Social Work: using voices to write critically

Writing for the audience
You are writing primarily for your instructor and they want to see that you:
• can present a clear position (i.e. that you have a voice)
• can support your position with evidence and/or reasons (i.e. you can develop a logical argument)
• understand the major concepts relevant to the topic you are discussing (i.e. that you understand the positions of other scholars who have discussed the topic)
• can evaluate other scholars’ ideas and the evidence they present
• can distinguish both your voice and the voices of your sources and identify each source appropriately

Using voices in your assignment
1) The assignment writer’s voice (your voice)
• You as the writer use your voice to introduce and present each argument
• Your voice is the dominant voice and the one that controls the argument
• Your voice is used to show how or why other people’s ideas are relevant and important to the point you are making (i.e. it shows your critical thinking about the topic)

2) Other voices in the assignment
Other voices in your assignment:
• are used to support your position
• provide evidence such as statistics, expert arguments and/or examples
• do not present the argument

The writer’s voice (your voice) is not cited, while other voices are
Voices that are not cited are taken to be the essay writer’s voice. If the support voices are not cited, it looks like there is no evidence to support the argument. Academic debate involves a dialogue between many voices and if the dialogue disappears, the writer appears to be presenting a personal opinion. Not identifying supporting voices can result in plagiarism which is a serious offense in universities.

Indirect voices are used far more frequently than direct voices.
Your own voice will disappear if you use too many direct voices (quotations) in your essay. Furthermore, the reader may think that you have no position and are just copying what other people are saying if you use too many direct voices. It is often better to use the indirect voice by paraphrasing and summarising information as this demonstrates your understanding of what you have read.

(Brick 2011, p. 107)
Example essay

‘Australian Federalism has changed dramatically since 1901. Critically discuss this statement.’

Introduction

The constitutional distribution of powers and responsibilities in the Australian federation has proved to be exceptionally flexible. Although, originally conceived as a decentralized federation with the bulk of powers remaining in the hands of the states, there has been a steady accretion of power to the Commonwealth government since shortly after federation in 1901. Although formal amendment of the constitution has been limited, changing interpretation by the High Court and the exercise of financial control by the Commonwealth have resulted in growing power and responsibility being exercised by the Commonwealth government. This essay will aim to demonstrate how Australian federalism has changed since 1901 by referring to factors that have motivated its change and its current state of existence.

Body paragraphs

The constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia came into force on 1 January 1901. The creation of ‘one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland’ was the result of protracted negotiations throughout the 1890s between the framers of the Constitution, the colonial parliaments, the people and ultimately, the Imperial Parliament (Nauze 1972, p. 14). The result was a constitution that brought together the two themes that have since dominated Australian governance: responsible government and federalism. Williams and Macintyre (n.d.) insist that these twin aspects of the Constitution captured Australia’s comfortable constitutional inheritance from the United Kingdom together with the less familiar constitutional solution of a federal system. The latter dimension was an obvious solution to the need to retain the political integrity of the Australian colonies. The system was informed by comparative constitutional research that focused primarily on the United States and, to a lesser degree, on Canada and Switzerland (Baker 2001).

Analysis of voices used

Sentence 1: Writer’s voice introduces the topic

Sentences 2-3: Writer’s voice identifies issues/challenges/gaps associated with the topic

Sentence 4: Writer communicates the aim of the essay (what the essay intends to do) and the position they will take in discussing the topic

Sentence 5: Writer provides the scope of the essay (how the essay will be organised)

* Note: References are seldom used in the introduction of an essay. However, this may not always be the case as some instructors require that you do so. It is always good practice to confirm these aspects with your tutor before you begin writing.

Sentence 6: Writer’s voice introducing the topic sentence

Sentence 7: Direct voice ‘...’ is used here by the writer to make a strong claim. However the writer still uses the indirect voice (paraphrase) for the rest of the idea.

Sentence 8: Writer’s critical voice (interprets the debate in this area).

Sentences 9-9a: The writer supports this argument with an indirect voice. Author prominence is given here with the citation placed at the beginning of a sentence to emphasise the authors’ idea. ‘insist’ is a reporting verb. Writers use reporting verbs to reflect the strength of their argument.

Sentence 10: The writer uses evidence to support a claim. Here the writer has given prominence to the information by placing the citation at the end of the sentence.
The distinctive characteristic of the Constitution’s growth, including the development of the powers and responsibilities within the federal structure since 1901, has been one of evolution not revolution. As Saunders (2002) maintained, to achieve the union, the Constitution build on what was largely known, and what was needed, in 1901. The imperatives for federation – defence, uniformity of economic policy, freedom of interstate trade and uniformity in immigration policy – formed central parts of the constitutional compact (Saunders 2002). In a way that was consistent with their understanding of extant models, the framers trusted in parliamentary government and thus saw no need to adopt a bill of rights (Williams & Macintyre n.d.).

Since the federation, the development of the Constitution has continued along an evolutionary path. Campbell (2003) claimed that in the 105 years since the Constitution’s adoption, there have been only eight formal amendments, of which only three relate directly to the distribution of powers. This is a reflection of both the procedural difficulty to effect such change and the cautious approach with which Australian electors approach reform. Yet notwithstanding the lack of formal change, the Constitution, inasmuch as it relates to the distribution of powers and responsibilities between the states and the Commonwealth, is now read in different terms than it was in 1901. Several factors account for this. The assertion of Australia’s legal sovereignty vis-à-vis Great Britain shows an incremental shift despite the formal links to the British monarch still in place (Lindell 1986). More significantly, it is the High Court, rather than formal constitutional amendment, that has presided over the significant centralization of authority in the hands of the Commonwealth (Williams & Macintyre n.d.). The role and function of the states have, consequently reflected this change...
The Australian federal system has been dynamic in its evolution. Through economic crises and two world wars, the Constitution has evolved to meet the changing needs of the social, economic and political circumstances. The realignment of federal relations would astonish its framers, who conceived of a stronger federal instrument. Yet, overall, the Constitution has served Australia well. The past century has seen a centralization of power at the expense of the federal principle. Whether or not this trend continues, or whether there is a return to a more dispersed federal structure is unclear. One thing, however, is clear: at present, there is no evident call for radical change or for abandoning the federation. If nothing else, this can be seen as a measure of its success.

Sentence 23: The writer has restated the thesis statement to draw the reader’s attention to the main message of the discussion. This is particularly important as readers tend to lose focus when they are reading very long essays.

Sentences 24-27: Summary of discussion that had been raised in the body of the essay.

Sentences 28-29: The writer’s interpretation and point of view about the debate (concluding statements).

NOTE: The conclusion brings the whole essay together. No new points are introduced in the conclusion. Generally, no citations are listed in the conclusion section of the essay. You also need to confirm with your tutor if the heading ‘Conclusion’ is allowed in your essay. Remember to include a reference list in your essay.

Example essay adapted from:

Reference