

Dear Cecelia,

I received your draft of the paper due in your English class. Regretfully, your writing is nowhere near college level yet. This is not really a criticism since most students just entering college are in the same boat (which I am certain drives your college professors mad). I was fortunate enough to have excellent middle and high school English teachers who made writing very simple.

Instead of re-writing your paper for you, I am going to give you a list that consists of specific advice and criticism as well as some writing theory. I want you to re-write your paper with these tips in mind. After you are done with this new draft, I will go through and correct it for you. I believe that this is the best way for me to teach you to write properly and has been very successful when I have tutored others to write. I hope that you find this helpful.

## **WRITING TIPS AND TRICKS**

### **1. PAPER & PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE**

Writing in the academic world differs markedly from real-world writing. The most obvious difference is that of paper and paragraph structure. Luckily, there is a simple formula for writing in the academic world that no one has ever taught you, I am certain, but it works remarkably well and is rewarded by teachers with high grades.

First, we discuss the overall structure of the paper. Your model academic paper consists of five paragraphs: one introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and one conclusion paragraph. If the paper needs to be longer than five paragraphs, you simply add more body paragraphs – but you must always have one introductory and one conclusion paragraph in the paper.

#### **A. Introductory Paragraph**

The introductory paragraph should consist of between three and five sentences. The purpose of the introduction is to identify the problem or topic and specify the exact topic of the paper.

The first sentence should be very general and broad. The next one to three sentences should narrow your topic. The final sentence should specifically identify the topic of your paper.

For example, let's say that you are writing a paper about the health benefits of fruit, your paragraph might look something like this:

As Americans live longer lives they are becoming necessarily obsessed with keeping their health in the best condition possible so that their older years are not plagued with sickness and ill health. The most important factors in keeping one's health in good shape are exercise and diet. Nature has provided man with some optimal foods that provide nourishment as well as incredible health benefits.

Americans should dramatically increase their consumption of fruits in order to maintain their health.

The first sentence introduces the concept of keeping Americans healthy – a very broad topic that could discuss many issues, including but not limited to exercise, becoming a vegan, or using alcohol or tobacco products. The next two sentences narrow the broad topic, moving from exercise and diet to simply diet. The final sentence of the introductory paragraph is your *topic sentence for the paper* which specifies exactly what your paper covers. In this case, the paper discusses the health benefits of eating fruit.

The most important rule for an introductory paragraph is that it moves from a broad topic to a very specific topic.

## **B. Body paragraphs**

Each body paragraph should discuss one specific issue relating to your topic. In our sample paper, this could mean that you have the first body paragraph discuss the specific health benefits of fruits, the second could discuss how inexpensive and available fruits are for people. The third paragraph could then deal with why people do not consume more fruit given their health benefits and availability.

Each paragraph should deal with only one basic idea or concept. Each body paragraph should be at least three sentences long and no more than seven sentences long. Five is an ideal number of sentences for a body paragraph.

The structure of the body paragraphs is very basic. The body paragraph's first sentence is the *topic sentence for the paragraph*. This sentence identifies the single concept or idea that will be discussed in the paragraph and ties it to the topic sentence for the paper.

For example, our first body paragraph topic sentence might read: "Fruits provide great health benefits because they supply the body with essential vitamins and minerals while being low in calories and fat."

The next sentences in the body paragraph are the support sentences. You use these to discuss the topic of the paragraph and support your idea or proposition. In our example, the first body sentence might quote a health care source about the benefits provided by fruits. Your next sentence might mention that fruits are natural and a better means of getting vitamins and minerals than supplements. Your third body sentence might give a concrete example of how much more Vitamin C is absorbed by the body when consumed by eating an orange than is absorbed when you take a high dose Vitamin C pill.

The final sentence of each body paragraph is the conclusion sentence and it simply restates the body paragraph's topic sentence – don't copy it exactly, paraphrase it. So in our example, our conclusion sentence in the first body paragraph might read: "By providing vitamins and minerals in a low fat, low calorie way, consuming fruits is a

wonderful way to become healthier. This says the same thing that the introductory sentence says in a slightly different way.

### **C. Conclusion paragraph**

The final paragraph of your paper is your conclusion paragraph. The conclusion paragraph is the exact opposite of your introductory paragraph.

The conclusion paragraph should be between three and five sentences long. This paragraph moves from the specific to the broad – which is inverse of the introductory paragraph's topic sentence.

The first sentence of your conclusion paragraph is a restatement of your paper's topic sentence – again don't copy it exactly, paraphrase it. Then use the following sentences to apply the topic sentence to the broader topic discussed in the first sentences of the introductory paragraph.

For example, our sample paper's conclusion paragraph might look something like this:

In order to maintain their health throughout their lives, Americans should dramatically increase the number of fruits they consume in their diets. Fruits are natural providers of vitamins and minerals and are superior to health store food supplements. By consuming more fruits, Americans can help insure their health remains excellent well into old age.

### **D. Quick Summary of Paper & Paragraph Structure**

As a quick guide, here is the above information in a nutshell:

#### **I. Introduction Paragraph (3-5 sentences)**

- A. Sentence 1: General Statement**  
*Broad topical statement.*
- B. Sentences 2-4: Limiting Sentences**  
*Narrow topic from broad statement*
- C. Sentence 5: Topic Sentence**  
*Topic sentence – specifies exact topic.*

#### **II-IV. Body Paragraph (5-7 sentences)**

- A. Sentence 1: Introductory Sentence**  
*Identifies one concept for the paragraph and ties it to the paper's topic sentence.*
- B. Sentences 2-4: Body Sentences**  
*Quotes support for paragraph's concept and discuss the concept and evidence.*

- C. **Sentence 5: Conclusion Sentence**  
*Paraphrases the paragraph's introductory sentence.*

### III. Conclusion Paragraph (3-5 Sentences)

- A. **Sentence 1: Restatement of Topic Sentence**  
*Paraphrases the paper's topic sentence.*
- B. **Sentences 2-4: Broadens the Specific Topic**  
*Applies the paper's topic to the broader concept or topic identified in the paper's introductory paragraph.*
- C. **Sentence 5: Broad Topic Restated**  
*Ties specific topic is tied to the broad theme in the first sentence of the Introductory paragraph.*

### E. How Academic Writing Differs from Real-World Writing

Academic writing is very formulaic – taking little imagination or effort. Your teachers are generally more concerned with form than content. Thus, as long as you use your spell checker and grammar checker in MS Word and follow the simple structural formula provided above, you should receive high grades.

This letter is an example of real-world writing. Paragraphs are structured to convey a message. They still start off identifying the topic to be discussed but there is little redundancy. A formal conclusion-summary sentence is unnecessary. Transitions and topical tie-ins are less apparent and more subtle. The paper itself takes a logical progression so that the reader does not need to be reminded of the relevancy or topicality of the information discussed. People in the non-Academic world would quickly dismiss Academic writing as dull and formulaic – they would be correct.

## 2. SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Now that you know the basics of constructing a paper, your grades should improve markedly and your writing should be much clearer. However, this tip and the others following it discuss how to *actually* improve your writing.

Sentence structure is important. Try not to have long sentence after long sentence. Compound sentences should generally be avoided. Each sentence should convey one idea or piece of information. Sentence lengths should vary. For example, use a few short sentences followed by a long sentence followed by a short sentence followed by a medium sentence. By varying the length of your sentences you make your writing more interesting and the reader does not become bored or fatigued reading what you have written.

### **3. BE CONCISE**

Say what you have to say and move on. Do not repeat the same thing over and over. This is dull and quickly disinterests the reader.

### **4. GENERALLY, AVOID THE USE OF JARGON AND OTHER UNFAMILIAR WORDS**

*Jargon* means words that are specific to an industry, profession, or group that a person outside of that group will not usually understand. You are not trying to confuse your readers or impress them with your great vocabulary. If you use too many words with which they are unfamiliar, they will quickly decide that your article or document is unreadable and not worth their time or effort.

You must consider your audience when selecting verbiage. If you are writing for the general public, you should assume a vocabulary and comprehension sophistication on par with a sophomore in high school. If a common word will say what you need to – use it instead of a jargon or unfamiliar word. Even for something as basic as the word “illiterate” you may want to write “those who can not read.” If you must use an unfamiliar or jargon word, define it contextually. For example, say you are writing about a legal issue for the general public and need to use the phrase “mens rea.” You might write “The *mens rea*, or mindset and intentions, of the suspect must be considered.”

However, if your audience is more sophisticated and better educated, you can increase your use of generally unfamiliar words since your audience will comprehend their meanings. Also, if you are writing a document for a specific profession, you will use jargon without any contextual definitions. For instance, in the above example, if you are writing an article for a legal journal, your audience (lawyers and judges) will know what “mens rea” means and find your writing elementary and without merit if you spend your time defining words with which they are intimately familiar. Definitely use jargon words when writing for a group that uses those jargon words or you will be seen as unknowledgeable.

### **5. WRITE IN A CONVERSATIONAL STYLE AND BE INTERESTING**

No matter the audience or level of professionalism for which you write, you should always strive for a conversational tone in your writing. Writing is a form of communication and when we communicate with others we are trying to form a connection whether it be educational, personal, or entertaining. When you write conversationally, you are trying to actually connect with your audience.

Far too often poor writers do not consider that they are writing for other people. No matter how important and professional your work may be, writing in a dull and lifeless way will invariably reduce the readership of your work. People will find it difficult to absorb and a tedious waste of time. If your work is important, isn't it better to make it interesting and accessible to the largest possible group within your target audience?

The greatest thinkers, judges, and scientists write in an engaging way that attracts a far larger audience than their less compelling peers. Would we know so much about Albert Einstein, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, or Machiavelli if they were simply brilliant without the ability to convey their brilliance through their writing? I seriously doubt that most people would have any idea who they were and their amazing contributions to the human race would have been far more limited in their scopes.

Well, I think that I have provided you some good general advice about how you can improve your writing. Simply using the formula provided above will greatly increase the quality of your writing. With practice, your writing can become great. Writing is a learned skill and not one with which people are inherently born – the more you practice, the better you will become.

I look forward to seeing your revised paper and will continue to offer assistance and pointers as you progress in your college writing.

Charles