

Basics

When you write, it is important to make it clear what the main points are. The opening paragraph often contains the main points, claims or statements the writer wants to make, or their central thesis. The other paragraphs then support the main points.

We do the same thing at paragraph level. The writer makes a point, claim or statement in the form of a topic sentence – usually (though not always) in the first sentence of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph then supports the main statement.

Supporting sentences might be in the form of examples; or they might be reasons, explanations or justifications. Depending on the reason for writing and the length of the paragraph, they could also include further points or suggestions, as well as the expected results of carrying out these suggestions.

The academic context

Writing is a common way of proving what you know. In order to impress tutors and examiners, your writing needs to be organized. This means that, once you have chosen your main points, you need to support them with examples and/or reasons. In academic writing, it's not enough to make your points – you have to back them up with appropriate material.

Key features

Once you have chosen suitable main points, you need to:

- Choose an overall structure for your main points. This should be based on the task – for example, do you need to write 250 words or 5,000 words? See **Plan and draft writing (1)** and **(2)** for help with this.
- Decide whether to support each point with an example, a reason, or both.
- Choose suitable supporting examples/reasons.
- Add any other relevant supporting information (such as a suggestion or expected result).

Challenges / difficulties

It can be difficult to choose the best way to support your points. You need to select good examples or give good explanations. Sometimes one of these is enough for each point, but you might need to write more to make your writing easy to understand. There is a danger, however, that in writing more, you make your writing confusing or irrelevant, so you have to find the right balance.


How can I develop this skill?

Planning is very important (see **Plan and draft writing (1)** and **(2)** for more information). It helps you choose the most relevant points and supporting sentences. Before you write, make a basic paragraph plan. Note down the main points and supporting examples/reasons you plan to use. This will mean you don't leave anything out or go off topic. Planning can also save you time if, for example, you realize that you can't think of good supporting sentences for some of your points. This might indicate you need to rethink these points or leave them out.

Learning outcome

By choosing your supporting sentences carefully, you will make the best possible impression on the reader. Your academic writing will stay on topic, and your argument will be easy to follow.

Theory to practice

- 1**  The pie charts show the results of a survey about the concerns/worries of people in two different age groups. In pairs or small groups, discuss the general differences between the two age groups and their concerns.

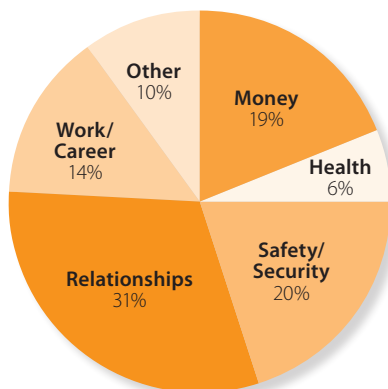


Figure 1: Biggest concern among under-25s

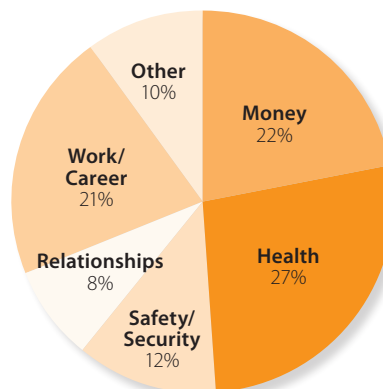


Figure 2: Biggest concern among over-55s

- 2** Look at some quotes given by respondents in the survey. Then look at a plan for two paragraphs in an essay based on the information in the pie charts. Complete the supporting sentences in the second paragraph.

When you're young, you think you're going to live forever, don't you?

Ian, aged 19

There's plenty of time to worry about your health when you're older.

Bella, aged 22

It's an issue for some of us, maybe, but relationships and that sort of thing trouble you more when you're young, don't they?

Donal, aged 56

Relationships matter – of course they do – but at my age, you're either in one or out of one, and have probably learnt to like things as they are.

Sandra, aged 60

I think relationships are important, but when you are old, other things take priority!

Morgan, aged 70

Paragraph 1	
Topic sentence	One of the biggest differences in levels of concern between under-25s and over-55s was on the subject of health.
Explain with statistics	This was cited as the biggest concern by 27% of the over-55 age group. In contrast, only 6% of under-25s felt it was their biggest concern.
Example(s)	At least two respondents from the younger age group expressed the belief that health worries were the province of older people. In other words, such concerns did not apply to them.

Paragraph 2	
Topic sentence	Another major difference between the two age groups was in the area of relationships.
Explain with statistics	
Example(s)	

Ways to get more practice

Get into the habit of thinking of supporting sentences as you think of your main points. Each time you do a piece of academic writing, try using a template essay plan, such as the one on the Worksheet, to record your thoughts. If you use word-processing software, you don't need to worry about the order of your thoughts – just group main points, reasons and examples together, and organize your material afterwards.