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An Introduction to Writing

This chapter will

- introduce you to the basic principles of effective writing
- ask you to write a simple paragraph
- present writing as both a skill and a process of discovery
- suggest that you keep a journal
- suggest a sequence for using this book



Though some of us may stumble upon the job of our dreams, many of us have also had a job that seemed more like a nightmare. In this chapter you will read a student's paragraph about his worst job. Think about the best or worst job you have ever had. Later in the chapter you will be asked to write a paragraph of your own on this topic.

This book grows out of experiences I had when learning how to write. My early memories of writing in school are not pleasant. In middle school, I remember getting back paper after paper on which the only comment was “Handwriting very poor.” In high school, the night before a book report was due, I would work anxiously at a card table in my bedroom. I was nervous and sweaty because I felt out of my element, like a person who knows only how to open a can of soup being asked to cook a five-course meal. The act of writing was hard enough, and my feeling that I wasn’t any good at it made me hate the process all the more.

Luckily, in college I had an instructor who changed my negative attitude about writing. During my first semester in composition, I realized that my instructor repeatedly asked two questions about any paper I wrote: “What is your point?” and “What is your support for that point?” I learned that sound writing consists basically of making a point and then providing evidence to support or develop that point. As I understood, practiced, and mastered these and other principles, I began to write effective papers. By the end of the semester, much of my uneasiness and bad feelings about writing had disappeared. I knew that competent writing is a skill that I or anyone can learn with practice. It is a nuts-and-bolts process consisting of a number of principles and techniques that can be studied and mastered. Further, I learned that while there is no alternative to the work required for competent writing, there is satisfaction to be gained through such work. I no longer feared or hated writing, for I knew I could work at it and be good at it.

English Skills explains in a clear and direct way the four basic principles you must learn to write effectively:

1. Start with a clearly stated point.
2. Provide logical, detailed support for your point.
3. Organize and connect your supporting material.
4. Revise and edit so that your sentences are effective and error-free.

Part One of this book explains each of these steps in detail and provides many practice materials to help you master them.

Understanding Point and Support

An Important Difference between Writing and Talking

In everyday conversation, you make all kinds of points, or assertions. You say, for example, “I hate my job”; “Sue’s a really generous person”; or “That exam was unfair.” The points that you make concern such personal matters as well as, at times, larger issues: “A lot of doctors are arrogant”; “The death penalty should exist for certain crimes”; “Tobacco and marijuana are equally dangerous.”

The people you are talking with do not always challenge you to give reasons for your statements. They may know why you feel as you do, or they may already agree with you, or they simply may not want to put you on the spot; so they do not always ask “Why?” But the people who *read* what you write may not know you, agree with you, or feel in any way obliged to you. If you want to communicate effectively with readers, you must provide solid evidence for any point you make. An important difference, then, between writing and talking is this: *In writing, any idea that you advance must be supported with specific reasons or details.*

Think of your readers as reasonable people. They will not take your views on faith, but they *are* willing to consider what you say as long as you support it. Therefore, remember to support with specific evidence any statement that you make.

Point and Support in Two Cartoons

The following two *Peanuts* cartoons will show you quickly and clearly what you need to write effectively. You need to know how to (1) make a point and (2) support the point.

Look for a moment at the following cartoon:



Peanuts © United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

See if you can answer the following questions:

- What is Snoopy’s point in his paper?

Your answer: His point is that _____

- What is his support for his point?

Your answer: _____

Snoopy's point, of course, is that dogs are superior to cats. But he offers no support whatsoever to back up his point. There are two jokes here. First, Snoopy is a dog, so he is naturally going to believe that dogs are superior. The other joke is that his evidence ("They just are, and that's all there is to it!") is no more than empty words. His somewhat guilty look in the last panel suggests that he knows he has not proved his point. To write effectively, you must provide *real* support for your points and opinions.

Now look at this other cartoon about Snoopy as a writer.



See if you can answer the following questions:

- What is Snoopy's point about the hero in his writing?

Your answer: His point is that _____

- What is his support for his point?

Your answer: _____

Snoopy's point is that the hero's life has been a disaster. This time, Snoopy has an abundance of support for his point: The hapless hero never had any luck, money, friends, love, laughter, applause, fame, or answers. But the flaw in

Snoopy's composition is that he does not use enough supporting *details* to really prove his point. Instead, he plays the opposites game with his support ("He wanted to be loved. He died unloved.") As readers, we wonder who the hero wanted to be loved by: his mother? a heroine? a beagle? To sympathize with the hero and understand the nature of his disastrous life, we need more specifics. In the final panel of the cartoon, Snoopy has that guilty expression again. Why might he have a hard time ending this paragraph?



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Point and Support in a Paragraph

Suppose you and a friend are talking about jobs you have had. You might say about a particular job, "That was the worst one I ever had. A lot of hard work and not much money." For your friend, that might be enough to make your point, and you would not really have to explain your statement. But in writing, your point would have to be backed up with specific reasons and details.

Below is a paragraph, written by a student named Gene Hert, about his worst job. A *paragraph* is a short paper of 150 to 200 words. It usually consists of an opening point called a *topic sentence* followed by a series of sentences supporting that point.

My Job in an Apple Plant

Working in an apple plant was the worst job I ever had. First of all, the work was physically hard. For ten hours a night, I took cartons that rolled down a metal track and stacked them onto wooden skids in a tractor trailer. Each carton contained twenty-five pounds of bottled apple juice, and they came down the track almost nonstop. The second bad feature of the job was the pay. I was getting the minimum wage at that time, \$3.65 an hour, plus a quarter extra for working the night shift. I had to work over sixty hours a week to get decent take-home pay. Finally, I hated the working conditions. We were limited to two ten-minute breaks and an unpaid half hour for lunch. Most of my time was spent outside on the loading dock in near-zero-degree temperatures. I was very lonely on the job because I had no interests in common with the other truck loaders. I felt this isolation especially when the production line shut down for the night, and I spent two hours by myself cleaning the apple vats. The vats were an ugly place to be on a cold morning, and the job was a bitter one to have.

Notice what the details in this paragraph do. They provide you, the reader, with a basis for understanding *why* the writer makes the point that is made. Through this specific evidence, the writer has explained and successfully communicated the idea that this job was his worst one.

The evidence that supports the point in a paragraph often consists of a series of reasons followed by examples and details that support the reasons. That is true of the paragraph above: Three reasons are provided, with examples and details that back up those reasons. Supporting evidence in a paper can also consist of anecdotes, personal experiences, facts, studies, statistics, and the opinions of experts.

The paragraph on the apple plant, like almost any piece of effective writing, has two essential parts: (1) a point is advanced, and (2) that point is then supported. Taking a minute to outline the paragraph will help you understand these basic parts clearly. Add the words needed to complete the outline.

Point: Working in an apple plant is the worst job I ever had.

Reason 1: _____

- a. Loaded cartons onto skids for ten hours a night
- b. _____

Reason 2: _____

- a. _____
- b. Had to work sixty hours for decent take-home pay

Reason 3: _____

- a. Two ten-minute breaks and an unpaid lunch
- b. _____
- c. Loneliness on job
 - (1) No interests in common with other workers
 - (2) By myself for two hours cleaning the apple vats

See if you can complete the statements below.

1. An important difference between writing and talking is that in writing we absolutely must _____ any statement we make.
2. A _____ is made up of a point and a collection of specifics that support the point.

An excellent way to get a feel for the paragraph is to write one. Your instructor may ask you to do that now. The only guidelines you need to follow are the ones described here. There is an advantage to writing a paragraph right away, at a point where you have had almost no instruction. This first paragraph will give a

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quick sense of your needs as a writer and will provide a baseline—a standard of comparison that you and your instructor can use to measure your writing progress during the semester.

Here, then, is your topic: Write a paragraph on the best or worst job you have ever had. Provide three reasons why your job was the best or the worst, and give plenty of details to develop each of your three reasons.

Notice that the sample paragraph, “My Job in an Apple Plant,” has the same format your paragraph should have. You should do what this author has done:

- State a point in the first sentence.
- Give three reasons to support the point.
- Introduce each reason clearly with signal words (such as *First of all*, *Second*, and *Finally*).
- Provide details that develop each of the three reasons.

Write your paragraph on a separate sheet of paper. After completing the paragraph, hand it in to your instructor.

Benefits of Paragraph Writing

Paragraph writing offers three benefits. First, mastering the structure of paragraphs will make you a better writer. For other courses, you’ll often write pieces that are variations on the paragraph—for example, exam answers, summaries, response papers, and brief reports. In addition, paragraphs serve as the basic building blocks of essays, the most common form of college writing.

Second, writing paragraphs strengthens your skills as a reader and listener. You’ll become more aware of the ideas of other writers and speakers and the evidence they provide—or fail to provide—to support those ideas.

Most important, paragraph writing will make you a stronger thinker. Writing a solidly reasoned paragraph requires mental discipline. Creating a paragraph with an overall topic sentence supported by well-reasoned, convincing evidence is more challenging than writing a free-form or expressive paper. Such a paragraph requires you to sort out, think through, and organize ideas carefully.

Writing as a Skill

A sure way not to learn how to write competently is to believe that writing is a “natural gift” rather than a learned skill. People who think this way feel that everyone else finds writing easy and that they’re “just not good at it.” This attitude makes them try to avoid writing and, when they do write, to do less than

their best. Their attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: Their writing fails chiefly because they have brainwashed themselves into thinking that they don't have the "natural talent" needed to write.

But writing is a skill, and like most other skills, such as typing, driving, or cooking, it can be learned. If you have the determination to learn, this book will give you the practice you need to develop good writing skills.

Of course, it's frightening to sit down before a blank sheet of paper or computer screen and know that, an hour later, you may not have written a lot worth keeping. Transforming thoughts from one's head into words on a sheet of paper can be a challenge, and at times it can be frustrating. But writing is not an automatic process—we will not get something for nothing, and we shouldn't expect to. For almost everyone, competent writing comes only from plain hard work—determination and sweat. It is a head-on battle. The good news is that you can do it if you are ready to work hard.

To get a sense of just how you regard writing, read the following statements. Put a check (✓) beside those statements with which you agree. This activity is not a test, so try to be as honest as possible.

- _____ 1. A good writer should be able to sit down and write a paper straight through without stopping.
- _____ 2. Writing is a skill that anyone can learn with practice.
- _____ 3. I'll never be good at writing because I make too many mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- _____ 4. Because I dislike writing, I always start a paper at the last possible minute.
- _____ 5. I've always done poorly in English, and I don't expect that to change.

Now read the following comments about the five statements. The comments will help you see if your attitude is hurting or helping your efforts to become a better writer.

Comments

- Statement 1: "A good writer should be able to sit down and write a paper straight through without stopping."

Statement 1 is not true. Writing is, in fact, a process. It is done not in one easy step but in a series of steps, and seldom at one sitting. If you cannot do a paper all at once, that simply means you are like most of the other people on the planet. It is harmful to carry around the false idea that writing should be easy.

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- Statement 2: *“Writing is a skill that anyone can learn with practice.”*

Statement 2 is absolutely true. Writing is a skill, like driving or word processing, that you can master with hard work. If you want to learn to write, you can. It is as simple as that. If you believe this, you are ready to learn how to become a competent writer.

Some people hold the false belief that writing is a natural gift that some have and others do not. Because of this belief, they never make a truly honest effort to learn to write—so they never learn.

- Statement 3: *“I’ll never be good at writing because I make too many mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.”*

The first concern in good writing should be content—what you have to say. Your ideas and feelings are what matter most. You should not worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation while working on content.

Unfortunately, some people are so self-conscious about making mistakes that they do not focus on what they want to say. They need to realize that a paper is best done in stages, and that applying the rules can and should wait until a later stage in the writing process. Through review and practice, you will eventually learn how to follow the rules with confidence.

- Statement 4: *“Because I dislike writing, I always start a paper at the last possible minute.”*

This habit is all too common. You feel you are going to do poorly, and then you behave in a way that ensures you *will* do poorly! Your attitude is so negative that you defeat yourself—not even allowing enough time to really try.

Again, what you need to realize is that writing is a process. Because it is done in steps, you don’t have to get it right all at once. If you allow yourself enough time, you’ll find a way to make a paper come together.

- Statement 5: *“I’ve always done poorly in English, and I don’t expect that to change.”*

Even if you did poorly in English in high school, it is in your power to make English one of your best subjects in college. If you believe writing can be learned, work hard at it! You *will* become a better writer!

Your attitude is crucial. If you continue to believe you will never be a good writer, chances are good that you will not improve. If you start believing that you *can improve*, chances are excellent that you *will improve*.

Writing as a Process of Discovery

In addition to believing that writing is a natural gift, many people believe, mistakenly, that writing should flow in a simple, straight line from the writer’s head

onto the page. But writing is seldom an easy, one-step journey in which a finished paper comes out in a first draft. The truth is that *writing is a process of discovery* that involves a series of steps, and those steps are very often a zigzag journey. Look at the following illustrations of the writing process:

Seldom the Case

Starting point  Finished paper

Usually the Case

Starting point  Finished paper

Very often, writers do not discover exactly what they want to write about until they explore their thoughts in writing. For example, Gene Hert had been asked to write about a best or worst job. Only after he did some freewriting on good and bad jobs did he realize that the most interesting details centered on his job at an apple plant. He discovered his subject in the course of writing.

Another student, Rhonda, talking afterward about a paper she wrote, explained that at first her topic was how she relaxed with her children. But as she accumulated details, she realized after a page of writing that the words *relax* and *children* simply did not go together. Her details were really examples of how she *enjoyed* her children, not how she *relaxed* with them. She sensed that the real focus of her writing should be what she did by herself to relax, and then she thought suddenly that the best time of her week was Thursday after school. “A light clicked on in my head,” she explained. “I knew I had my paper.” Then it was a matter of detailing exactly what she did to relax on Thursday evenings. Her paper, “How I Relax,” is on page 87.

The point is that writing is often a process of continuing discovery. As you write, you may suddenly switch direction or double back. You may be working on a topic sentence and realize suddenly that it could be your concluding thought. Or you may be developing a supporting idea and then decide that it should be the main point of your paper. Chapter 2 treats the writing process directly. What is important to remember here is that writers frequently do not know their exact destination as they begin to write. Very often they discover the direction and shape of a paper during the process of writing.

Keeping a Journal

Because writing is a skill, it makes sense that the more you practice writing, the better you will write. One excellent way to get practice in writing, even before you begin composing formal paragraphs, is to keep a daily or almost daily journal. Writing a journal will help you develop the habit of thinking on paper and

will show you how ideas can be discovered in the process of writing. A journal can make writing a familiar part of your life and can serve as a continuing source of ideas for papers.

At some point during the day—perhaps during a study period after your last class of the day, or right before dinner, or right before going to bed—spend fifteen minutes or so writing in your journal. Keep in mind that you do not have to plan what to write about, or be in the mood to write, or worry about making mistakes as you write; just write down whatever words come out. You should write at least one page in each session.

You may want to use a notebook that you can easily carry with you for on-the-spot writing. Or you may decide to write on loose-leaf paper that can be transferred later to a journal folder on your desk. Many students choose to keep electronic journals on their computers or online through livejournal.com or a similar Web site. No matter how you proceed, be sure to date all entries.

Your instructor may ask you to make journal entries a specific number of times a week, for a specific number of weeks. He or she may have you turn in your journal every so often for review and feedback. If you are keeping the journal on your own, try to make entries three to five times a week every week of the semester. Your journal can serve as a sourcebook of ideas for possible

papers. More important, keeping a journal will help you develop the habit of thinking on paper, and it can help you make writing a familiar part of your life.



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Following is an excerpt from one student's journal. (Sentence-skills mistakes have been corrected to improve readability.) As you read, look for a general point and for supporting material that could be the basis for an interesting paper.

October 6

Today a woman came into our department at the store and wanted to know if we had any scrap lumber ten feet long. Ten feet!

"Lady," I said, "anything we have that's ten feet long sure as heck

continued

isn't scrap." When the boss heard me say that, he almost canned me. My boss is a company man, down to his toe tips. He wants to make a big impression on his bosses, and he'll run us around like mad all night to make himself look good. He's the most ambitious man I've ever met. If I don't transfer out of Hardware soon, I'm going to go crazy on this job. I'm not ready to quit, though. The time is not right. I want to be here for a year and have another job lined up and have other things right before I quit. It's good the boss wasn't around tonight when another customer wanted me to carry a bookcase he had bought out to his car. He didn't ask me to help him—he expected me to help him. I hate that kind of "You're my servant" attitude, and I told him that carrying stuff out to cars wasn't my job. Ordinarily I go out of my way to give people a hand, but not guys like him. . . .

- If the writer of this journal is looking for an idea for a paper, he can probably find several in this single entry. For example, he might write a narrative supporting the point that "In my sales job I have to deal with some irritating customers." See if you can find another idea in this entry that might be the basis for an interesting paragraph. Write your point in the space below.
-
- Take fifteen minutes to prepare a journal entry right now on this day in your life. On a separate sheet of paper, just start writing about anything that you have said, heard, thought, or felt, and let your thoughts take you where they may.

Using This Text

Here is a suggested sequence for using this book if you are working on your own.

1. After completing this introduction, read the remaining five chapters in Part One and work through as many of the activities as you need to master the ideas in these chapters. By the end of Part One, you will have covered all the basic theory needed to write effective papers.
2. Turn to Part Five and take the diagnostic test. The test will help you determine what sentence skills you need to review. Study those skills one or two at a time while you continue to work on other parts of the book. These skills will help you write effective, error-free sentences.
3. What you do next depends on course requirements, individual needs, or both. You will want to practice at least several different kinds of paragraph development in Part Two. If your time is limited, be sure to include “Exemplification” (pages 180–195), “Process” (pages 196–211), “Comparison or Contrast” (pages 226–246), and “Argument” (pages 307–322).
4. After you develop skill in writing effective paragraphs, go on to practice writing one or more of the several-paragraph essays described in Part Three.
5. Turn to Part Four as needed for help with projects that involve research.

Remember that, for your convenience, the book includes the following:

- On the inside back cover, there is a checklist of the four basic steps in effective writing.
- On page 633, there is a list of commonly used correction symbols.

Get into the habit of referring to these guides on a regular basis; they’ll help you produce clearly thought-out, well-written papers.

English Skills will help you learn, practice, and apply the thinking and writing skills you need to communicate effectively. But the starting point must be your determination to do the work needed to become a strong writer. The ability to express yourself clearly and logically can open doors of opportunity for you, both in school and in your career. If you decide—and *only you can decide*—that you want such language power, this book will help you reach that goal.