

3 The Pieces of the College Essay

In chapters 4 and 5, we are going to look at the real nitty-gritty of college essay writing: how to make an argument. This is really the core of what you need to understand in order to write effective college essays.

But before we can get to that, we need to make sure that we all understand exactly what is included in a college essay. Then we can see how our argument fits into those pieces.

Think of the pieces of an essay like a mold into which we pour our essay. In the summers when I was a kid, my friends and I would make Kool-Aid and then pour it into ice cube trays with a tooth pick stuck into each cube mold. We would stick these in the freezer, and after a few hours, we had ice cube Kool-Aid treats. We could pop them out of the trays, hold them by the toothpicks, and eat them, and they were delicious.

Writing is the same way. You start with something of value—your argument. In our analogy, it's the Kool-Aid. It's good stuff, but only once it is in the right form. If I made up a pitcher of Kool-Aid and then just poured it into the freezer without using any sort of mold, I would have a mess, not a bunch of nice Kool-Aid treats. So even though the Kool-Aid in the pitcher had POTENTIAL value, it couldn't realize that value until I had put it into a mold so that I could shape it into a usable form.

It's the same with your argument. You may have a great argument, but if you just blurt it out all over the page without any "mold" or shape, it's just going to be a mess. Believe me, I've read a LOT of arguments that looked like Kool-Aid poured all over my freezer.

Before we look at the required pieces of the essay and some basics of what we have to do in each, let me say this: it's understandable that this is difficult. The fact is, we're really dealing with two separate things here:

1. What you want to say (your content)
2. How you need to say it (your organization)

For example, if you were going to write an essay either in support of or opposing some form of gun control, you would have all kinds of ideas. You might be thinking in terms of accidental gun deaths, mass shootings, children and guns, the Second Amendment, and other things along those lines. You almost certainly would NOT be thinking of things like "thesis statement" or "topic sentence" or "conclusion."

You wouldn't think of these things because they have nothing to do with your CONTENT. Your content includes things related to gun control itself. Those other terms ("thesis statement" and the like) are all related to your ORGANIZATION, and as I said, these are really two separate things. However, we have to make them work together in order to write an effective essay, and in the next couple of chapters, we will see how this is done. But don't be discouraged; we'll get there.

THE BASICS

All college essays have three basic pieces:

1. The introduction
2. The body
3. The conclusion

My guess is, you've heard of these plenty of times. The difficulty comes in understanding just what role they play in an effective essay. The good news is, if we think in terms of everyday communication between people, we will see that these pieces are normal and natural.

For example, let's say that you are at a party, and you see a person with whom you would like to become better acquainted. At this point you haven't met, but your desire is to meet, strike up a conversation, hope that you enjoy each other's company, and maybe walk away with the promise of another meeting at another time. In other words, you want to have a positive interaction with this person.

If this is your goal, would you approach this person (remember, this is a person whom you have never met), and start your conversation with this:

"And then one time I actually got to see this crazy band called Wingnut in concert, and they were amazing! And then afterwards, my friends and I went to a nightclub..."

You wouldn't start a conversation this way, right? Why not?

Because you haven't even introduced yourself to this person, that's why not, and you'd sound like someone who didn't have all of his or her marbles. If you actually tried this, I imagine that the person would slowly move away from you and hope to get lost in the crowd.

So what would you do in order to not frighten this person away? Might you move within speaking distance of the person, make eye contact and smile, and say something like this:

"Great party, right? I'm loving the fact that they're playing some Wingnut songs. You ever heard their music before? My name is Mike, by the way..."

Okay, so I don't have the world's greatest pickup lines, but you get the point, right? You have to start the conversation with some sort of ice breaker, and then introduce yourself, and then move on to other things.

That is simply an INTRODUCTION, and if you remember our list of things from above, it's the first piece of any college essay. Before we can dive into our argument and all the reasons why we hold the position we do, we have to break the ice with our reader and introduce the topic to him or her. It's just a natural part of human communication.

The same is true when our conversation ends. After you've met the person you wanted to meet, you introduced yourself, and maybe you chatted for ten or fifteen minutes, you realize that it's a good time and place to end your conversation and move on. You don't simply stop mid-sentence, turn your back, and walk away, do you?

Of course you don't; that's rude. You have to wrap things up. So you say something like this:

“Well hey, it’s been great meeting you, Person X. I enjoyed chatting. I think my buddies are about ready to take off, so I better go catch up to them. But I hope to talk to you again soon!”

Now I have indicated to my conversational partner that the conversation is over. That’s just a CONCLUSION, which is the third part of all essays. We do it with every conversation we have, and we do it in our writing as well.

Remember that when we communicate with another, we have to break the ice and introduce ourselves (or our topic), have the conversation that we wanted to have, and then wrap things up and end the conversation. This is all an introduction, body, and conclusion are.

There is nothing magical or mysterious about any of this. Too often, we get a bit freaked out because we connect these terms with “English” class or with “Freshman Comp,” and so they become scary and academic and we feel that they are over our heads. But the fact is, these pieces are just a natural part of any conversation. In our freshman composition class, we just make them more formal, that’s all.

WHAT GOES WHERE, BRIEFLY

We will talk about what I’m about to explain in far more detail in the next chapter, but just so you’re up to speed on things, note that there are some specific things that need to happen in each of these sections. Again, we can easily connect these to normal conversation.

THE INTRODUCTION

As we discussed above, the introduction “introduces” things. In a conversation, we introduce ourselves. In an essay, we introduce our topic and provide some context for that topic. We also need to break the ice, and in essay terms, we call that “a lead.” A lead is simply the first thing we say in our essay. So we always have one. It might be no good, but it’s there.

The Lead

Remember at our party, we wanted to start with something that would make the other person want to talk to us. We want an effective ice breaker. It’s the same with an essay. We want to catch the reader’s attention and say something that will make him or her want to keep reading. Here is an example of a bad lead:

“My essay is about gun control.”

That is boring and vague and doesn’t make anybody want to keep reading. Here’s another bad lead:

“Gun control is a controversial issue in America today.”

You're telling the reader something that he or she probably already knows. And again, it's boring and vague and doesn't inspire someone to keep reading. Here's a better one":

"Last year, more than 11,000 Americans were killed with handguns."

This is much better, right? It provides a specific statistic that is probably shocking to the reader and is quite possible emotional as well.

There are lots of ways we can open an essay:

- A startling statistic. "Last year over 11,000 Americans were killed with handguns..."
- A story: "Three-year-old Johnny Baker had no idea what he was doing when he opened his father's nightstand and found his loaded .38 Special. He simply wanted to show it to his little sister Amy..."
- A brief history: "In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court, in the Heller decision, declared that owning a firearm is an individual right in the United States..."
- A quote: "I'll give you my gun when you take it from my cold, dead hands." So said Charlton Heston..."

The idea is to break the ice and get your reader to want to read more. You're just applying the same principle you used at the party to your essay.

THE THESIS

We will discuss thesis statements at length in the next chapter, so I will not discuss them here, except to say that they are not as scary as you think. For now, consider this: your thesis is simply the argument you are making in your essay, in one clear sentence. The thesis is usually (but not always) found at the end of your opening paragraph, after you have broken the ice and provided a little context on your topic. Again, read on.

THE BODY

The body of your essay is where your argument really happens. Think of our party analogy again. You break the ice and introduce yourself to the person at the beginning of the conversation, and you wrap things up and make a clean break from the conversation at the end. Everything in between is the "body" of your conversation.

Remember what we said above (just an FYI: you will read this several times in this book); an essay has only two functions:

1. Make an argument
2. Defend that argument

You do the first of these in your thesis. You do the second everywhere else, especially in the body of the essay. Again, we will discuss this at length over the next two chapters.

THE CONCLUSION

In the conclusion, we restate our thesis, in different words. This is a clue to our reader that we are wrapping things up. So, for example, if my thesis were this:

Because of their inherent dangers and the untrustworthiness of people in general, handguns must be banned in America.

I would spend the body of my essay making the argument for this ban. Then, when it came time to wrap things up, I would restate my thesis in similar (but not identical) terms:

Both handguns and people are simply too dangerous to allow handguns to be legal in America.

Once I have restated my thesis, I wrap up my essay. There are several things I can do here. I can briefly summarize the main points of my essay. I can throw in a quote that agrees with my thesis and comes from a highly respected person. I can paint a picture of a future in which my argument is or is not accepted by society. I can logically tie everything together. I can challenge the reader to action (but never COMMAND the reader).

So it's important as we begin looking at arguments to know how the pieces fit. And again, it's not rocket science. This all works in accordance with common sense and human nature. You can do this.

