

WRITING THE ESSAY

What Is an Essay?

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AN ESSAY AND A PARAGRAPH

An essay is simply a paper of several paragraphs, rather than one paragraph, that supports a single point. In an essay, subjects can and should be treated more fully than they would be in a single-paragraph paper.

The main idea or point developed in an essay is called the *thesis statement* (rather than, as in a paragraph, the *topic sentence*). The thesis statement appears in the introductory paragraph, and it is then developed in the supporting paragraphs that follow. A short concluding paragraph closes the essay.

THE FORM OF AN ESSAY

The diagram on the next page shows the form of an essay.

Introductory Paragraph

Introduction
Thesis sentence
Plan of development:
Points 1, 2, 3

The *introduction* attracts the reader's interest.

The *thesis sentence* states the main idea advanced in the paper.

The *plan of development* is a list of the points that support the thesis. The points are presented in the order in which they will be developed in the paper.

First Supporting Paragraph

Topic sentence (point 1)
Specific evidence

The *topic sentence* advances the first supporting point for the thesis, and the *specific evidence* in the rest of the paragraph develops that first point.

Second Supporting Paragraph

Topic sentence (point 2)
Specific evidence

The *topic sentence* advances the second supporting point for the thesis, and the *specific evidence* in the rest of the paragraph develops that second point.

Third Supporting Paragraph

Topic sentence (point 3)
Specific evidence

The *topic sentence* advances the third supporting point for the thesis, and the *specific evidence* in the rest of the paragraph develops that third point.

Concluding Paragraph

Summary, conclusion,
or both

A *summary* is a brief restatement of the thesis and its main points. A *conclusion* is a final thought or two stemming from the subject of the paper.

A MODEL ESSAY

Gene, the writer of the paragraph on working in an apple plant (page 44), later decided to develop his subject more fully. Here is the essay that resulted.

My Job in an Apple Plant

Introductory paragraph

¹In the course of working my way through school, I have taken many jobs I would rather forget. ²I have spent nine hours a day lifting heavy automobile and truck batteries off the end of an assembly belt. ³I have risked the loss of eyes and fingers working a punch press in a textile factory. ⁴I have served as a ward aide in a mental hospital, helping care for brain-damaged men who would break into violent fits at unexpected moments. ⁵But none of these jobs was as dreadful as my job in an apple plant. ⁶The work was physically hard; the pay was poor; and, most of all, the working conditions were dismal.

First supporting paragraph

⁷First of all, the job made enormous demands on my strength and energy. ⁸For ten hours a night, I took cartons that rolled down a metal track and stacked them onto wooden skids in a tractor trailer. ⁹Each carton contained twelve heavy cans or bottles of apple juice. ¹⁰A carton shot down the track about every fifteen seconds. ¹¹I once figured out that I was lifting an average of twelve tons of apple juice every night. ¹²When a truck was almost filled, I or my partner had to drag fourteen bulky wooden skids into the empty trailer nearby and then set up added sections of the heavy metal track so that we could start routing cartons to the back of the empty van. ¹³While one of us did that, the other performed the stacking work of two men.

Second supporting paragraph

¹⁴I would not have minded the difficulty of the work so much if the pay had not been so poor. ¹⁵I was paid the minimum wage of that time, \$2.65 an hour, plus a quarter extra for working the night shift. ¹⁶Because of the low salary, I felt compelled to get as much overtime pay as possible. ¹⁷Everything over eight hours a night was time-and-a-half, so I typically worked twelve hours a night. ¹⁸On Friday I would sometimes work straight through until Saturday at noon--eighteen hours. ¹⁹I averaged over sixty hours a week but did not take home much more than \$150.

Third supporting paragraph

²⁰But even more than the low pay, what upset me about my apple plant job was the working conditions. ²¹Our humorless supervisor cared only about his production record for each night and tried to keep the assembly line moving at a breakneck pace. ²²During work I was limited to two ten-minute breaks and an unpaid half hour for lunch. ²³Most of my time was spent outside on the truck loading dock in near-zero-degree temperatures. ²⁴The steel floors of the trucks were like ice; the quickly penetrating cold made my feet feel like stone. ²⁵I had no shared interests with the man I loaded cartons with, and so I had to work without companionship on the job. ²⁶And after the production line shut down and most people left, I had to spend two hours alone scrubbing clean the apple vats, which were coated with a sticky residue.

Concluding paragraph

²⁷I stayed on the job for five months, all the while hating the difficulty of the work, the poor money, and the conditions under which I worked. ²⁸By the time I quit, I was determined never to do such degrading work again.

Important Points about the Essay

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

An introductory paragraph has certain purposes or functions and can be constructed using various methods.

Purposes of the Introduction

An introductory paragraph should do three things:

- 1 Attract the reader's *interest*. Using one of the suggested methods of introduction described below can help draw the reader into your paper.
- 2 Present a *thesis sentence*—a clear, direct statement of the central idea that you will develop in your paper. The thesis statement, like a topic sentence, should have a key word or words reflecting your attitude about the subject. For example, in the essay on the apple plant job, the key word is *dreadful*.
- 3 Indicate a *plan of development*—a preview of the major points that will support your thesis statement, listed in the order in which they will be presented. In some cases, the thesis statement and plan of development may appear in the same sentence. In some cases, also, the plan of development may be omitted.

Activity

1. In "My Job in an Apple Plant," which sentences are used to attract the reader's interest?
 _____ sentences 1 to 3 _____ 1 to 4 _____ 1 to 5
2. The thesis in "My Job in an Apple Plant" is presented in
 _____ sentence 4 _____ sentence 5 _____ sentence 6
3. The thesis is followed by a plan of development.
 _____ Yes _____ No
4. Which words in the plan of development announce the three major supporting points in the essay? Write them below.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____

Common Methods of Introduction

Here are some common methods of introduction. Use any one method, or a combination of methods, to introduce your subject in an interesting way.

- 1 **Broad statement.** Begin with a broad, general statement of your topic and narrow it down to your thesis statement. Broad, general statements ease the reader into your thesis statement by providing a background for it. In “My Job in an Apple Plant,” Gene writes generally on the topic of his worst jobs and then narrows down to a specific worst job.
- 2 **Contrast.** Start with an idea or situation that is the opposite of the one you will develop. This approach works because your readers will be surprised, and then intrigued, by the contrast between the opening idea and the thesis that follows it. Here is an example of a “contrast” introduction:

When I was a girl, I never argued with my parents about differences between their attitudes and mine. My father would deliver his judgment on an issue, and that was usually the end of the matter. Discussion seldom changed his mind, and disagreement was not tolerated. But the situation is different with today’s parents and children. My husband and I have to contend with radical differences between what our children think about a given situation and what we think about it. We have had disagreements with all three of our daughters, Stephanie, Diana, and Gisel.

- 3 **“Relevance.”** Explain the importance of your topic. If you can convince your readers that the subject applies to them in some way, or is something they should know more about, they will want to continue reading. The introductory paragraph of “Sports-Crazy America” (page 243) provides an example of a “relevance” introduction.
- 4 **Anecdote.** Use an incident or brief story. Stories are naturally interesting. They appeal to a reader’s curiosity. In your introduction, an anecdote will grab the reader’s attention right away. The story should be brief and should be related to your central idea. The incident in the story can be something that happened to you, something that you have heard about, or something that you have read about in a newspaper or magazine. Here is an example of a paragraph that begins with a story:

The husky man pushes open the door of the bedroom and grins as he pulls out a .38 revolver. An elderly man wearing thin pajamas looks at him and whimpers. In a feeble effort at escape, the old man slides out of his bed and moves to the door of the room. The husky man, still grinning, blocks his way. With the face of a small, frightened animal, the old man looks up and whispers, “Oh God, please don’t hurt me.” The grinning man then fires four times. The television movie cuts now to a soap commercial, but the little boy

who has been watching the set has begun to cry. Such scenes of direct violence on television must surely be harmful to children for a number of psychological reasons.

- 5 Questions.** Ask your readers one or more questions. These questions catch the readers' interest and make them want to read on. Here is an example of a paragraph that begins with questions:

What would happen if we were totally honest with ourselves? Would we be able to stand the pain of giving up self-deception? Would the complete truth be too much for us to bear? Such questions will probably never be answered, for in everyday life we protect ourselves from the onslaught of too much reality. All of us cultivate defense mechanisms that prevent us from seeing, hearing, or feeling too much. Included among such defense mechanisms are rationalization, reaction formation, and substitution.

Note, however, that the thesis itself must not be a question.

- 6 Quotation.** A quotation can be something you have read in a book or an article. It can also be something that you have heard: a popular saying or proverb ("Never give advice to a friend"); a current or recent advertising slogan ("Reach out and touch someone"); a favorite expression used by your friends or family ("My father always says . . ."). Using a quotation in your introductory paragraph lets you add someone else's voice to your own. Here is an example of a paragraph that begins with a quotation:

"Evil," wrote Martin Buber, "is lack of direction." In my school days as a fatherless boy, with a mother too confused by her own life to really care for me, I strayed down a number of dangerous paths. Before my eighteenth birthday, I had been a car thief, a burglar, and a drug seller.

SUPPORTING PARAGRAPHS

Most essays have three supporting points, developed in three separate paragraphs. (Some essays will have two supporting points; others, four or more.) Each of the supporting paragraphs should begin with a topic sentence that states the point to be detailed in that paragraph. Just as the thesis provides a focus for the entire essay, the topic sentence provides a focus for each supporting paragraph.

Activity

1. What is the topic sentence for the first supporting paragraph of "My Job in an Apple Plant"? (*Write the sentence number here.*) _____
2. What is the topic sentence for the second supporting paragraph? _____
3. What is the topic sentence for the third supporting paragraph? _____

TRANSITIONAL SENTENCES

In paragraphs, transitions and other connective devices (pages 90–96) are used to help link sentences. Similarly, in an essay *transitional sentences* are used to help tie the supporting paragraphs together. Such transitional sentences usually occur near the end of one paragraph or the beginning of the next.

In “My Job in an Apple Plant,” the first transitional sentence is:

I would not have minded the difficulty of the work so much if the pay had not been so poor.

In this sentence, the key word *difficulty* reminds us of the point of the first supporting paragraph, while *pay* tells us the point to be developed in the second supporting paragraph.

Activity

Here is the other transitional sentence in “My Job in an Apple Plant”:

But even more than the low pay, what upset me about my apple plant job were the working conditions.

Complete the following statement: In the sentence above, the key words _____ echo the point of the second supporting paragraph, and the key words _____ announce the topic of the third supporting paragraph.

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

The concluding paragraph often summarizes the essay by briefly restating the thesis and, at times, the main supporting points of the essay. Also, the conclusion brings the paper to a natural and graceful end, sometimes leaving the reader with a final thought on the subject.

Activity

1. Which sentence in the concluding paragraph of “My Job in an Apple Plant” restates the thesis and supporting points of the essay? _____
2. Which sentence contains the concluding thought of the essay? _____

Essays to Consider

Read the three student essays below and then answer the questions that follow.

Giving Up a Baby

¹As I awoke, I overheard a nurse say, "It's a lovely baby boy. ²How could a mother give him up?" ³"Be quiet," another voice said. ⁴"She's going to wake up soon." ⁵Then I heard the baby cry, but I never heard him again.

⁶Three years ago, I gave up my child to two strangers, people who wanted a baby but could not have one. ⁷I was in pain over my decision, and I can still hear the voices of people who said I was selfish or crazy. ⁸But the reasons I gave up my child were important ones, at least to me.

⁹I gave up my baby, first of all, because I was very young. ¹⁰I was only seventeen, and I was unmarried. ¹¹Because I was so young, I did not yet feel the desire to have and raise a baby. ¹²I knew that I would be a child raising a child and that, when I had to stay home to care for the baby, I would resent the loss of my freedom. ¹³I might also blame the baby for that loss. ¹⁴In addition, I had not had the experiences in life that would make me a responsible, giving parent. ¹⁵What could I teach my child, when I barely knew what life was all about myself?

¹⁶Besides my age, another factor in my decision was the problems my parents would have. ¹⁷I had dropped out of high school before graduation, and I did not have a job or even the chance of a job, at least for a while. ¹⁸My parents would have to support my child and me, possibly for years. ¹⁹My mom and dad had already struggled to raise their family and were not well off financially. ²⁰I knew I could not burden them with an unemployed teenager and her baby. ²¹Even if I eventually got a job, my parents would have to help raise my child. ²²They would have to be full-time baby-sitters while I tried to make a life of my own. ²³Because my parents are good people, they would have done all this for me. ²⁴But I felt I could not ask for such a big sacrifice from them.

²⁵The most important factor in my decision was, I suppose, a selfish one. ²⁶I was worried about my own future. ²⁷I didn't want to marry the baby's father. ²⁸I realized during the time I was pregnant that we didn't love each other. ²⁹My future as an unmarried mother with no education or skills would certainly have been limited. ³⁰I would be struggling to survive, and I would have to give up for years my dreams of getting a job and my own car and apartment. ³¹It is hard to admit, but I also considered the fact that, with a baby, I would not have the social life most young people have. ³²I would not be able to stay out late, go to parties, or feel carefree and irresponsible, for I would always have an enormous responsibility waiting for me at home. ³³With a baby, the future looked limited and insecure.

³⁴In summary, thinking about my age, my responsibility to my parents, and my own future made me decide to give up my baby. ³⁵As I look back today at my decision, I know that it was the right one for me at the time.

Sports-Crazy America

¹Almost all Americans are involved with sports in some way. ²They may play basketball or volleyball or go swimming or skiing. ³They may watch football or basketball games on the high school, college, or professional level. ⁴Sports may seem like an innocent pleasure, but it is important to look under the surface. ⁵In reality, sports have reached a point where they play too large a part in daily life. ⁶They take up too much media time, play too large a role in the raising of children, and give too much power and prestige to athletes.

⁷The overemphasis on sports can be seen most obviously in the vast media coverage of athletic events. ⁸It seems as if every bowl game play-off, tournament, trial, bout, race, meet, or match is shown on one television channel or another. ⁹On Saturday and Sunday, a check of TV Guide will show almost forty sports programs on UHF and VHF alone, and many more on cable stations. ¹⁰In addition, sports makes up about 30 percent of local news at six and eleven, and network world news shows often devote several minutes to major American sports events. ¹¹Radio offers a full roster of games and a wide assortment of sports talk shows. ¹²Furthermore, many daily papers such as USA Today are devoting more and more space to sports coverage, often in an attempt to improve circulation. ¹³The paper with the biggest sports section is the one people will buy.

¹⁴The way we raise and educate our children also illustrates our sports mania. ¹⁵As early as six or seven, kids are placed in little leagues, often to play under screaming coaches and pressuring parents. ¹⁶Later, in high school, students who are singled out by the school and by the community are not those who are best academically but those who are best athletically. ¹⁷And college sometimes seems to be more about sports than about learning. ¹⁸The United States may be the only country in the world where people often think of their colleges as teams first and schools second. ¹⁹The names Penn State, Notre Dame, and Southern Cal mean "sports" to the public.

²⁰Our sports craziness is especially evident in the prestige given to athletes in the United States. ²¹For one thing, we reward them with enormous salaries. ²²In 1995, for example, baseball players averaged over \$1,000,000 a year; the average annual salary in the United States is \$20,000. ²³Besides their huge salaries, athletes receive the awe, admiration, and sometimes the votes of the public. ²⁴Kids look up to a Michael Jordan or a Roger Clemens as a true hero, while adults wear the jerseys and jackets of their favorite teams. ²⁵Ex-players become senators and congressmen. ²⁶And an athlete like Monica Seles or Troy Aikman needs to make only one commercial for advertisers to see the sales of a product boom.

²⁷Americans are truly mad about sports. ²⁸Perhaps we like to see the competitiveness we experience in our daily lives acted out on playing fields. ²⁹Perhaps we need heroes who can achieve clear-cut victories in the space of only an hour or two. ³⁰Whatever the reason, the sports scene in this country is more popular than ever.

An Interpretation of Lord of the Flies

¹Modern history has shown us the evil that exists in human beings.

²Assassinations are common, governments use torture to discourage dissent, and six million Jews were exterminated during World War II. ³In Lord of the Flies, William Golding describes a group of schoolboys shipwrecked on an island with no authority figures to control their behavior. ⁴One of the boys soon yields to dark forces within himself, and his corruption symbolizes the evil in all of us. ⁵First, Jack Merridew kills a living creature; then, he rebels against the group leader; and finally, he seizes power and sets up his own murderous society.

⁶The first stage in Jack's downfall is his killing of a living creature. ⁷In Chapter 1, Jack aims at a pig but is unable to kill. ⁸His upraised arm pauses "because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh, because of the unbearable blood," and the pig escapes. ⁹Three chapters later, however, Jack leads some boys on a successful hunt. ¹⁰He returns triumphantly with a freshly killed pig and reports excitedly to the others, "I cut the pig's throat." ¹¹Yet Jack twitches as he says this, and he wipes his bloody hands on his shorts as if eager to remove the stains. ¹²There is still some civilization left in him.

¹³After the initial act of killing the pig, Jack's refusal to cooperate with Ralph shows us that this civilized part is rapidly disappearing. ¹⁴With no adults around, Ralph has made some rules. ¹⁵One is that a signal fire must be kept burning. ¹⁶But Jack tempts the boys watching the fire to go hunting, and the fire goes out. ¹⁷Another rule is that at a meeting, only the person holding a special seashell has the right to speak. ¹⁸In Chapter 5, another boy is speaking when Jack rudely tells him to shut up. ¹⁹Ralph accuses Jack of breaking the rules. ²⁰Jack shouts: "Bollocks to the rules! We're strong--we hunt! If there's a beast, we'll hunt it down! We'll close in and beat and beat and beat--!" ²¹He gives a "wild whoop" and leaps off the platform, throwing the meeting into chaos. ²²Jack is now much more savage than civilized.

²³The most obvious proof of Jack's corruption comes in Chapter 8, when he establishes his own murderous society. ²⁴Insisting that Ralph is not a "proper chief" because he does not hunt, Jack asks for a new election. ²⁵After he again loses, Jack announces, "I'm going off by myself. . . . Anyone who wants to hunt when I do can come too." ²⁶Eventually, nearly all the boys join Jack's "tribe." ²⁷Following his example, they paint their faces like savages, sacrifice to "the beast," brutally murder two of their schoolmates, and nearly succeed in killing Ralph as well. ²⁸Jack has now become completely savage--and so have the others.

²⁹Through Jack Merridew, then, Golding shows how easily moral laws can be forgotten. ³⁰Freed from grown-ups and their rules, Jack learns to kill living things, defy authority, and lead a tribe of murdering savages. ³¹Jack's example is a frightening reminder of humanity's potential for evil. ³²The "beast" the boys try to hunt and kill is actually within every human being.

■ Questions

1. In which essay does the thesis statement appear in the last sentence of the introductory paragraph?

2. In the essay on *Lord of the Flies*, which sentence of the introductory paragraph contains the plan of development? _____
3. Which method of introduction is used in "Giving Up a Baby"?
 a. General to narrow c. Incident or story
 b. Stating importance of topic d. Questions
4. Complete the following brief outline of "Giving Up a Baby":
 I gave up my baby for three reasons:
 a. _____
 b. _____
 c. _____
5. Which *two* essays use a transitional sentence between the first and second supporting paragraphs?

6. Complete the following statement: Emphatic order is shown in the last supporting paragraph of "Giving Up a Baby" with the words *most important factor*; the last supporting paragraph of "Sports-Crazy America" with the words _____; in the last supporting paragraph of "An Interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*" with the words _____.
7. Which essay uses time order as well as emphatic order to organize its three supporting paragraphs? _____
8. List four major transitions used in the supporting paragraphs of "An Interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*."
 a. _____ c. _____
 b. _____ d. _____
9. Which *two* essays include a sentence in the concluding paragraph that summarizes the three supporting points?

10. Which essay includes two final thoughts in its concluding paragraph?
