

ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING

For students at Charles Darwin University

*A resource to
assist tutors
working with
Indigenous
students*

Purpose of this booklet

This booklet aims to provide resources to tutors who work with Indigenous students at Charles Darwin University. It is intended to provide you with information and exercises to assist you to scaffold students to be successful in their university studies. We focus on writing academic essays, because this is a skill student's need in most university courses, and is a skill that can be transferred to assessments in other units.

We know that students bring a wide range of skills and life experiences to the university setting. What we hope to do is to assist you, as tutor, to build on the students' existing skills and knowledge, with transferrable skills that will enable them to succeed at university. Our philosophy aligns with the old proverb:

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach him to fish, you feed him for life."

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The Academic World

The 'academic world' and the 'real world' are not the same.

Levin (2004) explains that the 'academic world' and the 'real world' are not the same, and students need to learn the differences between these worlds.

The real world is where we experience our lives – we live and work, raise children, play or watch sport, spend time with family and friends and interact with the natural world. A lot of what we know about the real world is from our experiences.

The academic world on the other hand is one of theories, explanations, ideas and critiques. We can't experience them the same way as we experience the real world, through seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. In the academic world we learn from what is spoken, or more often written, about the world. This means that in the academic world you learn at second hand, from what other people have written, rather than from your own experience. Levin (2004, p 5) argues that:

"The culture of higher education in the Western world is very much a culture of the written world".

Exercise: Rules of the game

Ask your student which sport they play or follow. On paper or whiteboard draw up two columns. In one column list the rules of the game as the student identifies them. In the other column, list the rules of writing academic essays. Get the student to help to identify these if they can. Your completed list might look something like this:

Rules of soccer(football)	Rules of essay writing
You cannot pick up the ball unless you are goalie.	You must analyse the question carefully to make sure you answer what is asked.
You can head the ball in the air.	You must use formal academic English – not slang or txt language.
You must play within the lines of the field.	You cannot just write your opinion. You must back everything you write with evidence (what other people have written).
You cannot physically push or shove players on the other team.	Different lecturers may have different rules about what academic language is – you will need to check with them.
Games are usually 45 mins each half.	You must reference where you got your information from.
You must obey the Referee even if you don't agree with him or her.	There are particular forms of referencing you must use.
You need to stay onside.	You must not copy other people's work (plagiarism).
You must wear shin guards to protect your ankles.	You need to write in paragraphs- start with an introduction and finish with a conclusion.

Critical thinking

Students often have trouble understanding what we mean by “critical thinking”. It is worthwhile spending some time exploring ideas around critical thinking, and the difference between description and analysis or critical thinking. We have found the following exercises to be very helpful.

Exercise: Critical thinking 1

1. Show your students a standard bottle of water – or show the picture of a bottle of water, and ask them to **describe** this.

When describing they should just tell you what they see –

- it is a clear plastic bottle
- the label says it is ‘spring’ water
- it has a white cap
- etc

2. Ask your students to **think critically** about this bottle of water. You might need to ask them the question “So what? This is a bottle of water, what else do we know about bottled water?”

The students should be able to come up with things that might include:

- It costs \$4 for a bottle of water this size from the supermarket
- Plastic bottles like this are a problem in landfill
- At home we drink bottled water because our tap water tastes bad
- Bottled water isn’t any better than the water that comes from our taps
- We don’t take bottled water when we go country because then we drink from the spring



Why do we need critical thinking?

Students often ask why they need to develop critical thinking and why they need to demonstrate it in an essay. Most jobs require people to be able to think critically, and essay writing is one way that the university can see that students are developing critical thinking. In many jobs people are required to write reports that will guide the action of others – for example in nursing, and critical thinking is required to do this.

Exercise: Critical thinking 2

Ask your student to imagine that where they live has just been struck by a cyclone. Describe what they might see: List their descriptions on the left-hand column. Then ask them to imagine that they are the civil defence wardens for their neighbourhood. Get them to think critically about what they described, and write what they identify when thinking critically. For example:

Cyclone: description	Cyclone: critical thinking
The houses seem to be OK, but garages and sheds have been blown down.	Are there any injured people in the houses? Are any of the buildings in danger of falling down and injuring people?
Some of the streets are flooded. It looks as though the water is up to one metre deep.	Are there people who have been cut off by the water that need rescuing? Is there still fresh water coming from the taps? What type of vehicle is needed to get through the flooding?
There are trees blown down over roads and power lines.	Are any of the power lines still active? Are they a danger to anyone? Is there any power in the neighbourhood? Are the roads accessible, or are they blocked to traffic by live power lines or fallen trees?
Etc	Etc
Etc	Etc

PREPARING TO WRITE AN ESSAY

Unpacking the essay question

*Work with the student to
analyse and decipher the
question.*

*What does the lecturer want
in the essay?*

***Even if you think that the
lecturer has set a silly
question, it is what the
student must answer.***

*Help the student unpack the
question.*

Unpacking the essay question

Usually the essay question will have some **direction words** that give clues about what is wanted in the essay (Rolls & Wignell 2013). These words may be “describe”, “explain”, “argue”, “discuss”, “critique” etc.

Describe: Write about the facts, process or event. Write in a systematic order, and emphasise the most important points. You are not expected to explain or interpret.

Explain: You will need to analyse, not simply describe or summarise. You need to focus on the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of a particular issue, to clarify reasons, causes and effects.

Argue: If you are asked to argue, you need to systematically support or reject a point of view by presenting evidence. You also need to show that you are aware of the opposing point of view.

Discuss: You present a point of view. This will include both description and interpretation. Your opinion should be supported by argument and evidence from other writings.

Critique: A critique is where you identify and discuss both the positive and negative aspects of a topic.

Compare and contrast: Find the similarities and differences between two or more ideas, events or interpretations.

Examples of essay questions:

NAPLAN (The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) is a feature of education in all Australian Primary schools. Describe NAPLAN and discuss why it is so controversial.

Critically analyse the key concepts of working cross-culturally, specifically in regards to effective communication and the impact on your work practice.

Outline and analyse the key components of a framework for health professionals to engage in effective and respectful communication with Indigenous peoples, especially in regards to the delivery of health services. Describe how this could potentially be viewed as part of a strategy across a number of levels to systematically lift the cultural competency of mainstream health services.

Looking at the marking rubric

In most units at Charles Darwin University, a marking guide or marking rubric is provided.

Go over this with your students because it usually gives a clear picture of what the lecturer is looking for in the essay. It assigns percentages of the marks for particular things.

Many students believe that having an essay free of grammatical errors and that is nicely formatted is the most important aspect of essay writing. This is important, because it makes the essay readable, but often other aspects of an essay are worth many more marks.

Example of a marking rubric

In the following example of a rubric, what are the three aspects of the essay that the lecturer considers most important? Where should the student put most effort? How important is text organisation and essay structure?

	points	For maximum points essay must
Text organisation and essay structure	5	Introduction: Must have clear thesis statement aligned to body of essay
	5	Body of essay: Must be well structured, have cohesive paragraphs, and flow well.
	5	Language: Must have style of voice suitable for purpose and audience
	5	Conclusion: Must include clear summary of key points from body of essay and link to thesis topic.
Content	25	Answers the question: Ideas must be well presented and consistently related to the essay question.
	25	Critical thinking: Shows high level of critical analysis, and includes different points of view where relevant.
Quality of evidence	15	Research: Ideas supported by credible and relevant sources.
	5	In-text and referencing list accurate.
Grammar	8	Sentence structure clear, consistent & error free.
Formatting	2	Formatting as requested. Cover sheet completed accurately.

Brainstorm or mind map

It is always good to start with what the student already knows about the essay topic.

A good way to record this is in a brainstorm or mind map.

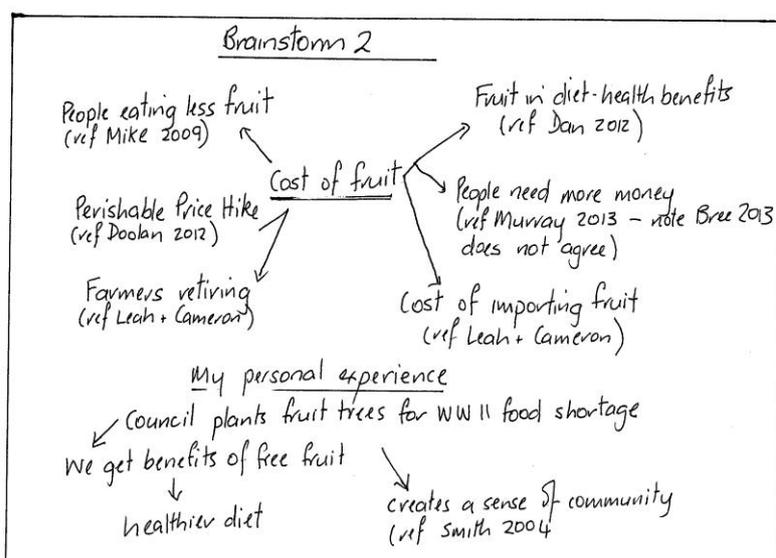
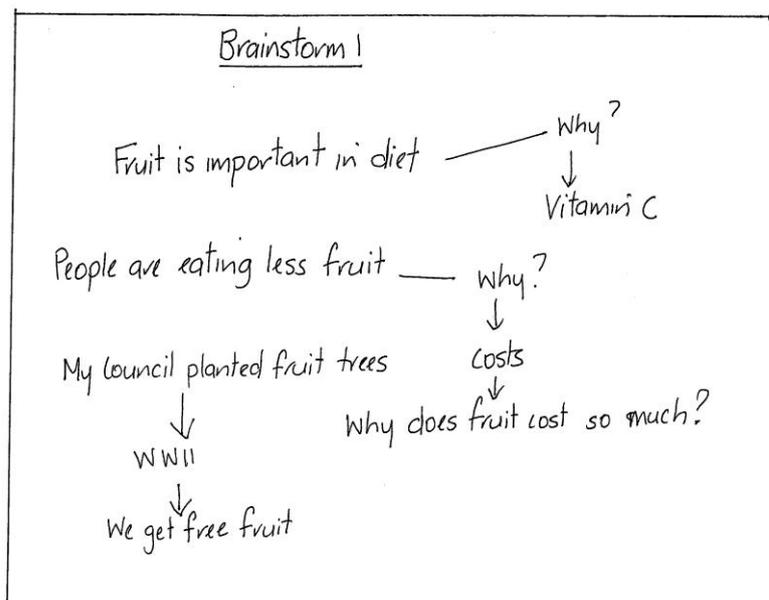
The following two brainstorms show a student's developing thinking about an essay topic: Using personal reflection, write a 1000 word essay on how rising food prices are impacting on people's diets.

Brainstorm 2 was completed after the student had spent time researching the topic. The student was able to find references for the ideas on Brainstorm 1, and add additional aspects from his/her researching readings. In Brainstorm 2 he/she has attached references to all his/her main ideas.

Understanding a Brainstorm of the essay topic

Essay topic: Using personal reflection, write a 1000 word essay on how rising food prices are impacting on people's diets

Brainstorm 1: The student has decided to focus the essay on *fruit* process as a sub-group of *food*. His/her knowledge is limited at this stage to three main points – fruit is important in a diet, people are eating less fruit, and his/her council planted fruit trees during WWII.



Brainstorm 2 shows how the student developed his/her thinking about the essay topic after doing some research. He/she has included references in the diagram. Brainstorm 2 provides a good outline for the essay.

Creating a taxonomy

A taxonomy is a way of organising information that groups things that are alike together (Rolls & Wignell 2013).

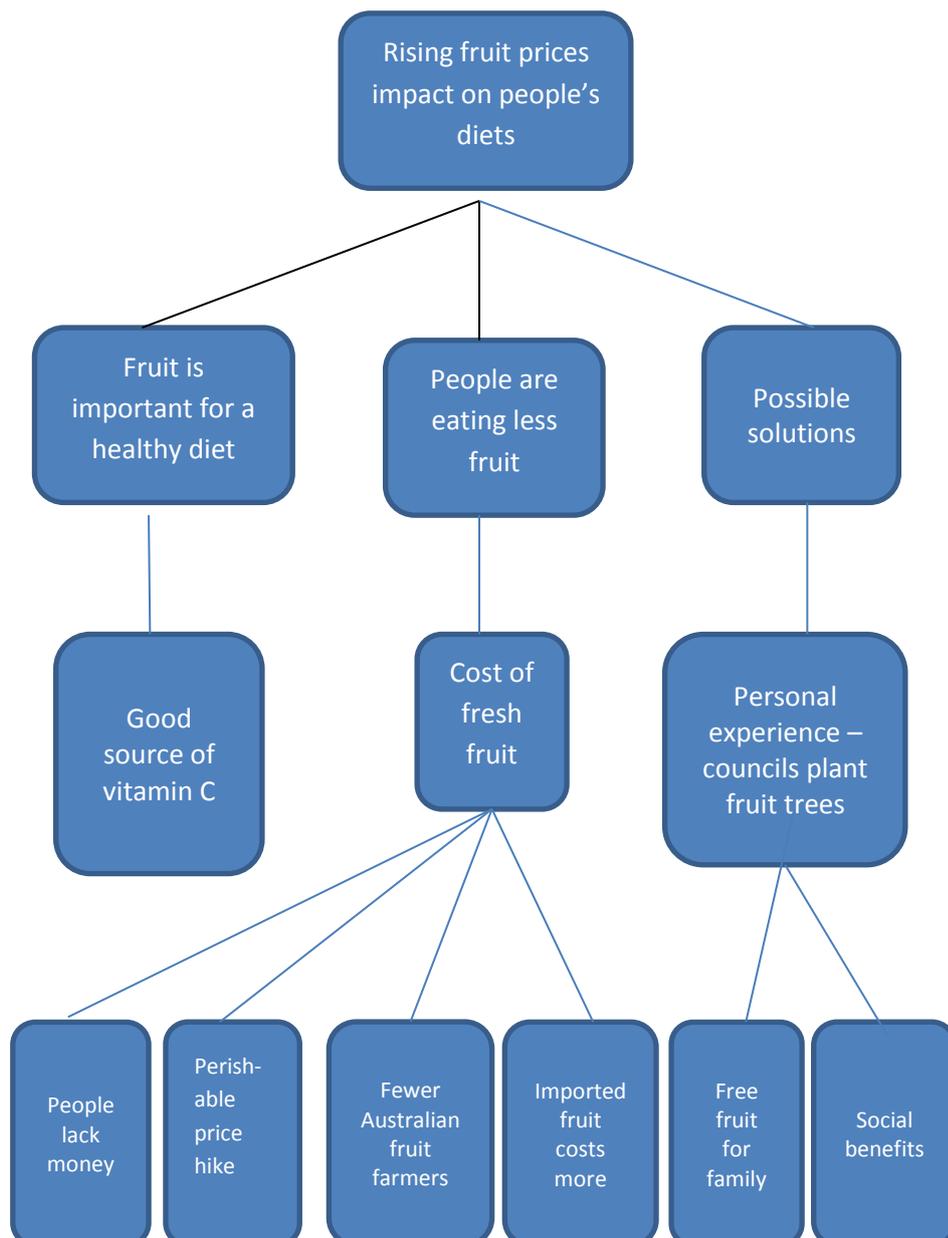
When the student has completed a second brainstorm, it is a good idea to then get them to organise it into a taxonomy. A taxonomy can be thought of as a “tidy brainstorm”. It gives the student a clear picture of how to structure their essay, and which supporting arguments go with which main argument.

All arguments or themes in an essay **MUST** be supported by **EVIDENCE**.

Evidence is what other’s have written and published about the particular issue. Evidence from a reputable academic journal or book has more credibility than evidence from magazines or newspapers.

Developing a taxonomy for the essay topic:

Using personal reflection, write a 1000 word essay on how rising food prices are impacting on people’s diets.



Academic essay structure

While the essay structure provided by Rolls & Wignell (2013) may appear overly prescriptive, it does provide an excellent framework for a student who is beginning essay writing, or a student who has difficulty structuring an essay.

This structure can be expanded to accommodate answers to even quite complex essay questions.

If your student has completed a brainstorm and taxonomy for the essay question, you can work with them to decide on the order of their paragraphs, and put them into the essay structure framework.

A word on academic language

Universities have differing requirements relating to whether students can use the first person "I" "we" in their essays. Generally the policy at Charles Darwin University is that students write in third person and do not use "I" in their academic essays unless they are asked for a personal reflection.

Ask the student to check what form of writing their lecturer expects.

Example: An academic essay structure (Rolls & Wignell, 2013, p 55)

Introduction	
	General statement Thesis statement Outline of main ideas you will discuss
Body of essay	
	Paragraph A Topic sentence Supporting evidence Supporting evidence Supporting evidence Concluding sentence
	Paragraph B Topic Sentence Supporting evidence Supporting evidence Supporting evidence Concluding sentence
	Paragraph C Topic Sentence Supporting evidence Supporting evidence Supporting evidence Concluding sentence
Conclusion	
	Summary of main points; final comment. (paraphrase what is in the introduction).

Many academics write their introduction and conclusion last, to make sure that they reflect what is in the body of the essay. For beginning essay writers it is good to write the introduction first to ensure that they answer the question asked, but always check it and revise if necessary when the body of the essay is completed.

Writing a thesis statement

A thesis statement is the most important sentence in the introduction of an essay because it clearly states what the essay will be about. There are many ways of creating a thesis statement, but for beginning or struggling essay writers turning the essay question into a statement is probably the most straight-forward.

In addition to stating what your essay will be about, the thesis statement is used to restrict the scope of the essay and signal the writer's position. There are no wrong examples, although the essays will be significantly different.

Ask your students to identify which of the thesis statements restrict the scope, and which signals the writer's position.

Creating a thesis statement from the essay question

The following examples based on the work of Rolls & Wignell (2013) show that there is no one right way to create a thesis statement. **What is important, is that the thesis statement signals what the essay will be about.**

Essay Question 1

What is meant by the term globalisation? Discuss the effects of globalisation on at least one of the following:

- Trade
- Business
- Consumerism
- International relations
- The arts

Thesis statement 1a

This essay will discuss the positive and negative effects of globalisation in relation to consumerism, trade and business.

Thesis statement 1b

This essay begins by defining what is meant by globalisation, and then discusses the positive effects of globalisation on the arts in Australia.

Essay Question 2

Despite its negative health effects the tobacco industry remains an important part of the economy of many nations. Discuss the economic effects of the tobacco industry in relation to at least one of the following levels of industry:

- Primary level (farmers)
- Secondary level (small business)
- Tertiary level (Government revenue)

Thesis statement 2a

This essay will show that the economic benefits of the tobacco industry are beneficial to the global economy at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of the industry.

Thesis statement 2b

Despite its negative health effects the tobacco industry remains an important part of the Australian economy. This essay will discuss how the Federal Government tax regime on the industry currently brings in more money than is spent on tobacco related illnesses.

Writing an Introduction

The introduction is the most important paragraph in an essay, because it sets out the thesis statement and gives the reader clear signposts for what they will be reading in the essay.

A note on using headings

Getting students to use headings when writing their essays is a really good idea because it helps them keep focussed on the structure of the essay. However, as it is not usual to include headings in academic essays, make sure that the students delete them from their final copy of the essay.

Writing an introduction

An introduction should include the following:

Background information

This is usually made up of one or two sentences to introduce the topic and give background information.

Thesis statement

This introduces the main topic or argument on which the essay is based.

Outline

The outline lets the reader know what the essay covers, and how it is organised.

Scope

This section is only needed if the focus of the essay is narrowed. It lets the reader know the focus of the essay.

Rolls & Wignell (2013, p 58) provide a very clear example of this framework in the following example:

INTRODUCTION

Background

In the past two years the threat of cane toads to the Top-End of Australia has become an increasing reality. Their numbers continue to steadily increase in Kakadu National Park and they are causing damage to this pristine environment.

Thesis statement

This essay will discuss the effects of cane toads on the environment of Kakadu National Park and show that they will cause permanent damage to the environment. This will be seen, firstly by

Outline

discussing the characteristics of cane toads and then, examining their predicted long term effects on the animals of Kakadu and the tourist industry.

Scope

Because there is data available only on the effects of cane toads on goanna, frogs and crocodiles, these are the only animals that will be discussed.

Writing a paragraph

Paragraphs form the building blocks of an essay. In academic essays a paragraph should introduce one main idea and provide supporting evidence that elaborates the main idea. This supporting evidence needs to be referenced with in-text referencing.

The main idea is often called a **topic sentence**, and provides the reader with a map of what is coming next in the essay.

A paragraph should have a beginning (topic sentence), a middle (evidence), and if it is a long paragraph, a summary sentence at the end.

An essay that flows well is easier to read. Encourage your student to use linking words and sentences to link their paragraphs.

Good linking words

To begin

To conclude

In addition

In the same way

In this case

For this/that reason

In other words

In particular

Another possibility is

In contrast

However

To summarise

Writing a paragraph

The following paragraphs have been adapted from Rolls and Wignell (2013, p 63).

Topic sentence

Adults should read to infants. Smith and Brown (2010) explain that this helps them to read at a later stage because it helps them to see the association between words on the page and language. It should also help infants to view books and reading as a positive experience because 'story-time' is usually a cosy, one-to-one experience between a parent and child.

Supporting sentences with evidence

Topic sentence & link sentence

Another reason that global warming is a major concern is its effect on habitats. This will occur as melting ice caps increase water levels around the globe. Low-lying countries will be the most seriously affected. A study by CSIRO (1999) had projected that by 2020 a number of Pacific Island countries will need to be evacuated. As human habitats will be affected, so too will be the habitats for plants and animals.

Supporting sentences with evidence

The following essay illustrates the different sections of an academic essay. Because the essay asks for a personal reflection, it is acceptable to use "I" in this essay.

Thanks to Jamie Pomfrett for making this available

Essay: Using a personal reflection, write a 1000 word essay on how rising food prices are impacting people's diets

This is the information that gives the reader some orientation and background to the question and the essay topic. It is very general information. In a 1000 word essay 1-2 sentences is sufficient.

Thesis: This clearly states what your main argument of the paper is. All the rest of your information will be used to make this argument. In a 1000 word essay a thesis will be focused on one or two **specific** things. Doing this will help to guide your essay and keep your argument succinct and within the word limit.

INTRODUCTION

Fruit is an important part of a healthy diet. However Jones (2010 p, 12) states that people are eating less fruit because it is becoming more expensive. This paper will argue that one way of combating the rising price of fruit is for local council's to plant more fruit trees in local parks and public areas. Firstly, the paper will identify key terms in the literature around food prices. Secondly, the paper will focus on fruit, and examine its role in healthy diets and evaluate recent consumption of fruit. Finally I will use my personal reflection of the current situation in my home town to explore a possible response.

Sign Post/ Road Map: This section clearly shows the reader what evidence you are going to use and how you are going to present the evidence to support your thesis. In a 1000 word essay you might use 2-4 main pieces of evidence. And you say I will firstly ... and secondly ... and finally ...

Topic sentence

The evidence that supports the topic sentences

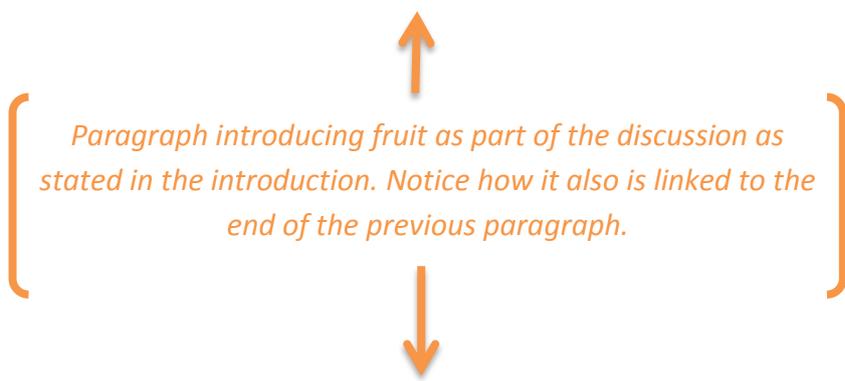
BODY

The rise of food prices in the last five years is indisputable. Jones (2010) makes it clear that across Australia the price of food has increased more than people's wages have increased which makes it difficult for people to access food the way they did five years ago. Doolan (2012) highlights that fresh food, in particular fruit, has been the most effected. She claims that the price of non-perishable items such as flour and sugar have increased by only 5% while the price of fruit and vegetables have increased by 20% (Doolan 2012, p 4). This kind of price rise is what food theorists such as Manhood (2011) call a "perishable price hike", which is when the price of fresh food like fruit and vegetables increases further than the price of non-perishable items.

These are paragraphs that define key terms as stated in the introduction

Concluding sentence, see how it links to the topics sentence of the next paragraph

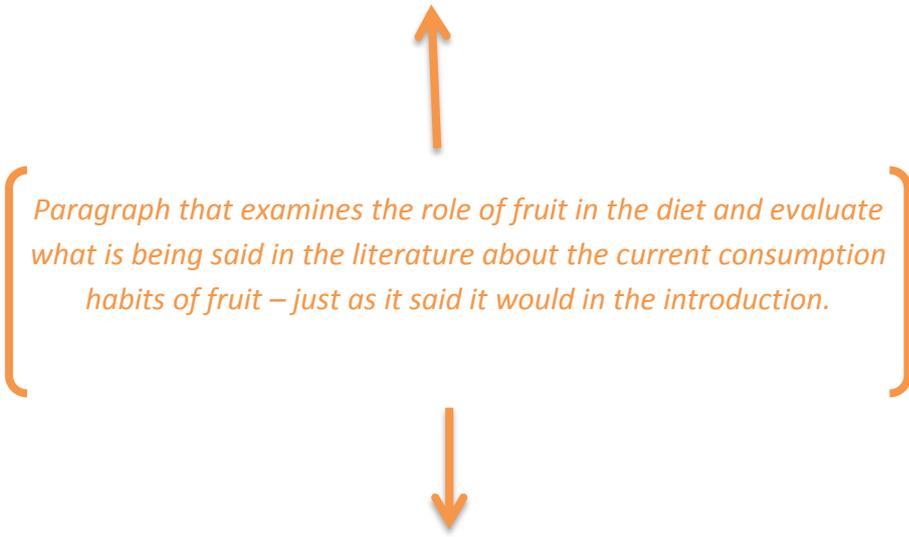
According to some authors (Leah & Cameron, 2011) the perishable price hike we are currently experiencing in Australia has to do with what they call the "diminishing farmer population". This means that as farmers get old and retire, they are not being replaced by younger ones and therefore there are fewer farmers growing food in the country (Leah & Cameron, 2011). Because there is less food grown, Australia is forced to purchase food grown overseas which is more expensive and therefore raises the price of food that we see on the shelves. Perishable items such as fruit and vegetables require refrigerated transport, unlike sugar and wheat, and the costs associated with refrigerated transport are much higher (Leah & Cameron, 2011).



Paragraph introducing fruit as part of the discussion as stated in the introduction. Notice how it also is linked to the end of the previous paragraph.

Current fresh fruit consumption trends suggest that this perishable price hike is having a negative impact on health. One report, based on interviews with 500 people, states that on average people are eating half as much fruit as they were 5 years ago (Mike, 2009). In addition, in another study (Jones, 2010) it was reported that shops are selling half as much fruit as they were 5 years ago. These two reports clearly demonstrate that people are eating much less fruit than they were five years ago before the perishable price hike started.

Health experts (Dan 2012, and Bee 2013) indicate that this drop in consumption of fruit will have negative impacts on the community. They claim that fruit is a great way to access essential vitamins and minerals (Dan, 2012) and that if people are not getting these vitamins and minerals then the health impacts could be devastating. Bee (2013) states that in the last five years more people have become severely debilitated by even the common cold because of a lack of vitamin C in their diet. She goes on to say that the food people are buying, like flour and sugar, does not have the vitamin C that people need to stay healthy.



Paragraph that examines the role of fruit in the diet and evaluate what is being said in the literature about the current consumption habits of fruit – just as it said it would in the introduction.

Murray (2013) says that more economic development is needed so that people can have access to the money they need to buy the food to keep them healthy. But the health experts suggest that this will not be a solution. Bee (2013) says people need a regular reliable source of food, and that we cannot rely on imported fruit and vegetables to provide perishable goods. If the source of food is the problem, then I would like to discuss my experience of growing up in regional NSW as a possible solution.

Here the writer is using a personal reflection. The writer firstly describes in and then analyses their reflection relation to the topic and argument of the essay.

Notice how this paragraph evaluates the literature and also leads the discussion into the next paragraph and topic in the essay.

In my home town there were many fruit trees planted in the parks and along the streets. They were was planted during WWII as people feared there would be food shortages as a result of the War. There are many different types of fruits - oranges, lemons, cherries, apples and pears. There is enough of a variety of fruits that there is always something in season. Our family will often walk down to the park to get our fruit, especially since fruit in the shops is so expensive. I wouldn't say that people are eating as much fruit as they were five years ago, because there are not enough trees in the town to supply everyone, but people do have enough fruit to get by.

In this paragraph the writer uses some literature which is about the topic and argument of the essay but also links to the personal reflection the writer has used. This is a very good skill and needed when using personal reflections.

I also think it is nice in my town, that when you harvest fruit from a tree, you get the chance to talk to someone. Smith (2004) says that talking to people in your community has positive health benefits because people feel a sense of community. So I think that the fruit trees in our town are not just good for our diets, but for community health as well. I think that if the rest of Australia followed my town's fruit tree planting example, then people would have a way of accessing fruit without having to buy it.

The conclusion! Notice how it summarises the discussion and reaffirms the thesis. It answers what the introduction says it will do.

Conclusion

Because of the “*diminishing farmer population*”, Australia is currently experiencing a rise in the cost of food in particular a “*perishable price hike*”. The evidence suggests that as a result of this people are not eating as much fruit as they were five years ago. This change in how much fruit people are eating is having a negative impact on health as people are now being severely affected by things like the common cold. Some authors say economic development is needed to give people more money but others say this won't work and the source of food needs to change. I have suggested that planting fruit trees in parks and along the streets will change the source of food and give people a greater access to fruit and help reverse the negative health impacts we are seeing as a result of the perishable price hike.

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Referencing

Many students struggle with the concept of referencing. In academic essays students must reference, not only direct quotes, but also ideas, and information they have summarised or paraphrased.

Useful words to use to refer to what others write include:

- States
- Argues
- Discusses
- Identifies
- Talks about
- Asserts
- Maintains
- Contends
- Indicates
- Examines
- Notes
- Reports
- Considers

It is sometimes useful to remind them that "There is no such thing as an original idea".

Referencing provides students with supporting evidence for what they have written.

Students seem to have more difficulty with in-text citations, so the following examples are worth going through.

In text referencing

Direct quotes:

This is when you take the exact words and sentences from an author and use it in your own writing. If it is longer than one sentence, indent it. For example:

Swann and Raphael (1995) state:

The Aboriginal concept of health is holistic and encompasses mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. This concept does not just refer to the whole body, but is in fact steeped in harmonised inter relations which constitute wellbeing. Crucially it must be understood that when the harmony of these inter relations is disrupted, Aboriginal ill health will persist (p 19).

*These are the exact words from the article. They are not changed, so it is a **direct quote**. We do not use direct quotes a lot in academic writing because the idea is to demonstrate that the student has understood what the author is saying and can put it in their own words.*

Paraphrasing:

This is when you summarise the author's points and put it into your own words. If we are to paraphrase the quote above we might say:

A range of activities that support the balance of mental, physical, cultural and spiritual health are essential for Aboriginal health and wellbeing (Swann & Raphael 1995 p19).

Another paraphrase of the same quote could be:

Swann and Raphael (1995, p 19) claim that Aboriginal ill health will continue until the mental, physical, cultural and spiritual components of health are harmonised.

Referencing

Academic referencing includes in-text referencing and reference lists at the end of the essay.

There are various forms of referencing used in academic, the most common being the American Psychological Association (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA), and Harvard referencing styles.

At CDU most faculties have adopted the APA 6th edition style of referencing. Information on this style is available online through the CDU library:

<http://www.cdu.edu.au/library/downloads/pdf/APA6thMar2014.pdf>

Appendix 1: Example of an analytical essay

Brainstorm

The brainstorm starts with what the student already knows about NAPLAN. It also asks questions that the student will follow up in his/her research.

Essay Question:

NAPLAN (The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) is a feature of education in all Australian primary schools. Describe NAPLAN and discuss why it is so controversial.

Brainstorm

Brainstorm: What I know about NAPLAN

League tables of results

- My schools website.
- Schools not "level playing field"
- Don't recognise "added value" idea

Teachers hate NAPLAN

- Time wasted teaching kids how to sit tests
- Narrows curriculum
- Performance pay ~~with~~ NAPLAN?

NAPLAN

- * literacy + numeracy test
- * all primary schools have to do it annually.

- Is it a fair test for ESL students?

- Is it a fair test for Indigenous students?

Is it being used by teachers to improve student learning?

Introduced 2008
Has it been reviewed yet?

Essay Plan

The student has used a table format to set out the essay plan. Tables can be used in this way to develop taxonomies. The student has attached references to each section of the essay.

Column 1 of the table gives the headings the student used to frame the essay. These headings were deleted when the essay was written.

Exercise: See if your student can insert the headings from the Essay Plan table into the essay that follows.

Essay Plan

Introduction	Stating what the essay will cover.	
Defining the terms	What is NAPLAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardised test; In all Australian primary schools; Gives a snapshot of children's literacy and numeracy
	Govt objectives of NAPLAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools' accountability to communities • Information for Government • Educationalists say objectives are too general (Angelo, Latham, Rice) • Different stakeholders use information for different purposes (Angelo)
Impact on teaching and learning	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrows curriculum (lots of refs for this) • Teaching to tests (lots of refs for this) • International evidence that not good practice (Senate Interim report)
Improving students' performance	Formative assessment as a basis for teaching program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NAPLAN is not a diagnostic test (Harris et al) • Timing doesn't work for planning programs (Harris et al, Kostogriz et al)
	Identifying underperforming schools/teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools not 'level playing ground' – ignores wider learning factors (Harris et al; Ladwig) • Ignores 'added value' (Harris et al; Ladwig) • Not valid or reliable (Harris et al, Wu et al)
Cultural bias of NAPLAN	Disadvantages NESB students – focus on Indigenous students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed for Eng. first language speakers (Dooley et al; Freeman; Harris et al) • Literacy demands too high (Freeman) • Cultural bias of content (Dooley et al; Freeman; Harris et al) • Double negative of not recognising strengths of multi-linguistic students (Wigglesworth)
Uses of NAPLAN statistics	My School website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labels some schools as 'failures' • Narrows picture of what success is – ignores cultural and social aspects (Harris et al)
Conclusion	Link to introduction; Link to 2013 review of NAPLAN- not out yet.	

NAPLAN (The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) is a feature of education in all Australian Primary schools. What is NAPLAN, and why is it so controversial?

This essay begins by describing The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and its introduction into Australian primary schools. NAPLAN has been very controversial, and this essay will identify some of the arguments relating to NAPLAN including: the lack of clarity about the objectives of NAPLAN; the impact of NAPLAN on teaching practices; the problems related to using NAPLAN as a formative assessment tool for teachers and schools; the cultural bias of the tests themselves; and the way that the data is used to produce 'league' tables.

NAPLAN is a standardised national assessment program introduced in Australia in 2008 for Years Three, Five, Seven, and Nine. All students in these year levels are expected to participate in tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and Numeracy in May each year. NAPLAN is not designed to test content, but to test skills in literacy and numeracy that are developed over time through the school curriculum. The NAPLAN results are made available four months later, and since 2010 have been published on the *My School* website at an individual school level (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013).

The NAPLAN website (www.nap.edu.au) states that NAPLAN is designed to “give a snapshot picture of students literacy and numeracy skills. It is designed to give government education authorities, schools, teachers and parents information about the literacy and numeracy levels of students”. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) provides an expanded version of the primary objectives of NAPLAN:

To provide the measure through which governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents can determine whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community.

The tests provide parents and schools with an understanding of how individual students are performing at the time of the tests. They also provide schools, states and territories with information about how education programs are working and which areas need to be prioritised for improvement (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013, pp5-6).

While it can be argued that NAPLAN’s objectives relating to driving improvements in student outcomes, and providing increased accountability to the community are clear, others, for example Angelo (2013), and Latham (2013) argue that the objectives are too general. Furthermore they assert that how the information can be used is not clear. The stakeholders such as the government education authorities, schools, teachers and parents, have different and sometimes conflicting views on the objectives of NAPLAN, and the use of its data. For example, state systems might use NAPLAN data to justify widespread curriculum changes; regional systems to allocate resources to improve NAPLAN results; school principals to target individual teacher performance; parents to choose schools; and real estate agents to promote particular housing localities. Angelo (p 30) claims that for NAPLAN to be effective the Government must begin by clarifying “the purposes for which NAPLAN is to be used, and what it is not to be used for”.

One of the major criticisms of NAPLAN by teachers and schools is that the NAPLAN testing regime has an adverse impact on teaching and learning practices, with a narrowing of the curriculum as teachers teach to the tests. Teachers claim that the focus on NAPLAN preparation has resulted in limiting creative learning within classrooms

(Harris et al., 2013; Hamilton-Smith et al 2010; Reid 2010). These criticisms are backed up with international literature from the United Kingdom and the United States that has found that testing can have:

...distorting influences on the way in which teachers teach, changing teachers' pedagogy but also changing the way in which schools assign value to different parts of the curriculum. For example, the research has found that things like the arts, drama and music are given less prominence in the curriculum because they are regarded as being further away from the main focus of the testing which is literacy (Senate Interim Report, 2013, p 8).

One of the objectives of NAPLAN is to provide schools with information about how individual students are performing, with the understanding that the information can then be used by schools to develop instruction that will improve the individual student's literacy and numeracy learning. Apart from the fact that NAPLAN is not a diagnostic test (Harris et al., 2013), and teachers have much more refined strategies for formative assessment of their students' abilities and needs, the timing of NAPLAN mitigates against its use for this purpose. Testing is done in May, and results are not available for four months. During that period students' needs and abilities will have shifted considerably (Harris et al., 2013; Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013).

NAPLAN claims that it will improve school performance by identifying under-performing schools and teachers. This notion seems to be based on the premise that if students are under-achieving, it is because of poor teaching, and once individual teachers have been identified, measures can be taken to improve their teaching, thus resulting in higher student achievement in NAPLAN tests. This is problematic because research has shown that many factors influence student learning, for example: socio-economic conditions and poverty; health issues; sociocultural and linguistic factors; student aspirations and learning needs; out-of-school learning experiences; and peer, family and community factors (Harris et al., 2013; Ladwig, 2010). Schools do not start with a 'level playing field' which negates the validity of standardised national testing as a measure of school performance. Similar arguments are made for the use of NAPLAN data to judge teacher effectiveness. Harris et al (2013), and Wu and Hornsby (2012), assert that the use of NAPLAN for this purpose is not valid or reliable.

As NAPLAN tests are designed to test first language learner's mastery of academic and written aspects of their first language, they are problematic when used with students for whom English is a second or third language (Dooley & May, 2013; Freeman, 2013; Harris et al., 2013). The language and literacy demands of the tests have been found to be too high for students with first languages other than English, who often struggle to access the questions and complete the tests. This is particularly pertinent in the Northern Territory where 40% of the school-age children are Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Freeman, an experienced teacher with nine years working in remote NT, maintains that in remote Indigenous communities:

Most students sitting the Year 3 and 5 NAPLAN tests are unable to access the tests as they do not yet have a sufficient grasp of Standard Australian English or of the cultural/social knowledge the tests assume. Whether the student is progressing well at school (i.e. developing English oracy, demonstrating literacy skills through their first language, developing numeracy concepts) or whether the student is a poor school attender who is not progressing well at school, the NAPLAN results are likely to be similar in either case (Freeman, 2013, p 75).

To summarise Freeman's concerns, students who work hard at school, with families who support their learning and ensure good school attendance, are categorised as failures based on the NAPLAN results.

In addition to the language issues raised by Freeman, the cultural bias of the NAPLAN tests provide a further barrier to Indigenous students achieving successful NAPLAN test results. Any test's content is culturally laden and NAPLAN is no exception, with a bias towards non-indigenous urban dwelling students (Dooley et al., 2013; Freeman, 2013; Harris et al., 2013). For Indigenous students living in remote communities, this means content and concepts are not

always accessible or relevant to them; for example, such as questions focussing on newsagency shops or cinemas that are not present in remote communities. The cultural bias in NAPLAN has been described by Hipwell and Klenowsk (cited in Harris et al., 2013, p 36) as the 'silent assessors'. They use the term 'silent assessors' to reveal the way that the literacy demands of the assessment itself and the identity work that is implicit within the assessment, are value laden but unacknowledged.

Not only does the cultural bias of the tests result in Indigenous student failure in NAPLAN, Wigglesworth et al (cited in Harris et al., 2013, p36) assert that "For many Indigenous students living in linguistically complex communities, NAPLAN actually masks their linguistic, cultural and literate competencies". From this standpoint, NAPLAN is actually detrimental to the education of Indigenous students in remote communities, because it not only brands them as failures, but does not recognise the strengths they bring into the school based on their multi linguistic literacy abilities.

Few would question the rights of parents to be informed of their children's educational progress as part of the school's accountability, but the use of NAPLAN school results on the *My School* website can have unintended consequences. Many educators and academics for example, argue that the way that the NAPLAN test results appear on the *My School* website gives a very narrow picture of the school, with no information about the quality of the school in relation to important aspects of education such as social and cultural outcomes (Harris et al., 2013; Hickey, 2013; Reid, 2010; Snartt, 2012). Although the *My School* website has tried to avoid the dangers of simple league tables by listing schools in groups of 60 'like schools', simple league tables do appear in newspapers and social media. This is unfortunate because "many school communities are being publicly labelled and stigmatised through comparisons with other schools made on the basis of such limited information" (Reid, 2010, p 12).

It is now six years since NAPLAN was first introduced into Australian schools by the Commonwealth Government as a way to give a snapshot picture of students' literacy and numeracy skills and to give government education authorities, schools, teachers and parents information about the literacy and numeracy levels of students. During this period, it has been highly controversial, and this essay has discussed some of the issues related to its use, including the lack of clarity about the objectives of NAPLAN; the impact of NAPLAN on teaching practices; the problems related to using NAPLAN as a formative assessment tool for teachers and schools; the cultural bias of the tests themselves; how NAPLAN does not acknowledge the strengths of Indigenous students; and the way that the data is used to produce league tables. In conclusion, the issues discussed in this essay have been raised by academics and the popular press since the inception of NAPLAN. In 2013, the Commonwealth Government of Australia mandated the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to review the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. It will be interesting to read the results of this committee's findings, and see which, if any, of these issues raised in this essay are addressed when Committee releases its final report.

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