

General Essay Writing Tips

Despite the fact that, as Shakespeare said, "the pen is mightier than the sword," the pen itself is not enough to make an effective writer. In fact, though we may all like to think of ourselves as the next Shakespeare, inspiration alone is not the key to effective essay writing. You see, the conventions of English essays are more formulaic than you might think – and, in many ways, it can be as simple as counting to five.

The Five Paragraph Essay

Though more advanced academic papers are a category all their own, the basic high school or college essay has the following standardized, five paragraph structure:

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Paragraph 2: Body 1

Paragraph 3: Body 2

Paragraph 4: Body 3

Paragraph 5: Conclusion

The Introduction

The principle purpose of the introduction is to present your position (this is also known as the "thesis" or "argument") on the issue at hand but effective introductory paragraphs are so much more than that. Before you even get to this thesis statement, for example, the essay should begin with a "hook" that grabs the reader's attention and makes them want to read on. Examples of effective hooks include relevant quotations ("no man is an island") or surprising statistics ("three out of four doctors report that...").

Only then, with the reader's attention "hooked," should you move on to the thesis. The thesis should be a clear, one-sentence explanation of your position that leaves no doubt in the reader's mind about which side you are on from the beginning of your essay.

Following the thesis, you should provide a mini-outline which previews the examples you will use to support your thesis in the rest of the essay. Not only does this tell the reader what to expect in the paragraphs to come but it also gives them a clearer understanding of what the essay is about.

Finally, designing the last sentence in this way has the added benefit of seamlessly moving the reader to the first paragraph of the body of the paper. In this way we can see that the basic introduction does not need to be much more than three or four sentences in length. If yours is much longer you might want to consider editing it down a bit!

DO - Pay Attention to Your Introductory Paragraph

Because this is the first paragraph of your essay it is your opportunity to give the reader the best first impression possible. The introductory paragraph not only gives the reader an idea of what you will talk about but also shows them how you will talk about it. Put a disproportionate amount of effort into this – more than the 20% a simple calculation would suggest – and you will be rewarded accordingly.

DO NOT - Use Passive Voice or I/My

Active voice, wherein the subjects direct actions rather than let the actions "happen to" them – "he scored a 97%" instead of "he was given a 97%" – is a much more powerful and attention-grabbing way to write. At the same time, unless it is a personal narrative, avoid personal pronouns like I, My, or Me. Try instead to be more general and you will have your reader hooked.

The Body Paragraphs



The middle paragraphs of the essay are collectively known as the body paragraphs and, as alluded to above, the main purpose of a body paragraph is to spell out in detail the examples that support your thesis.

For the first body paragraph you should use your strongest argument or most significant example unless some other more obvious beginning point (as in the case of chronological explanations) is required. The first sentence of this paragraph should be the topic sentence of the paragraph that directly relates to the examples listed in the mini-outline of introductory paragraph.

A one sentence body paragraph that simply cites the example of "George Washington" or "LeBron James" is not enough, however. No, following this an effective essay will follow up on this topic sentence by explaining to the reader, in detail, who or what an example is and, more importantly, why that example is relevant.

Even the most famous examples need context. For example, George Washington's life was extremely complex – by using him as an example, do you intend to refer to his honesty, bravery, or maybe even his wooden teeth? The reader needs to know this and it is your job as the writer to paint the appropriate picture for them. To do this, it is a good idea to provide the reader with five or six relevant facts about the life (in general) or event (in particular) you believe most clearly illustrates your point.

Having done that, you then need to explain exactly why this example proves your thesis. The importance of this step cannot be understated (although it clearly can be underlined); this is, after all, the whole reason you are providing the example in the first place. **Seal the deal by directly stating why this example is relevant.**

<p>DO: Tie Things Together </p> <p>The first sentence – the topic sentence - of your body paragraphs needs to have a lot individual pieces to be truly effective. Not only should it open with a transition that signals the change from one idea to the next but also it should (ideally) also have a common thread which ties all of the body paragraphs together. For example, if you used "first" in the first body paragraph then you should used "secondly" in the second or "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" accordingly.</p>	<p>DO NOT: Be Too General </p> <p>Examples should be relevant to the thesis and so should the explanatory details you provide for them. It can be hard to summarize the full richness of a given example in just a few lines so make them count. If you are trying to explain why George Washington is a great example of a strong leader, for instance, his childhood adventure with the cherry tree (though interesting in another essay) should probably be skipped over.</p>
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A Word on Transitions

Transitional phrases are useful for showing the reader where one section ends and another begins. It may be helpful to see them as the written equivalent of the kinds of spoken cues used in formal speeches that signal the end of one set of ideas and the beginning of another. In essence, they lead the reader from one section of the paragraph of another.

Examples of transitional phrases include "furthermore," "moreover," but also "by contrast" and "on the other hand" – and are the hallmark of good writing.

The Conclusion

Although the conclusion paragraph comes at the end of your essay it should not be seen as an afterthought. As the final paragraph it represents your last chance to make your case and, as such, should follow an extremely rigid format.

One way to think of the conclusion is, paradoxically, as a second introduction because it does in fact contain many of the same features. While it does not need to be too long – four well-crafted sentences should be enough – it can make or break an essay.

Effective conclusions open with a concluding transition ("in conclusion," "in the end," etc.) and an allusion to the "hook" used in the introductory paragraph. After that you should immediately provide a restatement of your thesis statement.

This should be the fourth or fifth time you have repeated your thesis so while you should use a variety of word choice in the body paragraphs it is an acceptable idea to use some (but not all) of the original language you used in the introduction. This echoing effect not only reinforces your argument but also ties it nicely to the second key element of the conclusion: a brief (two or three words is enough) review of the three main points from the body of the paper.

Having done all of that, the final element – and final sentence in your essay – should be a "global statement" or "call to action" that gives the reader signals that the discussion has come to an end.

DO: Be Powerful



The conclusion paragraph can be a difficult paragraph to write effectively but, as it is your last chance to convince or otherwise impress the reader, it is worth investing some time in. Take this opportunity to restate your thesis with confidence; if you present your argument as "obvious" then the reader might just do the same.

DO NOT: Copy the First Paragraph



Although you can reuse the same key words in the conclusion as you did in the introduction, try not to copy whole phrases word for word. Instead, try to use this last paragraph to really show your skills as a writer by being as artful in your rephrasing as possible.

Taken together, then, the overall structure of a five paragraph essay should look something like this:

Introduction Paragraph

- An attention-grabbing "hook"
- A thesis statement
- A preview of the three subtopics you will discuss in the body paragraphs.

First Body Paragraph

- Topic sentence which states the first subtopic and opens with a transition
- Supporting details or examples
- An explanation of how this example proves your thesis

Second Body Paragraph

- Topic sentence which states the second subtopic and opens with a transition
- Supporting details or examples
- An explanation of how this example proves your thesis

Third Body Paragraph

- Topic sentence which states the third subtopic and opens with a transition
- Supporting details or examples
- An explanation of how this example proves your thesis

Concluding Paragraph

- Concluding Transition, Reverse "hook," and restatement of thesis.
- Rephrasing main topic and subtopics.
- Global statement or call to action.

More tips to make your essay shine!

Planning Pays

Although it may seem like a waste of time – especially during exams where time is tight – it is almost always better to brainstorm a bit before beginning your essay. This should enable you to find the best supporting ideas – rather than simply the first ones that come to mind – and position them in your essay accordingly.

Your best supporting idea – the one that most strongly makes your case and, simultaneously, about which you have the most knowledge – should go first. Even the best-written essays can fail because of ineffectively placed arguments.

Aim for Variety

Sentences and vocabulary of varying complexity are one of the hallmarks of effective writing. When you are writing, try to avoid using the same words and phrases over and over again. You don't have to be a walking thesaurus but a little variance can make the same idea sparkle.

If you are asked about "money," you could try "wealth" or "riches." At the same time, avoid beginning sentences the dull pattern of "subject + verb + direct object." Although examples of this are harder to give, consider our writing throughout this article as one big example of sentence structure variety.

Practice! Practice! Practice!

In the end, though, remember that good writing does not happen by accident. Although we have endeavored to explain everything that goes into effective essay writing in as clear and concise a way as possible, it is much easier in theory than it is in practice.

As a result, we recommend that you practice writing sample essays on various topics. Even if they are not masterpieces at first, a bit of regular practice will soon change that – and make you better prepared when it comes to the real thing.