

# How to Teach Essay-Writing

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Teaching essay-writing is a challenge for many teachers. I'd like to share a method I've used successfully with middle school and high school students both in the classroom and as a private writing tutor to homeschoolers. The method relies on recognizing how a well-structured paragraph can be expanded into longer and longer essay forms.

## The Paragraph Form

Let's start with a sample paragraph.

Everyone knows that exercise keeps our bodies healthy, but did you know that playing sports can also help your mental health? When we play a sport, our bodies release chemicals into the bloodstream that lift our mood. Playing sports with others helps build strong friendships that support our mental health. Helping our team win a game or improving our ability in our sport also increases our self-esteem. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" isn't just a saying; it's a reality when we enjoy playing sports.

Next, let's break the paragraph down into its component sentences.

- (1) Everyone knows that exercise keeps our bodies healthy, but did you know that playing sports can also help your mental health?
- (2) When we play a sport, our bodies release chemicals into the bloodstream that lift our mood.
- (3) Playing sports with others helps build strong friendships that support our mental health.
- (4) Helping our team win a game or improving our ability in our sport also increases our self-esteem.
- (5) "A healthy mind in a healthy body" isn't just a saying; it's a reality when we enjoy playing sports.

The first sentence is the **topic sentence**; it states the writer's **thesis** or what the paragraph is about. The three sentences in the middle of the paragraph provide pieces of **evidence** that supports the topic sentence. The last sentence **concludes** the sentence by restating the thesis.

## Three-Paragraph Essay

We can expand a simple, five-sentence paragraph into a three-paragraph essay. The first and last sentences become the topic sentences of the introduction (1st paragraph) and the conclusion (last paragraph). The middle three sentences become the body, or middle paragraph, of the essay. In outline form, the essay will look like this:

- I. Introduction (First Paragraph)
  - A. Sentence #1 from our basic paragraph (Thesis Statement)
  - B. Statement listing the general topics we'll address in the body of our essay
  - C. Transition Sentence
- II. Body (Second Paragraph)
  - A. Topic Sentence
  - B. Sentence #2 from basic paragraph
  - C. Sentence #3 from basic paragraph
  - D. Sentence #4 from basic paragraph
  - E. Transition Sentence
- III. Conclusion (Third Paragraph)
  - A. Topic Sentence
  - B. Transition Sentence
  - C. Last Sentence from Basic Paragraph (Restatement of Thesis)

Here's an example of how we might write the expanded, three-paragraph essay. The sentences in bold are the ones from our basic paragraph. The underlined words have been added to help the reader follow our argument and to make the essay flow better by providing variation in our sentences.

**Everyone knows that exercise keeps our bodies healthy, but did you know that playing sports can also help your mental health?** Playing sports benefits your body, your relationships, and your self-esteem. Sports make us healthier and happier.

Physical exercise like playing a sport helps our minds in several ways. First, **when we play a sport, our bodies release chemicals into the bloodstream that lift our mood.** Playing sports with others also helps build strong friendships that support our mental health. In addition, **helping our team win a game or improving our ability in our sport also increases our self-esteem.** Something as simple as a game of soccer with friends can make us feel better mentally as well as physically.

When we play sports, our minds and bodies work together so we experience greater health and well-being. It's to our benefit to take advantage of this easy

way to feel happier. “A healthy mind in a healthy body” isn’t just a saying; it’s a reality when we enjoy playing sports.

## Five-Paragraph Essay

The five-paragraph essay is just a further expansion of our basic five-sentence paragraph. Each sentence of the original paragraph becomes the topic sentence of a complete paragraph in our five-paragraph essay. These paragraphs are then rounded out with further supporting information. We conclude each paragraph with a sentence that provides a transition to the next paragraph or, in the last paragraph, restates the thesis. As in the three-paragraph essay, we add words or phrases to help the reader follow our argument.

The first paragraph in our three-paragraph essay can be used again for our five-paragraph essay.

**Everyone knows that exercise keeps our bodies healthy, but did you know that playing sports can also help your mental health?** When you play sports, your body, your relationships, and your self-esteem all benefit. These aspects of sports make us happier and healthier.

Now we take each of the three middle sentences from our basic paragraph, and expand them into three complete paragraphs to form the body of our new essay.

**First, when we play a sport, our bodies release chemicals into the bloodstream that lift our mood.** These chemicals, called endorphins, help our bodies cope with stress by blocking pain and by giving us a boost of energy. Endorphins are responsible for the “runner’s high” that some people experience. It’s no wonder that people use exercise to counteract stress and to feel happier.

**Playing sports with others also helps build strong friendships that support our mental health.** We all know that having close friends makes it easier to face life’s challenges. Sharing experiences with others, like working together as a team to win a game, brings us closer to people. When we know others well, we can trust them to listen to our problems and offer helpful suggestions. Knowing that someone cares about us makes us feel better when life gets hard. Our teammates can be real allies in life’s struggles, just as they are on the field.

**In addition, helping our team win a game or improving our ability in our sport also increases our self-esteem.** Doesn’t it feel great to know that your team pulled together to win the championship? If we don’t play a team sport, making improvements in our athletic ability shows us that we can succeed if we put our

mind to it. Even if we don't win, we can feel proud knowing that we did our best. These good feelings about ourselves last long after the game is over.

The kind of information we use to expand the body of the essay will depend on the type of essay we're writing. In a literary analysis we'll use examples and quotations from the text to support our argument. In a persuasive essay about a political issue, we might use statistics or quotations from elected representatives. In an essay on a more personal topic, we'll draw examples from our own life experiences and observations. Whatever support we use should fit the purpose of the essay.

(Can you identify the role of each sentence in the paragraph you just read? Which one is the topic sentence? Which are the supporting details that form the body? Which is the conclusion? Can you expand the paragraph into a three- or five-paragraph essay?)

Once we've written the body of our essay, we need to wrap it up with a strong conclusion. We can use the same concluding paragraph we did for the three-paragraph essay, or we can add a sentence or two to make it stronger. In the concluding paragraph below, I've added a sentence recapping the topics I've discussed in the body. This kind of review helps the reader remember the argument and makes the structure of the essay clearer.

When we play sports, our minds and bodies work together so we experience greater health and well-being. Whether it's because of endorphins, good friends, or hard work, sports can make us feel better. It's to our benefit to take advantage of this easy way to feel happier. **"A healthy mind in a healthy body" isn't just a saying; it's a reality when we enjoy playing sports.**

I hope these examples have taken some of the intimidation factor out of teaching the essay. It's really not difficult once you understand how all the parts fit together. In fact, longer essays—like the five- to ten-page papers typically assigned in college classes—are just a further expansion of the format, with more paragraphs in the body to accommodate more evidence and examples.

The key point to convey to your students is that the five-paragraph essay has a standard format that presents information in a consistent and logical way that is easy for readers to understand. Since the purpose of expository writing is to explain things, anything that helps make one's ideas clearer and easier to grasp is worth mastering.