



The Basic Essay Structure

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The MWC is a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative serving Northwest Vista College students, faculty, and the community through tutoring in writing skills, critical thinking, and building writing pedagogy. Effective writing is a cornerstone of education.

The Center is located in Mountain Laurel Hall (MLH) 232

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What's the Point of an Essay?

Essays ask you to show mastery of **content (information)** and **communication**. An essay requires you to choose and assess sources, use them well, explain your understanding or argument, and clearly convey facts and critical thinking.

Essays allow you to show mastery of **content** and **communication** by:

- addressing the prompt
- answering all its questions
- using reputable sources, and
- making clear, thoughtful connections.

You show you can explain arguments and concepts. Think of the assignment as a chance to teach a concept to another person.

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**Your instructor may have different preferences or instructions in their essay prompts.*

*Always follow your specific assignment instructions**

General Essay Format

Main Parts of an Essay

Typically, an essay has **three** main sections: the **introduction**, the **body**, and the **conclusion**. We will cover these in more detail down below.

Length

Length depends on the complexity of the prompt and the assignment requirements. Most essay assignments you encounter here will require **one paragraph for your introduction, at least one paragraph per point of argument/thesis for your body section, and one paragraph for your conclusion**. Each paragraph should be at least 3-5 sentences.

Language

Take care to avoid slang (unless it is in a direct quote), avoid text-speak, and check if you are allowed to use first person (I, me, our), second person (you, your), or must use third person (he, she, it, they). Use complete sentences with academic grammar.

The Introduction

The introduction sets the framework or parameters of your paper. It should clearly address the prompt from the beginning.

Typically, an introduction starts with general information, and narrows down to your specific argument or thesis.

A History essay about the causes of the US Civil War might begin by explaining the time period, event, and debate surrounding the causes of the War, then briefly explain the major sides of the debate, and finally state your argument/thesis you intend to prove through your paper.

Overall, the introduction sets the scene, defines or explains important points, and states your thesis.

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The Thesis

Your thesis is **your direct response or answer to the essay prompt.**

- A Psychology essay prompt might ask, "Explain three main differences between the behavioral and biological perspectives of Psychology."

Your thesis may state, "Three main differences between behavioral and biological perspectives are _____, _____, and _____."

- A Government essay prompt might ask, "Analyze the US Constitution's Bill of Rights. Explain why two rights were included and what possible consequences, positive or negative, may result from them."

Your thesis may state, "The Bill of Rights included the rights of _____ and _____ because of _____ and _____. Possible consequences of these rights are _____ and _____."

Unless directed otherwise, your thesis can be more than one sentence.

The Body Section

General Format

The body section should typically have at least one paragraph for each point in your thesis. If needed, you can have multiple paragraphs per point (a sub-section).

Each paragraph or sub-section should state your thesis point, your evidence supporting your point, and your original analysis of this point (when required by the assignment). You may go back and forth between evidence and analysis if your prompt or argument is complex enough.

Order

Body paragraphs or sections should build upon one another. Make sure the order of your points in your thesis and the order in which you address them in the body section matches. If you realize your thesis points should be reordered to make more sense or make a stronger argument, then do that.

Using Evidence

It is tempting to simply find evidence you think "works" with your argument, and just insert it into your paragraph. Good use of evidence requires more care.

Evidence, continued

A better practice is to integrate evidence into your argument by making clear connections to your thesis point and showing your understanding of both your point and the evidence with analysis.

You must cite your sources. The most common citation and format styles are MLA, APA, and Chicago. You may use direct quotes (word-for-word, in quotation marks), or paraphrases (your own restatement of the source). You cite both practices. Typically, you will use both in-text citations and provide a Works Cited/References/Bibliography page.

All writing centers and the campus library can help with citations, as well as the following online resources:

- the NVC Library page (links to guides and access to a free Noodletools account)
- the Purdue OWL (search Purdue OWL MLA/APA/Chicago)
- The Chicago Manual of Style website citation quick guide

Example

A basic format might be:

“The first major difference between behavioral and biological perspectives is _____. According to [author] in [work title], this difference is shown by [quote or paraphrase] (citation). This difference is clear because _____ and leads to differing practices such as _____. Furthermore, this difference is important to psychology because _____.”

The example embeds the quote or paraphrase into the paragraph, explains the information, and makes deeper and broader connections within the field.

The Conclusion

The conclusion should restate your thesis, the general argument supporting it, and a final statement of analysis. The section is a chance to re-teach your argument in a more brief and condensed way. Do not include any new evidence in the conclusion, but you may expand briefly on your argument as a way to re-explain your point.

The conclusion re-teaches and summarizes the topic, its major sub-topics, your overall argument, and strengthens your analysis of the topic. It is *not* a repeat of the introduction. You show your ability to re-teach a topic and your analysis of it.
