

Essay Writing Basics

Overview

An academic essay is a group of paragraphs, organized into three sections. Those sections are: introduction, body, and conclusion. These sections may have more than one paragraph in each, though the body section must have more than one paragraph. Body paragraphs differ in structure and function from introduction and conclusion paragraphs, so we will study each section separately, identifying the common characteristics in a traditional academic essay.

The Paragraph

Paragraphs are groups of sentences, organized around a topic sentence. The topic sentence announces to the reader what the paragraph is about and what the author will say about that topic. It has, then, two components: topic and attitude.

- **The Topic:** The topic of a paragraph is a word or phrase that the author has narrowed down. By “narrowed down,” I mean that the author has found a topic that he can cover effectively in one paragraph. For example, a subject like “tuition costs” would be too large for one paragraph if the author wants to provide a detailed discussion that will help the reader understand the topic. So, the author works to narrow this topic down to something that he can cover in one paragraph. To do so, the author turns to prewriting techniques, such as brainstorming, freewriting, and clustering. These techniques ask the writer to jot down as much as possible about the topic. These prewriting techniques have multiple purposes:
 - They clear the author’s brain
 - They allow the author to get down, on paper, everything he knows about a topic
 - They allow the author to begin organizing information through grouping of like information and deleting of irrelevant information

Choosing a particular prewriting technique depends on the author and the purpose. Some techniques lend themselves to more detailed information, and others appeal to particular learning styles. Authors should practice using several techniques and discovering which work the best for them under certain circumstances.

Prewriting might yield the following topics on “tuition costs:”

- Recent hikes in tuition at SSC
- Breakdown of tuition use at SSC
- Comparison of tuition at SSC and other area colleges
- Getting financial aid at SSC

Notice that all of these topics deal with SSC. This is another way of narrowing a topic. Since tuition may change from school to school, an author cannot easily make a blanket statement about tuition in Oklahoma or America. The more he can narrow the scope of his topic, the more he can accomplish in the paragraph. This, however, is only half of the topic sentence. At this point, the author has not informed the reader what he will say about the topic. This is the “attitude.”

- **The Attitude:** Before a writer has a topic sentence, he must figure out what he wants to tell the reader about his topic. This is called, among other things, the “attitude.” We can take the four topics above and add attitudes to them:
 - Recent hikes in tuition at SSC + will prevent many current SSC students from continuing their education.
 - Breakdown of tuition use at SSC + reveals the college’s commitment to providing advanced technological resources for students.
 - Comparison of tuition at SSC and other area colleges + shows the great bargain offered to students attending Seminole for their first two years of college.
 - Getting financial aid at SSC + can be easy with the right planning.

Now we have a complete topic sentence that the author can write about in the paragraph. Writers must be careful that they do not begin a paragraph with simply an announcement of a topic rather than a complete statement of purpose: topic + attitude.

After the author has settled on a topic sentence, he can begin planning his paragraph. Planning is an important part of writing. When a writer has some idea of where he’s going with his paragraph, he can better prepare for any obstacle to his position on the topic that he might face and/or that the reader might have. Obstacles can present themselves in several ways:

- Lack of basic knowledge of topic: the reader does not know enough background information to fully appreciate or understand the author’s point.
- Different opinion about topic: the reader has an opposing position and may strongly disagree with the author or challenge the author’s evidence and reasoning.
- Different education level than author: the reader may not have the same vocabulary or educational background as the author, so the author must modify his diction and style to suit his audience.
- Difficulty finding evidence: the author may not find or have trouble finding the facts and examples he needs to prove his position on the topic.

Even the best planning might not help the author prevent some of these problems, but it helps lower the odds of major problems late into the writing process.

Nine Paragraph Elements

Planning also helps the author organize the other components of an academic paragraph. These are the thesis, the topic sentence, explanation, example, evidence, transitions, audience, context/purpose, and wrap-up. You must use all of these components in your essay to fully express your message to your audience.

1. *The thesis:* this is the overall point of the essay, and you derive all topic sentences from the thesis. The thesis statement should have two major components: the subject and the purpose. The subject announces what the essay is about, and the purpose announces what you are going to tell us about the subject. You can also provide an “essay map” in your thesis. This means previewing the topics in each body paragraph.

Example thesis: Though Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. provided important leadership during

the Civil Rights Movement, King's leadership style proved more appealing to the mainstream who sought integration for America not more segregation.

- a. Subject: Contrasting Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. as leaders during the Civil Rights Movement.
 - b. Purpose: Show how Martin Luther King, Jr.'s style of leadership appealed to those wanting to integrate rather than segregate.
 - c. Audience: People interested in diverse leadership styles of the two and why one spoke to a wider audience.
2. *Topic sentences*: These drive the body of the essay. For each specific point you make to support your thesis sentence, you must have a topic sentence and at least one body paragraph that provides detailed support. For the thesis on King and Malcolm X, the topic sentences must come from the aspects of leadership you have established as important for this discussion. You must do that in your introduction, before you announce your thesis. You must tell your reader why this is an important discussion to have – why should we analyze these two? How are you defining leadership in this context?

Sample Topic sentences:

- a. Martin Luther King, Jr. lead his supporters into any conflict by first teaching them how to maintain a peaceful attitude that would not provoke or justify a violent response from police.
 - b. Malcolm X encouraged aggression in his followers.
3. *Explanation*: Following the topic sentence, you must explain your point to your reader. What does it mean when you say that King taught his followers how to respond? What does "aggression" consist of concerning Malcolm X's methods? Without this explanation, your reader may not understand the specific point you are trying to make. Explanation would also include important definitions: any words or terms the reader may not know, or that have potential multiple means that the reader may misinterpret. Explanation usually remains at the general level. You discuss what was the overall behavior like. You do not get into details until the next step: example.
4. *Example*: After giving an explanation, you then make it perfectly clear what you mean by giving the reader a specific example to illustrate your explanation. In this case, you would use a common knowledge incident or cite from a source that shows us in detail what King's methods were. If necessary, you might even present two or more examples to show a variety of techniques or to prove that this was the dominant method.
5. *Evidence to support details*: if the topic warrants, the author must back up his position with facts, statistics, authoritative testimony, and other objective evidence that supports his attitude on the topic. The more debatable or argumentative the attitude, the more likely the author will need objective evidence outside his own experience or opinion.
6. *Transitions*: between each component, you must provide connections that help the reader see the relationship between these parts, like cause, effect, comparison, and contrast, etc. You simply don't list these elements in order. It is up to you to provide the coherence and unity through transitions that logically guide your reader through your reasoning.

7. *Audience*: Knowing who your audience is determines the depth of explanation and example you provide as well as the language you use to express yourself. It also helps set the parameters for the discussion.
8. *Context/Purpose*: Always keeping in mind the reason for the discussion helps you organize and develop your paragraphs. You must connect your reasons always to the overall purpose – in this essay, it is to show how King’s leadership style was better than Malcolm X’s in this particular context. That context is integration rather than segregation.
9. *Concluding/Summary sentence*: the final sentence or sentences in a paragraph should wrap up the author’s point. It might summarize the overall material or it might ask readers to take action, consider solutions, or evaluate their own positions on the topic. Some paragraphs may not need a summary sentence – this is a judgment call on the author’s part. You do not want to be repetitive or state the obvious; however, you also want to be sure your reader clearly understands the significance of what you’ve just argued. Generally speaking, the longer the paragraph is, and the more complex the argument gets, the more likely it is you will need a wrap-up sentence before moving on to your next point or to your conclusion paragraph.

As you continue to work on your essays, print out a clean copy and mark each of these items on your draft. If you are missing any one, then you should work on adding that component to your paper. If your essay is falling short of the required length, chances are you are missing some of these components.