

ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

英语

学术写作

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Chapter One The Writing Process

Whatever its genre, every piece of writing passes through a number of phases before the final draft, this chapter looks in particular at the process of writing a college essay: every essay should pass through each phase described in the following six sections. Much of this material will also be useful for formal and semi-formal pieces of writing outside the university context.

1.1 Addressing the question

It is not enough to be articulate and clever to get good grades for college assignments. An essay which is intelligent, well-researched and well-written may achieve only a bare pass. Sometimes even a brilliant essay rates a mediocre mark. Students are left wondering what went wrong, and begin to doubt both his and her ability to write and to cope with the subject.

The problem is much more likely to result from a simple failure to answer the question. With any assignment, the first task is to understand what you are being asked to do. The second is to work out how to do it. It takes very little time to analyze a question or instruction; having done so, we can approach the writing process with confidence and enjoyment, and reduce the risk of receiving disappointing grades.

This section will help students understand what different questions and instructions mean and explain how to answer a question directly and fully. We also deal with how to focus, or narrow down, a broad question or topic.

1.1.1 Interpreting instructions

When setting essays, a lecturer may ask a question or give an instruction. The most common instructions are defined below.

Discuss/Consider: Explore a range of ideas and perspectives, noting their strengths and weaknesses. A discussion should be thorough and balanced and may incorporate many of the other interpretive tools in this list.

Analyze: Take apart the whole and examine its component parts. For example: "Analyze the Impact of the Women's Welfare League in West China". In planning an answer you might start by

listing specific areas in which the League has had influence, beginning with the most important. In the essay you would deal with these areas one at a time, discussing the nature and extent of the League's impact.

Assess/Evaluate: Determine importance, make a judgment. An assessment or evaluation goes beyond discussion and analysis: it requires weighing up evidence carefully and putting forward an opinion about overall value. For example: "Evaluate the extent to which gender-related behavior can be explained by sex stereotyping". This instruction could be paraphrased: To what extent can the differences between girls' and boys' behavior be explained by social conditioning? You might decide, having reviewed a body of evidence, that differences in behavior have little to do with sex stereotyping by society and more to do with genetic factors. Or, you might decide the opposite. An assessment or evaluation is your judgment based on careful consideration of evidence.

Classify: Place persons or things (especially animals and plants) together in a group because they are alike or similar. Science uses a special classification or group order: phylum (or division), class, order, family, genus, species, and variety.

Summarize/Outline: Extract the main points, give an overview. A summary or outline should be clear, concise, and follow a logical sequence.

Demonstrate/Illustrate: Show, prove or clarify using reasoning, evidence and examples. Pin down abstract discussion with relevant, well-explained examples. Show you can apply the theory.

Explain: There are several meanings:

1. Make plain or understandable. For example: Explain Marx's theory of historical materialism.
2. Give reasons for. For example: Explain Hitler's decision to invade Russia.
3. Show the logical development of. For example: Explain the process by which a bill becomes law.

Argue: Set forth a case to support a particular point of view. Convince the reader with reasoning and evidence that the view is sound. Try to anticipate and answer the opposition's objections to your argument.

It is important to point out that you may not personally agree with what you are asked to argue. For example, you may be given the instruction: Argue the case for the removal of all forms of censorship. It is immaterial whether you personally agree or disagree with censorship—if you are asked to take a certain line that is how you must argue. This type of exercise is very good practice for developing objectivity.

Comment: Give an opinion. When asked to comment on a situation, you are being asked for your response to it. You may discuss the issues, or make observations, explain interpret where appropriate.

Identify: Single out and discuss, establish the identity of. For example: "Identify the key features of the government's economic policy."

Examine: Inspect closely, test rigorously, investigate, challenge, question. Subject what-ever is to be examined to the kind of treatment you must endure in examinations!

Describe: Give an account or outline. Description is a straightforward task, but it is not purely a

matter of copying the right bit from the relevant source. There may be a mass of material which needs synthesizing and structuring. The descriptive account should be clear and well-organized, with the main points emphasized.

Define: There are several meanings:

1. Identify and discuss. For example: Define the characteristics which distinguish humans from other species.
2. Set precise limits. For example: Define the extent to which the police should intervene in domestic disputes.
3. Give a definition. For example: Define the term “pro-choice” as it relates to the abortion debate.

You may be asked to write an entire essay based on the definition of a term. Here you need to focus on the special usage of the term in a given context.

In a definition essay it is important to distinguish the term to be defined from other similar terms. In the last case above, for example, you might show that, while the term “pro-choice” and “pro-abortion” mean the same, each has distinct connotations. These connotations are crucial for the abortion debate: where you stand on the question determines which term you prefer. It would be important to discuss how the term “pro-choice” controls the ideological basis of those who defend “a woman’s right to choose”.

Compare: Identify similarities between two things. What important features do they have in common?

Contrast: Identify differences between two things. In what important ways is each unique?

Although the terms compare and contrast are often regarded as opposites, they form part of a single analytical process. In the course of examining two things side by side, we discover both similarities and differences. To focus exclusively on one set or the other gives only half the picture.

The things you are required to compare/contrast will be related to one another in some way; that is, there will be superficial similarities. For example, you may be asked to compare two sonnets, the political styles of two leaders, or the causes of two wars. An instruction beginning compare/contrast requires you to expose the subtle and crucial similarities and differences between the two.

1.1.2 Taking the question apart

When lecturer passes out sheets of essay questions the commonest initial response among students is overwhelming confusion. Some questions seem like puzzles, packed with instructions or questions, special terminology and concepts, modifying phrases and clauses, sub-sections and so on. Other questions are vague and broad.

There are efficient ways of dealing with both types of question. Blind stabbing at an answer is very likely to miss the point of the exercise. To write a good essay it is essential to have a sense of control over the material and a clear purpose for writing. If we remain confused about the meaning

of the essay question, confusion will spill into our writing. A strong, coherent and lucid essay begins with the writer understanding clearly the requirements of the task. The steps for tackling a question are set out below.

1.1.3 Keeping to the point

We have seen how to confront a question in a way that will enable us to answer it directly and fully. It is also important to be seen to be answering the question by the marker. Sometimes students use the question to launch their essay, and then leave it behind on the title page. A good essay makes explicit reference to the question in the introduction and echoes key phrases of the question several times during the writing. This shows the marker that we know our purpose and remain focused on the task set.

The writer must judge the right place and how often to echo the question. The strategy is often used effectively in the introduction, at the start or end of paragraphs, and in the conclusion. Echoing can be overdone: repeating the same phrase too often bores and irritates the reader. Reading your essay aloud with a critically-attuned ear is the best way to pick up over-repetition.

It is important to satisfy the reader that you are keeping to the point of the question and are not straying into an interesting but irrelevant side issue. It is even more important that the point of the question is understood at the outset.

The following essay question was set for an Effective Writing class. The question appears to be straightforward, and perhaps, for this reason, many students missed the point. The essays were competently written, but either treated the question too generally, or misread it. The question was: "What are the causes of alcoholism among teenagers?"

Most essays dealt with the causes of teenage *drinking* instead of the causes of teenage *alcoholism*. They failed to explain what turns teenage drinkers into alcoholics. Other essays focused on: the nature and extent of the problem, the difficulties of curing teenage alcoholics, the effects of teenage alcoholism, and the ills in society which produce teenage drinkers and teenage problems generally.

The following essay stood out from the rest because the writer, Joslyn Tait, clearly understood what was being asked and constructed a direct, thorough and intelligent answer. A marker asks no more than that.

Sample essay

What are the causes of alcoholism among teenagers?

Establishes common ground with reader.

Introduction begins by talking about effects, and works back to causes.

We are all too well aware of the adverse psychological and physical effects alcoholism among teenagers may have on the dependant and his/her family and friends. Treatment for those concerned is available in many different forms, but by then the major damage is already done. The best way to

Establishes reason for answering question.

Paraphrases question.

Divides causes into types and indicates to reader the plan of attack.

protect people from the consequences of alcohol abuse is through prevention of the problem in the first place. In order to do this we need to know the causes. Alcoholism is a complex problem and the reasons for its existence are no less complicated. What makes young people become dependent on drink? The possible causes can be broken down into three main categories: social, psychological, and biological.

The social aspect involves the acceptability and the availability of alcohol. Such factors are not within the control of the individual. There are five social causes that may lead to the use of alcohol by teenagers.

Introduces first set of causes: social.

Deals with the use of alcohol initially.

Discusses first social cause: the need for acceptance by Peers.

The first involves the basic human need for acceptance by a group. In teenage circles, the use of alcohol symbolizes unity, friendship, and sociability. Adolescence is a time when most people need to feel part of a group, and by accepting drink when offered, the teenager believes him/herself to be a member of that group.

Second social cause: the need or desire to rebel against adults.

Adolescence is also a time of rebellion. Consuming alcohol expresses a general rejection of conventional adult standards. This, then, is another cause of alcohol use and possible abuse by youths.

Third social cause: the belief that alcohol consumption is a measure of masculinity.

A third cause is the definition of alcohol as a symbol of aggressive and masculine behavior. Teenagers especially tend to judge others on their ability to consume large quantities of drink in a short time. Being able to outdo the next person creates a sense of power. Such competitiveness is conducive to an abusive drinking style.

Fourth social cause: a desire to imitate adult behavior.

Related to this is the belief that drinking symbolizes adult status. Teenagers find themselves at a difficult stage between childhood and adulthood. Because teenagers are eager to leave one stage and advance to the next, imitation becomes another cause of drinking.

Fifth socially-related cause: alienation.

The fifth socially-related cause is that of alienation. This could be from peers, parents, or both. The actual reason for feeling alienated could be anything from simply not fitting in due to differing values and attitudes, to the presence of a rift between parents and children as a result of a broken home. The frustration of not being able to relate to or communicate with these people can cause many teenagers to find refuge in alcohol. This leads to the psychological causes.

Leads into discussion of psychological causes.

States first psychological cause: the induces belief that alcohol pleasure or averts discomfort. The social aspects discussed above are not the immediate causes of alcoholism among teenagers. Instead, they are the causes of various psychological effects which in turn may lead to alcohol dependence. The following psychological causes and their relationship to the social elements is complicated, but the basic psychological reason for drinking is to promote a feeling of satisfaction, that is, to induce pleasure or avoid discomfort.

Psychological cause: belief that alcohol reduces tension. The use of alcohol as a form of tension reduction is a direct consequence of the feeling of alienation. Alcohol induces a feeling of relaxation which is satisfying to the drinker. It is this attempt to reduce tension which can lead to abuse.

Psychological cause: belief that drunkenness excuses undesirable behaviors, or gains attention for drinker. When a teenager discovers alcohol as a result of any of the causes discussed thus far, he/she often also discovers that drunkenness can be used as an excuse for his/her actions or as a means of gaining attention. This leads to the main psychological cause of alcoholism: drinking for reinforcement.

Summarizes essay so far.

Discusses how reinforcement works.

Gives status of main psychological cause. As discussed above, young people consume alcohol for various reasons—group acceptance, rebellion, power, imitation, tension reduction, as an excuse for their actions, and attention—and it is as a reinforcement of these conditions that they continue to drink. As soon as they discover that alcohol can satisfy them for whatever reason, the automatic progression is to drink more. Reinforcement of satisfaction is therefore the immediate cause of alcoholism.

Discusses aspects of individuals' personalities which may contribute to alcohol abuse Also psychological conditions, but not a direct cause of problem drinking, are personality disorders. Many youths express antisocial, depressive, or delinquent behavior. In such cases, alcoholism is more likely to develop than with people who do not exhibit such tendencies. These disorders, however, are not sufficient causes of alcoholism but merely contributory conditions.

Introduces third set of causes: biological. Shows relationship among three sets of causes. The final category is biological causes. Again, these are not single, sufficient causes of alcoholism, but they mean that those people in these classes are more susceptible to problem drinking if social and psychological causes are present. There are two such classes: abnormalities of body functions found

States two types of biological cause: abnormalities of body functions, and genetics. Gives status of biological causes in many alcoholics, but although studies have been made, it has not yet been proved whether these are causes or effects of excessive drinking; and genetics, where the facts are still uncertain, but studies are suggestive of genetic factors in the development of alcoholism. It must be stressed here

that biological factors alone can not be blamed as the cause of dependence on alcohol; they are at best contributory.

Conclusion summarizes the roles of different types of cause.

Suggests most effective prevention of the problem.

We can see then that the causes of alcoholism among teenagers are varied and complex. There may be contributory biological factors, in which case those susceptible could be made aware of possible problems. The underlying causes, however, are social ones, and these in turn cause psychological effects which are the immediate cause of alcoholism. All teenagers are subject to the possibility of alcohol dependence. Unfortunately, the social factors discussed are difficult to control. In order to attempt to prevent alcoholism among young people, there needs to be early identification of problem drinking. Better still, teenagers themselves need to be aware of the causes.

1.1.4 Focusing on a question or topic

Sometimes a question may be very broad, and provide the student with few clues on how to proceed with writing a satisfactory answer. Other assignments invite the writer to invent his or her own topic. In these situations there are strategies we can use to arrive at a precisely-defined and manageable writing project.

To produce a tightly-argued, coherent piece of writing, the narrower the topic the better. A broad topic is difficult to control—there is so much to cover that we don't know where to begin, or are only able to discuss the topic in a vague and superficial way.

It is useful to set out in the introduction to the essay how a broad question will be dealt with. Limits may be set if the scope is too broad for the space permitted. It would be wise to check these limits with the lecturer or tutor if possible. The following extract is the introduction to a social anthropology essay on ritual healing. If we are given a choice of essay topics within a broad area we may use the following exercise to arrive at a well-focused topic. Considerations guiding the final choice include: our personal interests, our ability to handle a subject, and the availability of research materials.

Sample Assignment

Write an essay on any aspect of children's play

1. We begin by thinking of as many ideas as possible which are related in some way to the broad topic. These, should be listed randomly—there is no need to arrange a hierarchy of ideas. For example:

the role of play
TV and play

gender and play
historical changes
play at different stages of childhood
language and play
war toys
resolution of conflict in play
etc.

2. Next, we look through the list, extract an idea which seems interesting, and do the exercise again. For example:

TV and play

influence of TV on types of play
influence on time spent playing
influence of advertising
influence of values presented—differ from parents
etc.

3. Again, we choose an idea that appeals, and repeat the exercise. For example:

influence of values presented on TV

Do children who watch violence on TV become more aggressive in play?
Does TV have a greater influence than parents' values on the development of children's values?
Does TV teach children to become anti-social and materialistic, and how does this impact on play?

4. By continually narrowing our focus in this way we arrive at a suitable topic or question for an essay. For example:

Topic: The impact of television on children's values as expressed in their play.

Question: Do children who watch violence on TV become more aggressive in their play?

Checklist for addressing the question

The following questions may be used to check that an essay addresses the question, and thus meets the requirements of the task.

1. Does the essay confront the question directly and explicitly?
2. Have I identified the instructions accurately?
3. Have I interpreted the question correctly? (Paraphrasing helps.)
4. Have I answered every part of the question? Is a reasonable amount of space devoted to each part?
5. Does the essay keep to the point?
6. Have I echoed key phrases of the question several times during the essay?
7. Is the topic defined precisely in the introduction?

1.2 Planning a piece of writing

Planning is often the most demanding and time-consuming phase of the writing process. Writing itself is more fun—the practice of a craft. During planning we decide what to say; during writing we work out how to say it.

Planning is concerned with content, not style. It involves re-reading notes, sifting and sorting facts, ordering ideas, and deciding priorities. It requires coming to terms with the demands of a writing task and taking a stance towards a question, topic, or issue in the light of research.

Writers plan in different ways. At one extreme are those who do a great deal of reading and thinking but no formal, written planning. They plan entirely in their heads. At the other extreme are those who write very detailed plans including numbered points, subheadings, quotations to be used, cross-references to sources, and a well thought out argument. Both extremes can produce successful writing.

Writers choose the method that suits them and one they feel confident will achieve the best result for a particular writing task. Some like the security of a detailed plan; others prefer to rely on flashes of inspiration as their pen flies across the pages (or their fingers across the keyboard).

The danger with having no written plan is that the writing often lacks coherence and direction. The reader senses that the writer is not firmly in control of the material. With an essay, there is the risk of veering off the topic and failing to answer the question. Too rigid planning, on the other hand, produces writing which lacks energy and flair. The voice risks becoming too formal and fluency suffers.

Most writers work out some sort of plan on paper. This helps pin down ideas and establish a clear purpose for writing. The task becomes more approachable when the way ahead is mapped out in logical steps. The plan acts not only as a guide, but also as a reference point by which we can measure progress.

Readers feel greater confidence in a writer when they can identify a clear structure to a piece of writing. Markers of essays, in particular, are impressed by work which is well organized. Many lecturers ask students to state their plan of attack in the introduction to their essay.

The more time we spend thinking and planning, the less we spend writing, and vice versa. Writers who plan very little on paper tend to work through more rough drafts before the final draft. With each successive draft, ideas are re-organized and clarified and the writing is perfected. Bits are added, expanded, cut down or cut out.

Writers who make detailed plans usually need to do fewer drafts because the approach and organization of a piece are decided before the writing begins. Re-working tends to focus on individual sentences within paragraphs, and can be done as the writing proceeds. Two drafts, with some polishing and editing, may be enough to produce a good piece of work.

Experienced writers know how much planning they need to do before beginning to write. Less experienced writers often plunge into writing too quickly—not because they believe this produces the best work, but because the specter of the looming deadline causes panic. The outline below is one method of constructing a plan for a piece of writing. It can be modified for different types of writing task and to suit different writers.

1.2.1 Reading over your notes

While reading, list every point you consider important for answering the question/meeting the requirements of the task. The important points will come up again and again in your notes. Don't worry about classifying and ordering points at this stage.

1.2.2 Reading through important points

Add any other ideas or questions of your own which are pertinent to the topic: this is called “brainstorming”. The final list should cover all the important ideas—your own and from the background literature—to be discussed in the assignment.

1.2.3 Classifying and organizing material

Look through the list and group related points into broader categories. Rank the categories in terms of their importance for the assignment.

Sensible and cunning organization contributes to the overall strength of a piece of writing. To woo the reader, it is essential to begin and end a piece strongly. Generally, the most important point should follow the introduction. Beginning with a minor point could result in the reader dismissing our whole argument as ridiculous.

Section 1 in this chapter includes an essay on the cause of teenage alcoholism. If the essay had begun by emphasizing the genetic factor in alcoholism, some readers might have given up in disgust, thinking that the writer had missed the point. Tait saves the discussion of genetic factors until well into the essay, where she suggests that they may contribute to the development of alcoholism where certain social and psychological factors exist. In this way she avoids the risk of losing the reader at the outset.

General points should come before particular points. In the same essay, Tait states, after the introduction, that social factors causing teenage alcoholism have to do with the acceptability and availability of alcohol. This general point is followed by discussion of five specific social factors.

Such specific points are subordinate to, and support or apply, a general, broad idea.

As well as ordering ideas according to their importance, we need to plan for a smooth transition from one idea to the next. The reader should be able to see how each idea is connected logically to those before and after it.

Sometimes it takes several days of thinking about the material and the task before we feel able to classify and order the material. Often it helps to take a break from formal work on an assignment at this stage to achieve greater objectivity. Intense concentration on a project over a long period may cloud our perception. Over a break, ideas settle and arrange themselves in our minds. Themes, priorities and a sequence for the piece writing emerge.

Usually we decide our main argument during the planning stage. This is necessary because the entire piece of writing needs to be organized to support it.

1.2.4 Writing a plan

This should be written on one side of paper so that it can be easily referred to during writing.

Arrange the plan in sections. The number and scope of sections will depend on the scale or the assignment. For example, there would be no point planning to cover ten sections in an essay of 1,000 words. Five would be more feasible. You may wish to award a number of words to each section to ensure a balanced coverage; for example, 100 words for the introduction, 250 for section one, and so on.

Summarise the content of each section in point form. Note any quotations or examples you intend to use in the section.

The plan should begin with any introduction and end with a conclusion. The characteristics of each are described below in brief.

An introduction should:

1. Engage the reader's interest and draw attention to the importance of the issue to be discussed. Sometimes brief background details are given.
2. State your main argument/conclusion. If you do not want to disclose this at the beginning, state the main issues to be considered.
3. State what you plan to cover, how you intend to answer the question. This provides readers with a "map" —they know what to expect and what to look for in the writing.

A conclusion should:

1. Sum up your main points clearly and convincingly.
2. Announce or repeat your main argument/conclusion.
3. Satisfy the reader that you have met the requirements of the task.

Do not introduce any new information in the conclusion. Leave no loose ends. Finish on a strong, positive note.