

General Guidelines for Drafting Essays

Note: These general guidelines apply to the writing of a variety of genres or text types. Specific elements or characteristics of expository essays, persuasive essays, and personal narratives are included as separate handouts. The guidelines are designed to help students become thoughtful and process-oriented, rather than product-oriented, readers and writers. They are not meant as a strict sequence for writing an essay. Writing is a recursive process, and a student may choose to write the body of the essay before writing the introduction or may even start by writing the conclusion.

Beginning of the Essay: Drafting the Introduction

The introduction is the author's chance to grab the reader's attention, show why ideas are worth considering, and give a brief overview of the subject/topic/argument. There are, of course, many ways to write an introduction, and some types are better suited than others for certain essays.

Sometimes, introductions are not as effective as they need to be. Students' essays will get off to a good start when they include the following:

- A "hook" to get the reader's attention
- Background information the audience may need about the topic
- A thesis statement—a central or controlling idea

Begin with a concise, yet intriguing, first sentence.

Remember, the introduction is just an introduction—not the entire essay. Start with something interesting rather than just summarizing the essay.

Be specific.

Being too general can affect the overall quality of the essay. If you generalize, the development of ideas will be weak or minimal. A good essay presents specific and well-chosen ideas and examples that substantially support the main points and the argument/position.

Don't restate the prompt or question.

For most prompts and assignments with specified topics, the reader more than likely knows what the prompt is. Restating it only takes up space and can be interpreted as a lack of creativity.

Avoid using clichés.

Clichés are overused expressions that often are considered boring and uncreative, and may even result in the reader not wanting to read the rest of the essay.

Stay away from dictionary definitions to introduce the topic.

Using a dictionary definition is often a sign that the author is having difficulty beginning the essay. The dictionary also may not be considered an appropriate source for some topics.

Avoid extraneous information on the subject.

Throwing in irrelevant information signals that the author is just filling up the required number of paragraphs or page(s).

Don't drive the reader away.

The introduction should make the reader want to read the rest of the essay. For instance, although beginning an essay with, "This essay is about. . ." may appear straightforward and to the point, it falls short of motivating anyone to read on. Wordiness and simple grammar errors can also leave a poor first impression.

Revisit the introduction after drafting the entire essay.

Have students reread the introduction. As writers develop their ideas and craft essays or texts, their understanding of the topic may have changed. Teach students to make adjustments to the first paragraph and/or thesis, if necessary.

Middle of the Essay: Drafting the Body

In the body of the essay, authors develop ideas that are focused on the topic and the thesis or central/controlling idea. Teach students to fully develop and sustain this focus throughout the essay. Usually, there is no set number of paragraphs that authors need to write.

Here are some tips for writing clear and concise paragraphs and using meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections.

Vary the length of the paragraphs.

A general suggestion for the length of a paragraph is roughly three to five sentences. There is not, though, a set number of sentences. Often for a paragraph to be well developed, it needs more than five sentences; sometimes a one-sentence paragraph is appropriate.

Teach students to consider the white space on the page when writing. Try to break down the thoughts as much as possible. A series of long paragraphs can be intimidating to readers and can make it more

difficult for them to process the argument. Vary the length of paragraphs to make the essay more reader-friendly. Balance the paragraphs according to the length of the essay.

Focus and develop one idea in each paragraph.

A well-written paragraph becomes its own independent “chunk” of writing. Teach students to introduce a thought with an opening sentence, develop it throughout the paragraph, and then wrap it all up in a concluding sentence.

Vary sentence length within the paragraphs.

Avoid entire paragraphs of choppy, simple sentences or lengthy, rambling, complex sentences filled with commas and conjunctions. Teach students to intersperse long and short sentences in their writing. The result will make reading the essay more interesting.

Use meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections.

Meaningful transitions help to establish logical connections between ideas, sentences, and paragraphs in the essay. Meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections enhance the flow of the essay by clearly showing the relationships among the ideas. Transitions also help the reader understand those relationships. A transition can be a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph.

Although transitions are not a substitute for good organization, they can make the organization clearer and easier to follow. Transitions help to bind the essay into a unified, coherent, well-developed whole. Transitions help readers connect with what has come before in a sentence, paragraph, or section and help readers anticipate and better comprehend what they will be reading next.

Examples of Different Types of Transitional Words and Phrases

Transitions that mean “to add”	<i>and, furthermore, in addition to</i>
Transitions that mean “to compare”	<i>also, likewise, as well</i>
Transitions that mean “to contrast”	<i>but, however, alternatively</i>
Transitions that mean “to prove”	<i>consequently, thus, therefore</i>
Transitions that mean “to show relationships in time”	<i>first, second, third, finally, then</i>
Transitions that mean “to give an example”	<i>for example, for instance</i>
Transitions that mean “to summarize, conclude”	<i>finally, in conclusion</i>

End of the Essay: Drafting the Conclusion

Good conclusions can be tricky to write. They are designed to provide closure and also function as a review of anything that needs reviewing. Conclusions need to accomplish these tasks without being boring, redundant, or off topic. A concluding paragraph supports the thesis or central/controlling idea.

Sometimes, conclusions are not as effective as they need to be. The following list of tips can help your students write a strong conclusion and leave a lasting final impression with the reader/audience.

Don't stretch to fit the page requirement.

Stretching the conclusion until you meet the page limit results in irrelevant fluff that only weakens the essay. If the essay is not long enough, go back and further develop the content by elaborating on the main points. Always add to and strengthen the evidence or idea development rather than simply extending the conclusion.

Avoid adding new information and leaving loose ends.

Teach students not to introduce new information in the conclusion. They will have little time for adequate development and can leave the audience hanging. It's usually best not to bring up something at the end that hasn't been previously discussed or even mentioned. Instead, take the thesis or central/controlling idea a step further (i.e., discuss its implications, reemphasize the significance and relevance of your topic/position/argument).

Don't repeat the thesis or central/controlling idea.

Because the reader has already read the thesis or central/controlling idea statement, it doesn't need to be repeated verbatim. The conclusion should state the thesis in a new way or further develop it. Teach students that they can sum up the important points they made throughout the essay, but for short essays this usually is unnecessary. Students should ask themselves: *Will readers be able to remember what I've said, or do I need to remind them?*

Avoid resorting to clichés.

The conclusion should be memorable. Adding clichés (i.e., old metaphors and tired phrasing such as "In conclusion") often accomplishes just the opposite effect. Clichés typically make the essay sound unoriginal. As a result, a reader may discount what the author has to say. Instead, use vivid images and colorful language that will leave an impression on the readers. Because these are the last words the audience will read, make them count.

REFERENCE: Virgil Undergraduate Writing Center, 2001–2005.