

How to write an academic essay: Structuring paragraphs well

Within the body of your essay, your paragraphs need to have some kind of structure, or your arguments will not make sense. I have put together this helpful, systematic step-by-step guide to assist you in developing well-structured paragraphs:

Paragraphs in academic essays are usually at least three sentences long, though they can be longer. Each of those sentences shouldn't be longer than three lines, though, or you run the risk of producing huge slabs of text that put off markers and make it hard to follow the logic of your arguments.

As a general rule, if you can't fit at least three paragraphs on a page, they are too long. If you have more than five or six paragraphs on a page, they are likely too short.

Paragraphs contain three main elements:

- **Main point:** the topic sentence, which describes the focus of the paragraph
 - All paragraphs should be focused: they should discuss only one major point. That point should connect with the overall focus of the essay (the **thesis statement** that we discussed when learning how to write a good introduction).
 - The major point of a paragraph is often called the *controlling idea*. Every paragraph should have a different *controlling idea*, each one discussing one aspect or part of the overall essay.
 - Body paragraphs will often begin with a summary of the *controlling idea*: the **topic sentence**. The **topic sentence** summarises the paragraph in the same way that the *thesis statement* summarises the whole essay.
 - The rest of the paragraph supports that **topic sentence**, by explaining it in detail, giving an example, or citing evidence that reinforces it.
- **Support:** explanations, evidence, and examples that reinforce the main point
 - The largest part of any body paragraph is the support: explanations, evidence, and examples.
 - Explanations use logic to fully explain the point raised in the topic sentence. It is not enough to just explain an idea, however: you need to show that outside evidence supports it as well.
 - Evidence can include:
 - Facts
 - Published opinions
 - Research from books, journal articles, websites, etc.
 - Published case studies
 - Research data
 - But, in your case, for the purposes of English essays, evidence will largely be composed of examples taken from the passages you analyse, presented as *quotes*, properly punctuated with quotation marks (**always remember:** if you are writing out a quote from a passage provided in an assignment or examination, you **do not** need to provide **references** for those quotes **only!** Any quote **from any other source** must be **accurately** and **comprehensively** referenced).
 - All evidence must be relevant to the topic, and it must be used and credited properly.

- Outside sources can be quoted, summarised, or paraphrased. Crediting outside sources that have been quoted, summarised or paraphrased is known as referencing, which we will get to later.
- **Transitions:** connections between this paragraph and the thesis statement and other, nearby paragraphs.
 - Body paragraphs do not exist in isolation. They should fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Transitions show the connections between paragraphs themselves, and the connections between the paragraphs and the overall focus of the essay (the **thesis statement**). They often appear at the end of a paragraph.
 - Transitions are essential for maintaining momentum in your essay and showing the reader how all the ideas fit together.