**How is an essay structured?**

In order for your essay to be convincing and make sense, it needs to be presented inside a well structured piece of writing. How do you do this within the framework of an essay's general structure of Introduction, Body, [and Conclusion](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4biv.html)? Firstly, you need to be clear about what elements you should include within these three sections of an essay. The table below outlines these elements.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| [Introduction](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4bii.html) | bullet General statement or orientation to topic bullet Thesis statement bullet Brief summary of the main topics/arguments/points made in the essay | |
| [Body paragraphs](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4biii.html) | 1. Topic sentence A    1. supporting sentence    2. supporting sentence    3. supporting sentence 2. Topic sentence B    1. supporting sentence    2. supporting sentence    3. supporting sentence 3. Topic sentence C    1. supporting sentence    2. supporting sentence    3. supporting sentence | These sentences support, expand or explain the point made in the topic sentence |
| [Conclusion](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4biv.html) | Restatement or summary of the main points made in the body paragraphs and a final comment (if appropriate) | |

You also need to be clear about the function of each of these essay sections.

**The introduction of the essay**

The function of the **Introduction** is to serve as a 'map' of the essay, outlining to your reader the main argument and points which you develop in your essay. Most introductions begin with an **orientation** in the form of a brief general statement that leads the reader into the topic showing how the specific topic relates to bigger issues or to the discipline field. This is followed by your **thesis statement**, which is your concise response to the essay question, then an **outline**of the argument presented in the essay. You may find it useful to think of an essay's introduction as funnel shaped ­ moving from the general to the specific. Here is an example:

**Example of an essay introduction**[1](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4bii.html#footnote1)

***Essay Question:****Italy on the eve of 1860 has often been described as an unlikely nation. Why?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| On the eve of 1860 the word Italy described not a nation, but a geographical area. The peninsula was split into eight separate states, all independent of one another. Economically, while the whole of Europe seemed to be surging ahead, Italy was lagging behind. At this time, Italy was seen as an unlikely nation because of the many obstacles that lay in the way of unification. The main obstacles were the dislike and distrust between the states and the "slowness of the great bulk of Italians to accept or even comprehend the idea of Italy" (Mack Smith, 1968: 2). There was also a lack of planning and common goals amongst the minority of the populations that supported and were prepared to fight for a unified country. This was exacerbated by the disagreement and dislike between the leaders of Il Risorgimento, the Italian independence movement. | background orientation to the topic   thesis statement  outline of argument |

1This essay has been adapted from material developed by R. Woodward-Kron, E. Thomson & J. Meek (2000) *Academic writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong

**The body of the essay**

The function of the essay's **body** is to fully develop the argument outlined in the introduction. Each paragraph within the body of the essay elaborates on one major point in the development of the overall argument (although some points may consist of a number of sub-points, each of which will need a paragraph). The main point in each paragraph needs to be clearly stated in the form of a [topic sentence](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4biii.html), which is then supported with evidence. Let's look at how the student's essay on why Italy in 1860 was seen as an unlikely nation developed (remember the argument is *that Italy was seen as an unlikely nation because of the many obstacles in the way of unification*). The example below shows only the first (or topic) sentence of each paragraph, and not the remaining sentences of each paragraph. This is to highlight the way the main points in the argument can be presented at the beginning of each paragraph to show the logical steps in the argument.

**Body of the essay** (skeleton framework)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **One of the obstacles** to the unification of the Italian nation was the failure of the majority of the population to take up the cause of unification........... | *Main point in the paragraph presented as the topic sentence* |
| The divisiveness between the states was **another major obstacle** to national unity..................... | *Main point in the paragraph presented as the topic sentence* |
| The mistrust that existed between the states **also created an obstacle** for unification..................... | *Main point in the paragraph presented as the topic sentence* |
| **A further obstacle** obstructing the formation of a united Italy was the lack of common goals and the poor planning associated with the unification uprisings that were occurring throughout Italy..................... | *Main point in the paragraph presented as the topic sentence* |
| **The final major obstacle** to the unification of the Italian nation was the dislike and disagreements between the main agitators in the independence movement know as "Il Risorgimento".............. | *Main point in the paragraph presented as the topic sentence* |

1This essay has been adapted from material developed by R. Woodward-Kron, E. Thomson & J. Meek (2000) *Academic writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong

In each of these paragraphs several words are written in coloured type, eg. *the final, another, a further.* These [connective words](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/effective/6.html) serve to establish relations between the various parts of the essay. They are an important element in developing an argument that is [cohesive and flows logically](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/effective/3.html) through your essay.

**The conclusion of the essay**

The function of the essay's **Conclusion** is to restate the main argument. It reminds the reader of the strengths of the argument: that is, it reiterates the most important evidence supporting the argument. Make sure, however, that your conclusion is not simply a repetitive summary as this reduces the impact of the argument you have developed in your essay. The conclusion provides a forum for you to persuasively and succinctly restate your thesis given the reader has now been presented with all the information about the topic. Depending on the discipline you are writing in, the concluding paragraph **may** also contain a reflection on the evidence presented, or on the essay's thesis. The nature of the reflection will depend on your topic (Woodward-Kron, 1997) but questions such as these may be considered:

bullet What is the significance of your findings?  
bullet What are the implications of your conclusions for this topic and for the broader field?  
bullet Are their any limitations to your approach?  
bullet Are there any other factors of relevance that impact upon the topic but fell outside the scope of the essay?  
bullet Are there any suggestions you can make in terms of future research?

The conclusion should match the introduction in terms of the ideas presented and the argument put forward. Sometimes you will find that the process of writing has changed what you have argued and so it will be necessary to go back and reword the introduction. Finally, the conclusion is not the place in your essay to introduce new information or new ideas: these should be in the body of your essay.

**Example of an essay conclusion**[1](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4biv.html#footnote1)

***Essay Question:*** *Italy on the eve of 1860 has often been described as an unlikely nation. Why?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Before 1860, only a tiny minority of the population believed that Italy could ever become a unified nation under one Italian ruler. Yet, despite this belief and the many obstacles blocking the path to unification such as differences and suspicion between the many regions of the peninsula, the lack of planning and common goals that saw many uprisings fail and the divergent views and politics amongst the men who fought for unity, the Piedmont region emerged "...as the nucleus around which the rest of Italy could gather" (Mack Smith, 1959: 17). On March 17, 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed. Italy was no longer a geographical expression, it was a nation. | reference to essay question reiteration of thesis point overview of main arguments explaining the obstacles to Italy's unification concluding comment and reference to essay question |

1 This essay has been adapted from material developed by R. Woodward-Kron, E. Thomson & J. Meek (2000) *Academic writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong

**Argumentation within paragraphs**

A closer look at a paragraph in the body section of the essay allows us to see how a main point is established then supported with evidence from the literature. Critical thinking can help you develop argumentation within your own writing. The paragraph example below develops the point in the example essay that the divisiveness between the states was another major obstacle to national unity. Notice how paraphrased information from source material is used to develop and to provide support for the idea presented in the topic sentence.

**(Body) The structure of the paragraph**[1](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4bv.html#footnote1)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **The divisiveness between the states was another major obstacle to national unity.** Despite sharing a common heritage such as the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and Catholicism, many divisions were evident between the Italian states. One example of these divisions was that the majority of the population only spoke the dialect of their own region. In fact, when Italy was unified, only four per cent of the population had knowledge of the official Italian language (Duggan, 1994:156). The enormous differences between the regions were exacerbated by the keen political and commercial rivalry that existed between these states: Guise Mizzen, the leading agitator for the unification of Italy at this period, declared:  We have no flag, no political name, and no rank among European nations. We have no common centre, no common fact, and no common market. We are dismembered into eight states... all independent of one another, without alliance, without unity of aim, without connection ... (these factors) divide us and render us as much possible strangers to each other (1845:36).  A striking example of the commercial division and rivalry between the states which impeded the national economic interest was the existence of as many as twenty two customs' barriers around the Po River region of Italy (Mack Smith, 1959). In addition to these divisions between the states, mistrust of each other's economic and political motives was also evident. | **topic sentence**    supporting evidence     Expansion      supporting evidence (quotes a primary source)       further supporting evidence  transition to next paragraph |

1This essay has been adapted from material developed by R. Woodward-Kron, E. Thomson & J. Meek (2000) *Academic writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong

Beginning student writers often rely too heavily on

Quotes

 To introduce ideas and theories. It is important to try and avoid this because your argument may be lost amongst the quotes and your argument will not be clear. Quotes should be used only when you want to provide extra support in the actual words of an established authority or a primary source for the point you are making in your topic sentence. Follow this link for more information on [finding your voice in academic writing](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/academic/4bi.html).

[Topic sentences](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/essay/4bv.html) should clearly signal to your reader the main idea in the paragraph. Following sentences should provide the explanation and expansion of the point being made and help to establish the sources and support necessary to strengthen your argument. This means that in the body section of a good essay, you should be able to get a sense of the overall argument by reading only the topic sentences. Try this when editing your drafts ­ you will get a sense of whether your argument and ideas are flowing logically, or need to be re-ordered.