

## Composing and Organization

### How to Write An In-Class Essay

Writing an in-class, timed essay is a critical skill that your instructor may ask you to do in your first-year English course. An in-class essay demonstrates your ability to recall information, synthesize readings, argue coherently, and think critically under pressure. It also serves to measure your readiness to take college-level essay exams that will be required of you in more advanced classes.

One of the best ways to prepare for an in-class essay is to practice taking one. Set aside the same time limit that you will be given in class and then attempt to answer a practice question that you, a classmate, or your professor has given you. Being familiar with the testing situation is half the battle for succeeding at any timed test.

By following a planned process, you can increase your chances of success on an in-class writing assignment. Consider using this step-by-step guide (or your own variation on it) to make the most of your writing time:

1. Read the question carefully. Make sure you understand what it is asking; look for key words that suggest a possible approach. For example, if it asks “why,” then a causal argument might be in order.
2. Take 5-10 minutes to prewrite on a separate sheet of paper. Brainstorm some ideas, generate a thesis, and scribble out an outline. If you have an outline to follow, you will be less likely to get off topic.
3. On the top of a new sheet, write out your **thesis**. To make sure you are answering the question, echo key words and phrases from the question. **DO NOT** write an introduction yet; your thesis will serve as an intro for now. The body paragraphs are the most important because that is where your evidence is. Keep the thesis page where you can see it so that you are constantly tying your evidence back to it.
4. Use a separate sheet of paper for each **paragraph**. Start with the easiest body paragraph first; then go to harder ones. By putting paragraphs on separate pages, you can shuffle the order later. Make sure each body paragraph has at least one to three good, concrete examples and an interpretation of that example. State reasons and assumptions where necessary. The body is the heart of your essay and worth the most points, so make sure you have good body paragraphs.
5. Write a **conclusion** that sums up your points and leaves the reader with a good idea of why you made your argument to a particular discourse community. Answer the question “So What?”
6. If you have time, go back to the thesis page and write an **introduction** under your thesis. Use your intro to contextualize your thesis in the ongoing debate or conversation in the discourse community that your class is a part of.

7. Save a few minutes for **revision and proofreading**. Add extra support where you need it. Make sure there are no major errors.

## What Is a Paragraph?

A paragraph is a compilation of sentences, each of which deals in some way with a single topic. Paragraphs indicate to the reader key areas of development as related to the thesis. To be as effective as possible, a paragraph should have a topic sentence, should be unified, should be coherent, and should be adequately developed.

### 1. A topic sentence

A topic sentence indicates the idea or thesis of the paragraph. Not all paragraphs have clear-cut topic sentences, and not all topic sentences occur at the very start of a paragraph. Topic sentences can be the first sentence, the last sentence, or a sentence somewhere in the middle. A paragraph that begins with its topic sentence is generally easier to understand, however. Therefore, a good general rule is to place the topic sentence at or near the beginning of every paragraph. (Note: paragraphs in descriptive and narrative writing often lack topic sentences.)

### 2. Unity

Every sentence in the paragraph should center on the paragraph's controlling idea. There should be one central focus. The paragraph **should not** end with statements that anticipate what the next paragraph will cover. You cannot assume that your audience will mentally fill in the gaps. Make sure that you include transitions so that the audience's "ride" is smooth.

### 3. Coherence

A unified paragraph may not be coherent. If the order of the sentences does not relay information clearly to the reader, coherence has not been achieved. The reader must be able to see how sentences relate to one another. You can help to create coherence in by supplying bridges.

- Successive sentences can be constructed in parallel form.
- Key words can be repeated in several sentences.
- Synonymous words can be repeated in several sentences.
- Pronouns can refer to nouns in previous sentences.
- Nouns, pronouns, and verbs can be consistent.
- Transition words can be used to link ideas from different sentences

### 4. Adequate development

The paragraph's topic should be discussed adequately. Adequate development varies from paragraph to paragraph, depending on the author's purpose, but writers should beware of paragraphs that have only two or three sentences. It's a pretty good bet that the paragraph is not fully developed if it is that short. (Specialized writing such as news writing or business writing may contradict this rule of thumb.)

- Use examples and illustrations.
- Cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others).
- Examine testimony (what other people say, quotes and paraphrases).
- Use an anecdote or story (Narration).
- Define terms in the paragraph if necessary.

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- Compare and contrast or use an analogy.
- Evaluate causes or effects.
- Analyze the topic.
- Describe the topic.
- Classify the topic.
- Offer a chronology of an event (time segments).

### Transitional Expressions

LOGICAL RELATIONSHIP	TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION
<b>Similarity</b>	also, in the same way, just as ... so too, likewise, similarly
<b>Exception/Contrast</b>	but, however, in spite of, on the one hand ... on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, in contrast, on the contrary, still, yet
<b>Sequence/Order</b>	first, second, third, ... next, then, finally
<b>Time</b>	after, afterward, at last, before, currently, during, earlier, immediately, later, meanwhile, now, recently, simultaneously, subsequently, then
<b>Example</b>	for example, for instance, namely, specifically, to illustrate
<b>Emphasis</b>	even, indeed, in fact, of course, truly
<b>Place/Position</b>	above, adjacent, below, beyond, here, in front, in back, nearby, there
<b>Cause and Effect</b>	accordingly, consequently, hence, so, therefore, thus
<b>Additional Support or Evidence</b>	additionally, again, also, and, as well, besides, equally important, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, then
<b>Conclusion/Summary</b>	finally, in a word, in brief, in conclusion, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, thus, to conclude, to summarize, in sum, in summary

### Special Types of Paragraphs

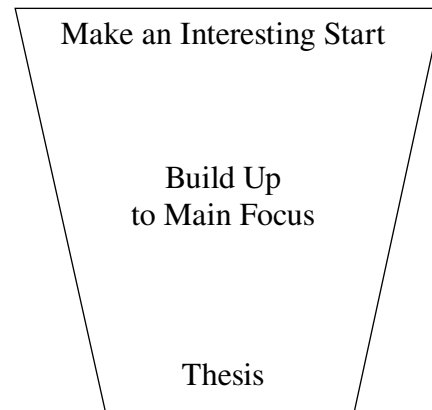
These types of paragraphs may not always adhere to the guidelines mentioned above. Depending on their purpose in your writing, you may make decisions about your introduction, conclusion, or transitional paragraphs that do not seem to follow the normal suggestions for paragraphing.

#### Introductions

Opening paragraphs are meant to draw the reader into your subject. They should catch the reader's attention and focus that attention on your particular topic or argument. Your opinion and

your specific topic should be clearly stated and, if appropriate, stated in your thesis statement.

- Ask a question
- Relate an incident
- Use a vivid quotation
- Offer a surprising statistic or fact
- Provide background
- Define a word central to your subject
- Compare or contrast
- Detail a visual image



A common type of introduction is the general to specific (inverted pyramid) introduction. Avoid starting with statements that are vague generalities (In America today), a flat reference to the paper (The purpose of this essay is ...), a reference to the title of the essay, a reference to a dictionary definition (According to Webster), and an apology for your opinion.

## Conclusions

Conclusions are a chance to make a lasting, last impression. It allows the reader to recap your major points and to focus on the thesis of the entire paper.

## Strategies

- Use a quotation.
- Recommend a course of action.
- Restate thesis in a different way and reflect on its implications.
- Echo the approach used in the introduction.
- Summarize the paper.
- Give a compelling example.
- Strike a note of hope or despair.

Avoid simply restating your thesis. Avoid going off in a new direction. Avoid concluding with more than your paper offers. Avoid apologizing for your work or casting doubt on your work.

## Transitional Paragraphs

Such paragraphs are typically short and used to put emphasis on the idea presented in the preceding paragraph and, possibly, to introduce the next idea. Transitional paragraphs should not be used when simply putting a transitional word or phrase at the beginning of the next paragraph would be sufficient. They should be reserved for places where an essay takes a dramatic turn.

## Developing Introductory Paragraphs for Persuasive essays

The following is an example of a bare, undeveloped introductory paragraph:

Many people today cannot have children, so they use technological advances, like having surrogate mothers. Although many people question this practice, surrogacy should remain an option for people wishing to have children.

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This paragraph shows a bit more development:

Many people today cannot have children, although they dream of becoming parents. Infertile couples have tried many ways to have a family, such as adoption and fertility drugs. One controversial means is surrogacy. Although many people question this practice, surrogacy should remain a viable option for people wishing to have a child.

Here is an example of a fully-developed paragraph:

As people mature, quite often they dream of getting married and starting a family. Having children is a fundamental desire for most married couples, yet for an increasing number of people, infertility stands in the way of attaining this lifelong goal. Over the years, many have turned to adoption and, more recently, advanced technology in order to become parents. One such technology, surrogacy, is fast becoming a common, although controversial, means of acquiring a child. A great deal needs to be done to establish specific surrogate-birth guidelines, but surrogacy is and should remain a viable option to infertile couples wishing to have a child.

### Summary/Précis

One of the most helpful ways to reach an understanding of a given text is to write a précis or summary. The purpose of writing a summary of an article is two-fold: it helps you fully understand what the author is saying, and it teaches you how to quote, paraphrase, and condense—the types of writing that are going to be essential for almost any type of writing you will do in college.

Unless your instructor provides you with an article or a choice of articles, you will need to find a magazine or journal article six to ten pages in length for which you will write a brief, accurate, and complete summary.

The final draft of your summary should

- be no longer than 1 1/2 pages in length
- include direct quotations and paraphrases from the text, cited in correct MLA form
- use attributive tags that indicate the attitude of the author and serve as smooth transitions
- be a clear, complete, and accurate presentation of the text
- be edited for spelling and grammatical errors

Remember that your purpose here is to convey the information in the article to your reader in a condensed form. You should not include your own personal opinions or judgments about what the author is presenting.

### Summary/Précis Peer Response Guide

This sheet is intended to lead you through the process of critiquing and responding to your peers' papers. Try to answer these questions as completely as you can. Be thorough in your remarks. Go the extra step and give examples that clearly show the writer what you mean by your comments. Your responses will benefit your own writing as well as that of your classmates.

1. Does the summary satisfy the length requirement? What needs to be cut from the summary? Where does it need more explanation?
2. Does the summary cover all the main ideas discussed in the essay? List any you feel should be included. Are there any ideas that you feel should be left out of the summary? What and where are they?
3. Underline all the attributive tags in the summary. Do the attributive tags effectively weave the quotations and paraphrases together with the summarized material? Note any awkward places and give suggestions on how they could be revised.

4. Are the quotations completely accurate? (Check the original text.) Has the author paraphrased with words that are too close to the original text?
5. Has the writer included any personal opinion in the summary? Note any place where you hear the writer interjecting his or her own voice. How can these areas be revised?
6. Mark or discuss any grammatical, mechanical, spelling, and MLA documentation errors or problems that you see.

## Argument Paper

Most writing done in the university takes the form of argumentative writing. We argue to get our points across to other people in a convincing way. Every paper that includes your opinion can be considered some sort of argument paper. This assignment is intended to give you practice writing persuasively.

The final draft of your paper should contain the following basic features:

- a well-defined issue;
- a clearly stated thesis, declaring your position;
- sound reasoning based on logic and supported by credible evidence from appropriate sources;
- effective and clear organization;
- evidence that you have anticipated opposing viewpoints and have attempted to refute them;
- appropriate tone for your audience;
- information from at least four credible, properly documented sources.

In addition to the above, your final paper should be:

- five to seven pages typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins;
- documented and formatted according to MLA style;
- edited for spelling, mechanical, grammatical, and typing errors.

Please note that writing is a process. While the final draft of your essay should meet these standards, no one writes a polished essay at one sitting. Your class will discuss these features of writing, giving you a chance to learn how to write an academic argument. Remember, you will also have the opportunity in class for someone else to respond to your essay prior to turning it in.

## Argument Paper Peer Response Guide

This sheet is intended to lead you through the process of critiquing and responding to your peers' papers. Try to answer these questions as completely as you can. Be thorough in your remarks. Go the extra step and give examples that clearly show the writer what you mean by your comments. Your responses will benefit your own writing as well as that of your classmates.

1. Write a brief description of the issue discussed. Is it well-defined? What sort of audience do you think is assumed, and how could the definition of the issue be improved to provide better context for that audience?
2. Underline the thesis statement. Is the thesis/claim clearly stated?
3. Underline the reasons given to support the thesis. Do all the reasons support the thesis? Where does the essay get off track? How credible is the evidence supporting the reasons?

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4. Is there enough evidence to back each of the reasons? If not, where does the argument need more supporting material?
5. Is the essay well-organized and easy to follow? Mark places where you get lost.
6. Are there any assumptions or opposing viewpoints that the argument does not take into consideration? How do the opposing points affect the argument? Does the essay use an appropriate tone?
7. Are at least four credible sources properly cited? Circle all of the attributive tags. Are they used effectively? In what other places would attributive tags be appropriate?

