

THE WRITING PROCESS

Organizing an Essay

Organizing ideas and information clearly and logically in an essay, so that readers will understand and be able to follow the writer's thinking, is an essential stage of the writing process, but one that often proves to be more difficult than it sounds. When people write, ideas tend to come out in whatever order they occur to the writer, and it's not always easy to turn a first effort into a cohesive, coherent order. Deciding what information belongs together, what should come first, second, etc., creating a logical flow from one idea or topic to another, all are part of organization. And these judgments can be hard to make.

The organization of material will vary somewhat depending on the type of essay—its subject, whether it's a research or personal essay, how long it will be, etc. However, there are certain features which appear consistently in most types of expository writing and which can be followed as general guides for organizing essays.

PARTS OF AN ESSAY

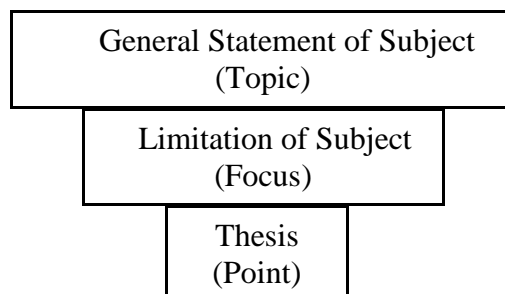
Most essays, and many other kinds of writing, are divided into three basic sections: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. Although the length and number of paragraphs for each section may vary widely from essay to essay, these three sections are relatively consistent in terms of purpose and the kinds of information they include.

The Introduction

The introduction has three main purposes:

- to present the thesis or central idea of the essay
- to lead in to this idea by describing the major issues the writer is concerned with, giving any necessary background information, or discussing how the thesis was arrived at.
- to interest the reader in the topic and give him/her a good sense of how you will approach the topic in the rest of your essay.

An introductory paragraph may be shaped in a number of different ways, but one common shape is frequently used. Called the "funnel shape" because it goes from wide to narrow, this type of introduction looks like this:



The thesis statement is always a statement of the most important point—the idea that the essay seeks to demonstrate or argue. It is a commitment that everything to follow will support that point of view.

Some writers include in the thesis a preview of the main supporting points their essay will develop; others don't.

Example of a Thesis with Preview: Until society recognizes the necessity of supporting working parents, and unless the attitudes of employers change, women will always face an uphill battle in successfully combining family and career responsibilities.

Example of a Thesis without Preview: Women in the workplace face unfair pressures and attitudes that create difficult, perhaps even insurmountable, challenges.

Beginning writers often find that including a preview in their thesis helps them stay on track as they develop each support paragraph. Use whichever version works best for you—as long as your thesis announces exactly where you stand. Whether you preview your supporting points in your thesis or not, be sure to express the supporting points clearly in subsequent paragraphs.

The Body

The body section expands, develops, and supports the central idea or thesis set forth in the introduction. The body of the essay is the writer's discussion of the subject, issues, and points presented in the introduction, developed through examples, explanations, details, and supporting arguments.

- The body should be **unified**: focused on expanding one central idea—the thesis of the essay.
- It should be **developed**: using examples, quotes, details to provide a clear and complete treatment of the subject.
- And it should be **coherent**: follow an ordered line of thinking from paragraph to paragraph and from sentence to sentence.

The length of the body section will depend on the number of subpoints, examples, or supporting arguments you will use. It will probably be divided into several paragraphs, each with its own main idea, related to the central idea or thesis. And like the essay overall, each supporting paragraph should be unified, developed, and coherent.

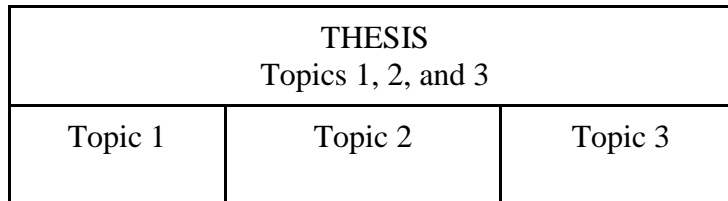
The Conclusion

The conclusion brings the essay to a close. It may restate the thesis or summarize the main points of the argument, but it probably shouldn't merely repeat language that has already been used.

The conclusion may reflect on the importance of the subject in a wider context, or it may suggest some action, or even pose a further question. A conclusion may include any final thoughts stemming from the subject of a paper, but it should not raise any new points or arguments.

ESSAY STRUCTURE

In the framework for the basic essay, each paragraph in the body of the essay is controlled by its own topic statement, which focuses on one aspect of the thesis. In other words, the thesis is the main idea and each topic statement treats one part of the main idea, as diagramed below:



Many types of writing follow some version of the basic shape described above. This shape is most obvious in the form of the traditional five-paragraph essay: a model for college writing in which the writer argues his or her viewpoint (thesis) on a topic and uses three reasons or subtopics to support that position. In the five-paragraph model, as illustrated below, the introductory paragraph mentions the three main points or subtopics, and each body paragraph begins with a topic sentence dealing with one of those main points.

SAMPLE ESSAY USING THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH MODEL

Introductory Paragraph

Opening

Thesis sentence
Points 1, 2, 3

First Supporting Paragraph

Topic Sentence
(Point 1)

Specific evidence

Throughout history, population growth has proceeded at a rather leisurely pace, from approximately 250 million people in A.D. 1 to 500 million people by 1650. Within the past 300 years, however, our numbers have increased dramatically, doubling in ever-shortening cycles, so that by 1930, world population stood at 2 billion and a brief 48 years later, at over 4 billion. The consequences of this accelerating population growth can already be seen, and will be even more devastating in the future. **If this kind of growth continues, it will result in worldwide starvation, destruction of the environment, and literally, no room to breathe.**

If population growth continues at its present rate, it will put enormous pressure on world food supplies, making it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid hunger and starvation on a massive scale. Despite all the triumphs of agriculture in the twentieth century, population growth is outstripping the gains in food production. If all the food in the world were equally distributed with each person receiving the same share, we would all be undernourished. In order to feed the world's people twenty-five years from now, according to one expert, the production of cereal

The opening draws the reader in.

The thesis (bold) states the main idea advanced in the paper.

The plan of development is a list of the points that support the thesis.

The topic sentence (underlined) advances the first supporting point for the thesis.

The specific evidence in the rest of the paragraph develops the first

grains must be doubled, animal products quadrupled, and fruits and vegetables tripled. The probability of accomplishing such goals is not high, given the vagaries of weather and the difficulty of raising sufficient capital to finance such efforts

main point.

Second Supporting Paragraph

Topic Sentence
(Point 2)

Specific evidence

In addition to food shortages, rapid population growth will increase the contamination of the environment. The air over many large cities has become a grayish haze because of automobile exhaust and industrial pollutants; and as population grows, so will the number of automobiles and factories. And pollution of our water and land grows apace. Monstrous oil tankers now spill millions of gallons of oil into the oceans each year, factories and municipalities pour chemical and human waste into rivers, lakes, and streams. This pollution could have catastrophic effects if phytoplankton—minute, floating aquatic plants—are destroyed, since they provide 70 percent of the earth's oxygen. Destruction of the land will increase as it becomes covered with asphalt for more roads and highways, as it becomes despoiled by giant strip-mining machines in search of more coal, and as its natural vegetation is removed to make room for more houses and refuse dumping sites. The solution to hunger and famine obviously depends on the intelligent use of the land. If we do not cherish and protect it, it will not support our current population, to say nothing of billions more.

The topic sentence (underlined) advances the second supporting point for the thesis.

The specific evidence in the rest of the paragraph develops the second main point.

Third Supporting Paragraph

Topic Sentence
(Point 3)

Specific evidence

People also have a need for space, for room to live and play. Though we might be able to feed, clothe, and house more billions, we cannot create more space for them; and limitations of space will create serious psychological problems for humanity. The more people are jammed together, the more hostile and irrational they become. Such irrationality is evidenced in the higher crime rates, the more frequently disrupted public services, and the general impersonality and lack of community in large cities. And people need recreational space too, especially if they live and work in cramped quarters. Yet, recreational areas—beaches, camping grounds, national parks, etc., are already inundated with people. What will conditions be like when the world population reaches 8 or 9 billion?

The topic sentence (underlined) advances the third supporting point for the thesis.

The specific evidence in the rest of the paragraph develops the third main point.

Conclusion

Summary and/or concluding statement

To sum up, unchecked population growth is not merely an annoying problem exaggerated by pessimists who always worry about the future. It is, on the contrary, the most serious problem humanity faces today. Hunger and starvation, environmental destruction, and increasing human tensions and irritability—these are the certain results if we are not able to solve it.

A summary is a brief restatement of the thesis and main points. Conclusions are final thoughts stemming from the subject.

Remember, this is a very simplistic model. It presents a basic idea of essay organization and may certainly be helpful in learning to structure an argument, but it should not be followed religiously as an ideal form.