



Building The Essay

An essay is a piece of writing that consists of several parts or paragraphs. The length of an essay will often depend on the nature of the assignment or your instructor's specifications. The parts of an essay correspond to the parts of the paragraph: the essay has a thesis statement and the paragraph has a topic sentence, and an essay has support paragraphs like a paragraph has support sentences.

Understanding The Writing Process For Essays

There is a basic process that one must follow in order to write an acceptable essay. This process consists of four stages:

1.) Prewriting

- Explore and narrow your topic
- Find a main point and write a thesis statement
- Find and select support details

2.) Drafting

- Arrange your ideas in an outline
- Write a draft using complete sentences and paragraphs

3.) Revising

- Improve the unity, support, and coherence of your essay

4.) Editing

- Find and correct errors in grammar, word use, punctuation, and mechanics

1. PREWRITING

Explore and Narrow Your Topic

The first thing that you must do in the prewriting stage of the writing process is explore your topic. Without prewriting, the writer has difficulty generating initial ideas for the draft. To generate these ideas, you may use any one of the many prewriting strategies to help you generate ideas about your topic. Listing, freewriting, and clustering are just a few writing strategies. Using these strategies will give you a real sense of what you do know about a topic. Many novice writers are not familiar with these strategies or just assume that they are not important. To save time, the writer will often "cut to the chase," thus overlooking this crucial step in writing and begin drafting the first part of the essay or the introduction. This is a big mistake! By skipping this step, the writer is often left

with a lack of direction. Prewriting allows the writer to see "the big picture," or at least the major components of the essay before the draft is even complete. As you prewrite, you want to narrow your topic and focus your ideas on the essay assignment. Before starting work on your draft, you must have a clear understanding of the purpose of the assignment. Consider the following modes.

Narration tells a story or reflects on a personal experience. The ideas in a narration should be organized in chronological order.

Description stimulates the reader's imagination and makes a place or event "come alive." The essay should be written with a fixed point of view. In other words, describe something as if you were stationary, from top to bottom, left to right, near to far, etc.

Exemplification supports points with examples. Examples may be the most single convincing aspect of any paper.

Classification places various topics, events, or things into a single class. It places parts into a whole. The parts should be presented as equal, so no particular order is essential.

Comparison/Contrast shows how two subjects are similar or different. You should find at least three bases of comparison or contrast. Also, use transitions that accurately signal the similarities or differences.

Cause/Effect addresses what makes an event happen and/or what happens as a result of the event. Use transitions that show the important relationship of the ideas.

Argument utilizes logic and reason to show that one idea is more correct and legitimate than another. Support all of your arguments with concrete evidence -- statistics, direct quotations of experts, facts, etc.

Process gives a step-by-step explanation of a procedure. It may be a concrete process or an abstract process.

Definition explains the meaning of a term. You can define by structure, function, or analysis for this essay.

Find a Main Point and Write Your Thesis Statement

After considering your purpose for writing, you should develop a tentative thesis statement. Keep in mind that at this early stage in the writing process, your thesis is tentative, which means it's not "carved in stone" and will probably have to be revised to reflect the refined ideas in your later drafts. The thesis statement is the most important statement of the essay. It tells the reader what the entire paper is about. A strong thesis statement should express an assertion or main point that can be explained or proven, it should prepare the reader for the rest of the essay, and it should be specific.

Topic + Assertion = Thesis Statement

Our cafeteria's problems include poorly cooked meals, a bad floor plan, and an unhelpful staff.

General --I saw an interesting movie.

Specific--The movie *Dead Man Walking* forces viewers to confront the death penalty.

Weak--In this essay, I will show the importance of body language.

Forceful--Body language reveals much about a person.

Find and Select Support Details

One of your primary goals in developing an essay is supporting your thesis statement. Look at the ideas you generated during your prewriting to find the major points to support your thesis statement. Jot down three or four possible major support points, and then move any additional supporting ideas and details under them. Each major point is presented in a paragraph with its own topic sentence, and the ideas and details under them will support the topic sentences. Like the thesis statement tells the reader what the entire essay is about, the topic sentence tells the reader what the entire paragraph is about. The topic sentence, as an extension of the thesis statement, must be focused and specific.

2. DRAFT

Arrange Your Ideas in an Outline

Before you start on the actual draft, you might consider producing an informal outline of the essay, pulling your ideas from your prewriting. This outline should help you organize your ideas before you begin working on the draft. The outline will be your map or blueprint as you write. Your outline should include your tentative thesis statement, major points, and rough supporting details. If you discover that generating an outline is more work for you, then forge ahead to the first draft. Again, the purpose of the informal outline is to give you a clear idea of how the essay will be organized and developed.

Write a Draft Using Complete Sentences and Paragraphs

The body paragraphs are the bulk and “meat” of the essay. They must be organized, developed, unified, and coherent.

Organization in Paragraphs

An effective essay has a recognizable shape – an arrangement of parts that guides the reader, helping him to see how ideas and details relate to each other and contribute to the whole. The following pattern reflects the appropriate organization for an argumentative essay on the issue of taxing tobacco products to alleviate nationwide health care cost burdens.

Introduction

- General information about the subject
- Clear idea of what the essay will cover
- Arouses reader’s interest

Thesis Statement: I believe that taxes should be raised on tobacco products to pay for health care in the United States because (1) individuals purchasing this product are those requiring health care for tobacco-related diseases and (2) the added tax may discourage young people from becoming smokers who would undoubtedly require health care due to tobacco addiction.

Paragraph #1

Topic Sentence: Because a large number of individuals requiring health care are those people using tobacco products, it would make sense that they should be responsible for paying a large portion of the nation's health care expenses.

Paragraph #2

Topic Sentence: In addition, increasing the tax on tobacco products may reduce the number of smokers, which, in turn, may reduce the amount of health care required by individuals, and lower the overall cost of health care in the future.

Conclusion

- Provide closure for the entire essay
- Stress the importance of the central idea of the thesis

Development in Paragraphs

An effective essay uses plenty of specific information; particularly examples that are appropriately arranged to support the main idea. The following is an adequately developed paragraph for this argumentative essay.

Because a large number of individuals requiring health care are those people using tobacco products, it would make sense that they should be responsible for paying a large portion of the nation's health care expenses. **At the same time**, these victims are aware of the effects of cigarette smoking; the Surgeon General reminds them of the hazardous effects on every single pack of cigarettes they purchase. **Furthermore**, it has been statistically proven for years that excessive tobacco use ultimately contributes to health problems such as emphysema, lung cancer, and throat cancer. Obviously, victims of these diseases require health care. Special equipment, medication, and various types of medical treatment are necessary for recuperation and recovery from these diseases, and all of this medical attention adds up to astronomical medical expenses. **On the other hand**, individuals who choose not to purchase or smoke tobacco products are also aware of the health hazards of cigarette smoking; consequently, they make a conscious decision not to smoke. These people are taking precautionary measures to avoid the inevitable medical attention necessary to treat smoking-related illnesses. Ironically, these health-conscious individuals are having to share the burden of higher health care costs with those smokers who are largely

responsible for these costs **when, in fact**, the financial responsibility should lie solely on the culprits--those who purchase and smoke cigarettes.

Unity in a Paragraph A unified paragraph in an essay is one that includes sentences that relate to the single topic in the paragraph and relate directly to the main idea in the essay. Notice the underlined words and phrases in the preceding paragraph. The writer remains on task and maintains unity in her paragraph by using similar phrases and reminding the reader of her purpose in the paragraph. All of the sentences in the paragraph, in fact, reflect a unifying thread to the topic sentence.

Coherence in a Paragraph A coherent paragraph consists of ideas that are arranged in a clear, logical order and appropriate transitions. Notice the words and phrases that appear in bold in the above paragraph. They allow the writer to connect ideas logically rather than express ideas in short or choppy disconnected ideas that have no relationship to each other. Transitions provide "flow" from one sentence to the next.

A Note about Introductions and Conclusions . . . Although the real substance of an essay lies in the body paragraphs, the introduction and conclusion are nonetheless important. Realize, however, that there is not one right way to produce an introduction or a conclusion. Be aware of the basic function of these paragraphs and generate ideas accordingly.

An introduction should do the following:

- (1.) Establish the main idea or topic of the essay
- (2.) Present the thesis statement of your essay in a way appropriate to reflect the purpose of the essay
- (3.) Interest the reader in your essay.

Here are some strategies for introductory paragraphs:

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| -State the subject | -Make a historical comparison or contrast |
| -Use a quotation | -Describe a problem or dilemma |
| -Relate an incident | -Ask a question |
| -Create an image | |

A conclusion should do the following:

- (1.) Reemphasize the thesis statement
- (2.) Provide closure for your essay

Here are some strategies for conclusions:

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| -Create an image | -Summarize the essay |
| -Strike a note of hope or despair | -Reiterate the ideas expressed into the intro |
| -Use a quotation | -Restate the thesis statement using different word |
| -Give a symbolic fact or other detail | |
| -Recommend a course of action | |

3. REVISING THE ESSAY

Many writers believe that the writing process is complete when the last sentence in the last rough draft is complete. However, the writer must revise his essay to improve the unity, support, and coherence of his essay. Consider the following questions in the revision process.

- 1.) Does the body of the essay carry out the purpose and central idea expressed in the thesis statement?
- 2.) Are there adequate details, examples, or reasons to support each of the ideas?
- 3.) Is the essay unified? i.e. Does each paragraph and sentence relate clearly to the thesis statement?
- 4.) Is the essay coherent? i.e. Is the sequence of ideas clear? Are the relationships within and among parts apparent?
- 5.) Does the introduction engage and focus the reader's attention?
- 6.) Does the conclusion provide a sense of completion?

4. EDITING THE ESSAY

Before producing the final draft of the essay, the writer must also edit the last rough draft. This crucial step in the writing process reminds the writer about possible errors made at the sentence level. As you edit, consider the following questions.

- 1.) Are the sentences grammatical? i.e. Are the verb forms correct, and do the subjects agree with the verbs?
- 2.) Are there any errors such as fragments, comma-splices, run-ons, errors in pronoun shift or reference, or misplaced and/or dangling modifiers?
- 3.) Are commas, semicolons, and other punctuation used appropriately?
- 4.) Are capitals, hyphens, and abbreviations used appropriately?
- 5.) Is the writing concise?
- 6.) Are the words spelled correctly?