

# Better essays: signposting

An essay can be thought of as a kind of journey from the introduction to the conclusion. In this analogy you, as the essay writer, are the driver, and your readers are passengers on your journey.

Have you ever, as a passenger, slept for much of a journey, and only woken up occasionally? If so, you will know how disorientating it can be: upon waking you tend to think ‘Where are we?’ and ‘How did we get here?’ *This is exactly the feeling that tutors have when reading some essays* – not because they have fallen asleep (well, not often), but because the writer has not clearly **signposted** the essay.

## What is signposting?

In the context of essays, signposting means using words to tell your reader about the content of your essay, rather than just telling them the content itself. This is done to help the reader understand as clearly as possible. Here are some (real) examples:

What the writer wrote:	How it helps the reader:
...in order to explain and understand the causes of this offence, it would be useful to apply the criminological theories...	The reader realises in advance that the writer is going to be using some theories to explain a criminal offence.
There are several ways in which the new style shopping centres seem attractive.	The reader knows that at least two elements of the attractiveness are about to be discussed.
Another issue close to the heart of the feminist is...	This reminds the reader that one such issue has already been written about, and another is about to be revealed.
This essay explores theoretical and practical approaches to communication.	Straight away, and in advance, the reader knows that the writer will be covering two ways of thinking about communication.

See why this is called signposting? It is like the driver telling you about the journey as you travel.

## Two kinds of signposting?

There are perhaps two kinds of signposting used in essays:

**Small-scale signposting** – where the writer uses frequent single words or short phrases to ‘guide’ the reader. Examples of small-scale signposting are single words such as ‘However’, ‘Furthermore’ and ‘Finally’, and phrases such as ‘By contrast’ and ‘In conclusion’.

**Large-scale signposting** – where the writer uses longer phrases or whole sentences to indicate where we are in the essay, and where we have been and are going. An example might be ‘Having discussed the reliability of the research, this report will next address its validity...’

The rest of this handout is about large-scale signposting.

## Large-scale signposting – a few possible ways to do it

Note that the following provides just a small range of suggestions. The precise words used will of course vary for any individual assignment. You must be certain about the meaning of the verbs you use in your signposting, of course – **do not use a word just because it appears here!**

### In introductions:

This essay will [first]  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{outline...} \\ \text{examine...} \\ \text{address...} \\ \text{demonstrate...} \\ \text{argue...} \\ \text{focus on...} \end{array} \right.$  ...and will [then] [attempt to]  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{ascertain...} \\ \text{establish...} \\ \text{clarify...} \\ \text{show...} \\ \text{judge...} \\ \text{prove...} \end{array} \right.$

It is often helpful to *quantify* (put a number to) what the essay will be doing. For example:

This essay will address three aspects of...

You might also signpost *how* the essay is going to do these things. For example:

This essay will, by  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{describing...} \\ \text{reviewing...} \\ \text{evaluating...} \end{array} \right.$  attempt to demonstrate that...

### In the body of an essay (sentences like these would normally begin a paragraph):

Having established..., this essay will  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{now} \\ \text{next} \end{array} \right.$  consider...

$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{In addition to...} \\ \text{As well as...} \end{array} \right\} x, y \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{must be} \\ \text{should be} \\ \text{needs to be} \end{array} \right.$  established.

... is  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{one} \\ \text{an important} \\ \text{the key} \end{array} \right.$  issue that has to be considered.  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Another} \\ \text{A second} \\ \text{Of equal importance} \end{array} \right.$  is...

### In conclusions:

In signposting your conclusion, you might use similar verbs as you have in the introduction and body, but you would normally use the *past perfect tense* (sometimes in the *passive form*). For example:

This essay *has focused* on three factors affecting... Each *has been considered* from the viewpoints of...  
It *has been established that*...