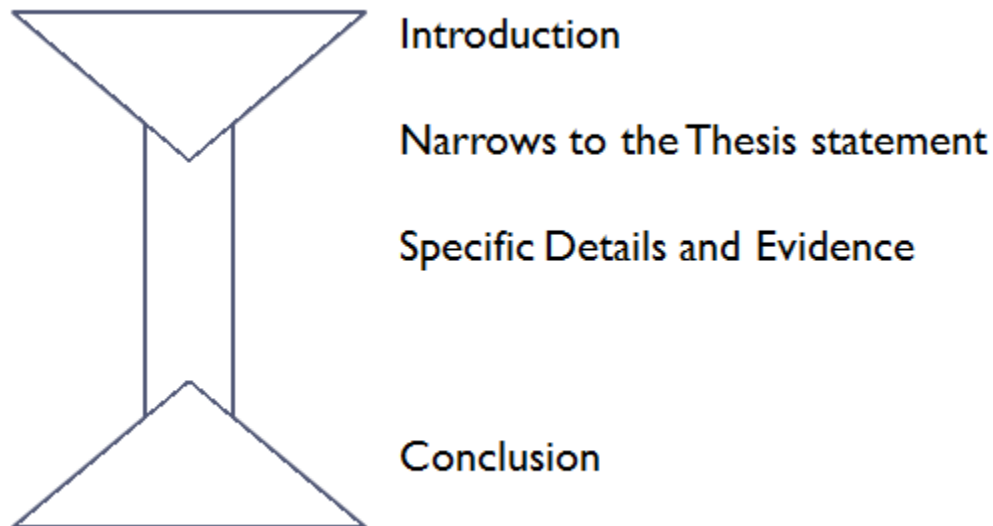


The Hourglass of Writing

The Standard Structure of Academic Papers

What is Academic Writing?

There are many kinds of academic paper writing, and it may be intimidating to students to feel like they need to become familiar with so many different formats. Fortunately, there is a standard structure that virtually every form of academic writing follows. When visualized, that structure resembles an hourglass.



The Introduction

Notice that the top of the hourglass is quite broad. Your topic will begin with a broad, global point of view. The introduction is where you provide the background and context for your topic, so that your reader can understand the points you bring up later. We always begin with a very general overview of the topic, then focus in and become more specific until we reach the thesis statement. The thesis statement is where the hourglass becomes narrow – it is the specific focus of your paper, and your details and evidence will illustrate this point.

The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is your “point”—It is the reason you are writing this paper! What would you like your reader to learn from your paper? What was important about the evidence you are presenting to them? In a laboratory paper, the thesis statement is where you state your hypothesis—what did you expect to find with this experiment? In other forms of academic writing, the thesis statement serves a similar purpose: what does the evidence suggest about this topic?

The thesis statement often takes the form of an argument, or a stance on an issue. If you are having trouble identifying your thesis statement, it may help to look at your conclusion—what point did you make? What did you ultimately decide was the most important thing to emphasize with your evidence? A paper that has an unclear thesis statement will tend to drift aimlessly within its topic, and the conclusion will often be weak and unsatisfying. If you frequently have trouble with conclusions, it may help to work on your thesis statement skills.

The Body

The body is where the bulk of your writing occurs. It is the narrow and specific part of the ‘hourglass’. Now that your paper has become specific and focused in on a thesis statement, it is time to present all of the evidence that backs up that statement. Try to make it obvious how each piece of evidence relates to the thesis statement. Once the reader reaches your conclusion, they should see how all of the evidence ties together to form the big picture.

The Conclusion

The conclusion is where you wrap it up and emphasize your points. There are usually three major parts to the conclusion:

What did we just learn?

- Recap your thesis statement and remind the reader how all of the evidence works toward it.

Why is it important?

- Discuss the implications of this evidence. Why was it important to learn this?

What should we do now?

- Take it further. We have discussed the evidence and supported the thesis statement. What should we do now that we know these things? You can now offer some suggestions for future action. It is important to realize you don’t need to ‘save the world’ with your suggestions - identifying weaknesses or gaps in the research is just as important as offering solutions to problems.

In many ways the conclusion is a mirror of the introduction. Notice how the hourglass shape becomes broad again at the bottom—your paper will do the same thing! Bring your paper away from the specific focus of your thesis and back to a broad point of view. Now that we know the specifics of this topic, how does it apply to the world as a whole?