

Architectural Thinking

Structure and Flow in Middle East Studies Writing

Week 5 | May 13, 2025 | 1:00-1:45

Session Goals:

- Identify structural patterns in interdisciplinary Middle East research
- Apply visual mapping techniques to clarify argumentative flow
- Develop strategies for integrating multiple disciplinary approaches
- Create an action plan for structural improvement

Opening Check-in

In the chat, please respond with one word:

| *"What's your biggest structural challenge in writing about your Middle East research topic?"*

Common challenges in interdisciplinary Middle East writing:

- Balancing historical context with contemporary analysis
- Integrating multiple disciplinary frameworks
- Managing multilingual sources and translations
- Connecting regional specificity with broader theoretical frameworks

Structural Clarity Example

Before: Confusing Structure

From thesis on contemporary Turkish literature and politics

Section jumps from Ottoman literary history → modern political movements → author biography → textual analysis → returns to history → theoretical framework introduced late

Reader response: "I'm lost in when/where we are and how these pieces connect"

After: Clear Structure

Same content, reorganized

1. Theoretical framework established upfront
2. Historical context presented chronologically
3. Author positioned within literary/political movements
4. Textual analysis with clear connections to framework

Reader response: "I can follow the logical progression of your argument"

Visual Mapping for Structure

1. Reverse Outlining

Working backward from existing text:

- Read each paragraph and identify its main point
- Note connections (or gaps) between paragraphs
- Identify where argument threads are dropped or confused

Best for: Revising drafted sections, identifying logical gaps

2. Argument Mapping

Visual representation of claims, evidence, warrants:

- Main claim at top/center
- Supporting claims branching outward
- Evidence connected to each claim
- Counterarguments and responses included

Best for: Complex theoretical integration, clarifying logical relationships

Visual Mapping for Structure

3. Flow Diagramming

Tracking the logical flow between concepts:

- Concepts in boxes/circles
- Arrows showing relationships (causality, influence, progression)
- Color-coding for different disciplinary perspectives

Best for: Interdisciplinary connections, complex causal relationships

Middle East Studies Example:

A thesis on Egyptian women's movements might use flow diagramming to show how colonial policies → nationalist response → religious revival → feminist movements interacted across decades, with color-coding to show which elements draw from historical, religious studies, and gender studies approaches.

Architectural Models for Middle East Research

1. The Multi-lens Approach

Chapters organized by disciplinary perspective

Example: Syrian Refugee Experience in Jordan

- Chapter 1: Historical context of Syrian-Jordanian relations
- Chapter 2: Anthropological analysis of camp spaces
- Chapter 3: Political economy of refugee labor
- Chapter 4: Discourse analysis of humanitarian narratives
- Chapter 5: Integration of perspectives

Strength: Clear methodological boundaries

Challenge: Integration may feel forced or delayed

Architectural Models for Middle East Research

2. The Phenomenon-Centered Model

Organized by aspects of the research object

Example: Contemporary Islamic Finance

- Chapter 1: Theoretical foundations and historical development
- Chapter 2: Institutional structures and governance
- Chapter 3: Financial instruments and mechanisms
- Chapter 4: Social impact and ethical considerations
- Chapter 5: Global contexts and future directions

Strength: Coherent narrative around central phenomenon

Challenge: May prioritize description over analysis

Architectural Models for Middle East Research

3. The Theoretical Framework Integration

Organized by theoretical constructs

Example: Gender Politics in Iranian Cinema

- Chapter 1: Theoretical framework (feminist film theory, Iranian studies, post-revolutionary aesthetics)
- Chapter 2: Representation and the politics of visibility
- Chapter 3: Space, containment, and transgression
- Chapter 4: Voice, silence, and narrative authority
- Chapter 5: Theoretical implications and contributions

Strength: Theoretically sophisticated and cohesive

Challenge: May become abstract without sufficient concrete examples

Structural Challenges Specific to Middle East Studies

- **Integrating textual analysis with fieldwork**

Challenge: Bridging different types of evidence and methodologies

Solution: Create parallel analytical frameworks that can be applied to both text and field data

- **Balancing historical context with contemporary analysis**

Challenge: Avoiding overwhelming historical background while providing necessary context

Solution: Strategic use of timelines, targeted historical vignettes, and historical references integrated into analysis

- **Managing multilingual sources and translation issues**

Challenge: Maintaining original meaning while making text accessible

Solution: Consistent translation practices, strategic use of original terms, targeted glossaries

Collaborative Analysis

Breakout Room Activity (15 minutes)

You've been grouped by methodological similarities:

- **Group A (text/discourse analysis):** Review structural patterns in literary/media analysis of Middle Eastern sources
- **Group B (historical/archival):** Examine techniques for balancing chronology with thematic organization
- **Group C (ethnographic/interview-based):** Explore strategies for integrating voices and maintaining ethical representation

Tasks:

1. Review examples from the pre-session assignments
2. Identify 3-4 structural patterns that work effectively
3. Create a "best practices" list for your methodological approach
4. Prepare to share with the whole group

Middle East Studies Structure Solutions

Integrating Glossaries and Context

- Create a focused glossary of key terms with cultural/political context
- Use footnotes for first appearances of specialized terminology
- Consider visual timelines for complex historical backgrounds

Visual Mapping Techniques

- Use geographic maps to illustrate spatial relationships
- Create conceptual maps showing relationships between theoretical frameworks
- Develop timelines that integrate multiple historical narratives

Signposting Multilingual Concepts

- Develop consistent transliteration practices
- Create visual cues for language shifts (italics, formatting)
- Use strategic repetition of key terms in both languages

Middle East Studies Structure Solutions

Balancing Description with Analysis

- Create explicit connections between rich description and theoretical framing
- Develop "evidence → interpretation → significance" patterns
- Use strategic subheadings to signal analytical shifts

Representing Marginalized Voices

- Create consistent attribution practices for sources
- Integrate reflexivity sections addressing positionality
- Balance direct quotation with paraphrasing
- Consider visual frameworks for showing multiple perspectives

Individual Action Planning

My structure action plan is...

1. I will restructure my work by: [specific commitment]
2. The specific structural technique I will implement is: [technique]
3. I will apply this to: [specific section or chapter]
4. I will complete this restructuring by: [date]
5. I will know it's successful when: [success criteria]

Take 2-3 minutes to complete your action plan

Resources for Structure Development

- **Program Resources:**
 - Thesis Structure Guide on Program Website
 - Archive of Exemplary Program Theses (Library)
 - Faculty Office Hours Schedule
- **Recommended Reading:**
 - Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Writing Against Culture" (structural approaches)
 - Said, Edward. "Orientalism Reconsidered" (theoretical framing)
 - Booth, Wayne C. et al. "The Craft of Research" (structural patterns)
- **Upcoming Opportunities:**
 - Middle East Studies Association Conference (abstracts due June 1)
 - Graduate Writing Center Workshops (schedule online)

Next Steps

- **Apply one structural technique** to your current draft
- **Exchange structural outlines** with a writing partner before next session
- **Review exemplary thesis structures** in your specific area
- **Bring visual map** of your current structure to next session

Questions before we conclude?