

The **deadly dumbbell format** is a descriptor coined by John Gordon, a professor of English at Connecticut College, in his manuscript for a student writing guide called *Summa Contra Boring*. We commonly see essays that follow this structure in high school and much early college writing.

AVOIDING THE D E A D L Y D U M B B E L L F O R M A T : P U M P U P Y O U R B O D Y P A R A G R A P H S



Put simply, a “dumbbell”-style paper consists of three parts: **introduction, body, and conclusion**. While there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with this as a method of organization, it encourages student writers to write redundant and repetitive papers that **make the same point in three different ways while contributing very little to a reader’s understanding**. As Gordon says, “too many such papers can drive readers mad.” Student writers should strive toward crafting a paper that functions as a cohesive whole, one in which the writer gracefully leads the reader through his/her thoughts without radical shifts in tone or style.

“The so-called ‘dumbbell’ paper results from the format many of you were taught to follow in high school, that of a first paragraph **which says what you are going to say**, a ‘body of the paper’ **which says it**, and a conclusion **which says what you have said**. Like training wheels on a bicycle, such exercises may be useful in helping beginning writers to settle on their main point at the outset. But for almost all college assignments, they are simply repetitious, **useless to any reader who does not have a serious problem with short-term memory**.”

Gordon writes from the point of view of a teacher, which is useful to students who are not used to looking at papers from the other side. A student (ideally) puts a lot of time and energy into his or her own paper, but the teacher probably has dozens of them to grade. He explains that he (and probably most teachers) can handle reading a **three-page paper in two or three minutes**. When we look at the situation this way, the dumbbell paper “**would tell me the same thing three times in about three minutes**.”

THE INTRODUCTION

“Most of the first paragraphs of the papers that I have read over my years of teaching have been pretty useless. **First paragraphs tend to be where student writers clear their throats and shuffle their thoughts while settling on what they’re going to say**. Also, many college writers use them for the first, summing-up-ahead-of-time stage of the deadly dumbbell format. Before doing the final version, **try drawing a big X through the first paragraph of your working draft**, then imagining a paper beginning with the second paragraph. **It may require a few adjustments, but probably fewer than you think**.”



A writer's job in crafting an introduction is not to create a nutshell version of an argument before s/he makes the argument itself, but to get the ball rolling and not jumping into highly-specific material right away. This is your chance to grab the reader's attention. Of course you should tell your audience what the paper is about, but try starting with an **anecdote**, a **surprising slant** to your topic, the **idea that your paper will refute**, or create a **vivid image** that will stick in the reader's mind as s/he reads.

THE BODY

When it comes to the **body** of an essay, the most important thing to remember is that **this is where writers should make their argument**. When students adhere to the deadly dumbbell format, they may think that because they began an argument in the introduction that they should simply rephrase it in the body. Similarly, they may come to rely upon a long and dense conclusion to tie up all the loose ends in a paper.

Do not repeat yourself unless you absolutely need to for the sake of clarity; go into depth and detail about your topic. This is the place for it! This is the meat of your essay and it should be full of **strong claims that are thoroughly supported with evidence**. The deadly dumbbell places too much emphasis on the beginning and end of a paper. This is not to suggest that introductions and conclusion are not important, but they are not the place for juicy arguments, claims and counter-arguments, and lengthy quotations from the text.

THE CONCLUSION

First of all, try to **avoid overused phrases** like, "In conclusion," "In summary," and "To sum up." Your reader can see your paper is ending; you need not explain it to them. Rather than trying to summarize your whole paper in your last paragraph, try to think about **what the reader knows now that s/he did not know when the paper began**. Recapitulate your thesis to remind the reader of the strength of your claims, but bring in something special: *echo the language or imagery* of your introduction, **give a striking example** that illustrates your point, or **consider the implications** of your argument. You should also think outside the box and try to come up with answers to some of these questions:

- What is the importance of your argument?
- Does your approach have implications that fall outside the scope of the paper?
- If you were to keep writing on the same subject, where would you take the paper next?

So, you may ask, how do we break out of the deadly dumbbell format? With what can we replace it?

Perhaps we can think of some useful shapes. How about the **rolling rectangle**, in which the writer carries the reader through **smooth transitions** in an understandable **progression from point-to-point**, supporting claims with a proportional amount of evidence **without abrupt subject changes** or irrelevant quotations? This structure will not prioritize any section of the essay over any other, and will allow the reader to see how **each line of argument in a paper contributes to the whole**.

Or maybe the **insightful inverted triangle**, where the writer starts with broad claims (but not too broad—let's not have any "Throughout history, man has struggled to express himself through language..." business) and smoothly sharpens his/her argument with relevant examples and support while **moving toward an incisive claim**? This format will **ensure a logical progression**, since the writer is constantly laying the groundwork for future claims, **each of which will build on the last**.

