



mail@easenglish.net
IBT, PBT, IELTS

Basic Essay Structure

On the Written portion of the TOEFL, you will be asked to write an essay that is more than one paragraph long. The reason for this is that in U.S. academic culture, essays need to be several paragraphs long in order for students to express their ideas clearly and for instructors to determine whether or not students understand the material.

Knowing how to **organize** your ideas in such long essays is very important for academic success.

Generally, academic essays have a similar format. They are at least five paragraphs long, although often they are much longer. Also, the basic structure of each of these paragraphs is the same as that which we have already studied. In addition, the paragraphs in the U.S. academic essay can be divided into three basic kinds: (1) the **introductory paragraph**, (2) the **body paragraphs**, and (3) the **concluding paragraph**.

The Introduction

The first paragraph of the academic essay is the one that is usually the most different from the basic paragraph that we have studied. In Lessons #1 and #2, we saw that a basic paragraph had a topic sentence as its first sentence, followed by supporting sentences with supporting details, and these (sometimes) followed by a concluding sentence.

In the multi-paragraph academic essay, however, the structure is a little different. Like the basic paragraph, the introductory paragraph opens with a very general statement about the topic, and is often followed by some supporting examples, but the paragraph then finishes with a narrow statement about the topic. This narrow statement is called the **main thesis**. Here is a short example of an introductory paragraph:

Throughout human history, the physical universe has often presented dangers to explorers. For example, when primitive humans left their tribal villages to search for food and water, they risked death or injury from dangerous animals. Later, when people sailed the oceans in search of new lands for settlement or trade, many died in terrible storms. **Similarly, the ocean of outer space has many dangers, but it also has several unique challenges for explorers.**

Notice how the first sentence, *Throughout human history, nature has often presented dangers to explorers*, is a very general statement about the topic, which is dangers in exploration. The next two sentences give some supporting examples of this initial sentence. However, the third sentence of the paragraph gives an example that contrasts in some way with the previous two sentences. Then, the final sentence does something new: It introduces a **specific example of the general topic**. This specific topic is the **main thesis** of the entire essay; that is, the rest of the essay will focus on this specific topic, which in this case is *several unique challenges for explorers*.

This **main thesis** functions like the topic sentence of the basic paragraph, which we have studied in Lessons #1 and #2. **It is the most important sentence of the essay.**

Notice how the main thesis is worded. It includes the phrase, *several unique challenges*. This raises a question in the reader's mind, namely: "What are these challenges?" The reader will find out what some of the challenges are in the **body** of the essay, which we will study next.

The Body

The body portion of the essay is the largest portion. Typically, it has three paragraphs, but it might have two paragraphs and of course it can have many more than three. Each of these paragraphs usually has a topic sentence and several supporting sentences, just like the basic paragraph we have studied. Here is an example of three body paragraphs (which together continue the essay that we have started studying above):

One of the challenges that is unique to

space is the fact that space is a vacuum, which is a risk for various reasons. First, in a vacuum there is no atmosphere and therefore no air pressure. Without air pressure, the human body has no oxygen to sustain itself. After too many minutes without oxygen, a person would lose consciousness and eventually die. Also, in a vacuum a person's blood will gradually begin to boil. Finally, without an atmosphere, the rays of the Sun can cause radiation poisoning.

Another difficulty that is unique to outer space is the presence of meteors and micrometeors. These are pieces of rock and metal that are left over from the formation of the solar system. Many of these objects travel at very high speeds. Under the Earth's blanket of air, people are usually protected from meteor impacts. However, in space, people and spaceships are vulnerable to collisions with meteors. It is true that the chance of meteor impacts is relatively small, but if even a small micrometeor happens to collide with a spacecraft, it could cause serious damage.

A third special challenge involved with the environment of space involves the fact that it is very difficult to find life-sustaining water off the Earth. For example, the planet Mercury, which is closest to the Sun, is too hot to have water, so space travelers must take water from Earth if they want to visit Mercury. A similar situation exists on the planet Venus, second from the Sun. This planet is likewise too hot for water to exist. Similarly, the fourth planet, Mars, is too cold and dry, although there may be some water frozen at the north and south poles of the planet.

paragraphs, as has been done above. The spaces between the paragraphs above are only for study purposes.)

Recall that the main thesis statement of this essay said, *Similarly, the ocean of outer space has many dangers, but it also has several unique challenges for explorers.* You can see how the body of the essay is **organized** according to the challenges that are mentioned in the main thesis. The first body paragraph discusses the dangers of space vacuum, the second body paragraph gives information about meteors, and the third paragraph mentions the fact that water is very difficult to find on other planets.

The Conclusion

The concluding paragraph does **not** always appear in an academic essay. In particular, on the Written portion of the TOEFL, which lasts 30 minutes, there may not be enough time for you to include a formal concluding paragraph. However, here is an example of a concluding paragraph for you. Notice how it summarizes the main points of the preceding body paragraphs:

There are other difficulties involved with space exploration, but these are three of the most important ones. In summary, without adequate air pressure, the unprotected human body may be seriously harmed in a vacuum. In addition, meteors can threaten human life and damage spacecraft. Finally, the lack of water in space means that human life may have a difficult time surviving on other planets. As one can see, the challenges of space travel are rather different from terrestrial dangers.

Here is another example of a concluding paragraph:

As mentioned above, the Earth's natural environment has often presented dangers to explorers. Dangerous animals, vast oceans, and violent weather have

presented risks to humans. However, the new frontier of outer space, with its vacuum, meteors, and lack of water, presents unique challenges to people who desire to explore it.

*This page was created by F. Scott Walters on 11/07/99.
It was last updated on 11/23/99.*