

Essay Writing Structure

I. The Thesis

The thesis is the idea around which your essay revolves. It is your opinion on the subject, your conviction, your evaluation, your discovery. It is clear and debatable.

- typically in a single sentence which is succinct and unmistakable
- not a generality
- not an obvious statement
- not merely an opinion, but a statement that can be supported by evidence and analysis and addresses the questions HOW and WHY

II. Introductory Paragraph

Intro paragraphs aim to do three things: **grab the reader's attention, identify the central issue or subject, and create the tone of the essay.**

The thesis statement can appear anywhere in the paragraph.

-Funnel Approach – Begin with focused generalization that provides context, then increasingly narrow subject, flushing out the main points of the essay (*Be careful - not in a formulaic way – no flat lists*), until you reach the thesis at end.

-Up Front Approach – Begin with thesis, flush out main points (*see caution above*), and end by argumentatively restating the central idea.

-Creative Approach – Always more sophisticated to begin with an illuminating quotation, a provocative question, a revealing, relevant anecdote, an arresting image, or an engaging piece of figurative language (e.g. allusion, metaphor, paradox) before argument, if you have time to craft.

-Multi-paragraph Openers – The first paragraph may provide the necessary background information while the second paragraph flushes out the argument and thesis.

-*Pitfalls to avoid – the obvious definition or question, facts nobody needs to be reminded of, clichés, apologies or excuses for what the paper does not do.*

-Do not include specific information in the intro that would be better placed in the body of the essay.

III. Structure and Strategies of Body Paragraphs (see MEAL Paragraph Pattern)

Body paragraphs share three main qualities: **unity, development, and coherence.**

-Every idea, fact, and opinion must revolve around the main point of the paragraph.

-The topic sentence is commonly the first sentence, but it can come anywhere in the first few sentences, and it should tie back to the essay thesis.

-Well-organized paragraphs commonly follow a pattern beginning with a general but strong statement to be proven (not a fact or plot point), followed by ample specifics, discussion of relevance, and analysis of that evidence (SO WHAT?), followed by general concluding thought(s) to give closure to paragraph and/or to connect to thesis.

-Connect paragraphs and sentences within paragraphs with effective transitions to show clear chronology, logical progressions, and to restate significant ideas. Be careful not to overuse transitions or writing may sound formulaic.

-Avoid ending body paragraphs by leading into the next one – formulaic.

- If incorporating quotations,
 - be sure to give context to lead into the quotation (don't just plop it in)
 - blend brief "bits and pieces" into your own thoughts rather than unnecessarily large chunks
 - pick and choose quotations carefully (they should not merely repeat a thought, they should reveal more) and use sparingly (don't let the quotations talk for you)
 - punctuate and cite properly using MLA format
 - always explain the significance of a quotation with sophisticated analysis

IV. Concluding Paragraph

The conclusion has three goals: **to make one last effort to convince the reader, to suggest larger implications than you could reasonably assert before you presented your evidence, and to provide a satisfying sense of closure.**

- You might go back and recap central ideas and thesis with emphasis.
- Do not include information in the conclusion that wasn't explored in the essay.
- Good concluding paragraphs leave the reader with something to think about.
- Pitfalls to avoid* –
 - *"The Wastebasket Ending"* - *sweeping up all of the overflow points that did not fit earlier in essay*
 - *"The Fade Out"* - *voice dwindles as writer loses heart at end*
 - *"The Wild Surmise"* – *a grand pronouncement that is not qualified or appropriate; preaching to your audience (avoid 2nd person)*
 - *"The Mirror Image"* – *dully and mechanically rewriting the introduction*

V. General Thoughts on Essay Structure and Style

- Three is not a magic number. A five-paragraph essay works, but it is not the only format. Most arguments worth reading cannot be fully explored in only three body paragraphs.
- Sometimes a main subtopic may require more than one paragraph to fully argue.
- Good writers make linguistic choices about how best to organize to impact reader.
- If writing about literature, consider your audience intelligent. Provide as little summary of the narrative as possible. You may always assume that your reader has read the text.
- Always write in the present tense when writing about literature, unless there is a reason to switch to past.
- Vary your diction, sentence patterns, and sentence lengths for effect.
- Incorporate imagery, figurative language, power verbs, and descriptive adjectives for enhanced style.
- Essay writing is creative writing!**