

Queen's Writing Centre



- *Workshops*
- *Credit courses*
- *One-on-one writing tutorials*

- *Essay writing*
- *Lab report writing*
- *Thesis writing*
- *Grammar*
- *General writing tips*

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HOW TO WRITE YOUR FIRST UNIVERSITY ESSAY

Topics covered

- Communicating through writing
- Profs' and markers' expectations
- Thesis statements
- Outlining
- Paragraphs
- Editing

Q: WHAT IS THE POINT OF WRITING AN ESSAY?

A: To communicate something to your reader that *you* think is significant in some way

The transition from high school to university means that

- you become a more independent learner
- you discover and develop your own ideas
- you convey your ideas to your reader in your own voice

ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:

“By the time my reader has read my essay, I want him or her to have understood ... **what?**”

WHAT SHOULD YOUR ESSAY DEMONSTRATE?

- Evidence of critical thinking.
- Proof that you understand the material.
- Demonstration of your ability to use or apply the material in ways that go beyond what you have read or heard.
- An argument that is developed and sustained throughout the paper.

HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE YOUR POINT TO YOUR READER EFFECTIVELY?

- Understand what you are being asked to do.
- Understand the material you are writing about.
- Understand what it is that you want to say (what is your point?).
- Understand the conventions of your discipline (thesis in intro paragraph, IMRAD, MLA style, APA style, etc.).

TERMS FREQUENTLY USED IN WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

<i>If the assignment requires you to...</i>	<i>... your essay or project should...</i>
ANALYZE (OUTLINE/EXPLAIN)	separate the matter at hand into key parts, essential elements; break things down, consider the details; identify causes/key factors or features/ possible results.
COMPARE	note similarities and differences between two or more things.
CONTRAST	note differences, dissimilarities, tensions between two or more things.
EXAMINE (EXPLORE/ INVESTIGATE)	take a diagnostic approach; enquire or look into closely, perhaps to uncover a hidden motive, cause, theme etc.; seek out core issues, suggest possible interpretations/solutions.
ARGUE	take a position on a given subject and support that approach; give reasons for <i>or</i> against something.
DEBATE	present opposing viewpoints on a given subject, deliberate; give reasons for <i>and</i> against something.
EVALUATE (JUDGE/CRITICIZE/ ASSESS)	determine the value or significance of something.
DESCRIBE	depict, present or delineate in words; place more emphasis on <i>how</i> something occurs than on <i>why</i> it does.
DEFINE	give the meaning of something; present its nature or essential qualities.
TRACE	follow the course, development, history of something.
REVIEW	summarize the key aspects of the material at hand.
DOCUMENT	like "TRACE," follow the development, course or history of something, but emphasize the use of written sources, references and citations in supporting your approach; prove using written support material, concrete sources and evidence.
DISCUSS	comment on, talk over, write about the topic at hand using whatever approach seems appropriate (i.e., any of the approaches listed in this chart).

**MEETING YOUR
READER'S EXPECTATIONS,
or,
What Profs Want**

The following slides are actual directions or statements made by Queen's professors about their expectations regarding essays.

1. "Your paper should be double-spaced, between 5 and 6 pages in length, 12-point Times New Roman font, with normal margins."

This is a typical direction from a professor, intended to keep your paper within the word limits. Spacing and margins make it easier for your marker to tell if you're under or over. Be sure to number every page of your essay (save for the title page) and place your name and student number on every page, as well.

2. “I mark down for errors in punctuation, sentence structure, and proof-reading. I penalize more for recurring errors, and if they recur more than twice, generally I fail the paper.”

Be aware that markers often keep copies of their comments on your papers on file. Implement the advice given by markers, as they will be tracking your progress (or lack thereof).

3. “ Never use first person in an academic essay.”

Some say “never.” Other profs may tell you that they’re happy for you to use first person. However, it’s obvious that a statement such as “The Gaels will prevail” is stronger than “I think the Gaels will prevail.”

4. “Do not use contractions in an academic essay.”

This is standard advice. Academic writing is formal writing, and contractions (“I’m,” “you’ve,” etc.) are considered informal. However, avoid falling into the opposite trap of writing pretentiously.

5. “Avoid the passive voice.”

Your grammar-check program will tell you the same thing.

The passive voice (e.g., “Imagery of the sea is used in the poem”) is vaguer (who wrote the poem?), wordier, and weaker than the active voice.

However, some scientific writing may use the passive voice (e.g., “The liquid was added to the powder, resulting in a loud bang.”).

You can learn more about appropriate writing for the sciences at the Writing Centre’s workshop on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 7:00-8:00 p.m., Ellis Auditorium.

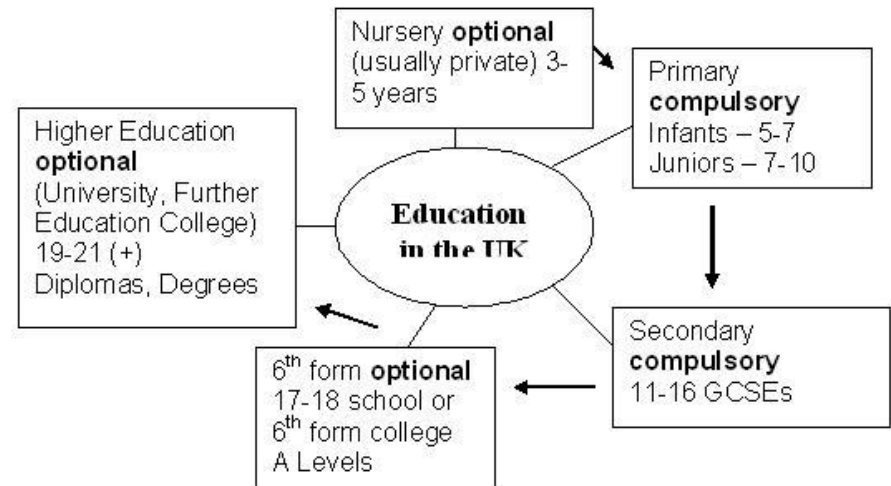
6. “Provide references for all quotations and ideas that are not your own. Failure to acknowledge intellectual property constitutes plagiarism.”

Plagiarism (“academic integrity”) charges are scary territory. If you make use of someone else’s words or thoughts, reference properly.

The Writing Centre will be offering a workshop on how to use secondary sources and avoid plagiarism on Oct. 27, 1:00-2:00 p.m., Stauffer Library Rm 121.

GETTING STARTED: HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS FOR YOUR ESSAY

- Spend time free-writing.
- Create a mind-map.
- Develop an outline.



A SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTION

“In recent years, student street parties have become synonymous with the student presence at Queen’s. The collateral damage and increasing notoriety associated with such parties have become an issue for the Queen’s student body, the University administration, the Kingston community, and the local Police Department.”

Discuss student street parties and their implications for one of these groups. Focus on the aspect of the issue you find most significant and develop an argument. Support your position with evidence from at least three sources.

THE THESIS STATEMENT

Q: Does every essay have a thesis?

A: Yes. And, while **some** essays you may write will not require an explicit and identifiable thesis statement, the **majority** of university essays do.

Your thesis is the central insight or proposition or explication that captures what you consider to be the most important results of your thinking.

It answers the question or fulfills the assignment set by the instructor.

It presents the argument that seems most significant and most interesting **to you**, supported by solid evidence and reasoning.

Your thesis is the BACKBONE of your essay. It is your POINT.

YOUR THESIS STATEMENT: **NOT**

NOT a description: *In this essay, I will discuss the effects of street parties on the student body. I will examine the issues of Queen's reputation and student safety as well as consider the long-term implications.*

NOT self-evident: *Street parties at Queen's are divisive.*

NOT personal opinion that cannot be argued against: *Street parties are great for students and Kingston residents should just chill.*

NOT a question: *Are the effects of street parties significant enough to warrant action?*

NOT a broad generalization: *The younger generation is always open to new experiences while the older is more interested in control and order.*

NOT a statement of fact: *Student street parties have become an issue for the Kingston community that has implications for residents, both tax-payers and renters.*

A THESIS STATEMENT SHOULD ANSWER: WHAT/HOW/WHY?

WHAT?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•The matter at hand•The topic or incident to be examined
HOW?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•The means by which the topic will be examined•Example, key images, etc. (i.e., the major discussion points of your essay)
WHY?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interpretation of the events, topic, etc.•Significance of examining the topic from the angle you have chosen•Conclusions to be drawn (i.e., the “SO WHAT?” of your argument)

WRITING AN EXPLICIT THESIS STATEMENT

A SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENT:

What: Street parties → effects on community → immediate community of student renters and tax-paying residents.

How: Property damage, noise pollution, larger sense of community safety and comfort.

Why: Parties have an unacceptable negative effect on many residents in the immediate area.

The Simple Statement of Position

Student street parties have an unacceptable negative effect on tax-paying residents and student renters in the immediate area.

The Roadmap Thesis Statement

Student street parties have an unacceptable negative effect on many residents of the immediate area, including damage to property, significant noise pollution, and the overall loss of a sense of community safety.

The Complex Thesis Statement

While student street parties encourage a sense of tradition, spirit, and continuity for many Queen's students and alumni, the damage to property, significant noise pollution, and loss of a sense of community safety has an unacceptable negative effect on the residents of the immediate area.

YOUR INTRODUCTION

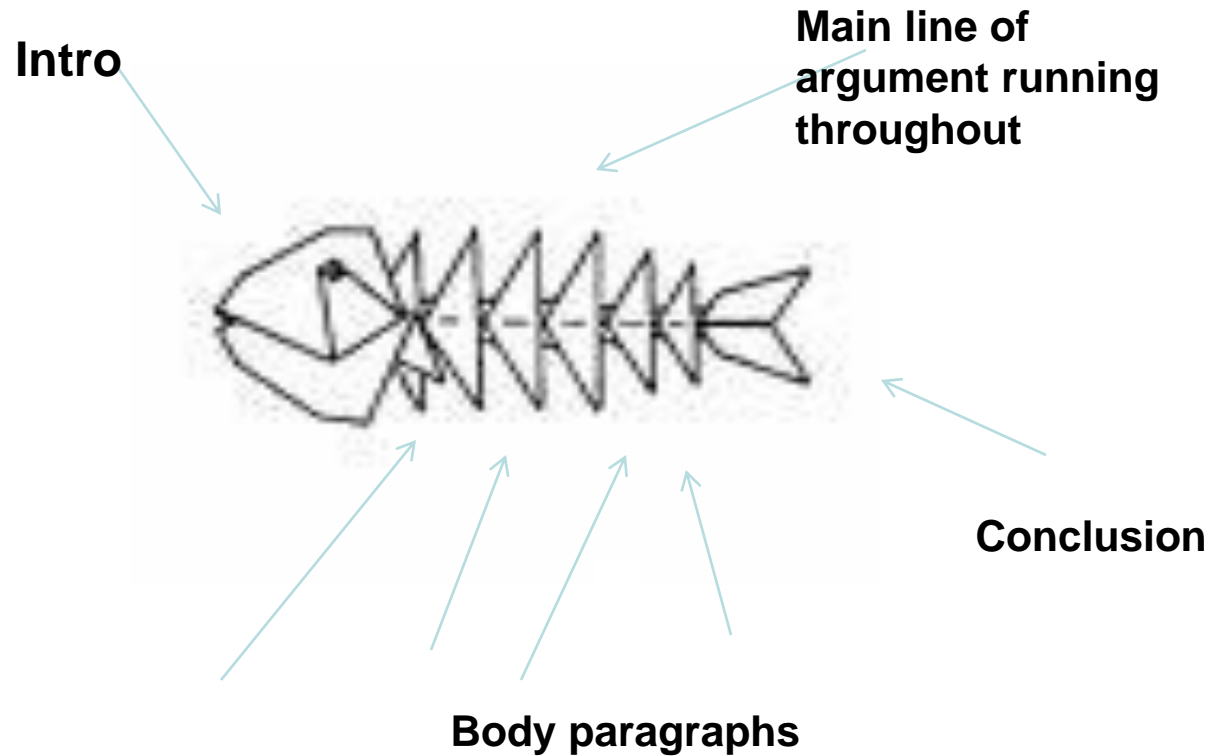
Q: Where should your thesis appear in your essay?

A: It should appear in your introduction – the part of the essay that establishes its focus and parameters as well as the argument you intend to make.

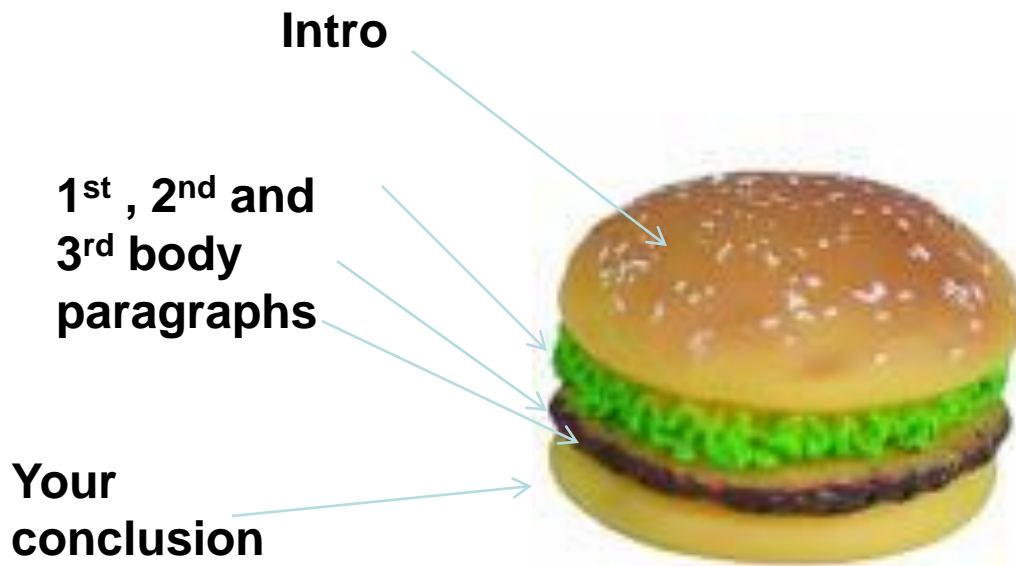
- Usually a single paragraph.
- Includes some opening remarks directly related to the issue your are writing on (not too general – avoid “Since the dawn of time” openings).
- Introduces your theory/approach (if you’re using one).
- Provides any other context that is relevant/necessary for the reader to make sense of the issue and the thesis statement (titles, dates, names).
- Culminates with your thesis statement – the point you intend to make about the issue (generally comes at the end of the paragraph).

**STRUCTURING
YOUR ESSAY:
Some classic models**

THE FISH



THE HAMBURGER (5-body-paragraph model)



Same elements as the Fish, different imagery. It's the old high-school favourite, but generally it's too simple for most topics and tasks at a university level.

THE HAMBURGER

(a more complex model)



Infinitely expandable, depending on your task and word limit.

THE HAMBURGER

(a really complex model)



Can quickly get out of control.

HONOURS or MASTER'S THESIS



Good luck!

WHY ORGANIZE YOUR PAPER?

- Essays written at university are usually longer and more complex than those written in high school.
- The limited format of three body paragraphs may not suit your writing task.
- A well-organized essay shows the development of your argument and is easy to read.

THE OUTLINE

- Begins with a thesis statement.
- Is organized in sections, paragraphs, and points.
- Contains sentences that express each main point in support of the thesis.
- Indicates where examples or other evidence will be used.

A SAMPLE OUTLINE

Thesis statement: While street parties encourage a sense of tradition, spirit, and continuity for many Queen's students, the damage to property, noise pollution, and loss of a sense of community safety have an unacceptable negative effect on residents of both the immediate area and the larger community.

Section I. Many students, former and current, argue that street parties are an important part of the Queen's experience and a financial windfall for the city.

Paragraph A – contributes to tradition, continuity, and spirit

Paragraph B – indirectly leads to alumni contributions

1. quotations from alumni at this year's party
2. stats re: alumni contributions

Paragraph C – generates money for Kingston

Section II. However, parties are actually more detrimental than positive, particularly for residents of the area.

Paragraph A – cause serious amount of noise pollution

Paragraph B – result in mild through extensive property damage

Paragraph C – lead to erosion of neighbourhood sense of safety and community

Section III. Finally, there are negative implications for the larger Kingston community as well.

Paragraph A – financial burden due to policing costs, clean-up, etc.

Paragraph B – further strain on town-gown relations

WRITING PARAGRAPHS

Applying a **what/how/why** strategy to paragraph structure may help you stay focused.

What? (the Point)	The main idea to be discussed (best introduced in a topic sentence, the introductory sentence to your paragraph)	1 to 2 sentences
How? (the Proof)	The evidence used to substantiate the point or back up the argument: examples, appropriate reference material, quotations, etc.	2 to 4 sentences
Why? (the Comment)	Commentary outlining the significance of the preceding material. Your explanation of how and why these ideas fit together: relationships, contrasts, conclusions, etc.	2 to 4 sentences

WHY TRANSITIONS ARE IMPORTANT

- Transitional words or phrases help your reader to understand how one paragraph, idea, or sentence relates to the next.
- Transitions can signal to your reader a shift to a new idea, an opposing point, or an additional example.

NOTE:

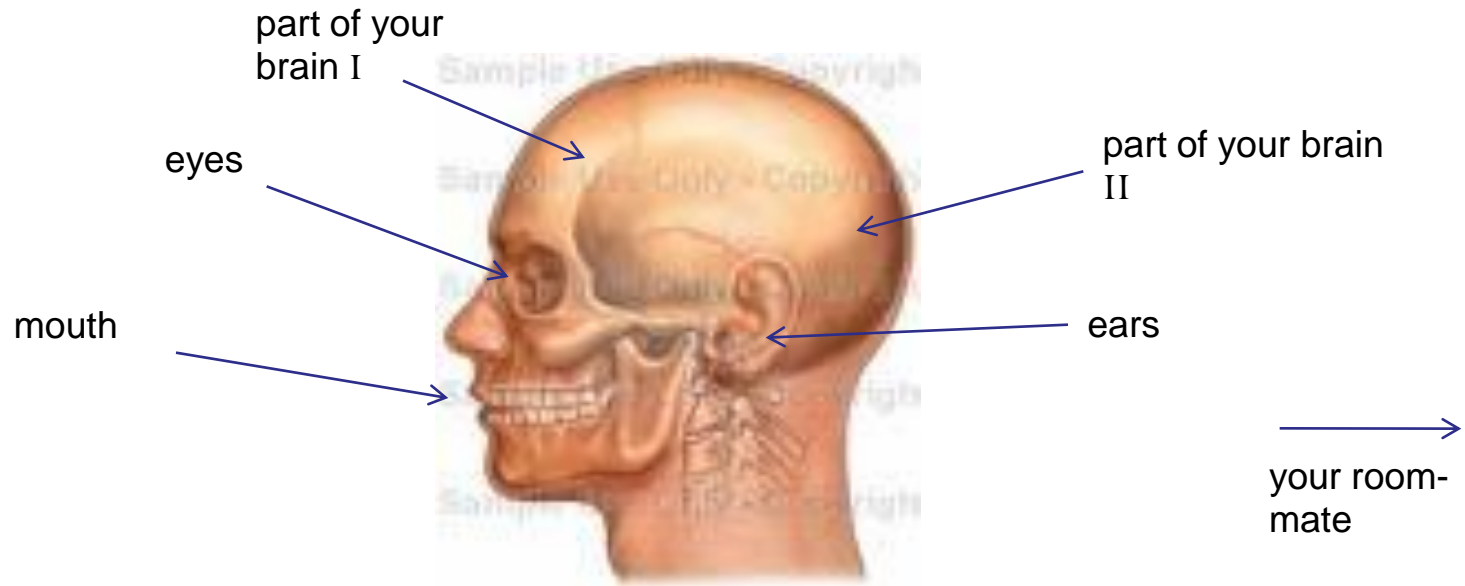
Transitions between paragraphs should occur at the beginning of a new paragraph rather than at the end of the previous paragraph.

COMING TO CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH(S) SHOULD ...

- Provide a brief summary of your essay's thesis and main points – not a restatement of your introduction.
- Suggest the wider implications of your discussion.
- Avoid introducing a contradiction.
- NOT introduce any new material.

MAKE USE OF ALL YOUR EDITORS



Never hand in a paper without first printing out a final draft and reading it over, pen in hand. The part of your brain that reads an electronic screen is different from the part you use when you're reading hard copy. These two areas of your brain will notice different problems in your essay.

By reading your paper aloud, you bring into play two further “editors” in your brain – your ears and your mouth.

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Queen's Learning Commons

Main Floor, Stauffer Library

Upcoming Writing Centre Workshops

Writing Effective Thesis Statements:

Sept. 29, 11:00-12:00 p.m. Stauffer Library Rm 121

Effective Writing for First Year Science Students:

Oct. 4, 7:00-8:00 p.m., Ellis Auditorium

How to Write Your 2nd (or 3rd University Essay):

Oct. 20, 2:00-3:30 p.m., Stauffer Library Rm 121 AND

Oct. 24, 7:00-8:30 p.m., Stauffer Library Rm 121

How to Use Sources Effectively (and Avoid Plagiarism):

Oct. 27, 1:00-2:00 p.m., Stauffer Library Rm 121