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PART 4

Writing

Aside from the basics of word choice, sentence structure, and punctuation, what else do you need to understand to write better? Just as sentences are built according to accepted patterns, so are larger “structures” of English—paragraphs and essays, for example.

Think of writing as including levels of structure, beginning small with words connecting to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. Then sentences connect to form paragraphs and essays. Each level has its own set of “blueprints.” To communicate clearly in writing, words must be chosen and spelled correctly. Sentences must have a subject, a verb, and a complete thought. Paragraphs must be indented and contain a main idea supported with sufficient detail. Essays explore a valuable topic in several coherent paragraphs, usually including an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Not everyone approaches writing as a structure, however. You can write better without thinking about structure at all. A good place to start might be to write what you care about and care about what you write. You can make an amazing amount of progress by simply being *genuine*—being who you are naturally. No one has to tell you to be yourself when you speak, but you might need encouragement to be yourself in your writing.

Writing is almost never done without a reason. The reason may come from an experience, such as receiving an unfair parking ticket, or from a requirement in a class. And when you are asked to write, you often receive guidance in the form of an assignment: tell a story to prove a point, paint a picture with your words, compare two subjects, share what you know about something, explain why you agree with or disagree with a statement or an idea.

Learning to write well is important, one of the most important things you will do in your education. Confidence is the key. The Writing sections will help you build confidence, whether you are expressing your own ideas or summarizing and responding to the ideas of others. Like the Sentence Structure sections, the Writing sections are best taken in order. However, each one discusses an aspect of writing that you can review on its own at any time.

What Is the Least You Should Know about Writing?

"Unlike medicine or the other sciences," William Zinsser points out, "writing has no new discoveries to spring on us. We're in no danger of reading a newspaper that a breakthrough has been made in how to write [clearly]. We may be given new technologies like the word processor to ease the mechanics of composition, but on the whole we know what we need to do."

One thing that's certain is that you learn to write by *writing*, not by reading long discussions about writing. Therefore, the explanations and instructions in these sections are as brief as they can be, followed by samples from student and professional writers.

Understanding the basic structures and learning the essential skills covered in these sections will help you become a better writer.

Basic Structures

I. The Paragraph

II. The Essay

Writing Skills

III. Writing in Your Own Voice

IV. Finding a Topic

V. Organizing Ideas

VI. Supporting with Details

VII. Revising Your Papers

VIII. Presenting Your Work

IX. Writing about What You Read

Basic Structures

The Paragraph

A paragraph is unlike any other structure in English. Visually, it has its own profile: the first line is indented about five spaces, and sentences continue to fill the space between the margins until the paragraph ends (which may be in the middle of the line).

As a beginning writer, you may forget to indent your paragraphs, or you may break off in the middle of a line within a paragraph, especially when writing in class. You must remember to indent whenever you begin a new paragraph and fill the space between the margins until it ends. (Note: In business writing, paragraphs are not indented but double-spaced in between.)

Defining a Paragraph

A typical paragraph develops one idea, usually phrased in a topic sentence from which all the other sentences in the paragraph radiate. The topic sentence does not need to begin the paragraph, but it most often does, and the other sentences support it with specific details. (For more on topic sentences and organizing paragraphs, see p. 229.) Paragraphs usually contain several sentences, though no set number is required. A paragraph can stand alone, but more commonly paragraphs are part of a larger composition, an essay. There are different kinds of paragraphs, based on the jobs they are supposed to do.

Types of Paragraphs

Sample Paragraphs in an Essay

Introductory paragraphs begin essays. They provide background information about the essay's topic and usually include the thesis statement or main idea of the essay. (See p. 227 for information on how to write a thesis statement.) Here is the introductory paragraph of a student essay entitled "A Cure for My Premature Old Age":

Most people like to live in a quiet neighborhood. I have heard that some people even camp out in front of a house they are planning to buy just to see if the block is as quiet as they have been told. Maybe I am unusual, but not so much as I felt that my community was too quiet. It was a problem for me, but I didn't get much sympathy when I told people about it. I learned that, in the problems in our lives, we become who we are.

In this opening paragraph, the student leads up to the main idea that "we become who we are" as a result of the challenges in our lives with background information about the "problem" of living in a quiet neighborhood.

Body paragraphs are those in the middle of essays. Each body paragraph contains a topic sentence and presents detailed information about one subtopic or point that directly to the essay's thesis. (See p. 229 for more information on organizing body paragraphs.) Here are the body paragraphs of the same essay:

The silence of my neighborhood affected me. Everyday I woke up to an alarm clock of quiet. There were no birds chirping, no cars passing by, nothing noisy around to comfort me. I lived then (and still do) in a cul-de-sac next to a home for senior citizens. Even the ambulances that came to transport the old folks never used their sirens. I often felt lonely and spent time looking

out the window at the bushes and the badly painted fence. I too was becoming old, but I was only nineteen. I found myself actually whispering at times.

There was no easy solution to my problem. My grandmother hated loud sounds, and she would never consider moving. We didn't even watch television because the blaring commercials upset her. I wanted to get out of the house with friends and visit noisy places, but my grandmother needed me to help her while my parents were at work. I didn't mind spending time with her, and she did teach me to make an incredible spaghetti sauce.

One day, I finally discovered a remedy for my problem. I took my grandmother to visit her friend Irene at the nursing home next door, and—no, I didn't leave her there. I started reading out loud to both of them. At first I read from the newspaper, but then someone suggested that I read a short story instead. As I read them the story, I realized that I had been silent for so long that I loved to hear my own voice, to test out my characters' personalities, and to live through the actions of my characters. Grandma and Irene loved it, too.

Notice that each of the three body paragraphs discusses a single aspect of the student's response to the problem—the way it affected him, the lack of a simple solution, and finally the “cure.”

Concluding paragraphs are the final paragraphs in essays. They bring the discussion to a close and share the writer's final thoughts on the subject. (See p. 229 for more about concluding paragraphs.) Here is the conclusion of the sample essay:

Now I am in my first year of college, and I've chosen English as a major. My grandmother spends three days a week visiting Irene next door. After school, I read them the stories I write for my classes, and they give me advice on how to make them better. I also work on campus, making recordings of books for visually impaired students. And I will be playing the part of Mercutio in our theater department's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I never imagined that the solution to my problem would turn out to be the beginning of my adult life.

In this concluding paragraph, the student describes his transformation from depressed “aging” man to promising student and aspiring actor—all as a result of living in the past and caring for his grandmother.

Sample of a Paragraph Alone

Single-paragraph writing assignments may be given in class or as homework. They test the your understanding of the unique structure of a paragraph. They may ask you to answer a single question, perhaps following a reading, or to provide details about a limited topic. Look at this student paragraph, the result of a homework assignment asking students to report on a technological development in the news:

These shorter writing assignments help students practice presenting information within the limited structure of a paragraph.

The assignments in the upcoming Writing Skills section will sometimes ask you to write paragraphs. Remember that you may review the previous pages as often as you wish until you understand the unique structure of the paragraph.

II The Say

Like the paragraph, an essay has its own profile, usually including a title and several paragraphs.

Title

While the paragraph is the single building block of the essay, almost all forms of writing (in essays, magazine articles, letters, novels, newspaper stories, and so on), an essay is a larger, more complex structure.

The Five-Paragraph Essay and Beyond

The student essay analyzed on pages 214–215 illustrates the different kinds of paragraphs within essays. Many people like to include five paragraphs in an essay: an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Three is a comfortable number of body paragraphs—it's not too many, which makes an essay seem like a comparison even when it isn't; and it's not too few, which may be too many subtopics for the beginning writer to organize clearly.

However, an essay can include any number of paragraphs. As you become more comfortable with the flow of your ideas and gain confidence in your ability to express yourself, you are free to create essays of many different shapes and sizes. As with many skills, learning about writing begins with structure and then expands to include all possibilities.

Defining an Essay

There is no such thing as a typical essay. Essays may be serious or humorous, but the best of them are thought-provoking and—of course—informative. Try looking up the word *essay* in a dictionary right now. Some words used to define what an essay is might need to be explained themselves:

An essay is *prose* (meaning it is written in the ordinary language of sentences and paragraphs).

An essay is *nonfiction* (meaning it deals with real people, factual information, actual opinions and so on).

An essay is *composition* (meaning it is created in parts that make up the whole, several paragraphs that explore a single topic).

An essay is *personal* (meaning it shares the writer's unique perspective, even if it's only a small part of topic, method of analysis, and details).

An essay is *analytical* and *instructive* (meaning it examines the workings of a subject and shares the results with the reader).

A Sample Essay

For an example of a piece of writing that fits the above definition, read the following essay by George Beiswinger about how, if you know someone *very* well, you can communicate almost without words.