

The Elements of Effective Writing: Thesis, Main Ideas, Supporting Details, and Transitions

Understanding how ideas are put together within essays, articles, and textbooks can help students to do better on tests and to become more effective readers and writers. With a little practice, you will be able to identify the following basic elements of effective writing.

Thesis: the thesis is what the entire piece of writing is about. A thesis is usually found in the first or second paragraph, and it is usually stated in one sentence. All of the other paragraphs of a text relate to and support the thesis.

Main Ideas: a main idea is what an entire paragraph is about. It is like a “mini-thesis” that applies to just one paragraph. Main ideas are like sub-topics or parts of the overall thesis. The main idea of a paragraph is usually expressed in a **topic sentence**. Sometimes the main idea is unstated, in which case the main idea is **implied**.

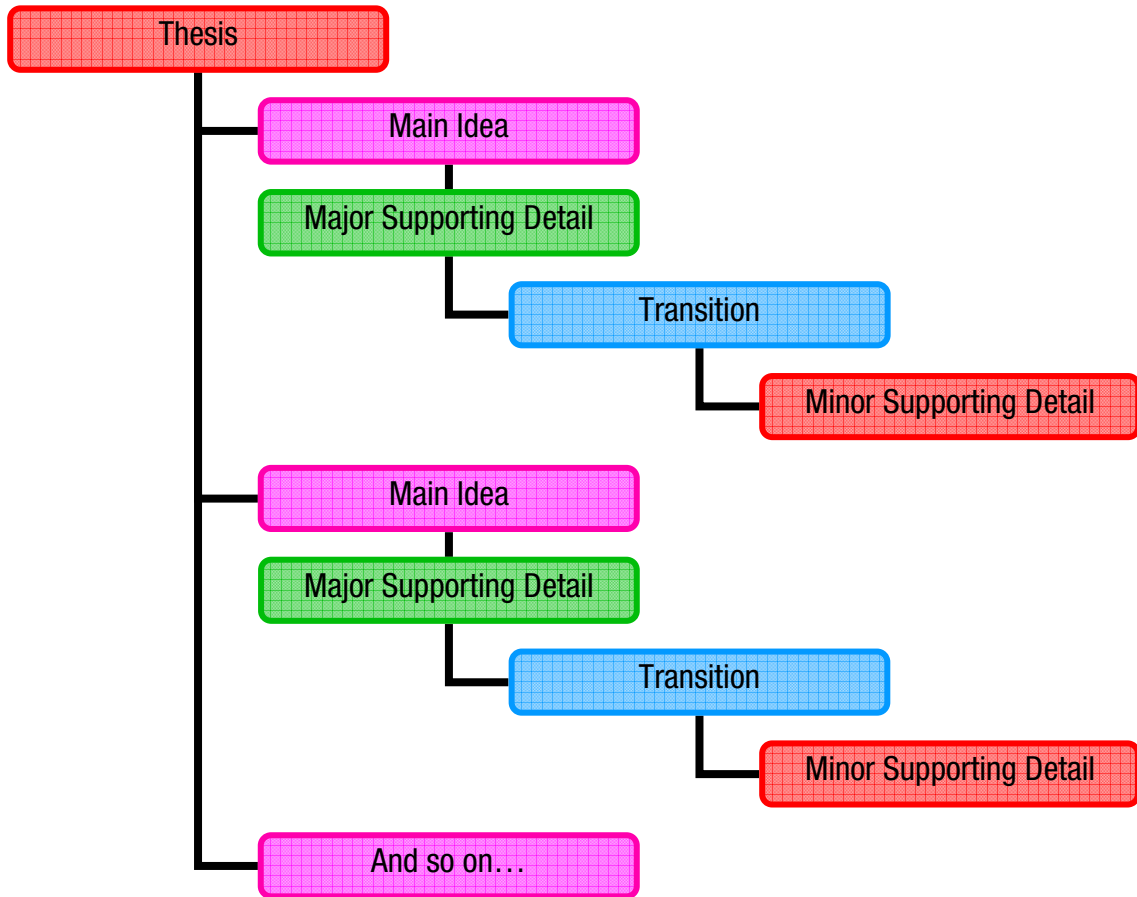
Supporting Details: supporting details are all the other sentences in a paragraph that support the main ideas. Not all supporting details are equally important. They may take the form of facts, statistics, examples, or quotations.

Transitions: transitions are words or phrases that link ideas together and tell the reader how they relate to one another. Some common transitions are shown in the following table.

Types of Transitions	Examples	What They Tell the Reader
Time or Sequence	first, later, next, finally	The author is arranging ideas in the order in which they happened.
Example	for example, for instance, to illustrate, such as	An example will follow.
Enumeration	first, second, third, last, another, next	The author is marking or identifying each major point (sometimes these may be used to suggest order of importance).
Continuation	also, in addition, and, further, another	The author is continuing with the same idea and is going to provide additional information.
Contrast	on the other hand, in contrast, however	The author is switching to a different, opposite, or contrasting idea than previously discussed.
Comparison	like, likewise, similarly	The author will show how the previous idea is similar to what follows.
Cause and Effect	because, thus, therefore, since, consequently	The writer will show a connection between two or more things, how one thing caused another, or how something happened as a result of something else.

Putting It All Together

The elements of effective writing fit together in a way that clearly communicates ideas. The following diagram illustrates how they are usually put together.



Adapted from McWhorter, Kathleen T. Reading Across the Disciplines. 2nd Ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.