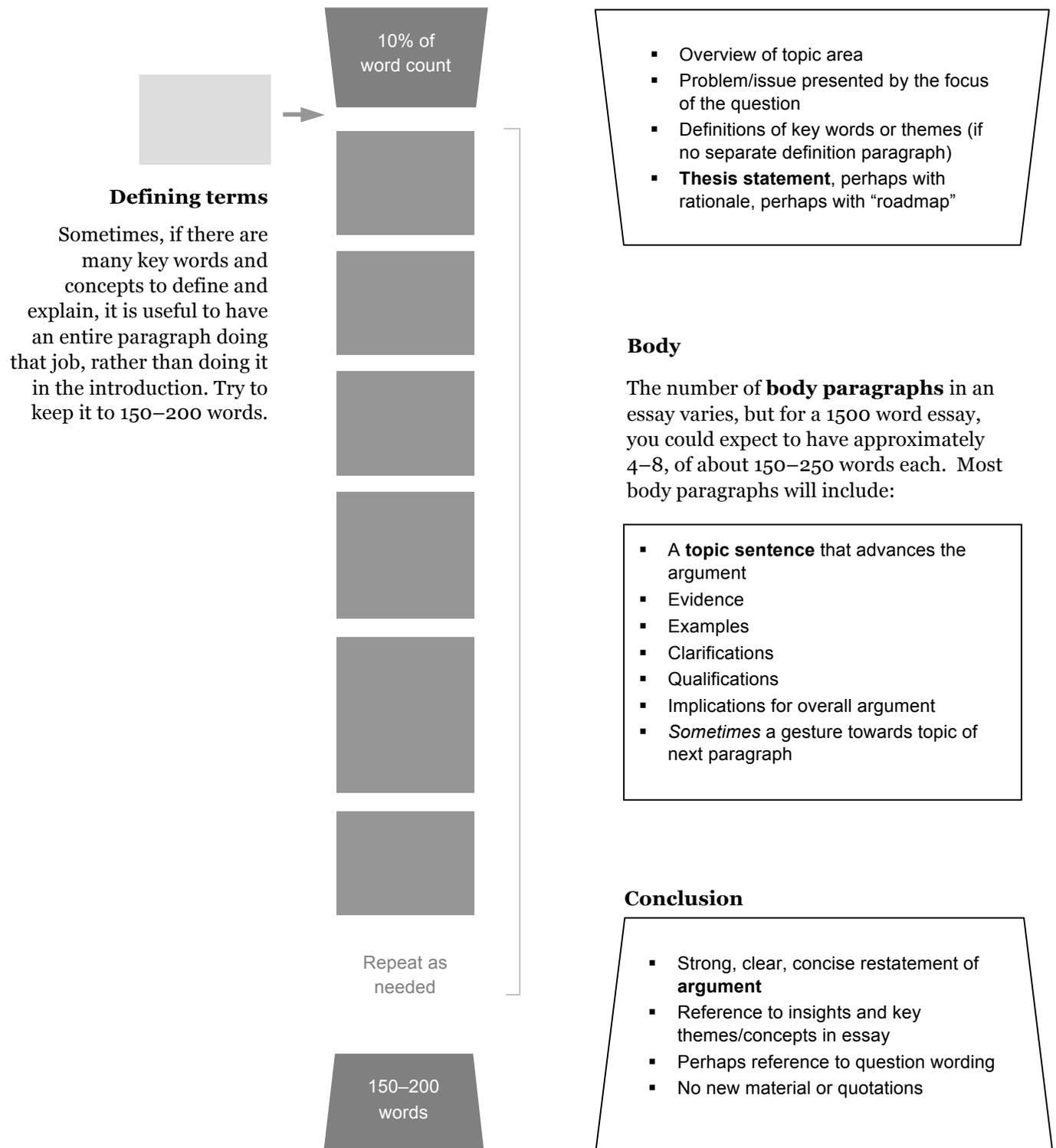


Academic Essays: form and function

Essays have a particular structure, and understanding this can improve your writing

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The structure of a 1000–3000 word essay



Personal vs. academic essays

Essays are pieces of writing that creatively and engagingly discuss a given topic – generally to persuade the reader to accept a particular point of view, position, or way of understanding. However, students should remember that broadly speaking there are two types of essay – the “personal” and the “academic”. You are expected to write academic essays at university. You will find a personal essay in, for example, a book of “great essays” or in *The New York Times*. A personal essay is usually an individual’s reflections on a topic; its focus will often seem to drift to and fro, and it may not state its ideas very directly. A personal essay will often imply or suggest, not stating its point of view explicitly, nor explaining the connections between its ideas.

An academic essay should never be suggestive in this way, and that is one of the main differences between the two types of essay. An academic essay needs to be very explicit about its subject matter, about its way of interpreting that subject matter (its **argument**), and about the interconnections between all the ideas that make up its argument. Indeed, the main structural components of an academic essay – its **introduction** and **thesis statement**, its **body paragraphs**, **topic sentences**, and **conclusion** – all ensure that the writer is being clear about his/her argument and its progression.

Other differences between personal and academic essays concern the style and tone of the writing. There is less freedom of expression in an academic essay: you are expected to follow academic rules of grammar and punctuation without improvising; very short or over-long paragraphs are discouraged; information and quotations from other sources must be referenced according to strict protocols; informal, colloquial language and contractions are inappropriate; and the use of first-person pronouns – *I* and *we* – is usually not acceptable, especially in the more scientific disciplines.

Despite these restrictions, however, there is still considerable art in writing a good academic essay. Mostly this is a matter of organising your ideas into a structure that most logically, simply, and compellingly leads the reader to an understanding of your overall point of view or argument. An academic essay’s essential structural components, mentioned above, provide a very basic but necessary framework for the delicate task of structuring each unique essay.

The introduction

The introduction has many jobs to do in a very short space. You need to move efficiently from an overview of the topic area, to an articulation of the issue suggested by the focus of the question, to a summary of the argument in one concise sentence (the thesis statement). You may also define key terms and point to key themes or ideas that will appear throughout the essay. The thesis statement normally comes near the end of the introduction. As well as summarising the argument, it may also include a brief statement of the logic behind that argument. It will often be accompanied by a “road-map” of the essay – a suggestion of the topics that will be covered as the logical path of the argument is followed. By the end of the introduction, readers should have a good sense of where the essay is going; for this reason, many writers find it easier to craft their introduction *last*.

The body

The body of an essay is made up of as many paragraphs as is appropriate to its size. Each paragraph should deal with one identifiable point or subpoint. That point – or the topic of the paragraph – should be clear from the topic sentence, which is usually the first sentence of the paragraph. This is very important for students new to essay writing: paragraphs should focus on your argument, not merely on the topic of the essay. That is, a paragraph’s opening sentence should not present facts (evidence or examples), but should be a statement of understanding that will require evidence and examples to support it. The remainder of the paragraph will provide such evidence and examples, and will clarify and discuss the implications for the overall argument of the point being made. Ordering paragraphs in an essay – finding an appropriate structure to present the various points – is a complex art, and there are no straightforward rules because every essay is different.

The conclusion

An essay’s final paragraph is the conclusion. By this point, you will be most clear in your own mind about your argument, and now is the time to restate it in a new and vigorous manner. It is also useful to refer to the various important themes and concepts that have appeared in the essay, and to allude to the more general implications of the argument you have presented. The conclusion should not introduce any idea that has not already been addressed in the body of the essay.