

Tyndale Tutor

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How to Structure a Typical Paper

Do you struggle to begin an essay? A relevant question, anecdote, statistic, or quote can secure the reader's attention and establish the importance of your topic in your introductory paragraph. Alternatively, you might lead with a statement broad enough to enable your reader to grasp the context of your topic, but not too broad to say nothing of importance. Depending on the type of essay, the next few sentences may establish a progression of ideas that leads to a specific statement, or it may hint at the structure your argument will follow. As an illustration, this paper explains the importance of developing and referring to a working thesis throughout the writing process, ensuring that each paragraph is well-structured, and forming an outline to effectively organize ideas.** By incorporating each of these components into your writing process, you will produce a stronger and more coherent essay.

To begin, the most vital part of your paper, your (working) thesis, should continually act as a reference point from which you approach each of your sub-topics. Typically the last sentence or two in your introductory paragraph – re-read the previous paragraph to see if you can locate it – the thesis or main argument of your paper makes a defensible claim and communicates your stance on a topic. Although you may not have perfected your thesis during the drafting stage, a working thesis will help you to keep your argument on course. As the Writing Centre staff at The University of North Carolina explain, a working thesis is “a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need

* While some basic formatting and citation guidelines are consistent across disciplines, some of the formatting used here, particularly the details included near the top of this page, along with the works cited at the end of this document, are particular to MLA formatting. Ensure that you know the expectations for citing sources in your field of study.

** While this particular essay presents three main points and addresses each point in one paragraph, the vast majority of your university-level papers will cover a varying number of points, and each point may require multiple paragraphs to defend and explain.

adjustment along the way.” While drafting, you might find it helpful to type your working thesis into the header to keep it at the forefront of your mind and tweak the thesis as you go along. When you start to ramble on about something, you should return to your thesis and remind yourself, and perhaps your reader as well, why that particular point is relevant. This approach can help you to stay focused and ensure that the parts connect clearly to the whole.

Another¹ essential method of unifying your paper is to construct solid paragraphs. Each paragraph should focus on one idea or aspect of an idea, and, in a typical paper, most paragraphs will substantiate the thesis that you have delineated in your introduction and will reiterate in your conclusion. When constructing paragraphs, you may want to remember the following acronym: T.E.S.T. (Topic sentence, Explanations/Examples/Evidence, Summary, and Transitions). The topic sentence introduces the focus of your paragraph and highlights its relevance to your thesis. The sentences that follow should explain or expand on that first statement, clarify it through relevant examples, or validate it through external proof. Indiana University exemplifies the role of evidence in a paper as follows: “Like a lawyer in a jury trial, a writer must convince her audience of the validity of her argument by using evidence effectively.” Remember to always introduce and comment on your quotes to provide context and clarify the connection to your argument. Throughout each paragraph you should also weave in transitions – words or phrases that signal relationships between ideas. For ease of identification, some of the simpler transitions in this paragraph have been underlined for you, although a different kind of transition can be found when a key word or idea in one sentence is repeated later. Finally, to conclude each paragraph, you may briefly summarize your idea and reiterate its connection to your thesis, but be sure not to introduce the next idea before the paragraph that follows.

While referring to a working thesis and maintaining good paragraph structure can enhance the clarity and focus of your paper, getting started in the first place is usually one of the

¹ The underlined words in this paragraph are to highlight transition words or phrases you might also want to use. But when it comes to your papers, please refrain from underlining. Let your words speak for themselves.

most challenging steps in the writing process. A productive way to begin recording and organizing your ideas is to create a detailed outline of your paper. Once you have brainstormed a series of points to discuss, organize them into a structure that will follow a natural progression towards your conclusion (for example, use chronological order if the topic lends itself to it) or else order the weaker points toward the middle of your paper and the strongest toward the end. Placing your working thesis at the top, use bullet points to jot the key arguments and, if possible, insert the supporting quotes or other pieces of evidence beneath each point. While this outlining process can seem time-consuming at the outset, it should save you time overall. The Writing Center staff at the Center for Excellence in Writing and Communication explain that “an outline expedites the drafting process... [by] allow[ing] you to see your paper holistically... even before it’s finished (even before it’s begun for that matter).” When you take time to complete an outline before beginning your paper, you can be free to focus on more sophisticated aspects of your writing instead of trying to remember and organize your ideas. The end result will be a paper that is better-structured and focused.

Although the strength of your ideas will still depend on the depth of your thought and research, the techniques described – referring to a working thesis, employing proper paragraph format, and formulating an outline – each of these can help you to translate your ideas into an effective argument. As this essay draws to a close, let us offer some final tips to help you conclude your own essay. Just as you began your introduction with a broad statement about your topic and narrowed in on your thesis, reverse your introduction’s structure in your conclusion, so that you begin with a reiteration of your thesis (in different words) and pan out to close with a more extensive statement about your topic. The final sentence should leave the reader with something to ponder, a poignant quote, a recommendation, or perhaps, like this essay, a broader application of your argument and its significance to the reader: writing effectively is a vital skill to develop and refine throughout your academic career, a skill that can be instrumental to your occupation and Christian calling.

Works Cited

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