

The Essay

The word "essay" comes from the French word meaning "to try." An essay is an attempt to communicate your ideas about your experience, reading, or research to a larger audience. The main idea that you are attempting to explain is known as the **thesis**. Every essay has a thesis, whether it is stated or not. Essays vary in length, but are always composed of several paragraphs. In the most basic structure, the first paragraph is the **introduction**, the middle paragraphs are the **body paragraphs**, which explain, define, and/or support the thesis, and the final paragraph is the **conclusion**. As you read, you will notice that other writers sometimes take more than one paragraph for an introduction or conclusion. Also, you may notice that other writers do not state a thesis, though their essays still contain a main point. This is known as an *implied thesis*. Professional writers can do this, but teachers expect your thesis to be explicit, not implied. As a student, you are expected to have a clear thesis statement in the beginning of your essay.

In school, you are always writing for a specific **purpose**. This purpose will guide the focus, style, structure, and content of your essay. It will also lead you to your thesis. So the first step in the writing process is to establish the purpose of the paper you are about to write. That will help give you a direction. Oftentimes, the teacher will make the purpose of the paper clear to you.

Related to the purpose is the **audience**. While you may write your paper by yourself, you must keep in mind that other people will be reading your paper. If your teacher does not tell you a specific audience to write for, assume that the audience is the teacher and the other students in the class. Keeping this audience, or ideal reader, in mind will help you decide how much you need to explain things and what word choice (*diction*) is appropriate. Your goal is not only to explain yourself clearly to your audience, but to do so in an engaging way.

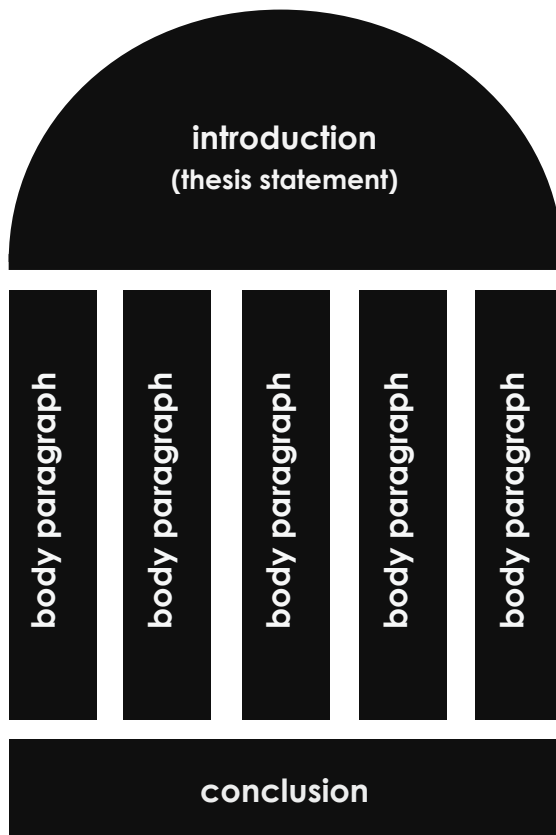
Lastly, while it may not feel like it, by writing an essay you are entering into a larger discussion about your given topic. The more you understand the bigger significance of what you are writing about, the more you and your readers will get out of your paper.

Some terms you should know in order to talk about essays in school are: introduction, thesis, transition, body paragraph, logic, fact/opinion, general/specific, example, narration, description, persuasion, comparison/contrast, diction, style, structure, and conclusion.

Basic essay structure

The essay should be a unified piece of writing. The unifying principle for an essay is the **thesis**. Everything—the examples, the style, the conclusion, etc.—should work towards supporting and reinforcing the thesis.

Imagine the essay as an architectural structure:



The introduction is the dome that covers the essay. It establishes the scope of the essay and draws the reader into the rest of the paper. An introduction generally contains a thesis statement, which is the focus of the entire paper.

thesis = topic + opinion/insight

Each body paragraph must support the thesis.

That means that the arguments and examples in each paragraph must not only relate to the topic of the paper, but also to the opinion/insight on that topic.

If a body paragraph does not give detail about both the topic and the opinion/insight, then the thesis will be unsupported and the essay will come crashing down.

Everything comes to rest on the conclusion. If the conclusion brings up a new topic or opinion/insight, then the essay will have no base and will be left incomplete.