

## Essays: General Structure

The university is a place of many different faculties and departments, and for each faculty or department there are different expectations for the *focus*, *purpose*, *format*, and *structure* of your paper. To ensure that you are adequately fulfilling those expectations, you will want to talk to your professor or T.A. However, as a general guideline, you can refer to this handout when organizing the content of your essay.

### The Introduction

This paragraph's primary purpose is to identify the essay's main topic and argument. For that reason, you are on the right track if your introductory paragraph answers these two questions:

- 1) **What is this paper about?**
- 2) **What argument does this paper make?**

In most first- and second-year courses, your professor will want you to answer these questions separately, with the answer to the first question forming **the topic sentence** of the essay, and the answer to the second forming the paper's **thesis statement**. However, in some cases, you can answer both of these questions in a single, concise sentence at the very beginning of the paper, leaving you room for other, secondary considerations, which could include:

- Providing background information on the topic
- Defining terms (avoid definitions taken directly from a dictionary)
- Establishing the context and significance of your inquiry
- Identifying the scope of your analysis (including brief reference to the **evidence** you present)
- Giving your reader some sense of the organization of your paper

**Note:** When writing your introduction, try to engage your reader, but do not be overly concerned with providing an initial “**hook**” to capture your reader's interest. You best accomplish this by having an interesting and thought-provoking argument. Also avoid topic sentences that are too broad in scope. For example, no university essay should ever begin with a sentence like “*Since the beginning of time...*” or anything to that effect.

### Body Paragraphs

The body paragraph's main purpose is to present the **evidence** that supports your thesis. So this **evidence**, in whatever form it takes (*quotation*, *paraphrase*, *statistic*, *equation*, etc.), is the focal point of any body paragraph. All of the other components are there only to help aid you in presenting this **evidence** so that it is **clear**, **contextualized**, and **connected to your thesis**.

These ‘other components’ have no specific number, and can include further elaborating on a specific part of an issue or expanding your discussion of the implications of a particular problem, but in general, each body paragraph should contain a *minimum* of **five essential components**.

## The Five Essential Components of Body Paragraphs:

- 1) **Topic Sentence** – One of the first sentences of each paragraph should tell your reader the specific *idea, example, issue* or *subject* that will be the focus of the rest of the paragraph. In some cases, you may write more than one sentence if you feel your reader needs additional background information.
- 2) **Context** – Transitioning directly from the topic sentence to, for example, a quotation can create some confusion for your readers because they will want to know where this new information comes from and why it has been included in your paper. For this reason, you will always want to establish *context* prior to introducing your **evidence**. This reference to *context* does not have to be a separate sentence, and in many cases can be as simple as “**In her 2012 study, Dr. Smith argues that...**”.
- 3) **Evidence** – Having contextualized the **evidence**, you can now present it in whatever form seems appropriate given your discipline. See our **Quoting and Paraphrasing** handout for more information.
- 4) **Explanation** – In most situations, your **evidence** will not be self-explanatory. This is especially true with quotations, which are highly interpretive, so you will want to explain to your readers how they should understand the significance of the **evidence**. This explanation can often be done in conjunction with the last component, *Connection*.
- 5) **Connection** – Having explained what the **evidence** means, and why that is important, you can now ‘wrap up’ this paragraph by showing your readers how this **evidence supports your thesis statement**. Be sure, at this stage, to avoid simply restating parts of your thesis. Instead, connect the specific discussion of this paragraph to that part of your argument to which it is most closely related.

**Note:** You can, of course, include more than one statement of evidence in a body paragraph (for example, two quotations), but remember that each piece of evidence needs both context and explanation, while the paragraph as a whole needs only one topic sentence. This gives you the following configuration:

- Topic Sentence
- Context
- Evidence
- Explanation
- Context
- Evidence
- Explanation
- Connection

## The Conclusion

This paragraph’s purpose is to summarize the paper’s major points of **evidence** and to remind the reader of **the thesis statement**. In addition, conclusions can offer recommendations or establish the significance of the topic from a broader, real-world perspective. For more information on conclusion paragraphs, see the handout entitled **Essays: Conclusions**.