

A Quick Guide to Essay Structure

The purpose of this handout is to give you some basic essay writing guidelines. Following these guidelines will help you to produce an essay that can effectively convey your thoughts to your reader.

Introductory Paragraph

An introductory paragraph introduces your topic in broad terms. It outlines your main arguments and sets the tone of your essay. An essential part of any introduction is the **thesis statement** (see separate handout). A thesis statement is the central idea or message of your essay.

EXAMPLE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

1. Topic

In Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart,"¹ several interpretations are possible concerning the source of the beating heart² that causes the narrator to reveal himself to the police. The noise could simply be a product of the narrator's obviously deranged mind. Or perhaps the murder victim's spirit lingers, heart beating, to exact revenge upon the narrator. Although either of these interpretations is possible, most of the evidence in the story suggests that the inescapable beating heart that haunts the narrator is his own.³

2. The area of focus

3. Thesis statement

Body Paragraphs

An effective structure for body paragraphs is to write them as you would a miniature essay (intro, body, conclusion). They should begin by introducing the topic of the paragraph, include a tie to the thesis (i.e., topic sentence), and provide support for the thesis through reasoning and evidence (examples and data). Body paragraphs should maintain unity, development, and coherence throughout, and conclude by tying the argument together, ultimately referring back to the thesis. Transition words are words or phrases that show the reader connections between ideas. Use them to link concepts and maintain progression in your writing. Some useful transition words are: *furthermore, in addition to, however, nevertheless, finally, therefore, etc.*

EXAMPLE BODY PARAGRAPH

1. Introduce the topic

The interpretation that the heartbeat stems from some kind of auditory hallucination is flawed.¹ The narrator is clearly insane—his killing a kind old man because of an “Evil Eye” demonstrates this—and his psychotic behavior is more than sufficient cause for readers to question his truthfulness. Even so, nowhere else in the story does the narrator imagine things that do not exist. Nor is it likely that he would intentionally attempt to mislead us since the narrative is just a confessional monologue through which he tries to explain and justify his actions. He himself describes his “disease” as a heightening of his senses, not of his imagination. Moreover, his highly detailed account of the events surrounding the murder seems to support this claim. Near the end of the story, he refutes the notion that he is inventing the sound in his mind when he says, “I found that the noise was not within my ears” (792).² Although the narrator’s reliability is questionable, there seems to be no reason to doubt this particular observation, so we can dismiss the suggestion that he simply imagined the heartbeat.³

2. Clearly present evidence supporting the topic.

3. Refer back to the topic sentence.

Conclusion

A good conclusion smoothly ends the essay by reiterating how various aspects of the argument relate to the thesis. It will maintain the same order established in earlier paragraphs, i.e., it follows progression across topics. A conclusion DOES NOT introduce new ideas, or simply restate the introduction.

EXAMPLE CONCLUSION

1. Summary of main points.

There have been many possible explanations given for the presence of the beating heart in Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Some interpretations have suggested that the beating heart was invented by the narrator. However, in spite of his obvious insanity, he appears to be reliable. This is not a ghost story, so the suggestion that the beating heart is supernatural is also unsatisfactory.¹ The timing of the heartbeat and the events in the story strongly support the conclusion that the beating heart belongs to the narrator.²

2. Re-statement of thesis.

*Essay adapted from a student piece in *Simon & Schuster’s Handbook for Writers* (Fourth Canadian Edition).