

How to develop a structured essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

How do I write a unified essay?

Your essay of about 750 words must have the basic organizational structure of an introduction, body paragraphs and a conclusion—in other words, **a beginning, a middle and an end**. Your essay should also use **transitional words and phrases** (e.g., moreover, however, in addition, to conclude) at the start of each paragraph and when adding points within your paragraphs to show how ideas connect within or between paragraphs.

Why is the first paragraph so important?

The introduction paragraph sets the tone for your essay, makes the first and strongest impression on readers, and is therefore very important. The introduction should include, at least, 1) the title and author of the text you are writing about, 2) the main idea or ideas you have identified in the essay, and 3) the thesis you have chosen to develop in your own essay. You should also include a brief mention of writing techniques used by the author that you will include in your discussion of the essay. Do not make sweeping or vague generalizations, do not pronounce, do not begin tritely with a dictionary definition, and do not apologize for your inadequate ideas or knowledge.

How many paragraphs do I write?

For the body of the essay, you should write at least three substantial paragraphs, each developing one idea and stating a topic sentence that makes the focus of the paragraph clear. For example, you may decide to develop a discussion of techniques and devices in one of the three body paragraphs, or you may decide to discuss one technique in each body paragraph.

What do I do for a conclusion?

Your conclusion paragraph should be a restatement of the major ideas you have presented in your essay and it should bring some closure to your essay. It can be shorter than the body paragraphs; the most important thing is that it include some statements that bring a sense of conclusion to your ideas and observations about the text you are discussing.

Instructions

In Module 10, we created thesis statements, and in earlier modules (Module 9, for example), we identified main ideas in an essay. Now you must take your own thesis ideas and turn them into a 750-word essay. This exercise asks you to work on developing a structured essay. This exercise will also help you practise creating a short outline for your essay. You should aim for a five or six paragraph essay. Even if you did not complete Modules 9 and 10, you should start in the same way—by thinking about main ideas and good thesis statements you could write about in your own essay in response to the short story or essay you are going to write about in this particular exercise.

Always express your ideas clearly, even when you are listing ideas. In the sections below, you will be asked to list some of the ideas you might develop in the various paragraphs of your essay.

- In **PART 1** of this exercise you will draft an essay outline based on your response to an original essay. In preparing an outline, your goal is to create a skeleton structure that you can use to guide yourself through the writing of a 750-word essay about a text. Never attempt to write an essay without first planning, in an outline, what you will discuss. The outline does not have to be written in full paragraphs. Instead you can briefly list the topic sentence and supporting points that might go into each paragraph. In the appropriate spaces below, fill in the outline plan for an opening paragraph, three or four body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph.
- In **PARTS 2 and 3**, simply identify the paragraphs as acceptable or unacceptable examples of introduction and conclusion paragraphs.

Exercise

I PART 1

OUTLINING: In the spaces below, create an outline for a 750-word essay based on “Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas.

INTRODUCTION

“Seven Wonders” - Main Ideas

“Seven Wonders” - Thesis Statement

BODY

First body paragraph

Second body paragraph

Third body paragraph

Fourth body paragraph (if applicable)

CONCLUSION

II PART 2

Determine whether the sample paragraphs below are acceptable or unacceptable as introductory paragraphs.

1. “Seven Wonders” presents a list of the wonders of the world according to author Lewis Thomas. He has chosen mainly scientific things for his list, starting with bacteria at the bottom of oceans and ending with the planet Earth as his overall number-one choice. The human species also makes the list. Also included are things like cells and an example of a virus.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

2. Lewis Thomas has written about his choices as the modern-day wonders of the world. While we might disagree with a few of his choices, it is difficult to disagree with his choice of the planet Earth as number one overall. He uses enumeration and detailed description well to get us to agree with him.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

III PART 3

Determine whether the sample paragraphs below are acceptable or unacceptable as concluding paragraphs.

1. Lewis uses description well in his list. He makes it clear what he is talking about, and his use of details comes forth in a language that is not too scientific for the average reader. For example, he says about the olfactory cell that “How it manages to make sense of what it senses, discriminating between jasmine and anything else non-jasmine with infallibility, is one of the deep secrets of neurobiology” (9). He also describes the virus well and makes us cringe on occasion.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

2. To conclude, everyone on occasion must wonder a little about what we see and don't see in the world around us. If we were all asked to make a list of what makes us wonder the most, many of us would surely come up with some of the same examples as Thomas does in his essay. His list reflects his own particular scientific interests but certainly gives us something to think about.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

Answer key

I PART 1

Here are two examples of outlines for an essay on “Seven Wonders.”

Example 1

a) First paragraph - Introduction

1. mention essay title and author
2. explain things in the world that amaze us (main idea)
3. agreement with author’s list of seven wonders (your thesis)
4. enumeration and personal tone are two techniques that will be discussed (organizing statement)

Remember, you may have chosen other acceptable writing techniques to discuss in your essay.

Possible body structure

- b) second paragraph – list wonders Lewis has used, and how he builds towards number 1; while listing his choices try to include some brief comments on what you like and don’t like in his list so that it does not result in a pure summary paragraph
- c) third paragraph – show agreement with author’s choice of the planet Earth as number-one wonder (give 3 examples)
- d) fourth paragraph – how personal tone, use of first-person (I) narrator, and scientific emphasis in essay (numbering, different cell forms) help convince us (give 3 examples)

Final paragraph

- e) conclusion – difficult to disagree with choices Lewis has made, especially his number-one choice

Example 2

a) First paragraph (introduction)

1. author, subject of essay, i.e., wondering in general (main idea)
2. our need to explain the unexplained (main idea/thesis)
3. how author uses example and descriptive detail so well (thesis/organizing statement)

Remember: You may have chosen other acceptable writing techniques to discuss in your essay.

Possible body structure

- b) second paragraph – the small things often amaze us the most and Lewis effectively uses scientific detail to describe and remind us (give 3 examples)
- c) third paragraph – the last choices, man and the planet Earth, are unbelievable creations overall and end a good list of examples chosen by Lewis...he has used examples of other things, too (give 3 examples)

Final paragraph

- d) conclusion – essay reminds us we really are amazing and worth wondering about overall and that we will continue to evolve and make future generations wonder about it all

II PART 2

1. **Unacceptable.** On the positive side, this paragraph mentions the author and text name and lists some major elements of content, but it is missing a reaction-response (thesis statement) and makes no mention of techniques that will be discussed.
2. **Acceptable.** This paragraph has the author's name, the basis of the essay, a reaction-response (thesis statement) and even a mention of literary techniques to be discussed. It would be even more complete if it mentioned the title of the original text.

III PART 3

1. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph could be used as a body paragraph discussing the use of techniques and devices, but it brings no sense of closure to the essay at all. It would be out of place as a conclusion paragraph.
2. **Acceptable.** This paragraph has some general comments that reflect back to the essay as a whole, combined with the student's feelings about the essay and even what comes next. It also that is used correctly and does not mislead the reader.