

An essay is a piece of **continuous, flowing, paragraphed text** that is (usually) **uninterrupted by headings**, so it can appear to be unstructured. In fact, good essays need to be very carefully structured indeed.

Exactly how an individual essay is structured is very much the choice of the individual writer. There is no prescribed 'recipe' for structuring essays. Most essays, however, do follow the same very basic pattern. This pattern is described below.

For more detail on essay writing see Chapter 11 in Stella Cottrell's excellent book:

Cottrell, S. (2013). *The study skills handbook* (4th ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

An essay consists of four basic parts:

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|---|------------------------------|---|
| 1 | An introduction |] <i>although all essays have these, you should not write them as headings in the essay</i> |
| 2 | The body of the essay | |
| 3 | A conclusion | |
| 4 | A reference list |] <i>this does get its own heading</i> |

Additionally, essays you submit for your course will have a title page and author declaration. You may need to add other sections – check task instructions, or your course or unit handbook, for further details.

1 Introduction

The introduction to an essay usually has two purposes:

- It 'sets the scene' by providing just a little background information about the topic – in other words, it **contextualises the topic**.
- It tells the reader what the essay is going to do. This is known as **signposting**.

You should aim to restrict your introduction to one or at most two paragraphs. Here's a very short, simple introduction to the (obviously invented!) essay title 'Cats are better than dogs. Discuss.'

Both cats and dogs are popular pets in the U.K. It is sometimes said that people can be divided into 'cat people' and 'dog people' (e.g. Smith, 1991, p. 15; PDSA, 1996, pp. 3–4). This essay will discuss the relative merits of the two animals in a domestic context. Historical interpretations of the value of the two will be contrasted, and the scientific evidence of the health benefits of keeping them will be scrutinised.

2 Body

The body of the essay is the part that addresses the title. It should be **organised into paragraphs**. Each paragraph should deal with a different aspect of the issue, but each paragraph should also link in some way to those that precede and follow it. (This is not an easy thing to get right, even for very experienced academic writers. Don't expect to be able to paragraph perfectly when you are new to academic writing!)

There are many ways to successfully structure and use paragraphs in an essay. Here's one:

- 1 The first sentence might show a link to the previous paragraph (a kind of retrospective signposting – see the handout *Better essays: signposting*).
- 2 Another sentence introduces the main theme of this paragraph (this is often called the **topic sentence**). This topic sentence can also come first in the paragraph.
- 3 The next few sentences elaborate the point, perhaps by explaining more, giving supporting evidence or demonstrating differences or alternatives.
- 4 The last sentence summarises the main point made in the paragraph.

Here's a paragraph-and-a-bit from more of our fictional 'cats and dogs' essay:

It is known from the deciphering of hieroglyphics that the Ancient Egyptians considered cats sacred. Some were mummified and entombed with their wealthy owners, an indication of high regard (Smith, 1989, p. 65). Cats are even, in scenes "extraordinary to modern European eyes" (Smith, 1989, p. 67), portrayed aiding hunters. It seems true that cats were clearly 'better' in at least one ancient society.

Dogs used for hunting in the European tradition can hardly be regarded as sacred, and yet there is perhaps something in the attachment of owner to dog...

Note: this is a very short paragraph, partly because the title is so oversimplified. 'Proper' essays should consist of between perhaps 7 and 12 longer paragraphs (including one each for the introduction and conclusion).

3 Conclusion

The conclusion often does three things:

- It reminds your readers what the essay was meant to do.
- It provides an 'answer' to the title.
- It reminds your readers how you reached that answer.

The conclusion should normally occupy just one paragraph. Here's a simple conclusion to our fictional 'cats and dogs' essay:

This essay set out to discover which is better: cats or dogs. Much of the evidence examined points to cats being the 'better'. They prove in tests to be more intelligent. They are by most criteria easier to keep as pets. They may not seem to possess dogs' loyalty, but new research has found such loyalty to be present in most domestic cats: it is simply expressed more subtly. As pets, cats are extremely beneficial to psychological well-being. Finally, they have a long record of being held in high regard – as 'status pets'. It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude that cats are 'better' than dogs.

Remember! There is no right way to structure an essay and the paragraphs that constitute it. You will need to experiment with slightly different approaches.