Understanding Paragraph Structure

This handout discusses a “recommended” (not required) structure for paragraphs in position papers. You can argue persuasively using various paragraph styles in scholarly essays; nevertheless, you should consider the structure discussed in this handout before you abandon the recommended structure in favor of another structure.

To follow the recommended structure,
1. State your claim.
2. Orient readers.
3. Quote evidence from the text to support your claim.
4. Explicate the text to demonstrate that your claim is warranted.
5. Clinch your argument at the end of your paragraph.

Stating Your Claim
State your claim as the first (topic) sentence of your paragraph (get to the point).

**Example:**
The textual descriptions of the love of Narcissus for his own image (love of oneself) and of Echo for Narcissus (love for the Other) show that both are forms of love; both loves are characterized by the movement of the one who loves toward the one who is loved.

Orienting Readers
Let readers know where you are in the text you are examining. You can usually orient readers using an introductory adverbial clause.

**Example:**
After Echo first encounters Narcissus, she follows him through the forest.

Quoting the Text
Provide readers with quotations from the text to back your claims.

**Example:**
After Echo first encounters Narcissus, she follows him through the forest: “Secretly she glided, / Fired with love to follow him; and she / Came closer to his side” (##).
Explicating the Text

You must show that the evidence you cite for your claim is warranted. Point to specific words in the quotation you cite and show how these words have the implicit meaning you claim they have to demonstrate that your claim is warranted.

Example:
The verbs “came,” “follow,” and “glided” show Echo’s movement toward Narcissus, the person she loves.

To further support the claim for this paragraph, the writer must also show that the author characterizes Narcissus’ love for himself similarly.

Example:
When Narcissus talks to his image in the pool, he says, “I reach, your arms almost embrace me . . . I bend / My head toward you . . . Where do you vanish when I come to meet you?” (#). The verbs “come,” “reach,” and “bend” portray Narcissus’ longing for his image by showing his movement toward his image.

Clinching Your Claim

Cap off your paragraphs with a “clincher” sentence that clearly connects your claim with your thesis. A clincher reminds readers of the main point of your paper, signals to readers how this particular claim fits into your overall argument, and provides a smooth transition to your next claim (and thus, to your next paragraph).

Example:
By using verbs of movement, Ovid shows that both Narcissus and Echo love; however, Ovid goes on to show that the results of loving oneself are radically different than the results of loving the Other.