



# Organization: Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay

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The five paragraph essay model doesn't tell you much about the innards of a paper. There is the introduction/thesis, there are three paragraphs of evidence supporting the thesis, and there is a conclusion to rehearse the whole argument. To wit:

Capital punishment is terrible because of its irreversibility, its impracticality, and its immorality.

- It's irreversible and innocent people die
- It's impractical and expensive
- It promotes an immoral mentality of revenge.

In conclusion, the death penalty is an irreversible and impractical punishment that spreads the destructive values of revenge. Thank you for your time; I will have my "B" now.

This model *has* its virtues: it's *good* for a thesis to forecast a clear and simple structure that's easy for your reader to follow.

But if you rely only on the five paragraph model to organize a longer research paper, you will run into trouble. After all, your research paper is likely to have six, eight, or even more support paragraphs. Here, then, are some tips for organizing a longer paper without abandoning the simplicity of the five paragraph theme.

**1. Beginnings:** information you need to present *before* you get to your evidence paragraphs.

- **Statement of Fact.** Although your introduction will have briefly introduced the subject matter of the essay—the scenario, events, or texts your essay will analyze—*sometimes* “what happened” demands further exposition before you present your evidence. In an essay using Truman's speeches and letters to investigate the decision to drop the atomic bomb, for example, some context for that decision might be in order.

*Before analyzing Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb, it's important to grasp the strategic situation of the war with Japan in 1945.*

- **Definitions/"Literature Review"** If your argument depends on specialized terms (“jargon”) you've discovered in secondary sources, you may need to explain these terms before your analysis of the evidence can make sense. Consider this thesis statement:

*The biographies of enslaved women show that they resisted the masters' edicts by using ideas of feminine theology to subvert the roles assigned to their bodies by the white gaze.*

This student took the terms “white gaze” and “feminine theology” from two scholars named earlier in her introduction. Because the ideas are unfamiliar, however, she



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quickly explained them in a “lit review” before her first evidence paragraph. In a 2000-word paper, a “background” section should be shorter than a page.

**2. Middles: Chunking and Sequencing** As with the five paragraph essay, the main body of your research paper should consist of evidence paragraphs. To organize these proofs, “chunk” them into a few overarching themes. Sequence these chunks so your argument builds toward its strongest point. Here’s how one might “chunk” and re-order our imaginary capital punishment paper:

**A. The Hangman’s Inefficiency** (easiest proof goes first)

Body Par. #1: Statistics on various costs of death penalty.

**B. The Death of Innocents** (stronger point—dead innocents!)

Body Par #2: Two “Innocence Project” examples

Body Par #3: Impact on families

**C. The Mentality of Revenge.** (broader social impact—most important!)

Body Par #4: Present idea of “retributive justice”

Body Par #5: “Vengeance” idea in DA’s press releases

Body Par #6: Evidence for victim as “scapegoat”

**3. Endings: Ye Olde Aces in the Hole.** Near the end of your paper, adding a reflection or objection paragraph is a great way to re-start a stalled argument.

- **Objection Paragraphs.** Imagine you’re a prosecutor making a final argument. What is the defense going to say? Start a paragraph by anticipating what a skeptic would object. Present the objection fairly. Then, either refute it or qualify your case.

*Certainly, those who justify the bombing of Hiroshima would object to [what I just said]. They would argue \_\_\_\_\_ . These objections have some merit: it’s true that \_\_\_\_\_ . Still, I maintain \_\_\_\_\_ .*

- **Reflecting Turns:** Think of a reflecting paragraph as a *second introduction*—a place where you summarize the story so far, pose a new problem, and lay out how the rest of your paper will address that problem.

*Thus far I’ve argued \_\_\_\_\_ . All of this might seem to imply \_\_\_\_\_ . What I’m really saying, though, is \_\_\_\_\_ .*

**4. Conclusions:** 1. Concisely rehearse the elements of your argument with special emphasis on the logical connections between them. 2. Gesture toward the broader implications of your argument—why this is a big deal.