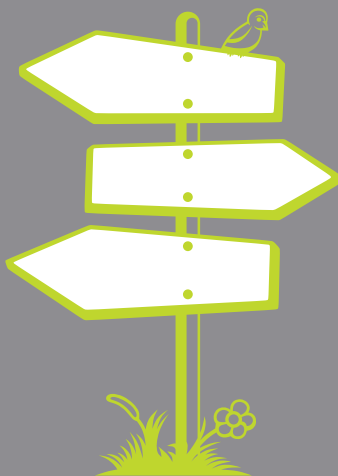


# A short guide to signposting in essays

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# What is signposting and why is it important?

Your essay is a journey through your argument or discussion. Your paragraphs are stepping stones in that journey. Signposts help to guide the reader through. They indicate what will happen, remind them of where they are at key points along the way, and indicate the direction your essay is going to head in next.

Signposting should happen in your introduction and throughout your whole essay.

There should be some element of signposting in each paragraph.

Signposting can be useful for linking your paragraphs together. It also makes the reader feel as if you are in control of the structure of your essay.

## Examples of signposting phrases:

Signpost:	How it aids the reader:
In order to understand the causes of the London Riots, it would be useful to apply sociological theories...	The reader realises in advance that the writer is going to be using some theories to explore the causes of the London Riots.
Another aspect of Hardy's portrayal of Tess is...	This reminds the reader that at least one aspect has already been discussed, and another is about to be revealed.

# When should you signpost?

## An example:

*Introduction*

*Signpost the aim of the essay, what it will cover and in what order*

*1st main point of argument*

**Signpost:** point to be made by the first paragraph

*2nd main point of argument*

**Signpost:** what direction this paragraph will take the essay in and how it links to the previous point

*3rd main point of argument  
(and so on...)*

**Signpost:** what direction this paragraph will take the essay in and how it links to the previous point

*Consideration of opposing viewpoints*

**Signpost:** remind the reader what the essay has addressed so far and indicate that opposing viewpoints will now be discussed

*Conclusion*

*Retrospective signposting: remind the reader of the journey the essay has taken them on and how it has answered the question*

### Signposting in an introduction

The signposts in your introduction should indicate:

- what is the overall aim of your essay ('This essay intends to...')
- what ideas or factors will be discussed and in what order ('Firstly... secondly... finally...').

You may also wish to:

- **justify** why you have chosen to focus on certain aspects of a topic ('For this reason... will be the main focus of this essay.')
- **quantify** your aims or the content of your essay ('This essay will discuss **three** approaches to the issue of...')



### Signposting throughout an essay

Throughout an essay you will probably use two types of signposting: **small and large scale**.

1

Large scale signposting tells the reader specifics about what is to come, or what has gone before.

**Example:** 'Having discussed the arguments in favour of the Third Way, it is also necessary to consider its limitations.'

2

Small scale signposts are individual words or short phrases which help to signal direction, such as:

- Consequently
- As a result
- Alternatively
- However
- Additionally

## WARNING!

### Use signposts precisely!

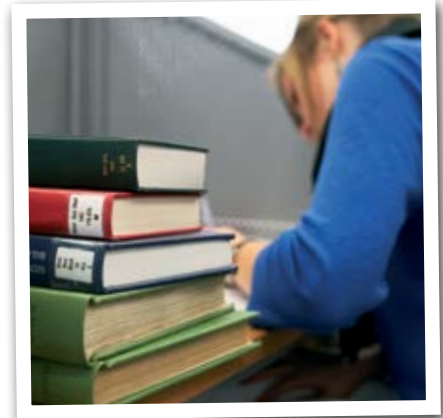
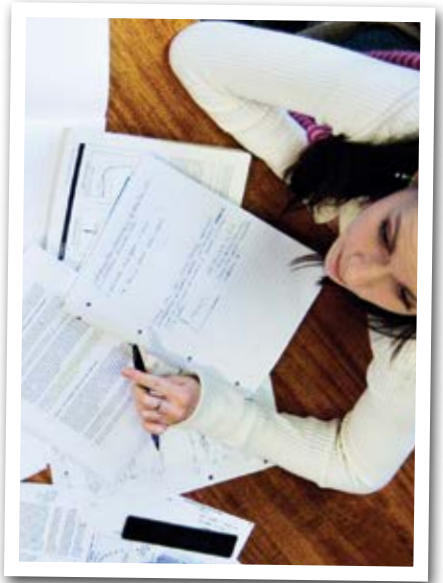
It can make your work seem sloppy if you use words like 'However' or 'Conversely' in the wrong contexts. Avoid the temptation to dot signposting words throughout your text at random. Think carefully about the link between two paragraphs, and choose a word that effectively conveys that link.

'However' should indicate that a counter-point is about to be made.

'Furthermore' should indicate that you are adding something to the previous point.

Consider the specific meaning of a signpost like 'consequently' – do not use it if the idea that follows is not truly a consequence of the previous one!

Remember: precise language helps you to communicate more accurately and effectively with your reader.



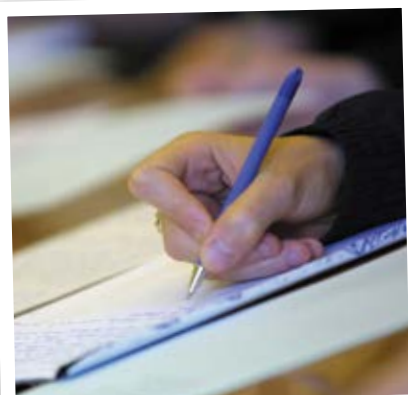
### **Retrospective signposts**

You can also signpost things you have already covered, as a reminder and summary to the reader. This should happen at the end of paragraphs, to highlight the point that you have made and its relevance to your essay question.

You will also use retrospective signposting in your conclusion.

### **Some useful tips for signposting in conclusions:**

- Look at the verbs you have used in your introduction (eg, suggest, discuss, argue). In your introduction, these will probably have been used in the future tense eg, 'This essay will discuss...' In your conclusion, you could use the same verbs but in the past tense eg, 'This essay has discussed...'
- Your conclusion should remind the reader of the line of reasoning you have guided them through, and how your essay has answered the original question.



### Verbs can be signposts, too

When introducing quotes or referring to other people's work, think about the verbs you use. These can act as signposts to the reader in terms of how you feel about the theories or ideas you are discussing.

Ø Shoolbred (2013) demonstrates  
Ø Cooper (2014) claims...

Verbs like 'shows' or 'demonstrates' give the impression that you are endorsing a scholar's viewpoint, whereas verbs like 'asserts' or 'claims' indicate that you might be about to challenge their perspective. Again, it is important to be precise. Never use a verb like 'proves' if that person did not actually prove something. Additionally, be careful with words like 'portrays' and 'conveys.' Students often use them in the wrong context. Find out their exact meaning and use them wisely!

### Conclusion

Your reader should find it really easy to follow your line of reasoning and understand the links between your ideas. Therefore, learning to use signposts effectively will greatly improve your writing. Signposts should complement a strong essay structure. For further help with structuring your arguments, read our **Short Guide to Essay Structure**.

### Further references on signposting

Hampton, M. (2010) **Better essays: Signposting**. University of Portsmouth, Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement [online]. Available from: <http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/studentssupport/ask/resources/handouts/writtenassignments/filetodownload,32756,en.pdf> [Accessed 20 May 2013].

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