

UNIVERSITY OF BATNA II – MOSTEFA BENBOULAI
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT TRANSLATION
LEVEL: 3rd YEAR
SUBJECT: WRITING TECHNIQUES
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THE ESSAY STRUCTURE

1/ THE INTRODUCTION

Because it establishes the reader's attitude toward the topic and toward the writer, the **introduction** is the most important part of the essay. An interesting introduction will make the reader want to read the rest of the essay.

The **introduction** to an essay should

- Get the reader **interested in the topic** (attention-getter).
- Provide **background information** about the topic (factual material).
- State **the thesis** of the essay (main idea).

The Attention-Getter and Background Information

Most essays don't begin immediately with the thesis. Instead, they start gradually by getting the reader ready for the thesis.

Attention-getters and background information can take many forms, some of which are listed below. You can use any of these strategies alone or in combination. Remember that the purpose of the introduction is to prepare the reader to read, understand, and agree with the thesis, so it's important to provide whatever information is necessary to get the reader on the same wavelength as the writer. Imagine you were going to read your essay—what would get you interested?

• **A story or anecdote**

A good story is like a picture, and as the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. A story that illustrates the point you plan to make in the essay will get the reader interested and predisposed in favor of your slant on the topic.

• **History, facts, or information about the topic**

Sometimes a topic is so complex that a review of what has happened legally, socially, medically, or politically with the topic must be reported before the reader can appreciate the significance of the thesis your essay will develop. Facts can also help define the significance and the implications of your topic.

• **An appropriate quotation**

Sometimes a quote from a historical figure or an authority in the field can get the reader's attention.

• **A problem the reader should know about the topic**

Sometimes the reader needs to be alerted to a problem or to the scope of the problem in order to understand your thesis

• **A question that limits your topic**

The answer to the question is your thesis.

• **A statement that popular ideas about your topic are wrong**

State popular ideas about your topic and show how you intend to disprove them.

• **A strong opinion**

Sometimes the writer gets the reader's attention by shocking him or her through a strong statement of opinion.

Length and Placement

How much background information to provide depends upon the length of the essay and the strategy the writer uses to get the reader prepared for the thesis. In general, an essay of five paragraphs should include three to six sentences of background *before* the thesis. *All* the background information must come before the thesis is presented to point the reader toward the main idea that the essay will develop.

Thesis or Thesis Statement

The thesis or thesis statement of the essay presents the main idea that the essay will develop. The thesis creates a focus for the essay and should not be too broad or too narrow for the assignment. A thesis that is too broad is a statement that is too large to be adequately developed in the length essay you have been assigned. A thesis that is too narrow is a statement that is not large enough to be developed into an essay. A well-focused thesis presents a main idea that can be adequately developed in the number of paragraphs or pages you have been assigned to write.

- ✗ **Too broad:** People are unhealthy for many reasons.
- ✓ **Adequate focus:** The diet of many American teenagers is unhealthy.
- ✗ **Too narrow:** American teenagers consume too much salt.
- ✓ **Adequate focus:** The diet of many American teenagers is unhealthy.

Blueprinted Thesis

A blueprinted thesis lists in a series the major points the essay will develop. The points should be listed in the order that they will appear in the body paragraphs. The list may appear in the thesis or in a separate sentence after the thesis. The major points in the series must be **parallel**.

In other words, areas listed in the thesis should be expressed in the same grammatical form.

Thesis Statement: Henry's Department Store is a wonderful place to shop.

Blueprinted Thesis Statement: Henry's Department Store is a wonderful place to shop because of its quality merchandise and helpful customer service.

Thesis Statement: Computers are very useful to students.

Blueprinted Thesis Statement: A personal computer helps students do their schoolwork, communicate with professors and friends, and entertain themselves.

Thesis Statement: The Yankee Doodle Restaurant is a great place to eat.

Blueprinted Thesis Statement: The Yankee Doodle Restaurant is a great place to eat because the staff is friendly, the food is delicious, and the atmosphere is relaxing.

PITFALLS: You should watch out for these common errors when writing an introduction.

- Avoid a boring or uninteresting introduction.
- Avoid placing the thesis before background information.
- Avoid a too broad or too narrow thesis.
- Avoid faulty parallelism in a blueprinted thesis.
- Avoid discussing main points in any order other than the order they are listed in a blueprinted thesis.

2/ THE BODY PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is a unit of thought made up of a set of related sentences. All the sentences of the paragraph work together to develop a single idea. A paragraph can stand alone as an independent discussion of one idea, or paragraphs can be put together into a larger unit such as an essay.

THE PARTS OF THE PARAGRAPH

The paragraph contains three parts. The **topic sentence** states the main idea of the paragraph. Sentences in the body of the paragraph **support** the main idea with specific details. The **conclusion** summarizes the ideas in the paragraph. All the parts of the paragraph work together.

THE TOPIC SENTENCE

The topic sentence is the most important part of the paragraph because it creates the focus for the rest of the sentences. It states the **main** or **controlling idea** that the rest of the paragraph will develop or support.

The controlling idea is the main idea that the writer is developing in a composition. The controlling idea usually expresses a **definite opinion or attitude about the topic of the composition**.

The daily newspaper provides *a valuable source of information*.

Trout Pond holds *special meaning to my family*.

I'm *lucky to have my roommate*, Bud.

The interior of the new Supra minivan is *designed for the driver's safety and comfort*.

EXERCISE 1: Underline the words that express the controlling idea of each topic sentence.

1. Credit cards can get consumers into trouble.
2. Computers are becoming an important part of the modern home.
3. Raising a child alone is a challenge.
4. My next-door neighbor is one of the kindest people I've ever known.
5. There should not be a required attendance policy in college
6. Rissoto's serves delicious Italian food.
7. My high school coach, Mrs. Vinson, gave me valuable guidance in choosing a college.
8. I got a bargain when I bought my present automobile.
9. German shepherds are easy to train.
10. Casino gambling should not be legalized in our state.

STATEMENT OF OPINION

The topic sentence should express a main idea that can be developed with stated reasons. This statement is usually an **opinion, feeling, attitude, belief, or point of view** about the topic. It should *not* be a statement of fact that needs no development.

These facts do not need a paragraph to develop them.

Fact: The Air and Space Museum is in Washington, DC.

Fact: The Marshalls are my neighbors.

Fact: More Americans are obese than ever before.

These opinions need a paragraph to develop or explain them.

Opinion: Visiting the Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, was the best part of our trip.

Opinion: I really enjoy having the Marshalls as my neighbors.

Opinion: The health risks of obesity should not be ignored by overweight Americans.

EXERCISE 2: Identify these statements as fact (F) or opinion (O).

- _____ 1. There are more students enrolled in college this year than any year in the past decade.
- _____ 2. Woodstoves provide an economical alternative to gas and electric home heating.
- _____ 3. The campus police are here to serve the college community.
- _____ 4. My grandparents came to the United States from Lebanon.
- _____ 5. The plane we took to New York was a turboprop..
- _____ 6. My family has lived next to the Parkers for more than twenty years.
- _____ 7. The Parkers are very friendly neighbors.
- _____ 8. The Tigers are the top ranked team in the state this year.
- _____ 9. The Tigers should win the championship this year.
- _____ 10. My car is unsafe to drive.

FOCUS

Because the topic sentence determines what the rest of the paragraph will develop, the topic sentence must create an **adequate focus** for the paragraph. The topic sentence should be explained or developed in five to ten sentences. If the main idea is too broad, it cannot be adequately developed in one paragraph; if it is too narrow, an entire paragraph is not needed to develop it.

✗ **Too broad:** The causes of the Civil War are complex.

✓ **Adequate focus:** The Battle of Bull Run had a number of strange coincidences.

✗ **Too narrow:** My daughter has a beautiful smile.

✓ **Adequate focus:** My daughter is very attractive.

This topic sentence can be developed with three to four reasons.

PLACEMENT

The **placement** of the topic sentence should aid the reader in understanding the ideas being developed. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph so that the reader will know immediately what main idea the paragraph will develop. However, the topic sentence can be placed anywhere in the paragraph. In order to create a different process of understanding for the reader, sometimes writers place the topic sentence in the second or third sentence or at the end of the paragraph.

EXERCISE 4: Identify the topic sentence that would best express the main idea of the paragraph.

Because seat belt use is required by law in most states, drivers can be ticketed for failing to use restraining devices. Those who use seat belts regularly not only avoid being ticketed for breaking the seat belt law but may avoid other tickets as well because an officer who stops a driver for a traffic infraction such as speeding is more likely to be lenient if he sees that the driver is wearing a seat belt. Not only are those who consistently wear seat belts less likely to be ticketed, but also they are less likely to be injured if an accident should occur. Seat belts prevent passengers from hitting the dashboard or flying through the windshield when a collision occurs; therefore, they prevent serious injury and they save lives. The mandatory seat belt laws in many states have dramatically decreased the number of automobile fatalities in the United States each year. With ever-increasing numbers of cars on the road and with speed limits once again rising, motorists have more reason than ever to buckle up before they leave their driveways.

___ A. Seat belts are required by law to be used.

___ B. Seat belts prevent injuries in accidents.

___ C. Motorists have more reason than ever to buckle up before they leave home.

___ D. Seat belt laws have made the roads safer for motorists.

GENERATING A TOPIC SENTENCE

You should determine your purpose and your audience before generating a topic sentence. Sometimes the purpose is stated or implied in the discussion prompt with words like *convince* or *explain*. The audience can be the general reader, meaning someone like you, or it could be stated in the discussion prompt: "Convince your parents to help you buy a new car." For a detailed discussion of audience, purpose, and tone.

Topic: a good friend

Topic sentence: José Morales is a good friend to me.

Topic: college pressures

Topic sentence: A freshman feels a lot of pressures when starting college.

Topic: Explain to a new employee why you like or dislike your job.

Topic sentence: I enjoy my job as a cashier at Handy's very much.

EXERCISE 5: Generate a topic sentence for each topic.

1. Choose a sport you enjoy or don't enjoy watching or playing and explain why.

2. Choose a course you are taking and explain why you like or dislike it.

3. Whom do you admire most and why?

SUPPORTING SENTENCES

The body of the paragraph provides support for the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. **Supporting sentences** develop the main idea or controlling idea in the topic sentence by **proving, illustrating, explaining, or defining** the main idea. The number of supporting sentences can vary.

Most paragraphs contain a minimum of three.

SPECIFIC DETAIL

In order to develop, explain, or prove the topic sentence, good writers provide lots of specific details in their supporting sentences. Topic sentences are best supported by concrete information that readers can verify as true. Effective specific details in sentences of support include **examples, facts, statistics, or other concrete information**.

RELATION TO TOPIC SENTENCE

The specific details should relate directly to the main idea. Supporting sentences often explain how the specific detail proves the topic sentence. However, an actual statement explaining how the specific detail relates to the topic sentence is not always necessary in the paragraph, but by reasoning out the relationship, the writer can make the logic clear to the reader.

UNITY

If sentences don't directly relate to the topic sentence, then the reader can become distracted and confused. In order for the paragraph to achieve **unity**, every sentence in the body of the paragraph should support the topic sentence.

EXERCISE 6: Cross out the sentence that does not support the topic sentence because it does not prove or explain why the topic sentence is true.

1. **Topic sentence:** A child should have a pet.

Supporting sentences:

- A. Owning a pet teaches a child to accept responsibilities.
- B. Having a pet helps a child learn to respect all animals and their rights.
- C. Most pets take very little time to care for.
- D. Pets are cute and cuddly.

2. **Topic sentence:** Trees are a valuable resource.

Supporting sentences:

- A. The roots of trees help to prevent soil erosion.
- B. Trees provide oxygen for all animals to breathe.
- C. There are many different sizes and shapes of trees and their leaves.
- D. Many trees provide fruits and nuts for people and animals to eat.

3. **Topic sentence:** Being sick can be expensive.

Supporting sentences:

- A. The cost of pills can reach five dollars apiece.
- B. If an employee misses work, he can lose pay.
- C. A visit to the doctor may cost as much as \$150.
- D. I don't like to spend money unnecessarily.

THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion is the last sentence of the paragraph. It either sums up the paragraph by reminding the reader of the main idea or interprets the significance of the supporting ideas. It should *not* start a new argument.

Inappropriate conclusion: Since the newspaper is so valuable, I believe that everyone should be required to subscribe. (starts new argument)

Appropriate conclusion: Reading the newspaper helps us develop our intelligence as citizens by providing us with important information about our world. (sums up paragraph)

3/ THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion to the essay is the **final paragraph** of the essay. If the essay is very long, the conclusion might be more than one paragraph, but essays of five to ten paragraphs generally have only one paragraph of conclusion.

The two most common techniques for concluding an essay are to

- **Refer back** to the story, problem, question, or quote that began the introduction.
- **Emphasize** the important points. Remind the reader of the thesis of the essay and how its major details are developed.

Length of the Conclusion

The conclusion is generally not as long as the introduction. The length of the conclusion depends upon the length and complexity of the essay. An essay of five or six paragraphs should present a conclusion of three to ten sentences.

PITFALLS: You should watch out for these common errors when writing conclusions.

- Avoid beginning the conclusion with *in conclusion*, *finally*, or *to summarize* because it is obvious to the reader that you are going to conclude your essay in the last paragraph.
- Avoid sounding mechanical in summarizing the essay; for example, do not repeat the thesis statement and list of major details word-for-word from the introduction.
- Avoid beginning a new argument in the conclusion.