

Formulas and Definitions for the Five-Paragraph Essay

The five-paragraph essay is formulaic writing that helps inexperienced writers express their ideas with a clear, un-deviated focus and a logical organization with relevant details. Once you understand the formula, you will become more comfortable with the writing process. The formula can be applied to most of the rhetorical modes, including description, narration, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, illustration, process analysis or explanation, and persuasion. It can also be applied to various levels of writing assignments, including one paragraph, an essay, or a research paper.

One of the goals in teaching this type of writing is to help you understand the function and form of different types of sentences, such as the thesis statement, topic sentence, and supporting sentence. Below is a description of the basic elements of a five-paragraph essay, including *formulas and examples of the types of sentences you will need to be able to write for your assignments.*

The Hook or Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to establish the subject's relevance to the reader. If you have difficulty thinking of a "hook," write the answer to this questions: Why might _____ (the subject of the essay) be interesting to your classmates?

Other ideas that may be included in the "hook" are:

- Definitions
- Statistics
- Questions
- Famous person involvement in this subject
- Personal story of why the writer is interested in this subject
- Brief summary or description (5 W's)

Thesis statement

The thesis statement is a complicated, inclusive sentence that links the subject of the essay with the student's proposition (thesis idea) about the subject. The thesis statement is usually the last sentence of the first paragraph. It is important to differentiate between the *subject* and the *thesis idea*. The thesis idea is your thought or point of view about the subject. Note how the example follows a formula.

A thesis statement must contain the first two elements in the formula, and some instructors require the essay map to be part of the thesis statement.

Subject of the essay + Thesis idea (student's proposition) + essay map (3 points that will be developed in the essay)

Example of thesis statement with essay map:

Three ways that a person suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) can overcome the condition and lead a normal life are receiving psychological treatment, maintaining strong family bonds, and developing a regular routine of accomplishment, such as a job or school.

Example of thesis statement without an essay map:

There are several ways that a person suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) can overcome the condition and lead a normal life.

Notes:

1. Notice how the thesis idea determines how the subject will be developed. If the thesis idea was “cannot overcome...,” a very different essay would be written.
2. After a careful reading of the topic or the instructor’s assignment, you should be able to determine the subject and to formulate at least a beginning thesis idea.
3. The order of the elements in a thesis statement sentence may be changed (i.e. the thesis idea can be placed at the beginning of the sentence).

Some of the challenges in formulating the three points that will be developed:

- Developing three distinct ideas that do not overlap with each other
- Including ideas that are “big” enough to be developed into paragraphs in the body of the essay.
- Using parallelism, which is using the same form (part of speech) for all items in the series.

Topic Sentence

Each paragraph in the body of the essay must have a clear topic sentence, usually the first sentence in the paragraph. In the example sentence below, notice the small change in language from the thesis statement while the idea remains the same. At the pre-writing stage, you will need to develop new ways of expressing the thesis idea and the items in the essay map. Increasing your vocabulary should be one of your goals as your practice writing.

The formula for a topic sentence is:

Major transition word (usually numerical or chronological) + subject + thesis idea (from the thesis statement) + point # 1, 2, or 3

Example:

First of all, if someone is suffering from the stress of a traumatic event (PTSS), he or she might find that speaking with a professional psychologist can help ameliorate the negative effects and lead the person to normality.

In order to make an essay coherent, you must repeat the subject and the thesis idea throughout the paper, but this does NOT mean repeating the same language. Therefore, use different words or structures with the same or similar meaning while continuing to repeat the thesis idea in some way in each paragraph.

Supporting/Example sentences

Every one of these sentences should relate directly to the topic sentence of the paragraph and *provide specific details or examples to develop the thesis idea*. One way to stay focused on this task is to effectively use transition words. However, it is important that you differentiate between transition words for topic sentences (see above) and transition words for supporting/example sentences. Transition words used in supporting/example sentences may include: for example, also, in addition, furthermore, moreover, for instance, however, therefore, etc. Another type of “transition word” is the subordinating conjunction, such as while, although, because, when, until, if etc. which are used in complex sentences.

In a research paper, citations from primary or secondary sources are usually contained in the supporting/example sentences as support for the student’s ideas.

Conclusion

While the aim of the introduction is relevance, the conclusion should point to reflection on the subject and thesis idea. If you have a problem thinking about the conclusion, write the answer to the following question: After writing this paper, what did I learn about _____ (the subject) *that I did not know before?*

Ideas for the conclusion paragraph:

- Make a recommendation or give advice
- Show personal reflection on the topic
- Specific recount what has been learned
- Express a hopeful thought or idea
- Summarize the main points of the paper (some ENC 1101 instructors do not like this type of conclusion)

Note about the conclusion:

One of the most common errors students make in the conclusion is to use second person “you” to make general statements. While second person should *always* be avoided in academic writing, the most important reason not to use it in the conclusion is that it almost always changes the entire focus of the paper.