

Essay Shape and Organization

Style

It is important to recognize that just like there are many distinct styles of art or music, there are different styles of writing. Each style has its own unique characteristics and techniques.

Think about how distinct each of these pieces of writing is:

- A newspaper article vs. a short story
- A college application essay vs. a job resume

These differences may seem obvious, but there are also differences between academic writing assignments. A 40-page master's thesis will be structured very differently from a chemistry lab report, which will be structured differently from an 8-page research paper. In this class, you will learn a specific style of basic academic writing that is called a "five-paragraph essay." This is a very predictable nonfiction essay structure that is considered foundational to other, more advanced writing styles. A five-paragraph essay will be described in detail in the following sections.

There are a variety of benefits that come from learning how to write a five-paragraph essay. First, in order to write using other styles in the future, you need to know how to analyze an example text and base your writing off the structure you identified. Because five-paragraph essays are so straightforward, they make a good style of writing to learn this skill with. Similarly, it provides a simple context for mastering complicated skills that apply to a variety of writing styles like logically connecting your ideas. Writing a five-paragraph essay is also a gateway skill to college admission for many students on timed exams like the TOEFL, GRE, LATs, etc. As such, most of your native-speaking peers have learned this structure in their high schools and you will have similar background knowledge to those peers as you enter the university.

You should be very careful to not assume that everything you write will always follow the structure of a five-paragraph essay. In fact, many college writing teachers will ask you to break the five-paragraph structure and use more complex structures. Your future writing will be better if you learn how to control this more prescriptive form of writing while applying the skills you will learn in this class (e.g., developing your ideas, using adequate support, etc.). You need to remember to be flexible in the way you approach writing assignments at the university. Always do a little background research before you begin writing something in a new style. That background research should include reading any resources your instructor gives you, especially a rubric or assignment description sheet.

As part of knowing the style you will use, you should understand that at this level, your essays should be based on your own knowledge and experiences (not facts you find from any outside sources). Using sources improperly can lead to plagiarism, which is a serious issue in the U.S.

Shape

Before anyone reads your essay, you communicate something about your skill by the shape of your essay. You should divide your essay (more or less evenly) into paragraphs.

Typical formatting guidelines you should be aware of include using 12 pt font, Times New Roman font, double spacing, one-inch margins, left-alignment, indented paragraphs, and not leaving a space between paragraphs.

If you are writing a timed essay on the computer, most of these formatting features are not within your control. You should however, still make an effort to divide your essay into paragraphs by either indenting at the beginning of the paragraph or leaving an empty line between paragraphs.



Organization

Five-paragraph essays have very predictable organization. These short, academic essays typically have four, five, or six paragraphs: one introduction paragraph; two, three, or four body paragraphs; and one conclusion paragraph. The number of body paragraphs you need can change depending on the topic or time requirement (but they are still generally referred to as "five-paragraph essays").

The way you organize your ideas in a five-paragraph essay may be different from the way you normally organize your ideas. You should focus on one central idea, and that idea needs to be clearly stated multiple times. The essay should present reasons and evidence that support that one, central idea. You may have heard that American writers "tell you what they are going to tell you, they tell you, and then they tell you what they told you." This is often true in a five-paragraph essay.

While it is often easier to draft your essay by beginning with the body paragraphs, the following section will present the organization of an essay to you in the order your reader should experience your writing. You should prepare them for the topic (in the beginning of the introduction), present your main idea (at the end of the introduction), provide explanations and evidence to support your main idea (in the body paragraphs), and summarize or extend your main idea (in the conclusion).

Exercises

Exercise 1: Noticing Styles

Discuss the unique styles of the following types of writing. Who is the audience? How is the tone different? What differences do you see in vocabulary or grammar?

- [Standard 5 paragraph essay for writing class](#)
- [BYU Newspaper article](#)
- [Intro to Business Textbook](#)
- [Pride & Prejudice by Jane Austen \(novel\)](#)
- [The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare \(play\)](#)
- [How to Article & Resume Example](#)

Exercise 2: Shape

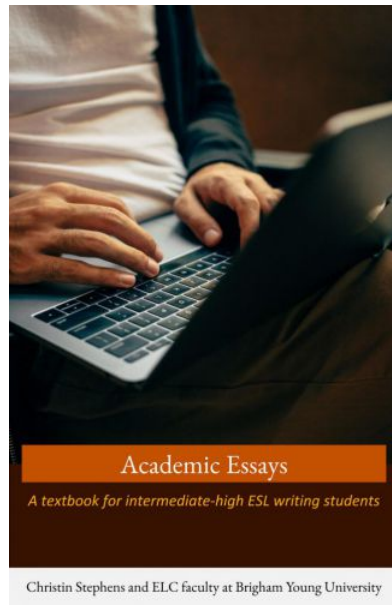
Discuss the unique shapes of the following types of writing. Why do you think the paragraphs and sentences are structured differently?

- [Standard 5 paragraph essay for writing class](#)
- [BYU Newspaper article](#)
- [Intro to Business Textbook](#)
- [Pride & Prejudice by Jane Austen \(novel\)](#)
- [The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare \(play\)](#)
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Exercise 3: Analyze Example Essay

Consider how the essay in the following chapter of this book follows the patterns of a typical five-paragraph essay. Look for the following components:

- *Introduction*
- *Body paragraphs*
- *Conclusion*
- *Repeated ideas*



Stephens, C. (n.d.). *Academic B Writing*. BYU Open Textbook Network.
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