

# A Quick Guide to Writing an Excellent Essay

Introduction, statement of case, outline, proof, refutation, conclusion: the six parts of organization are, remember, parts, not necessarily paragraphs.

Though students have often been taught that every paragraph must have a topic sentence, one sentence that distills the proof in the paragraph which is proving the thesis, that is not strictly true.

What is essential is that the material in the paragraph support the argument. Whatever part a paragraph inhabits, it must be both unified and coherent; that is, it must represent one thing, and it must do so rationally. If a paragraph is not unified, divide it; if it is not coherent, reconsider it. Unity is often difficult to ascertain. If, for example, you discuss one idea, but present two examples of it, should that be one paragraph or three? It depends. Paragraphs are conventional: Journalistic paragraphs tend to be quite short; academic ones, long. One can test one's paragraphing by asking the following question: Do the divisions lead the reader through the world of the essay with ease? To achieve coherence, include transitions within the paragraph that disclose its design. (Each part of the whole essay—its parts, its paragraphs, and its sentences—must be designed.) Again, let invention dictate organization: if a paragraph is defining, for example, examine the defined thing's *genus*, then its *differentiae*.

Each method of invention will disclose a paragraph arrangement. And employ one of the following four techniques of transition within the paragraph: Repeat important terms; employ unambiguous pronoun references; number your points; join clauses with accurate subordinate conjunctions and

conjunctive adverbs. (These techniques work as transitional devices *between* paragraphs as well.) The following paragraph employs all four techniques of transition to achieve coherence. The repetitions are bolded; the clear pronouns are italicized; the numbered points are capitalized; and the subordinate conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs are underlined:

*Agamemnon is not a good leader because, although he is courageous, he is rash. **A good leader** must be both **courageous** and **deliberate**. **FIRST**, the **good leader** must have the **courage** to act, even if that action will offend some of his or her people, and **Agamemnon** is certainly **courageous**. **The good leader**, however, must also be **deliberate**, and this **SECOND** virtue is even more important than the **FIRST**. **Agamemnon** lacks this **SECOND** **virtue**.*

A reader will seldom notice these techniques when they are used well and left unmarked; instead, he or she will follow the coherent path, only noticing transitions when they don't work.

A finely designed essay—one in which the beginning, the middle, and the end fit into a harmonious whole and the parts and paragraphs of each cohere—ensures that the reader discovers the essay's invention by traveling within its organization.

In the best work, the reader experiences the harmony of invention and organization that define cosmic fashioning, a harmony that results from discipline, as Corbett explains, "a discipline that trains the student in the judicious selection and use of available means to the desired end." Meaning is not only discovered through invention; it is also made through organization. The reader of a work that both discovers and makes will experience something unusual but persuasive—the pleasure that Stephen Booth describes in *An Essay on*

*Shakespeare's Sonnets*: "Art comforts the spirit by presenting experience selected and organized in such a way as to exhibit the sense of pattern that the human mind tries to perceive in all of experience."

The selections of design exhibit patterns not otherwise perceived. Essays, like poems or foundings, are cosmic exhibits of the patterned truth your reader desires. To lead that reader's soul, you must know how to satisfy that desire.

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