

THE MAIN IDEA OF THE WHOLE THESIS
ЗАГАЛЬНА КОНЦЕПЦІЯ ТЕЗ ДОПОВІДЕЙ

The concept of the thesis, topic sentence, or main idea of a piece of writing, the pattern of a typical academic essay is shown in this article. The following assignments will give you practice identifying and extracting the main idea from a body of data.

Keywords: thesis, typical academic essay, article, composition, writer.

В статті висвітлено основну концепцію написання тез доповідей, формулювання теми, основної ідеї, зразок типового академічного есе. Наступні практичні патерни дають можливість на практиці ідентифікувати та визначити основну ідею з загального обсягу інформації.

Ключові слова: тези доповідей, типове академічне есе, стаття, твір, письменник.

The main point or central idea of a piece of writing in English is often explicitly, or directly, expressed near the beginning of the text. This statement is traditionally called the thesis. In addition, if the article has several paragraphs, the main point of each paragraph (traditionally called the topic sentence of the paragraph) is often expressed somewhere near the beginning of the paragraph. You can think of these explicit statements of the main ideas in a composition as labels. To help you understand how these labels function, imagine that you are moving to a new apartment and must pack all your belongings in boxes. In order to remember which box contains kitchen utensils, which box contains books, and which box contains clothes, you might label the outside of each box with a statement of what is inside. Similarly, a thesis helps the reader understand immediately what the

basic content of an essay will be, and a topic sentence near the beginning of a new paragraph helps the reader see in which direction the author intends to move in that paragraph. What you say in a thesis or in a topic sentence will make your reader expect to read certain things in your discussion, and English-speaking readers trust you to meet their expectations.

Figure 1. shows the usual pattern of a typical academic essay.

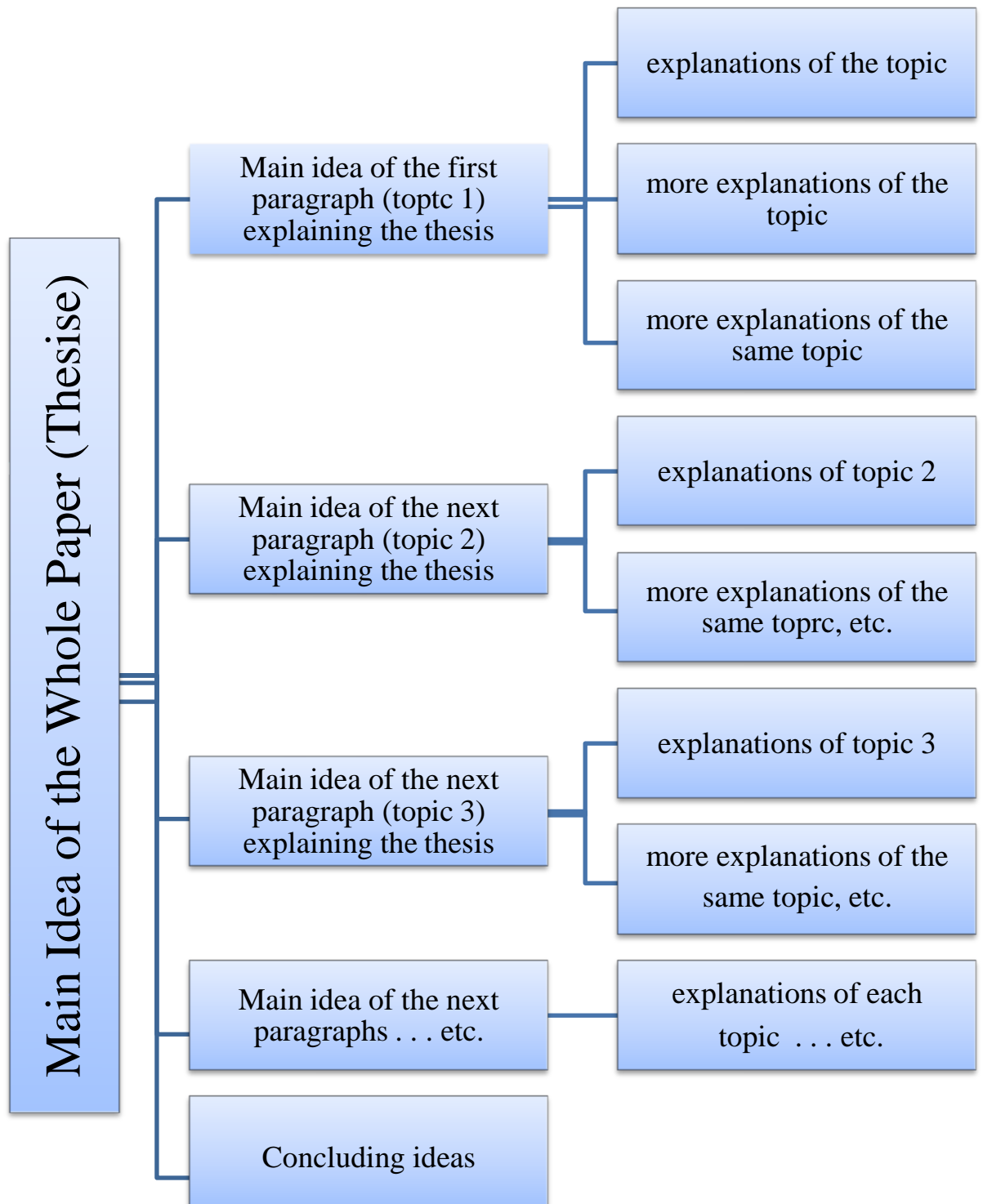


Figure 1. Possible Organization of an Essay

The following sentences express the main ideas of several paragraphs.

1. For years scientists have tried to discover exactly what causes headaches, but they have had little success. Although the exact cause is still unknown despite today's great advances in medicine, a few facts have emerged.

Most English-speaking readers would expect a discussion of the facts that are known about the causes of headaches.

2. As a first step toward understanding headaches, scientists distinguish among several types.

The rest of this discussion will probably cover each of the different types of headaches.

3. Although nearly all adults suffer from headaches, one type of headache is most common in women while another type is more typically experienced by men.

Here most English readers would expect a comparison of these two types of headaches.

4. The most common type of headache experienced by most men is called the cluster headache.

This sentence leads the reader to expect a description of the characteristics of this type of headache.

5. Migraine headaches are always painful, but the case of Joan Didion is an extreme example of how a simple headache can disrupt an otherwise normal life.

The writer will probably tell the story of Ms. Didion's case.

In each of the previous sentences, the writer made a kind of promise to the reader about the content of the paragraph to come. English readers tend to trust the writer to fulfill this promise. If the writer goes off in another direction and discusses something else, the reader becomes confused and even frustrated, finding it difficult to follow the writer's "train of thought."

As you have seen, the main idea of an essay is usually expressed somewhere near the beginning of the text. However, you do not need to know exactly what the main idea is before you begin to write. Although you will probably know the topic you want to write on, you may not know exactly what you want to say about it until you have done some invention writing and seen your ideas on paper. Formulating a thesis or a topic sentence that exactly fits your discussion is a form of revising, of focusing more clearly and sharply. Once you know more or less what your main idea is, that is, once you know what you intend your essay to explain or prove, keep this idea in mind as you gather information and write or reread your draft.

On one hand, the way you state or even think of your main idea will have an important effect on what you then write about your main idea in your paper. Keeping your main idea in mind will help you to select what to include in your paper and also to recognize what is irrelevant. On the other hand, you may find as you gather information or write your draft that your main idea changes or becomes dearer to you in different terms. That is fine. Just change your thesis or topic sentences so that they become good summary statements of the ideas you discuss in the essay or paragraph. Then reread your paper and remove any statements that are now irrelevant to your new main idea.

Explicitly stating your main idea is useful for two reasons:

1. For the writer: It helps you control your writing by helping you decide what to include in your essay and how to organize your ideas. Writing down on paper a clear statement of your main idea forces you to think through fully what you want to say and to crystallize it into a few words.

2. For your reader: A clear, explicit statement of the main idea helps your reader know quickly what direction you intend to take in the essay and within the paragraphs of the essay. This efficiency and clarity are especially important in business or industry, where your audience may be an administrator who wants a quick overview of what you will communicate in

a report you submit. In fact, in some situations, particularly in technical writing for business or industry, readers will request a statement like this at the beginning of a piece of writing: "*In this report I am going to define (or explain or compare X to Y or show or analyze) . . .*" However, this kind of blunt announcement violates the conventions of academic writing in some situations. You should avoid such a statement unless you are specifically asked to include one.

There is no rule of English that says a statement of the main idea must appear near the beginning of a paper. In fact, while there is always a main idea in published writing, it sometimes appears at the end of the piece, especially in editorials in newspapers and journals. Sometimes, the main idea is not explicitly stated at all in the article. In most academic writing, however, readers appreciate being told early what the main idea will be, and it is probably a good idea for you to meet that expectation.

The ability to produce a clear summary statement of your main idea is a valuable skill to develop for your school work. Look at the following question and answers from an essay exam in a U.S. history course. The specific answers to the question are the same, but the second one is more powerful intellectually and gives a better impression because the generalization or topic sentence at the beginning suggests that the writer is in control of all the ideas.

Question: What were the main causes of the U.S. Civil War?

Answer 1: One cause of the Civil War was that the North was developed industrially while the South was mainly agricultural. Another cause was that the South wanted to expand the number of slave states. Another cause. . . .

Answer 2: The main causes of the U.S. Civil War fall into two distinct but interlinked categories: economic causes and political causes. Economically, the North was developed industrially while. . . .

Notice that in the second answer the general statement of the main idea is not long or elaborate. It is a straightforward one-sentence general answer to the exam question. The general answer is then followed by a specific explanation of

the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. Because the main idea is not explicitly expressed in the first answer, it is hard to tell if the student is in control of the information. This answer gives the impression that the student's ideas are listed in a random order, not analyzed logically.

Summing up the results we must admit the concept of the thesis, topic sentence, or main idea of a piece of writing, the pattern of a typical academic essay is fully disclosed in this article. The aforementioned assignments gave you practice identifying and extracting the main idea from a body of data.

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