Writing a Coherent Essay

This workshop attempts to provide a useful guide for writing a coherent college-level essay. While a 90-minute session can provide an overview of requirements, strategies and resources to help the writer execute an assigned task, it can do only so much. You are encouraged to use the many resources available to you, including the services of the MWS.

For today, we will focus on the following:

1. The Writing Task
2. Thesis Development
3. Pre-writing, Planning and Organizing
4. Elements of an essay
5. Helpful resources

1. The Writing Task
You must be entirely aware of what the essay question/prompt is asking of you. Review the following:

WRITING TOPIC
Since media have been in existence, parents, educators, and doctors have tried to track the impact on children of violence in media. Usually video games and movies are studied. Court cases have existed where families have argued that violent real-life incidents have occurred because of kids watching violent films or playing violent video games.

WRITING INSTRUCTIONS
In a carefully crafted essay, convince your reader that films and video games containing violent content DO or DO NOT impact the attitudes and actions of children and teenagers. Follow APA format.

APPLICATION: Re-read the Writing Task/Writing Instructions presented above, and apply this strategy for unpacking what is being asked of you.

STRATEGY
• Underline or highlight key words.
• Number the parts of the writing prompt.
• Answer the prompt by restating the question.

FOR MORE PRACTICE: Read (and re-read) the introduction paragraph presented below. Now, use the same strategy to work backward and determine the writing prompt that is being asked of the student writer.

Psychologists have argued for decades about how a person’s character is formed. Numerous psychologists believe that one’s birth order (i.e. place in the family as the youngest, oldest, or middle child) has the greatest influence. Birth order can have a significant impact in the formation of a child’s character. Birth order can strongly affect one’s relationship with parents, relationships with others, and how one views responsibility as an adult.

The thesis statement makes a strong claim about birth order.

Subpoints in the thesis make the reader know how the essay will be organized.
2. **Thesis Development**
   The thesis is the central point or main idea of an essay. It is one of the main ways an essay is unified.
   
   - The thesis is the **purpose** of the essay.
   - If there is no thesis, there is no essay.
   - Having a clearly stated thesis **unifies** the argument.
   - Having a clearly stated thesis **simplifies** the writing task.

A promise: If you spend time developing a strong thesis, you’ll produce a much stronger essay.

APPLICATION: Read (and re-read) the thesis statements presented above. Evaluate each and determine which one is most effective. Be able to explain why.

- **Native Americans have made many valuable contributions to modern U.S. culture.**
- **Native Americans have made many valuable contributions to modern U.S. culture, particularly in the areas of language, art, food, and government.**
- **Many people are unaware of the fact that Native Americans have made valuable contributions to modern U.S. culture, particularly in the areas of language, art, food, and government, and this lack of awareness contributes to the continued disenfranchisement of this minority community.**

The focus of a paper should **NOT** be a simple presentation of facts: it **MUST** contain an analysis.

FOR MORE PRACTICE: Read the question presented below.

**EX:** How did gender roles play a part in the French Revolution?

Your answer should not simply say: **Gender roles played a part in the French Revolution in the following ways...**

This thesis would lead to a mere summary of facts, not an analysis or interpretation.

Now, consider the following:

**Primary sources detailing the personal exchanges of women in late 18th century France reveal that women exerted considerable influence on events, not just as the wives of important men, but also as independent agents of change.**

Adapted from [http://www.swarthmore.edu/writing/developing-a-thesis-statement](http://www.swarthmore.edu/writing/developing-a-thesis-statement)
FOR MORE PRACTICE: Read each of the following and determine which thesis statement is MOST EFFECTIVE? How do you know?

1. The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.
2. While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.
3. While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.

Adapted from http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A good thesis statement:</th>
<th>A weak thesis statement is a/an:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• explains your subject clearly</td>
<td>• incomplete thought or fragment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• clarifies your point of view</td>
<td>• simple statement of fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• justifies your reason for writing</td>
<td>• vague personal opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• supports itself with fact or other evidence/examples</td>
<td>• unsupported declaration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• presents material in a lively, interesting way</td>
<td>• simple assertion of information with no particular spice or zing</td>
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In your own words, explain the elements of an effective thesis statement:

In your own words, explain why some thesis statements fail:

3. A. Prewriting, Planning and Organizers

BEFORE YOU CAN DO ANY WRITING, YOU MUST DO SOME THINKING!

Prewriting is a term that describes any kind of preliminary work that precedes the actual paper writing. It doesn't necessarily have to be writing. In fact, prewriting can just be concentrated thinking about what you want to write your paper on. Various prewriting techniques are expanded upon below. However, know that you don't have to use all of them, nor is any one better than any of the others. Successful prewriting occurs when the writer finds what works best for him/her.

“Nothing so facilitates good writing as actually having something to say.” –T.S. Eliot

Since writing is thinking, effective writers spend a good amount of time developing their ideas and planning their essays. They may employ one or more of the following strategies.

- Brainstorming
- Clustering/Mindmapping
- Outlining
- Freewriting
- Journaling
- Question-Answer
EX 1: Determine which strategy is used below.

Introduction
— Focus
— Thesis
1st paragraph
— Topic sentence
— Evidence
2nd paragraph
— Topic sentence
— Evidence
3rd paragraph:
— Topic sentence:
— Evidence

Conclusion

EX 2: Which strategy is used below?

• Why does _____________________________?
• What is the significance of _____________________________?
• Is _____________________________ important? Why? How does it connect to other ideas?
• How does ______ a__________ affect ____________? Why________________?
• What evidence is there to support these claims?
• What happens in the end? What does all this lead to?

http://slc.berkeley.edu/you-start-writing-paper-guide-prewriting-techniques-0

EX 3: Using the Cluster Strategy

To begin to cluster, choose a word that is central to your assignment. For example, if you were writing a paper about the value of a college education, you might experiment with something like this:
EX 4: Here’s another effective cluster:

![CAUSES OF POOR PRODUCT QUALITY Diagram]

Of course, clustering does not take the place of a linear, traditional outline; but, as the example shows, it allows you to explore ideas before committing them to a particular order.

FOR PRACTICE: Below is a practice exercise in which you will be asked to explain all aspects of the essay topic and employ a brainstorming strategy.

**ESSAY TOPIC**  International students and culture shock

*Leaving home and traveling to study in a new country can be a stressful experience, even though it may be something you have planned and prepared for. Many people are surprised when they experience the impact of culture shock, and it can be helpful to realize your experience is actually quite normal.*

**WRITING TASK**
Define culture shock and the factors that contribute to the experience. Discuss in detail (3) of those factors and consider strategies for dealing with them. Copy this Concept Web on a sheet of paper and use it to develop ideas for an essay on the topic presented.
SELF-REFLECTION

What are some prewriting strategies you plan to use in your next writing assignment?

4. Elements of an essay

You already know that your essay must contain an INTRODUCTION, BODY and CONCLUSION. But how do you structure your essay? keep it organized and unified? help your reader follow you from idea to idea.

The answer –

**TOPIC SENTENCES:** It is essential that you learn how to use these at the start of each new paragraph.

There are two types of topic sentences: **obvious** and **implied**.

You should probably focus on **obvious** topic sentences. For most classes, it is best to be straightforward and state your point as clearly and early as possible. Remember: the goal of your essay/paragraph is to get your point across in a clear, concise, and persuasive manner. You don’t want to confuse your reader or your instructor.

**Obvious Topic Sentences**

These sentences should come at the beginning of your paragraph, preferably in the first or second sentence (since you want to leave room to effectively transition from one paragraph to the next). A rule of thumb: If the topic sentence comes at or towards the end of the paragraph, you should move it up to the beginning. Making your reader figure out what you’re trying to say as you go along is generally not a good tactic.

Adapted from [http://www.english.ucla.edu/TA/hyperteach/PDFs/topic_sent.pdf](http://www.english.ucla.edu/TA/hyperteach/PDFs/topic_sent.pdf)

**A good example** (of a clear, effective, and obvious topic sentence):

*Burnout is a potential problem for hardworking and persevering students to fight. A preliminary step for preventing student burnout is for students to work in moderation. Students can concentrate on school every day, as long as they do not overtax themselves. One method students can use is ______________.*

**Consider this more detailed example:**

Let’s say you intend to argue that music history courses should not skip over the musical developments that occurred during the Civil Rights era in the U.S., especially as they relate to R & B music.

Then, imagine that you've developed a list of reasons why others should agree with you. Don't worry about researching the topic if you don't know much about this type of music. Remember, the topic sentence simply introduces the information—the facts and details will not be explained until later in the paragraph.

- Use of anger/outrage in lyrics
- Use of subtext/hidden meanings
- Artists who gained popularity during this time period
**Thesis Statement:** The important link between Civil Rights era music and today's conception of the R & B genre has been overlooked in today's music history courses.

**Sample Topic Sentence:** The turmoil of the Civil Rights era led popular musical artists and lyricists to incorporate explosive and highly personal lyrics into their songs, very much like the explicit lyrics we've come to expect from Eminem and Kid Rock today.

**Topic:** Use of subtext/hidden meanings

**Sample Topic Sentence:** Music history classes discuss the various ways that music helps bring communities of people together; however, they often overlook the ways that the hidden meanings in songs like “The Backstabbers” by the O'Jays (1972) helped to maintain continued support of the Civil Rights Movement in the African American community.

**Topic:** Artists who gained popularity during this time period

**Sample Topic Sentence:** Many of the influential artists whose work is discussed in music history classes—such as Bob Dylan, Mahalia Jackson, and Sam Cooke—first emerged from the Civil Rights Movement.

Adapted from https://www.roanestate.edu/owl/TopicSentences.html

Moving on from essay structure, the next essential element is **TRANSITIONS!**

Good writers help the reader to follow the text and make sense of the central ideas.

- Readers expect linkages between words, sentences, and paragraphs.
- Provide readers with SIGNPOSTS: transition words / phrases / sentences

[What is a Transition?](http://www.slideshare.net/Rebaenrose/the-three-transition-types-2336758)

**Transitions between paragraphs:**
- Will highlight the relationship that already exists between two paragraphs by summarizing the previous paragraph and suggesting something that will be part of the content in the paragraph that follows.

**Transitions between sentences:**
- Transitions within paragraphs act as cues by helping readers to anticipate what is coming before they read it. They can show the relationship between the idea in one sentence and the idea in the next.

- Make sure the sentences in each paragraph are in logical order, usually with the topic or claim in the first sentence, followed by evidence
- Use transitions to aid logical flow between ideas and evidence

There is no shortage of available resources to help you find the right transition!
Finally, you must compose a well-developed and detailed Conclusion

You MUST have a strong conclusion, since this is the last chance you have to make an impression on your reader. The goal of your conclusion isn’t to introduce any new ideas, but to sum up everything you’ve written. Specifically, your conclusion should accomplish three major goals:

- Restate the main idea of your essay (thesis statement)
- Summarize the three subpoints of your essay
- Leave the reader with an interesting final impression

The paragraph below is an example conclusion. As you read, think about what each sentence accomplishes within the paragraph. What sentence(s) restates the essay’s thesis statement? What sentence(s) summarizes the essay’s three subpoints? What sentence(s) leaves the reader with an interesting final impression?

Two alternative designs for an emission-free fuel cell powered car have been presented and evaluated in terms of environmental friendliness and other factors. Car A is a luxury sedan which runs on hydrogen, and Car B is a medium-sized family hatch which uses hydrogen and oxygen. Each car features recyclable materials and conforms to Australian design standards in terms of performance and safety. However, Car B is recommended because it was found to be more economical in terms of both manufacturing and running costs.

Adapted from monash.edu.au

Notice that the first sentence restates the thesis. The second and third sentences summarize the essay’s subpoints. Finally, the fourth sentence leaves the reader with an interesting final impression. No new information is presented in this paragraph. Instead, the writer sums up what has been written so far and leaves the reader with a last thought. While the content of the paragraph is very similar to the introduction, the paragraph itself is not exactly the same. This is important. Even though the goal of the conclusion is to restate a lot of the information from the introduction, it should sound different because the conclusion’s purpose is slightly different from the introduction.

Adapted from https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/2/60/

Some advice on how NOT to end an essay:
• Don’t simply summarize your essay. A brief summary of your argument may be useful, especially if your essay is long—more than ten pages or so. But shorter essays tend not to require a restatement of your main ideas.

• Avoid phrases like “in conclusion,” “to conclude,” “in summary,” and “to sum up.” These phrases can be useful—even welcome—in oral presentations. But readers can see, by the tell-tale compression of the pages, when an essay is about to end. You’ll irritate your audience if you belabor the obvious.

5. Helpful resources

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/
http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure
https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/resourcesforwriters
http://www.apastyle.org/learn/quick-guide-on-references.aspx#In-Text
http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/conclude.html
http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/transitions/

FINAL NOTES: We welcome you to the MWS and we encourage you to use our services. To make the most effective use of your time (and ours), please come prepared with (a.) your assignment, (b.) evidence of your thinking and planning, and (c.) specific goals.

    Thanks for your active and positive participation.
    
    We look forward to your attendance at future workshops.
    
    Have a great semester!