



UNIVERSITY OF  
PORTSMOUTH  
ASK - ACADEMIC  
SKILLS UNIT

# Basic Essay Structure.

Essays are usually written in continuous, flowing, paragraphed text. They don't use section headings. This may seem unstructured, but good essays are carefully structured.

This handout has four sections: first, a brief outline of the structure of essays; secondly, introductions; thirdly, main body paragraph; and fourthly conclusions. Please also see our handout: "[Paragraphs: Main Body of an Assignment](#)".

Exactly how the essay content is structured is your choice. However, they generally follow the basic pattern below.

## The three basic parts of an essay.

- First: An introduction.
- Second: The main body of the essay.
- Third: A conclusion.

The essay itself usually has no section headings. Only the title page, author declaration and reference list are written as headings, along with, for example, appendices. Check any task instructions, and your course or unit handbook, for further details.

## Introduction.

**Please note** that the content in an introduction can vary widely. For example, in some disciplines and for some assignments you have to provide a full background and context, some may require a little, and others none.

An introduction to an essay usually has three primary purposes:

1. It sets the scene.
2. It tells the reader what is important, and why.
3. It tells the reader what the essay is going to do. This is known as signposting.

**Standard** content of an introduction includes the following five key elements:

1. A statement that sets out the topic and engages the reader.
2. The background and context of the topic.
3. Any important definitions, integrated into your text as appropriate.
4. An outline of the key points, topic, issues, evidence, ideas, arguments, models, theories, or other information, as appropriate. This may include distinctions or contrasts between different ideas or evidence.
5. A final sentence or two which tells the reader your focal points and aims.

You should aim to restrict your introduction to information needed for the topic, and therefore only include background and contextual information which helps the reader understand it, and to set the scene for your chosen focal point or points.

In most essays you will have a considerable range of options for your focus. You will be expected to demonstrate your ability to select the most relevant content to address your chosen focal point or points in depth.

There are some exceptions, for example, where the assignment brief specifically directs the focus or requires that you write broadly about the topic. However, these are relatively rare or are discipline-specific. **Therefore, you should check your task instructions and discipline and subject area conventions.**

Examples are provided below of an opening statement, a summary of the selected content, and a statement at the end of the introduction which tells the reader what the essay will focus on and how it will be addressed. A fictional essay is used for this.

The title of our essay is, "Cats are better than dogs. Discuss". Please note that you would need to add citations as appropriate.

### **Example of opening statements:**

People have shared their lives with cats and dogs for millenia. Which is better depends partly on each animal's characteristics and partly on the owner's preferences.

### **Here is a summary of five specific topics selected for the essay, which would be covered in a little more detail in the introduction:**

1. In ancient Egypt, cats were treated as sacred and were pampered companions.
2. Dogs have for centuries been used for hunting and to guard property. There are many types of working dog, and both dogs and cats are now kept purely as pets.
3. They are very different animals, with different care needs, traits and abilities.
4. It is a common perception that people are either "cat-lovers" or "dog-lovers".
5. It is a common perception that people tend to have preferences for one, and negative beliefs about and attitudes towards, the other.

### **Example of closing statements at the end of the introduction:**

This essay will examine both cats' and dogs' behaviour and abilities, the benefits of keeping them as pets, and whether people's perceptions of their nature matches current knowledge and understanding.

## **Main Body: Paragraphs.**

The body of the essay should be organised into paragraphs. Each paragraph should deal with a different aspect of the issue, but they should also link in some way to those that precede and follow it. This is not an easy thing to get right, even for experienced writers, partly because there are many ways to successfully structure and use paragraphs. There is no absolutely perfect paragraph template.

### **The theme or topic statement.**

The first sentence, or sometimes two, tells the reader what the paragraph is going to cover. It may either:

1. Begin a new point or topic, or:
2. Follow on from the previous paragraph, but with a different focus or go into more-specific detail. If this is the case, it should clearly link to the previous paragraph.

### **The last sentence:**

It should be clear if the point has come to an end, or if it continues in the next paragraph.

Here is a brief example of flow between two summarised paragraphs which cover the historical perspective:

It is known from hieroglyphs that the Ancient Egyptians believed that cats were sacred. They were also held in high regard, as suggested by their being found mummified and entombed with their owners (Smith, 1969). In addition, cats are portrayed aiding hunters. Therefore, they were both treated as sacred, and were used as intelligent working companions. However, today they are almost entirely owned as pets.

In contrast, dogs have not been regarded as sacred, but they have for centuries been widely used for hunting in Europe. This developed over time and eventually they became domesticated and accepted as pets. Today, they are seen as loyal, loving and protective members of the family, and are widely used as working dogs.

## Conclusion.

Please note: there is **never** any new information in a conclusion.

The conclusion usually does three things:

1. it reminds your readers of what the essay was meant to do.
2. it provides an answer, where possible, to the title.
3. it reminds your reader how you reached that answer.

The conclusion should normally occupy just one paragraph. It draws together all the key elements of your essay, so you do not need to repeat the fine detail unless you are highlighting something. A conclusion to our essay about cats and dogs is given below:

Both cats and dogs have been highly-valued for millenia, are affectionate and beneficial to their owners' wellbeing. However, they are very different animals and each is "better" than the other regarding care needs and natural traits. Dogs need regular training and exercise but many owners do not train or exercise them enough, resulting in bad behaviour. They also need to be "boarded" if the owner is away and to have frequent baths to prevent bad odours. In contrast, cats do not need this level of effort and care. Dogs are seen as more intelligent, loyal and attuned to human beings, whereas cats are perceived as aloof and solitary, and as only seeking affection when they want to be fed. However, recent studies have shown that cats are affectionate and loyal and more intelligent than dogs, but it is less obvious and useful. There are, for example, no "police" or "assistance" cats, in part because they do not have the kinds of natural instincts which make dogs easy to train. Therefore, which animal is better depends upon personal preference and whether they are required to work. Therefore, although dogs are better as working animals, cats are easier, better pets.

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