

How to develop a structured essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Powder” by Tobias Wolff**

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 story, and 3) the thesis you have chosen to develop in your own essay. You should also include a brief mention of writing techniques used by the author that you will include in your discussion of the story. 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 of 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. Your 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 750-word essay based on “Powder” by Tobias Wolff.

INTRODUCTION

“Powder” – Main Ideas

“Powder” – 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.

- In “Powder,” the author tells us about a boy and his father and the exciting trip they had after a day of skiing and how they drove home during a bad storm. The boy’s mother was surely happy to see he got home OK when she saw him at the end. It was an exciting drive in the snow and they had some problems seeing where they were going.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

- While the story starts very slowly, the author uses simple diction and dialogue to make the characters of the boy and his father realistic, to the point where we can believe this is the way a father and his son might actually talk in that situation. I know I talk like that to my father. The story is an easy read, almost like it was written for high school students.

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.

- Life is always full of surprises and challenges. In this story, Wolff has presented a simple story about what happens on a trip home after skiing, and at the same time about how a new understanding, perhaps even admiration, develops between a father and son. The writing is very impressive. Wolff has succeeded in making us care about his characters and whether or not they will make it home. This is what I like in a good story.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

- “Powder” reminds us that we will never win in any battle with Mother Nature, and that is the way it should be. The father will be a sad person when he crashes his car before he gets home because that is what happens when you don’t follow the authorities. As they say on television, “Don’t XXXX with mother nature!” The policeman is doing an important job. He should be respected.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

If unacceptable, explain why

Answer key

I PART 1

Here are two examples of outlines for an essay on “Powder.” Remember: you may have identified other techniques that are also acceptable.

Example 1

a) First paragraph – introduction

1. mention the story’s title and author
2. mention the fact the story is about a boy and his father on a skiing trip and their trip home
3. explain how the boy learns to appreciate and trust his father
4. and how Wolff uses suspense, realistic diction, and first-person narration so well

Possible body structure

- b) second paragraph – how they enjoy the skiing but delay their departure home, how they fool the policeman, how they head out in the storm, but it turns out okay; we see why the boy is not sure about what his father is doing or why exactly he is doing it
- c) third paragraph – the key to understanding the story is to see how the son changes his attitudes towards his 48-year-old father, because this is the primary theme, father-son bonding
- d) fourth paragraph – how the mother comes into play in the family relationships, how she expects them home, how and why the father does not want to disappoint her
- e) fifth paragraph – the suspense in the story created by the dangerous drive and the interesting narrative perspective (we see everything through the eyes of the young boy)

Final paragraph

- f) conclusion – the story comes full circle, starting with powder skiing and ending with powder driving; in both instances, the boy is learning to appreciate his father more and more; maybe a theme is that sports is an ideal place for these kinds of things to happen, where people really get to know one another

Example 2

- a) First paragraph – introduction
 1. mention author and essay title
 2. discuss how the story is all about taking risks,
 3. mention that we need to know when to go and when not to, and that we have to be ready to take a risk now and then because of the benefits that might be involved
 4. identify techniques, like use of narration, simple diction and dialogue

Possible body structure

- b) second paragraph – brief plot structure and summary explaining how the decision by the father to head home even in the storm is a calculated risk; he knows the consequences of not making it home but he also knows his son wants to go
- c) third paragraph – while disobeying the policeman might seem foolish, the father seems to know what he is doing, and he really wants to impress his son after getting him to go along with the trip home
- d) fourth paragraph – the suspense is well structured into the story, the happy-style ending is not certain until the end, the story is easy to read, and the dialogue works well

Final paragraph

- e) conclusion – sometimes we need to make difficult, maybe even dangerous decisions, but when the situation demands it sometimes we have no choice; as they say on TV “Just do it!” (but don’t get too carried away)

II PART 2

1. **Unacceptable.** Although the story title is mentioned, there is not much more here than plot summary, and there is even some confusion about events because the story ends before the boy gets home. We do not know how angry his mother will be. (Remember, for paragraph one, you want to mention the author, the story title, a main idea, a theme or thesis focus idea, and perhaps even techniques you will write about.)
2. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph is all about techniques used by the author; it does not mention the title or author, and does not make a statement related to any theme or main idea in the story. (Remember, for paragraph one, you want to mention the author, the story title, a main idea, a theme or thesis focus idea, and then techniques you will write about.)

III PART 3

1. **Acceptable.** This is an acceptable conclusion paragraph that reminds us how the story is about people, not only events, and how the events portrayed in “Powder” bring forth evidence of a new relationship developing between the father and son. The suspense helps too; the story keeps our interest. The paragraph even rates the quality of the writing overall, and this is what we look for in conclusion paragraphs and in closure sentences.
2. **Unacceptable.** While some ideas expressed here might actually have some elements of truth, the issues are not directly related to the story. This paragraph is not a sensible reaction to or interpretation of the Wolff story, even though we might agree with some of what the student is saying. The conclusion misreads the story in claiming that Mother Nature will defeat the father and that he will crash the car.