

Chronology writing

What happened?

This structure follows time with a sense of the sequence of events, one following another. You *relate* or *recount* what happened. This may, naturally, often be used in history. Chronology can be expressed visually as a 'timeline' which shows the sequence of events during a certain period, as a calendar does. A similar structure may be used to tell the plot of a novel or film. There will often be occasions when you need to use this structure, but you will also need to do more than this and go on to think about and explore further what you have recounted. Chronology writing might well appear at the beginning of an assignment, to give the background to the rest of the piece. Beware of

spending too long on chronology writing in any one assignment because the task usually demands more than this.

Description writing

What is something – or someone – like? What are its characteristics or what are the different parts that make it up?

Description usually needs to be followed by or linked to explanation. The visual way to represent description may be as a diagram, with labelled parts, as in biology. However, if we are describing something more abstract – for example, the characteristics of the twentieth-century family – then a spider diagram may be a good way to build up our thinking on what it is like, as we considered in Chapter 2. As with chronology writing, you will usually need to move on to consider more analytic questions, such as why, or what does this mean or what does this relate to.

Cause–effect writing

Why did something happen? What were the consequences?

In practice you will not get far in recounting what happened without bringing in cause and effect, which relate events to each other. Take a simple example: the king died; the people rejoiced. For this to make sense we need to know why the people rejoiced (maybe he was a tyrant). However, the idea of a straight correlation between two events – that something is caused by something else – is often seen as a bit simplistic. All the same, cause and effect – ‘what caused something’ and/or ‘what followed’ – can still be an important way of representing a relationship. As soon as you start to consider ‘why’ or ‘what followed’, of course, your thinking becomes complex. How do you know why? What else is involved? Again you have to analyse many different factors, and usually the first ‘why’ leads to more questions.

Compare/contrast writing

How are two things different from and like each other?

This is a very common structure. It shows the similarities and differences between two things and in the process it tells you more about each of them. One common feature of university writing is that the ‘things’ may well be quite abstract or intangible – for example, two different social policies or two different psychological theories. You can handle the compare/contrast structure by moving back and forth between both ‘things’ or by discussing each in turn. This structure might form the main part of your assignment or it may be used for just a part of it. The need for it may well be identifiable in the title of an assignment.

The following kinds of writing are less to do with the way the writing is organized or shaped as with what you are actually doing as you write; in other words we are concerned with the work that the particular type of organization is doing.

Summary writing

What does the writer say? What is this idea about?

You will sometimes be asked to write a summary and to give the gist of what an article or book is about as an exercise in its own right. You may also have to write briefly about what someone says, or about a particular position or way of thinking as part of your assignment. This is necessary because a lot of university writing is specifically about discussing what other authors have said about a topic. In this case you will need to refer to just those points and ideas which are relevant to your particular assignment or a specific part of your argument within your assignment. Pointers to summarizing what an author says are given in Chapter 5. Here are some ways in to thinking about summarizing for a particular purpose:

- What is important about what this writer says for your assignment – why do you wish to include something about her/him?
- How do these ideas fit in with what I want to say?

Analysis writing

Going deeper: what is this all about?

This is the most difficult kind of writing to explain because ‘analysis’ is a term that is frequently used by university tutors in different ways. It always demands that you say more about, for instance, what you are describing or comparing. It requires you to be searching and to ask questions such as:

- What does this mean?
- Why is this important?
- How does this work?
- How is this put together?
- Can you explain this?

These are just some of the questions involved in ‘being analytical’, or ‘using analysis’; use them if they seem appropriate. However, it is equally important to think of your own questions, in context, when you are attempting to be analytical.

Strictly, ‘analysis’ means breaking things down into their constituent

parts, and this idea comes from science. This thought can be helpful in understanding what you need to do in any analytical writing. It means that you can't just make 'big' statements, as you might do in daily life. If you do, tutors might suggest that 'you need to unpack it', to 'tease it out' (we say more about this in the section on feedback in Chapter 9). For example, in film studies students are not required to say whether a film is 'good', which is simply a value judgement, but to work out how it is put together to make its impact. Being analytical involves thinking through what you are doing in your writing and the information and ideas you are presenting in a particular, sharp, questioning way.

Evaluating writing

What is the value of this? How is this important?

In evaluating writing you have to make some sort of a judgement, often about what other writers are saying. This is different from the kind of judgement you might make in daily life, for example, 'That was a good film'. You have to evaluate different positions, perspectives or points of view. (We examine this further in Chapter 7.) You have to do more than say, for example, 'This is a false argument' or 'This is wrong'; you have to give reasons for your judgement. Evaluating may involve writing about how different positions suggest certain attitudes or omit some crucial information, weighing up one against the other. It is important to remember that in order to evaluate in university writing you have to be analytical. As with all these different kinds of writing, what you actually have to do varies between courses and subject areas, as we elaborated in Chapter 3.

Here is an example of analysis and evaluation from an essay on the 'concept of the family unit' as it is applied to problems of old age:

There are several disadvantages to using 'the family' as the focus of an explanation for the problems of old age. Firstly, not everyone lives in a family. Secondly, there are now many different forms of families, so generalizations made about the traditional nuclear family are not applicable to all. The consequence of this is that families are expected to behave in ways that do not match reality and they may be blamed for problems connected with old age that they cannot control.

This writer uses analysis in order to evaluate accounts of the problems of old age that are based on the concept of the family unit. You will notice that the analysis is not centrally about the problems of old age but about how these problems are addressed from a particular perspective and position specifically related to the idea of the family unit.

Using a range of writing structures

As we have said, you may well employ more than one kind of writing structure in any one assignment. For example, in the course of writing an account of the causes of homelessness you may have to include a chronological historical account. An assignment about the chronological history of women's writing may also include some analysis of individual works by women writers. Let us take as an example the following assignment: 'Parents have ultimate responsibility for their children's delinquent behaviour. Discuss.'

Chronology writing

You might give a historical account of different attitudes to young offenders; or use a case study in which you recount what happened in a particular case of a young offender.

Compare/contrast

You might want to compare what two writers say on the topic.

Writer A

Writer B

Believes that the family set-up is an important factor in juvenile delinquency.

Believes that factors in society are more important.

Believes that young children can be taught right and wrong at home and school.

Believes that young children cannot be held responsible for their actions.

This would also involve you in some summarizing, because you would need to write about what each writer says on the matter. However, you would do this selectively in relation to how you were using the author's work for this assignment.

Analysis writing

In addressing this assignment title you would not (of course) just answer 'yes' or 'no'. You would consider different positions that have been taken on juvenile delinquency and weigh them up. Here is one possible format:

- What are these positions about juvenile delinquency?
- Who holds them and why?

- What attitudes or assumptions about what children are like or about what family life is like do these positions suggest?
- What policies and action follow from them?

As a part of this analysis you will also need to evaluate these different positions and come to some judgement about them.

In this section we have been considering what kind of work your university writing may be doing, which to a large extent determines how it is organized into its shape. Bearing these kinds of structures in mind, both in your reading and your writing, helps you to become more conscious of what you are doing, and so to do it better.

TASK 6.2: Identifying writing structures

Take one assignment from a subject that you are working on. Can you identify some of the kinds of writing described above that you will need to answer the assignment? You might find that one kind of writing may shape most of it.

Developing your argument and working out your 'story'

One important element of shaping your writing is concerned with developing your argument. Look back to Chapter 3 to see what the tutors quoted had to say about argument. An 'argument' is one of the things tutors are most often looking for when they set written assignments, and they often criticize an assignment on the grounds that it does not have an 'argument'. However, in practice, the term 'argument' often means different things to different tutors and in different subjects. It certainly doesn't mean a 'quarrel' (although as a matter of fact academics are rather notorious for conducting academic 'quarrels'). An argument can be described in quite technical and particular ways, but here we are concentrating on some more general ideas of what tutors seem to mean when they use the term. Here are some examples.

Developing an argument

- The writing shows a sense of purpose, as though the writer knows where she is going and is leading the reader there step by step.
- There is a definite central idea with reasons for it and evidence to back it up and support it.
- The writing may 'present a case' for a particular viewpoint.

- The writing is constructed in a particular way – for example, it builds up a case with one idea logically leading to the next.
- The ideas are put together in a way that is clear to the reader.

Building up your argument step by step

Here is a brief paragraph from the middle of an essay on domestic violence:

An alternative feminist approach suggests that women may stay in violent relationships even when they are not 'weak'. For these women a constituent of being a woman involves being there for their men and being able to maintain a relationship despite obstacles. These women tried to understand their violent partners and felt duty bound to cope the best way they could, for walking out would have been an admission of failure.

This paragraph contains a common structure on a small scale:

- *A general statement:* in this case the 'idea' is a statement about 'an alternative feminist approach'.
- *Adding to the first idea:* the next sentence gives further explanation about the first statement concerning these women.
- *An example* of what the women do.

The writer is building up her writing point by point as if she is anticipating questions or a request for more information from her reader.

Constructing your 'story'

One way of thinking about developing an argument in your writing is to think of it as your 'story': What is your story? Do you have a clear storyline or plot? Using the notion of a story may not seem very academic, but we think that it gives a good indication of the 'feel' of developing an argument. It should help you to identify more clearly the process of construction that you have to go through to get to a written argument that feels complete for you. Your work as a student writer is to construct your story-argument so that it is convincing to the tutor/reader.

Argument as 'story'

- The writer and the reader know clearly what this piece of writing is about.
- Selected ideas or events are linked together in a particular sequence.

- The reader is given a sense of direction as she reads.
- There is a clear beginning and end.
- There is a sense of 'completion' to the whole piece, of it being 'rounded off'.
- There are some basic patterns and conventions that the writer tries to follow and the reader expects.

Formulating your central idea

In trying to put together your argument it is important to work towards getting the central idea you wish to present. What do you want your reader to know or think by the end of your assignment? What position are you presenting or arguing in this assignment? Or, in the terms we have been considering above, what is your 'story' or storyline? Here are some examples:

There are disadvantages and advantages to the 'care in the community' policy; overall the disadvantages outweigh the benefits.

This advertisement uses signs related to class to try to sell its product.

There are three different theoretical perspectives used to explain domestic violence; they all reveal different attitudes about society.

It is often not easy to formulate this central idea. However, it may be easier if you bear in mind that it needs to form an answer to the assignment title if you have one. If not, the central idea you wish to get over to your reader will help you to think of your own focused title. You may need to do quite a lot of thinking, and even writing, as we have explained, to get to this central idea. You can start to work towards this by analysing the title in the way we suggest in Chapter 4. Once you have been able to sort out your central idea, you will find it easier to shape your assignment, because you will be making sure that the information you include is relevant to this central idea. You will know where the writing should be going and have a sense of purpose for it. We must emphasize again that different writers reach the stage of knowing exactly what their assignment is about at different points in their writing. However, it is certainly worth working towards formulating your central idea right from the beginning of your work on any assignment.

A biology student was having difficulty in organizing her short assignment: 'Discuss the membrane as a link and a barrier'. She had many notes and ideas but she couldn't get them into shape. As she put it, 'I can't get my plot'. She meant that she could not yet say, 'The central idea of this assignment is ...'. Without needing to know anything about the subject, you might think an appropriate shape for this piece of writing could be:

Introduction: what structural features does the membrane consist of?

- 1 How the membrane functions as a link.
- 2 How it functions as a barrier.

Conclusion that briefly brings these two aspects together.

But the student couldn't get this to work. As she was talking she suddenly realized that the whole point of what she wanted to say was that the structural features of the membrane worked both as a link and as a barrier at one and the same time. This meant that she had to change her organization as follows:

Introduction: what structural features does the membrane consist of?

- 1 First structural feature (a) as a link (b) as a barrier.
- 2 Second structural feature (a) as a link (b) as a barrier.

Conclusion that brings these together: that the same things that make the membrane work as a barrier also make it work as a link.

Now she had her 'plot', her central idea, and could get on with the assignment. She felt that there was a much clearer connection between her introduction and the main part of the assignment, and that it made sense. She was able to construct her story-argument.

The idea of an argument as a 'story' may be expressed as follows. The assignment you are writing has a central idea, which expresses what it is about. This central idea is supported by a number of themes, which are organized and linked together into particular structures. The themes may be bits of information, reasons or evidence that make the reader understand and appreciate the central idea. Together these make up the story-argument that you have constructed to answer the assignment most effectively for your purposes.

Developing your argument from topics and themes

We have talked about how an argument is frequently concerned with developing a central idea and the way in which all the different parts of your assignment will be related in some way to this central idea. In your writing you will be concerned with developing a number of themes which support your central idea and therefore provide evidence for the argument that you are

making. One way of thinking about the central idea is that it is **at** the core of your argument. It is the core structure, and building an argument is often about putting together a number of themes to create this core structure. The themes themselves are also made up of components, and these are the basic content based topics of the assignment. These topics come from your reading and lecture notes and may be concerned with factual material which you need to illustrate and develop your themes. So, in a sense the topics are the basic building bricks out of which you construct your themes. Remember how we used the analogy of building blocks in Chapter 3. Figure 6.5 illustrates how these topics and themes help to underpin your central idea and support the complete argument.

Look at Figure 6.6, the mind map on 'Famine and its causes'. The student who wrote this used it as the basis of her written assignment. The notes in Figure 5.1 were also hers and relate to the same piece of work. So how would she have gone about putting together her argument? Some of the topics that this student needed to bring in to illustrate her themes can be seen in her mind map: depletion of grain stocks; lack of food; lack of work; cattle prices; migration. From these topics she developed one of her main themes; this was that 'war causes displacement'. She used this, along with other relevant themes, in order to develop her central idea that 'famine was caused by factors other than lack of food'. For her, this idea lay at the heart of the argument that she wanted to express in her assignment. She developed her argument, as she wrote, through the examination of her chosen themes. The argument did not exist before she began to write but it gave voice to the central idea that she wished

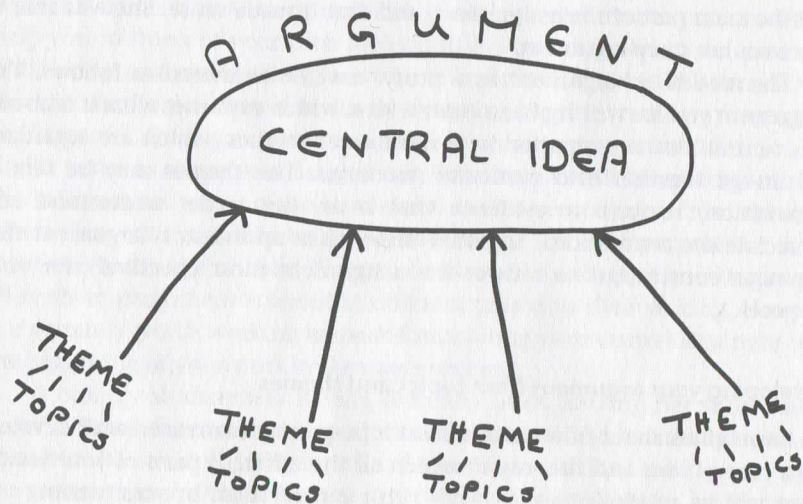


Figure 6.5 Developing an argument

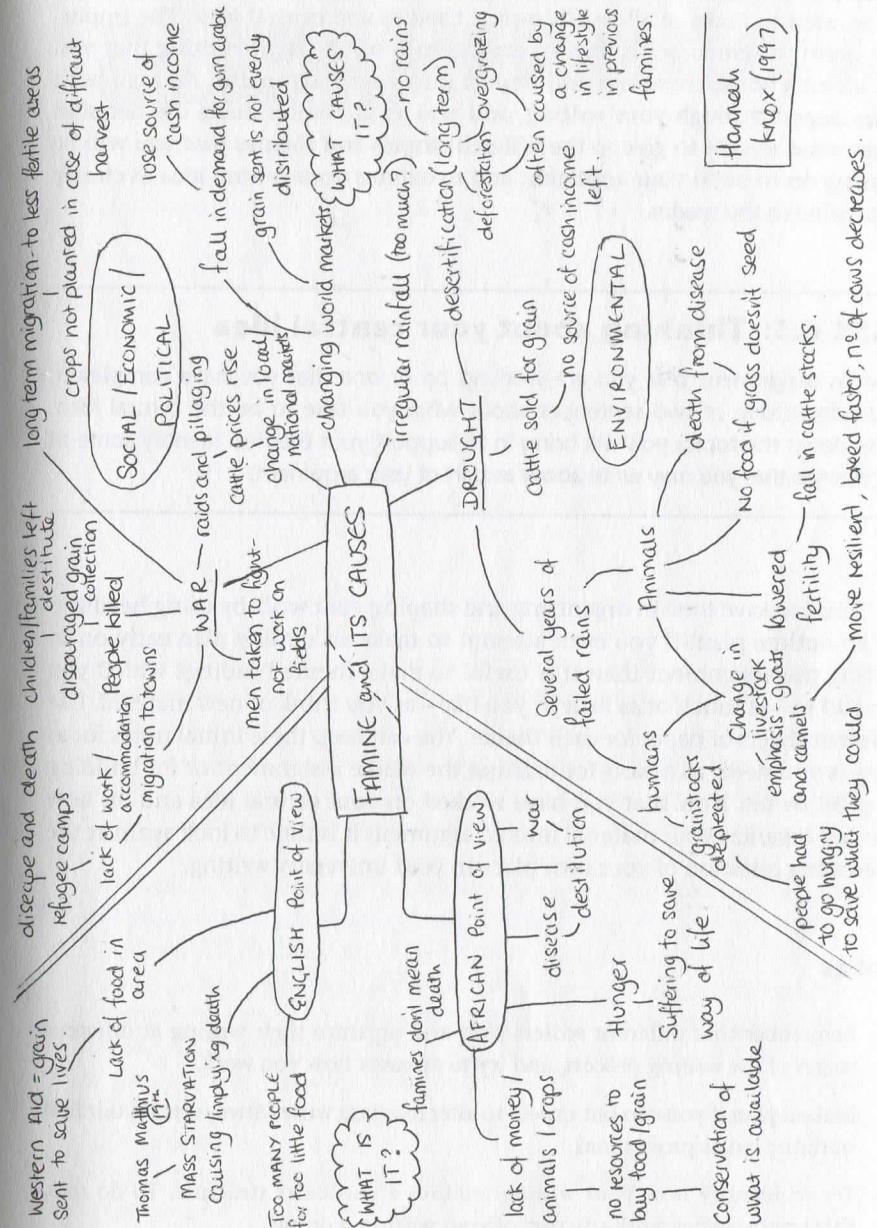


Figure 6.6 Famine and its causes

to develop. Although she had her mind map to guide her, the argument was developed through the writing process as she struggled with the points that she wanted to make at all levels: topics, themes and central idea. The important point to remember is that an argument is not a tangible thing that you can identify somewhere else and import into your assignment. An argument is developed through your writing, and you as the writer make the decision about what weight to give to the different topics and themes that you will be drawing on to build your argument and to express your central idea as clearly as possible to the reader.

TASK 6.3: Thinking about your central idea

Take an assignment that you are working on or one that you have completed. Write down one or two sentences about what you take to be the central idea. Write down the topics you will bring in to support your themes. Identify some of the themes that you may write about as part of your argument.

You can save time in organizing and shaping your work by using headings for an outline plan. If you even attempt to make an outline plan early on in writing the assignment then it is useful to make theme headings which you can add to – as much or as little as you like – as you think of new material. Use different sheets of paper for each theme. You can keep these initial notes for as long as you need, as a basis for drafting the whole assignment or for building it up bit by bit. Now that you have worked on your central idea and on how you can organize your material into an argument it is time to look again at the interesting question of your own place in your university writing.

Notes

- Remember that different writers plan and organize their writing at different stages of the writing process, and try to discover how you work.
- Make a plan if you can but expect to alter it as you write. Always treat your first outline plan as provisional.
- Try to identify how your writing requires a particular structure. To do this, think about what work any part of your writing is doing.
- Above all, determine what your central idea is and make sure that your assignment is organized around this.

- Experiment with mind maps to help you build up the topics and themes for your argument.
- With the computer you can always move things about early on in the planning stage to get an overall feel for how the different parts of your assignment might fit together.