

Essay Basics

The Introductory Paragraph

Remember to include all three elements in your introductory paragraph:

- **Topic** (Explain the topic with a “grabber” or a question that will eventually be answered.)
- **Thesis** (What’s *your* opinion about the topic? This must *control* the rest of your essay!)
- **Outline** (Mention the body paragraphs topics; they are the means by which you prove the thesis.)

For short essays, especially in-class test papers, three to four sentences are sufficient for an introduction.

The Body Paragraphs

Remember these issues regarding your body paragraphs:

Structure

- An essay should have at least *two* body paragraphs.
- Each body paragraph is like a mini-essay. Each body paragraph should have *one main point*, and must have a beginning, middle and end. In other words, each body paragraph must have a **topic sentence [TS]**, a **body** and a **concluding sentence [CS]**. The lack of a concluding sentence is a common error; the lack of a topic sentence is fatal.*
- If you are writing a narrative or historical paragraph, tell your story by explaining the cause of the example, the sequence of events, and the significant outcomes. In other words, keep it chronological.
- Organizing your evidence: (1) In essays where a series of examples prove your thesis, put the strongest examples near the end. (2) You may have essays with contradictory evidence; if, for example, you have 6 body paragraphs, two that contradict the thesis and four that support it, you normally place the two opposing, anti-thesis paragraphs *at the beginning*. Thus, group your paragraphs together according to their relationship to the thesis (and never alternate them).
- Make sure to use appropriate **transitions** between sentences and paragraphs, but do not overuse them.

Evidence

- Make sure each body example actually proves or illustrates your body topic!
- Fully explain each body example; an assertion of belief or an unanswered question *does not* constitute proof!
- In an essay that examines text (e.g. literature, philosophy) you should try to build your paragraph’s main point around a quotation. Introduce the quote, place the quote in quotation marks or as a block, and then explain the quote in your own words. **Never end a paragraph with a quote**; it’s *your* job to explain its meaning. It stands to reason, then, that your explanation should be longer than the quote itself. (Generally speaking, 2 or 3 short quotes per body paragraph are optimal.)
- A few quality examples are much better than a list of points.
- It’s acceptable to discuss a contradictory example in a body paragraph, but do so quickly at the beginning of the paragraph and provide a refutation!

The Concluding Paragraph

The conclusion must contain these elements:

- **Restatement of Topic and Thesis:** Make sure your conclusion doesn’t contradict your thesis; it happens more than you think!
- A **Summary** of the Body Paragraphs (This should take one sentence for each paragraph topic.)
- A **Generalization** (Briefly and generally speaking, *why* is your central thesis true?)

Given the things it must accomplish, the conclusion ought to be longer than the introduction. This is your time to demonstrate your understanding of the topic. However, since it’s a summary paragraph, don’t introduce new facts into the conclusion.

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* Narrative essays don’t require stringent topic & concluding sentences like persuasive & expository essays, but they nevertheless require clear paragraphs.