

3. Building a Simple Essay Format

Now we are going to build a simple essay to show the basic framework of any essay. Like a skeleton, there is a logical order and when you have fitted it together once, you will be able to do it again for an essay of your own.

The Basic Answer

When somebody asks you a question, such as, “Why didn’t you wash the car last Sunday?” your simplest response may be, “Because”. However, few people are ever satisfied with this non-answer. Since the question has not been answered, the interrogator will probably probe further. “Because why?”

At this stage, you know that it is time to come up with a real answer. For instance, you may say, “It was a hot day”. At first you think this is a good response until you remember that last Sunday was the City to Surf annual fun run and despite the heat over 40,000 people ran 14 km up hills with encouraging names like Heartbreak Hill. So you rattle off a few more answers to bolster up your response. They may include, “The car was being used most of the day” and “Dad loaned the car cleaners to his best friend”.

Now you have listed three answers to the question which was “Why didn’t you wash the car last Sunday?”

1. It was a hot day.
2. The car was being used most of the day.
3. Dad loaned the cleaning equipment to his best friend.

In an essay, we can call these answers your arguments, points or cases.

The Reasoned Response

Now if your interrogator is a particularly picky person, you will be asked to spell out why these circumstances prevented you from washing the car. So you will have to turn the responses into reasons.

Question

“Why didn’t you wash the car last Sunday?”

Reasoned responses

1. It was a hot day and the heat seemed to drain my energy levels.
2. The car was being used most of the day, so it was largely unavailable for me to clean it.
3. As Dad had loaned the car cleaning equipment to his friend, the materials I needed to wash the car were unavailable.

Prove/Justify Your Point

You have now developed a reasoned argument, which would satisfy most people. However, you are dealing with no ordinary interrogator. This one is trained to find holes in any loosely

woven argument, to tear apart any weakly connected case or to knock over any reason that is not based on solid ground. This person is AN ACADEMIC.

For thousands of years, since the time of Socrates, the western world has developed a system of learning based on logic and proof. Scientific method involves an observation that leads to a hypothesis, or guess, to explain the observation. The hypothesis is then rigorously tested. If the results of a test do not fit the hypothesis, either the hypothesis is changed to allow for the new information or it is completely junked and a new hypothesis is considered. In this way a body of knowledge has been built up over the centuries that we can fairly happily rely on.

Anything that has been proved incorrect has already been tossed out the window and what remains has “stood the test of time”, as the expression goes. That is, what remains has not yet been disproved, although it may be shown to be wrong in the future. For instance, Magellan proved that the earth was spherical when he first circumnavigated it in the years 1519 to 1521, and Copernicus showed that the earth revolved around the sun in 1543. Yet, until these two men arrived on the scene to disprove the hypotheses of the time, the earth had been considered to be a flat object with the sun revolving around it.

Academics have passed this system of knowledge (things that are known, because we haven't been able to prove them wrong) down the generations in the same way as a religious order passes on a faith. All of this suddenly becomes very significant when you are answering a question posed by an academic.

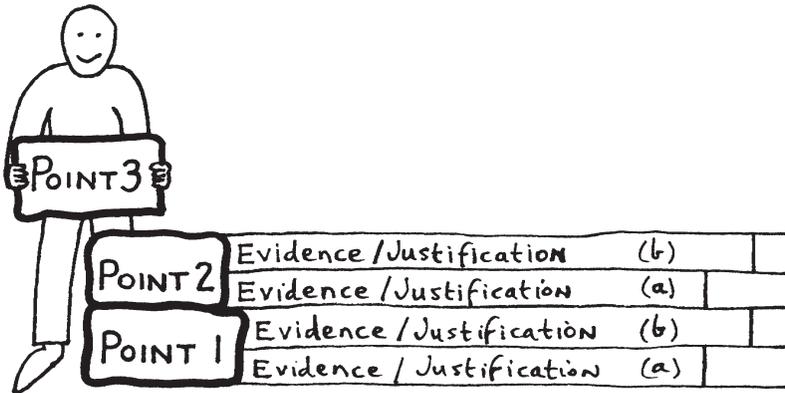
You must justify every single thing you say. Back it up with solid evidence to ensure that it will withstand anyone's attempts to disprove it. If you don't provide evidence, you are merely making an assertion.

For instance, you say that it was a hot day and the heat seems to have reduced your energy levels. But what if it was only 16°C that day? Or what if it was 32°C, but you live in an area which has an average temperature of 38°C? Your reasoned argument is instantly blown. So prove what you say, even if you think it is labouring the point. Often your point may not be as obvious to someone else as it is to you. What you are doing is strengthening the threads of your argument against those who will attempt to pick them apart.

It is a good idea to have more than one piece of evidence for every argument: at least three – the more evidence, the more solid is your case.

Capping-off

Always remember to connect your three pieces of evidence or justifications with a capping-off sentence that shows how they relate to the main point.



In shorter essays, where all the evidence for a point can be placed in one paragraph, the capping-off sentence helps the essay to flow. In longer essays, where you may need one or

more paragraphs for each piece of evidence, a capping off sentence, or paragraph, helps to remind your reader how this evidence is linked to your main point.

The Body of Your Essay

Reasoned response with evidence/justification

Question

Why didn't you wash the car last Sunday?

Response

Including the evidence we have obtained, we can now answer:

1. It was a hot day and the heat seemed to drain my energy levels.

- a. The temperature rose to 32°C, which is 8°C higher than is normal for this time of year.
- b. Humidity was 90%, making it a sticky and uncomfortable day.
- c. In the City to Surf race held that day, the runners' best times were 10% below those of the previous year, which commentators attributed to the energy-sapping nature of the weather.

So, in retrospect, it seems that the weather on Sunday was not conducive to outdoor work.

2. The car was being used most of the day, so it was largely unavailable for me to clean it.

- a. Dad and Mum drove to the local markets at ten o'clock and returned just before lunch with some fresh fish.
- b. Mum drove the car to the hospital to visit her sister for a couple of hours after lunch.

- c. Dad took the car to the golf course for a quick round with some friends later in the afternoon.

Therefore, I did not have sufficient time between uses to clean the car.

3. As Dad had loaned the car-cleaning equipment to his friend, Ralph, the materials I needed to clean the car were unavailable.

- a. Ralph borrowed the car-cleaning equipment when he dropped Dad off after work on Friday and said that he would return them on Saturday afternoon.
- b. Dad phoned Ralph on Saturday night and left a message on the answering machine saying that I would need the equipment on Sunday. However, Ralph did not call back.
- c. On Tuesday, we learned that Ralph's wife began contractions on Saturday – three weeks earlier than expected – and gave birth to their second daughter on Sunday night after a long labour.

So there was no possibility of getting the cleaning equipment back in time to clean the car on Sunday.

We have just built up a reasoned argument backed with evidence. This is the body of your answer.

The Introduction

Notice how your answer has become quite lengthy? Many people who ask questions are short of time. Before they settle in for half an hour to listen to your reasoned response backed with proof, they may want a brief outline of your answer, just as most people check the TV guide to see quickly what a show is

about before they decide whether or not they want to watch it.

The introduction is a quick summary of your main arguments without any of the evidence. It is much easier to give the short answer when you are clear on the whole story. So, in essays, it's a good idea to write the introduction *after* the rest of the essay has been written as a first draft. Write the introduction in a way that states your main points as an answer to the question.

Q. Why didn't you wash the car last Sunday?

Introduction

I did not wash the car last Sunday because:

1. I found the hot day very tiring,
2. the car was unavailable for most of the day, and
3. the car-cleaning equipment was unavailable.

Notice how the question is restated as an answer. This shows that you are actually answering the question, not waffling around, and is very comforting for any interrogator. The numbers are here to help you distinguish the separate points noted in the introduction. They do not appear in your essay.

Now that everyone knows exactly what the three main points of your argument will be, they can settle down and listen to the full story, including the evidence that gives your case its substance.

The Conclusion

People have short memories. By the time you have listed all your arguments and backed them up with evidence, it is highly likely that your audience has forgotten the original question and the main points of your case. Therefore, it is wise to give

a closing summary, or conclusion, to remind people what the essence of your long response is.

The conclusion is a summary of the main points of your argument, just as your introduction was. Simply restate the original question as an answer and list your main points. As the introduction and conclusion are almost the same, I often virtually copy my introduction with just a few phrasing changes, so that it is not too repetitive and boring. Be as creative as you want to be. However, the aim is to provide a succinct summary of your major points. Again, the numbers are only included to help you follow how the conclusion is constructed.

Q. Why didn't you wash the car last Sunday?

Conclusion

In short, my reasons for not washing the car on Sunday are that:

1. I was tired from the unseasonably hot day,
2. the family was using the car for most of the day, and
3. the materials for cleaning the car were unobtainable.

The Essay in Summary

In fact, we have just written a short essay. When we put it all together, it looks like this:

Question **Why didn't you wash the car last Sunday?**

Answer

INTRODUCTION

Restatement of the question **I did not wash the car last Sunday because**

- *Point 1* I found the very hot day tiring,
- *Point 2* the car was unavailable for most of the day,
- *Point 3* and the car cleaning equipment was unavailable.

BODY OF THE ESSAY

Point 1 **It was a hot day and the heat seemed to drain my energy levels.**

Evidence/ The temperature rose to 32°C, which is
Justification a. 8°C higher than is normal for this time of year.

Evidence/ Humidity was 90%, making it a sticky
Justification b. and uncomfortable day.

Evidence/ In the City to Surf race held that day the
Justification c. best times of runners was 10% below those of the previous year, which commentators attributed to the energy-sapping nature of the weather.

*Capping-off
sentence*

So in retrospect it seems that the weather on Sunday was not conducive to outdoor work.

Point 2

The car was being used most of the day, so it was largely unavailable for me to clean it.

*Evidence/
Justification a.*

Dad and Mum drove the car to the local markets at ten o'clock and returned just before lunch with some fresh fish.

*Evidence/
Justification b.*

Mum drove the car to the hospital to visit her sister for a couple of hours after lunch.

*Evidence/
Justification c.*

Dad took the car to the golf course for a quick round with some friends later in the afternoon.

*Capping-off
sentence*

Therefore, I did not have sufficient time between uses to clean the car.

Point 3

As Dad had loaned the car cleaning equipment to his friend, Ralph, the materials I needed to clean the car were unavailable.

*Evidence/
Justification a.*

Ralph borrowed the car cleaning equipment when he dropped Dad off after work on Friday and said that he would return them on Saturday afternoon.

*Evidence/
Justification b.*

Dad phoned Ralph on Saturday night and left a message on the answering machine saying that I would need the equipment on Sunday. However, Ralph did not call back.

Essay Maker

Evidence/

Justification c.

On Tuesday we learned that Ralph's wife began contractions on Saturday, three weeks earlier than expected, and gave birth to their second daughter on Sunday night after a long labour.

Capping-off

sentence

So there was no possibility of getting the cleaning equipment back in time to clean the car on Sunday.

CONCLUSION

Restatement of the question

In short, my reasons for not washing the car on Sunday are that

• *Point 1*

I was tired from the unseasonably hot day,

• *Point 2*

the family was using the car for most of the day,

• *Point 3*

and the materials to clean the car were unobtainable.

The headings on the left are the framework for a simple essay structure. It is a reliable and versatile format that can be used as a basis for most essays.

A Simple Essay Format

INTRODUCTION

- *Restatement of the question*
 - * *Point 1*
 - * *Point 2*
 - * *Point 3*

BODY OF THE ESSAY

Point 1

- *Evidence/Justification a.*
- *Evidence/Justification b.*
- *Evidence/Justification c.*
- *Capping-off sentence*

Point 2

- *Evidence/Justification a.*
- *Evidence/Justification b.*
- *Evidence/Justification c.*
- *Capping-off sentence*

Point 3

- *Evidence/Justification a.*
- *Evidence/Justification b.*
- *Evidence/Justification c.*
- *Capping-off sentence*

CONCLUSION

- *Restatement of the question*
 - * *Point 1*
 - * *Point 2*
 - * *Point 3*