

Study Skills-Paragraph & Essay Structure

An essay is a common form of student writing that is usually a response to a question or in some instances is an argument or justification around a topic, issue or circumstance. For example, you might be asked to “explain why ‘carry in-carry’ out rubbish policies in national parks is an effective conservation strategy”. Alternatively, you might be asked to “Justify why you think ‘carry in-carry out’ rubbish policies are overrated”. Either way, you would be expected to make your case convincingly using facts, evidence, convincing writing or a combination of all three! **What you have to say** is very important of course but equally important is **how you say it**. Knowledgeable, evidence based and impassioned statements are good but the same three items expressed in the form of well structured, logical, clear and coherent writing is better. Your reader will have far more sympathy for what you are saying if they can easily understand your writing. Structuring your essay is vitally important.

What is a Thesis Statement?

The thesis statement is the main point, issue or argument that you are trying to make in your writing. You only need to make it once and it should be clear, firm and (hopefully) you can back it up in the body of your writing with some facts, evidence and convincing paragraphs.

Constructing paragraphs

- The paragraph must have at least 2 sentences to be classed as a paragraph. Generally speaking each paragraph tells its own small story.
- Paragraphs should be written in a structured, organized way that lead your reader into making an informed decision about what it is you are trying to say.
- The paragraph should also be trying to justify its own existence. In other words, the small story it is telling should make sense.
- When you join several different paragraphs together, you are joining the small stories to create the larger or total story.
- Paragraphs should contain a **topic sentence** and then **main points, supported with evidence, explanations, expansions, samples or scenarios**.

Example: Lets say we had to write about why cats make good pets.

It is common to start your paragraph with a **topic sentence**, which sets the scene for the rest of the paragraph and basically tells the reader what this paragraph is going to be about.

Example Topic Sentence: *People enjoy the companionship of cats.*

Next, you back up your topic sentence by including main points in the sentences that follow in the remainder of the paragraph. Try to jot down some main points first, as dot points. Then you can build around them later and perhaps explain what you mean in your main points. Here are some examples:

Many cats are affectionate.

If they're not feeling affectionate, cats are generally quite playful.

Contrary to popular opinion, cats can be trained.

Now put the topic sentence together, supported by the main points, and linked with some other writing. Your first paragraph might look like this, with the *topic sentence in italics*, and each main point underlined.

In the first place, people enjoy the companionship of cats. Many cats are affectionate. They will snuggle up and ask to be petted, or scratched under the chin. Who can resist a purring cat? If they're not feeling affectionate, cats are generally quite playful. They love to chase balls and feathers, or just about anything dangling from a string. They especially enjoy playing when their owners are participating in the game. Contrary to popular opinion, cats can be trained. Using rewards and punishments, just like with a dog, a cat can be trained to avoid unwanted behavior or perform tricks. Cats will even fetch!

Use this Sample Basic Essay as a Model

The essay below is an expanded version of the writing we just looked at and demonstrates the principles of writing a basic essay. The different parts of the essay have been labelled.

- The thesis statement is in bold,
- *the topic sentences are in italics*,
- each main point is underlined.

When you write your own essay, of course, you will not need to mark these parts of the essay unless your teacher has asked you to do so. They are marked here just so that you can more easily identify them.

Sample Small Essay

"A dog is man's best friend." That common saying may contain some truth, but dogs are not the only animal friend whose companionship people enjoy. For many people, a cat is their best friend. **Despite what dog lovers may believe, cats make excellent housepets.**

In the first place, people enjoy the companionship of cats. Many cats are affectionate. They will snuggle up and ask to be petted, or scratched under the chin. Who can resist a purring cat? If they're not feeling affectionate, cats are generally quite playful. They love to chase balls and feathers, or just about anything dangling from a string. They especially enjoy playing when their owners are participating in the game. Contrary to popular opinion, cats can be trained. Using rewards and punishments, just like with a dog, a cat can be trained to avoid unwanted behaviour or perform tricks. Cats will even fetch!

In the second place, cats are civilized members of the household. Unlike dogs, cats do not bark or make other loud noises. Most cats don't even meow very often. They generally lead a quiet existence. Cats also don't often have "accidents." Mother cats train their kittens to use the litter box, and most cats will use it without fail from that time on. Even stray cats usually understand the concept when shown the box and will use it regularly. Cats do have claws, and owners must make provision for this. A tall scratching post in a favourite cat area of the house will often keep the cat content to leave the furniture alone. As a last resort, of course, cats can be declawed. m

Lastly, one of the most attractive features of cats as housepets is their ease of care. Cats do not have to be walked. They get plenty of exercise in the house as they play, and they do their business in the litter box. Cleaning a litter box is a quick, painless procedure. Cats also take care of their own grooming. Bathing a cat is almost never necessary because under ordinary circumstances cats clean themselves. Cats are more particular about personal cleanliness than people are. In addition, cats can be left home alone for a few hours without fear. Unlike some pets, most cats will not destroy the furnishings when left alone. They are content to go about their usual activities until their owners return.

Cats are low maintenance, civilized companions. People who have small living quarters or less time for pet care should appreciate these characteristics of cats. However, many people who have plenty of space and time still opt to have a cat because they love the cat personality. In many ways, cats are the ideal housepet.

[illegible]

Linking Paragraphs to make an essay

Now, imagine we had been asked as a group to answer the essay question

“Explain why participation in sport is beneficial to people”

All we would need to do is:

- Link the different paragraphs created by the class together
- Add a thesis statement to the front
- Add a concluding statement to the end and
- Make sure the paragraphs were in order that made the best sense.

Add this Thesis Statement

Many people believe that sport is just for kids. However, organized sporting events and participation by people from all ages has many benefits. **For people of all ages, sport has many benefits and advantages beyond the actual participation in the activity itself.** These issues will be discussed below.

Add this Concluding Statement (also known as the conclusion)

As highlighted above, there are many different benefits and advantages to people who participate in a range of sporting activities. **For people of all ages, sport has many benefits and advantages beyond the actual participation in the activity itself including HEALTH BENEFITS, FITNESS, SOCIALISATION, MAKING FRIENDS, ENJOYING THE OUTDOORS, CHALLENGING YOURSELF, BUILDING CONFIDENCE and HAVING FUN.**