

CRITICAL THINKING 3: Academic Writing

Use this sheet to help you:

- understand how argument structure can be used in written assignments
- develop a step-by-step approach to understanding an assignment question

5 minute self test

Think about the following questions before reading this Helpsheet:

- Are arguments important in academic writing?
- Why is it important to have an argument in your essay?
- Do you only need critical thinking in the body of your essay?
- Do you always need references when making an argument?

Please read Critical Thinking 1 and 2 before reading this Helpsheet.

A natural question lecturers and tutors ask when reading students' work is: 'So What?'. 'What does critical thinking have to do with being a student?' At university you are assessed on how well you present and criticise arguments in your assignments. Critical thinking is thus very important.

The following essay topic from a class in International Business requires a degree of critical thinking:

Michael Porter's schema of industry analysis is a powerful tool for managers to think strategically about the relationships their firm has with their external environment.

Is the industry in which a firm for whom you have worked (you can disguise its identity if there are issues of commercial confidentiality or you can choose another company if you feel that your employment experience does not help you with this question) "attractive" or "unattractive"? In **making your argument** you must address each of the "five forces" identified by Michael Porter. The second part of the question is to **make an argument** about whether the current state of industry "attractiveness" will stay as it is or whether it will change over the next 3-5 years. Take care to explain why you expect this outcome.

The essay topic asks you to "make an argument" in two places. Indeed, if you study the task carefully you will see it asks you to do four things:

1. **Describe** Porter's industry analysis schema
2. **Outline** whether your industry is "attractive" or "unattractive"
3. **Discuss** whether your industry's level of attractiveness will change or stay the same
4. **Explain** why you expect this.

In addition, you are requested to "make an argument" about parts 1-3. The words in bold are **direction words** telling you what to do (they are sometimes made explicit in assignment topics). See **CELT Helpsheet: Task Words**

This simple argument form can be used to frame your argument:

P1: If Porter's industry analysis is to adequately explain the attractiveness of an industry it needs to be X.
P2: Thailand's manufacturing industry is not X or does not indicate X [evidence needed]
C: Therefore, Porter's industry analysis does not adequately explain the attractiveness of the Thai manufacturing industry [evidence/support needed].

This format is very clear but it is not very suitable for a written assignment which needs to be in flowing English prose. However, you can use the basic argument "form" and "dress" it in language like that given below (underlined phrases are connecting phrases to assist in linking the parts of the argument).

The argument below is not complete and would need to be supplemented by providing some discipline-specific points:

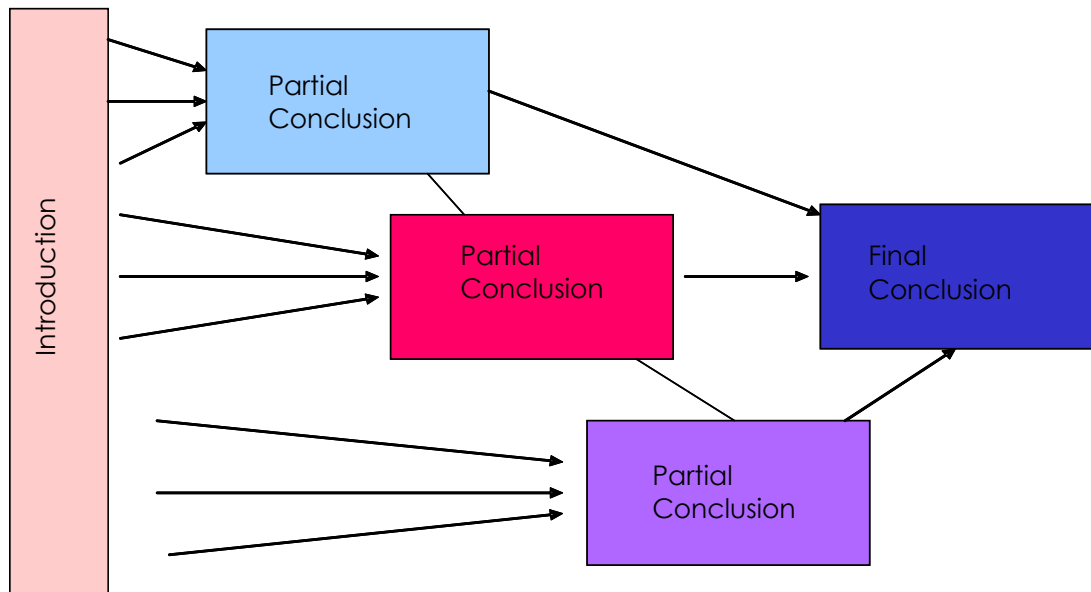
In this essay it will be argued that while Porter's five forces, especially the third, are important for most industries, they are **not crucial** in explaining the attractiveness of the manufacturing industry in Thailand. For Porter's forces to be crucial in explaining attractiveness, they need to be However in the case of the manufacturing industry, **this is not the case due to the following three factors:** (1).... (2).... (3)..... Therefore **it will be claimed** that Porter's forces are of only **limited relevance** to the manufacturing industry in Thailand.

Content is left out here but, of course, it would need to be included in the final version. This introductory argument could be even better, however an introduction should be shaped like an inverted "funnel". It should begin with the general topic, narrow down to the specific topic, isolate a research gap (in italics below), give an argument or "thesis" statement, and then signpost the essay ahead (i.e., give an outline). (See **CELT Helpsheet: Introductions**). It could also be supported with a few in-text citations.

With a little reworking the essay introduction might read:

Porter's five forces industry analysis has been used as a conceptual tool for more than 10 years (Franklin, 1999; Jones, 2000). Its relevance is undisputed in modern industrial western societies (Harrison, 1997). However, while it has been applied to a number of industries it has not been extensively used in the industrial sector in developing countries such as Thailand (Higgins, 2002). **In this essay it will be argued that** while Porter's five forces, especially the third, are important for most industries, they are **not crucial** in explaining the attractiveness of the manufacturing industry in Thailand. For Porter's forces to be crucial in explaining attractiveness, they need to be However in the case of the manufacturing industry, **this is not the case due to the following three factors:** (1).... (2).... (3)..... Therefore, **It will be claimed** that Porter's forces are of only **limited relevance** to the manufacturing industry in Thailand. The essay is structured as follows: ... In the first section, the essay outlines ... In the second section, the paper looks at ... and so on.

From this initial argument in your introduction you can build a more complex and convincing case in the body of your essay.



The argument structure mentioned above can be “defended” though your essay as follows:

- In **partial conclusion 1**, you argue why, of Porter’s five forces, only the third is most important to the case you are considering, namely, the manufacturing industry in Thailand.
- In **partial conclusion 2** you argue that if Porter’s five forces is to explain attractiveness of an industry, it needs certain characteristics or features.
- In **partial conclusion 3**, you argue why of Porter’s five forces are not crucial in explaining the attractiveness of the manufacturing industry in Thailand for 3 main reasons.
- This builds to the **final conclusion** that Porter’s theory is only of limited relevance to the manufacturing industry in Thailand.