

CHAPTER 11

STRUCTURAL DESIGNS

Essayist Annie Dillard describes writing as an architectural endeavor, a continuous cycle of design, demolition, and rebuilding. Sentences are the bricks; paragraphs are the walls and windows:

Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity. . . . Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck.¹

Dillard's metaphor strikes at the emotional heart of the writing process, which involves destruction as well as production, short-term losses as well as long-term gains. Stylish academic writers are craftspeople who regard their texts as intricate, labor-intensive structures that must be carefully planned and meticulously built, from the pouring of the foundation and the sourcing of the materials to the final polishing of the banisters—not to mention those rare but wrenching occasions when the wrecking ball must be called in.

A well-structured article or book, like a well-built house, requires careful thought and planning. Most academics enjoy a wider range of structural choices than they may realize, starting with the most basic decision of all: will their overall structure be conventional, unique, or something in between? As a general