

Essay structure

The expected structure for an essay **varies** widely among courses and academic **disciplines**. Always read your assignment page carefully and make sure you understand the requirements. Don't be afraid to ask questions if something isn't clear. However, a TA or professor may not give you guidance on a particular issue if discovering a solution independently is considered part of the **challenge** of the assignment. Students are frequently expected to figure out for themselves a suitable approach to a writing task. Whether or not the assignment provides you with detailed directions, writing an essay is ideally a kind of **intellectual journey** which will enhance your understanding of the subject. The following are some methods to use when you are given the **freedom** to choose your own approach to an assignment or when you're writing in response to a **broad question**.

1. Be alert to the **argumentation** in the readings and lectures. Note down the types of arguments the professor makes (not to repeat them in your paper, but to get a sense of how people argue in this discipline). Pay close attention to the way **evidence** is used to support the larger concepts in the readings.
2. Break down your assigned topic or question into **progressively smaller** units. For example:
 - Let's say your assignment is to "discuss the contributing causes as well as the implications of one or more changes in the status of women during the 20th century." As you can see, much of the initial work for this essay will be in **narrowing** down the topic to arrive at a clear and specific **focus**.
 - Consider the **length limit** for the essay: How many changes can you realistically cover in the number of pages you are permitted to write? Is it just one change, like voting rights? Can this change be broken down further into various aspects, like the role of particular individuals, organizations, or movements? Are there controversies regarding the reasons for this change or the effects it had on women's lives? How can these controversies be analyzed using the theories or other information you've been introduced to in the course? **Use and refer to** what you've learned in the course as you construct your essay.
 - You may need to **narrow your focus** even further, to discuss women of a particular social class, religion, nationality, age, etc. In deciding how to narrow the focus, keep in mind the available information and the degree of depth expected in the course. In most essays, it is preferable to narrow your focus so you can develop your ideas in greater **depth**.
3. Consider the **method of organization** best suited to your topic. Should you describe the results and implications of the change first, and then argue as to

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAM (ELL)

the contributing causes—or the reverse? Is it necessary to explain the causes in chronological order, or would your argument be strengthened by presenting the causes from least important to most important? Or should you begin with the leading cause? How will you divide the available space between “causes” and “implications” so as to cover both adequately?

4. Think about how material is presented in this course and ask yourself what structure will be most **persuasive**. How might one of the writers in the course readings organize this essay, if she were in your place? Don't be afraid to use your **intuition**.
5. As you're reading and researching, use “**previewing**,” “**skimming and scanning**,” and “**active reading**” techniques to help yourself come to the detailed observations you'll need for the essay. (Handouts on these techniques are posted on this site, under “Effective Academic Reading”).
6. Read some student papers in the same discipline from an online **undergraduate journal**. To explore a variety of undergraduate journals, see the list at: <http://www.cur.org/ugjournal.html>

Below you'll find a description of some common expectations for the structural elements of an essay. Please be aware that these expectations may vary according to the particular discipline, course, or marker. Remember, too, that writing is not science, and there are always many valid ways to approach a writing task. Approaches that work for one topic may not work for another, so let your own perceptions be your guide. Your assessment of your work will be sharpened if you write a draft and then let it sit for a day or two before reading it over. You can also use “peer review” techniques, which are detailed in a separate handout, also posted on this site.

Introduction:

- The purpose of the introduction is to **orient** your reader and create interest in the paper. You may need to establish a context for your essay by giving some background information on a topic of central importance to the paper. If your main purpose is to respond to course readings, it may also be necessary to identify their titles and authors' names.
- In a short paper (up to 6-8 double-spaced pages) the introduction is usually **one** paragraph (half to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page in length). Your precise subject should be apparent from the very beginning. **Avoid** writing broad generalizations that take up space unnecessarily (e.g. “Revolution is a fascinating phenomenon, and revolutions have swept societies throughout history.”)

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAM (ELL)

- Instead, begin your introduction by making specific, interpretive statements, even as you are taking a somewhat wider view: “In the three years leading up to the X revolution, X society could best be described as....”
- In a longer paper (10-20 pages), it may take **two or three** paragraphs to introduce your exact subject, though all the information should be relevant to your thesis.
- You may also want to include a **mapping sentence** following the thesis statement. This sentence tells how you will develop the ideas in the thesis. “In this essay, I will compare the A and B revolutions in terms of their relative X and Y. I will then attempt to show their differences in Z.” Sometimes the thesis and mapping sentences form their own short paragraph, after the introductory material.
- If you find your introduction becoming too long and detailed, look to see which statements can be **removed** and saved for the body of the essay. This may include some background material that is essential for your essay but which the reader doesn’t **need to know** in the introduction. Many essays provide historical or other background in the first body paragraph. Ask yourself where the reader most benefits from the placement of this information.

Thesis:

- Your thesis is a brief **overview** of the central concepts of your paper. It may be written in one sentence, but avoid “listing” ideas so simply that the concept of the essay seems vague. When drafting your thesis, look for overly general language like “things” or “many differences” and replace it with more specific vocabulary. The thesis may take **two or more** sentences to express in adequate detail, depending on the length and complexity of the paper. See the “Models for Thesis Statements”, also posted on this site.
- If the essay is written in response to a specific assignment question, be sure that the thesis provides a direct **answer** to that question. Do **not** just restate the assignment question as your thesis.
- The thesis is usually stated in a concise form at the beginning of your paper, at the end of the introduction (half or $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way down the first double-spaced page), and it is then **developed** throughout the body of the essay. Keep your thesis in mind as you write, and **remind** your reader at intervals of your overall **purpose**.
- In most paragraphs, you should be advancing the ideas in your thesis and **explaining** to your reader exactly how the information you’re presenting refers back to your central concepts.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAM (ELL)

- The reader expects that the organization of points in the essay will follow the **order** in which those points are presented in the thesis and/or mapping sentences.
- In some courses, your thesis may take the form of an **original** argument. You may be expected to take a position on a point of controversy. In other instances, the thesis may be used more as an organizing principle which allows you to **synthesize** aspects of the course material and present some of what you've learned. In either case, you need a clear sense of **purpose** for your paper, and you will need to have narrowed down your topic.

Body paragraphs:

- Each body paragraph should develop your thesis a bit further. In order to do this effectively, you need to “look back” to your original statement. Try to use the **key words** in your **thesis** as you're moving forward in your paragraphs, and show how these words gain new meaning with the additional information you're presenting.
- Also “look ahead” to the coming paragraphs; remember that you have a destination for your reader, and make sure that goal influences what you're saying. The art of persuasion depends on gradually building an explanation. Be sure **each step** of your logical thinking is **expressed** in the writing and not simply left for the reader to understand.
- Develop your paragraphs with explanations, illustrative details and examples. In general, write paragraphs of about **5-8** sentences, and make sure all the information about a certain aspect of your topic is grouped together in one part of the essay.
- Aim for **2 to 3** paragraphs per page. (Note: do *not* try to write a “5 paragraph essay,” as this will not be suitable for the length of most university assignments).

Topic sentences:

- The first sentence of each body paragraph will usually give a clear idea of the overall content of that paragraph and will show how it supports the thesis. This is called the topic sentence. Not every paragraph begins this way, but **in most academic papers** authors advance their arguments or explanations strongly in the first sentence or two of each paragraph. This technique provides a helpful “signpost” to the reader.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAM (ELL)

- A paragraph may also build up to its topic sentence at the end. Each paragraph should function as a **unified whole** with a particular point to make; each is a carefully shaped piece of the larger design of the paper.
- Try to move **from the general to the specific** within each paragraph. Avoid placing quotations or very specific data at the beginning of a paragraph, since the reader doesn't yet know why they're there. Instead, first present the general concept and then progress to explaining and illustrating it inside the paragraph. Many paragraphs also look back toward the thesis at their beginnings or endings. Many look ahead toward the coming paragraphs, too. However, don't feel you must follow any of this as a rigid formula. Think instead of where your reader **needs** a reminder of how the evidence you've just presented supports your overall purpose, or where the reader will need a hint of what comes later.
- Be **explicit** about exactly how the **information** you present supports the argument. Most student writers are too subtle, not too obvious.
- Don't try to cover too much in one paragraph—if a **new topic** appears, see where it fits into another paragraph or develop it in a new paragraph.
- Use some transitional expressions (e.g. “however”, “consequently”) if you find them useful, but don't overuse them. Instead, focus on explaining your reasoning carefully, taking the reader with you each step of the way.

Conclusion:

- Most short essays have one paragraph of conclusion, though a longer essay may have more than one. The main purpose of the conclusion is to “look back” over the essay as a whole, though *not* at every point.
- Focus on the **key issues** you want your readers to remember best, and present them in a lively and interesting way.
- You may need to summarize your main points, but don't repeat points you've already made in exactly the same language. Instead, **vary** the **wording** you use in the conclusion.
- Explore some of the **implications** of the points you've already developed. Avoid wandering away from your thesis, but don't be afraid to introduce a new idea that **logically flows** from what you've been saying.
- Further information can be found in “Introductions and Conclusions”, also posted at this site.