

CORE LEARNING

COLLEGE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY &
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Writing Right

Introduction to Academic Writing:

Anatomy of a Paragraph & Hedging an Argument

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The Anatomy of a Paragraph: How to Structure Your Writing to Make a Strong Point

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Identify the purpose of a given paragraph
 - Construct a suitable topic sentence such that it is linked to the overall thesis of the essay
 - Organise a coherent paragraph in a logical sequence such that the topic sentence is supported by evidence
 - Explain or interpret the evidence clearly such that it supports the topic sentence or key point
 - Conclude a paragraph by returning to the main point of the paragraph
- Understand the different types of sentences (simple, complex, and compound) and how to go about using them appropriately
-

Reading and understanding how disorganised paragraphs can confuse a reader

If we are in a foreign country and want to visit different places, we need a map. These maps tell us where we are and where all the other places are in relation to our position. Without them, we can be easily lost and frustrated. Likewise, in an essay, it is useful for us to first have an accurate map for ourselves and then to share it with the reader. The table below provides an example of an introductory paragraph.

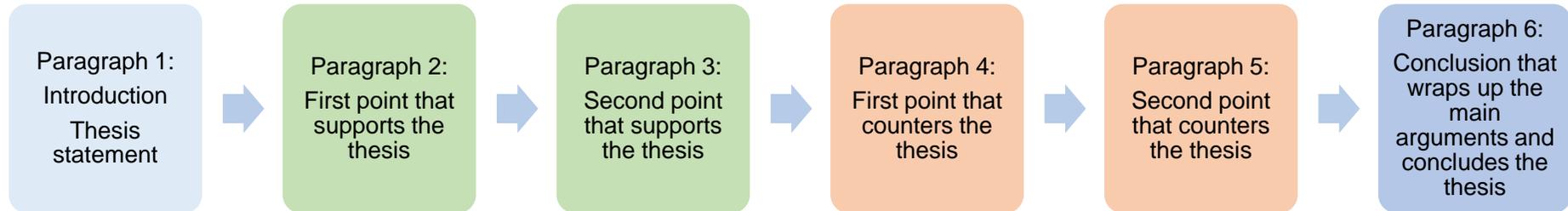
Sentences and phrases	Analysis
There is a rich culture and heritage in Singapore's Chinatown. Over the past century, the area has evolved greatly since Raffles divided various immigrant communities through the Raffles' Town Plan.	This part introduces the essay and the main topic.
In this essay, we will examine the Singapore Tourism Board's \$97.5 million plan to energise Chinatown.	This provides a clear indication about what the essay will be about.
There are strong arguments against this revitalisation of Chinatown and various groups have voiced concerns about whether the project would help to keep Chinatown's authenticity. However, there are also rational and objective reasons why the Singapore Tourism Board has embarked on this project to preserve the heritage of the area.	It moves into the two main arguments for and against the plan. Although there are no details provided, the reader will now know that the essay will explore these two broad perspectives.
After examining both sides of the argument, this essay will argue why the project should continue but with significant changes to its original plan.	It ends with a stand on what the author will argue for. The thesis statement should be included in the opening paragraph.

In the subsequent body paragraphs, there should also be a clear structure so that the reader knows where the essay is headed. Here are some key guidelines (OSCAR) to keep in mind as you are organising the paragraph and ideas:

- 1) **One paragraph, one idea.** There can be different examples that relate to the main idea, but it should be clear to the reader that the paragraph only has that one central idea.
- 2) **Start with a topic sentence.** Although some writers may place their topic sentences in the middle or at the end, a good general guideline is to place it right at the start. This makes it very clear for the reader what the paragraph will be about.
- 3) **Cite evidence and examples.** A good paragraph should have relevant examples and evidence to support the topic sentence or main idea.
- 4) **Alignment with the topic sentence.** As you are writing the paragraph, constantly ask yourself if the sentences are linked to the topic sentence of the paragraph.
- 5) **Recap the main idea at the end of the paragraph.** The last sentence of the paragraph could conclude with a link back to the topic sentence so that the reader is reminded about the key point that you are making.

Reading and understanding the importance of organising ideas for a well-structured and strong argument

A good essay starts with a clear introduction and has body paragraphs that are well structured. It is clear and coherent with the paragraphs linking and flowing smoothly from one to another. There are several ways to think about these links and organisation of the paragraphs.



**Note: You may have more than two points supporting and countering your thesis. The example above only uses two for illustrative purposes.*

In this approach, there are four main parts:

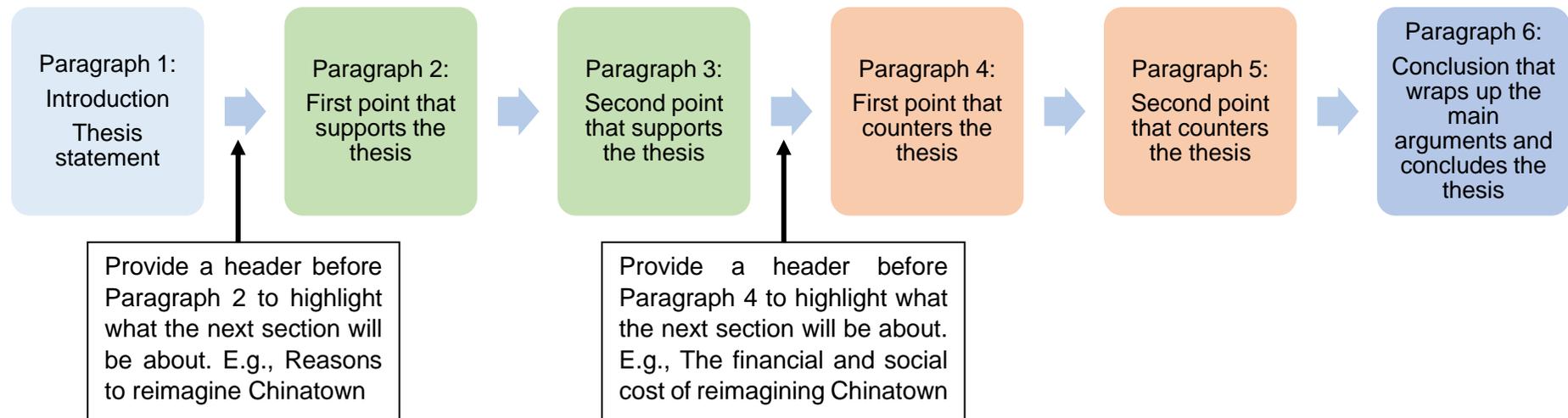
1. Introduction
2. Arguments for the thesis
3. Arguments against the thesis
4. Conclusion

It is a balanced approach and both sides of the argument are considered. It is also possible to alternate between a point that supports the thesis and a counterpoint. However, the writer should be careful to ensure an alignment with the overall thesis. In an argumentative essay, this approach is useful because it is easy to follow.

Signposts and clear directions

To further organise the essay, you could include signposts which will clearly tell your reader what you are trying to say. You could also think about it as helping the reader to chunk the essay into manageable parts to understand.

Here is one way to provide signposts.



As mentioned above, you may have more than two points supporting or countering your thesis. In general, the longer the essay and the more complex the arguments, the more signposts and headers are needed. This would help the reader in navigating through your essay.

Understand the different types of sentences (simple, complex, and compound) and how to go about using them appropriately

Very often, when a reader is reading your essay, words are being read out loud in their minds. In the same way that a musical piece may become boring if a similar rhythm was constantly played, a paragraph can also become mundane if the sentences are not varied.

Different types of sentences

Type of sentence	Description of this type of sentence	Examples
Simple sentence	A sentence with an independent clause. It does not have any dependent clauses.	Tim enjoys visiting Chinatown.
Compound sentence	A sentence with multiple independent clauses and no dependent clauses.	Tim enjoys visiting Chinatown and he loves the food and clothes there.
Complex sentence	A sentence with an independent clause and a dependent clause.	They wondered what they could do to help because they were very fond of the elderly owner.

Topic Review and Exercises

Analysing sample paragraphs and identifying topic sentences, evidence, concluding statements

Exercise 1

In an earlier section, we covered the use of a simple method (OSCAR) to help you organise your paragraph and ideas. The statements in Column A are not in the correct order. Read them carefully and write down the correct order in Column B using the labels A, B, C as given in the Label column. The first statement is given as an example.

Label	Column A (incorrect arrangement)	Column B (correct arrangement)
A.	<i>Recap the main idea at the end of the paragraph.</i>	<i>E.g. C (One paragraph, one idea)</i>
B.	Cite evidence and examples.	
C.	One paragraph, one idea.	
D.	Start with a topic sentence.	
E.	Align the ideas to the topic sentence.	

Exercise 1: Suggested answers

Label	Column A (incorrect arrangement)	Column B (correct arrangement)	Explanation
A.	<i>Recap the main idea at the end of the paragraph.</i>	<i>E.g. C (One paragraph, one idea)</i>	It should be clear to the reader that the paragraph only has one central idea.
B.	Cite evidence and examples.	D Start with a topic sentence.	This makes it very clear for the reader what the paragraph will be about.
C.	One paragraph, one idea.	B Cite evidence and examples.	A good paragraph should have relevant examples and evidence to support the topic sentence or main idea.
D.	Start with a topic sentence.	E Align the ideas to the topic sentence.	Constantly ask yourself if the sentences are linked to the topic sentence in the paragraph.
E.	Align the ideas to the topic sentence.	A Recap the main idea at the end of the paragraph.	The reader is reminded about the key point that you are making

Analysing sample paragraphs and identifying topic sentences, evidence, concluding statements

Exercise 2

In the paragraph below:

- Circle the topic sentence
- Underline the evidence
- Highlight the concluding statements.

Before 1914, there was friction among the European nations caused by economic rivalry and competition. Germany's strong growth caused her European neighbours to become wary of her industrial and military prowess. In addition, the political and military manifestation of her economic strength seemed to show that she was now well capable of carrying out the threats of war. This led to an increasingly isolated Germany and drew her closer to Austria-Hungary.¹

Exercise 2: Suggested answers

Sentences from Exercise 2	Description
Before 1914, there was friction among the European nations caused by economic rivalry and competition.	Topic sentence
Germany's strong growth caused her European neighbours to become wary of her industrial and military prowess.	Evidence and example to support the topic sentence
In addition, the political and military manifestation of her economic strength seemed to show that she was now well capable of carrying out the threats of war.	Further evidence to support the topic sentence
This led to an increasingly isolated Germany and drew her closer to Austria-Hungary.	Concluding statement of what happened as a consequence of the rivalry

¹ Adapted from an unpublished undergraduate assignment by Ong, Y.C.M. (2003). Domestic politics may have been a major factor leading to the outbreak of the First World War, but it could not have happened without economic and political rivalries". Is this a reasonable assessment of the long-term causes of the First World War? NIE, NTU: Singapore.

Arranging the order of certain sentences such that there is a logical sequence to the paragraph

Exercise 1

The statements in Column A are not in the correct order. Read them carefully and write down the correct order in Column B using the labels A, B, C, D, E given in the Label column. The first statement is given as an example.

Label	Column A (Incorrect order)	Column B (Correct order)
A	Various devices such as iPads are costly and can be a distraction from the lesson's learning objective.	Example: B
B	Efforts to include technology in the primary school classroom should be complemented with effective pedagogical techniques.	
C	To avoid students becoming distracted, educational technology and pedagogical methods should be considered together when purchasing new products for the classroom.	
D	In short, it is important to think about how pedagogical methods can complement the use of technology while engaging students in class.	
E	For example, teachers can consider how the devices can support various students' learning needs and engage them at their different levels of progress.	

Exercise 2: Suggested answers

Label	Column A (Incorrect order)	Column B (Correct order)
A	Various devices such as iPads are costly and can be a distraction from the lesson's learning objective.	Example: B
B	Efforts to include technology in the primary school classroom should be complemented with effective pedagogical techniques.	A
C	To avoid students becoming distracted, educational technology and pedagogical methods should be considered together when purchasing new products for the classroom.	C
D	In short, it is important to think about how pedagogical methods can complement the use of technology while engaging students in class.	E
E	For example, teachers can consider how the devices can support various students' learning needs and engage them at their different levels of progress.	D

Proceed with Caution: Hedging an Argument and Presenting Your Ideas Clearly and Carefully

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Evaluate the level of certainty behind a given argument by analysing the context of the statement
 - Describe how to clarify certain assumptions behind one's arguments
 - Anticipate certain questions that the reader might have and address them appropriately while staying focused on the thesis statement
-

Reading and understanding how important assumptions are glossed over in a given argument

Consider this argument between a father and his 7-year-old daughter.

Father: You are always not cleaning your room. It's never tidy or neat.
Daughter: That's not true. I cleaned it last week. Aunty Lee said it was very neat when she came over for Chinese New Year.
Father: That's once in a year!
Daughter: But you said '*always* not cleaning your room' and that it's '*never* tidy'.
Father: You drive me crazy sometimes.
Daughter: That's ok, I guess. Mum said you drive her crazy all the time!

In our conversations, it is not uncommon for people to use superlatives to exaggerate a given situation. However, in academic writing, it is advisable to avoid taking positions that can be easily refuted or debunked.

Consider the following statement:

- 1) *Violent computer games cause people to have violent tendencies.*

The statement seems to have taken a strong view of violent computer games and directly relates it to people's violent tendencies. By writing in such a direct manner, the writer risks generalizing too widely and being open to criticism. For example, do all people who play computer games develop violent tendencies? If just one person does not, then the statement would not hold true. Thus, it might be prudent to soften the statement by using *hedges*.

By saying that violent computer games might increase the chances of people developing violent tendencies, the writer softens the claim and acknowledges that a direct causation link may not exist.

The table below shows some useful words that can help to hedge an argument and provide some level of caution as the writer makes certain arguments.

appears	some	generally	might	possible	based on
tends	many	often	could	probably	according to
seems	one of	seldom	may	perhaps	in the view of

By using certain words to take a more cautious stance, the writer could demonstrate a more nuanced and balanced stand. However, it should also be mentioned that if this is done excessively, then the writer could come across as not saying anything consequential or original. For example:

The number of patients might increase if certain measures are not taken. The authorities might implement certain changes in the coming future. However, nothing is certain at this point and most things seem rather unpredictable.

After reading this short paragraph, it is difficult to conclude anything other than the situation is rather unpredictable.

In short, it is important for the writer to decide whether the evidence at hand is convincing enough to make a confident and committed stand. If the level of certainty is not very high, then a more cautious approach might be more appropriate.

Reading and understanding the importance of anticipating some questions that a reader might have and addressing them appropriately

In writing an academic paper, it is important to have a balanced view such that it does not provide the impression that you have only considered one side of the argument. You can still make a strong stand and argue for or against a certain point while acknowledging, accommodating, or debunking certain points that may oppose your viewpoint. Here are some ways that you may go about doing that.

Being aware of the counterargument

While researching on a given topic, you may develop your own set of ideas about the thesis. However, if you have done sufficient reading on a topic, especially a controversial one, it is very likely that you would encounter alternative viewpoints. If you do not encounter them at all, then it would still be ideal to ask yourself with a critical mind whether your thesis would hold true in all circumstances. If it does not, then these would form the basis for possible counterarguments in your essay. In short, the first step in anticipating questions that a reader might have lies in you being reflective and critical during the pre-writing stage.

Discussing the counterarguments

After researching into the counterarguments, the writer can consider the ways to present them so that they add value to the overall argument and thesis.

The first way to present it could be to share the main counter point and to provide examples to support the point. However, if the counterpoint itself is not strong, the writer shares the reasons why it should be debunked.

A second way to present the counterargument is to acknowledge and accommodate the point. This is usually done when the counterargument is reasonable and strong. Rather than nit-picking and offering superficial arguments for why it should not be included, it is possible to accept the point but still maintain that the strength of the main thesis outweighs the counterargument.

To recap, counterarguments are important because they lend credence to your argument. They demonstrate that you have considered alternative perspectives and have done due diligence in investigating them. By being aware of them, researching into them, and presenting them well in your essay, the essay will be more balanced and stronger than if it was only resting on one side of the argument.

Analysing how writers may use quotations and references to support a given stance

Apart from using language that is cautious and addressing counterarguments appropriately, authors can avoid making overconfident and one-sided claims by quoting other authors and researchers. These can be used for both points supporting the thesis or counterarguments. There are several ways to do this within the essay.

Phrase	Examples
Based on research by...	Based on research by Ong (2021), it was found...*
According to...	According to Ong (2021), the findings show...
There is evidence demonstrating that...	There is evidence demonstrating that plastic straws are causing significant damage to the environment (Ong, 2021).

***Note:** *Ong, 2021 is used here as an example only.*

In summary, academic writing tends to be more cautious than spoken conversations. The nature of the written word makes claims more permanent, and authors prefer to anticipate arguments and address them early rather than being seen as one-sided or ignorant of alternative perspectives.

Topic Review and Exercises

Analysing how writers may deliberately qualify certain statements such that they would not be faulted for a premature or presumptive conclusion

Exercise 1

There are 5 statements given below. Write the letters which correspond to the level of certainty demonstrated by the writer.

C: The writer is certain about the statement.

H: The writer has hedged the argument and taken a cautious stance

Statements	C / H
Longer recesses tend to allow students to rest more, and this seems to make them more attentive.	
Students run faster after eating more nutritious food.	
Everyone learns better with more assessments and quizzes.	
Research by scientists seem to suggest that more sleep leads to better retention rates.	
Politicians and activists have different opinions on everything.	

Exercise 1: Suggested answers

Statements	C / H
Longer recesses tend to allow students to rest more, and this seems to make them more attentive.	H
Students run faster after eating more nutritious food.	C
Everyone learns better with more assessments and quizzes.	C
Research by scientists seem to suggest that more sleep leads to better retention rates.	H
Politicians and activists have different opinions on everything.	C

Analysing how writers may deliberately qualify certain statements such that they would not be faulted for a premature or presumptive conclusion

Exercise 2

In the statements given below, there are some assumptions that are glossed over. Rewrite the original statements using the words in the box below to hedge the argument and take a more cautious approach. You may use more than one word to rewrite the sentence.

at times	suggests	potentially	generally
----------	----------	-------------	-----------

Original statement	The students were distracted but they were still very attentive in class.
Question/assumption	How might the students be attentive and distracted at the same time?
Suggested change	

Original statement	This research demonstrates that mankind's harmful activities have led to an irreversible change in the climate.
Question/assumption	Is the research conclusive that the change cannot be reversed? Is this based only on one research study?
Suggested change	

Exercise 2: Suggested answers

Original statement	The students were distracted but they were still very attentive in class.
Question/assumption	How might the students be attentive and distracted at the same time?
Suggested change	The students were distracted <u>at times</u> , but they were <u>generally</u> attentive in class.

Original statement	This research demonstrates that mankind's harmful activities have led to an irreversible change in the climate.
Question/assumption	Is the research conclusive that the change cannot be reversed? Is this based only on one research study?
Suggested change	Research <u>suggests</u> that mankind's harmful activities have <u>potentially</u> led to an irreversible change in the climate.

Further reading

Instruction words

- <https://student.unsw.edu.au/glossary-task-words>
- <https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/academic-and-employability-skills/2020/10/02/understanding-instruction-words-in-academic-essay-titles/>

Hedging

- <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-writing-centre/develop-academic-voice/caution-hedging>
- <https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/hedges-softening-claims-in-academic-writing>

General resources for writing

- <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/moving-assignment-topic>
- <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca>

For more resources on Academic Writing or English Language support,
you may scan the QR code below.



<https://www.suss.edu.sg/academic-research-writing-resources>

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