

How to develop a structured essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

How do I write a unified essay?

Your essay of about 750 words must have the basic organizational structure of an introduction, body paragraphs and a conclusion—in other words, **a beginning, a middle and an end**. Your essay should also use **transitional words and phrases** (e.g., moreover, however, in addition, to conclude) at the start of each paragraph and when adding points within your paragraphs to show how ideas connect within or between paragraphs.

Why is the first paragraph so important?

The introduction paragraph sets the tone for your essay, makes the first and strongest impression on readers, and is therefore very important. The introduction should include, at least, 1) the title and author of the text you are writing about, 2) the main idea or ideas you have identified in the essay, and 3) the thesis you have chosen to develop in your own essay. You could also include a brief mention of writing techniques used by the author that you will include in your discussion of the essay. Do not make sweeping or vague generalizations, do not pronounce, do not begin tritely with a dictionary definition, and do not apologize for your inadequate ideas or knowledge.

How many paragraphs do I write?

For the body of the essay, you should write at least three substantial paragraphs, each developing one idea and stating a topic sentence that makes the focus of the paragraph clear. For example, you may decide to develop a discussion of techniques and devices in one of the three body paragraphs, or you may decide to discuss one technique in each body paragraph.

What do I do for a conclusion?

Your conclusion paragraph should be a restatement of the major ideas you have presented in your essay and it should bring some closure to your essay. It can be shorter than the body paragraphs; the most important thing is that it include some statements that bring a sense of conclusion to your ideas and observations about the text you are discussing.

Instructions

In Module 10, we created thesis statements, and in earlier modules (Module 9, for example), we identified main ideas in an essay. Now you must take your own thesis ideas and turn them into a 750-word essay. This exercise asks you to work on developing a structured essay. This exercise will also help you practise creating a short outline for your essay. You should aim for a five or six paragraph essay. Even if you did not complete Modules 9 and 10, you should start in the same way by thinking about main ideas and good thesis statements you could write about in your own essay in response to the short story or essay you will be writing about in this particular exercise.

Always express yourself clearly, even when you are listing ideas. In the sections below, you will be asked to list some of the ideas you might develop in the various paragraphs of your essay.

- In **PART 1** of this exercise, you will draft an outline for an essay based on your response to an original short story. In preparing an outline, your goal is to create a skeleton structure that you can use to guide yourself through the writing of a 750-word essay about a text. Never attempt to write an essay without first planning, in an outline, what you will discuss. The outline does not have to be written in full paragraphs. Instead, you can briefly list the topic sentence and supporting points that might go into each paragraph. In the appropriate spaces below, fill in the outline plan for an opening paragraph, three or four body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph.
- In **PARTS 2 and 3**, simply identify the paragraphs as acceptable or unacceptable examples of introduction and conclusion paragraphs.

Exercise

I PART 1

OUTLINING: In the spaces below, create an outline for a possible 750-word essay based on “Cranes Fly South.”

INTRODUCTION

“Cranes Fly South” – Main Ideas

“Cranes Fly South” – Thesis Statement

BODY

First body paragraph

Second body paragraph

Third body paragraph

Fourth body paragraph (if applicable)

CONCLUSION

II PART 2

Determine whether the sample paragraphs below are acceptable or unacceptable as introductory paragraphs.

1. “Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt reminds us that getting old is not an easy thing for everyone, that we need to respect the needs and wishes of elders, and most important, that sometimes we need to give in to them, because they are in the best position to know what is really important for their own peace of mind.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

2. “Cranes Fly South” is all about an old man who lives on a farm with his kids and his grandson. He has not seen a whooping crane in over forty years and he does not believe his grandson when the young boy tells him he thinks he has seen one. The young boy’s father says he wishes he had seen one as well.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

III PART 3

Determine whether the sample paragraphs below are acceptable or unacceptable as conclusion paragraphs for an essay.

1. “Cranes Fly South” is really all about people, about what matters most to them, and about how we need to respect their wishes, especially older people. When Lee realizes that his grandfather would do anything to see a crane, he makes it happen. The old grandfather probably died a much happier man because he saw something important for him; he was able to go somewhere and do something (with the boy’s help) when he wanted. In conclusion, I think we should all be so lucky when we are his age or in his position.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

2. “Cranes Fly south” uses many techniques to present the themes it deals with. Most of the story is centred on the old man, but the young boy, Lee, has a role to play; the same goes for the big bird and Lee’s parents. No one seems to agree much about anything. The rash decisions of the boy cause his grandfather’s death and the boy’s father is not happy about this at all.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

Answer key

I PART 1

Here are two examples of outlines for an essay on “Cranes Fly South.”

Example 1

a) First paragraph – introduction

1. mention short story title and author
2. explain the fact the story is about a boy who sees a rare bird and tells his grandfather and then he brings him to see it but Grandpa dies
3. explain the theme of how Grandpa got what he wanted
4. and finally, state that description of farm life and realistic use of dialogue are two techniques that will be discussed

Remember: You may have identified other techniques that are also acceptable.

Possible body structure

- b) second paragraph – brief summary of main plot events, seeing the rare crane, how much the grandfather wanted to see one and why, the dangers of bringing him, what the boy eventually decides, and what happens; these events reveal the characters for us, show us the family relationships, and so forth
- c) third paragraph – how the death of the grandfather following the events is viewed differently by the boy and his parents; what the boy learns about growing up; symbolism of the title
- d) fourth paragraph – how McCourt has used effective description to make us visualize the setting and effective dialogue to make the characters realistic and credible

Final paragraph

- e) conclusion – whether you feel the ending is positive or negative for young Lee overall, and what he has learned through the events of the story

Example 2

a) First paragraph – introduction

1. mention author and short story title
2. explain that this story is not about rare birds but about people
3. state how the story is full of symbolism and about how death can impact on us as we grow
4. explain that the author uses symbolism throughout the story to get his ideas across

Remember: You may have identified other techniques that are also acceptable.

Possible body structure

- b) second paragraph – brief plot structure and summary of important events in the story and mention of the use of symbolism by the author throughout
- c) and d) – symbolism in the title, in how the grandfather talks of going south to a better climate like the birds, in the relationship between cranes and Grandpa, symbolism of how Grandpa must go see crane just like the crane will naturally head south, what the boy really means when he says “He’s gone south” at the end, how harsh environment symbolizes harsh life, the difficulties of surviving in a harsh environment

Final paragraph

- e) conclusion – essay uses symbolism to draw portrait of young boy learning about death and life, and how one must sometimes respect the wishes of others, even if there are dangerous consequences; for example, helping the grandfather realize his dream symbolizes the grandson’s love

II PART 2

1. **Acceptable.** This paragraph gives the story title and author and lists the important events that take place and the themes presented by McCourt through the events witnessed by Lee. It goes beyond simply what happens and includes some ideas on what it all means to Lee and what it might mean to us as readers.
2. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph gives the story title and a summary of some of the important facts mentioned in the story, but there is no real thesis sentence (reaction-response) concerning the events that take place or even any mention of techniques used. Too much plot summary and hardly any analysis at all.

III PART 3

1. **Acceptable.** We find here an acceptable conclusion paragraph that reminds us the story is really about people, how we interact with one another, and the impact of the death of a family member. It also reminds us the story is about respect of elders and how important this is for the characters in the story, and for the readers as well.
2. **Unacceptable.** Here the student promises to talk about techniques but does not, and then simply jumps all over the place. There is no paragraph unity or sense of closure. The story does not say that the boy is solely responsible for the old man's death. Clearly Grandpa has some responsibility as well. The final sentence is inaccurate, since the story implies that Lee and Grandpa together made choices that probably contributed to Grandpa's death.