Essay (Composition) Structure

An essay is made up of carefully organized parts, all held together by one central idea, the Thesis Sentence (abbrev.Th/s). Figure on 5-8 ¶’s (paragraphs)

I. Introductory section (Introduction): usually, one ¶ (minimum of four sentences) containing background (setting) to the problem and a Th/s (Thesis sentence) in that order. Do not announce your intentions, plans, techniques, e.g. "This paper will show..."

  A. Background: the topic, conflict, plot, etc. (this information can be in any order and combined in as few sentences as are clear and artistic)
     1. author’s name, title, and type (article, short story, novel, poem, etc.)
     2. brief plot sketch: what’s going on or happening
     3. state the conflict or problem only this way: the conflict is "between A and B" [A and B are not people, but the elements of the conflict]
     4. topic/theme: both the author’s and yours (as writer of this paper)
        (5 and 6. are optional):
     5. place and/or time, if either or both are important
     6. brief sketch of author’s thesis and main supporting ideas/themes (about two or three sentences)

  B. Th/s: (the essay’s most important sentence!)
     1. definition: one complex sentence idea statement (not a question or merely a fact) of your opinion, assertion, claim, position, etc, on the topic of the essay. (It is really the conclusion you have drawn from having thought through the problem and having organized all your ideas). For our class purposes, the Th/s is to be placed as the last sentence of the Introduction and enclosed in square brackets, as in the example below.

     2. One MC(main clause)-only rule: although it may include one or more SC’s (subordinate clauses) and phrases, the Th/s (a complex sentence, like the t/s to be discussed below) must not have more than one MC or your readers can be confused as to which one is your main idea. This “one-MC-only” requirement also applies to the t/s’s (topic sentences) in the Discussion section, below, but not to any other sentences in the essay.

     3. example of a Th/s: [Before she pays any money, the wise buyer of a used car should take careful precautions.]
This information ends your Introduction, and now you are ready to discuss three-to-five different aspects (ideas) of your Th/s in the Discussion section (about 60-70% of the essay). Figure a new ¶ to begin each such aspect (idea, not fact), and each aspect stated as a reason or method in the ¶’s first sentence, called the topic sentence (t/s). Don’t mix reasons with methods in the t/s’s although o.k. to mix them later in the ¶. Remember that the “one-MC-only” requirement applies to each t/s, as well as the Th/s.

II. Discussion section (do not use the term “body” even if the textbooks do): figure 3-5 ¶’s

A. General theory: in this section, the Th/s, above, is discussed in its specific and different aspects by giving either reasons (the “why’s?”) or methods (the “how’s?” or “in what ways?”). Choose whichever of these two approaches seems most logical, but don’t mix them, yet. List 3-5 on scrap paper, only one sentence for each. Each reason or method, called the topic sentence (t/s), is a complex sentence statement of idea, not fact, and will become the first sentence of a Discussion ¶. The rest of the ¶ will give reasoning and facts to support/explain the t/s and, at this level, you can even mix in the approaches that you didn’t use in the t/s.

Example (using the Th/s in I B2, above):

(methods: “How can the wise buyer take careful precautions?”

(1st t/s) He can inspect the car himself

(2nd t/s) He can also get maintenance papers from the seller or former owner

(3rd t/s) Besides self-inspection and the maintenance papers, he can have his mechanic examine the car

(4th t/s) He can even ask his auto club to search DMV records

Note: for smooth coh (coherence), use trans (transitions: language that smoothly connects a prior thought to an upcoming one) throughout your essay: within sentences, between sentences and between ¶’s. In the four examples, above, the trans terms are underlined.

Note 2: remember the “one-MC-only” requirement: although both Th/s and t/s’s can have SC’s and phrases, unlike ordinary sentences they must not have more than one MC; otherwise, the readers might become confused as to the main point.

B. Language Evidence: since all meanings come from the particular language chosen by the author, it is highly desirable to quote that
language as evidence in your Discussion ¶’s (always enclose it in 
quotation marks). Quote the fewest possible words in any one section; 
usually, only one or two are necessary since they hold the key to the 
meaning of an entire line or passage (you can always briefly summarize 
the rest of the words). Immediately after the quotation, add the page 
number in parens (parentheses):this page number is so important that if 
you ever omit it, within a month all your hair and teeth may fall out!

III.Summary section:a short, one-¶ reminder of your main ideas. Avoid radically 
different ideas since you won’t be able to develop them.