Teaching Academic Essay Structure: As Easy as 1-2-3

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Introduction

Learning how to write a well-organized academic essay is a foundational skill that EAP students need to acquire. However, this can be challenging if essay structure differs from the styles of writing students are accustomed to in their own culture and language or if they simply do not have much prior experience with writing for an academic audience. This tip describes a fun, student-centered, collaborative, and constructivist activity in which students discover the basic structure of an academic essay with minimal teacher input. The three phases—building, analyzing, and color coding a paper—make academic essay structure easy to teach and to learn, as easy as 1-2-3.

Preparation

Students should have at least a low-intermediate proficiency level, be familiar with expository paragraph structure, and have prior experience working in groups. The activity will take about 60-90 minutes and is designed for groups of three or four.

Preparing the Model Text

1. Choose, adapt, or create a suitable example essay. A four-paragraph essay with very clear structure—introduction, two body paragraphs, and conclusion—is recommended. The introduction should have background information on the topic and a thesis statement that outlines the structure of the essay. Body paragraphs should have topic sentences, supporting ideas, details or examples, and concluding sentences. The concluding paragraph should restate the thesis statement as well as leave the reader with an interesting final impression. The essay should be at the students' independent reading level so that readability does not interfere with text analysis.

2. Reprint the essay breaking it into these components (see Appendix).
   - Introduction: background info and thesis statement

- Body paragraphs: a topic sentence, supporting idea 1 with details or example, supporting idea 2 with details or example, and a concluding sentence
- Conclusion: a restatement of thesis statement and information that leaves the reader with an interesting final impression.

Use a font size that 3-4 students can examine together. It is important not to photocopy and cut a printed essay into pieces because students will be able to put it together without reading it carefully.

3. Print enough copies for groups of three or four.

4. Cut each copy of the essay into strips, mix up the strips, and put them into an envelope. Ensure that each group will have all the pieces needed to reconstruct the essay.

Procedure

Assemble the Materials

Each student will need a copy of the intact model essay, and each group will need

- An envelope with the model essay cut into its component parts
- A sheet of A1 size paper
- Glue or a glue stick.
- Highlighters (or pens) in six different colors. Each group should have the same colors.

Phase 1: Building the Essay

1. Divide students into groups of three or four and explain that they will discover the structure of an academic English essay by putting together a puzzle.

2. Give each group an envelope containing the cut-up essay.

3. Explain that they should reassemble the essay on their table. When they think they are finished, they should notify you to come check their work.

4. If a group finishes with the correct arrangement, give them a sheet of paper and glue and tell them to rebuild the essay on paper, leaving space between each paragraph. If desired, they can then help other groups.

5. If a group finishes with an error, point out the piece that is out of order, but avoid telling them how to repair it. Typically, groups can correct their errors themselves.

6. If desired, insert an element of competition by saying that the first group to finish correctly will have their work used as the answer key for the others.

Phase 2: Analyzing Essay Structure

Once the essay has been reconstructed, ask the questions in the table below. Typical student discoveries and responses are on the right.

	Questions	Typically, students are able to see that…
1	Were you able to discover the essay structure? If so, how did you do it?	Transition words and phrases in the topic sentences and throughout the essay make it possible to build the essay.
2	Which part of the essay shows what the entire essay is about?	The thesis statement is key. It identifies the topic and previews the structure of the essay.
3	How do the body paragraphs connect to the thesis statement?	They give more information to support the thesis with facts, examples, and stories.
4	How are the introduction and conclusion similar and different?	• The introduction has background information. • The thesis idea is mentioned in both, but usually in different words. • The conclusion includes a short summary of the essay and leaves the reader something to think about.

Phase 3: Color Coding the Essay

Give a set of highlighters to each group and a copy of the intact essay to each student.

1. Facilitate a classroom discussion to review the essay components, emphasizing the terms used to describe them (thesis statement, topic sentences, body paragraph, etc.), and their respective purposes.

2. Ask students to highlight each part of the essay. If you have a computer and projector available, you can work alongside the students using the highlighter tool in Microsoft Word. Alternatively, you can invite one group to tape their paper to the board and do their highlighting where everyone can see. Instructions can be given orally or in writing.

Introduction
• Highlight the background information in purple.
• Highlight the thesis statement in yellow.

- Body Paragraphs
- Highlight topic sentences in blue.
- Highlight supporting ideas in green.
- Highlight details and examples in red.
- Highlight concluding sentences in brown.

Conclusion

- Highlight a restatement of the thesis in yellow.
- Highlight information that leaves the reader with an interesting final impression in brown.

Extensions and Benefits

Once students have completed the "Easy as 1-2-3" routine, there are numerous ways to extend it in future lessons.

- Give students another model essay to highlight as homework. Ask them to use the same coding pattern as practiced in class. During the next class, students can compare their work and discuss any differences. For example, it may be possible to arrange body paragraphs in more than one way.
- Ask students to write their own essay, color-coding it (with the same color scheme) as a check on its organization. Remind them that no sentence should be left uncolored. Examining their own writing in this way pushes students to reflect on the purpose of each sentence, including its function and position in the paper.
- Give students (or groups) a cut-up essay that is not well structured, ask them to build, analyze, and color it so see if they can identify and repair the weaknesses in the organization.
- Use the same process to examine the structure of other text types encountered in academic reading or writing lessons.

The reflective practice of examining each sentence in an essay to see how to color code it has benefits for both students and instructors. First, in order to complete the three steps, they must understand, in an active way, the key components of an essay and how they are interrelated. Second, following this lesson, students are often able to notice and correct organizational weaknesses in their own essays, for example, a missing topic sentence. Third, by examining each sentence of their essay as they attempt to color-code it, students can often find sentences that are off-topic or unnecessary. If they find that a sentence does not fit their color scheme,

they know that it either needs to be deleted or rewritten so that its meaning and purpose are clearer. Last, but certainly not least, this process helps students begin to notice organizational structure in academic texts that they are reading.

Asking students to color code their papers is also beneficial to the instructor. First, the color helps the teacher comprehend the student's organization, thereby making the essay easier to read and quicker to respond to. As any teacher of writing knows, after an extended period of marking, black text on white paper starts to become blurry. Color-coded essays may reduce the physical and mental fatigue experienced by teachers as they mark multiple essays in one sitting. If teachers provide feedback on a colored draft and then require students to revise it based on feedback given, it is easy for teachers to see how students have, or have not, modified their papers.

Conclusion

By working together to construct, examine, and annotate an essay, students notice details about the parts and their interconnectedness in a way that listening to a lecture or reading a textbook does not always ensure. Of course, not all papers that students read or write in their academic courses will be as tightly organized as the models presented in EAP courses. However, this strategy will help students both unpack their academic reading assignments and compose well-organized papers in their higher education courses.

About the Author

Austin Pack, a Ph.D. student of the University of Liverpool, has taught English, Greek, and linguistics courses in China and America. Austin currently manages the Virtual Reality Language Learning Lab at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. His research interests include the psychology of the language learner, complex dynamic systems, computer assisted language learning, and language pedagogy.

Appendix

Sample Essay Strips and Color Coding

This is an extract of a text used by the author as a model essay. It consists of the introduction, first body paragraph, and the topic sentence of a second body paragraph. The essay describes factors that influence personal identity. It shows how the essay has been formatted for cutting apart as well as how it would be color coded after students have reconstructed it.

Developing an understanding of oneself is an essential part of every individual becoming a mature person. Each person's identity is a unique combination of many aspects, which can be as broad as woman or man, and American or Japanese. However, this can also be as narrow as being a member of one particular family or of a specific political party. (PURPLE)

Three important factors that often help shape a person's identity are nationality, education and family. (ORANGE)

First of all, one of the most significant factors influencing the formation of a person's identity is their nationality and country's culture. (BLUE)

Depending on where a person is born, an individual can have a very different upbringing, which may lead to different values and beliefs. (GREEN)

For instance, two cultures may have significant differences in issues involving social interaction. Americans, as an example, tend to emphasize individualism and informality when interacting with other people. The Japanese, on the other hand, often focus more on the importance of the group, such as the community or society, and interactions between people can be more formal and polite than in American culture. As a consequence of the cultural differences, individuals from these countries may develop very distinct self-identities. (RED)

Although it is hard to define "American-ness" or what it means to be Japanese, it cannot be denied that a person's identity will be influenced by the culture in which they grow up. (BROWN)

Another factor which has a significant impact on a person's individual identity is education. (BLUE)

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