

Organizing An Essay

Often student writers are taught short-term solutions to the problem of organizing an essay. The most common short-term essay is the "five-paragraph essay" format. The five-paragraph essay uses the following organization:

1. ~~Introduction~~ ~~Background and thesis~~
2. ~~First Body Paragraph~~ ~~The first reason why the thesis is true~~
3. ~~Second Body Paragraph~~ ~~The second reason why the thesis is true~~
4. ~~Third Body Paragraph~~ ~~The third reason why the thesis is true~~
5. ~~Conclusion~~ ~~Recap of essay~~

It is important to understand that the five-paragraph essay is not necessarily bad. However, most student writers are led to believe or falsely believe that all essays must follow the five-paragraph essay format. Just a little thought makes clear that format is very limiting and limited and does not provide an adequate organization for many types of writing assignments. That is why I have crossed-out the description of the five-paragraph essay, so that you won't make the mistake of thinking that it is the best way to organize your essays.

Instead, student writers should see that the form of an essay (its organization) needs to match the purpose of the essay. To begin with, we should look at the most common organizational strategy for college essays: The Outside-In Essay.

Using Representative Cases: The Outside-In Essay

Often students are asked to consider large and important issues in their writing assignments. These so-called "big ideas" essays present students with some large generalization and then ask students to analyze it. For example, in a political science class a student might be asked to write an essay on the freedom Americans have, and how it compares to that enjoyed by citizens of Mexico. Or in a psychology class a student might be asked to write an essay on the importance of honesty in personal and professional relationships. Both of these topics require students to answer difficult and possibly unanswerable questions. Because students feel the need to discuss all possible aspects of the topic, students respond to such general topics by writing broad and unspecific essays full of generalities. Instead students need to focus their discussion of the large and general issue by focusing on specific and representative situations. A representative situation is one that can stand in for most other situations. So instead of thinking about an essay as having five paragraphs, for general topics students should consider how the essay needs to move from the consideration of large and general ideas to the discussion of specific ideas.

Essay Part	Scope	Purpose (not all necessary for every essay)
Introduction	General	Background for the topic Setting out the issues Focusing the argument
Focusing	Less General	What other people have said about the issue Ways of further defining or subdividing the issue What possible ways there are to think about the issue Why some aspects of the issue can be ignored The specific aspect of the issue the writer intends to focus on Why this specific aspect is representative of many other aspects
Specific Aspect	Specific	Description of the specific Analysis of the specific
Relationship	More General	How the specific aspect represents the larger issue How the specific aspect helps us understand other aspects of the larger issue
Conclusion	General	Summing up How our understanding of the specific aspect and the larger issue might be changed by the writer's analysis How we might act upon the ideas the writer has presented