

# Basic Essay Structure

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the structure that many academic essays follow, and what that structure looks like in practice. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

### 1. Academic Essay Components

#### 1a. Introduction and Thesis Statement

#### 1b. Body Paragraphs

#### 1c. Conclusion

### 2. Essay Components in Action

## 1. Academic Essay Components

Like most other forms of writing, essays use sentences and paragraphs, and should include a structure of ideas that flows logically from one point to the next.

Most essays end up with three primary components:

- Introduction with a thesis statement
- Body paragraphs
- Conclusion

### 1a. Introduction and Thesis Statement

Essays generally begin with an introduction that lays out the primary purpose, goal, or point of the essay. As such, the thesis statement will be an important part of the introduction.

Recall that a thesis statement is a single sentence that expresses the main point or position of a piece of writing. That main idea is the driver of the paper, the goal that will organize the structure and content of the piece. Most essays include a thesis statement at the end of the introduction, meaning that the introduction itself starts out more general, moving toward that specific thesis statement at the end.

Every introduction should give both a brief explanation of the topic and a clear statement of the thesis, but a really good introduction will also draw the readers in and capture their attention.

## 1b. Body Paragraphs

Essays also include body paragraphs, or paragraphs that contain the main ideas of the essay, making up the body of the work. Each paragraph should have a **topic sentence**, which is a sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph, and which comes at the beginning of the paragraph. This will limit and focus the paragraph just like a thesis statement limits and focuses the whole paper.

Then, you'll have **supporting sentences**, which can include evidence, reasoning, and examples, in order to prove to your reader that the main point of the paragraph is valid. You'll want to carefully choose the support and the way you express it in order to match your audience and the main purpose or goal of the text.

Finally, a **concluding sentence** wraps up the paragraph and helps lead into the next one. Between each paragraph, just as between each sentence, you want to make use of **transitions** to direct and clarify. Transitions are words, word combinations, and even full sentences that highlight connections between ideas.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Topic Sentence

A sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph.

#### Supporting Sentence

A sentence in a paragraph that offers an example, explanation, important detail, or analysis to develop the idea presented in the topic sentence.

#### Concluding Sentence

A sentence that either summarizes a paragraph or signals how the essay will flow into the next paragraph.

#### Transition

A word, phrase, or sentence that highlights a connection between ideas.

## 1c. Conclusion

After the body paragraphs usually comes a conclusion, which is a final paragraph or two that wraps up the main points of the essay, and may point to further questions, ideas, and areas of thinking that are beyond - but still linked to - the essay's area of focus.

Conclusions tend to be challenging for writers because they should do more than simply restate the essay's main points, but they also must remain on topic and avoid introducing entirely new thoughts.

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# 2. Essay Components in Action

Now that you understand the major components of an essay, you can start to think about how those components will come together and ultimately form a successful essay.

Read the following short essay, and see if you can identify each of the components (introduction with a thesis statement, body paragraphs with topic sentences, supporting sentences, and transitions, and a conclusion) that the writer outlined beforehand.}}

*"Zero tolerance" is a way to describe policies that impose automatic penalties for breaking rules. These have been used in many schools to curb drugs, violence, and inappropriate conduct. Are zero-tolerance policies good for schools? Once we understand the effects, it's clear that zero-tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools.*

*Some proponents of zero tolerance argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important. Even if a student breaks a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing Advil, the rule against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.*

*In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that law without context creates a hostile environment. A student accidentally bringing Advil poses no threat to peers, and should not be treated the same as other drug violations. Imposing penalties on this student could have significant negative effects.*

*As we can see, such policies fail to acknowledge the reasons that rules get broken. Thus they cause, not prevent, harm. Because of the arguments against zero tolerance, schools should avoid instituting such policies.*

Here is the introduction, with the thesis statement underlined at the end:

*"Zero tolerance" is a way to describe policies that impose automatic penalties for breaking rules. These have been used in many schools to curb drugs, violence, and inappropriate conduct. Are zero-tolerance policies good for schools? Once we understand the effects, it's clear that zero-tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools.*

Now notice that the main point of each body paragraph, found in each topic sentence, directly relate to that thesis statement:

*Some proponents of zero tolerance argue that such policies are essential for protecting the safety of students. As they explain it, the reason why someone breaks a law isn't important. Even if a student breaks a rule against drugs on campus by accidentally bringing Advil, the rule against drugs is so important that the student would have to be punished.*

*In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that law without context creates a hostile environment. A student accidentally bringing Advil poses no threat to peers, and should not be*

treated the same as other drug violations. Imposing penalties on this student could have significant negative effects.

Those body paragraphs then each develop support for one element of the thesis. The second one, for instance, is specifically designed to point the reader towards the potential harm of these policies:

*In contrast, those against zero tolerance point out that law without context creates a hostile environment. A student accidentally bringing Advil poses no threat to peers, and should not be treated the same as other drug violations. Imposing penalties on this student could have significant negative effects.*

Also notice that the transitions ("some proponents" and "in contrast") in these paragraphs help the reader prepare for the paragraph to come.

Finally, the conclusion sums up the main points and connects back to the thesis:

*As we can see, such policies fail to acknowledge the reasons that rules get broken. Thus they cause, not prevent, harm. Because of the arguments against zero tolerance, schools should avoid instituting such policies.*

Overall, this is a pretty successful brief essay.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are three **academic essay components** that you will need in order to write a successful essay: an **introduction with a thesis statement**, **body paragraphs** that begin with a topic sentence and are further developed with supporting sentences, and a **conclusion** that brings the essay to a close. You then looked at these **essay components in action** by reading a short sample essay and identifying the function of each component.

Best of luck in your learning!



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Concluding Sentence

A sentence that either summarizes a paragraph or signals how the essay will flow into the next paragraph.

### Supporting Sentence

A sentence in a paragraph that offers an example, explanation, important detail, or analysis to develop the idea presented in the topic sentence.

**Topic Sentence**

A sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph.

**Transition**

A word, phrase, or sentence that highlights a connection between ideas.