

## How to Improve Your Writing

with many thanks to:

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### Much of your college performance will be determined by the quality of your writing.

This presentation emphasizes that you can do much to improve your writing by properly organizing and structuring your ideas.

There are a few myths about writing that should be dispelled before we begin:

1. Great writers are born, not made by practicing.
2. I need an IQ in the 130's in order to write well.
3. I need to have the vocabulary of a rocket scientist in order to write good papers.
4. My papers need to be over 30 pages in length in order to be acceptable.
5. I will never be good at writing papers.

The most important (and often the most easily improved) aspects of writing are clarity and organization.

The basic element of clarity and organization is a good paragraph.

A good paragraph has 3 parts

- 1) A TOPIC SENTENCE - to introduce the paragraph
- 2) 3-10 CONTENT SENTENCES
- 3) A TRANSITION SENTENCE - to introduce the next paragraph

The paragraph starts with what is called a "TOPIC SENTENCE".

-The topic sentence introduces the idea you will be discussing in that paragraph.

**ALL SENTENCES IN THE PARAGRAPH AFTER THE TOPIC SENTENCE MUST PERTAIN TO AND SUPPORT THE TOPIC SENTENCE!**

-If there are sentences that do not pertain to the topic sentence, they are out of place (they probably belong in a different paragraph) and will only confuse the reader.

-There may be three to ten content sentences that support the topic sentence.

-After you have fully explained the topic sentence, you need a sentence to lead the reader into the next paragraph.

-This type of sentence is called a TRANSITION SENTENCE.

-Learning to write good transitions takes practice.

-The transition often relates the idea from the current paragraph with what will be talked about next.

-It is much like a "clue" about what you will talk about next.

-The transition is ALWAYS the last sentence of a paragraph.

Here is an example:

The paragraph talked about the psychological treatment of social phobia in adults.

-The transition sentence at the end of the paragraph is:

"Although much investigation has been done into the treatment of social phobia in adults, very little work has been done to address treatment avenues for children who suffer from the disorder."

-Can you guess what the next paragraph will be about?

-You got it, the next paragraph will be about the treatment of children with social phobia!

So, if we look at the format for any given paragraph, it should look like this.

TOPIC SENTENCE (new paragraph)

- content sentence #1
- content sentence #2
- content sentence #3

.....

-content sentence #8

TRANSITION SENTENCE

TOPIC SENTENCE (new paragraph)

- content sentence #1
- content sentence #2
- .....
- content sentence #5

TRANSITION SENTENCE

-and so on until the paper is finished!

-There is no limit on how long a paragraph should be, but remember:

-If a paragraph is over 1 double-spaced page, it is probably too long. The reader may forget what idea the paragraph was discussing to begin with.

-Remember that paragraphs that are too big, often are trying to say too much at one time.

-Consider separating these multiple ideas and give each of them a separate paragraph, for a more complete description.

REMEMBER CLARITY IS THE ISSUE !

CLARITY IS ACHIEVED BY COMBINING SIMPLE,  
WELL-DESCRIBED IDEAS !!

### OK, in what order do I put the paragraphs ?

-The "rule of thumb" is that you begin with the most general idea, then narrow the focus with each successive paragraph, and finally return to remind the reader of the general idea. Here's an example.

- Paragraph #1 Define social phobia
- Paragraph #2 Describe the need for treating social phobia
- Paragraph #3 Treatment of adults with social phobia
- Paragraph #4 Treatment of children with social phobia
- Paragraph #5 Inpatient versus outpatient treatment of social phobia for children
- Paragraph #6 Proposed study will compare which is better (this paragraph will contain specific hypothesis about which treatment will be better.
- Paragraph #7 A brief review of social phobia and what the proposed research will add to what we know.

-This type of organization leads to a paper that is very easy to read and allows you to prepare and direct your reader to the message you want them to receive.

One way to improve the organization of your paper and make it easier to write is begin by making an outline before you begin writing.

-Label each idea (paragraph) and which order you believe they should appear in your paper.

-It will also be useful to write your topic sentences and transitions before you sit down to write the rest of the paper.

Two things you should do after you finish your paper

- Let the paper "get cold" for a day or two and re-read it (and probably re-write it - it never looks as good as you remember it being)

- Let someone else read it -- "peer review" brings fresh ideas & options

**"The way to learn to write is to write.  
There are no short-cuts."**

### Concise Writing

-Most reviews of articles involve reporting a variety of information, including number of participants, materials used, etc. (see grading sheets).

-While it is acceptable to report each "bit" of information in its own sentence, this leads to a bloated paper that is boring to read.

-Good writers learn to integrate ideas and information into concise sentences and paragraphs.

-Think about each "bit" of information you are including. Are they truly separate "bits" or are they describing different aspects of the same idea? Can the bits be combined into more descriptive sentences?

### Nonintegrated (Boring) Example

Two hundred and four students participated in the study. All of the students were undergraduates in psychology. Roughly 84% of the participants were female. The materials used were the Beck Depression Inventory and the Beck Anxiety Inventory. The participants were brought into a large classroom and asked to fill out the inventories. (52 words, 5 sentences)

### Concise & Integrated Example

Two hundred and four undergraduate psychology students (84% female) participated in the study. The participants were brought into a large classroom and asked to fill out the Beck Depression Inventory and the Beck Anxiety Inventory. (35 words, 2 sentences)