

# **ELEMENTS OF AN ESSAY**

## **Preliminary Remarks**

Following are some suggestions to help you write an acceptable academic-level essay. This is not the only way to organize and develop an essay. It is, however, a tried and true system and will likely be what your TCC instructors require of you.

## **Audience and Purpose**

Before beginning, you should consider both your audience and purpose. For, before you can know how to approach the subject, you must determine whom you will be addressing, how much they already know about the subject, and what they need to know. Moreover, you must decide what you are trying to do in the essay and how you are trying to affect the audience. Are you primarily trying to persuade someone to accept your point of view, to describe or define something, or to explain something? These considerations will determine how you handle the subject.

## **The Thesis**

The word “essay” means “to attempt,” “to try,” or “to test”; hence, an essay is a writer’s attempt to convince an audience that he knows something. An essay is a coherently unified piece of writing with a fairly standard form consisting of three parts— introduction, body, and conclusion—in which you must support a considered opinion, moving smoothly from point to point. This opinion must be neither wild conjecture nor incontrovertible fact, but a defensible judgment that admits the possibility of disagreement on the part of your audience. Furthermore, the statement of this opinion, or thesis<sup>1</sup>, governs the whole essay and must be supported, illustrated, expanded, and exemplified in the body of the essay.

## **The Introduction**

An introduction presents to the reader, in a general way, the subject to be treated in the essay, usually opening with a sentence or two that will grab the reader’s attention. In your introduction you tell the reader what is going to happen in the rest of the paper. You do this by funneling the reader through general opening remarks to the essential last sentence: a clear statement of the opinion you will support (thesis statement<sup>1</sup>, including limits and specifics of the subject) with a brief statement of your organizational strategy (enumeration of subject segments). And remember, interesting, arresting introductions are very important. This is where you can really capture a reader’s attention—or lose it.

## **The Body**

The body is where you support the opinion stated in the thesis statement. An essay usually has one body paragraph for each major division of the topic to be treated (i.e., subject segment). Each body paragraph contains a topic sentence<sup>2</sup> and several supporting sentences<sup>3</sup> with adequate detail and development. (You will have three such paragraphs in the five-paragraph essay that we are delineating here). You might think of a body paragraph as a mini-essay. It has an introduction (topic sentence), a body (supporting sentences, which in turn may have their own supporting sentences<sup>4</sup>), and a conclusion (a sentence drawing the paragraph to a close, wrapping it up, and completing it<sup>5</sup>). Development of body paragraphs will proceed according to the audience you have chosen to address and the effect you wish to produce in that audience.

## **The Conclusion**

The conclusion completes the essay by tying everything together into a coherent unity—functioning, with the introduction, much the same as a picture frame to set the bounds of the picture and establish its coherent completeness. Some strategies for doing this are these: restatement, chronological wind-up, illustration, prediction, recommendation of a course of action, and quotation. Your conclusion, then, should re-assert the thesis<sup>6</sup> and close the essay. In closing the essay, your conclusion might state explicitly an undeveloped implication or an unnoticed consequence of what you have said about your subject, thereby leaving your reader with something to think about<sup>7</sup>. For the conclusion is the last thing your reader sees, and it is often the only part of the essay that creates a lasting impression. So make it count. A good conclusion can sometimes redeem a mediocre essay. (**Note:** Your conclusion should not introduce any new material.)

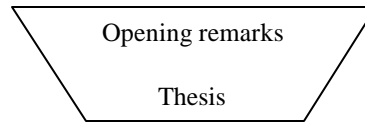
## **Postscript**

A good title can be an effective means to catch the reader's eye and pique his interest. A title should indicate or imply the limits of the subject and the thesis.

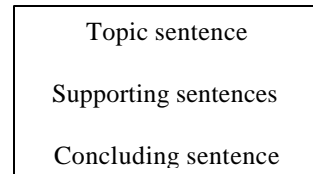
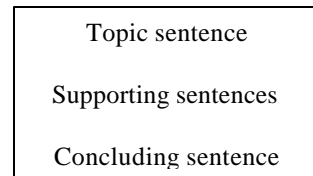
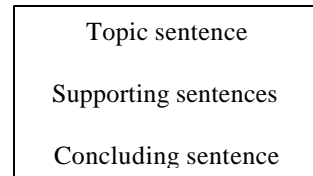
Also, a typed essay should always be double-spaced.

# SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM OF A FIVE-PARAGRAPH ESSAY

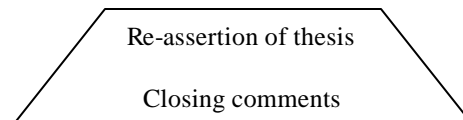
## Introduction



## Body Paragraphs



## Conclusion



In the essay on the next page, sentences that correspond to the elements of an essay described in the first part of this handout (e.g., thesis statement, topic sentence, supporting sentence) have been indicated with a superscript numeral at the beginning of the sentence.

## Escape Reading

Everyone needs to escape from a dull routine. Escape can sometimes be dangerous—if a person turns to alcohol or drugs, for instance. But escaping into a sport or hobby can be a healthy way to turn off the daily pressure. <sup>1</sup>My escape hatch is reading books that carry me to other times and places.

<sup>2</sup> I often escape, first of all, into spy stories. <sup>3</sup>These books are usually set in exotic lands I'm sure I will never actually see. <sup>4</sup>Spies, for example, pass information to each other in a market in Tokyo, a café in Venice, or an airport in Bombay. <sup>3</sup>In addition, spy novels are filled with fascinating marvels of technology. <sup>4</sup>James Bond has his Lotus car equipped with smokescreen and machine gun controls, of course, but even less glamorous spies use cameras the size of match boxes and microphones that pick up conversations miles away. <sup>3</sup>The intricate, twisted plots of spy stories also aid the sensation of total escape. <sup>4</sup>Keeping up with the secret agents, the counterspies, and the double crosses occupies my mind completely. <sup>5</sup>I don't worry about whether my car will pass inspection when I'm trying to figure out which American agent is really working for the KGB.

<sup>2</sup>A second kind of escape reading I enjoy is the Western. <sup>3</sup>A book by Zane Grey or Louis L'Amour is filled with atmosphere of a long-ago era. <sup>4</sup>I can live for a time in a town like Dodge City; I can almost see the dusty main street, the raised wooden sidewalks, and the women wearing calico sunbonnets. <sup>3</sup>The Western also helps me escape by providing plenty of action. <sup>4</sup>Almost every page puts me in the midst of a cattle roundup, a gunfight, or a galloping posse. <sup>4</sup>The non-stop action won't allow my mind to wander back to the real world until I turn the last page. <sup>3</sup>Finally, a Western tempts me to escape into it because the story usually describes a simpler, less confusing world than my own. <sup>4</sup>The characters are either good guys or bad guys, and it is easy to tell the difference. <sup>5</sup>In the Old West, justice always triumphs in the end.

<sup>2</sup>The final and most enjoyable escape I know is reading horror stories. <sup>3</sup>For one thing, such stories keep me interested because the authors create such fascinating imaginary monsters. <sup>4</sup>A story about a slimy creature that emerges from a graveyard or a huge, hundred-pound rat that lives in a basement is a story that blinks out reality. Horror stories introduce me to imaginary places as well. <sup>4</sup>A horror tale can be set in a series of tunnels beneath an Antarctic ice sheet or in another dimension that exists only in a spooky old house. <sup>3</sup>Pure shock, however, is what makes horror stories sure-fire escapes. <sup>4</sup>The problems I have at work could never be as bad, for example, as the horrible situations Stephen King's characters endure. <sup>5</sup>As I read about a woman being chased by a rabid St. Bernard or a little boy being pursued by an insane and murderous father, I forget the outside world completely.

<sup>6</sup>The members of my family have learned to leave me in peace when I escape into my books. <sup>7</sup>They know that giving me such time means that I will be easier to live with. <sup>6&7</sup>After I have returned from a dangerous spy mission, a Western shoot-out, or a house of horror, I can deal more calmly with everyday crises at home.

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--Langan, John. College Writing Skills, (Support Package). New York: McGraw, 1984.