

The Writing Center

at
Trident Technical College

What is so special about college writing?

College writing is also called *academic writing*. Academic writing is writing by scholars for scholars (and yes, college students are scholars!) that presents an *informed argument*. In other words, the essays you write for college classes should be written for a college level reading audience and should provide information about *what you know* about the topic as well as *what you think* about the topic.

What style and organization should I use when writing academic essays?

Academic writing is *highly structured* writing, and the reader has certain expectations about how information is organized and presented in an academic essay. The *language and word choice should be formal* rather than personal (which is why you avoid using “I” and “you” and why you avoid using contractions and slang terms) and should be appropriate for a college level reading audience. Academic writing should also be *logically organized*. The following organizational pattern is common in academic writing:

First paragraph (Introduction)—The *introductory paragraph* introduces the topic of the essay and the main point you are making about the topic, which is expressed in the thesis statement. The thesis statement is usually the last sentence of the introductory paragraph.

Succeeding paragraphs (Body)—Each body paragraph usually begins with a topic sentence, which states the point of that particular paragraph. An academic essay usually has several body paragraphs, depending on what points are being made about the topic of the essay. The *body paragraphs* each deal with one idea or point that supports and/or explains the thesis statement.

Last paragraph (Conclusion)—This paragraph usually reiterates the thesis idea and wraps up the entire essay to bring it to a meaningful close. Sometimes the conclusion will include a broader application of the main point of the essay.

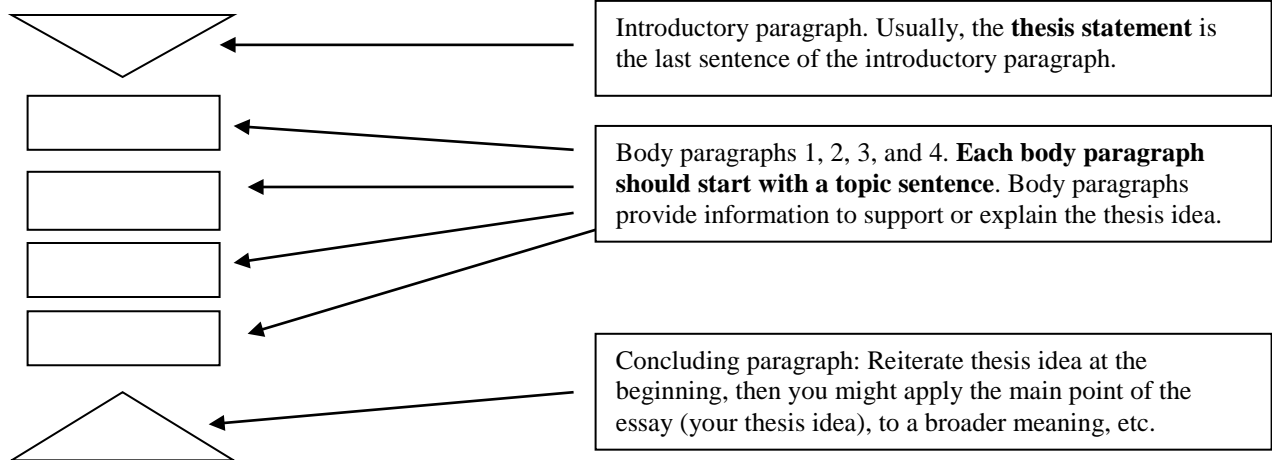


**Writing Academic Essays:
Organization, Thesis Statements, and Topic Sentences**

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The diagram below illustrates this common type of essay organization. The triangular shapes represent the introductory and concluding paragraphs; the rectangular shapes represent body paragraphs.



IMPORTANT NOTE: This diagrammed format is only to give you *an idea* of how you might organize a formal academic essay. If you rigidly stick to this format, your writing will seem mechanical and unoriginal. This format is best used as an *organizational guideline* for where to put the information you include in your essay.

“No set of conventions for preparing a manuscript can replace lively and intelligent writing, and no amount of research and documentation can compensate for a poor presentation of ideas.”

From *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed.



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Why should I use a thesis statement and topic sentences in my essay?

- ◆ **Thesis statements** and **topic sentences** help organize the ideas in an essay.
- ◆ Academic writers are expected to use thesis statements and topic sentences.

A **thesis statement** conveys the overall idea of the entire essay.
The thesis statement is usually (though not always)
the last sentence of the first paragraph of the essay.

A **topic sentence** conveys the main idea of an individual paragraph.
The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph.

THESIS STATEMENTS

- A thesis statement presents your essay's limited subject and your attitude towards the subject.
- The thesis statement should answer the questions "So what?" and "What difference does it make?" about your essay topic.
- One technique for developing a thesis statement is to formulate a question that you will answer in your essay. The thesis statement should not be the question, however. The thesis statement should be the **answer** to the question. To help formulate a question, ask yourself "What do I want my reader to know and think about this subject?"
- Your **thesis point should be arguable**. In other words, the thesis should be a statement that a reasonable person might agree or disagree with.
- Avoid using phrases like "In this paper I will..." or "This paper will examine the subject of..." in your thesis statement. This creates a tone that is too personal for academic writing.
- There is no specific "correct" length for a thesis statement. It is okay if the sentence seems long; the thesis statement should convey the entire point of your essay.
- Once you start writing your first draft, some ideas may emerge that change the original focus of your essay. *After you have written a complete draft of your essay, always check your thesis statement to be certain the thesis reflects the overall main point you've made in the essay you've actually written.*

TOPIC SENTENCES:



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- A topic sentence functions as a kind of mini thesis statement for the paragraph. The topic sentence tells the reader the main point of the paragraph.
 - The topic sentence usually appears as the first sentence of the paragraph.
 - The topic sentence should state the paragraph's main idea as well as create a smooth transition from the preceding paragraph.
 - Not all paragraphs you read will have a topic sentence. However, using topic sentences is a good way to help you organize your writing and make sure you are staying focused on your main point (as stated in your thesis).
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- Remember to use the topic sentence as a way to focus a paragraph. If you stray from the topic within your paragraph, consider beginning another paragraph that deals with the new topic. When you are editing the draft of your essay, be certain that the topic sentences accurately reflect the content of each paragraph.
 - Sometimes it helps to write a draft of your essay, then go back and add topic sentences to your body paragraphs. To do this, ask yourself "What is this paragraph about?" for each body paragraph in your essay, then be sure the first sentence clearly states what that paragraph is about.

A trick: After composing the first draft of your essay, go back and look at **your thesis statement** (the last sentence of your first paragraph) and **each of your topic sentences** (the first sentences of your body paragraphs). **These sentences together should completely summarize** (express the main points of) **your entire essay**. If these sentences do not express the main points of your essay, you probably need to revise your thesis and/or add topic sentences to your body paragraphs.

A reminder about how writing is organized:

- ◆ Words make up sentences.
- ◆ *A sentence expresses a complete thought.*
- ◆ Sentences make up paragraphs.
- ◆ *A paragraph deals with one idea in detail, so all the sentences within a single paragraph should address the idea of the paragraph.*
- ◆ Paragraphs make up essays, which deal with a central point being made about a specific topic.

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