

Paula Smith's Review of Essay Skills in Eight Worksheets



WORKSHEET ONE: Getting Started, or... Invention Strategies

1. BRAINSTORMING. Also known as “pre-writing” or “freewriting.” Put your pen to paper (or your fingers on the keyboard) and just keep writing for ten minutes *without stopping*. Ask a friend to time you, or set an alarm; you should write without even looking up at the clock. In this time, jot down everything you can think of about the topic, no matter how obvious, indefensible or obscure. If your mind is *blank*, keep writing, even if you resort to something like, “my mind is absolutely blank on this topic, I can’t think of anything to write, the only thing in my mind is how...” etc. Some detail that seems strange or disquieting about the topic might eventually lead into a perceptive essay. Don’t stop to criticize or censor your ideas. Later, you can read over the page and see which ideas might be worth developing.

2. LISTING. In any order and anywhere on the page, list your ideas and questions about the essay topic. Then begin thinking about the order in which you want to present and develop these items. Connect parts of the list with arrows and circles, forming the first draft of your essay outline.

3. CLUSTERING. Use unlined, blank paper. Create a web of concepts, with each main idea at the focus of a cluster of minor, related ideas (examples, consequences, or components of the central idea). Perhaps each cluster will become a paragraph of your essay.

4. JOURNALIST’S FIVE. Try bombarding your topic with the “five W’s” proverbially used by journalists: Who did What? When? Where? How and Why? Stay open-minded and creative in formulating the questions. “Who” might be the author of a story, or a character, but it might also be a group of characters, readers you think the story addresses, an impersonal force, a key concept such as “memory,” etc.

5. READING NOTES. Go back to your reading notes, underlined passages, and jottings in the margins of the text you plan to write about. Re-copy onto a blank page some quotations and phrases that seem suggestive or mysterious. Now either brainstorm with them (see #3), cluster them (see #1) or engage these ideas in dialogue (see below).

6. DIALOGUE. Imagine your topic, even if the topic is not a character, as a person. What series of thoughts and emotions led you to choose this topic? This series can be listed as a “life history” for your essay. Now begin to imagine (and to write down) a dialogue between yourself and the essay-topic. What questions do you ask? How does it answer? What attitude do the two of you have toward each other? Can you reach an understanding? Tell the topic about your frustration in trying to write, and see what it suggests. Write quickly and without stopping to analyze the dialogue. The purpose of this exercise is to bring subconscious ideas to the surface, so that you can work with them later in composing the essay.

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WORKSHEET TWO: BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The beginning draws your reader in, answering his or her first question, “What is this essay about?” In a few sentences, you need to set forth and limit your topic, while at the same time sparking the reader’s interest. There are many ways to achieve these twin goals. Invent your own strategy, or choose from the list below one that suits your *intended* audience, the way you plan to develop the topic, and the desired level of informality or seriousness:

- ↪ set up a problem (and go on to solve it)
- ↪ describe one image or moment from the text you are analyzing
- ↪ open with a paradox (and then unravel it)
- ↪ present two sides of a conflict central to your theme
- ↪ set forth an idea you will later contradict
- ↪ start general, then get specific (risks dullness; an overused strategy)
- ↪ pose a question to be answered at the end
- ↪ begin with a pertinent quotation (and then explicate it)
- ↪ provide context or background for your thesis
- ↪ open up possibilities in order to choose among them by the end

Re-read the beginning of your essay to make sure you have avoided these common traps: assuming your reader already knows what you are discussing; beginning with a series of grandiose or vapid statements; using words like “interesting” in the vain hope that your essay will magically *become* interesting; making claims about universal or general categories that you can’t possibly discuss thoroughly in a short essay. Very often the first three or four sentences of an essay were useful for the writer, who needed to “warm up” in approaching the topic, but they serve no useful purpose for the *reader*. Cutting these sentences from the final draft may improve your essay. Ask this question: How far down the page does the essay really begin?

The ending gives your reader time to reflect on the ideas you have presented. Leave the reader with a final thought or implication—not a summary—which may answer his or her question about the body of the essay: “if all this is true, so what?” Try to avoid trite and obvious concluding tags like “in conclusion” or “to sum up.” Remember: First and last paragraphs are not interchangeable. Is your ending simply a restatement of the opening lines?

- ↪ Save an especially strong quotation, persuasive example, or well-worded analysis for the end of your essay—something to get the main point in focus.
- ↪ Offer one last suggestion, implication, or question, though without introducing new evidence or points you haven’t foreshadowed earlier in the essay.
- ↪ Taking care to give it a new twist, you may echo a memorable image, quotation, or phrase from your first paragraph.

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WORKSHEET THREE: CREATING, TESTING, AND USING A THESIS

“The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea.”
—Virginia Woolf, “The Modern Essay”

You can't prove anything in a short essay, at least not in the rigorous scientific or mathematical sense. You can, however, persuade your reader of one fairly complex, unified idea. While writing, keep this central idea before you, relating everything else in the essay to it in some clear and specific way: as examples, components, implications, definitions, corollaries, counterexamples, results, explanations, etc.

At some point early in the writing process, try writing down your main idea as a single sentence, calling it your **thesis**. (If the idea cannot be expressed in one sentence, your essay may lack unity.) Keep this sentence in front of you as you write (or at least as you prepare your final draft), to check whether every sentence and paragraph in the essay stands in some clear relation to your thesis. Contrary to what you learned in high school, the thesis sentence does not need to be inserted at the end of your first paragraph. If you have a clear grasp of it, and you let it guide the organization and content of the whole essay, your reader will learn “what you're trying to prove” without being told directly. Your thesis may work better for you outside the essay.

How good is your thesis? Spend ample time devising and strengthening this central idea. It does little good to organize a whole essay around a poor thesis sentence. Test your thesis against the following four guidelines:

OVERLY BROAD SCOPE. Are you trying to reach conclusions about “the essence of democracy” or “the role of women” or “the evils of technology” in a four-page essay? Instead, focus on specific points that need interpretation or elucidation.

NO CONNECTIONS. Does your thesis sentence list “three things I noticed about this topic,” otherwise unconnected? Build a strong framework which sets your individual ideas in relation to one another. Watch out for the “list” thesis.

VAGUE CONNECTIONS. Two historical figures “are different, yet share some similarities” (could be said of any two things in the universe), or a poem “effectively uses poetic techniques to convey the poet's ideas.” Instead, use your thesis to link several elements in a specific and substantive relationship.

ANTITHESIS TEST. A persuasive essay always counters some opposing view, whether or not the counter-arguments are stated explicitly. Devise your essay's “antithesis” (contradiction of your thesis) and see whether you are bothering to argue against something foolish and trivial. A self-evident or obvious thesis guarantees a dull essay. Your antithesis might take the form of a direct counter-argument, an alternative interpretation, or even just an imagined skeptical reader making objections at every turn. Try building the antithesis right into your thesis sentence by using an oppositional phrase (although...contrary to...while it may seem...), in order to focus this tension while you write the essay.

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WORKSHEET FOUR: STAYING AWARE OF YOUR AUDIENCE

Every piece of writing has a purpose: to explain, describe, argue, inform, persuade, recommend, inspire, entertain, motivate, warn, encourage, record, demonstrate, etc. Often, the primary (explicitly stated) purpose of the writing hides a secondary “hidden agenda” which is not stated openly. The writer may want to persuade, for example, but she or he may also hope to demonstrate knowledge and gain the respect or favorable opinion of the audience.

If you are not used to thinking consciously about “audience” when you write, go through this quick exercise. Imagine that at your graduation a relative gave you an expensive watch. You left it in your locker at the PEC, and it disappeared. Now you have to write and explain the situation briefly (one paragraph each) to the following audiences:

- ↪ Director of Campus Security
- ↪ your parents
- ↪ the teacher whose class you skipped while looking for the watch
- ↪ your best buddy from high school, now attending another college
- ↪ a classified ad in the Pennysaver (rates charged by the word)
- ↪ your nine-year-old cousin

Just going through this exercise demonstrates how many elements of your writing are changeable: vocabulary, conciseness, tone (apologetic, offhand, didactic), level of diction (formal or informal), the amount and type of information you decide to convey. **In writing, you continually make a series of rhetorical choices.**

Even within the same college (sometimes within the same seminar) you may be writing for a slightly different audience. Some introductory-level essays require more formality than others. Some term papers address a specialized academic audience, while others address a general audience of non-specialists. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you begin to write:

- What kind of audience would be interested in this essay?
- What form and style suits our relationship?
- How receptive will this audience be to my message? Do they have prejudices or biases I need to take into account? Will they raise specific objections I can anticipate and answer within the essay?
- Will excessive formality make me seem stuffy?
- Will slang and colloquial language suggest frivolity? Immaturity?
- How can I avoid stating what will already seem obvious to the audience?
- What is the primary purpose of this writing? Do I also have a second purpose?

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WORKSHEET FIVE: How to Develop Paragraphs and Essays

Some of these methods will work for developing either a paragraph or an entire essay. Others will only work within a paragraph. If you have trouble organizing each of your paragraphs around a unifying idea, try out one of these ten classic development methods.

1. **Example or Illustration.** Use this in a paragraph. After making a statement, give a series of details or examples which act as supporting evidence. Make the examples specific, and think about the order in which you decide to present them. Should they build toward the most dramatic and convincing example, or work through some other logical progression? Remember that the last item in a series tends to gain emphasis from its final position.
2. **Description.** Present information about a situation or object, with a clear idea of the impression you want to give the reader. Have some common thread or dominant theme run through your description, depending on your purpose in the larger essay.
3. **Narration.** Use this to tell a story or present a chronological sequence of events. As one action follows another, don't lose track of your purpose in the essay. Beware of simply retelling the plot of a literary work, or recounting something that happened to you one day. This kind of writing may seem easier than others, because of the obvious transition phrases ("and then," "two days later") used to link the events.
4. **Comparison/Contrast.** Use this to highlight similarities and differences between two things. Usually, one of the two things is more familiar to your audience and needs less explanation. You can use this method to structure a whole essay (with each paragraph elaborating a similarity or a difference), especially when you need a simpler analogy to explain a complex process or subject. Make sure, however, that your thesis says something more than just "x is like y in three ways" or "x and z have important differences but they also share some similarities." There must be some reason or need underlying the comparison.
5. **Definition.** Depending on the complexity of your central term or concept, you could use this method in a paragraph or to structure an entire essay. Use definition to limit and identify your key idea. Beware of "according to Webster," which in various incarnations has become a deadly academic cliché. Think about your audience and what they probably already know; avoid boring them or condescending to them. Often, though, you do need to define or clarify what you mean by an ambiguous word, or explore a difficult concept by looking at it in a variety of contexts.
6. **Classification.** Arrange a complex set of ideas or items, explaining what you mean by each one and showing how it fits into a broader structure. Again, if the relationship among these items already appears obvious to your readers, you risk boring them unless you classify your elements; (types of x, three kinds of y, those who do this and those who do that) according to an original, intriguing perspective with some chance of unexpected implications.
7. **Process.** Explain, step by step, how to do something or how a process works. You can sustain this method through a whole essay, subdividing the steps logically into paragraphs. Usually your tone in this kind of essay, whether formal or informal, suggests that you know considerably more about the process in question than your readers do, and have decided to share your knowledge clearly and non-patronizingly. Think carefully about your audience, and how much they probably already know. Do you need to explain basic terminology?
8. **Causal analysis.** Remember that in a short essay you cannot "prove" in a rigorous sense, so don't jump from examples or correlations to an unfounded conclusion about cause and effect. With careful wording, you can suggest how interesting and suggestive it is to consider the connections between these elements. Show how x leads to y, but allow persuasion rather than strict proof to carry the weight of your essay.
9. **Concession.** In a paragraph, or sometimes a series of paragraphs, you outline the main points of the opposing argument (antithesis) and concede whatever seems reasonable in that approach. Use this method to anticipate your readers' objections, or to add tension and depth to your own argument. Sometimes as a result of developing and examining the opposite point of view you will modify (tone down, admit an exception, add a conditional phrase) to your thesis. Be prepared to refute what you don't concede, and vice versa, or holes will appear in your argument.
10. **Question and Answer.** Also known as Problem and Solution. You can use this structure to organize a paragraph or a whole essay. Begin by raising the question (perhaps a tough problem, an apparent conflict or contradiction, a set of mutually exclusive possibilities, a dilemma) and go on to persuade the reader of your own answer. You may need to dismiss alternative solutions, or counter opposing suggestions, within your essay. The "answer" may turn out to be a synthesis of several possible answers; it may reveal that the contradiction was illusory; it may conclude that the dilemma cannot be resolved. Also remember that the question does not need to appear in interrogative form.

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WORKSHEET SIX: The Art of Transitions

"All fluent and effective composition depends on the connections, or the art by which one step in an evolution of thought is made to arise out of another."

—Thomas de Quinicy

Stand back from your essay and assume the role of a reader. Do you find your ideas arising out of one another, or do you get an impression of sentences and paragraphs jumping disconnectedly across the page? When you look with a writer's eye, you remember your own thoughts and it seems quite clear to you: first you thought of sentence A and then (of course) you followed it with sentence B. To the reader's eye, however, the transition may appear tenuous or nonexistent. A reader who has to stop and puzzle out what was in the writer's mind will probably find the essay less than effective. Most likely you have already used most or all of the connective methods listed below. Sometimes, though, it's a good idea to work deliberately on smoothing out the transitions (between sentences and between paragraphs) in your writing. Eventually, you will include good connectives without having to stop and think about it.

1. Repeat an earlier key word in the new sentence, preceded by "this" if appropriate. The repetition orients your reader and prepares for the development of new material. (Note: if you use this method too much, it may become monotonous.)
2. Repeat the key idea, but use a synonym instead of exactly the same word. This method also allows the reader to relate the new sentence to the old one.
3. Orient the reader by using a term often paired with the key word in your last sentence. If you have been discussing work, a sentence about salaries, or vacation hours, will follow smoothly because it is half-expected by the reader.
4. Repeat a beginning phrase or some other grammatical pattern you have already used. Public speakers often use this method, because the repetition seems to gain intensity as the series progresses.
5. Use a signal word or phrase that directly tells your reader the logical connection between two sentences or paragraphs. This phrase might signal:

example (for instance, for example, such as)
cause and effect (therefore, because, so, as a result)
place or time (next, until, later, finally, where)
contrast (however, although, but, granted that, still)
emphasis (indeed, mainly, even more important)
addition (also, again, another, similarly, as well, furthermore)

If you use "**this**" as a connecting phrase, try to add a word—this problem, this opportunity, this exception—rather than leaving the referent vague and unspecified.

For paragraph transitions, make sure you are not overusing **addition**. Stringing paragraphs together in this way simply adds one point "and another...and another" in no particular order and without propelling the ideas toward a conclusion.

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WORKSHEET SEVEN: Advanced Sentence Building

A main clause can stand alone, grammatically, as a sentence. Complete in itself, with subject and verb, the main clause represents an independent unit of expression. If you try to glue two main clauses together with nothing but a comma, you will be guilty of a comma splice. Use a semicolon (;) or a conjunction (and, but, or, yet) between two main clauses if they are too closely connected in meaning to stand as separate sentences. Subordinate clauses are phrases, added on either side of the main clause, which cannot stand alone as sentences (if you try, you will get sentence fragments). If you want to vary the lengths of your sentences and avoid monotony for your reader, if you want to compose more ambitious and longer sentences, if you seek that elusive quality called “style”—try the methods listed below.

SENTENCE COMBINING

Combine a series of short, choppy sentences (often repetitively structured) into a long graceful sentence. Vary sentence lengths. Try different lengths to achieve different effects in the rhythm and pace of your argument.

SUBORDINATION

How often do you use synonyms for “and” (in addition, also, another)? Some writers, especially when in a hurry, connect sentences with “and” in place of a more specific logical relationship. When you’re writing a first draft, this probably does help you get from one sentence to the next, but when you revise watch carefully for “and,” “also” and “another” wherever these words occur. You might even circle them in your draft. In some cases “and” belongs in the sentence; often, though, a relationship of purpose, emphasis, time, cause, or condition has been obscured by the word “and.” In these cases, replace “and” with the appropriate subordinating conjunction.

PARALLELISM

When you present a pair or any longer series of items, make sure all the items are consistent in both logic and grammar. “Either...or...” and “not only...but also....” are examples of parallelism. If you list verbs, all should appear in the same tense (“swimming, dancing, and flying”). A series of nouns should represent separate logical categories (not “apples, fruit, and bananas,” because the logical categories overlap).

ACTIVE VERBS

On any page of your draft, go through and circle all the versions of “to be” verbs (is, are, been, become, etc.) to see whether passive voice and “to be” verbs dominate your style. A proliferation of sentences beginning with “it is” or “there are” might indicate a similar problem. Remember that “to be” sets up a static equation between two terms, rather than recounting an action or specifying a logical relationship. Look for dynamic, specific verbs hidden away in the subordinate clauses and noun phrases of your sentences, and make these more visible by shifting them into the position of main verb in the sentence.

FILLERS

Delete intensifiers such as truly, very, so (as in “so perfect”), and really. While intended for emphasis, these filler-words only weaken your statement.

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WORKSHEET EIGHT: Logical Argument

In a persuasive essay, make sure that your reasoning is sound and that you have not succumbed to the most common logical fallacies:

Overgeneralization. Taking one, or only a few, examples, you tried to claim that such and such is true in most or all cases. When you generalize (or universalize) on the basis of slight evidence, you will lose credibility with your reader.

False Analogy. Reasoning by analogy assumes that if two instances are alike in a number of important ways, they will be alike on the point in question. To use analogy in an argument, you need to show that the two instances are similar in all ways relevant to your argument—and you need to account for differences as unimportant.

Straw Man. Sometimes it's tempting to set up a "straw man" and argue against a position no one has really taken. A perceptive reader will see that you are avoiding the substance of your opposition's arguments. This problem may arise when you try to envision an antithesis, or opposing argument, for your essay. Make the antithesis as strong as possible, so that vanquishing it (or reaching an agreement with it) will represent a genuine achievement. Exploring a worthy antithesis can help to strengthen your own arguments.

Unjustified Emotional Appeal. If you resort to lurid images, sensational claims, and other appeals to your audience's emotions, you may catch their attention, but in the end this tactic may be resented by an audience that dislikes being manipulated.

Ad hominem. Latin for "to the man." If you use personal attacks, insults and insinuations about your opponent instead of responding to the arguments she or he has advanced, you are guilty of *ad hominem* argument. This fallacy is closely related to "guilt by association," in which you try to discredit an opponent by accusing this person of a connection with a group or individual disliked by your audience.

Oversimplified Cause. You have mistaken a contributory (partial) cause for a sufficient one, or you have recognized only one of several causes of an effect.

Circular reasoning. The "conclusion" is already implied in your initial assumptions.

Either-or fallacy. By presenting a situation as "it must be either x or y" you have ignored possible third alternatives. To refute an either-or fallacy, point out the alternatives that have been ignored.