Go The Distance
Essay structure

I. The structure of the introduction
A good essay introduction usually has four parts: a background statement, a focus on the essay question, a thesis statement, and signposting to guide the reader. Here's a quick review of what these four parts include:

**Introduction part 1: background statement**
This is a general statement, to introduce the topic of the essay and to interest the reader.

**Introduction part 2: focus on the question**
Every essay is an answer to a question. Here, your task is to convince the reader that your essay question really is important or interesting. One useful way to do this is to show that academics disagree about the answer to the question.

**Introduction part 3: thesis statement**
In the thesis statement, you tell the reader clearly and directly what your answer to the essay question will be. The thesis statement often uses phrases like, "This essay will argue that…".

**Introduction part 4: signposting**
In the last part of your introduction, you should explain the structure of your essay to your reader. We call this 'signposting'. In this part of the introduction, we often see phrases such as, "Firstly, this essay will examine…", "The second section will consider…", "Finally, I will analyse…", and so on.
Activity 1
Here's a short introduction from a student's essay about climate change. The sentences are in the wrong order. Rearrange them to make a good introduction to a British academic essay. Remember to think about the four-part introduction structure. You can find the answer in the key at the end of this document.

1. This essay will argue that it is possible for today's developing countries to industrialise without serious environmental compromises, but only if developed countries are willing to provide financial and political assistance.

2. The need to limit human impact on the environment and to avert catastrophic environmental change is unquestionably the most significant long-term challenge facing policymakers today.

3. In order to demonstrate this, this essay will firstly examine the process of industrialisation, before looking at the arguments for and against the possibility 'green industrialisation', and finally at the crucial relationship between governance and environmental health.

4. Data suggests that the industrialised nations are in fact making considerable progress in reducing their levels of pollution and other environmental damage; however, developing countries such as China and India are industrialising rapidly, and it is widely believed that this industrialisation is likely to have significantly negative environmental effects.

2. Writing a comparison essay
A comparison essay is a common type of academic assignment where you have to compare two or more things. Sometimes this is clear from the essay title, for example:

- Compare the structure of undergraduate degrees in British and US universities.

But sometimes different words are used.
Activity 2
Read these essay titles. Which of the essays will be comparison essays?

1. Compare the environment for start-ups in Britain with that in another country of your choice.
2. Compare and contrast Hobbes' view of the state with that of Locke.
3. Discuss the role of Bismarck in the formation and early development of the German state.
4. Account for the similarities and differences between Shakespeare's and Marlowe's use of Italian sources.
5. How important were economic factors as causes of the American Civil War?
6. What are the relative merits of conventional cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and 'mindfulness-based' CBT?

3. Comparison essays – vertical and horizontal patterns
In order to write a 'comparison' essay, we have to compare the features of two things (let's call them A and B), and show the reader how these two things are similar or different. First we need to do some research to get some reliable information about the features of A and the features of B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A - feature 1</th>
<th>B - feature 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A - feature 2</td>
<td>B - feature 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>A - feature 3</td>
<td>B - feature 3</td>
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Next, we have to decide how to organise this information so we can present it to the reader effectively.

There are two basic 'patterns' we can use. In a 'vertical' pattern, we describe all the features of A, and then we describe all the features of B.

**Vertical pattern**

A - feature 1
A - feature 2
A - feature 3

B - feature 1
B - feature 2
B - feature 3
In a horizontal pattern, we describe one feature of A together with one feature of B, then we describe another feature of A together with another feature of B, and so on:

**Horizontal pattern**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Feature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A - feature 1</td>
<td>B - feature 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>A - feature 2</td>
<td>B - feature 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>A - feature 3</td>
<td>B - feature 3</td>
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</table>

**Activity 3**

Look at these sections of three essay plans for an essay comparing the UK and education systems. Which ones use a horizontal pattern – and which are vertical?

**Plan 1**

US – undergrads take 4 years (more flexibility; more expensive)
UK – undergrads take 3 years (except courses that include work experience etc)
US – undergrads can apply as 'undecided', and choose 'major' later
UK – undergrads must choose subject when they apply
US – no undergrad degrees in Law or Medicine (postgraduate only)
UK – Law and Medicine available as undergraduate degrees

**Plan 2**

US – undergrads take 4 years (more flexibility; more expensive)
US – undergrads can apply as 'undecided', and choose 'major' later
US – no undergrad degrees in Law or Medicine (postgraduate only)
UK – undergrads take 3 years (except courses that include work experience etc)
UK – undergrads must choose subject when they apply
UK – Law and Medicine available as undergraduate degrees
4. **The conclusion**

In the conclusion of an essay, good writers often do three things:

1. Repeat the main message of the thesis statement, in different words
2. Summarize the main points in the essay, again in different words
3. Make a final statement about how the thesis relates to the context (often a statement about why the topic is important, or recommendations for practice / future research)

**Activity 4**

Read this conclusion taken from an essay about social enterprises. Considering the three features of writing a good essay conclusion, can you decide which sentence should not be here?

To conclude, no existing model can genuinely predict the success or failure of social enterprises. Balasu's (1998) and Cranston's (2012; 2103) models are applicable only in very limited geographical and political circumstances, and even then their validity is highly questionable. Boxer and Urquhart's (2003) model proves on closer examination to lack any predictive power whatsoever. It should also be mentioned at this point that Baumann (2016) has recently proposed an 'innovative' model for predicting the success of social enterprises, but the structure of her model is almost identical to Boxer and Urquhart's, and thus it suffers from the same deficiencies. In the absence of a genuinely predictive model, there seems to be little hope in the short term for more rational, evidence based policy in this area.

**More**

Remember to check our Academic Writing webpages for information and activities to practise:

- Academic vocabulary
- Understanding assignment questions
- Writing effective paragraphs

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**Plan 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Undergraduate Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>- Undergrads can apply as 'undecided', and choose 'major' later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Law and Medicine available as undergraduate degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>- Undergrads take 4 years (more flexibility; more expensive)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>- Undergrads take 3 years (except courses that include work experience etc)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Citing sources correctly
• And more!

You can find these materials at
http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/gothedistance/academicwriting

Answer Key

Activity 1
The correct order for this introduction is 2 – 4 – 1 – 3.

Activity 2
1. This is a comparison essay:
   This essay title asks us to compare two things: (1) the environment for start-ups in Britain, and (2) the environment for start-ups in another country of our choice.

2. This is a comparison essay:
   This essay title asks us to compare two things: (1) Hobbes’ view of the state, and (2) Locke’s view of the state.

3. This is not a comparison essay:
   This essay title asks us to explain one thing: the role of Bismarck in the formation and early development of the German state. There is no comparison here.

4. This is a comparison essay:
   Although the title does not use the words ‘compare’ or ‘comparison’, this is a comparison essay. It asks us to compare two things: (1) Shakespeare’s use of Italian sources, and (2) Marlowe’s use of Italian sources.

5. This is not a comparison essay:
   This essay asks us to explain one thing: the importance of economic factors as causes of the American Civil War. There is no comparison here.

6. This is a comparison essay.
   Although the title does not use the words ‘compare’ or ‘comparison’, this is a comparison essay. It asks us to compare two things: (1) cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and (2) ‘mindfulness-based’ CBT.

Activity 3
1. This plan uses a horizontal pattern, describing one feature of the US system together with one feature of the UK system, then describing another feature of the US system together with another feature of the UK system, etc. Because it follows this horizontal pattern clearly, we can also say that it is logically organised.

2. This plan uses a vertical pattern, describing all the features of the US system and then all the features of the UK system. Because it follows this vertical pattern clearly, we can also describe this plan as being logically organised.
3. This essay plan uses neither a horizontal pattern nor a vertical pattern. The features of the US system and the features of the UK system seem to be presented in a random order, and there appears to be no logical structure here.

**Activity 4**

To conclude, no existing model can genuinely predict the success or failure of social enterprises. Balasu's (1998) and Cranston's (2012; 2103) models are applicable only in very limited geographical and political circumstances, and even then their validity is highly questionable. Boxer and Urquhart's (2003) model proves on closer examination to lack any predictive power whatsoever. It should also be mentioned at this point that Baumann (2016) has recently proposed an 'innovative' model for predicting the success of social enterprises, but the structure of her model is almost identical to Boxer and Urquhart's, and thus it suffers from the same deficiencies. In the absence of a genuinely predictive model, there seems to be little hope in the short term for more rational, evidence based policy in this area.

The sentence in **bold font** should not be in the conclusion: it doesn't do any of the things that an introduction should do. In fact, this sentence introduces new information, which is problematic, since new information should not be introduced in the conclusion.