

Chapter 57

Structuring an essay

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People who are gifted writers can pick up a pen or sit at a computer, simply start writing, and end up with a perfectly structured essay. These people are few and far between, and I know I'm definitely not one of them! So for us mere mortals, it becomes important before we start writing something to come up with a rough *structure* for how our essay is going to unfold.

At its simplest, an *outline* is just a list (not necessarily in order) of the major topics or points you're going to cover in your essay. For instance, for an *informative* essay on Tyrannosaurus Rex, we might come up with a simple topic outline like this:

- The real Tyrannosaurus Rex
- Introduction
- The world 65 million years ago
- Tyrannosaurus – physical description
- Hunter or scavenger?
- Conclusion

Pretty simple – each point represents what we might talk about for a paragraph in the

essay. Already the outline gives us a rough idea of how long the essay might be – five paragraphs, in this case. This type of outline is often called a *working outline*. It's usually not perfect, and doesn't always cover every major detail, but it's OK – you can *work* with it for the moment.

Use the outline to check if you're missing anything

You can use the outline to quickly check whether you're going to miss anything in your essay. For instance, once I'd written this outline, I'd probably go over a mental checklist of what I should cover in the essay:

- The world at that time – check!
- What did Tyrannosaurus Rex look like – check!
- What were its hunting habits – check!
- Life cycle of a Tyrannosaurus Rex – whoops, missed it!

So using the outline, I've worked out that I've missed a section I want to cover – the life cycle of a T-Rex. So I need to put that in somewhere. The outline is, once again, useful here – I can use it to find the most *suitable* place for this extra paragraph. It probably belongs after the paragraph describing what T-Rex looked like. So I'd put it into the new outline:

The real Tyrannosaurus Rex
 Introduction
 The world 65 million years ago
 Tyrannosaurus – physical description
 Life cycle of a T-Rex
 Hunter or scavenger?
 Conclusion

SECTION 57.2 - MORE DETAILED OUTLINES

For a short five-paragraph essay, the outlines we've covered so far are probably sufficient. However, if you need to write a longer, more complicated essay, your outline also has to increase in size. A more detailed outline might have major topics, which each take up a few paragraphs. It would also have subtopics under each of these major topic headings – each subtopic might take up a paragraph in the final essay.

A more detailed essay on T-Rex might have six major topics and many subtopics. The outline can be used to check several things.

- Are each of the major topics balanced, or is half the essay spent discussing one topic while others are neglected?
- Are all the subtopics located in the right place in the essay? For instance, the

movement subtopic ties in very closely with the scavenger theories topic. It would be possible to shift most of the movement description into one or more other sections, depending on what you thought was most appropriate.

- Flow between major topics and between subtopics under each major topic. For instance, when describing the environment, is it appropriate to first discuss the climate, *then* the landscape structure, and *then* the flora and fauna? In this case, I would say it is – you start with a description of the skies and climate, move down to the mountain ranges, valleys, and deserts, before finally getting down to the inhabitants of the landscape – the animals and plants.

The real Tyrannosaurus Rex

Introduction

What was Tyrannosaurus Rex?

Significance in modern culture

The world 65 million years ago

Climate

Landscape structure

Flora and fauna

Tyrannosaurus – physical description

Size

Bone and muscle structure

Movement

Life cycle of a T-Rex

Gestation

Dependent years

‘Teenager’ years

Adulthood

Hunter or scavenger?

Hunter theories

Scavenger theories – speed limitations

Hybrid theories

Conclusion

Summarise what T-Rex was

Significance in today’s world

Organising an outline chronologically

Many essays discuss a sequence of events that happened over a period of time. Almost always, the order that events are discussed in the essay should be the same as the order that they happened in real life. When doing the outline for the essay, you'd structure it so that the events were ordered appropriately.

Essay title
 Introduction
 1st event or thing to occur
 2nd event or thing to occur
 ...
 Last event or thing to occur
 Conclusion

For instance, an essay might discuss the evolution of dinosaurs over the entire time period they were around. The age of the dinosaurs is called the *Mesozoic*, and can be divided into three major time periods – the *Triassic*, *Jurassic*, and *Cretaceous*. The outline therefore, might look like this:

The Age of the Dinosaurs
 Introduction
 Triassic
 Archosaurs
 First primitive dinosaurs
 Jurassic
 Start of the reign of the dinosaurs
 The huge dinosaurs
 Cretaceous
 Most highly evolved dinosaurs
 Extinction
 Conclusion

Of course, you can also put subheadings like we've done here into the essay outline. In this outline, we have three major topic headlines – one for each of the major time periods, in *chronological order*. Then, under each major heading, we have subtopics which are relevant to the particular time associated with the major heading. For instance, for the last period of the dinosaurs – the Cretaceous – one of the subheadings is 'extinction', which is what happened to the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous period.

Organising an outline for contrast and comparison

If you're contrasting or comparing two things in your essay, you may want to structure your essay in an alternating sort of format. Once again, the outline can be very useful to get the right sequence of paragraphs and get the flow right:

Compare or Contrast Essay

Introduction

Discuss something about thing A

Discuss something about thing B and why it is similar or different to thing A

Discuss something else about thing A

Discuss something about thing B and why it is similar or different to thing A

...

Conclusion

So if I was discussing the differences between life in prehistoric times and now, my essay outline could be something like:

Life Now and Then

Introduction

Hours spent surviving back then

 Hunting and gathering food

 Building shelter

Hours spent surviving now

 Working a job

 Accommodation and food

 Managing everyday things

Health back then

 Rudimentary treatment of minor injuries

Health now

 Expensive, extensive treatment

 Incurable diseases / viruses

...

Conclusion

SECTION 57.3 - GENERAL ESSAY CONSIDERATIONS

The thesis statement

Most essays have a thesis statement. All thesis statements tell the reader what the essay is going to be about, in one way or another. Sometimes thesis statements are explicit – they say that the essay is going to cover this and that. In descriptive essays, this is often the case. Other times, such as in argumentative essays, the thesis statement makes a strong statement about the topic or issue. This leaves the reader to work out that the rest of the essay is going to be about the statement and supporting evidence and arguments for the statement.

Evolution of the thesis statement

You can't really start writing a good essay without having a thesis statement in mind. Even the essay outline is easier if you have some type of thesis statement in your head. So the thesis statement starts its life when you first start to work on your essay.

But you should not leave the thesis statement alone as you write. As you write an essay, you quite often think of new. You might remember or think of another source of information that you need to look up before you do any further writing. And when you do look up that information, you may find that it casts new light on the topic you're discussing in your essay. This may require you to *modify your thesis statement*, or in extreme circumstances, re-start your thesis statement *from scratch*.

It's very tempting to not change your thesis statement, because if you change it you often have to rewrite large chunks of your essay. Once people are well into writing their essay, they tend to ignore any additional information they come across that suggests that their thesis statement might not be quite correct. However, being lazy is not a good idea, especially if the information you've come across is something major that you probably should have picked up in your first round of research. Chances are that whoever's reading your work will know about the extra information. So if you don't modify your thesis statement to reflect this extra knowledge, you're risking a lower mark.

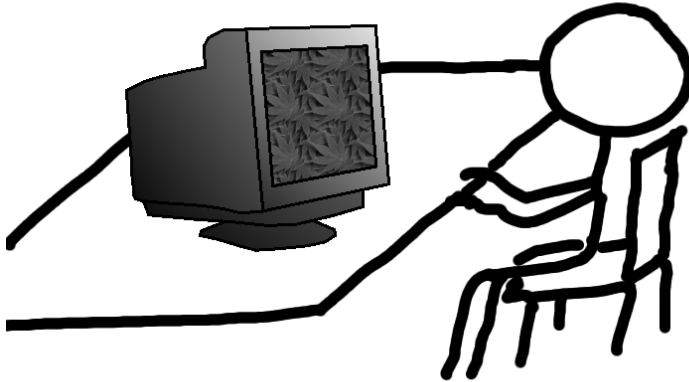
This issue crops up a lot with people who are working on long-term projects, such as a PhD thesis, especially when the topic they're working on is a *current* one. For instance, I might be writing an essay arguing that looking at a computer screen doesn't cause eye damage. My thesis statement might be something like:

With regular breaks and proper posture, daily viewing of a computer screen does not cause long-term eye damage.

However, halfway through writing my essay, a friend who knows I'm working on this essay might send me an interesting article they came across on the Internet. The article's title might be something like: "Long term studies prove extended computer screen viewing damages your vision." Uh-oh! That sort of contradicts your current thesis statement, doesn't it? You could gamble and hope that whoever is reading your essay hasn't come across the article. But Murphy's Law states that if something can go wrong it

will, so odds are your reader(s) will have read your friend's article. So you need to change your thesis statement. Now, you could totally change your thesis statement to something like this:

Daily viewing of a computer screen causes long-term vision damage.



However, this will require a complete rewrite of everything you've written. What you can do instead is *modify* your thesis statement to take into account the new information, but allow you to still use some of what you've already written:

Taking regular breaks and adopting proper posture can help minimise long-term vision damage from daily viewing of a computer screen.

We've been clever here – this new thesis statement takes into account the study showing computer screens cause vision damage, but still uses some of the stuff we've already written about how taking breaks and sitting properly helps your eyes deal with a computer screen.

Using the thesis statement to work out if you're in over your head

Have you ever read a two page essay on the human race? Probably not. Why not then? Well, the human race is a rather *broad topic* to cover in an essay. There's lots and lots and lots of stuff you can talk about. For instance:

- Evolution
- Races
- Politics
- Countries
- History
- Languages

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- Jobs
- Lifestyles
- Life cycle

And that's only a few of the possible topics. How can you cover all of that in one short essay? The answer is simple – you can't! There's only so much you can cover in one essay. Even if you had 200 pages to work with, you still couldn't begin to cover every aspect of the human race.

Your thesis statement should be a good indicator of whether you're trying to cover too much in your essay. Think about your thesis statement and how *broad* the topic or issue it covers is. If it's too broad, rewrite it until it covers a topic that is *specific* enough. You want to be able to cover the topic completely and in reasonable detail in your essay. Remember, your thesis statement doesn't have to be perfect the first time you write it – it rarely is! For instance, I might start with this thesis statement:

Technology is making our lives more complicated.

This is a pretty general statement – it sort of comes out a bit like this:

Technology = bad

Say you've got a 500 word limit. There's no way you're going to be able to cover all aspects of technology, and all the different ways it's making our lives more complicated. We'd better narrow my thesis statement:

Computer technology is increasing the complexity of the workplace.

This is a lot better – now we're not just talking about any technology, we're talking about *computer technology*. And we're not just talking about our lives in general – we're talking about our *work lives*. So we've narrowed the topic in two different places. It's still probably a bit broad though for a short essay. Let's make it even more specific:

E-mail has evolved to the stage of having a net negative effect on workplace productivity.

So we've now got even more specific with computer technology – now we're just talking about *computer e-mail*. And also, we're now not just talking about workplace complexity in general, but specifically, about *workplace productivity*.

Sometimes it's OK to pick and only skim the surface of a very broad topic. This is often known as an *introductory* essay. For instance, you might have a thesis statement like:

The field of astronomy involves the study of things in outer space.

Astronomy is a huge topic. However, this thesis statement is simply saying that astronomy involves studying stuff in outer space. So what the essay has to do is back this up with some examples. The statement is a fairly broad one and isn't a particularly controversial topic. This essay will be more of an *introductory* one that touches on the field of astronomy. So inside the body of the essay, you might provide a few examples of what astronomy does. There's no way you could cover every aspect of astronomy in one essay, but that's OK – you're just *introducing* the reader to the topic.

So before you actually get into the business of writing your essay, have a good think about your thesis statement and how *broad* or *specific* it is. Think about what word limit (upper or lower) you've got, and how that fits with your thesis statement. If necessary, change the statement to be more specific or more general to better suit the length limitations for your essay.

Placement of the thesis statement

The thesis statement usually belongs near the start of the essay. However, the exact placement can vary.

For a relatively simple, short essay, you could put the thesis statement as the first sentence. Then, the rest of the first paragraph discusses what you're going to talk about in the rest of the essay. By the time you get to the second paragraph, you're already into the first part of the essay – you've finished the introduction. This is OK for simple, straight to the point essays.

Thesis statement placement in a simple essay

Thesis statement. Blah blah blah – rest of introductory paragraph describing what we're going to talk about in the essay.

Second paragraph – straight into the discussion of the first topic.

However, putting the thesis statement as the very first sentence in the essay doesn't work as well once your essays get a little longer and more complex. Reading the thesis statement in the first sentence can be a bit of a put off for the reader – there's no warm-up for the reader before the statement is introduced.

More sophisticated writing (and face it, that's what you're usually trying to do, or at least appear to do) prepares the reader for the thesis statement. It's sort of like trying to get someone to do something for you. You're usually better off gradually working your way to the request, rather than asking straight out:

Handy Hint #31 - How not to ask for something

James: Can you lend me \$20?

Sally: No!

James: Please?

Sally: No!

I'm sure you've heard people asking something straight out. Unless the person they're asking owes them a favour, they're not that likely to get what they ask for. Most people (even if they don't admit it) can be *manipulated* just a little to be in a more *receptive* state of mind for a request. Watch!

Handy Hint #32 - How to ask for something

James: I've got to go to soccer training tonight.

Sally: That should be lots of fun.

James: Yeah, it will be exhausting.

Sally: I hope you don't collapse.

James: Yeah, well if I get some food into me now I should be alright.

Sally: Yeah, what are you planning to eat?

James: I don't know ... (*looks into wallet*) Oh man, I don't have any money.

Sally: What'd you do with it?

James: Oh, that's right, I had to lend it to Mum. I don't suppose you've got \$20 I could borrow, please, just to get some food?

Sally: Oh, OK. Here you go (*gives James a twenty dollar note*).

James has set up some background information – he's got to go to soccer training tonight. To get through soccer training he's going to need lots of energy, which means he'd better eat well. Then he 'discovers' he has no money, so he won't be able to buy lunch. On top of that, the reason he doesn't have any money isn't his fault – he's 'lent' the money to his Mum (sure he has!) Now that Sally has the background information, she would feel a lot worse about saying no to him, than she would if he'd just asked straight out.

The same goes for a thesis statement – you're trying to sell something to your audience. It helps if you 'butter up' your audience first, especially if it's a potentially hostile audience that might disagree with your thesis statement.

So use your first paragraph to work into your thesis statement – to focus the reader's attention on the general topic (and in a direction that you want the reader to focus). That way, they'll be warmed-up when you introduce the thesis statement itself, which can happen somewhere near the end of the first paragraph, or even in a second paragraph if you want an extended 'lead-in' to the thesis statement.

Thesis statement placement in a good essay

Introductory sentence. Background / lead in sentence. Background / lead in sentence. Background / lead in sentence. **Thesis statement.**

Second paragraph – straight into the discussion of the first topic.

How to present the thesis statement

Usually you don't want to blatantly announce the thesis statement to the reader. Doing something like this is pretty awkward and makes the writing look like an eight-year-old kid is the author:

In this essay, I will try to convince you, the reader, that gun control laws should be made stricter in order to reduce violence in society.

Two main things are wrong with this. First of all, it's really, really blunt. The reader knows or can guess easily that your essay is going to be based around some central topic, argument or opinion. There's no need to treat the reader like a complete idiot and blatantly tell them what your essay's central statement is. It's a little bit like listening to the first part of an eight-year-old's talk or presentation to their classmates (not how you want to sound). An eight-year-old would usually start off with something like:

Today, I am going to talk about my Dad.

The second thing that you usually wouldn't do is address the reader in the second person with the 'you'. Sometimes this is appropriate; for instance, if you are writing the essay to convince only one person, or a very specific small group of people. This might happen if you are writing to your local politician to try to change a new road being built in your suburb. The personal touch introduced by using 'you' sometimes helps in this sort of situation. But it's not something that is generally done in formal essay writing.

Try to write the thesis statement as a more definite statement. So remove all the 'I am going to try', and 'I will attempt' phrases from it. These statements tell the reader that you're going to make an attempt to do something but that you're not really sure whether it's going to work! This is not the impression you want to give your reader. Also avoid unnecessary references to the essay itself. Phrases like 'in this paper' are unnecessary – the reader usually realises that the essay is where you're going to discuss the topic or argument. How else are you going to get your points across to the reader – telepathy?

A better thesis statement might be something like this:

Increasing the strictness of gun control laws will result in an increase in peace and stability in society.

First up, this is a definite statement. There's no doubt about the statement itself (although readers may, at first, disagree with it). Secondly, it's not overly personal. There are no first person references, and it doesn't address the reader in the second person either. Getting these things right is a big part of producing good thesis statements.

Handy Hint #33 - Flora and fauna

I heard the expression ‘flora and fauna’ many times before I finally learnt what it meant. *Flora* is all about plants – you use the word ‘flora’ to refer to all the plants within a certain group. For instance, all the plants on a certain continent in the world. *Flora* in Roman mythology was the goddess of flowers.

African **flora** varies as you travel from the southern tip to the Mediterranean.

Fauna is all about animals – you use the word ‘fauna’ to refer to all the animals within a certain group. For instance, all the animals of a certain time period.

Discussion of the **fauna** 100 million years ago usually focuses on dinosaurs, but there were other types of animals prospering at the same time.

There are many situations in real life where you’ll hear the phrase ‘fauna and flora’ or ‘flora and fauna’. For instance, say you are visiting a national park. Reading the map guide, you may come across a description something like:

Yosemite National Park has a wide range of **flora and fauna** for visitors to see.

I never feel comfortable with the expression, so I always mentally change it to more familiar words:

Yosemite National Park has a wide range of **plants and animals** for visitors to see.