Body Paragraphs

Inquire: Proving an Argument

Overview
Think about a time you were able to sway the opinion of someone you respect. How did you convince them to agree with you? Chances are, you may have needed to show evidence that supported what you were saying. Perhaps you needed to go through your argument point by point with that person, explaining each point and why it was true. In an essay, this is the job of your body paragraphs. In each body paragraph, you'll present a point that relates to your thesis, support that point with evidence you’ve found in your research, and then make a conclusion based on that evidence that proves your point. With enough of these, you’ll be able to show your reader that your thesis is well thought out and supported by other sources.

Big Question: How do I use research to support my argument?

Watch: The Legs of Your Essay
If your essay were a stool, then the body paragraphs would be the legs. The stronger the legs, the stronger the stool. In the same way, the stronger your body paragraphs are, the stronger the whole essay will be. So, how do you write a strong body paragraph?

First of all, before you start writing body paragraphs - or even think about writing body paragraphs - you’ll want to have a strong, well-developed thesis statement. If the essay lacks a cogent thesis statement, it will be difficult to identify the sub-topics you want to discuss in those body paragraphs, and find the compelling supporting evidence you want to include.

Secondly, you will want at least three well-researched sources that effectively support your thesis. Going back to our analogy, if the body paragraphs are the legs of your essay, these sources are the wood from which you’ll carve out the legs. They need to come from sources that are reputable and have merit in the fields that they represent, such as peer-reviewed journals.

Why three sources? Think about that stool again. If it only had two legs, it wouldn’t be very sturdy. Similarly, when supporting a thesis, you want a good variety of information showing that your argument is well founded. If your thesis only has one source supporting it, it can seem like your argument is merely repeating the opinions of another writer, or is poorly researched, which is never good. And while it’s not impossible to write an effective essay with only two sources, it’s very difficult to strongly support an original argument without your evidence seeming thin.
Once you have your thesis developed and your sources researched, you’re ready to begin writing your body paragraphs. Remember that these paragraphs will form the bulk of your essay. Have a clear idea in mind of the sub-topics you will be discussing, and how your sources will relate to those sub-topics.

As you move forward, think about the evidence you’ve used to support arguments in the past. How did you determine what was a reliable source? What were some different sources you drew upon to defend your opinion? What kind of sources did you know to avoid?

Read: The Basic Body Paragraph

Overview: An Essay in Miniature

Body paragraphs will make up the majority of your essay, so they are just as important as your thesis statement when it comes to making a convincing argument. The main function of a body paragraph is to present evidence that supports your thesis. Using quotes or data from primary and secondary sources as a basis for argument, you describe these sources and analyze how they help prove your argument. Essentially, a body paragraph is like a miniature essay. In each paragraph, you present a sub-topic related to your thesis, support that topic with evidence, and finally, make a conclusion based on that evidence. While this sounds like a lot of work for one paragraph, knowing how to craft each paragraph will make your task easier and your arguments more compelling. As with your introductory paragraph, a good place to start is to understand what each sentence in a basic body paragraph is meant to do, and then adjust your writing to fit your essay.

Sub-Topics

Before you get started on your body paragraphs, you’ll want to make sure you have identified your sub-topics and considered what sources related to those sub-topics you want to use. When deciding on your sub-topics, think about your thesis statement. What are some points that your argument must prove so that your thesis can withstand a counter-argument? Proving these points will be the job of your body paragraphs. These points naturally direct what sub-topics each body paragraph covers.

Try to find at least three sub-topics to discuss, each one supported by a source, as you’ll want a good variety of information showing that your argument is well founded. If your thesis only has one source supporting it, it can seem as if your argument is merely repeating the opinions of another writer, or is poorly researched. And while it’s not impossible to write an effective essay with only two sources, it’s very difficult to strongly support an original argument without your evidence seeming thin. If you cannot find information in your research to support a point, you may try rethinking your sub-topic, or presenting a different one to support your thesis.

The Five Sentence Body Paragraph

While this is a good basic model for writing a body paragraph, as you become more comfortable with essay writing, you may find that a different way of approaching these paragraphs works better for you. It may be that you use multiple paragraphs to cover a single sub-topic, which is perfectly fine so long as your discussion of the topic warrants that level of analysis. Just remember that the main idea here is to present a sub-topic, support it with quotes or data, analyze this data, and then tie it back to your thesis.

The First Sentence

Your first body paragraph sentence will introduce your sub-topic, usually by relating back to your thesis. For example, suppose you are writing an essay on the importance of civics classes in general education.
Your first sentence in a body paragraph might start with, “One aspect of civics classes that is important to general education is...” and then your subtopic would be, “that they teach students the importance of local government.” Linking your sub-topic to your thesis shows the reader which point you will be focusing on for this paragraph, just like your thesis statement does for your overall argument.

The Second Sentence
After you’ve introduced your sub-topic, your second sentence can do one of two things. It can either introduce the quote or data that relates to and supports this sub-topic or it can elaborate further on the point you are discussing. When you are introducing a supporting quote or piece of data, you should explain where this information comes from and how the source relates to your sub-topic. In some cases, your second and third sentences may be combined into one sentence that both introduces and presents your evidence.

The Third Sentence
This is where you will introduce your evidence, either as a quotation, paraphrase, or summary, or as a piece of data if you are writing a more technical paper. Do not simply drop your primary source material in as the third sentence. Rather, give context to the quote or data by explaining its place within the source and then add the cited material. Remember to provide a parenthetical citation for the quote or data at the end of your sentence.

The Fourth Sentence
Now that you’ve presented your evidence, your fourth sentence should analyze this evidence, explaining the significance of the evidence to your reader and showing how this information specifically supports your argument. Remember, your reader should not have to guess what you want them to understand from your quote or data. Explain your evidence as clearly as possible, and leave no room for doubt as to how it supports your point.

The Fifth Sentence
Finally, your last sentence should restate your sub-topic as a conclusion drawn from your evidence, showing again how it relates to your thesis. At this point, your reader should understand exactly how this sub-topic helps to prove your thesis.

Reflect: Generating Sub-Topics

Poll
When you are developing the points that will serve as the basis for your body paragraphs, you may notice that how you arrive at these points happens in similar ways. Perhaps you analyze your thesis inductively, finding the main points that relate to your argument by knowing what needs to be true in order for your thesis to be correct. Or, perhaps you imagine counter-arguments that might arise while arguing your thesis with someone else and use these counterpoints to build an effective defense. Think about an essay you’re writing.

What way do you find works best for you?

- Imagining counter-arguments
- “Unpacking” my thesis for the points that need to be proved
- Allowing my argument to develop organically as I write it
Finding my sub-topics through researching sources related to my thesis

Expand: Adding Flow to Your Essay

Overview: “Readability”
Because body paragraphs make up the bulk of your essay, this is usually where you want to start thinking about “readability.” How easy is it for a reader to digest the material you are presenting to them? There are a few ways to make your essay readable, but using transitions is a good place to start.

Transitions
It is a good idea to include a transition either at the beginning or end of your body paragraphs. Transitions such as these serve as a bridge from your previous paragraph to the next. You can include these transitions as part of your first or fifth sentences, or you can have the transition take the form of its own sentence. Smooth transitions can be introduced in several ways. You could enumerate your points to start the topic sentences of your paragraphs “First, Second, …Finally” — depending on their place in the essay. Alternately, you could draw a link between the two topics with language suggesting that connection: “Another way (your thesis) is correct is…” The key here is to give your essay a kind of “flow” that keeps your reader engaged with your ideas and allows them to follow your argument in a logical way.

Logical Flow
You can keep your reader engaged with your argument by arranging your body paragraphs in a way that gives them a logical flow. Remember, the topics you discuss in your body paragraphs are interrelated, since they all are sub-topics for your thesis. With this in mind, understanding how these points are interrelated will help you arrange your essay to give your reader a better understanding of this relationship. For instance, you may decide to have your topics grow in complexity, so that your reader starts with the least complex point and then arrives at the most complex point without feeling overwhelmed. Or, you may want your reader to see how each point becomes more relevant to your thesis. Again, you should always be thinking about how to craft your essay to best communicate your argument to your reader.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A short guide to body paragraph flow and logical discussions, with a helpful chart

- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paragraphs_and_paragraphing/paragraphing.html
- Source: The Online Writing Lab, Purdue University

A graphical layout of a body paragraph and some more helpful notes on transitions

- https://www.mesacc.edu/~paoih30491/Bodypgphs.html
- Source: Mesa Community College

An in-depth look at transitions

- https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/transitions/
- Source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Lesson Glossary

- **body paragraph**: paragraphs that follow the introductory paragraph and provide supporting arguments for a thesis statement
- **essay**: a structured written argument that uses multiple sub-points to support the main argument
- **evidence**: facts or information that support the validity or truth of an argument
- **source**: a piece or body of work that provides evidence for an argument
- **thesis**: sentence that defines an argument

Check Your Knowledge

1. All body paragraphs should have exactly five sentences.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. When it’s included in an essay, supporting evidence must have an introduction and a parenthetical citation.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. A body paragraph is like a miniature essay.
   - A. True
   - B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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