

LESSON ONE: Essay Writing

much of your university work will be assessed by *essay*, whether that's an essay you prepare in your own time over a period of days or weeks, or one you concoct in an examination hall in the space of an hour. It therefore follows that if you learn how to prepare, organize and present essays, you will do much better in your degree overall.

The Essay:

Kathleen McWhorter, author of *The Writer's Express*, defines an essay as “a group of paragraphs about one subject.” Aldous Huxley called the essay “a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything.”

Just as a unified paragraph has a stated or implied topic to which each sentence contributes, a unified composition has a central idea to which each paragraph contributes. Therefore, many of the techniques used to write paragraphs (e.g., developing a major idea, arranging supporting details logically and effectively, and making appropriate transitions) are applicable to the essay as a whole.

The Short Essay and the Five-Paragraph Essay

A short essay has three basic parts: an introduction, one or two body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Each part is a separate paragraph. The first sentence of each paragraph is indented.

- **The introduction** is the first paragraph of the essay. It contains the thesis of the essay, which states what the entire essay is about.
- **The body paragraphs** develop the idea presented in the introduction. Each body paragraph has a topic sentence and details that support the thesis in the introduction. The topic sentence of a body paragraph also states what that body paragraph is about.
- **The conclusion** is the last paragraph. It brings the essay to a close.

Advanced academic studies often require five-paragraph essays that are longer and more sophisticated. These essays have greater elaboration, which may include examples, statistics, questions, definitions, quotations, and anecdotes. They are more analytical in nature.

A good essay should be focused centering around one major idea (*The Thesis Statement*), It should be well developed, and it should be organized following a certain order.

1- Essay Structure:

Like a short essay, a five-paragraph essay has three basic parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. However, unlike a short essay that may contain only one or two body paragraphs, a five-paragraph essay has three body paragraphs. Each body paragraph contains a topic sentence that supports the thesis statement.

1.1. The Introduction

An introduction to a five-paragraph essay must have a hook, background information, and a thesis statement.

- **Hook :** A hook is a statement that begins the introduction. It includes one or two interesting sentences that engage the readers' attention and stimulate their curiosity. The sentences below provide the hook for an essay about a wedding celebration.
- **Background Information:** Background information in most cases follows the hook. The background information contains a general statement or statements that give a broader picture of the subject matter to be discussed. The sentences below provide the context (situation) for the essay on a wedding celebration.
- **Thesis Statements :** The thesis statement is the heart of every paper. It is a focused statement that summarizes the main argument and broadcasts the order in which the ideas will be discussed. A thesis statement usually **comes at the end of the introduction**. It contains the *topic and the controlling idea* for the whole essay. The topic is the theme or subject matter of the essay. The controlling idea defines the purpose of the essay and sets its direction.

Developing a Working Thesis Statement:

Developing a solid thesis statement takes time. It begins with reading and responding to a prompt or assignment to develop a basic claim, brainstorming the supporting arguments for that claim, creating a solid argumentative framework for the paper, and even predicting how you will conclude the essay.

It allows you, the writer, to go through the process of focusing, brainstorming, and ordering information as you work toward a statement that will not only convey to the audience the theme of the essay but also allow you to organize your thoughts and predict body paragraphs.

Example 1:

The Japanese automobile industry has been *invigorated by foreign competition*, which has *forced it to create more economical production techniques and creative, targeted branding for its cars.*

Topic: The relationship between the Japanese car industry and the foreign car industry

Claim: The outside car industry caused the Japanese industry to change.

Points: The paper will examine two areas: first production techniques and second branding (to support the claim).

Example 2:

Stress in the fast-food workplace has led to *serious physical, psychological, and emotional problems for employees.*

Topic: Work place stress for fast-food workers

Claim: Stress causes problems

Points: The paper will examine three areas: physical, psychological and emotional (to support the claim).

1.2. Body Paragraphs:

The three body paragraphs of a five-paragraph essay contain the supporting details of the essay.

- **The topic sentence** clearly states the content of each paragraph. It supports and expands on an aspect of the topic and controlling idea of the thesis statement. The topic sentence is often the first sentence of a body paragraph.

- **Each body paragraph must develop a point presented in the topic statement.** All the supporting details in a body paragraph must clearly relate to each other. They can be description, definitions, examples, anecdotes, statistics, or quotations. Quotations may come from a published work or from a personal interview.

- **The concluding sentence** may either bring the idea of the paragraph to a close or suggest the content of the next paragraph.

1.3. The Conclusion

All five-paragraph essays end with a conclusion that brings the essay to a close.

- It restates the thesis of the introduction in different words. This restatement connects the conclusion to the introduction.
- It may give advice or a warning.
- It may make a prediction or ask a question.
- It can provide new insights and discoveries that the writer has gained through writing the essay.

2- Unity and Coherence

2.1. Unity

Effective writing must have unity. Unity occurs when all the ideas in a paragraph or an essay support each other. Without unity, *the paragraph loses focus*. The topic sentence of the paragraph should focus on **one** topic and controlling idea. The supporting details of the paragraph must support the topic and controlling idea of the topic sentence. If they do not, they will be irrelevant and destroy the unity of the essay. An essay has unity when all the body paragraphs contain a topic sentence and supporting sentences that reinforce the thesis of the essay. Without unity, the essay loses focus and goes off the topic.

Example 1: The paragraph below contains sentences that do not support the topic and controlling idea expressed in the topic sentence. These irrelevant sentences have been crossed out in order to preserve unity.

Jay Gatsby was my favorite character in the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. ~~This is a classic American novel.~~ One of the qualities I valued most about him was his generosity and loyalty to his friends and neighbors. For example, he gave many extravagant parties and never thought about the cost. He invited anyone he knew and liked regardless of their social status. ~~His large home was situated on the wafer on Long Island.~~ In fact, he befriended a struggling young man and offered to help him earn more money. ~~This book is required reading in many college courses because it reveals the lifestyles of the 1920s.~~ Although this young man remained faithful to Gatsby, others took advantage of his good nature.

2.2. Coherence

Coherence in a paragraph means that all the ideas fit together in a logical flow. In a coherent paragraph, the relationship between ideas is clear, and one idea connects logically to the next. Coherence can be achieved by using transition expressions, logical order, pronouns, and parallel forms.

- **Using Transition Expressions for Coherence**

Transition expressions show how one sentence relates to another and create a logical flow. The example below shows how the transition expression *however* serves to set up two contrasting ideas.

Transition expressions are separated from the rest of the sentence by commas.

I enjoy writing in my journal. **However**, I do not like writing letters.

I enjoy writing in my journal. I do not like writing letters, **however**

Transition expressions can be used with a semicolon and a comma to form a compound sentence.

His first novel was not a success; **however**, his second work became a bestseller.

- **Ordering Ideas for Coherence**

One way to achieve coherence in an essay is to arrange ideas in a logical order, such as chronological order or order of importance.

- When arranging ideas in chronological order, use expressions such as in the beginning, next, then, first, second, or finally.

First, I went to the bank. **Next**, I visited my mother in the hospital.

- When arranging ideas in *order of importance*, you order items from the most important to the least important or vice versa. Use expressions such as the *most/least important thing*, *the next priority/most important thing*, or *the third/final priority/goal*. E.g. *The most important thing for me was to understand the assigned topic*

- **Using Pronoun Reference for Coherence**

A pronoun is a word that can replace a noun. I, you, he, it, this, that, those, and these are some examples of pronouns. Pronouns can be used to create coherence in an essay.

E.g. What is *revision* and why is **it** necessary?

Pronouns can also replace whole phrases or ideas.

E.g. I left my dictionary in the library. I do not know how I did **that**.

- **Using Parallel Forms for Coherence**

Another strategy to achieve coherence is by using parallel forms. This means that all items in a list have the same grammatical form.

I like **playing** tennis, **swimming**, and **dancing**.

I like playing tennis, swimming, and to dance, (incorrect)

She **cooked** dinner, **set** the table, and **arranged** the flowers.

Becoming an Academic Writer

Introduction

Learning how to write an academic essay is essential for students who are planning to attend college. Most professors require critiques of books and films, research papers, and formal reports related to the content of their courses. When I first started college, I was excited about facing these challenges and pursuing my major, media and communications. I was determined to improve my writing. To achieve this goal, I focused on three points: the content of an essay, correct grammar, and advanced level vocabulary.

Body Paragraphs

As soon as I started to write for college, I realized that college writing was different from the writing I was used to doing. In high school, most of my writing dealt with my personal experiences. I wrote mainly about my family, childhood, and friends. In contrast, college writing focused on a variety of issues that I was unfamiliar with, such as reacting to a piece of literature or writing about the community. Therefore, the most important thing for me was to understand the assigned topic before attempting my first draft. In some cases, I would have to read and do research to build a foundation. I wanted to include examples, statistics, and direct quotations whenever possible to support my opinions. By giving specific examples, I realized that my essays became more detailed, easier to read, and much more interesting. However, grammatical problems in my writing were still an issue.

I realized that I had to improve my understanding of grammar in order to write for college. Before I came to college, grammar was not my strong point. For example, I often created run-on sentences or sentence fragments. I was more concerned with what I wanted to say than with how it was said. In fact, my professors would not accept this type of writing and made me revise many times. Consequently, I made grammar my second priority. I reviewed the basic grammatical structures such as subjects and verbs and checked all my work for verb tense consistency and punctuation. As a result, my sentences became more complex because I included transitional words, gerunds, and embedded clauses. The more I wrote, the more my writing improved.

Furthermore, because I was accustomed to writing letters and informal essays, I usually wrote the way I spoke with my family and friends. It was quite common for me to include slang and abbreviated terms, which were appropriate in social contexts but were unacceptable in formal essays. I soon realized that academic writing required a much more sophisticated vocabulary. Not surprisingly, improving my vocabulary became my third and final goal. Thus, I bought a new dictionary and thesaurus to help expand my knowledge. I became more aware of how often I repeated the same words and phrases

throughout my essay. I often searched for synonyms to replace words that I thought were too simple for a college essay. I also focused more on the rules of spelling and corrected any errors I found before submitting my assignment to the instructor.

Conclusion

Academic writing requires critical thinking skills, an understanding of the topic, high level vocabulary, and correct grammar. Having these skills is empowering since it has made me a better communicator and student. I have come a long way since I started college, and I am now proud of the writing that I produce.

1. Underline the Thesis Statement in the introduction.
2. How do the topic sentences written in bold relate to the thesis statement?
.....
.....
3. Do the supporting sentences further develop the topic sentences of each paragraphs?
.....
.....
4. How do the concluding sentences of the body paragraphs relate to the next paragraphs?
.....
.....
5. Underline the sentence in the conclusion that restates the thesis statement.