

A structured essay

An essay is an extended answer to a question. The implication of this is that the question itself determines the organisation and 'shape' of the essay discussion.

For this example, the question is a straightforward one:

One of the traditional functions of Human Resources (HR) staff is workplace training of employees. In the online environment, will this role of HR staff be replaced by computer technology? (1000 words)

This question requires a fairly simple approach:

- Will HR training staff be replaced by technology?
 - Decide on your overall answer: yes / no / maybe / to some extent
 - Provide a logical sequence of reasons to explain your perspective

How do you arrive at a perspective with reasons?

- Read relevant research and ideas about this problem
- Make notes of the points that are helping you work out your answer
- Reflect constantly about how your perspective on the problem is gradually evolving from what you reading and take note of
- When you feel you've got enough to form a view with some reasons, weigh it all up (this can be the most difficult part)
- After weighing up, try to articulate your overall answer in a clear statement; we can call this a statement of your thesis (idea), your position, or your perspective.
- This is your starting point; from there, your aim is to convince a reader that your perspective is a well-considered and reasonable one.
- To do that, you set out your reasons, one at a time, in a logical order. We can call this your line of argument.

After reading your clearly organised argument, a reader should be able to say 'Yes, I see why this writer thinks this way.' The reader is free to agree or disagree with your perspective on the issue; an essay is not a matter of presenting the 'right' answer to a question. What matters is that you communicate your argument clearly, and help the reader see your reasoning.

On the following pages is an essay written in answer to the question above. It is 1093 words. Many lecturers allow 10% over or under the word limit, but if you had to target exactly 1000 words, it would simply be a matter of pruning here and there to state ideas more succinctly.

The note beside each paragraph focusses on one aspect of writing; think about how that aspect is evident in every paragraph.

This sample essay has been adapted from an example by K. McNeil in the *Newcastle Graduate School of Business: Student manual 2006*. Newcastle: University of Newcastle.

Essay	Part of essay, Comment
<p>Computer technology has made a dramatic difference to the nature of Human Resources (HR) administration and training delivery. However, it is simplistic to suggest that the training role of HR professionals will be replaced by technology.</p> <p>Rather, while online training offers significant advantages, the human element is still essential for effective teaching and learning. In this domain, technology has its limitations, so a blended approach of online and face-to-face instruction has proven to be successful. Beyond such delivery, however, HR professionals are still the most significant element in training needs analysis, quality course design, and evaluation.</p>	<p>Introduction Introduces topic in a general way.</p> <p>A thesis/position statement answers the Q directly. The whole essay will elaborate this position.</p> <p>The other sentences outline the stages of the argument that follows.</p>
<p>Advocates of online learning argue that, compared to traditional face-to-face training, digital technology offers practical advantages of space and time. Freed from the constraints of space, the most immediate advantage cited is that the digital space facilitates ease of delivery where employees may be geographically dispersed (Noe, 2002). Training can be delivered to all employees without incurring travel or accommodation costs (Noe, 2002; Brown, 2004), and the organisation does not need to fund a physical space for training (Dobbs, 2003). Also, because the digital space is asynchronous and flexible, employees can schedule their training sessions around competing work priorities (Oakes & Raghaven, 2002; Brown, 2003). As a result, online learning is cost effective because the organisation does not incur expenses or lost production hours. Given these savings in costs, it would seem reasonable for organisations to replace HR staff with digital technology.</p>	<p>Paragraph 1: structure Topic sentence makes a claim (or assertion)</p> <p>The sentences after that expand the claim by showing the evidence for it. (This par presents ideas that challenge this writer's position. This shows that the writer is informed. The writer doesn't agree with this thinking, but explains how and why in par 2.)</p> <p>The final sentence explains the relevance of this par to the essay Q.</p>
<p>Nonetheless, online training has demonstrated significant disadvantages in terms of learning outcomes. One problem is the poor completion rate of training courses. According to one study (Charles, 2002), 50%-90% of employees do not complete self-paced training. Another problem is that, as supervision shifts from instructor to learner, learners skip practice or rush through tasks, resulting in poor learning outcomes (Brown, 2001). These problems of participation and completion may be related to the questionable quality of online courses offered. Many courses have poor design and/or content (Charles, 2002), and some fail to adequately consider the organisational context or learner needs (Weaver, 2002). All of this would suggest that providing workplace training only in the online mode is not the most effective method of professional development for employees.</p>	<p>Par 2: discussion This par answers the challenge presented by par 1. The claim & evidence here affirm the writer's position. The words that show this are highlighted. In pars 3-6, the writer keeps discussing the issue by including evidence that both challenges and affirms the position – but the reader always knows where the writer stands.</p>
<p>However, it is not simply a matter of choosing between two methods of training; a blended approach to learning seems to be a viable alternative. The best blended learning models offer access to materials online for self-paced individual learning,</p>	

supported by various forms of interaction (Weaver, 2002). Online interactions can happen in virtual rooms via learning management systems (Blackboard.com, 2004), as well as group blogs and shared document creation, but HR staff should facilitate these online interactions (Cooper, 2004). The most successful online courses include a regular face-to-face component (Dobbs, 2000; Cooper, 2004), whereby the trainer and employees can discuss and apply the online content to real-world problem solving. Such interaction in an environment facilitated by training professionals is essential for effective learning (Cooper, 2004). The success of the blended approach is documented by reports (ASTD & MASIE Centre, 2001) showing that the highest participation rates and overall learner satisfaction have been for training courses that blend online content with face-to-face extension.

The success of the blended approach is evident in two case studies. KPMG (Dobbs, 2000) and Global Learning Solutions (Zielinski, 2000) were early adopters of online learning because of its cost effectiveness, with each organisation documenting consistent savings in training expenses. However, each organisation has also seen the need to include learning interaction and consolidation, mainly through sessions of face-to-face instruction. At KPMG, participants reported that the sessions clarified and expanded learning content through real-time interpersonal discussion and group exercises facilitated by the HR trainer (Dobbs, 2002). Employees at Global Learning Solutions (Zielinski, 2000) valued the opportunity to be with other learners in a physical space, and the ability to have extended discussions with the trainer.

Conversely, the trainers reported that monitoring progress and understanding was quicker and more effective in face-to-face mode (Zielinski, 2000). Each of these case studies confirms that face-to-face teaching is an essential component of good learning.

Yet, effective training requires more than effective face-to-face delivery; the foundation of learning is good course design, and it has been argued by some that the HR professional is not needed for this function. Barbian (2001), for example, claims that online tutoring systems are sufficiently intelligent to understand learning patterns and can be used for design purposes. However, other evidence (Salas & Canon-Bowers, 2001) suggests that HR staff are integral to ensuring that courses are designed according to important learning principles, such as the relevance of content, and the opportunity for practice. Another important learning principle is the provision of feedback to learners (Salas & Canon-Bowers, 2001; Weaver, 2002), particularly in the form of a conversation to clarify understanding between teacher and learner. This dialogue also provides feedback from learners, which is useful for the ongoing modification of course design (Weaver, 2002). Consequently, HR staff are essential to the appropriate and effective design of learning materials

Par 3: using evidence

The writer's claims are based on evidence, which is summarised as briefly as possible in the writer's own words, and only enough for readers to understand the point being made. When a summarised point is followed by 2 citations, it means that both sources had similar ideas, and the writer synthesised them into one summary statement. The summary content of evidence is highlighted; it's what you would read about if you looked up those sources.

Par 4: writer's voice

This is the opposite of par 3. Argument is found in the writer's voice, not the summarised content. Each writer puts evidence together in their own way. This writer's voice is highlighted here. It is quite ordinary language, and often includes adjectives. An adjective carries a judgement, and is often where you will see the writer's view expressed. The topic sentence is the writer's voice; it is an overall claim, and we know it will be explained by evidence (if it's not, then there's a problem).

Par 5: 'flow'

The writer uses linking language so that the reader can follow ideas easily. The words and phrases are marked. They refer to previously mentioned ideas, or signal new ideas coming, or 'signpost' how different bits fit together.

Good course design develops from a careful analysis of training needs. While technology can efficiently collect and collate data, the management and analysis of data relies on human judgement (Ellis, 2001). HR staff evaluate the correlation of organisational goals and strategies with the individual needs of learners. The HR trainer can assess individual differences, learning styles and training readiness (Cooper, 2004), such as the impact of new technologies on older workers (Salas and Canon-Bowers, 2001). HR staff can also assess whether training is really the solution to performance deficiencies, or if other interventions are more appropriate (Ellis, 2001). Artificial intelligence cannot adequately assume these functions, as the process is 'more an art than a science' (Salas and Canon-Bowers, 2001, p.477), thus confirming the need for HR staff in this role.

Technology has changed the role of the HR professional, yet, given the complex nature of teaching and learning, it is not foreseeable that technology will replace the human element in the design, delivery and evaluation of training. The HR professional is needed to ensure the alignment of organisational goals and individual needs. Furthermore, HR staff are essential for quality course the design which incorporates learners' needs, including adequate practice opportunities, real-word application of content, and feedback that is individually relevant. Consequently, the most successful approaches to using technology have blended online learning methods and materials with traditional face-to-face functions of design, delivery and evaluation. Online learning has often raised more questions than solutions, and the HR professional continues to bring the necessary human element and organisational perspective to the discussion.

Par 6

(how many of the above features can you identify here?)

Conclusion

Returns to the overall topic in a general way, and restates position.

The writer highlights a few key points that are central to the argument. These points are drawn from pars 6, 5 & 3.

Finally...

Here, the 6 topic sentences from the body paragraphs show how the argument develops in a sustained way. Each sentence moves the argument along, adding one new idea for each step of the argument.

1. Advocates of online learning argue that, compared to traditional face-to-face training, digital technology offers practical advantages of space and time.
2. Nonetheless, online training courses have demonstrated significant disadvantages in terms of learning outcomes.
3. However, it is not simply matter of choosing between two methods of training; a blended approach to learning seems to be a viable alternative.
4. The success of the blended approach is evident in two case studies.
5. Yet, effective training requires more than effective face-to-face delivery; the foundation of learning is good course design, and it has been argued by some that the HR professional is not needed for this function.
6. Good course design develops from a careful analysis of training needs.