



Essay writing



UNIVERSITY
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Argument

Essays are designed to develop an argument. They do this by making a series of points, and connecting them logically. In an academic context, an argument is not a ‘fight’, or necessarily a disagreement – it is an engaged, serious, critical discussion of a topic. Being critical here does not mean attacking a fault or shortcoming – it is simply a process of asking intelligent questions, considering evidence and developing ideas. An essay should present ideas that are well researched and logically structured to answer a specific question, express a point of view, and carefully assess information relevant to the essay topic. An argument is a series of strong, interconnected points, each of which is made in a separate paragraph, that is developed on the basis of some kind of evidence. A paragraph begins with a claim, which is then supported with explanation and illustrative example, drawn from authoritative publications in the field.

STRUCTURE

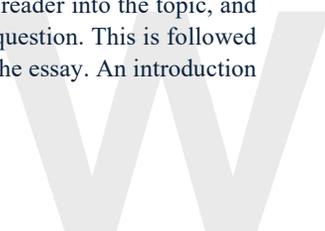
In order for your argument to be coherent and convincing, the writing needs to be structured in a predictable way. The general structure for an essay is: **Introduction, Body, Conclusion.**

Example: Essay structure	
General statement or orientation to topic	<i>Introduction</i>
Thesis statement	
Brief preview of the main points made in the following text	
1. Topic sentence A	<i>Body paragraphs (sentences following the topic sentence explain, expand, enhance and/or provide support for the claim it makes)</i>
1. supporting sentence	
2. supporting sentence	
3. supporting sentence	
2. Topic sentence B	
1. supporting sentence	
2. supporting sentence	
3. supporting sentence	
3. Topic sentence C	
1. supporting sentence	
2. supporting sentence	
3. supporting sentence	
Review /restatement of the main points made in the body paragraphs, and perhaps a final comment.	<i>Conclusion</i>

The **Introduction** functions as a ‘map’ of the whole essay, outlining the main line of argument that your essay will develop. Most introductions begin with a brief general statement that leads the reader into the topic, and follow this with a clear simple **thesis statement** that responds directly to the essay question. This is followed by a preview of the main points to be presented and elaborated through the body of the essay. An introduction usually moves from the general to the specific.

ACADEMIC LITERACY

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Example: Introduction

The term "culture" covers all the beliefs, customs, language, technology, arts, crafts and traditions of a group. It is any way of life, simple or complex. **The concept of culture contributes to our understanding of society in a number of ways.** It can explain how social order is maintained in a society, how behaviour is learned and why there are so many societies operating in different ways, as well as why societies are similar.

background or definition

thesis statement

outline of key points or sub-topics

The body of the essay functions to fully develop the argument indicated in the introduction. Each paragraph within the body of the essay makes a point in the development of ONE overall argument (although some key points may be made through a number of sub-points, each of which will need a paragraph). The point in a paragraph needs to be clearly stated in the form of a topic sentence or claim, which is then supported with some evidence.

The example below shows only the first sentence of each paragraph, to highlight how the various claims in the argument are presented at the beginning of paragraphs. Just by reading the topic sentences, readers can quickly glean the flow of the whole argument – in this case, the argument is that the concept of ‘culture’ contributes to our understanding of society in many ways.

Example: Body of an essay (skeleton)

One of the main contributions that the concept of culture can add to our understanding of society is an understanding of how social order is maintained.

Topic sentence - main claim first, then explained and illustrated through the paragraph

The concept of culture **also contributes** to our understanding of why the learned behaviours of a society are reproduced as they are.

Second main point in first sentence, then detailed

Culture **further contributes** insight into why there are so many societies operating in different ways.

Third main point in first sentence, then the paragraph goes on to explain and support it with evidence

Finally, the existence of universals of culture, those practices found in every culture, also helps to explain that there are similar behaviour requirements if a society is to exist.

Last main point at beginning of paragraph, then developed

In each paragraph the words in **bold** establish relations between the various parts of the essay. These are key to developing a logical and cohesive argument.

The **Conclusion** of an essay restates the main points, and might also reflect briefly on the thesis or evidence presented, speculate on the implications of the argument presented, or offer a suggestion – but the conclusion is **not** the place to introduce new information or new ideas.



Example: Conclusion

Thus, the concept of culture contributes greatly to our understanding of society. With this concept, a greater understanding may be reached of how order is maintained in society and how the behaviour of a society is learned. It also allows an understanding of why there are so many societies operating in different ways and, on the other hand, why societies are so similar.

reiteration of the main overall point (thesis)

recap of main points in the argument

DEVELOPING A POINT WITHIN A PARAGRAPH

A closer look at a paragraph within the body of the essay shows how a key point is made, by first presenting a claim, then supporting it with evidence from published academic literature (which is summarised and paraphrased to develop and support the claim presented in the topic sentence).

Example: Body paragraph

Finally, the existence of universals of culture, those practices found in every culture, helps to explain that there are similar behaviour requirements if a society is to exist. These universals are practices such as bodily adornment, education, music, religious ritual, trade, sociolinguistic variation and many others (Robertson, 1987:72). With a proper understanding of culture, one can see, as Hallinan claims, that the basic behavioural requirements of all societies are essentially the same, ie using technology, forming co-operative relations and communicating symbolically through language (1984:77). If a society's common practices, ie their culture, are taken away from them, that society will undoubtedly fall apart.

topic sentence

explanation

expansion

link to next paragraph

Beginning student writers often rely too heavily on quotes to present ideas and theories. It is better to present your argument clearly, and only use quotes from authorities for extra support for a point you are making. Topic sentences should clearly signal to your reader the main idea in the paragraph. Following sentences should provide the explanation and expansion of the initial claim, and use sources to support and strengthen your argument. This means that in the body section of a good essay, a reader should be able to get a sense of the overall argument by reading only the topic sentences. Try this when editing your drafts – you'll get a sense of whether your argument and ideas are flowing logically, or need to be re-ordered.

CLARITY OF ARGUMENT

In a good, clear essay, you can guess the question just by reading the introductory paragraph. The student's thesis in this case was that *the concept of culture is able to contribute to our understanding of society in a number of ways*, so the question was probably something like: *What can the concept of culture contribute to our understanding of society?*

The body paragraphs flesh out the various ways in which, it is argued, the concept of culture contributes to our understanding of society. Each paragraph discusses *one of the ways*.

Another essay responding to the same question was structured differently – can you see this essay's weaknesses?



Example: Body paragraph (weak)

Culture is a term used by social scientists to describe a people's whole way of life. In everyday conversation, the word culture may refer to activities in such areas as art, literature and music. To a social scientist, however, a people's culture consists of all the ideas, objects, and ways of doing things created by a group. It includes all the beliefs, customs, language, technology, arts, crafts and traditions of the group. It is any way of life, simple or complex.

'Introduction'

What is the thesis statement?

What is the argument?

The Oxford Dictionary (1893:85) defined culture as "the civilisation of a people (especially at a certain stage of its development in history)".

What point is being made in this body paragraph?

By 1936, Webster had devised a more scientific meaning for culture and defined it as "the complex of distinctive attainments, beliefs, traditions, etc. constituting the background of a racial, religious or social group, as a nation with many cultures" (p. 54).

What point is being made?

Hollsteiner relates culture to a biological organism, in that each of its parts is related in some way to all other parts.

What point is being made?

Although this second essay is attempting to answer the same question as the first example, it is actually providing answers to other questions (such as *What is culture?* or "*How has the concept of culture changed over time?*"). The student is not successfully developing an argument about *how* the concept of culture can contribute to an understanding of society. By starting off each paragraph with a quote or a reference to a theorist, they do not establish topic sentences that make a clear point for each new paragraph to develop. So the whole essay would probably fail, because no clear, coherent argument has been developed throughout.

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