

# Thinking and Writing in Modules

Faced with the task of writing an essay or a report, most writers tend to think of the task as one large overwhelming project. Instead you should think of each writing task as consisting of a number of smaller tasks each of which can be dealt with individually. This process of breaking down a project into smaller and more manageable subtasks is called thinking in “modules,” and is an important skill for analytical thinking.

A module is a small unit of thought (or writing). In the traditional “English class” essay, the introduction and the conclusion can be thought of as modules, as well as each of the body paragraphs (usually, but not always). Initially, we can break down every writing task into the following modules:

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

Of course, this breakdown is not very helpful. Most writers know that an essay has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The important idea to note here is that we have already broken the writing task into three separate (though related) tasks.

## The Body Module

We can further break down the body of an essay into modules. In most analytical and persuasive essays the body consists of the following modules:

- Literature Review (or alternate views rejected by the author or not important to the author’s argument)
- The author’s argument

The literature review is a brief summary of the current research or general opinion on the subject of the essay. When no secondary texts are used, this module of the essay often takes the form of a “clearing of the field,” a brief consideration and subsequent rejection of alternate points of view of a subject.

## The Argument Itself

The actual argument presented by the writer usually follows a logical sequence of thought and uses specific and detailed evidence (statistics, facts, secondary sources, illustrations or case studies) to support each major point. However, the writer also needs to ensure that the reader understands the relationship between the evidence and the specific point the writer is trying to make, as well as the relationship between the specific point and the larger argument of the essay. Therefore, each use of evidence needs to be “set up” and then subsequently explained.

Here’s how this looks in outline form:

- The point you are trying to make
  - A generalized discussion of the point
    - Specific evidence (statistics, facts, secondary sources, illustrations or case studies) that supports and clarifies the generalized discussion
  - The connection between the specific evidence and the generalized discussion
- The connection between the generalized discussion and the larger argument of the essay

## Anecdotal Evidence

What we need now is a specific example. The following is a paragraph from an essay on Lao-tzu's statement that "softness triumphs over hardness." The type of evidence used is anecdotal (a brief story). The paragraphs has been reformatted to look like the list above:

- Although softness sometimes triumphs over hardness, sometimes softness is the wrong approach.
  - Sometimes when others think a person is soft, they take advantage of her. Her friends might expect her to run errands for them, or her boss might assume that she will work overtime without pay. Even family members might take advantage of her, such as her parents or spouse expecting her to clean the house or wash the dishes. If she don't complain and stand up, others will assume that she is happy doing their work.
  - A situation like this occurred just last week when my boss expected me to work overtime. I work at a dry cleaning processing plant and sometimes the amount of laundry we get in is more than we can handle. Management should hire additional staff, but they prefer to pay us to work overtime. While the money is good, sometimes I don't have the time to work overtime. One night last week I needed to get home quickly so that I could do homework for my math class. When my shift ended, I started to get my things ready to go. My manager simply pointed at the stack of work that needed to be done and then pointed at his watch. Rather than discussing the situation with him, I just nodded my head and went back to work. Of course I was paid for the overtime, but I was so tired when I got off work that I couldn't finish my math homework.
  - It's early in the quarter and I'm already behind in most of my classes. If instead of always taking the softness approach I used the hardness approach, things would be different. If I used the hardness approach, I would tell my manager that I couldn't work overtime because I needed to do my schoolwork. Once I made clear to him that school is my priority, then maybe he would stop expecting me to work overtime. Ultimately he might hire additional workers, thus taking the strain off of me.
- It's clear to me that sometimes softness is not only wrong in terms of how it affects me, but also in terms of how it enables others to avoid making hard decisions. As long as my manager can rely on me working overtime and not complaining, he doesn't have to make the hard decision about hiring more people. By being soft, I make it possible for management to take advantage not just of me but of my fellow workers too.

## Textual Evidence

The following is a paragraph from an essay on Geoffrey Canada's proposals for ending violence found in chapter 23 of *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*. Note that the textual evidence provides the generalized background to the author's own observations. The paragraphs has been reformatted to look like the list on the previous page:

- Canada states that we must reduce the amount of violence in the media, but he fails to consider just how difficult it will be to achieve this.
  - He argues that we are conditioned by violent images from a very young age, "bombarded by images of violence that seep deep into our subconscious minds" (163). As we grow, we continue to encounter violent images on television, in films, and in music and these violent images lead to violent behavior and promote the idea that problems can be solved by violence. Canada notes that the message taught to youngsters is that "when faced with relentless injustice you must act more violently than your opponent" (163-164).
  - To this problem, Canada responds, "The television, movie, and record industries must all reduce the amount of violence they sell to Americans" (164). But the fact that these companies are selling something is the problem with Canada's proposal. With so much money at stake (billions of dollars, in fact), it is unlikely that any company will stop selling violence. Some might argue that if the media resists policing itself the government should step in to regulate the media. While Americans might be fed up with the media and while they might even be fed up with media violence, few people in this country would want to see the media regulated by the government. Such regulations would endanger constitutional guarantees of free speech and a free press. The truth is that Americans enjoy their violence, and as Canada accurately states we are willing to pay to see a lot of "action."
  - The problem of violence is like the problem of drugs that Canada discusses in a different proposal. We have focused too much on controlling supply. We should instead focus on reducing demand. We need alternatives to the images of violence, revenge, and competition. Instead of threatening the media with punishment, we should be providing them with incentives to change.
- While we probably cannot stop the media from selling violence, perhaps we can encourage the media to find products other than violence to sell.