

## “Kinds” of Essay: Getting Past 5-Paragraph Structure in Expository Writing

**Your Goal:** paragraphs that follow from one another based on an underlying logic, rather than the reductive and limiting 5-paragraph sandwich.

**What Follows:** a list of possible ways to conceive an essay strategy whose paragraphs achieve this goal.

**Compare & contrast:** Simple, yes, but this structure can be *deceptively* simple. (No, this is not advice to deceive your reader...) Predictably alternating paragraphs—or, instead, potentially imbalanced sets of paragraphs. A bland resolution—or a strongly committed resolution, even one that challenges the initial terms of comparison. (This structure can be embedded inside a larger structure...)

**\*Detail/close reading-driven:** An essay that is focused around a single detail, or a small set of such details (a single word and related words; a particular syntactic structure; a particular image/image group; a figure/images or set of related figures; a particular interpretive problem in a given text). Such an essay offers the opportunity to move from micro to macro—to show how the local detail in question allows one to move to a larger level of analysis (e.g., the text / the author’s body of work) with a renewed understanding. (The opposite of this essay would be the “big-picture” essay, one that *begins* with a small moment and then builds up to the level of world-historical significance—a tough structure for beginning writers, but one that it’s worth learning to recognize and evaluate skeptically.)

**\*Theme/theory-driven:** An essay that uses a particular theme or theoretical perspective as a lens through which to view the question, and consistently develops that angle throughout. “Writing as an expert in feminist theory” is one thing; “writing as a woman” is another—but there is a real and meaningful connection between the two strategies! In a sense, this is a *stance*-driven essay...

**\*Problem-driven:** A subcategory of the previous strategy. Here the writer locates and identifies an existing problem or debate, a problem given a context by a particular body of knowledge, and seeks to intervene. (Again, you do not need to write this one as an “expert”; again, the question of stance will be critical...)

**Narrative/chronological/historical:** An essay that “tells a story,” of course, but how will you give the story analytical force? Ideally, the story would by its very existence be argumentative—whether by being opposed to some other story, or by being opposed to some non-narrative way of understanding what’s at stake. At other times, the argumentative implications of your story may need to be more explicitly developed. **\*\***(Warning: when you write an essay that follows the narrative of a text, you are likely to find that you have fallen into summarizing other arguments, rather than citing them to support YOUR argument strategy; the organization of your argument strategy should not mimic the organizational strategy of another text! **\*\*** It is also possible to compose strategically placed “historical background” or “definition” paragraphs that serve the purpose of proving necessary history or background or definitions or interlocutor positions prior to proceeding with YOUR argument. This type of paragraph typically occurs right after the introduction.

**\*Bait and switch:** A two-part, unbalanced structure. A strategic “set-up.” The writer sets up a hypothetical, while knowing all along that the assumption or argument in question is limited—and then suddenly moves, in the second part of the essay, to convincingly demolish the initial position by replacing it with her real claim.

**\*Contrarian:** An essay that, *without ranting and raving, or being perverse for the sake of perversity*, challenges the assumptions of the given framework, the materials available, the assigned question, the prevailing viewpoint. Such an essay, when effective, will locate an underlying assumption shared by an “agreed-upon” context, and challenge that assumption, even if only in a hypothetical way: “But what if X *wasn’t* the case?” A contrarian stance doesn’t have to be *overtly* contrarian: it can be subtle (consider, for example, challenging a binary opposition offered by a source text, or redefining a Keyterm, thereby implicitly exposing a source’s definition as inadequate). (To take a contrarian stance on an issue is one thing; to *identify* oneself as contrarian is far more problematic.)

These are not the only possible organization models; you may have come up with one of your own (you may even have a label for it!) If so, ask me about it...