

Helping Your Child Write an Essay: Organizing and Brainstorming

Janet Parady, M.S.Ed.*

Your child has been given an assignment in English, or another class, to write an essay. She is unsure of how to start and comes to you for help. Where do you begin? What strategies would be most effective in helping her complete the assignment?

To begin with, it is helpful to know what is meant by the term “essay.”¹ In general, an essay is a formal composition containing:

- An introductory paragraph with a thesis statement.
- A minimum of two body paragraphs.
- A concluding paragraph.

Sometimes teachers will give specific guidelines for a writing assignment (i.e., the number of body paragraphs required) which gives you more direction in assisting your child. Sometimes, however, the assignment is more open-ended and you need to help your child figure out how best to complete the composition.

Planning and composing an essay in response to a specific prompt may seem somewhat overwhelming to your child – and to you as well! One of the most helpful strategies initially is to help your child develop a thesis statement. A **thesis statement** states the main idea of the essay and briefly explains how it will be supported. In essence, the thesis statement is the skeleton for the entire essay, a road map to let the reader know where the writer is going. Once it is established, all the supporting details and information can be fleshed out and organized within this framework.

¹ The term “essay” is used loosely by many to mean anything from a single paragraph to a multiple page composition. Try to determine what your child’s teacher means by “essay” if possible.

The Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is made up of three components, each of which can be generated by using guided questions. These questions help your child focus in on what they are going to write about and how they will support it. The three components are:

1. Topic:

- What one word or phrase describes what the essay is about?
- What is the main point/central idea of the essay?

2. Controlling idea:

- What are you saying about the topic? (This helps refine the focus and narrow down the topic.)

3. Sub-topics (supports):

- How do you plan to support your topic?
- The sub-topics can often be generated by asking “How?” or “Why?” in terms of your topic and controlling idea.

For example:

Topic (What is the essay about?):

- *work experience for teens*

Controlling idea (What are you saying about teens working?):

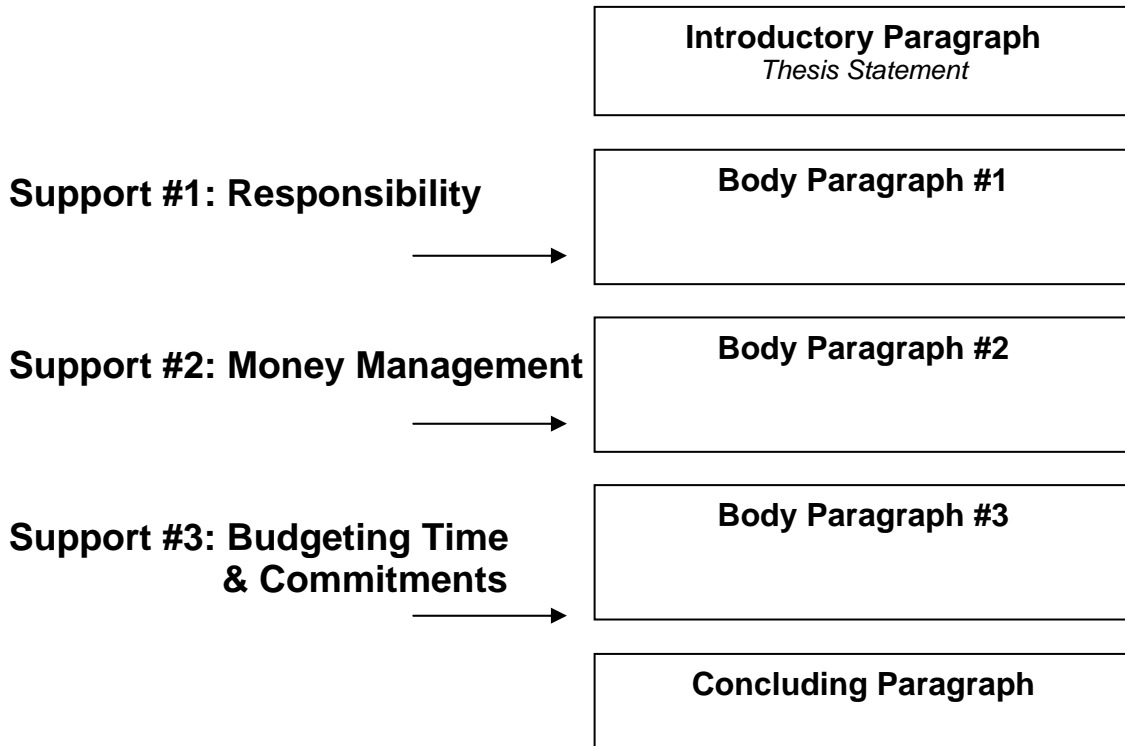
- *is beneficial*

Sub-topics (How or why is it beneficial for teens to work?):

- *teaches responsibility*
- *provides practice in managing money*
- *requires them to budget their time*

The Skeletal Format

The diagram below illustrates how the sub-topics generated above then become the skeletal format for the body of the essay.



Thus, each support in the thesis statement becomes the main idea of a body paragraph.

The Supporting Details

The next step is to make sure that your child can generate enough details and information to write a paragraph on each. A general rule of thumb is that a minimum of three supporting details are needed to write an adequate body paragraph. Your child can use the following type of format to brainstorm ideas and make sure she has enough information to use the sub-topics she has generated for the thesis statement. ([Click here to print a blank template.](#))

Responsibility	Money Management	Budgeting Time & Commitments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on time • Complete all facets of job description • Dress appropriately • Interact appropriately with coworkers, others • Help coworkers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure pay is correct • Set up savings account • Help pay for specific things (i.e., cell phone) • Compute pay for time and a half • Fill in tax forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep up with schoolwork • Maintain home chores • Make choices on activities that might have to be forfeited due to other commitments (i.e., party because of work)

It is important to note that your child may only be able to come up with one or two details to support one of the sub-topics. If this is the case, have her go back to the thesis statement and generate a new sub-topic that might yield more details. In this example, perhaps she could only come up with one detail for “budgeting time and commitments.” Therefore, you could have her scratch it off and try replacing it with “gains experience in real-life situations,” for example. If she can generate three supporting details for this new sub-topic, she just inserts it in place of the other.

Now that your child is confident that she has enough information to write a paragraph on each of the sub-topics, she can combine all three elements of the thesis statement (topic, controlling idea, sub-topics) into a formally written thesis statement. For instance, the components from our example could be combined into...

Allowing teenagers to have a part time job is beneficial in that it teaches them the importance of being responsible, it gives them practice in managing their money, and it requires them to be able to budget their time in order to meet the commitments of school, work and family.

Although the thesis statement can be placed anywhere within the introductory paragraph, the most straightforward location is as the last sentence of the introductory paragraph, with the opening comments leading up to it.

At this point, your child is ready to finalize her information and begin writing. She might want to choose the most relevant details for each sub-topic, sequence them in a logical way, and/or jot down elaborations for some or all of the details. Once this final organization is completed, she can begin writing the rough draft.

* Janet M. Parady, M.S.Ed. is head of the high school Language Arts Department at Landmark School (<http://www.landmarkoutreach.org/>) in Prides Crossing, Massachusetts and co-author of *The Trickster in Africa and African-American Folktales*.