Unit 1 of this module dealt with the process involved in writing an essay. This unit looks in more detail at the development of an argument or point of view and the structure of an essay.

What is an argument?
In the context of a university essay an argument is a well researched and logically structured answer to a particular question, or questions. It is a point of view formulated by critically assessing the information or ideas relevant to the essay topic. It is presented in the form of a series of main points which support your direct answer to the question. Each of these points is addressed in a separate paragraph and is supported with evidence, explanation and/or examples. It is supported by referencing authorities in the relevant field. An argument should also form a cohesive whole: this means the paragraphs need to be logically ordered and connections made between the points presented in those paragraphs.

How is an essay structured?
In order for your argument to be convincing and make sense, it needs to be presented inside a well structured piece of writing. How do you do this within the framework of an essay's general structure of Introduction, Body, Conclusion? Firstly, you need to be clear about what elements you should include within these three sections of an essay. The table below outlines these elements.

| Introduction | General statement or orientation to topic  
| Thesis statement | Brief summary of the main topics/arguments/points made in the essay |
| Body paragraphs | 1. Topic sentence A  
| 1. supporting sentence | These sentences support, expand or explain the point made in the topic sentence |
| 2. supporting sentence |  |
| 3. supporting sentence |  |
| 2. Topic sentence B | 1. supporting sentence  
| 2. supporting sentence |  |
| 3. supporting sentence |  |
| 3. Topic sentence C | 1. supporting sentence  
| 2. supporting sentence |  |
| 3. supporting sentence |  |
| Conclusion paragraphs | Restatement or summary of the main points in the body and a final comment (if appropriate) |

You also need to be clear about the function of each of these sections. Let's start off with discussing the purpose of the Introduction. Its function is to serve as a ‘map’ of the essay, outlining to your reader the main argument and points which you develop in your essay. Most introductions begin with an orientation in the form of a brief general statement that leads the reader into the topic. This is followed by your
thesis statement, which is your concise response to the essay question, then an outline of the argument presented in the essay. You may find it useful to think of an essay’s introduction as funnel shaped - moving from the general to the specific. Here is an example:

Example of an essay Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The function of the body is to fully develop the argument outlined in the introduction. Each paragraph within the body of the essay elaborates on one major point in the development of the overall argument (although some points may consist of a number of sub-points, each of which will need a paragraph). The main point in each paragraph needs to be clearly stated in the form of a topic sentence (usually the first or last sentence of a paragraph), which is then supported with evidence. Let’s look at how the student’s essay on culture developed (remember the argument is that the concept of culture is able to contribute to our understanding of society in a number of ways). The example below shows only the first (or topic) sentence of each paragraph, and not the remaining sentences of each paragraph. This is to highlight the way the main points in the argument can be presented at the beginning of each paragraph to show the logical steps in the argument.</th>
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<td>The concept of culture is able to contribute to our understanding of society in a number of ways. It can explain how social order is maintained in a society, how the behaviour of a society is learned and why there are so many societies operating in different ways and, on the other hand, why in societies are so similar.</td>
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The function of the essay’s Conclusion is to restate the main argument. It reminds the reader of the strengths of the argument: that is, it represents the most important evidence supporting the argument. Depending on the discipline you are writing in, the concluding paragraph may also contain a reflection on the evidence presented, or on the essay’s thesis. This reflection may take the form of speculation on the implications of the argument presented, or it might incorporate a suggestion. The nature of the reflection will depend on your topic (Woodward-Kron 1997). Finally, the conclusion is not the place in your essay to introduce new information or new ideas. These should be in the body of your essay.
Argumentation within paragraphs

A closer look at a paragraph in the body section of the essay allows us to see how a main point is established then supported with evidence from the literature. This paragraph develops the point that the existence of universals of culture help to explain that similar behaviours are necessary for cultures to exist. Notice how paraphrased information from source material is used to develop and to provide support for the idea presented in the topic sentence.

Beginning student writers often rely too heavily on quotes to introduce ideas and theories. It is important to try and avoid this because your argument may be lost amongst the quotes and your argument will not be clear. Quotes should be used only when you want to provide extra support in the actual words of an established authority for the point you are making in your topic sentence.

Topic sentences should clearly signal to your reader the main idea in the paragraph. Following sentences should provide the explanation and expansion of the point being made and help to establish the sources and support necessary to strengthen your argument. This means that in the body section of a good essay, you should be able to get a sense of the overall argument by reading only the topic sentences. Try this when editing your drafts – you will get a sense of whether your argument and ideas are flowing logically, or need to be re-ordered.

When the argument isn’t clear

We haven’t yet provided you with the essay question for the essay on culture. However, by reading the introductory paragraph again you can probably predict what the question was. The student’s thesis was that the concept of culture is able to contribute to our understanding of society in a number of ways, so if you said the question was something along the lines of What can the concept of culture contribute to our understanding of society, you would be right. In the paragraphs which formed the body of the essay (skeleton framework) we saw that these paragraphs argued the number of ways the concept of culture could contribute to our understanding of society. Each paragraph discussed one way. Let’s now compare the structure of this essay’s argument to another essay written in response to the same question. Can you see this essay’s weaknesses? The comments in the right hand side column highlight what is wrong with this example essay.
Sample essay
Culture is a term used by social scientists to describe a people's whole way of life. In everyday conversation, the word culture may refer to activities in such areas as art, literature and music. To a social scientist, however, a people's culture consists of all the ideas, objects, and ways of doing things created by a group. It includes all the beliefs, customs, language, technology, arts, crafts and traditions of the group. It is any way of life, simple or complex.

The Oxford Dictionary (1893: 85) defined culture as "the civilisation of a people (especially at a certain stage of its development in history)."

By 1936, Webster had devised a more scientific meaning for culture and defined it as "the complex of distinctive attainments, beliefs, traditions, etc. constituting the background of a racial, religious or social group, as a nation with many cultures" (p. 54).

Hollsteiner relates culture to a biological organism, in that each of its parts is related in some way to all other parts.

The essay presents an answer to the question What is culture? or "How has the concept of culture changed over time?" instead of answering the given essay question, it looks at different concepts and definitions of culture, and how these have changed over time. The student fails to develop an argument relating to how the concept of culture can contribute to an understanding of society. By starting off each paragraph with a quote or a reference to a theorist, the student fails to establish clear topic sentences, and so the main point of each paragraph is not clear. As a result, this student's essay fails to develop an argument in relation to the set essay question and would probably fail.

The last unit in this module, The Mechanics of Essay Writing, discusses some of the conventions of essay writing. It looks at how to achieve academic style and how to present evidence and information in your own voice. It also includes an overview of referencing styles, and guidelines to referencing.

References

Endnotes
1. This sample essay is adapted from Unit 1 (Paragraph Structure) of the Cohesive Writing Module, Independent Learning Resources, Learning Assistance Centre, University of Sydney.

2. For more information on topic sentences and the structure of paragraphs see Unit 4 Paragraph development: maintaining the focus in the self access module Cohesive Writing.

3. For more information on connective words see Unit 1 Conjunction in the self access module Cohesive Writing.