



# ESSAY WRITING

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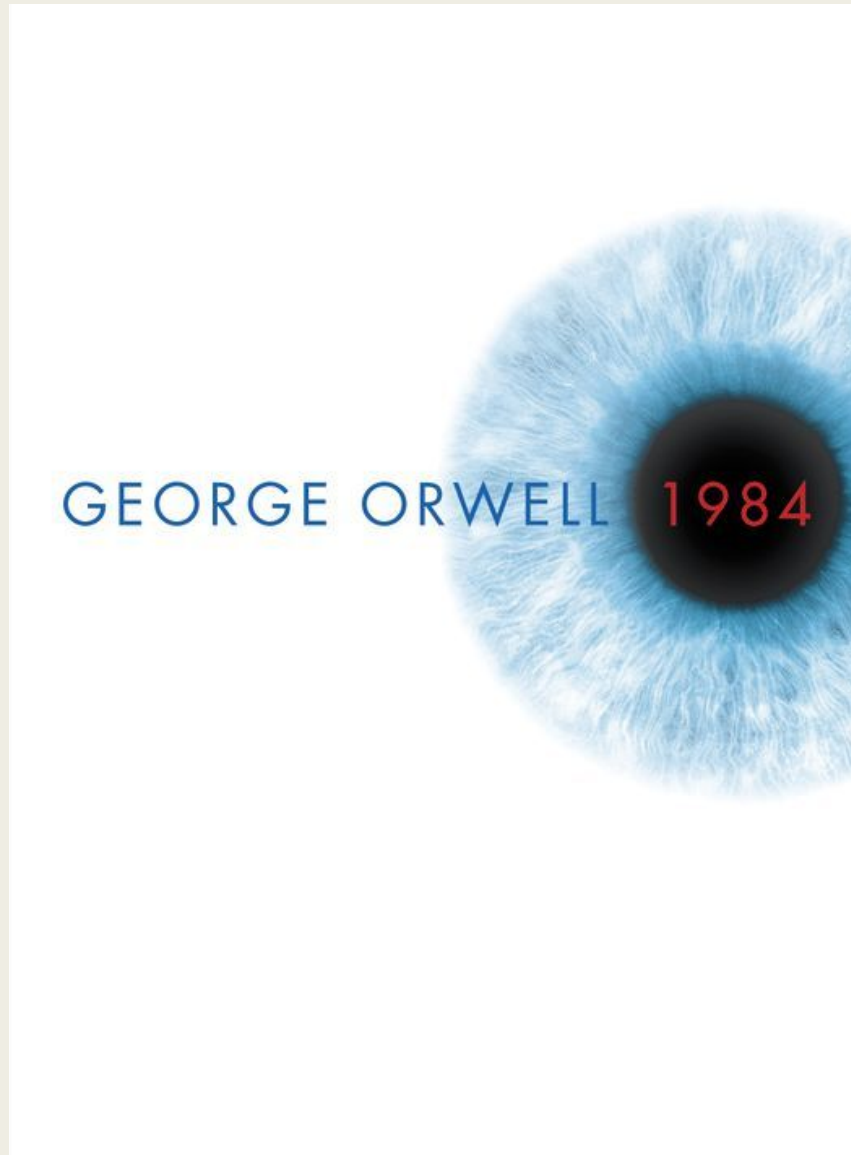
When we teach children to write, they also learn to think.

Bruner, 1973  
Applebee, 1984



When we teach **students** to write **critically**,  
they also learn think **critically**.

Berthoff, 1981  
Ellis, 1994  
Gleichsner, 1994



# Newspeak

A fictional language where the number of words and synonyms is drastically reduced, and the intensity and emotion behind the words is suppressed, allowing *The Party* to limit the population's perception of the world.

Supported by research in linguistics and psychology, e.g., Bruffee (1986)

## Thought

Express

Conceive

Retain

## Writing

Precise

Concise

Critical

## Outcome

Understand

Learn

Evaluate



# Session Overview

(What to do)

- Before Beginning
- Essay Structure
- Writing Style
- Term-Time v. Exam Essays
- Practice and Checking
- Exam Essay Example

# Handout Overview

(How to do it)

- Essay Terms Explained
- Essay Structure Diagram
- Examples
- Advice on Forming Arguments
- Writing Style Tips

## Common criticisms:

- Not enough critical writing
- Too descriptive
- Poor structure
- Doesn't answer the question
- Includes unnecessary info

## Goals of an essay:

1. Demonstrate **critical thinking and writing**  
(≠ regurgitation; > description/summary)
2. Make it easy for the reader to navigate  
through the points towards the conclusion
3. Answer the question!

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## Goals of an essay:

1. Demonstrate critical thinking and writing  
(≠ regurgitation; > description/summary)
2. Make it easy for the reader to navigate  
through the points towards the conclusion
3. To **answer the question!**

## Question:

**Examine** the usability and security of passwords.

- Establish key facts relevant to password usability and security
- Justify why these facts are important, in context
- Give a verdict about password usability and security based on evidence you provide

## **Question:**

Examine the usability and security of passwords.

## **Argument:**

It is the proliferation of passwords across multiple devices and services, rather than the nature of passwords themselves, that makes them unusable, which threatens the security they offer.

# Before Beginning

## Section 3 of handout

- Make sure you **UNDERSTAND** the question
- Formulate your **ARGUMENT** to decide on essay structure
- Create a **PLAN** and **OUTLINE** your essay

*“To what extent”*

*“Compare”*

*“Explain”*

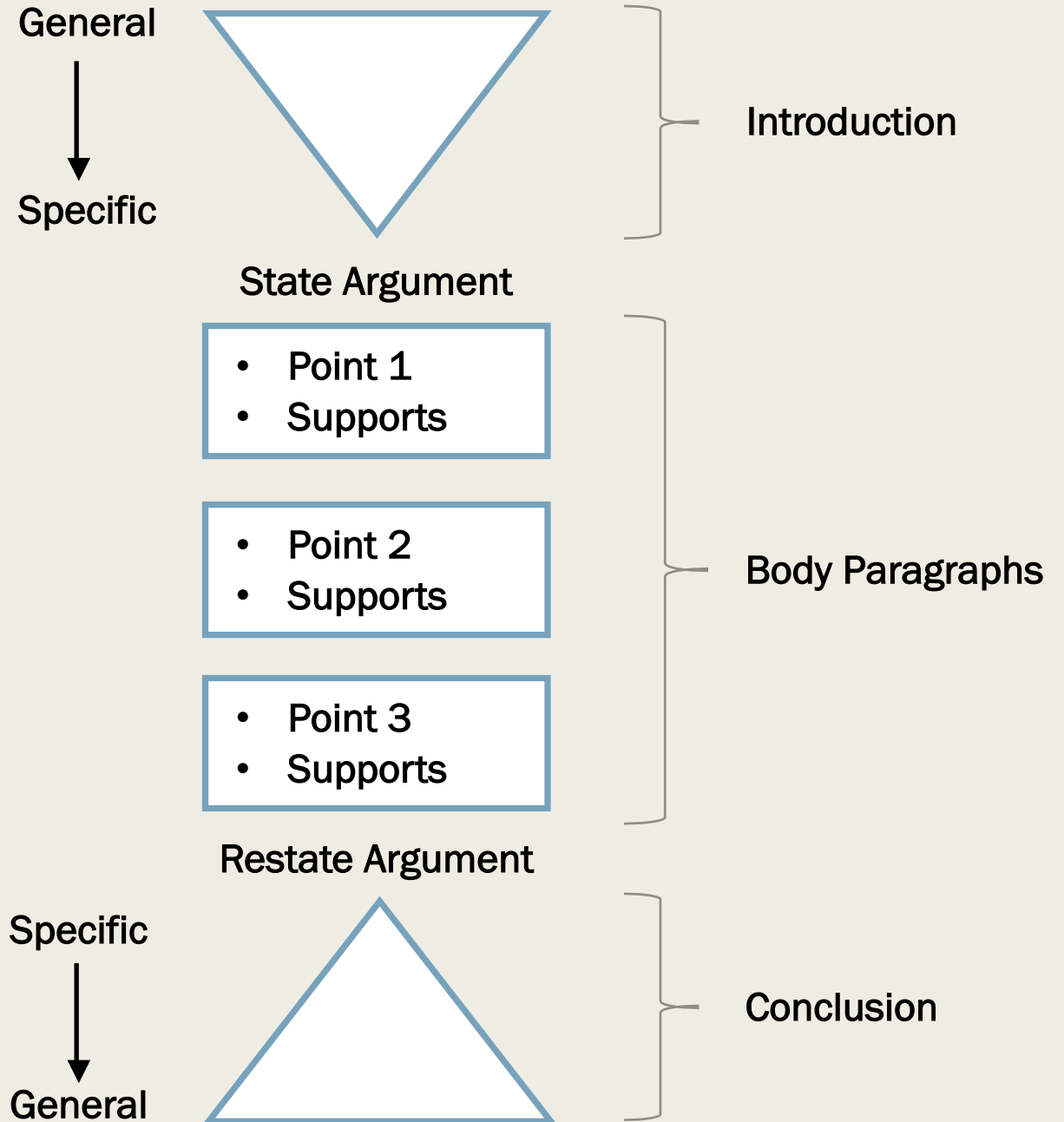
*“Analyse”*

*“Critically evaluate”*

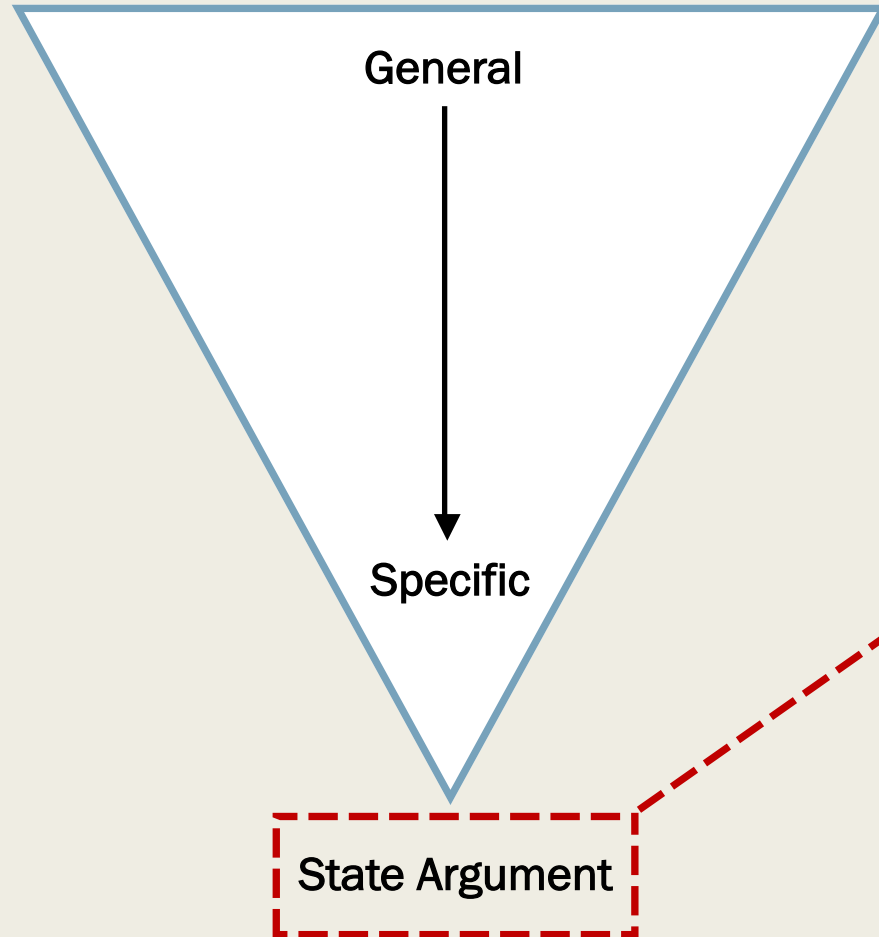
# Structure

Section 3 of handout

- Research, organise notes, and plan an outline *before* you start
- Structure your essay points around your *main argument*
- What *questions* might the reader have about your argument?



# Structure: Introduction



Aim = Introduce your central argument

## Approaches:

- Tell the reader what your argument will be
- Turn your argument into a **hypothesis**
- Indicate the **direction** of argument
- Frame your argument as a **question**
- State the **objective** of the essay
- State the **focus/what** the essay will cover

# Structure: Introduction

Section 3.1. of handout

## Some starting points:

- Re-write/**explain** how you interpret the question/show your understanding of the task set
- Challenge or (re-)**define the issue**/topic
- Engage with **definitions** of terms
- Establish the historical/social/economic/political **context**
- Summarise/**describe** the starting/common position, relevant theory, or other perspectives
- Indicate **how** you will answer the question in your structure
- Give a **summary** of the main issues/themes
- Tell the reader **why** the question is important/interesting/relevant (**so what?**)
- State **argument**: topic + purpose

# Caution!

## An introduction should:

- Avoid information that is *too general* (“*Security is important*”)
- Avoid too *much* general information (quantity)
- Get to the point quickly
- Provide a mini outline

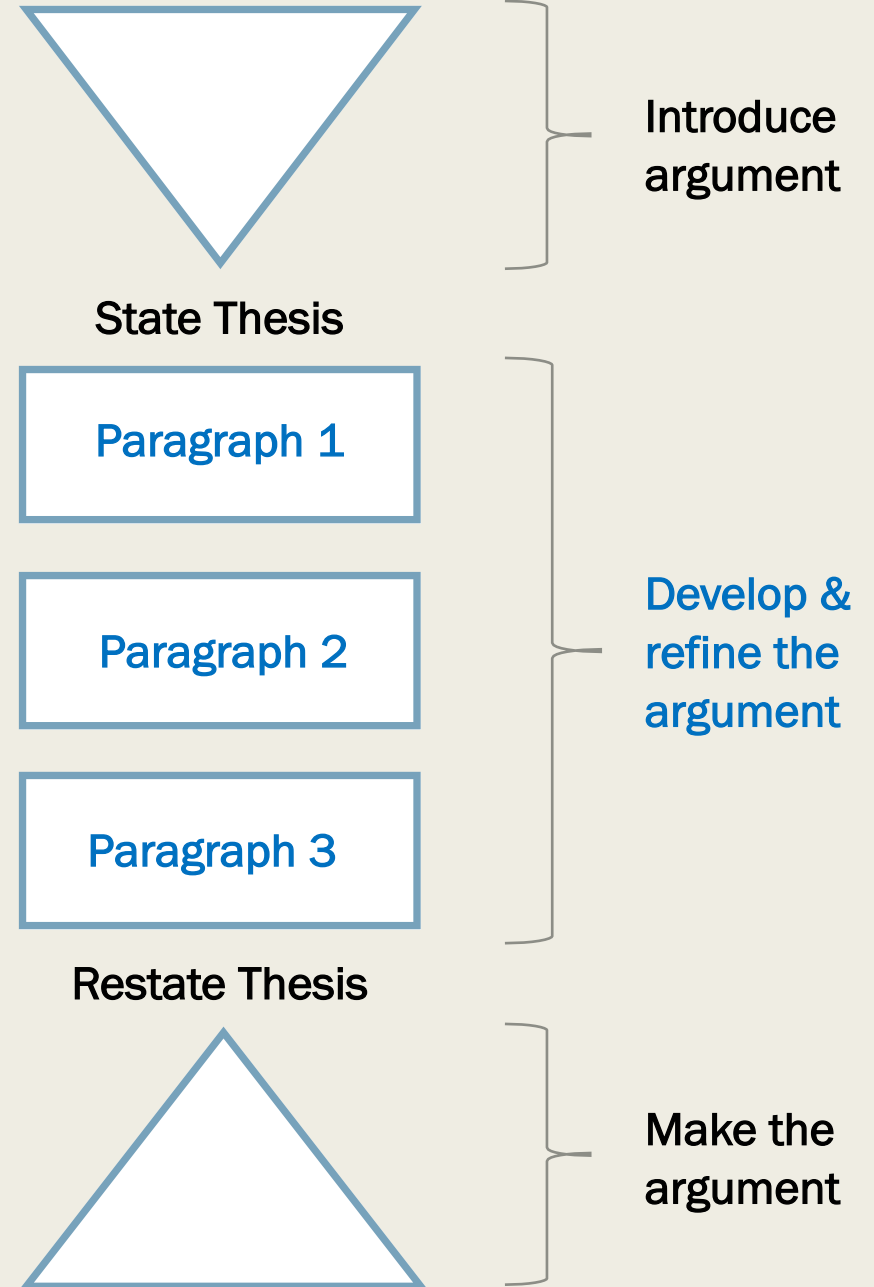


# Structure: Body

Section 3.2. of handout

Each **main idea/point** in the **body** of the essay is a separate section (paragraph), for example:

- **Paragraph 1:** Security demands are not ideal for usability, but manageable in themselves
- **Paragraph 2:** Security demands + proliferation of services means users can't remember them
- **Paragraph 3:** Users develop "hacks", which reduce the level of security passwords offer



# Structure: Body

Section 3.2. of handout

- An essay is not a record of everything you know
- An essay is not a list (like this is)
- An essay requires selectivity
- Descriptions and facts don't speak for themselves
- Organisation is key!

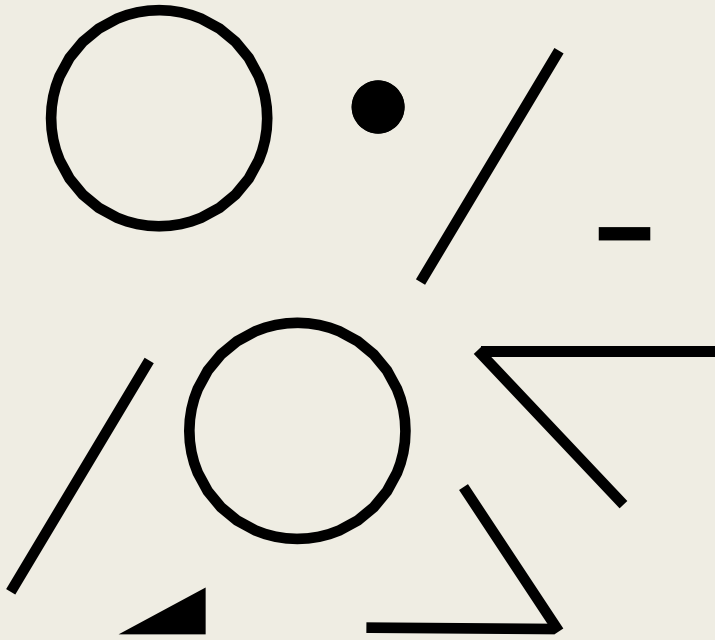
A large, light gray opening quotation mark consisting of two curved shapes.

*The whole is  
greater than the  
sum of its parts*

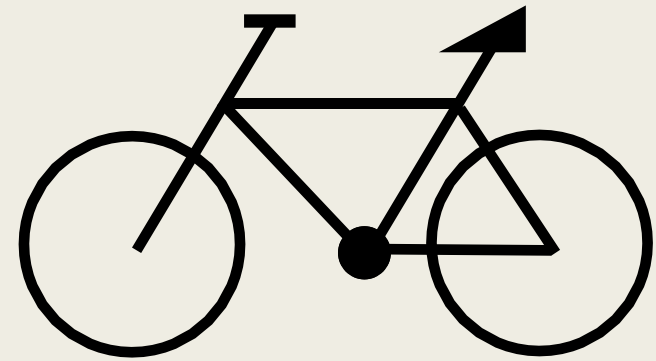
A large, light gray closing quotation mark consisting of two curved shapes.

Kurt Koffka, Gestalt Psychologist

## Sum of Parts



## The Whole



**Gestalt** [gə'ʃalt] "shape, form"

# A strong essay is one that develops an argument

## *Between paragraphs:*

- Consider how the **order** of paragraphs helps you progress your argument
- State the **progress** of your argument
- Pay attention to **transitions** between paragraphs

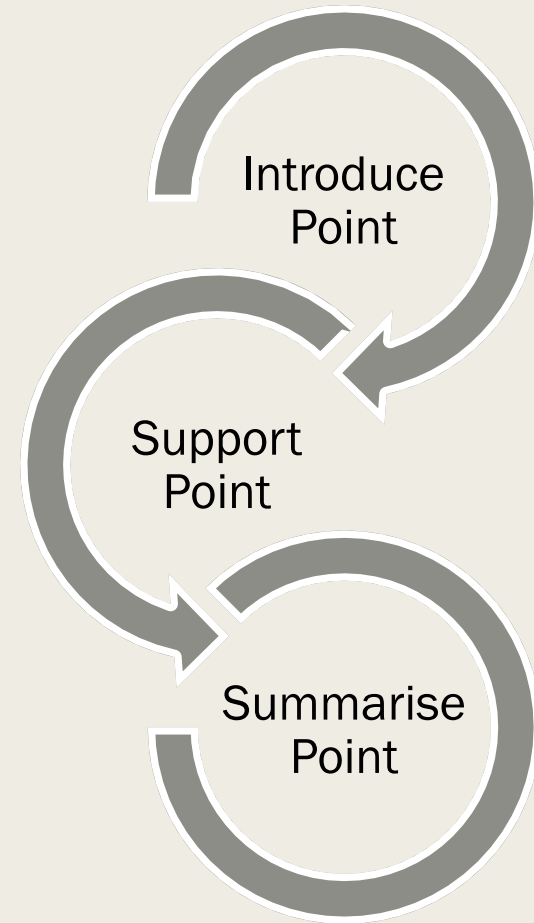
**Example:** “[...] Passwords are only as secure as the mechanisms users rely on to **generate and store** them.

When it comes to **generating and storing** passwords, users are told to pick a password that is new and unguessable, and then not to write it down [...]”

# A strong essay is one that develops an argument

## *Within paragraphs:*

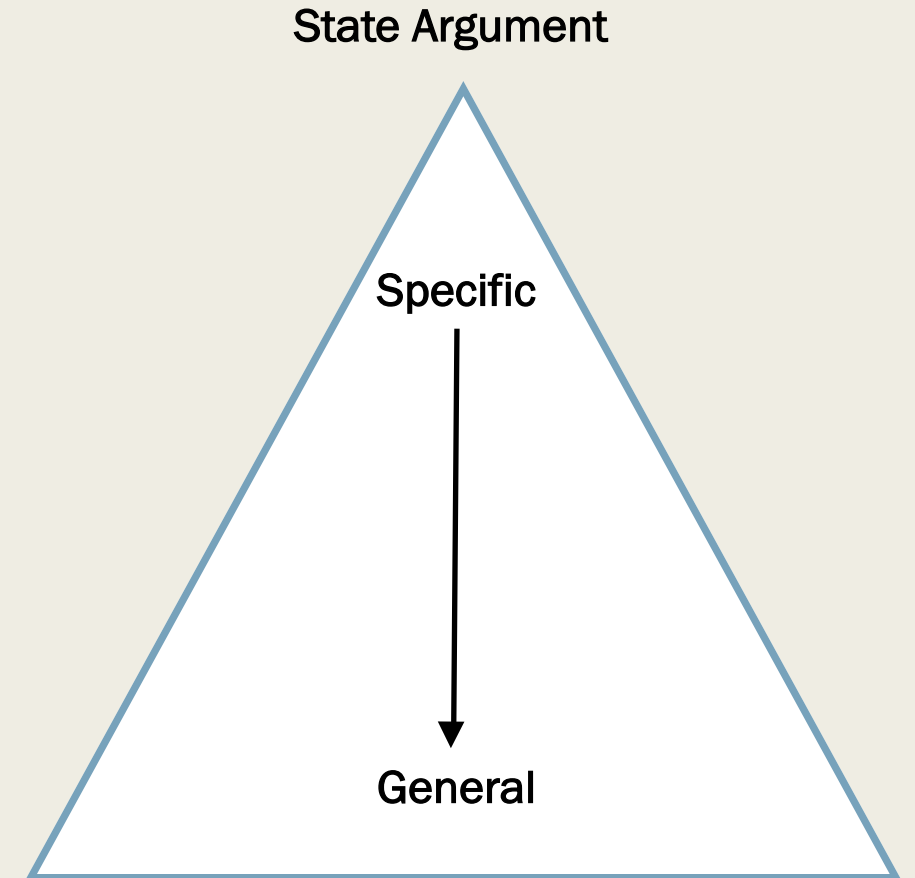
- Use clear **signposting** with a topic sentence (key idea/point)
- Don't just state your point, *demonstrate* it with **examples/evidence**
- Explain how this contributes to your argument in a **comment** at the end



# Structure: Conclusion

## Section 3.3. of handout

- Answer the question by restating the **argument** in a single statement.
- Support this statement by **synthesising** and **evaluating** the content of your essay.
- Bring to a **close**: what's the significance of the argument, in context?



# Caution!

A conclusion is **not**:

- A hit-and-run
- Just a summary
- A place to introduce new evidence or information
- A copy of the introduction
- A place to voice sentimental or emotional appeals

~~*“In summary, ...”*~~

~~*“And another thing!”*~~

~~*“We must...!”*~~

~~*“That’s all folks!”*~~

~~*“I think ...”*~~



# What an essay conclusion **is**:

- A place for **analysis** (rather than description)
- Based on **reasoning/evidence presented** in the main body of the essay
- Where you present your **final answer** to the essay question
- Where you **round it up**, for example:
  - Create a sense of closure; link last point back to first point
  - Put into larger context
  - Consider the implications
  - Identify gaps/future directions
  - Redefine a key term/assumption in essay question

# Writing Style: Academic Voice

Tip	Example
Be confident (but not arrogant!)	“This essay <u>aims to</u> show that <b>a</b> has an impact on <b>b</b> ” → “This essay shows that <b>a</b> has an impact on <b>b</b> ” → Or even just: “ <b>a</b> has an impact on <b>b</b> ”
Be critical (but not judgemental or dismissive)	Ask ‘how’, ‘why’, ‘what if’, and ‘so what’ (objectively)
Avoid colloquial (informal) language	Contractions, phrases/expressions, aphorisms, clichés, everyday abbreviations, regional language, certain words ( <b>section 5.1. of handout</b> ), etc.
Spell out the acronym the first time it is used	“The practical is to program a Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) card on the user’s phone”

# Writing in 1<sup>st</sup> Person

Section 5.3. of handout

Avoid writing in first person in essays

**But!**

- Depends on the reader
- Common in papers and articles
- Common in computer science
- Know your audience
- Does it make your sentence easier to read?

~~“You will see...”~~

~~“I will show...”~~

~~“S/he claimed...”~~

~~“We found...”~~

~~“They demonstrate...”~~

# Writing Style: Grammar

Tip	Example
Avoid contractions	don't → do not (see Reference R2.5. of handout)
Use commas, colons, and semicolons appropriately	<b>Section 5.5. in handout</b>
Use tense consistently	“The authors <b>provided</b> a protocol and <b>offer</b> an alternative ...” → “The authors <b>provide</b> a protocol and <b>offer</b> an alternative ...” (see Reference R4. of handout)
Prune your adverbs, especially intensifiers	“very”, “quite”, “actually”, “really”, “only”, “relatively”, “probably”, etc. (see Reference R2.4. of handout)

““

*The road to hell is  
paved with adverbs*

Stephen King

””

# Writing Style: Word Choice

Tip	Example
Use specific words	“Reliability is <i>something</i> in experimental science that ...” → “Reliability is a <i>concept</i> in experimental science that... (see Reference R2.2. of handout)
Avoid filler words	“Even”, “basically”, “just”, “anyway”, “obviously”, etc. (see Reference R2.3. of handout)
Know the difference between commonly confused words	Their: belonging to (“It was <i>their</i> computer”) There: a place or situation (“The computer is over <i>there</i> ”) They’re: they are (“ <i>They’re</i> at the computer lab”) (see Reference R2.6. of handout)
Avoid incorrect use of common words/phrases	“Literally”, “could/would/should of”, “use to”, “like”, “alright”, “alot” etc. (see Reference R2.7. of handout)

WHEN I SAW  
HOW MUCH IT  
COST, MY HEAD  
LITERALLY  
EXPLODED!

YOU SEEM TO  
HAVE HEALED  
SURPRISINGLY  
WELL.



# Writing Style: Simplify

Be precise, concise, and clear!

Tip	Example
Shorten words	Utilise → Use
Avoid redundancy	“ <del>In order</del> to demonstrate ...” (see Reference R2.3. of handout)
Shorten and split sentences	Replace “and” with full stop or semicolon (Section 5.4.1. of handout)
(Re-)consider the syntax (subject/doer, verb, object/receiver)	“Who/what is <i>doing</i> the <i>action</i> to <i>whom</i> ?” (Section 5.4.2. of handout)
Use the active voice (mostly)	Section 5.4.3. of handout





The active voice is easier to read and to remember than the passive voice

Coleman, 1964; 1965; 1968  
Spyridakis & Isakson, 1998

# Writing Style: Citations and Referencing

- Cite information sources, even when paraphrasing
- Avoid plagiarism
- Keep your ideas separate from information and thoughts in cited literature
- Reference your sources (in ACM or IEEE style)
- Avoid too many direct quotes

““

*If you can't explain it simply,  
you don't understand it well  
enough*

Albert Einstein

””

# Practice and Checking

Essays provide practice:

- For exams
- For your handwriting

Re-read (and expect to make revisions):

- Remove unnecessary words/sentences
- Ensure logical flow
- Make sure sentences are coherent
- Identify errors

*“Writing is rewriting.  
Someone said easy  
writing makes for  
hard reading.”*

Cormac McCarthy



Regardless of ability, a student's handwriting legibility and speed is a major factor in determining their achievement.

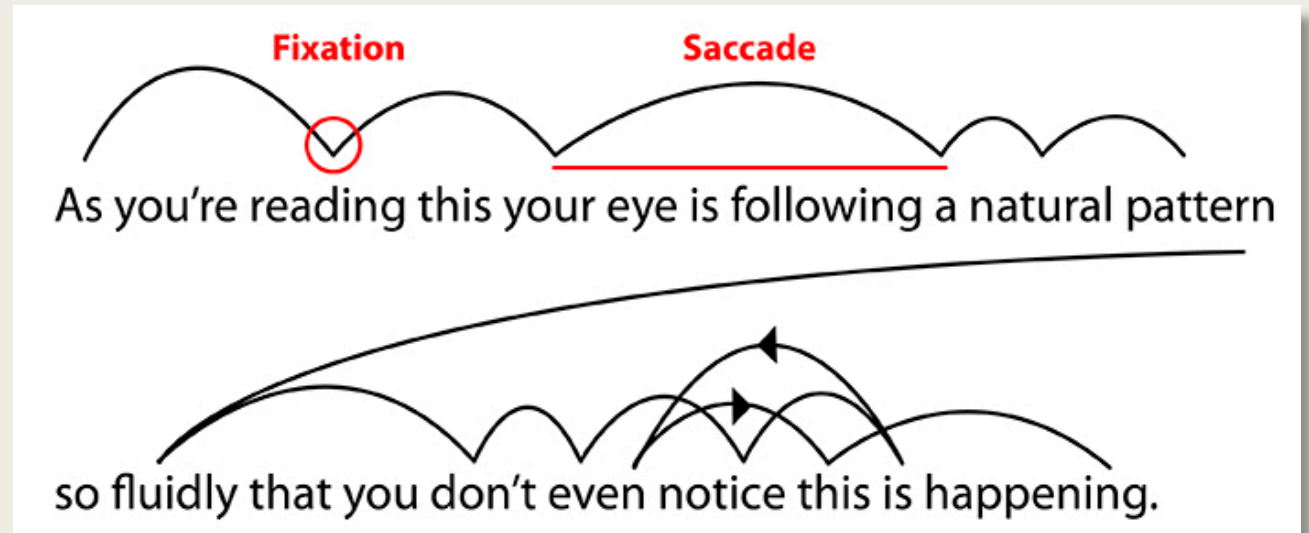
Alston and Taylor, 1987  
Jones and Christenson, 1999  
Graham, Harris, and Fink, 2000  
Connelly *et al.* 2005  
Spear-Swerling, 2006

# Look at every word; don't pass over them

- Word Superiority Effect (Cattell, 1886; Reicher, 1969; McClland & Johnson, 1977)
- We only accurately take in  $\approx$ 6-8 letters per fixation (pauses the eyes) (Rayner, *et al.*, 1980)
- Eyes jump back and forward to fixate on parts of sentences, not each word (Abrams & Zuber, 1972; Rayner, 1975)

→ Proof-reading to catch errors  
requires practice

*Diagram of the fixation points of a typical English-speaking reader:*



# Term-Time (Supervision) vs. Exam Essays

Similarities
Proofread
Answer the question!
Structure and plan your response
Handwriting
Signposting
Evidence and explain

Differences
Time!
Introduction depth
Conclusion length
Required summarising/outlining

# Exam Essay Example

What sort of **safety case** should the **government demand from vendors and service providers** if autonomous vehicles are to be allowed on Britain's roads? [20 marks]

1. Understand the question: **What is a safety case?**
2. Brainstorm ideas: Can you turn your safety case into **safety assurance demands**?
3. What's your argument?
4. Decide and organise: Which demands will you include in your essay answer?
5. Write your answer as a coherent story:  $\approx 3$  pages (shorter than a standard essay)



# Exam Essays: Final Tips

## Do



Make a plan



Write in full, coherent sentences



Manage time effectively



Provide references (as much as possible)

## Avoid



“Padding” your answer



The “kitchen sink” approach



Diving straight in



Lists

# Thanks!

Email: [jp662@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jp662@cam.ac.uk)