

Essays

Writing in an academic context is different from writing in other situations. Academic writing follows specific conventions of structure, style, and content, and your marker will expect to see these conventions in your assignments.

An **essay** is one of the most common **types of assignment** at university and can be deceptively difficult. They require more than presenting what has happened in a field of work. Typically, they involve you constructing an argument in response to a question.

Essay Structure (also see Figure 1)

Introduction

The **introduction** to an essay usually has three primary objectives:

- Explain the **context** of the essay
- Give the **answer**: the response to the question or the overall **focus** of the essay (the **thesis statement**)
- Describe the **structure** and organisation of the essay

These aims can be given more or less emphasis depending on the length and type of essay. In a very short essay (less than 1,000 words), for example, there is not much room to give a full and detailed context or structure. A longer essay has room for greater detail. Generally, an introduction is 10-15% of the word limit.

Body paragraphs

After the introduction come the body paragraphs. They usually take up most of the essay.

Paragraphs contain three main sections:

- **Point**: a sentence that describes the controlling idea of the paragraph (also known as the topic sentence)
- **Illustration**: evidence and examples that reinforce the main point
- **Explanation**: connections between sentences and paragraphs clarify how the reader should interpret your illustrative evidence and also how the paragraph's controlling idea works to support the thesis statement.

Academic paragraphs are usually at least three sentences (usually around five to eight sentences or 200 words). However, don't make sentences too long (usually, a sentence longer than three lines is too long).

Conclusion

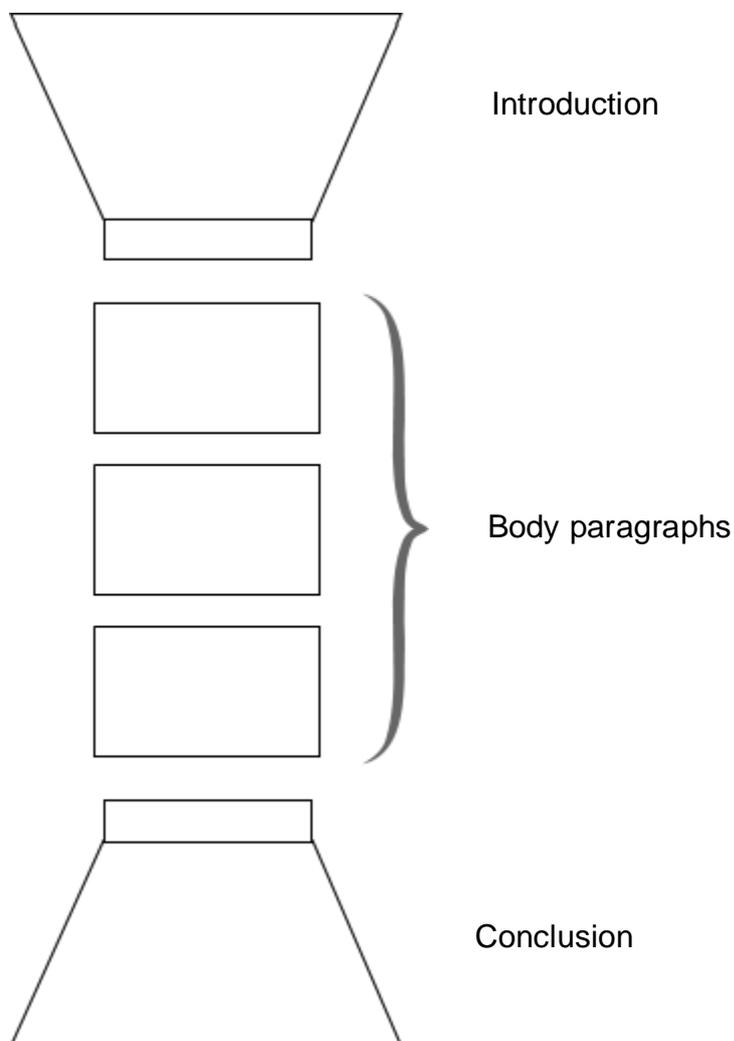
The conclusion of an essay has three major parts:

- **Answer:** the thesis statement, revisited
- **Summary:** main points and highlights from the body paragraphs
- **Significance:** the relevance and implications of the essay's findings or conclusion

No new information that is relevant to the focus of the essay should be introduced here. If you wish to make a new point, it should be in a body paragraph. A conclusion is usually about 10% of the word limit.

Figure 1. Essay structure

This picture represents the structure. The actual number of paragraphs depends on the length of your essay.



Essay thesis statement

The thesis statement forms the core of most essays (although there are some exceptions, for example descriptive essays may not require a thesis statement). It is a direct answer to the assignment question, or response to the assignment topic. It is usually only one sentence long (but may be longer if the question has more than one part).

The thesis statement outlines a position. Here “position” means an argument, contention, or thesis that answers the question. The thesis statement also summarises the reasons, evidence, and/or analysis that supports that position.

For example, if you have been given the assignment question “Why is Human Resource Planning a good idea for NZ organisations?”, your thesis statement might begin “***Human Resource Planning is a good idea for NZ organisations because...***” The position is that Human Resource Planning is a good idea; the evidence is given after “because.”

Guidelines for thesis statements

- State the outcome or conclusion of your essay, not just your intention to investigate
- Give a short summary of the reasons for your outcome or conclusion (“because,” “as,” “due to”) in the same sentence
- Keep the thesis statement clear and specific; avoid language such as “perhaps” and “may” and don't give too much detail (that's what the rest of the essay is for!)
- The thesis statement should be realistic: don't exaggerate/ overstate your position
- Make sure that your thesis statement answers the essay question directly
- How thesis statements should be expressed will vary for different disciplines. For some disciplines, a clear announcement is recommended/encouraged (e.g. “In this essay, it will be argued that...” or “It will be argued that...”), whereas for others these announcements should be avoided. Disciplines also vary with regard to whether it is acceptable to use the **first person** (e.g. “In this essay, I will argue that...” or “I will argue that...”). Check your guidelines (or ask your lecturer) about how thesis statements should be expressed.

Essay checklist

Re-read instructions and double check:

- Word limit
- Referencing style

Introduction

- Does it start with a broad opening statement?
- Is the position stated clearly?

Body paragraphs

- Does each paragraph start with a topic sentence?

Conclusion

- Is the position re-stated?
- Has the essay been given a sense of completion?

Academic writing and study skills support

1. Academic Q+A

If you have a quick question about study skills or academic writing, then they can ask it on the [Academic Q+A forum](#), which can be accessed via the [Academic Support Stream site](#).

2. Consultations

One-to-one consultations with learning advisors and writing consultants are [available online and on campus](#). Consultants can answer your questions about academic writing and study skills or give you feedback on your assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, presentation, use of sources, and referencing.

3. Online Writing and Learning Link (OWLL)

Develop your academic writing and study skills with the [Online Writing and Learning Link \(OWLL\)](#) website from Massey University. OWLL includes information on assignment writing, assignment types, referencing, study skills, and exam skills.

4. Pre-reading Service

The [Pre-reading Service](#) is a free service, which gives students an opportunity to send their draft assignment to [CLS consultants](#) for review and advice. Students receive individual written feedback on their assignment's structure, focus, paragraph structure, flow, style, presentation, referencing, and use of sources. The service can be accessed via the [Academic Support Stream site](#).

5. Workshops

Free study seminars and workshops are run on campus and online. See [Workshops page on OWLL](#) for [programmes and registration details](#).