

# Sample essay: body

The first paragraph of the *body* of the essay deals with the *most important contribution* by Jerome. It is good essay structure to make the most significant point early in your essay.

Topic sentence—tells the reader what the paragraph is about. **ONE** idea per paragraph.

It is rightly as a **translator of Scripture into the Latin Vulgate** that Jerome is best known. The existing Latin texts of the Bible, corrupted by incompetent translation, careless copying and deliberate falsification, differed repeatedly and widely among themselves.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of some twenty years, Jerome translated the Old Testament afresh from the Hebrew and revised much of the Latin New Testament by recourse to the oldest Greek manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Though not without its defects,<sup>3</sup> Jerome's version gradually ousted the old Latin translations and became the commonly accepted version of Western Christendom throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> **It has been called "the most precious monument of Latin Christianity"**.<sup>5</sup> For a thousand years it preserved in Western Europe a text of the Scriptures far purer than that which had preceded it, and which was then current in the Byzantine Church.<sup>6</sup> Jerome's principle that truth lies in the original language later became the basis of Protestant Bibles, which by-passed the official Vulgate to translate afresh from the 'original tongues'. His scholarship also established the difference between canonical and deuterocanonical writings, thus

The next 4 sentences explain why the translation was needed and how Jerome did it.

Key fact to establish significance.

2nd half of the paragraph explains the significance with supporting evidence—each piece of evidence is in its own sentence.

<sup>1</sup> Jerome himself observed, in regards the Old Latin Gospels, that "there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies." See Schaff & Wace, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* p. 488.

<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely that the Vulgate Acts, Epistles and Revelation are his. While Jerome does refer to his translation of "the New Testament" (ep. lxxi. 5), certain stylistic features characteristic of Jerome are lacking in the Vulgate version of these books. The prefaces attached to them in the Vulgate are clearly not his, and quotations from them in his own writings display a wide divergence from the Vulgate.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome's translation of the Old Testament is a highly conservative and in some places slavish literal rendering of the original. This frequently deprives a passage of its proper elegance or gives it an air of saintly unreality apt to cause confusion. It is pockmarked too by variations in renderings which appear quite arbitrary. See P.R. Ackroyd & C.F. Evans (ed.), *Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 1: From Beginnings to Jerome* (London, 1970) p. 526. His revision of the gospels was also conservative. Changes are few and remarkably inconsistent. Ibid, p. 523.

<sup>4</sup> "In 1546 it was pronounced by the Council of Trent to be the only true version, and alone authorised to be printed. Jerome's version was highly prized even in his lifetime: he records that a large part of the Old Testament was translated into Greek from his version by his friend Sophronius and was read in the eastern churches. See Schaff & Wace, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* p. 492.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop Westcott cited in L. Hughes, *The Christian Church in the Epistles of St Jerome* (New York: Macmillan, 1923) p.35.

<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, Jerome's work forms the basis of the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church to this day.

opening the way for the later Protestant rejection of the Apocrypha in the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Jerome's significance also lies in the historical value of his vast correspondence (and, to a lesser extent, his Biblical commentaries).<sup>8</sup>

Last sentence links to the topic of the next paragraph—this makes an essay flow nicely.

His colourful letters, perhaps more than those of any of his contemporaries, bring before us the general, ecclesiastical and theological life of the special time in which he lived.<sup>9</sup> Jerome reveals a Church which, though outwardly victorious over heathenism, was sowing the seeds of internal corruption.<sup>10</sup> He writes, for example, of clergymen who seek office: "in order to see women with less constraint. Such men are entirely engrossed with their dress, whether their perfumes are sufficiently fragrant and whether there are any creases in their shoes. Their hair bears evident traces of curling tongs; their fingers glisten with rings; they walk lightly on tip-toe lest wet roads would splash their feet."<sup>11</sup> Jerome's letters also provide an especially rich description of the rigours of the ascetic life and the rise of monasticism. He praises Paula, for instance, in the following terms:<sup>12</sup>

2nd topic and so a new paragraph. The topic sentence again introduces the topic—Jerome's letters—and *why* they are significant.

What he wrote about and quotes to illustrate the point.

She never entered a bath except when dangerously ill. Even in the severest fever

she rested not on an ordinary bed but on the hard ground covered only with a mat of goat's hair. Well did she fulfil the words of the psalter: 'All the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch

This quote is indented rather than in "quotation" marks because it is over 40 words.

<sup>7</sup> S.G. Hall, *Doctrine & Practice in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 1991) p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Besides his translation of a number of Origen's works, Jerome himself wrote numerous commentaries of 'scholarly distinction. Generally speaking, they suffer from an excessive, uncritical reliance on his predecessors, a lack of original thought. Their importance lies in the fact that they thereby preserve a mass of early exegetical matter that might otherwise have perished, and which through Jerome found its way into the commentaries of the Middle Ages. Jerome also wrote number of books on Church History and illustrative of Scripture. But his historical works are weakened by a lack of critical reflection and exaggeration ('The Life of Paul', for example, was written more with an eye to elegance and edification than to historic truth.)

<sup>9</sup> It was a special time, the close of Greco-Roman civilisation and the beginning of an altered world.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *The Christian Church in the Epistles of St Jerome*, p. 109. Jerome's scathing satire on Christian society in late 4th century Rome highlights the connection between the cessation of persecution, increased wealth and moral deterioration within the church.

<sup>11</sup> Ep. xxii. 28

<sup>12</sup> Ep. cviii, 15-17; see Schaff & Wace, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* pp. 202-203.

with my tears!’ She obtained her wish at last and died leaving her daughter overwhelmed with a mass of debt.

This sentence demonstrates *understanding*—that the writer has read and drawn a conclusion from, the letters.

It is clear from Jerome’s letters that he was a passionate and effective propagator of asceticism.

It is common to start paragraphs with the number of the topic.

A third part of Jerome’s heritage lies in his influence on the development of monasticism both in the West and among women.<sup>13</sup>

He believed that Paradise was lost through the sin of Eve and regained only through the virginity of Mary. He taught that self-deprivation of the physical was necessary to recover the spiritual purity lost in Eve’s fall. So, eating, drinking, even personal ablutions were low physical indulgences to be suppressed as far as possible.<sup>14</sup> Marriage—“a plank for a shipwrecked man”—was all but forbidden; virginity was the ideal if not the essential Christian life.<sup>15</sup> In Rome Jerome became the leader of a circle of wealthy patrician women who sought refuge in the ascetic life.<sup>16</sup> The revolution which he wrought in their lives had a significant effect in Rome.<sup>17</sup> Probably with a touch of exaggeration, Jerome himself observed that he:<sup>18</sup>

Although this topic is linked to the previous one—here the emphasis is on his teaching and example rather than his correspondence.

This is a *description* of his teaching, it does not critique it.

It also *describes* his influence, again without critique.

had the joy of seeing Rome transformed into another Jerusalem. Monastic establishments for virgins became numerous, and of hermits there were countless numbers. In fact, so many were the servants of God that monasticism which had before been a term of reproach became subsequently one of honour.

Although this is pure description, the writer has *decided* (either by reading what others have said, or by their own observation) *on a small number of examples* that the writer considers *most important*. It is not a long list of what Jerome taught or did.

13 Some have argued that it was mainly due to Jerome’s strenuous advocacy that monasticism became so deeply rooted in Western Christendom. See Hughes, *The Christian Church in the Epistles of St Jerome*, p. 41. The social and political condition of the world had certainly prepared the soil. It was a time of imperial decay and degenerate Christianity. But Jerome, tilling this soil, helped usher in a remarkable chapter of ecclesiastical history. His influence extended to the East. In Palestine he directed a monastery for the last thirty years of his life.

14 “Eating meat, drinking wine, having a well-filled belly—there you have the seed-bed of lust” (‘Against Jovinian’ 2.7)

15 Ep. xx ii, 20.

16 These included Paula, the heiress of the Aemilian race, Marcella, Principia, Fabiola. Not only women yielded to the spell. Men, too, were won over, such as the wealthy and well-born Florentius, Pammachius a senator and patrician, and Toxotius.

17 Indeed, the success of his monastic apostolate provoked such a storm of criticism that he was forced to leave Rome after the death of his ally, Pope Damasus.

18 Ep. cxxvii; see Hughes, *The Christian Church in the Epistles of St Jerome*, p. 256.

Jerome's influence can also be felt in the controversies which wracked the Church of his day. He engaged in one bitter controversy after another with vindictive passion. He wrote crushing polemical onslaughts against a number of adversaries.<sup>19</sup> His influence in these debates was, in at least two respects, of a negative nature. **Firstly,** Jerome appears to have been swayed not so much by the force of truth as by the authority of certain powerful Bishops and the wish to maintain his orthodox reputation.<sup>20</sup> He was no great theologian, no courageous or original thinker. In his almost groveling respect for ecclesiastical authority we see the seeds of the papal system of the Middle Ages taking root.<sup>21</sup> Through his writings, the "fatal circle of bondage to received authority" closed further around the Church.<sup>22</sup>

**Moreover,** Jerome's position in these controversies was frequently a *successful defence* of the ultra-ascetic or superstitious practices with which Christianity was being overlaid. Against Vigilantius, for example, Jerome defended the veneration of relics and sacred places. He wrote that it was right to kiss and carry the relics of apostles about in costly vessels or silken wrappings: "In their presence the demons cry out, and the devils who dwell in Vigilantius confess that they feel the influence of the saints."<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Jerome was followed by the ecclesiastics of his day, and these pagan infiltrations into the Church prevailed almost unchecked until the sixteenth century.

The next 3 short paragraphs are *critique*. This is where the negative aspects of Jerome's life are examined—again with evidence for each claim. This is important—we need to learn how to evaluate the contribution of people to the church. No one is perfect.

Here is the evidence of *WHY* Jerome's influence was *damaging*. This is not the writer's personal opinion—but the opinion of scholars of church history.

This is the 2nd point and shows *HOW significant* Jerome's influence was. Specifically, he was good at defending his opinion—so his opinion prevailed.

Each paragraph has a concluding sentence that sums up the argument.

These polemical writings often expose a striking contradiction in Jerome's character. For all his positive qualities,<sup>24</sup> he comes across as

<sup>19</sup> Such as Helvidius, Vigilantius, Jovinian (who denied the spiritual superiority of celibacy to marriage), Rufinus and Pelagius, among others.

<sup>20</sup> Schaff & Wace, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* p. xxx. This is evident in his about turn in regards to Origen: extravagant laudation of him at one time and violent condemnation at another.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. xi.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. xxxiii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 419

<sup>24</sup> He was kind to the weak and the poor, respectful of women, entirely without avarice, extraordinarily diligent in work and nobly tenacious of the main objects to which he devoted his life.

arrogant, resentful, hypocritical and vicious.<sup>25</sup> In his polemic ‘Against Jovinian’, Jerome describes his opponent’s argument as “the hissings of the old serpent; by these the dragon expelled man from Paradise.” Jerome’s dispute with his old friend Rufinus bred on Jerome’s part a seething hatred for Rufinus which he continued to express even after Rufinus’ death: “the scorpion lies beneath the ground with Enceladus and Porphyryon, and the many-headed Hydra has at length ceased to hiss at us.”<sup>26</sup> Jerome’s greatness does not reside, therefore, in his character. His life is no inspirational model of Christian virtue for emulation by succeeding generations of believers.

Here is a critique of Jerome’s character. It sounds harsh—but is backed up by evidence from his own letters. It is not simply the writer’s opinion.

<sup>25</sup> Friendship he found difficult. “The nearer anyone stood to him the more likely it was that it would turn sour.” H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967) p. 185.

<sup>26</sup> Schaff & Wace, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* p. 500.