

Anatomy of a College Paper

In the same way that one human body has pretty much the same parts as another, depending on the gender, every well-written college paper predictably has the same components. These are the **introduction**, the **thesis** statement, the **body paragraphs**, the **conclusion**, and the **citations and works cited**. Students might consider these parts the “skeleton” of a college paper. There might be other components in a paper, depending upon the requirements of the assignment, but these are the basics.

The structure for college papers outlined below is the one typically used for argument papers of various kinds. Different types of arguments can include persuasive, rhetorical, pro/con, compare/contrast, evidential, proposal, and definitional, among others. Students can expect to write these types of papers throughout their college careers.

1. The **introduction** of a paper typically includes three parts: hook, background, and the thesis statement. An effective introduction “sets up” the paper and lets readers know what to expect. It also states the claim the student writer is making and describes the evidence he or she plans to use to prove the claim. It can be helpful for a student to write a rough draft of the introduction before writing the rest of the paper. Then, once he or she has completed the entire paper, he or she can go back and rewrite the intro to make sure it actually reflects the contents of the paper.
2. A **thesis** is the answer to a research question. It helps familiarize the reader with the paper’s outline and main ideas. A thesis statement basically includes the following components (in any order): [topic + claim + evidence]. It typically appears at the end of the introduction and can be one or two sentences long. A well-constructed thesis statement can actually make it easier to research and write a college paper.
3. A college research paper will have a minimum of two **body paragraphs**, usually more. A body paragraph makes a point that supports the thesis of the paper. It then provides an illustration—also known as evidence—to support the point. Finally, the body paragraph must explain the evidence for the reader, reinforcing the conclusion the student writer wants the audience to make. Some instructors and professors refer to this formula as P.I.E.: [point + illustration + explanation].
4. A **conclusion** completes an essay and assures that readers have understood the writer’s purpose and ideas. A strong conclusion commonly restates the thesis in different words or from a fresh viewpoint. It also reminds readers of what the student writer wants them to think about, believe, or act upon. An effective conclusion can summarize the main points of the paper, urge awareness or action, ask a thought-provoking question, or make a recommendation, among other strategies.
5. Every college paper that uses outside sources must cite where the sources came from through in-text **citations** and **Works Cited** listings. The in-text citations give the specific location of the information the student is quoting or paraphrasing, while the works cited listings reveal the print publications, online databases, or websites in which the information appears. As an analogy, imagine that the in-text citation is the street address of a house, while the reference listed in the Works Cited section is the town in which the house is located.