



Essay structure

You need to present a clear argument in your essay, and if you organise your ideas in a structured way, that will help to present your argument clearly. You're trying to convince your reader of your position on the topic, so you need to make it as easy as possible for them to follow your argument. You can't convince someone of something they can't understand!

The time-honoured structure for an essay sounds simple – introduction, body, conclusion. But what does each of those mean? What do you need to write in those sections?

Introduction

(around 10% of the word count)

It may sound basic, but this is where you introduce the topic, the particular aspect of the topic you are focusing on, and the position you are going to argue in your essay. By the end of the introduction, your reader should be able to predict what kinds of points you are going to make. The reader should also be able to see clearly that you are addressing the assessment question or task.

Your introduction acts a bit like a train announcement (when you can hear them!). When you get on the train, you should hear an announcement of all the stations that train will stop at. If you get on at Strathfield to go to Penrith, you might hear:

'This train is a Western Line service, stopping at Parramatta, Blacktown, Penrith, and Emu Plains.'

That means it's an express and won't stop at all the stations in between. So you won't be surprised when the train stops at Blacktown, but doesn't stop at Mt Druitt. In your introduction, you should prepare your reader for the rest of your essay so they don't get any big surprises.

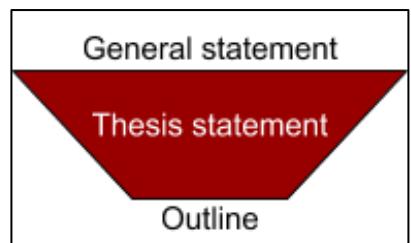
The three essential elements of an introduction are a general statement, a thesis statement, and an outline.

The **general statement** is usually the first sentence, and you use this to ease the reader into thinking about the topic. You've been researching the topic for a few weeks, but the reader is coming to it fresh. Out of all the possible topics that are out there, you need to help the reader get oriented to this particular topic and how it relates to the world in general.

The **thesis statement** is a statement of your argument. That means it will be more specific than the general statement, and it will narrow the scope of the essay. Out of all the different aspects of the topic that you could write about, this is the position you are taking and the aspects you will consider.

The **outline** gives the reader a preview of what points you will make as you argue your position. It's helpful if you put them in the same order as they appear in the body of your essay. Think of the confusion if the train announcement told people the stations all out of order!

You can think of these elements like a funnel or filter, working from broadest information to narrowest information; from the general to the specific. The outline then provides the launch pad for you to begin presenting your points in the body of your essay.



Example

In the following example of an introduction, the *General Statement* is in italic font, the **Thesis Statement** is in bold font, and the Outline is in underlined font.

Essay task: Identify and discuss the most serious occupational hazards of nurses.

While patient safety has long been a nursing priority, the occupational safety of nurses has only recently received serious attention. These occupational health hazards include the risk of back injuries, stress, and the dangers of radiation and infection. Apart from these kinds of risks, hospitals were thought to be safe places to work. **This paper argues that violence against nurses is a serious problem for hospitals and thus a serious occupational hazard.** It reviews the literature on the incidence of violence and the effects of violence on nurses, and suggests strategies to manage violent situations.

General statement introduces the topic in general terms and indicates the relevance of the issue ('long' vs. 'recently'). The following sentences give some definition and background to the topic of occupational health hazards in hospitals.

Thesis Statement outlines the writer's position. Outline indicates the stages of the essay (literature review, recommendation of risk management strategies).

Example adapted from Western Sydney University (2014).

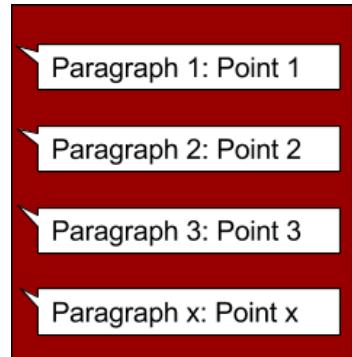
Body

(around 80% of the word count)

In the body of your essay, you present each point in your argument in its own paragraph (or set of paragraphs, if it's a longer point). Each paragraph should begin with a sentence signalling to your reader which point you are making in that paragraph. We call this a **topic sentence**.

Think back to the train example. When the train is approaching the next station (e.g. Parramatta), you get an announcement: '*This train will stop at Parramatta.*' This is the signal for passengers to know where they are up to on the train journey. The topic sentence makes a similar signal to your reader: 'This is where we are up to in my overall argument'.

It's also good if you can link the point to the overall argument in your topic sentence. If you've done your introduction well, the reader should be able to look at the topic sentence of each paragraph and match



them up to the points you signalled in your introduction. You should present the points in your essay in the same order you gave them in the outline in your introduction.

After the topic sentence, your paragraph should then have a sentence or two explaining the point in more detail, and at least one piece of evidence supporting the point. Your evidence might be a reference to scholarly sources or some research data. The basic structure of a paragraph is described in the following table:

Element	Function
Topic sentence	Introduce the main point of the paragraph, linking it with the topic of the overall argument.
Explanation and elaboration	Support the point by clearly explaining it with reference to the concepts of the field. If you need to define important terms in your point, do that here.
Evidence	Support the point with relevant examples from research or scholarly literature.
(Concluding sentence)	Optional. Finish your point with a summary statement.

Adapted from University of Western Sydney (2009, p. 32)

Example

Essay task: Do you agree with the Forestry Commission's policy to phase out major logging operations in NSW? Give reasons for your answer.

Thesis Statement and Outline from Introduction

Despite arguments to the contrary, there is strong evidence that these logging practices not only cause significant and often irreparable damage to the environment but ultimately to the timber industry itself. The Forestry Commission's policy of phasing out major logging operations by 1996 must, therefore, be considered essential to preserve what is left of the NSW rainforests.

Paragraph 1: The most important reason for phasing out logging is its destructive impact on the environment. Logging affects the rainforest ecosystem in a number of ways. Firstly, the loss of rainforest means the loss of large quantities of unique plant and animal species. *Despite their diminishing area, the rainforests of eastern Australia still retain the greatest number of flowering plant species in the world (Stacey, 1995:45).* The rainforests also provide a habitat for many species of rare and/or endangered animals, some of which are found only in rainforests. These plants and animals evolve to suit the specific environmental conditions of the rainforest. If these conditions are modified by removing trees, many of these species will become extinct. *It is estimated, in fact, that if rainforest destruction occurs at the present rate, by the end of the century nearly half of the world's plant and animal species will be wiped out (Lucas, 1998:36).*

Paragraph 2: A second reason for phasing out rainforest logging is that continuing present logging practices will ultimately have a negative effect on the timber industry itself. While the timber lobby argues that continued logging will protect the industry (Jarvis, 1998:56), this argument ignores the long term effects of continuing present practices. Many timber mills in NSW are still operating occurring to quotas which were set in 1953. These quotas were determined on the basis of each mill's log intake and were set well beyond the capacity of the State's rainforest areas to sustain them. Although some quotas have been changed since then, these unsustainable logging practices have led to diminishing supplies of timber. If present logging practices are continued the supply of timber will soon run out and many workers will lose their jobs.

Topic sentence signals the writer's first point in the argument: an environmental reason for the argument that logging should be phased out.

Explanation & elaboration supports the point with further detail and reasoning.

Evidence from research and scholarly literature supports the point.

Topic sentence signals the writer's second main point in the argument: an industrial reason for the argument that logging should be phased out. In this paragraph, the writer brings in an *opposing view* from the literature, and then presents a counter-argument. This is another way of elaborating and arguing your point.

Example adapted from University of Western Sydney (2014).

Conclusion

(around 10% of the word count)

Once you've covered each of your points in its own paragraph, you then conclude your essay by summarising the points you've made, reinforcing your overall argument. You shouldn't introduce any new information here, and in general you shouldn't need to quote or cite any references, as you are only summarising the content of your own essay.

The content of the conclusion will be similar to your introduction, but it has a different purpose – rather than introducing the reader to your argument, you now have the opportunity to make a final convincing summary of what you have just said and why it's valid. This means your conclusion should NOT just be your introduction restated.

When the reader reaches your conclusion, it should be very clear to them that this is the end of your argument. They've been reminded of all the good points you made and what your overall argument was. They haven't encountered any new information that would make them expect there is another paragraph to read.

Going back to the train announcement analogy, this is where the announcement says, 'This train will terminate here. All out, all change!' Although you won't use these words in your essay (or anything similar like 'the end'), you still need to use words in a way that signals closure.

Example

Essay task: Do you agree with the Forestry Commission's policy to phase out major logging operations in NSW? Give reasons for your answer.

Thesis Statement and Outline from Introduction

Despite arguments to the contrary, there is strong evidence that these logging practices not only cause significant and often irreparable damage to the environment but ultimately to the timber industry itself. The Forestry Commission's policy of phasing out major logging operations by 1996 must, therefore, be considered essential to preserve what is left of the NSW rainforests.

The arguments presented above make it clear that continuing current practices of rainforest logging in NSW would be irresponsible. Therefore, phasing out rainforest logging as proposed by the Forestry Commission is the only viable alternative because it allows for time to find environmentally sustainable alternatives to rainforest timbers and to provide alternative employment to the workers.

Essay recap refers back to the essay as a whole and reminds the reader of what its purpose was.
Restatement of Thesis reiterates the argument made in the Thesis Statement in the introduction.
Summary of main points refers back to the two main arguments made: environmental and industrial impact of phasing out logging

Example adapted from University of Western Sydney (2014).

Reference list

Because you will have referred to sources to support the points in your argument, you need to provide a reference list that includes all the sources you referred to.

Your reference list should normally be organised in alphabetical order and formatted according to the referencing style required in your unit. Check your unit's Subject Outline and the assignment instructions to make sure you use the right referencing style.

Then go to the Library's [Referencing and Citation Guide](#) for help with correctly formatting your citations and references.

More information

- [Argument mapping](#) (PDF, 155 kB) diagram from Jamel Ostwald
- [Essay Drafting Tool](#) (PDF, 711 kB) from School of Humanities and Communication Arts

References

Western Sydney University. (2009). *Preparing students for learning through written assessment: A toolkit for Learning Guides*. Student Learning Unit. Sydney, Australia.

Western Sydney University. (2014). *102080 'Academic Writing' Reader and Workbook*. Sydney, Australia.