



Essay Writing

This handout contains tips for organising your ideas and actually writing an essay.

- (1) Information on the structure of an essay.
- (2) Tips for planning your essay
- (3) More information on paragraphs
- (4) Some useful language

(1) The structure of an essay

An essay, no matter what your topic, is a piece of writing in which you try to put your ideas across to your reader(s) **clearly**.

In a conversation or discussion the listener can interrupt you and ask “What do you mean?” but they can’t do that with your writing.

An essay usually has

A BEGINNING

A MIDDLE

AN END



Why this structure?

- the beginning is where you introduce your argument i.e. you basically tell your reader what you are going to write about
- the middle is the main body of your writing where you present and develop your ideas
- the end is the conclusion where you sum up your ideas (or find some nice way of rounding off your essay – don’t just draw a line under an unfinished thought and write “THE END”.)

The beginning and the end usually consist of one paragraph each; the middle has several.

What is a paragraph?

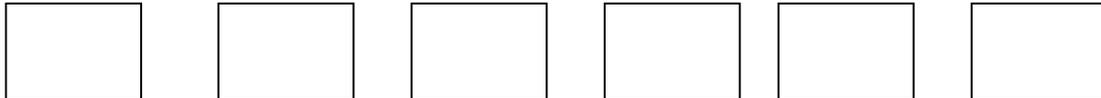
It is usually a set of sentences which present a **coherent idea**. It does not usually consist of only one sentence. See also Part (3) of this handout.

Why write in paragraphs?

Paragraphs are a **visual** way of signalling to a reader how your ideas are organised. Usually each new paragraph signals a new idea or aspect. (Logical link words are the **language** way of signalling to a reader how your ideas are organised.)

See also the handout on Logical Links from FindYourFeet.

So your essay structure really looks like this:



(2) Planning your essay

Some people are gifted writers. Most of us are not. It is possible, however, to learn how to write a good essay, which just means a clear text, and to write it relatively quickly.

You are not expected to be artistic, or literary, or tremendously creative. You are not competing for a literary prize.

The key to writing a clear text is forcing yourself to decide what your point, argument, thesis is, before you start writing. Another way of saying this is: You should organise your thoughts before you start to write.

Here are some ideas for working step-by-step to a good clear text:

If you are given a topic in class:

Step 1: start to brainstorm on the topic, i.e. collect ideas

Step 2: organize your ideas, decide what YOU think about it, and what YOUR argument is

Step 3: write

Step 4: read it carefully and then revise

Step 5: hand it in

Step 6: read my comments, make the corrections and hand it in again

Here are some more tips:

- If you are given a clear question to answer then make sure you answer it. An example question: *"Do you think Germany needs elite universities? Give reasons to support your opinion."*

Given that you are asked to write about your opinions on elite universities for Germany there isn't much point in writing pages about American universities or German schools, or about someone else's opinions.

If you think Germany needs them, then say this, giving your reasons.
If you think Germany doesn't need them, then say this, giving your reasons.

If you haven't made up your mind, present some of the pros and cons and give reasons for why you haven't made up your mind.

- If you are not given a clear question, then you really have to stop and think before you put pen to paper.

Sometimes in Essay Writing Class we watch a (part of) a film, or work on a short text and you are given the freedom to write on anything from a wide field. The film or text is only meant as a kind of stimulus to thinking, feeling and writing.

For example, we might watch a documentary on a Buddhist monastery in England! Everyone reacts differently to this. Some people start to think about the value of meditation for stress and pain relief, others think of the Catholic Church; yet others may think of 20th century consumer society, and so on.

Your minds are free to roam in any direction you want, taking this film as your starting point.

Before you start writing your essay, however, you have to be absolutely sure that you know what your argument is. Be clear in your own mind what you are writing about and what your argument is.

What is my argument? What do I want to put across to the reader?

It is a very good idea to write your idea, topic, argument, thesis on a little file card and keep it in front of you when you are writing. That way you won't lose the thread of your argument.

For example: "Meditation should be taught and practised at university to help people cope with stress."

- (If you have taken the preceding step seriously then you can ignore this one!)

Be sure you can handle your topic.

Is the topic too big or too general for me? Would it turn into a book instead of an essay? Should I narrow it down?

e.g. if you decide you want to write about Religion you'll soon realise it is an enormous topic. Can you handle this kind of general topic or do you want to narrow it down to writing about Religious Instruction in school, for example? And what is your argument?

For example: Do you want to argue that RI should be removed from the curriculum or that RI should be done in a different way?

- Write down notes on your topic. Just brainstorm. Write down anything that occurs to you. You shouldn't be critical at this stage.
- Organise your bundles of ideas. At this stage you could number them. Which idea/ aspect etc. am I going to present first, second etc.?
- Now you should start to be very critical. Which of my ideas are not relevant for my final choice of topic? Which of these do I not really know anything about, or do not really have

anything to say about? Cut out the irrelevant ideas. Save them up for another essay.

See also part (3) of this handout.

- Decide how you are going to introduce your topic clearly and how you are going to conclude. That is not difficult if your argument is clear to yourself.
- Don't forget to give your essay an interesting title. If you have a clear idea of what your essay is all about, then it is easy to find an interesting title.

Of course you do not have to follow all these steps, or follow the order given. Everyone thinks in a different way.

Sometimes you will have a clear idea in your head from the very beginning: this is what I want to argue and these are my reasons. But at other times you might be asked to write on a topic that you have not thought very much about before so you'll have to do some brainstorming and a lot of organising. Welcome the opportunity to do some thinking and learn the appropriate English vocabulary.

The important thing in any Writing Class is that you learn to **organise your ideas before you write**. It is well worth while. It pays off. If you take time to write notes and organise your thoughts you shouldn't have much trouble actually writing the paragraphs. Even when you are under time pressure. Even in exams.

In the Final Exam (State Exam and some Master's courses) you have to write an essay as well as translate German into English. You are expected to write a minimum of 400 words. If you choose a topic that really interests you it is not difficult to write that amount, and more. But there is no point in covering sheets and sheets of paper with chaotic thoughts.

(3) More information on paragraphs

Below are some **would-be paragraphs**. They were written by students on topics from the field of “Women in society”. They are interesting ideas, but they are NOT paragraphs.

“Having a child and bringing it up is a very responsible task. Many people are overburdened by this task and those who must suffer are the children.”

“Especially very young mothers (and fathers), themselves still not adults, are not suited to the task of bringing up children.”

“To be a male means to have more power, to be physically stronger and to be dominant in nearly all spheres of life.”

The above are suitable for the preparation notes but not for the handed-in essay. What has happened is that some very (interesting) general statements have been made and presented as complete paragraphs, but with no back-up material. They signal to the reader that you have interesting ideas, but have not really thought them through. I would feel like writing in the margin “Tell me more!”

(4) Some useful language

- This is a collection of words and expressions which a lot of students have difficulty with. The words “topic” and “point”, for example, are usually misused and overused. If you are not sure about any of them, check them in the Cobuild, and note more examples of how to use them correctly.
- Issue / topic / aspect / etc
An issue is an important subject that people are arguing about or discussing:
Is it right for the Church to express opinions on political issues?
Whether to introduce tuition fees or not is a key issue in Germany at the moment.

a chat / a gossip/ a conversation / a talk / a discussion / a debate - these all have a different meaning.

e.g.

I think I need to have a talk with a couple of students about their work.
That was a good discussion - I think we covered most of the issues.
There was a heated debate on TV last night about There were politicians, journalists, teachers present.

This is a really controversial issue. There are so many interesting aspects to consider, so many different points of view. I would like to discuss this from the point of view of a student.

When people argue that I think they are making a good point.
That's a good point.

Motivation is an important factor in a person's success.

As far as tuition fees are concerned I am totally against it.

Geography, History, Biology etc are all school subjects.

Welcome to History class. This morning our topic is working with source texts.

- arguing
Advocates of equal rights claim that it would
Opponents claim that

Some of the arguments for are that it would,

Some of the arguments against are that it would

I think that education at all levels should be free for all citizens irrespective of their age and origins / regardless of their age and origins.

- State / say / claim etc

President X made a press statement yesterday

The statement made by the military denied any involvement in yesterday's attack ...

Officials clearly stated that they felt unhappy with the decision ...

According to President X there is no danger of

President X claimed that / argued that / maintained that ...
yesterday's attack was

- "Concerning" is a preposition (formal) with the meaning of "about". "For further information concerning registration for the course please contact"
- mere(ly) / just / sole(ly): have different meanings

Some stars are so rich. For them, spending a couple of thousand euros is a mere trifle!

She isn't really arrogant - she's just shy and reserved.

That is precisely the problem: his sole aim is to occupy a position of power.

- Surely / certainly:
SURELY you know the difference between these two words?!

August 2004