

COLLEGE WRITING SKILLS

John
Langan

— in
Langan

ATLANTIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COLLEGE WRITING SKILLS

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Other books by John Langan

1980	DOING WELL IN COLLEGE (WITH JUDITH NADELL)
1981	ENGLISH SKILLS, SECOND EDITION
1982	READING AND STUDY SKILLS, SECOND EDITION (FORM A)
1983	SENTENCE SKILLS, SECOND EDITION (FORM A)
1984	SENTENCE SKILLS, SECOND EDITION (FORM B)
1984	READING AND STUDY SKILLS, SECOND EDITION (FORM B)

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

College Writing Skills will help students master the essential features of the traditional five-paragraph essay. It is a nuts-and-bolts book with a number of special features to aid teachers and their students.

- **Four principles are presented as keys to effective writing.** The four principles (unity, support, coherence, and sentence skills) are highlighted on the inside front cover and reinforced throughout the book. Part One focuses on the first three principles; Part Five serves as a concise handbook of sentence skills. Other parts of the book show how the four principles apply in different types of essay development (Part Three) and in specialized types of writing (Part Four).
- **Activities and assignments are numerous and varied.** For example, in the opening two chapters there are over twenty activities to help students learn how to advance and support a thesis. There are over a hundred activities in the entire book. Such activities serve as an essential step between the explanation of a skill and a student's full understanding of that skill.

A variety of writing assignments follows each of the types of essay development in Part Three. Some topics are highly structured for students needing such support; others require more work on the part of the student. Instructors thus have the option of selecting those assignments most suited to the individual needs of their students.

- **Clear thinking is stressed throughout.** This focus on logic starts with the introductory "To the Student" on page xiii. The book continually emphasizes that the essay is the result of a sustained reasoning process. Writing assignments provide direction in clear thinking and planning; a section in Part Two on outlining offers practice in grouping ideas and details in logical ways; many

activities in the book require students to develop rigorous thinking skills; a form that will help students plan a well-thought-out essay appears on the last page of the book. In short, students learn that clear writing is inseparable from clear thinking.

- **Writing is treated as a process.** Specific areas in Part Two of the book concern prewriting, rewriting, and editing. In addition, most writing assignments are accompanied by “Suggestions on How to Proceed” that give step-by-step directions in the process of writing a paper.
- **Lively models are provided.** One (though by no means the only) way that students learn is by imitation. *College Writing Skills* thus provides several high-interest essays with each assignment. Students read and evaluate these essays in terms of the already explained standards of unity, support, and coherence. Student essays appear in place of professional ones, which typically run longer than five hundred words and vary widely from the regular five-paragraph format. The book assumes that students are especially interested in and challenged by the writing of their peers. After reading vigorous papers composed by other students and experiencing the power that good writing can have, students will be more encouraged to aim for similar honesty, realism, and detail in their own work.
- **The book is versatile.** Since no two people use an English text in exactly the same way, the material has been organized in an highly accessible manner. Each of the seven parts of the book deals with a distinct writing area. Instructors can therefore turn quickly and easily to the skills they want to present.
- **Helpful learning aids accompany the book.** Instructors will find useful the checklist of the four steps in essay writing on the inside front cover. Also helpful will be the form for planning an essay on the inside back cover and the list of correction symbols on the last page. A thorough Instructor’s Manual includes a model syllabus, suggestions for using the book, a detailed answer key, and mastery tests for a number of key skills in essay writing. In addition, a set of twenty-five ditto master tests is provided free to those adopting the text. These tests offer practice in a wide range of skills covered in the book, from generating and narrowing a thesis to outlining essays to editing papers for such common mistakes as fragments, verb problems, and run-ons. Both the Instructor’s Manual and the ditto masters are available from the local McGraw-Hill representative or by writing to the English Editor, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020.

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John Langan

TO THE STUDENT

The experience I had writing my first college essay has helped shape this book. I received a C– for the essay. Scrawled beside the grade was the comment, “Not badly written, but ill-conceived.” I remember going to the instructor after class, asking about his comment as well as the word “Log” that he had added in the margin at various spots. “What are all these logs you put in my paper?” I asked, trying to make a joke of it. He looked at me a little wonderingly. “Logic, Mr. Langan,” he answered, “logic.” He went on to explain that I had not thought out my paper clearly. There were actually two ideas rather than one in my thesis, one supporting paragraph had nothing to do with either idea, another paragraph lacked a topic sentence, and so on. I’ve never forgotten his last words. “If you don’t think clearly,” he said, “you won’t write clearly.”

I was speechless, and I felt confused and angry. I didn’t like someone telling me that I didn’t know how to think. I went back to my room and read over my paper several times. Eventually I decided my teacher was right. “No more logs,” I said to myself. “I’m going to get these logs out of my papers.”

My instructor’s advice was invaluable. I learned that if you plan and think through an essay first, you’ll have completed a major stage of the work. *College Writing Skills* develops this idea by breaking down the writing process into a series of easily followed steps. Part One of the book presents the four basic steps or principles you’ll need to write strong essays. The steps are: (1) Begin with a clearly stated point or thesis. (2) Provide logical, detailed support for your thesis. (3) Organize your supporting material effectively. (4) Revise and edit carefully so that the material is presented in clear, error-free sentences.

In Part Two, you’ll learn a series of prewriting techniques that will help you generate and develop your ideas on paper. You’ll also work through a series of

outlining activities that will sharpen your ability to think clearly and logically. Other important factors in the writing process are presented as well.

Part Three describes a number of different ways you can organize and develop essays. Each chapter opens with a brief introduction followed by several essays written by students. Then comes a series of questions so that you can evaluate the essays in terms of the basic principles explained in Part One. Finally, a number of writing topics are presented, along with prewriting hints to help you plan and write an effective paper.

Part Four helps with the many types of writing you will do in college: exam essays, summaries, reports, the résumé and job application letter, and the research paper. You will see that all these kinds of writing are variations of the essay form you have already learned.

Finally, Part Five offers review and practice in the skills needed to write clear, error-free, and varied sentences. Included is a series of selections to sharpen your proofreading and editing ability.

For your convenience, the book contains the following: (1) on the inside front cover, a checklist of the four basic steps in effective writing; (2) on the inside back cover, an essay outline form to use when planning an essay; and (3) on the last page, a list of correction symbols. Get into the habit of referring to these guides on a regular basis; they can help ensure that you'll produce clearly thought out, well-written essays.

In summary, *College Writing Skills* will help you learn, practice, and apply the thinking and writing skills you need to communicate effectively. But your starting point must be the determination to do the work needed to become a strong writer. Remember that the ability to express yourself clearly and logically can open doors for you, both in school and in your career. If you decide—and only you can decide—that you want this kind of power, this book will help you reach that goal.

John Langan

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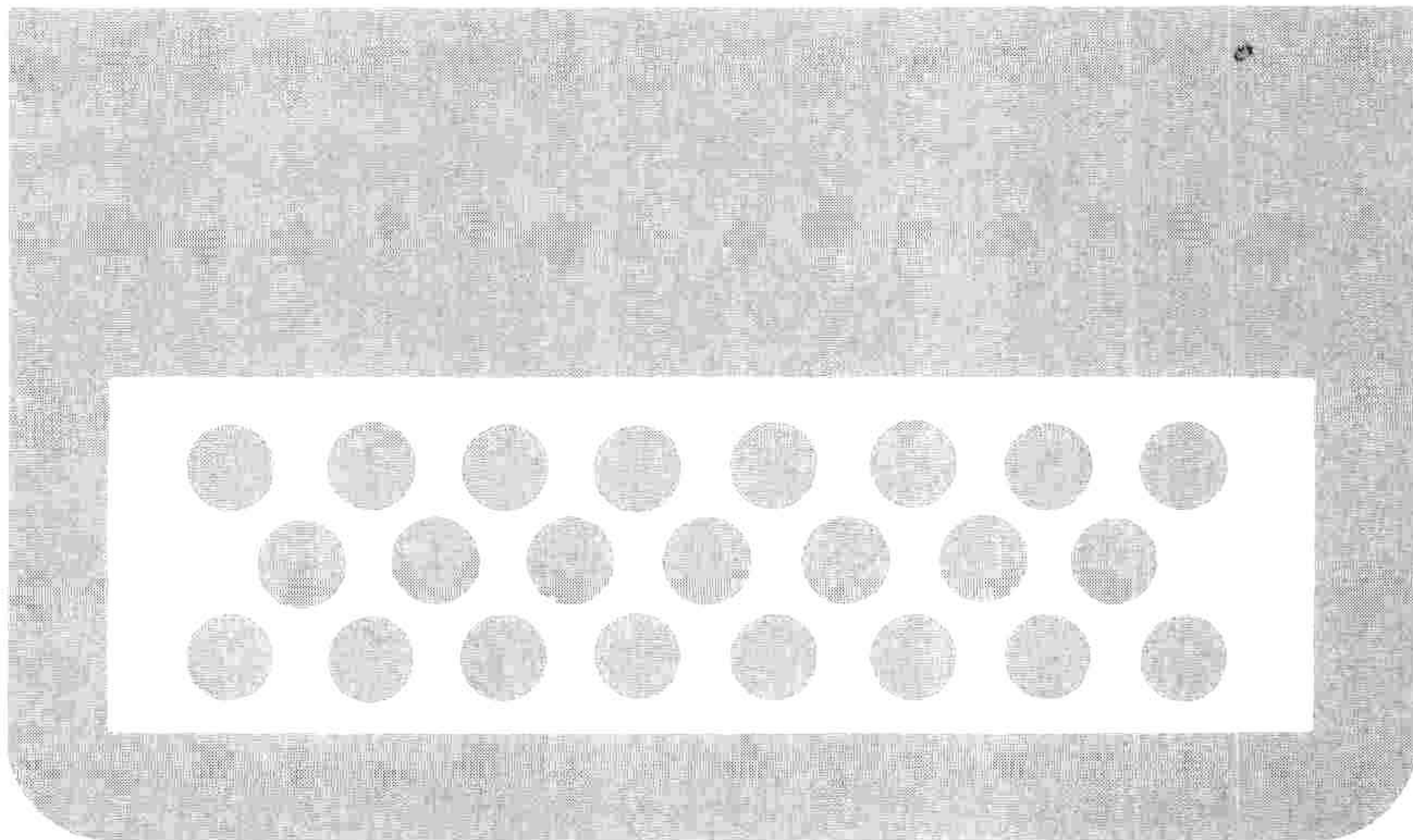
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PART
ONE

BASIC
PRINCIPLES
OF ESSAY
WRITING



INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSAY FORM

This chapter will explain:

- **The importance of supporting a point in writing**
- **The difference between a paragraph and an essay**
- **The general structure of an essay**

✓ **AN IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITING AND TALKING**

In your everyday conversation, you make all kinds of points or assertions. You say, for example, “It’s not safe to walk in our neighborhood after dark”; “My boss is a hard person to work for”; or “Poor study habits keep getting me into trouble.” The points that you make concern personal matters as well as, at times, outside issues: “That trade will be a disaster for the team”; “Lots of TV commercials are degrading to women”; “Students should have to work for a year before attending college.”

The people you are talking with do not always challenge you to give reasons for your statements. They may know why you feel as you do, or they may already agree with you, or they simply may not want to put you on the spot; and so they do not always ask, “Why?” The people who read what you write, however, may not know you, agree with you, or feel in any way obliged to you. So if you want to communicate effectively with them, you must provide solid evidence for any point you make. An important difference, then, between writing and talking is this: *In writing, any idea that you advance must be supported with specific reasons or details.*

Think of your readers as reasonable persons. They will not take your views on faith, but they are willing to accept what you say as long as you support it. So remember to support with specific evidence any statement that you make.

POINT AND SUPPORT IN A PARAGRAPH

argument, quarrel

In conversation you might say to a friend who has suggested a movie, “No thanks. Going to the movies is just too much of a hassle. Parking, people, everything.” From shared past experiences, your friend may know what you are talking about, so that you will not have to explain your statement. But in writing, your point would have to be backed up with specific reasons and details. Below is a paragraph on why moviegoing is a hassle. A *paragraph* is a short paper of around 150 words. It consists of an opening point called a *topic sentence* followed by a series of sentences which support that point.

risk, danger
✓ The Hazards of Moviegoing

Although I love movies, going to see them drives me slightly crazy. For one thing, getting to the theater means that I have a thirty-minute drive down a congested highway. Then, with a popular movie, I usually have to wait in a long line at the ticket booth. Another problem is that the theater itself is seldom a pleasant place to be. A musty smell suggests that there has been no fresh air in the theater since it was built. Half of the seats seem to be falling apart. And the floor often has a sticky coating that gets on your shoes. The worst problem of all is some of the other moviegoers. Kids run up and down the aisle. Teenagers laugh and shout at the screen. People of all ages loudly drop soda cups and popcorn tubs, cough and burp, and elbow you out of the armrest on either side of your seat. All in all, I would rather stay home and wait for the latest movie hits to appear on TV in the safety and comfort of my own living room.

Notice what the details have done. They have provided you, the reader, with *the basis for understanding why* the writer makes the point that she does. Through specific evidence, she has explained and communicated successfully her idea that moviegoing can be a hassle.

Activity

The paragraph on moviegoing, like almost any piece of effective writing, has two essential parts: (1) a point is advanced and (2) that point is then supported. Taking a minute to outline the paragraph will help you understand these basic parts clearly. Write in the space provided on the next page the point that has been advanced in the paragraph. Then add the words needed to complete the outline of the paragraph.