



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

THE ESSAY

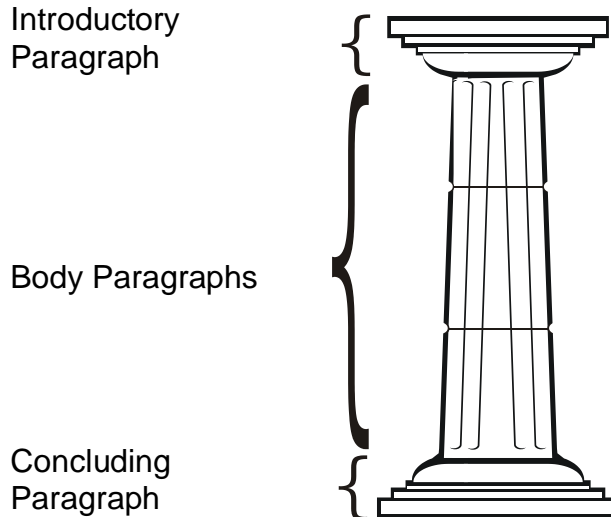
Instructors use the term “essay” to refer to a wide range of written work. Usually, however, by essay they mean a piece of writing that has a number of paragraphs and has one main focus or idea.

This handout discusses, in brief, a basic essay format. If you are unsure what sort of essay your instructor is looking for, you should ask your instructor for clarification. If you need more explanation of the different parts of the essay or the essay writing process, you should consult a Learning Centre tutor.

Typically, the 3 main parts of an essay are:

- The Introductory Paragraph
- The Body Paragraphs
- The Concluding Paragraph

A good way to think about an essay is to picture a column like this:



In the following pages, each of these parts is discussed and an example is provided from an essay by Anna, a Learning Centre tutor.

It is important to recognize that Anna’s essay only provides an example of how one student has applied essay-writing principles to write about a specific topic. It is not the only way to develop an essay. Anna’s essay is a research paper, and she has used APA style documentation to show her readers where she got her information.

The Introductory Paragraph

The introduction's role is to:

- To motivate your reader to read further
- To provide a context for your essay, and
- To clarify the purpose and scope of your essay.

The introductory paragraph should be fairly brief, typically no more than about 6 sentences in a short essay.

The Thesis: The most important part of the introduction is the thesis statement. It generally comes at the end of the introductory paragraph. The thesis statement typically expresses a point of view (or argument) about a topic. The purpose of the essay is to prove the truth of the thesis statement. Here are two examples of thesis statements:

- *In "The Necklace," de Maupassant shows that personal tragedy can lead to strength of character.*
- *Although the raid at Dieppe was unsuccessful, it was necessary to boost the morale of the citizens of Allied countries.*

Notice how each of these examples introduces a topic and then focuses on a particular aspect of that topic.

In some types of essays, a thesis statement expressing a point of view is not needed. In those essays, the thesis statement simply clarifies what the essay is about. For more information on effective thesis statements, see Learning Centre handout WR4.20: The Thesis Statement.

Developing the Introduction: Once you have written a thesis statement, you can develop your introduction in a number of ways. One way to develop your introduction is to start with a statement relating to one key concept in your thesis. This statement should be interesting enough to encourage your reader to read on. Then in subsequent sentences, narrow your focus to something more specific and closer to your thesis statement. The introduction ends with the thesis statement, the most specific sentence in the introduction.

The following introduction is from Anna's essay titled *A Residential School Legacy*.

From the late 1800s to the 1980s, more than 100,000 First Nations children in Canada attended residential schools (Llewellyn, 2008, p. 258).¹ To attend these schools, children were taken away from their families and communities. At the schools, the children suffered from emotional, physical, sexual and spiritual abuse (Steckley & Cummins, 2001, p. 191). The worst abuses were often used as punishment for speaking their indigenous languages (Petten, 2007, p. 22). The imposition of residential schools on First Nations children has led to significant loss of indigenous languages, and this language loss has led to further cultural losses for traditional First Nations cultures in Canada.

¹ APA style only requires page numbers for direct quotations, but it encourages the use of page numbers even with paraphrased material.

The final sentence of this introduction is the thesis statement. So, the reader knows that the rest of the essay will show how residential schools led to loss of native languages and cultures.

Anna begins the introduction with one general concept from the thesis statement – “residential schools.” She later adds the concept of “language loss” and then in the thesis statement ties the two together and adds the concept of “cultural loss.”

Anna’s use of statistics in the first sentence shows that the issue of residential schools is not a minor one. The length of time, the number of children, and the seriousness of the abuse all encourage the reader to take an interest in learning more about this issue. This information also provides a context for the essay – residential schools.

The Body Paragraphs

The body of an essay is made up of a number of sections. In a short essay, a section is the same as a paragraph. In a longer essay, each section may be broken up into a number of paragraphs. The number of body paragraphs depends on what the writer has to say and the length of the essay required.

Each body paragraph has the following components:

A topic sentence: The specific point to be developed in a paragraph is stated in its topic sentence, usually at the beginning of the paragraph. Typically key words or concepts from the thesis statement should be reflected in the topic sentences. This helps the flow of the essay by clearly connecting each section back to the main point of the essay as stated in the thesis in the introduction.

Support (Evidence and Explanation): After the topic sentence, you need to provide support for the point you are making. Often this will involve a number of supporting points. Each supporting point needs 2 parts: 1) evidence, and 2) explanation. The evidence might include facts, statistics, quotes, anecdotes, logical arguments, examples, elaboration, description or definition. The second part of giving support – explanation – is crucial because the reader needs to be told how the evidence supports the point that the writer is making. The purpose of the evidence and explanation is to prove the truth of the topic sentence.

Unity: Each body paragraph needs to be unified. This means that each sentence in the paragraph must clearly relate to the topic sentence of that paragraph.

Coherence: Each body paragraph needs to be coherent. This means that each sentence is logically connected to the sentence before it. This smooth flow of ideas can be created through the use of transitions, repetition of key words and ideas, and presentation of ideas in a logical order.

Here is Anna's first body paragraph from her essay about residential schools:

One far-reaching result of the residential school system is the loss of indigenous languages in Canada. A major cause of this loss was the removal of children from their families and language communities. Petten (2007) reports that, having been removed from their families at an early age, children lost the opportunity to continue to develop their mother tongues (p. 22). At the schools, only English or French were used. Furthermore, children were punished and abused for using their indigenous languages. Survivors of residential schools report priests and nuns punching, slapping, verbally abusing (Knockwood, 1992, p. 99), and sticking pins in the tongues (Steckley & Cummins, 2001, p. 193) of very young children for speaking their mother tongues. In the face of this abuse, many children quickly lost the ability to speak their indigenous languages. A long-term result of residential schools is a significant reduction in the numbers of speakers of indigenous languages. According to the 2001 Canada Census, only 24% of people who identified themselves as aboriginal said they could communicate in an aboriginal language (as cited in Norris, 2007, p. 20). In addition, over the past 100 years, at least ten indigenous languages have become extinct (Norris, 2007, p. 20). Although residential schools were not the sole cause of this loss of language, they played a significant role in the decline.

The Topic Sentence: In this paragraph, Anna's topic sentence is "*One far-reaching result of the residential school system is the loss of indigenous languages in Canada.*" This sentence reflects key ideas from the thesis statement – residential schools and language loss.

Support (Evidence and Explanation): Anna has two supporting points for the idea that residential schools contributed to the loss of indigenous languages. First, she shows that residential schools impacted children's first language development. She cites a source stating this general point and also provides examples of punishments for children speaking their first languages at the schools. After providing this evidence, she relates the evidence back to her topic sentence. Anna's second supporting point is the overall reduction in speakers of indigenous languages. She cites statistics about how few aboriginal people speak their indigenous languages and how many languages have become extinct. She then goes on to explain that residential schools were only one factor in the decline of indigenous languages.

Unity: Every sentence in this paragraph adds to our understanding of the language loss resulting from residential schools. This makes the paragraph a unified one.

Coherence: Anna creates coherence in a number of ways. First, she uses repetition so the reader is always clear what she is talking about. There are no uses of vague "it" kinds of pronouns. Notice the repetition of these ideas: *indigenous languages, loss, communication*. In some cases she uses words that mean the same (notice "*indigenous languages,*" "*mother tongues,*" "*aboriginal language*") so as not to be boring, but the ideas are repeated, which improves the paragraph's coherence. Second, she follows a logical order – cause to effect. First she talks about the causes of the children's language loss and then the effect of this loss on indigenous languages in general.

She also makes use of a few transition words that help the reader to follow the logic of her ideas. Examples of transitions (or connectors) in this paragraph include “*furthermore*,” “*in addition*,” “*a result of*.” Notice how each supporting point is clearly indicated by “*A major cause*” and “*A long-term result*.” This helps the reader realize that new ideas are being introduced.

An essay has more than one body paragraph, each with these characteristics. You will see Anna’s other body paragraphs later in this handout.

The Concluding Paragraph

The concluding paragraph includes:

- A brief summary of the main points of the essay and/or a restatement of the thesis statement
- A final comment on the topic. This might be a discussion of the implications of the truth of your thesis (answering the question, *so what?*) or some discussion providing food for thought for your reader concerning the thesis or a related topic.

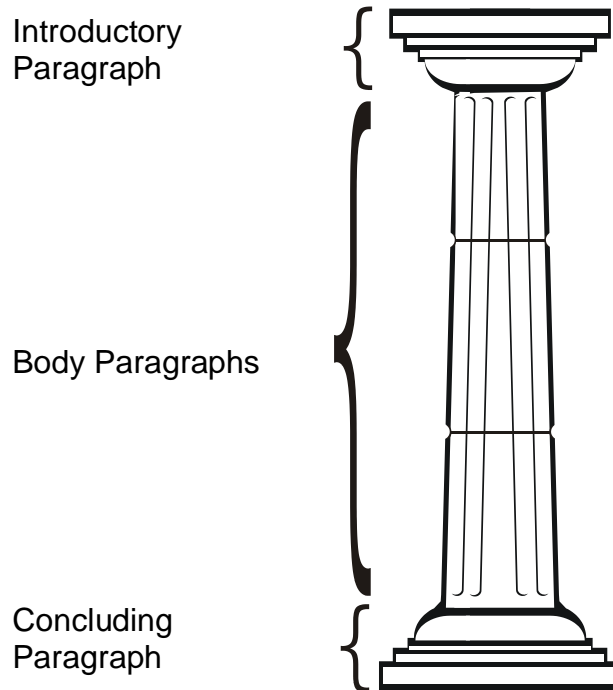
Here is Anna’s concluding paragraph from her essay on residential schools:

In short, interpersonal relationships and traditional belief systems were both sacrificed when residential schools contributed to the decline of First Nations children’s indigenous language abilities. The effects of these losses continue to this day despite attempts to reverse the damage. On June 11, 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Steven Harper offered an official apology on behalf of the Canadian government to survivors of residential schools for the treatment they had received there (Fitzpatrick & Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). Following this apology, Beverly Jacobs, President of the Native Women’s Association of Canada, noted that aboriginal people need more than an apology; they need a government commitment to dealing with the negative impacts of the schools in areas such as “language, culture, . . . tradition, and spirituality” (Native women’s leader, 2008, p. 2). The effects of the residential schools on First Nations’ language and culture will never be undone; all Canadians can do now is support efforts by aboriginal people to preserve and revitalize those linguistic and cultural traditions that have not been lost.

In her first sentence in the conclusion, Anna signals the reader that this is the conclusion by using the transition “*In short*.” She then summarizes her main supporting points and restates her thesis in one sentence. This is not an exact repetition of the thesis, but it says the same idea using somewhat different words and providing a bit more detail. She then discusses the Canadian government apology to residential school survivors and a response from the aboriginal community. Because the paper was about language loss and its effect on traditional native culture, information about the apology would not fit in the body paragraphs, but since Anna has already restated her thesis, she is now free to move away from the thesis and write about a related issue – what we can do about the problem.

A Visual Overview of the Essay

One way to think of an essay is to think of a pillar on an old Greek or Roman temple. Picturing this image can help you remember some key issues about essay structure.



At the top, there is a wide part that narrows to the width of the pillar. This top part is like the introduction. It is broader than the content of the rest of the essay, but it narrows to a focussed thesis at the end of the introduction.

The body of the essay is represented by the column itself. The body stays within the confines of the focus of the thesis. The body of the essay is made up of building blocks which hold up the thesis. Each block is heavy and strong. The strength of a body paragraph comes from the strength of the evidence and explanation provided.

At the bottom, there is another part that widens out from the column to make a pedestal on the floor. In the same way, the conclusion begins with the narrower focus of the body paragraphs and thesis and then widens out to include other ideas. Notice how this pedestal is a mirror-image of the top of the pillar. Similarly, a conclusion is like a mirror-image of an introduction.

A Sample Essay

Below is Anna's complete essay on residential schools. Read the essay and identify the following parts:

1. The introduction
2. The body Paragraphs
3. The conclusion
4. The thesis statement
5. The 3 topic sentences
6. The supporting points for each topic sentence
7. The evidence for each supporting point
8. The restated thesis in the conclusion
9. The summary of points in the conclusion

Discuss the parts with your tutor.

A Residential School Legacy²

From the late 1800s to the 1980s, more than 100,000 First Nations children in Canada attended residential schools (Llewellyn, 2008, p. 258). To attend these schools, children were taken away from their families and communities. At the schools, the children suffered from emotional, physical, sexual and spiritual abuse (Steckley & Cummins, 2001, p. 191). The worst abuses were often used as punishment for speaking their indigenous languages (Petten, 2007, p. 22). The imposition of residential schools on First Nations children has led to significant loss of indigenous languages, and this language loss has led to further cultural losses for traditional First Nations cultures in Canada.

One far-reaching result of the residential school system is the loss of indigenous languages in Canada. A major cause of this loss was the removal of children from their families and language communities. Petten (2007) reports that, having been removed from their families at an early age, children lost the opportunity to continue to develop their mother tongues (p. 22). At the schools, only English or French were used. Furthermore, children were punished and abused for using their indigenous languages. Survivors of residential schools report priests and nuns punching, slapping, verbally abusing (Knockwood, 1992, p. 99), and sticking pins in the tongues (Steckley & Cummins, 2001, p. 193) of very young children for speaking their mother tongues. In the face of this abuse, many children quickly lost the ability to speak their indigenous languages. A long-term result of residential schools is a significant reduction in the numbers of speakers of indigenous languages. According to the 2001 Canada Census, only 24% of people who identified themselves as aboriginal said they could communicate in an aboriginal language (as cited in Norris, 2007, p. 20). In addition, over the past 100 years, at least ten indigenous languages have become extinct (Norris, 2007, p. 20). Although residential schools were not the sole cause of this loss of language, they played a significant role in the decline.

² APA style requires double-spacing of both the paper and the reference list. Both are single-spaced in this handout simply to save paper. Papers and reference lists you hand in must be double-spaced.

This loss of indigenous languages caused by residential schools affected traditional family and community relationships. First, children's loss of their ability to speak their mother tongue affected their relationships within the family. As residential school survivor and researcher Isabelle Knockwood reports, it "drove a wedge between family members," even between siblings at the same school (1992, p. 100). For example, a residential school survivor, Freda Simon, tells of arriving at a residential school speaking only her mother tongue to find that her sister, who had been taken to the school two years earlier, could no longer speak their language (as cited in Knockwood, 1992, p. 100). This example shows that even at the schools, family members were separated due to language loss. When children went back to their communities, they were unable to communicate with parents and elders. They felt "suspended in limbo" (Knockwood, 1992, p. 158). As a result, the early survivors of residential schools were unable to develop bonds with older members of their communities and were unable to learn the traditional ways of their people through "songs, games, stories and ceremonies" (Blair, Rice, Wood & Janvier, 2002, p. 89). A strong traditional value in First Nations cultures was respect for elders (Couture, 1996), but with no ability for young and old to communicate, meaningful relationships between the generations became impossible.

Besides damaging family and community relationships, the loss of indigenous languages also distanced many First Nations people from their traditional belief systems. One common belief among First Nations traditional cultures is that "all of life is spiritual: everything that exists, animals, plants, people, rocks, the sun and stars have elements of sacredness" (Rajotte, 1998, p. 21). This suggests that aboriginal peoples' connection to nature is crucial to their spirituality. Aboriginal spirituality is passed on orally by elders through myths and rituals. Without knowledge of their traditional languages, young people could not learn about the spiritual beliefs of their people. This spirituality was all encompassing, affecting not only their thoughts about the spirit world but also their knowledge of places, plants and animals and traditional skills such as fishing, trapping, and tanning (Blair et al., 2002, p. 96). As Steckley and Cummins point out, without access to the elders' knowledge of nature, young people lost access to the beliefs and practices their people had developed over thousands of years (2001, p. 17). Therefore, the loss of language led to the loss of traditional spiritual beliefs and connection to nature.

In short, interpersonal relationships and traditional belief systems were both sacrificed when residential schools contributed to the decline of First Nations children's indigenous language abilities. The effects of these losses continue to this day despite attempts to reverse the damage. On June 11, 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Steven Harper offered an official apology on behalf of the Canadian government to survivors of residential schools for the treatment they had received there (Fitzpatrick & Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). Following this apology, Beverly Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada, noted that aboriginal people need more than an apology; they need a government commitment to dealing with the negative impacts of the schools in areas such as "language, culture, . . . tradition, and spirituality" (Native women's leader, 2008, p. 2). The effects of the residential schools on First Nations' language and culture will never be undone; all Canadians can do now is support efforts by aboriginal people to preserve and revitalize those linguistic and cultural traditions that have not been lost.

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Conclusion

This handout outlines the basic format of an academic essay. The Learning Centre has many other handouts relating to writing academic papers. To continue to learn more about essays, you may want to ask a tutor to show you our other Writing handouts. Also, your instructor may have different requirements, so be sure to read assignment instructions carefully and ask your instructor if you need more clarification.