Structuring Your Essay: The Hourglass Format

The hourglass format is an effective method of organizing research papers and essays. Your introduction should capture your reader’s attention and touch upon the broad idea or issue your essay will tackle. You will then transition into your thesis, which is the specific argument you will support throughout your essay.

The last or second-to-last sentence of your introduction should be the thesis statement. When closing the introductory paragraph, you should not only state your claim but also include what evidence you will use to support the claim. You can include this brief description of evidence in either your thesis or in the sentence following it. This information serves as a transition into your first body paragraph, so you should structure the thesis and its support in whichever style makes most sense in your essay.

Each body paragraph should conform to the hourglass format. Your first sentence should be a topic sentence that establishes the claim that the rest of the paragraph will support. Your second sentence should fully explain the claim. The rest of the paragraph should contain evidence for your claim and an explanation of how the evidence supports your claim.

Your conclusion should be a reflection of your introduction. You should briefly refer to your thesis and to the primary claims you examined to support it. You should end the essay discussing the wider ramifications of your topic and argument.

Checking for the Hourglass Format

Read your essay as you consider the following questions. If you can answer “yes” to the questions, your essay conforms to the hourglass format.

Introduction
- Does your opening sentence capture the reader’s attention?
- Does the rest of your introduction progress toward your thesis and establish context for your thesis?
- Does your thesis make a claim, express one main idea, and provide specific information?

Body Paragraphs
- Is your topic sentence a main claim of your thesis?
- Does your second sentence fully explain your claim?
- Does the rest of the paragraph support this claim?

Conclusion
- Do you refer back to the claim you made in your thesis?
- Do you touch upon the broad topics you discussed in your introduction?
- Do you leave the reader with your point of view?