

# Guide to Writing Essays

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## 1. The Three Parts of the Essay

### *(i) Introduction*

- In an introduction, you must include some variant of the following elements, in the following order:

*(a) Context and/or Problem:* A context is a “hook” designed to draw in readers, telling them why they should be interested in your topic. A problem is a suggestion by you, the author, that there is a puzzle that needs to be solved or a question that needs to be answered.

In a 5-page paper, the context and/or problem should be roughly 80 to 100 words.

*(b) Thesis Statement:* This is a clear, central argument – the main claim you are making – along with a succinct indication of the reasons for making this claim (the “why” of the argument). The thesis statement is not banal or obvious, and it is “counter-arguable”; that is, it would be reasonable for someone to propose the opposite of what you are arguing.

Make your thesis as explicit as possible. An academic argument is not akin to the plot of a mystery novel. If “the butler did it,” then you must tell us so as part of the thesis statement on the first page of your paper. The rest of your paper will be the case you make – in this instance – to convince us how and why he “did it.”

In a 5-page paper, the thesis statement should be roughly 50 to 60 words.

*(c) Road Map:* The road map indicates how the paper is organized. It is a brief summary of the “stepping stones” of the argument – what will be discussed and the order in which the discussion will unfold.

In a 5-page paper, the road map should be roughly 50 to 60 words.

In sum, for a 5-page paper, the total word count for the three parts of the introduction will typically take up about three-quarters of the first page. For larger papers, a general guideline is that the introduction should represent about 10 per cent of the total page count: one page for a 10-page paper, 1½ pages for a 15-page paper, and so on.

- For a sample introduction that contains these three elements, see Maureen Baker's "Family Poverty and Work/Family Conflicts: Inconsistent Social Policies" (in *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, no. 33 [1994], p. 45). Note also how her thesis statement is contained in the title of the article – we do not even have to wait for the first paragraph to see it.

*(ii) Body*

- The thesis statement governs the development and organization of the body of the paper. The purpose of the information presented in the body – the vast majority of your text – is to defend the thesis statement. There should be a logical arrangement of ideas and an evident progression from the start, through the middle, to the end. The paper should move from one point to the next, presenting step-by-step evidence, in an orderly manner with an obvious sense of direction. The information must not have the appearance of a collection of random thoughts.
- Appropriate evidence has to be used to support the thesis statement. Relevant and salient examples should be provided and statistics should be used judiciously. Important points need to be prioritized and discussed in detail. Mundane and trivial information must be excised from the final version of the paper. The limited space available must be used efficiently, with repetition kept to a minimum.
- In the best papers, the case made is persuasive. Counter-arguments are anticipated and successfully contested, while contradictory claims are avoided. In addition, sources are consistently and accurately cited, and it is always clear when arguments come from a source and when they originate with the author.
- If the paper is more than 5 pages in length, consider breaking it down into sections by using sub-titles. This will force you to highlight and prioritize your argument.

*(iii) Conclusion*

- The conclusion is a brief restatement of the argument you have defended throughout the paper. In the conclusion, you must run a fine line. For one, do *not* introduce new and provocative arguments; these belong at the beginning of your paper. At the same time, do not merely repeat yourself; use different words/expressions, so that there is only a slight "echo" of what has already been said. Running this fine line is what separates a solid conclusion from one that is pedestrian.
- In terms of length, the conclusion should represent about 10 per cent of your paper; hence a half-page for a 5-page paper, a page for a 10-page paper, and so on.

## 2. Responding to the Assignment

- Assignment instructions will often begin with commands like *analyze*, *assess*, *examine*, *compare and contrast*, and so on. Make sure you are aware of precisely what it is you are being instructed to do.
- Sometimes the assignment you receive will be open ended. You will be told, for instance, to “write a paper on any aspect of social policy in Canada.” In such cases, you need to reframe the terms of your assignment (though always consult with your professor on this). Pose the assignment as a question, preferably one that begins with *why*.
- Do not say, for example: “I’m going to write a paper on suicide rates in Canada” (or mental health, or race, or religion). Ask a *specific* question such as: “Why do men commit suicide at a rate four times that of women?”. Now you have the potential for an interesting assignment. There will certainly be *controversy* here. That’s what you want. You take one side in a controversy and make a case, make an argument. From a professor’s perspective, these papers are always the most interesting to read.
- A good question is one that cannot be answered “yes” or “no.” If you can answer yes or no, there’s no argument to be made. “Is the moon made of green cheese?” No. So there’s nothing to write about. “Does socioeconomic status affect average life span?” Yes – so again, nothing to write about. But this question could be changed to: “*Why* does socioeconomic status affect life span?” This revised question is intriguing, especially because we live in a country that has “free,” universal access to health care. Shouldn’t Medicare equalize the life spans of rich and poor? What’s up? Notice the element of mystery involved. A good question is a bit of a puzzle. The answer is not easy to figure out.
- Ask a question where a reasonable defense could be provided of an affirmative or a negative answer (“Should the Canadian state grant a per-vote subsidy to all registered political parties, or should parties be forced to fundraise on their own?”). Your objective is to show why one answer is *better than another*, not why one answer is the *only* answer. You have to consider: Would anyone *seriously* take the opposite view from the one I am arguing? If no one would, then you do not have a good question.
- Make sure that your question can be answered in the allotted space. Does your question constitute a huge topic? A good way to find out is to start compiling a bibliography. If you discover hundreds and hundreds of articles, try to narrow your topic somewhat, in consultation with your professor.

### 3. Answering the Question

- “Not answering the instructor’s question is one of the most frequent pitfalls of student writing.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, indeed. If you have a well-written, well-researched essay – but you ignore the question that was posed – you will not do well.
- Even worse are papers focused on the topic but poorly organized. These papers can be spotted in the opening paragraph. The student has a barely recognizable road map, and the thesis statement is missing. There is no clear indication of the argument that will be made. Sometimes there is no road map either, which is a key signal that the paper version of a car crash is about to unfold.
- Do not just throw down a lot of information on the paper, without addressing the question at hand. Do not pile on fact after fact, date after date, name after name, with no thought as to whether or not this information helps you answer the question. Papers will frequently have a lot of material that is well-written, accurate, and interesting. But what is presented provides little support for a thesis. “What does this have to do with my argument?” is a question you must ask yourself frequently as you write.
- Sketch out your case, especially if you are entering a controversy. See John C. Bean’s “An Idea Map” and “A Tree Diagram.”<sup>2</sup> It is an example of an author attempting to lay out the pros and cons of granting rights to animals. This sketch is worked and reworked *before* she attempts to write the paper. (This way of formulating an argument also helps you to avoid plagiarism.)
- You have to *choose*. You have to prioritize which issues will be discussed in detail and then assign those issues the appropriate amount of space in the paper.

### 4. Paragraphs

- The organization of your writing, the way you present your thoughts, is crucial. The *paragraph* is the most important building block of writing.
- A paragraph conveys *one* idea. Paragraphs must have appropriate topic sentences (a general statement that controls the information in the paragraph) and pertinent supporting details. Sentences should be lucid, varied, and precise. Within paragraphs, sentences have to be linked, moving smoothly from one to the next, with no “leapfrogging” within or between paragraphs; they have to blend together seamlessly.

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<sup>1</sup> Sociology Writing Group, *A Guide to Writing Sociology Papers*, 3rd ed., New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> In his *Engaging Ideas*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, pp. 231 and 233.

- A paragraph has to be *unified* around a single thought. Avoid paragraphs where many unrelated issues are discussed. When this happens, it seems like the author has forgotten the point they are trying to make. The author is just “babbling” aimlessly.
- A good topic sentence is critical to the success of the paragraph. An example of a bad topic sentence is: “Workers’ Compensation was introduced in Sweden in 1901 and was made compulsory by 1916.” This sentence is too specific and too “factual.” It would more appropriately appear in the middle of a paragraph, not at the beginning.
- A better topic sentence (because it is more general) would be: “Sweden has designed a welfare system that serves to protect its citizens from the negative effects of the free market.” This improved topic sentence recognizes that a paragraph is like an inverted triangle ( $\nabla$ ), which moves from a broad, wide-ranging beginning to a more pointed, specific ending.
- The sentences that follow support, illustrate, or elaborate on the idea in the topic sentence; they must be there for a reason. Do not put in a lot of “padding.” Once you have the topic sentence down, ensure that all of the following sentences are helpful in drawing out what you want to say. If they are not helpful, get rid of them.
- Paragraphs need to be coherent. A confused paragraph is one where the (numerous) issues discussed have little relation to the topic sentence. Sentences must flow logically and smoothly from one to the next. There should be a sensation of gliding from point to point. When it’s not done properly, there is a feeling of “lurching” back and forth, like being on a bus where the driver is constantly hitting the brakes.
- The following is an example of a paragraph that, while generally well written, fails the coherence test (sentence numbers have been added for ease of reference).

[1] Let’s take a look at the positive points of capitalism. [2] Every year more people graduate from universities and, upon leaving, face the challenge of finding employment. [3] A good percentage of these graduates already have the basics of capitalism established through part-time employment, while obtaining the education that will enable them to compete in the capitalist world. [4] These individuals are the labourers required to produce the goods that we as a consumer society have come to expect. [5] As more people enter the labour force, the chance of finding a decent job diminishes and welfare numbers increase. [6] Capitalism is in fact designed to keep the working class indebted to the employer for allowing members of this class to make a living and support a family. [7] To seek the replacement of capitalism by any other system would mean finding a viable solution to the problems created by it. [8] Until this happens, we will continue to be plagued with famine, drought, economic upheaval, and a myriad of other dilemmas too numerous to mention.

The paragraph begins with a very good topic sentence. It looks like we are well on our way to a wonderful, “inverted triangle” paragraph. Sentences 2 to 4, though not providing strong evidence in favour of capitalism, do at least link up with the idea of something “positive.” The paragraph begins to take a different tack in Sentence 5, however, when the problem of increasing numbers on welfare is mentioned. Sentence 6 delves further into the negative, when we discover an “indebted” working class. In Sentence 7, the author is suggesting that capitalism is so problematic, we may need to replace it. By Sentence 8, the paragraph has gone off the rails. We began with the objective of drawing out the positive aspects of capitalism and ended with famine, drought, and economic upheaval.

It would have been better if the student had taken *one paragraph* to draw out the *positive* features of capitalism, *one paragraph* to draw out the *negative* features of capitalism, and perhaps *one paragraph* to *assess* whether it is the positive or the negative features that predominate.

- Jane Aaron<sup>3</sup> has a number of good tips on how to maintain paragraph coherence (see pp. 32-7), especially the great list of transitional expressions (on pp. 36-7). She notes that transitional expressions have eight functions: to show sequence; to compare; to contrast; to give an example; to indicate place; to indicate time; to summarize; and to show cause or effect.
- Understand what is going on in your paragraphs. Are you describing something? Illustrating a point? Arguing over a definition? Classifying things to see how they are related? Comparing two phenomena? Trying to explain why something happened?
- Paragraphs need to follow each other in a logical order. Do not discuss issues in a haphazard way. Do not present your arguments to the reader in the order that you first thought about them, as if you just sat at the computer and typed everything from beginning to end (the infamous “night-before-job”). Think about the *logic* of your presentation.
- Provide a “bridge” or a link between paragraphs to connect your thoughts. Don’t move too quickly from one issue to the next. Take care with the topic sentence in each paragraph.
- An example of a bad bridge would be: “Power is the ability of one individual or group to ...”. This sounds like a definition, a mere “listing” of points. A better bridge would be: “Power is another aspect of social life that limits our ability to be an individual.” The bridge here is “another.” It links this new paragraph to the preceding discussion. The

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

reader can see where we are headed. Also, “limits our ability to be an individual” is a reference back to the author’s thesis statement.

- Do not undertake this “bridging” in an overly mechanical manner. For example, the next paragraph in this essay should not begin with: “And yet *another* aspect of social life that limits ...”.
- A common flaw in bridging is when the writer has the topic sentence as the last sentence of the previous paragraph. This problem is easily solved – just bump the sentence down to the beginning of the next paragraph.
- Each paragraph should be unified and paragraphs should follow each other in proper order. If you have done this, when your work is finished, someone should be able to read the introduction, the first sentence in each paragraph, and the conclusion, and have a *general* understanding of the overall sense of your work. Read topic sentences to check the *flow* of your writing.
- One of the benefits of reading topic sentences in other people’s work is to quickly grasp the central ideas of their writing. *But then you have to apply this same standard to your own work.* If you write this way, thinking about your topic sentences, it will force you to clarify the organization of the argument. This will prevent you from composing several pages with little or no point to them. You will also avoid repeating yourself, while keeping in mind the formula: one point = one topic sentence = one paragraph.
- How long should a paragraph be? There is no magic length, but avoid paragraphs that are too short (say, less than 100 words) or paragraphs that ramble on for a page and a half (or longer!). A rough guide would be about two, occasionally three, paragraphs per typed, double-spaced page. Few students can maintain the momentum of a paragraph if it extends to more than a page in length.
- Do not have one or two sentence paragraphs. This is a bad habit picked up from blogs and newspapers (especially their “low brow” variants). If the point made is important, you will need to expand on it. If not, it’s probably insignificant, and should be dropped.
- When writing, be concise. In every essay, cut out unnecessary paragraphs. In every paragraph, cut out unnecessary sentences. In every sentence, cut out unnecessary words. Everything on the page must contribute to the overall goal of the essay. This means you should be making constant reference back to the *objectives* of your assignment, to your thesis statement.
- Avoid having too many short sentences. This gives the work a “choppy” feel. An average sentence should have about 20 to 30 words. It is acceptable to have some short, “punchy” sentences. But try to join closely related thoughts into a single sentence. Make

use of commas and semicolons and words like “however,” “therefore,” “hence,” and “nevertheless.”<sup>4</sup>

- Avoid the repetitive use of words. For example, for “welfare” substitute “social assistance,” “government support,” “public programs,” etc.). Purchase a copy of *Roget’s Thesaurus*.

## 5. Quotation

- There are three good reasons to quote (as opposed to summarizing or paraphrasing): (1) you cannot think of a better way of expressing the thought. The author’s words are “right on,” in particular because they have used a vivid, distinct, or “apt” phrase; (2) you will be analyzing a difficult, complex passage in detail, hence it is necessary to quote it so the reader can follow your analysis; and (3) when a reader may be skeptical of a controversial claim if you put it in your own words. Quote to show you are not misrepresenting another person’s views.
- As a general rule, try to avoid direct quotation. By putting ideas in your own words, you show that you have thought about the issues and that you understand what is being said. If you quote too much, your voice gets lost. What you are left with is a bunch of quotations strung together. Always try to minimize quotations in your work.
- Try to reduce a long quotation down to one or two small “snippets,” the essential core of what you at first glance were prepared to reproduce as an extended quotation. Long passages of someone else’s writing drown out your voice and take up valuable space that should be devoted to your ideas.
- At the same time, it is a mistake to have a paper with no quotations in it. This will lead a reader to ask: Could you not find *anything* worth quoting in your research texts? Knowing what to quote, what to summarize, and what to ignore altogether is one of those litmus tests that separate the best papers from the weaker papers.
- Do not quote boring information (like statistics). Given that you should have only a few quotations, they should be insightful and superbly written. It should be clear that any quotations used are essential in drawing out your argument.

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<sup>4</sup> If you do not know when and why you need to use commas and semi-colons, Capital Community College has provided nice summaries at <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/commas.htm> and <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/semicolon.htm>



- Quotations should be integrated effectively into the text, woven in seamlessly.<sup>5</sup> Don't just drop in an unrelated quotation, from out of nowhere, into a paragraph, in an attempt to add credence to a weak argument. It will stick out like a sore thumb. You should especially avoid having quotations as topic sentences.
- Do not have many long, extended quotations (of more than 40 words). In a small paper of say 5 to 6 pages, there should probably be none. In a large paper (say 20 pages) you might want to have two or three. Having zero is best.

## 6. More Writing Tips

- Your argument is something that you should be able to summarize in a sentence or two. "Capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime because ...." Your essay is then a lengthy *defense* of that assertion. Always keep in mind: What am I trying to "prove"? This should be foremost in your thoughts, because all points that follow must relate back to the thesis.
- Think of your paper as in some ways resembling a lawyer's presentation in a court. You must present evidence in support of your client. All your evidence must be relevant to the case you are trying to make. Do not force the judge to ask: "And your point is ...?"
- In writing drafts, you will revise the text frequently. Revision means doing more than just rephrasing sentences, changing punctuation, and adding or deleting a few words and phrases. Do not be afraid to rethink the whole argument as you are writing. Be prepared to make major changes, by reconsidering ideas, reworking the introduction and conclusion, adding and deleting supporting details, and so on.
- You will discover new ideas as you move through the drafting process. This is evident in papers where the student has the main point at the *end* of the paper. It has been discovered it in the process of writing. In such cases, this "thesis statement" needs to be moved to the beginning of the paper and the introduction needs to be reformulated.
- Question your "truth claims." Ask yourself: "How do I *know* this?". Make sure you don't just *assert* something without providing evidence, like those "people in the street" interviews on the TV News. Instead, *demonstrate* your argument. That means dealing with opposition to the views you support.
- Understand the difference between an *opinion* and an *argument*. Opinion involves questions of taste, which you are not obligated to defend. You like vanilla ice cream; I

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see "Quotations: Integrating Them in MLA-Style Papers," by Dennis G. Jerz', found on the Web.

prefer chocolate. An argument, on the other hand, requires a defense. “They are undoubtedly the worst government in Canadian history,” you say. If someone asks you “why?”, an inadequate response would be: “They just *are* ... and that’s my opinion!” In the case of evaluating a government’s performance, we have left the realm of ice cream – with its likes and dislikes – into something requiring that a case be made.

- Make accurate claims: “\_\_\_\_\_ people on welfare are lazy.” Which phrase would you use to fill in this blank? “All,” “Most,” “A majority of the,” “Half the,” “Some of the,” “A minority of the,” “Almost none of the,” or “None of the”? What led you to this conclusion? In other words, *how do you know this*? Did you read a government’s “Report to Taxpayers”? An academic journal article? Was your choice based on your prejudices (that is, your “prejudgments”)?
- Make your point in the minimum space possible. Especially in a short paper, do not take a full page to drag out a relatively minor point. Do this in half a page, a quarter of a page – or even a sentence. This frees up room for you to raise *further* interesting and relevant issues. Even if you have a major point, try to make it concisely. Conversely, do not make the error of glossing over an important aspect of your argument; you may need to expand on it, hence provide more detail. Finally, throughout the paper, avoid focusing almost exclusively on one or two points, even if they are great ones. They can almost certainly be condensed, giving you room to address other matters.
- Be careful of relying too heavily on lecture notes. A very good regurgitation of the lecture will typically get you no more than (and sometimes much less than) a C+. Your professors will ask: Where is the writer/author? Where are their thoughts, expressions, and analyses? Use lecture notes as a *guide* in developing your thoughts – not as something to send back to your professors almost word-for-word.
- Make judicious use of statistics. Often, one statistic (rounded up to the nearest whole number!) is sufficient to support your argument. Writers, especially novice students, frequently drown their readers in a mountain of data. “It was 6.17% in 1955, 6.23% in 1956, 6.19% in 1957, and blah, blah, blah.”
- Excise the words *actual/actually*, *literally*, and *really* from your vocabulary.

NO	The actual figure was 5.2%.	YES	The figure was 5.2%.
NO	She really left him.	YES	She left him.
NO	He literally went through the wall.	YES	He went through the wall.

- Watch your verb tense. Avoid the constant shifting back and forth between tenses. This movement makes it irritating to read and difficult to follow your argument. Whatever tense you choose, be *consistent*. Obviously, there will be times when changing tense is unavoidable in order to make sense, such as at the beginning of a paper, when we often use the future tense (“In this paper, I *will* . . .”). This is acceptable, though keep this shifting of tenses to a minimum.
- It should be evident that a significant amount of research has been undertaken, and that you did not merely skim through a handful of pages from a couple of less-than-stellar sources. The research texts need to be read in a comprehensive manner and must shape your argument. Important information must be extracted from the texts, elaborated on, and integrated into a coherent analysis.
- Be aware of what you are doing wherever you are in the paper. Be a *critic* of your own work. Ask yourself: What am I trying to accomplish? What is my purpose in this paragraph? Is this the best topic sentence I can write? Does the order of my thoughts make sense, or could I improve it by moving material around? Do I need five examples – perhaps two would do? And so on.
- Be careful when using words that are commonly confused.<sup>6</sup> In particular, learn the difference between *its* and *it’s* (note that there is no such things as *its’*), *then* and *then*, *affect* and *effect*, *loose* and *lose*, and *who’s* and *whose*.

## 7. Final Thoughts

- Draw on *scholarly* materials as your main sources. That means two things: books and academic journal articles. You can also use “popular” sources like magazine, newspapers, and materials found on the Internet, but use these more as supplementary materials. Do not rely on them exclusively, as a way of avoiding more challenging works.
- The best papers go beyond mere regurgitation or summary to extend the material found in the research texts in interesting and imaginative ways, synthesizing the ideas of the texts with those of the author. Language is employed creatively, and the author’s voice dominates. These papers are critical – they reflect on ideas, call assumptions into question, and challenge claims to truth.

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<sup>6</sup> See “Commonly Confused Words,” on my web site at: <https://faculty.nipissingu.ca/larryp/lphome/Commonly%20Confused%20Words.pdf>