

1. An **introduction** paragraph that contains the basic topic of the passage.
2. Four or five **body** paragraphs that provide more information about the topic.
3. A **conclusion** that brings the passage to a close with a final statement.

Let's look at the structure of each of these paragraphs in detail.

## What Is the Structure of the Introduction?

Here's the introduction of a passage you've already read.

(1) Sometimes it appears that the human mark on this planet is indelible. (2) In only a blink of geological time, 200 years or so, human construction and expansion has resulted in the destruction of more than one-fifth of the world's forests, the recession of the polar icecaps, and the creation of a huge hole in the ozone layer. (3) Additionally, industrial activity has damaged rivers and oceans, as well as groundwater supplies. (4) Environmental scientists and activists warn that if Earth's future is not taken into account, humankind could very well destroy the planet.

Now let's look at this very same paragraph in terms of its structure or what each sentence contributes to the passage.

- (1) This sentence introduces the topic about which the author is writing.
- (2) This sentence provides information to support the first sentence.
- (3) This sentence also provides information to support the first sentence.
- (4) This sentence uses the information in sentences 1, 2, and 3 to make a point.

As you can see, stripping down the paragraph in terms of its structure makes it easier to comprehend. Many of the passages on the TOEFL will conform to this basic structure. That means for our purposes, when reading the introduction you should

1. **Read the first sentence—and sometimes the second, if the first doesn't provide enough information—and the last sentence very carefully.** They will most likely contain key information about the passage.
2. **Skim through the sentences in the middle.** They typically contain background information that merely supports the author's first or last sentence.

Reading the introduction is helpful for answering questions about the *main idea* or the *primary purpose* of the passage. The introduction may also contain background information about the topic, ask a question, answer a question posed by the author, or state a viewpoint. However, introduction paragraphs rarely contain important details; you'll find most of the details in the body paragraphs.