

One Page Concept Review: Structuring Essays

What is it?

Essay structure is obviously how your argument develops. What you want in an essay is threefold: 1) you want it to be easy for the reader to follow, 2) you want it to actually develop into something, and 3) you want that structure to develop organically.

Why should I care?

In many ways, how you structure your argument is as important as what you argue. In terms of the AP test, a good structure is one key to an upper half essay, and no structure is a guarantee of a lower half essay. Also, the sort of essay structures that you were taught in earlier grades (three reasons or three examples) are almost never going to earn high marks on either the AP test or in a university setting.

How do I do it?

- **Understand what your argument is.** This cannot be emphasized enough. If you do not know where you are going with something, it will only be blind luck if you end up with something worth reading. This means you have to plan before you start writing.
- **Outline your argument.** I do not mean a formal parallel outline (I doubt you've been taught to do this anyway), but a rough sketch of where you're going.
- **In a timed writing setting, shoot for four paragraph essays.** They're easy to structure, and it allows you to go deeper (not wider) into your argument. More importantly, unless you write and think very quickly, you are much less likely to run out of time than if try for something more ambitious (each essay needs to be completed in about 40 minutes).
- **Have clear topic sentences for your body paragraphs.** If your first or second sentence of a body paragraph does not express an opinion or an interpretive statement, you are screwing up. Even if you're writing a paragraph dedicated to examining a single instance of something, your first sentence should be some form of this statement: "X is a good/representative example of Y."
- **Body paragraphs do not have to be the same length.** If you're proving something that's easy to establish or is fairly obvious anyway, do not belabor the point.
- **Save big picture analysis for the conclusion.** Unless you want your conclusion to be a rote rewording of the introduction and thesis (yawn...), you've got to do a little planning so that you know ahead of time what you're saving for the end. *Write with the end point in mind...*
- **Have a strategy to address "essay-drift" in timed writings.** It happens to all of us. There are two good patch ups: 1) short transition paragraphs between body paragraphs; these should not be evidence focused, and 2) using the conclusion to address how you were really on-topic all along.
- **Have a handful of essay structures memorized to save time.** These are the four most versatile essay structures for the AP test:

First Part/Second Part (for Q1 or Q2 essays) or Before/After (for Q3 essays)

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Up until X moment, Y is true (Y=an interpretation, not an event)
- III. After X moment, Z is true (Z=an interpretation, not an event)
- IV. Change shows something important in the text (from thesis)

Contrast

- I. Intro and thesis

- II. Concept X
- III. Contrasts with Concept Y
- IV. Difference/Preference for X or Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)

Cause/Effect

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. X is true (in terms of characterization, apparent meaning, literary strategy)
- III. X causes Y (in terms of characterization, apparent meaning, literary strategy)
- IV. Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)

Idea/Qualification, Idea/Seeming Contradiction, or Expectation/Reality (These are all just variants of the same basic structure.)

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Idea/Expectation/Appearance
- III. Idea/Expectation/Appearance is qualified/contradicted/reversed
- IV. The gap between the two shows something important in the text (from thesis)

How do students screw this up?

Poor Planning

- **Do not underplan.** Just starting to write without knowing where you're going to end up is a loser's strategy. Yes, time is short, but a little thought beforehand saves a lot of time on the back end.
- **Do not overplan.** *Extensive* annotations (as opposed to a *focused* annotation about what you're going to address), listing out every piece of evidence (you don't have to know *everything* you're going to write about; trust yourself enough to let the argument unfold), rough drafts (never, never, never a good idea), or detailed outlines (as opposed to a working sketch) almost guarantees you'll run out of time.
- Figure out what you're going to do, then ask yourself, "**What is the most logical way to divide this idea into two parts?**" These become your two body paragraphs.
- **Do not rephrase the prompt for your thesis.** The prompt is always going to be too wide. You need to dig deeper than this if you want a higher score.

Taking the Easy Way Out

- **Avoid the easiest essay to write.** Do not use a Reason 1/Reason 2 or Example 1/ Example 2 structure unless something is going wrong. These essays are almost always dull and superficial (reading like two underdeveloped mini-essays instead of an integrated argument). The two obvious exceptions to this general rule are when you're running out of time, or if you don't really know what you're talking about (both of which preclude a more thoughtful approach).
- **Look for differences, not similarities.** Contrasts are almost always more fruitful than comparisons in terms of writing something that stands out from the crowd. Yes, I understand comparisons are easier to generate, but you'll end up writing the same essay as hundreds of other students-- a good portion of whom will do it better than you.

Trying to Do Too Much

- **Go deep, not wide.** This is especially true of Q3 essays. You are under no obligation to address everything important; strive instead to address one thing really well. In Q3 essays, focus on a single sub-plot, character, character and foil (an easy contrast essay), or a single instance of an idea.
- This means your first thought after reading a prompt should be, "**How am I going to narrow this?**" This is a forty minute essay, not a book length study.