Survival Guide

This will give you some convenient guidelines for writing well-formatted, well-organized papers. The quality of thinking is up to you—that takes time and energy.

WHAT YOUR PROFESSORS LOOK FOR, no matter what class you're in:

> **Intelligent ideas well thought out and supported, presented coherently and without errors; accurate research and appropriate information; a "smooth read," with none of the obstacles to understanding produced by faulty grammar and punctuation, lack of focus, and poor organization.**
>
> **All composition books and classes exist to help you accomplish those goals.**

WHY GOOD WRITING

IS WORTH

THE EFFORT

Who do you think is running the world?

The people who make and interpret laws, decide public policy, have social impact, run companies and departments, solve the Big Problems, get promotions and raises, etc. are the people who handle communication skills well. In the real world, under many circumstances, if there isn't a written record, the conversation, decision, meeting, policy--whatever--didn't happen. If it isn't written clearly, the event is open to dispute. That's why people say, "Get it in writing." Every "deal" is a eventually a written one. What if you ask someone for a recommendation? Won't you want it to be as well-written as possible? Wouldn't you want to be able to write one as well as possible? Ask yourself, do you stand a better chance of getting admitted to the college of your choice, or hired in a good company, with a clear, concise, intelligent, and competent letter, or with one that has a lot of mistakes?

The better you dress, the better the impression you make. The better you write, the more highly people regard you.

Think of any college writing assignment as a lab in which you acquire skills adaptable to other situations. Grants, legal cases, business accounts, success with an insurance claim--these things go to people who think and write well.

TO THE ESL STUDENT

There is good news and bad news.

The good news: you know more English than most native English speakers know of your language(s)--this includes your professors. You should never feel self-conscious, embarrassed, or inadequate because you don't speak or write as well as someone who grew up speaking English.

Here is some even more important good news: if you've learned English in school, you probably know more about English grammar than most native speakers. They take grammar for granted. (This is *bad* news for the native speakers.)

The bad news for you is really not that bad. You can learn grammar and punctuation, but, as with any language, idiomatic fluency takes a lot of practice. Many of the "mistakes" marked on your papers probably can't be corrected just by looking in a grammar book or dictionary. Idiomatic uses of prepositions or verb-preposition combinations, for example, are too individual and context-dependent to be covered by general rules. Your writing instructors will have to work with you on phrasing, and you'll have to read and practice. Learn from good English speakers, and read newspapers and magazines regularly to improve your vocabulary and sense of idiom. Don't be discouraged if you don't learn all at once. Fluency takes years, but you can improve your writing in every class you take.

Never be afraid to ask questions if you don't understand something, and don't hesitate to use your college's learning resource or language skills center. It's there for people who want to improve. It will also help immensely if you take every opportunity to speak and write English. The more you remain within the community of friends and relatives who speak only your native language, the less practice you'll get with English and the longer it will take to develop fluency and correctness. Remember, *in many cases, native speakers of English are struggling too.*

SOME THEORY AND DEFINITIONS

What is a writing book without a little theory and a few definitions?

These are interesting and informational. You don't necessarily need to know them to write decent papers, but they help.

1. **Expository writing.**

   There are many kinds of writing and occasions for doing it. **Expository writing** is, basically, essay and/or report writing--writing to communicate information as clearly as possible. Your basic composition courses are all courses in **expository writing**, and the "rules" for that kind of writing will apply in all other courses unless the professor, for whatever reason, informs you differently.

   Never get the idea that the "rules" of good writing only apply in English classes. Good writing is good writing in *all* your classes.

   The other major category for writing is "*creative*" writing. The classes are separated, and the professors are usually not the same. Unfortunately, this implies some kind of absolute difference between "expository" and "creative." But many of the techniques/devices "creative" writers use are also used in expository writing--e.g., description and dialogue. Perhaps the biggest difference, really, is that **expository writing makes its general ideas explicit**. Creative writing does not. But even this distinction is not absolute. The word "expository" comes from a Latin root that means "to lay open," like our word "expose," so you should think of your essays as "putting your ideas out" in the open, rather than leaving them implied.

   Both kinds of writing require intelligence, creativity, inspiration, and

hard work. Creative writing can often be more flexible about the rules of grammar and punctuation, but that doesn't mean you can mess up in an essay and say, "Oh, I was being creative."

2. **Occasion.**

This refers to the **reason** you're writing. In college, you will most likely be writing to complete an assignment. Other occasions might be accident reports, job applications, work-related suggestions and proposals, memos, or the desire to express yourself. College writing provides you with basic thinking, writing, and research skills. They can be applied elsewhere.

3. **Audience.**

Audience is the reader or group of readers your writing is directed to. In college, it's the professor, who should, ideally, represent the generic literate, well-informed reader one generically writes for. The professor can function in that role because, aside from specific philosophic/intellectual biases he or she may have, the basic qualities of good expository writing are well understood and will be immediately recognized.

Audience and occasion can affect your adherence to the rules and/or the way you apply them. We're concerned with college writing here. Obviously, if you're writing to a friend, you don't need to be as strict in observing all the "rules" that go into a properly-written class essay. If you're writing to some other audience, you need to address your readers in a language and style they will be able to relate to.

4. **Format.**

This is a term you will run into from time to time in classes. It means, simply, **the organizational pattern for your paper**, or how you're presenting your ideas The standard formats are as follows:

description comparison/contrast

example/illustration	argumentation
narration	classification
cause/effect	process
definition	

Usually the assignment, especially in lower-division classes will Make clear what the format should be: e.g. in an introductory writing class, you might be assigned to tell how and/or why you came to college. Narration and cause and effect are the most obvious choices. In an art history class, you might be assigned to compare and contrast two paintings; in a political science or history class, you might be assigned to explain what the results of an event or policy have been (cause-effect).

In advanced classes, you are likely to get less directive assignments. You have to do the research, come up with the ideas, and decide on the most appropriate format (or formats).

NOTE: even though you are writing a comparison/contrast paper, let's say, you will undoubtedly use other formats within individual paragraphs. Don't think that if you're writing in one format, you can't make use of others along the way.

6. **Tone**.

Tone is **the writer's attitude (emotion, feeling) toward the subject, or, put another way, the attitude the writer wants the reader to have**--anger, sadness, sarcasm, indignation, and so on. Sometimes expository writing might seem "toneless," but that is the sign of a neutral, reasonable, objective attitude on the writer's part--the attitude the reader is supposed to take as well.

That, generally, is what your professors expect. Unless otherwise stated, you are expected to discuss an issue objectively and develop your ideas about it persuasively. This doesn't mean you might not let anger or sadness or perplexity be apparent--this will

give your writing life. But you can't get carried away and forget to carry on a solid, well-written, well-substantiated discussion, especially with hot-button topics like abortion, gun-control, welfare, etc. Politicians and editorialists often sway us, whether they have good reasons or not. So long as they sound good and angry, we are supposed to think there must be something to it. But in college papers that won't work. Don't rant and rave.

7. **Rhetoric**.

A word with several definitions. Often, we think of it as meaning "lies," or "telling an audience what it wants to hear." Politics, where both those meanings often apply, has given rhetoric a bad name.

Originally, however, for the Greeks and Romans, the art of rhetoric meant knowing how to persuade an audience--what sorts of arguments, presented in what sorts of language would win the case for a lawyer or persuade a legislative body to take a specific course of action.

In college courses, when the term comes up, it means, essentially, the definition in the preceding paragraph. Using that definition, it is incorporated into the titles of composition books that focus on writing by "rhetorical formats." These books focus on ways of organizing and presenting information clearly. "Rhetorical" means writing with the needs of an audience in mind.

8. **Formal/Informal.**

Roughly, writing falls into the categories of "formal" or "informal," depending on the occasion and your audience. "Informal" refers to writing situations in which slang or colloquialisms can be used, not all sentences have to be complete, and you can be more flexible about the "rules" of writing; "formal" refers to situations where you yourself realize you need to write as well and correctly as possible. College papers are almost always formal, as are all professional communications.

FROM THE ASSIGNMENT

TO

THE COMPLETED ESSAY

A BRIEF PHILOSOPHY OF WRITING

When your instructor talks about writing, he or she will be thinking about it in several ways:

1. as a **process** in which you discover and clarify ideas, struggle and discard some, incorporate others. Part of writing is the struggle. Even professionals go through it.

2. as a **contract**: the writer makes an implicit agreement with the reader to state points clearly, to support them, and, generally, to write as well as possible. Lazy or inconsistent writing violates the implicit contract and activates the professor's implicit contract to give you low grades for substandard work.

3. as **discovery**. Well-known writers have said they write to discover what they have to say. This is perhaps the freest, most open-ended way to think about writing, and for that reason the most difficult, but also the most gratifying. You start with your own random thoughts and try to give them order and substance.

All writing combines process, contract and discovery.

Process, contract and discovery involve hard work. Don't be alarmed if you spend two to three hours per typewritten page.

As a guide, use

THE PLAN

When you get your assignment, your first reaction is likely to be anxiety. You have no particular ideas, no sense of what to say.

But you can get the paper written if you follow **The Plan**. And each time you work your way through it, you will gain more self-confidence. The more you write, the better your writing will become.

IMPORTANT: **Don't expect to begin with a finished paper. Work toward it, step by step**

MORE IMPORTANT: DON'T EVEN *THINK* ABOUT TRYING TO CRANK OUT A PAPER IN ONE HURRIED DRAFT. You will turn in a mess to your professor.

Work out a schedule:

If the assignment is due in a month, give yourself the first week or ten days to think and/or do the necessary research. (If research is called for.) If you have to write on a book, use this time to read. In either case, take a lot of notes.

Then, schedule *at least* three carefully-worked drafts. If you have a computer, so much the better--each computer draft is worth two or three hand-written or typed drafts.

Then start brainstorming, drafting, and formulating a tentative thesis. This whole part of the process is very fluid. It almost doesn't matter which thing you do first: if writing a draft first works for you, do that. If extensive outlining works for you, do that.

In the actual process of writing, it's not unlikely that the introduction will be the last step. Why? Because you can't know what you're going to introduce until you've done a lot of preliminary thinking and writing. You might, at any stage, write a preliminary introduction, but you can't be sure it will work until you're pretty far along with the rest of the paper. If this sounds suspiciously like trial and error writing, that's okay. **By the time you submit your paper, the trial/error element will be gone.**

THE FLUID, INTUITIVE NATURE OF WRITING

Clearly, this is a very loosely-structured process. Your paper is in an entirely fluid state until you actually hand it in. At any point between the raw idea and the finished essay, you are free to go back and forth to different steps. Do what works best for you. Rewrite whatever you think can be improved. If you work best by writing an introduction first, by all means do that.

No time for all this? Remember what I said: Don't wait until the last minute. Get into the habit of being professional about your studies; it will be good when you're actually on the job.

Each draft brings you closer to a "presentation structure." That is the form your professor will expect.

HOW YOUR PROFESSORS EXPECT TO SEE A PAPER PUT TOGETHER,
or
PRESENTATION STRUCTURE

Your professors expect a **BASIC ESSAY STRUCTURE**. You may have heard it described before as "telling the readers what you're going to say, saying it, and then reminding them of what you've said." Obviously, a good essay consists of more than this, but it's the basic idea. Professors in every class look for it.

One cautionary note: as should be evident from what I've already said, what I am about to describe is the **end result** of the writing process. The drafts are for trying ideas out, seeing how they fit together. Professional writers don't produce final copy on the first try, and you don't have to either. (Unless this is an **in-class essay or exam**: then the basic process and presentation rules still apply, you just have to apply them in a speeded-up form. All your thinking and preparation have taken place during your preparatory study.)

The **Basic Essay Structure**, your final form, *exists to make ideas clear to the reader*. In the process of writing, your ideas will also become clearer to you, and you will discover more of them.

Based on the presentation form, these are my basic **GRADING CRITERIA:**

1. **SUBSTANTIAL THOUGHT**: this is the whole point of your papers. Substantial thought includes information, research, ideas, clear and forceful expression, intelligence, literate vocabulary--all the things readers hope for. You should not write down the first easy idea that comes into your mind without questioning, examining, testing, and then giving original and individual examples. The best writing is based on the paradoxical principle of "controlled spontaneity."

   This is why the following grading criteria exist:

2. **FOCUS**: a clearly-stated thesis to give your discussion direction

3. **ORGANIZATION**: clearly following the direction laid out in the thesis

4. **DEVELOPMENT**: having adequate support/illustration of your points. (This is where the researched information, examples, statistics, etc. will appear.)

5. **COHERENCE**: effective use of transitions between paragraphs and from sentence to sentence to give your writing a sense of flow, continuity, and logical connectedness

6. **MECHANICS**: almost no mistakes of spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, or grammar. See any grammar book, and/or make use of Writing Center resources, such as the green handouts on grammar and punctuation.

FORMATTING

In the abstract, a three-to-five page paper should be set up like this:

A. **INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH**: with thesis (5 - 7 sentences)

B. **DISCUSSION PARAGRAPHS**: (7 - 12 sentences each, approximately 2 - 21/2 per page, as many pages as you need to complete the project/assignment)

Paragraph 1 Topic sentence

support/development

Paragraph 2 Topic sentence/transition

support/development

Paragraph 3 Topic sentence/transition

support/development

Etc., until the discussion is finished

C. **CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH** (5-7 sentences**)**

(Note: no instructor I know actually counts sentences in paragraphs; the numbers above are purely guidelines--if you have a two-sentence paragraph, you probably haven't developed your idea adequately; if you have a twenty-sentence paragraph, you've probably run several ideas together, and they should be in separate paragraphs. This is like assignments given in numbers of words. If you're given a 1000-word assignment, the number represents a

general scope of focus and development the professor wants you to be responsible for. He or she will not be counting actual words.)

With a well-written introduction and well-developed paragraphs, a three-page paper (750 words) will probably have seven to nine paragraphs, a five-page paper (1250 words) will have 12-15 paragraphs, and so on. These numbers are not absolute, any more than the number of sentences per paragraph: these are guidelines. Naturally, a longer paper (ten pages or more) might well have a longer introduction (perhaps several paragraphs) and conclusion.

1. FOCUS: THE INTRODUCTION (5-7 SENTENCES)

People always say, "I don't know how to get started."

The first thing to remember is that you don't have to start with the introduction. You might even write it last.

Here's what an introduction should accomplish:

1. establish a perspective on the topic, give it general significance, let the reader know **why this is an important topic** to write (and read) about. Establishing perspective leads to the next item:

2. a **thesis statement** that sets up the controlling idea and direction of the essay; the controlling idea is the one you're supposed to keep in the reader's mind throughout the essay, showing how each topic in the discussion relates to it.

1. ESTABLISHING THAT INITIAL PERSPECTIVE: why the topic is significant.

Even if you yourself are not interested in the topic, you have to give the topic its due and write substantially about it. As you get more involved, you are very likely to discover an interest you didn't think you had. It is never

acceptable to complain that the topic is boring and quit. In some cases, the professor might be open to an alternative you suggest.

If you have trouble starting your introduction, try one or more of these common and entirely acceptable techniques used by professional writers:

- describe a scene or situation

- quote someone else, perhaps an authority

- ask a rhetorical question (one that either doesn't require an answer because the answer is so obvious, or that you're going to answer yourself)

- make an outrageous statement

- summarize the history behind the issue

- place your discussion in some larger context

The important thing, however you begin your paper, is to give your introductory material an organic sense of unity and relationship with the issues you are going to discuss. These are techniques, but don't treat them mechanically.

Never say, "This topic is significant because . . . "

Its significance will be apparent from what you say about it.

2. THESIS STATEMENT:

The thesis statement should summarize the general idea of your essay, and it should lay out the plan of organization.

The thesis works very well as the last sentence of your introduction, though it may also be placed at the beginning. In either position, make it absolutely clear and follow it strictly throughout your essay. Without a well-stated thesis, the reader has little clue what to expect. A weak thesis, or no thesis,

often leads to a paper with little coherence and a weak conclusion. And remember, *you may not be able to write the thesis until you've done considerable preliminary research, thinking and writing.*

Your thesis should do two things:

1. give the essential idea of the paper in general terms

2. provide a generalized guide to the order of your discussion sub-topics

Examples (these statements would come after four or five sentences leading up to them):

"I have come to college hoping to improve my prospects for the future, meet more interesting people, and enrich my cultural and intellectual background."

"A happy dog is one whose master or mistress takes care of all the necessities, of course, but also provides a healthy, loving atmosphere filled with recreation and opportunities for learning."

"Compared with Spielberg's earlier films, *Schindler's List* is important and unusual because it tells, in a straightforward, non-cliched way, the story of a truly humane and heroic man doing what his assistant calls 'an absolute good.'"

"The Depression was a difficult period both in America and Western Europe."

These statements *won't* work as a thesis:

Schindler's List is an important and unusual movie. (States a fact or opinion but gives no general idea of why the statement might be true--i.e., no clue as to how the writer is going to make that argument.)

Happy dogs, not sad dogs. (This is obviously a title, not a thesis.)

In this paper, I will try to explain how to have a happy dog.

(This last example has several weaknesses. First, it is rhetorically weak: a writer should never say he/she is going to "try" to do something. The reader understands that already, and the statement sounds weak and apologetic, like, "Maybe I won't be able to convince you, but 'I will try.'" Second, a thesis should be **substantive**, not **operational.** A substantive thesis states the controlling idea for the paper; an operational thesis merely names an operation the writer is going to perform in the paper, i.e., "I am going to try to explain . . . ." For the substantive version of this thesis, look back a page.)

HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A GOOD THESIS?

Follow these steps (in conjunction with the writing you're already doing):

1. define the topic area (on exams and shorter assignments, the professor may do that for you)

2. develop ideas for the topic (by brainstorming and/or research, as explained above)

3. after you have a lot of ideas and/or have done a lot of brainstorming, ask yourself the **GLOBAL QUESTION**: *what general idea do I want to communicate on this topic, and how can I convince a reader that I'm right?*

The answer to the first part of this question gives you the first part of your thesis. The answer to the second part gives you the second part of your thesis--the discussion subtopics.

(4. by this time, you have already developed a preliminary outline)

Note: consider your thesis and outline subject to change as your ideas develop during the various drafts of your paper. You may not arrive at a final thesis, in fact, until the body of the

paper is well along. This is okay. Writing, as I've said before, involves continual revision and rethinking

Here's an example of a thesis statement for a typical personal paper:

> "College is one of the more important commitments in life because it improves prospects for the future, enables one to meet new and interesting people, and enriches one's intellectual background."

You know, after reading that thesis, what the writer thinks about college and why college is important. The "why" is divided into three sub-headings, which can be listed in outline form as follows:

a. improve prospects for the future

b. meet new and interesting people

c. enrich one's intellectual background

Important: you must discuss these topics in the order you put them in your thesis statement.

LEADING UP TO THE THESIS:

Here are examples using two of the techniques for getting an introduction started:

1. **placing the discussion in a larger context**. Your topic is the value of a college education. Why not introduce that by starting out with education in general? This introduction also begins with a **rhetorical question** (that is, one the reader is not really expected to answer because the writer is going to, or the answer is obvious).

"Is an education complete after high school? Many people seem to think so. They would prefer, after they graduate, to get out and make some money rather than put in four or more years getting a college education. Certainly the amount of money they can make at a full-time job, compared to what they had before, seems staggering. But that is their impression at age eighteen. By age twenty-four, they will begin to feel that life is passing

them by. Their friends who went to college will have graduated and begun careers. They will have gotten some other benefits as well, though perhaps less tangible. In addition to better prospects for the future, their college education has enabled them to meet new people and to gain an intellectual perspective on the world that they would not have developed otherwise. This is the key to their increased job prospects."

(Notice, I've adapted the original thesis statement to fit this introduction. That's okay--you make the thesis up, you can change it. If the professor gives you a thesis, you may not have the same freedom.)

2. **Setting a scene or describing a situation:**

"My first day on campus was a nightmare that made me wish I'd taken the secretarial job a friend of my father's offered me. I could have been sitting behind a desk in an air-conditioned office, getting ready to move into my own apartment and enjoy some privacy and a chance to live my life the way I'd always wanted. Instead, I was stuck in my car five minutes before class, in a dusty parking lot on a hot September day, not even sure where to find the room I was already supposed to be in. It turned out to be all the way across campus. I was more than ten minutes late, and the professor gave me a nasty look as I found a seat, disrupting four other students. By the end of that day, however, I began to experience the benefits of being in college. I was still living at home, still responsible for two family dinners a week and dishwashing on the evenings I didn't cook, but in classes I met two new friends, I got challenging assignments, and the courses I take in the future will give me greater job prospects."

Again, I've adapted the thesis statement to fit the introduction.

The important thing is that there is a thesis at the end of both those paragraphs, and **it gives the general idea and order of the paper**. I could have crammed the original thesis into the end of the paragraph, but it wouldn't have sounded natural. Part of your goal must always be natural, fluent communication.

What about other ways of writing an introduction?

If you feel that statistics might help, look some up. Your librarian can help you find numbers of students who enter college after high school compared to numbers of students who work and enter later. Be sure to acknowledge your source in a footnote.

You can see from these examples why one of the descriptions of how to write a paper doesn't tell the whole story: "tell the reader what you're going to talk about; talk about it; then tell the reader what you've talked about." This is brief and amusing, but it doesn't account for the variety of ways an introduction (and conclusion) can be written, and it doesn't address the *vitality* and *personality* you want to achieve in writing. If your writing is mechanically correct but lifeless, you'll hate it, and so will your professors. And then you'll hate your grade.

THE B.S. FACTOR. Perhaps you're thinking, "You mean we have to B.S. our way through an introduction just to satisfy some requirement about a prescribed number of sentences?" Well, you can call writing a good introduction "B.S.-ing" if you want, but it isn't--it's getting an *attitude* started, "warming up the audience." Jay Leno doesn't come out cold and start telling jokes. He has people who get the audience ready. Good introductions do the same thing: they ease the way in, capture the attention, provide a compelling reason to read the discussion. A good introduction is not B.S. A bad introduction is.

2. DEVELOPMENT: THE DISCUSSION

This is where you go through the subtopics of your thesis, point by point, paragraph by paragraph, explaining, illustrating, supporting, arguing. As with your introductory paragraph, your professor will be looking for good, substantial development, which means following each idea with a logical and well-related subsequent idea, and supporting the ideas with examples, anecdotes, discussion, analysis, solid research--whatever you need to make a particular point effectively.

STRUCTURING AND DEVELOPING DISCUSSION PARAGRAPHS

Ideas in an expository paper are most clearly laid out paragraph by paragraph.

Each paragraph is a group of sentences that develop a single idea, clearly stated (almost always) in a topic sentence, which usually comes at the beginning of the paragraph. The topic sentence of a paragraph has the same function as the thesis statement of your paper: to provide a clear statement of a central idea that the rest of the sentences will develop (a paragraph has focus, just like the overall paper).

In the paragraph, you must prove, illustrate, give examples, explain, clarify, support the topic sentence: that is called paragraph development.

How long should each paragraph be? In general, the paragraph should be long enough to support its central idea fully. This might mean seven sentences; it might mean twelve sentences. In some especially difficult topics, it might mean twenty sentences or more; in newspaper and magazine stories, new paragraphs can begin each sentence or two. In general, seven to twelve sentences is not a bad rule of thumb. Less than that, and you may have shortchanged your subject. More than that, and you may have run several topics together. Your writing instructor can help you develop a sense of appropriate length.

Examples of general ideas (topic sentences) you must go on to support:

> That dog is dangerous.
>
> Mr. X is not a man one can trust.
>
> She is an independent person, and she works hard to support her family.
>
> Many relationships fail because the partners cannot communicate well.
>
> That is a difficult topic to research.

In each case, you must go on to explain *why* you have made the assertion. If you made these statements in conversation, the natural response would be to ask why? or how do you mean? or to say, "Prove it." In an essay, since there is no one there to ask you these questions, you must provide the explanation unasked.

What sort of material goes into discussion paragraphs? That depends on the kind of essay, the kind of points you're trying to make, or the assignment. In general, paragraphs incorporate detailed, specific information as support for ideas. However, they can use the same organizational patterns as papers: comparison-contrast, example, description, narration, definition, argumentation, cause/effect, etc.

And they still have all the qualities of a good paper: focus (a controlling idea stated in such a way that its relationship to preceding ideas is clear); development (support, proof, clarification); coherence (clear sense of relationships); organization (logical order of statements, clear controlling pattern); competence with grammar and mechanics; intelligence and depth of thinking.

Each paragraph should move from general statements, like the ones I've used as examples here, to more and more specific statements. In fact, your **paragraph structure** will usually be as follows:

1. Topic sentence (stating the general idea)

2. perhaps a follow-up, or clarifying statement that is slightly more specific

3. support statements: the more specific and detailed, the more convincing your idea is going to be, moving back and forth between more general and more specific depending on the complexity of the idea you're trying to convince your skeptical friend about

You should ask yourself the same question for each paragraph that you do for the paper as a whole: what do I want to say, and how can I convince the reader I'm right?

The Principle of the Skeptical Friend

As an aid to support and development, try to imagine a friend who never believes anything you say, an eternal skeptic to whom you always have to justify yourself.

As an example of how to develop ideas, let's go back to the thesis statement about reasons for going to college.

a. "better prospects for the future"

Your question to yourself is: how can I convince the reader I'm right about college offering "better prospects for the future"?

You could explain or justify your statement by relating stories about friends who have found better jobs or have progressed faster because of their education (**anecdotal/narrative support**). Or, you could use statistics you found in your research. Or, you could rely on what you've heard teachers and parents say. Or, you could think about your own ambitions for the future.

You should also always think to yourself, what are the *best* arguments, the *best* proofs--i.e., the most likely to convince my skeptical friend. For example, simply telling him/her that your parents always said a college education would improve your prospects might not be enough support. The response might be, "Who cares what parents say--they always tell you the hardest thing to do, and they're boring anyway." Part of critical thinking is the ability to evaluate arguments, both in and of themselves, and according to whom you're trying to convince (audience).

b. "meet new and interesting people"

What better place to look for material for this topic than around you? You might compare a college friend with another friend who hasn't been to college (**comparison** /**contrast**--which might also have been a good way to approach the preceding paragraph). Or, you might explain how, at college, you met people from other countries, other backgrounds, with different ideas customs, traditions, and perspectives.

c. “enriched cultural and intellectual background.”

When they start college, many people don’t understand this concept. As classes progress, they become more aware of what college has to offer.

So, how do you write about a topic like this if you haven’t yet had the experience?

One strategy, of course, would be to find a subtopic you can talk about more easily.

But suppose this one is assigned. What do you do then?

You have to **BE INVENTIVE**. You can look in books, look at the college catalogue, talk a little about high school and how your college classes are either better or different. If you’ve been out of school for awhile, talk about how your job may have left you with the feeling that there must be something more to life than punching in, punching out, collecting pay, and partying.

“OPENINGS”

Any paper assignment will call on you to create something to say.

One way to think about this is to look for **OPENINGS**. “Openings” are those points in each statement where you can see the opportunity to say more. You yourself put them in all the time. For example, you might write a sentence like this: “The seminar by the public relations consultant had a tremendous impact on the way my company treated customers.” If you need more content, don’t stop at this point. Explain what the new policy is, how your company treated customers before the report, how it now treats them. This one statement provides you with an “opening” that could extend to a page.

Here’s another example: “Many of my friends have entirely different values and lifestyles from my own.” Again, you’ve given yourself an opening: explain what your own values and lifestyle are like, and then talk about your

friends. You should never be at a loss for things to discuss, especially in a paper that calls on your personal experience.

"Openings" operate as well in research papers. Be alert to points at which you need to say more. If you don't have the information immediately at hand, do some more research.

Development is important! Whether you are giving facts, description, statistics, examples--the reader needs to feel that general statements are well-supported. This means work for you as a writer, but it's work you must do.

Again, the B.S. factor. Never try to tell anyone that good development is just "BS"ing your way through the papers. If you don't take the assignment seriously, if you crank it out mindlessly, it *will* be B.S., and you'll get a bad grade. Take every assignment seriously, personalize it, think about it--*make* it worth your while. You should take yourself seriously enough that you never feel like saying, "I just bs'd my way through that." True B.S. is nothing to brag about.

3. ORGANIZATION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBTOPICS AS EXPRESSED IN THE THESIS AND TAKEN UP IN YOUR DISCUSSION.

You can organize an essay in any number of equally effective ways. Good organization means, first and foremost, proceeding according to the plan set up in the thesis.

In the example thesis we've been using, I listed the subtopics as follows:

a. prospects for the future

b. new and interesting people

c. enriched intellectual background

This is a perfectly adequate organization.

I could also have listed them this way:

a. new and interesting people

b. enriched cultural and intellectual background

c. prospects for the future

For this paper, the topics could appear in any order.

When making decisions about which is the best order for your discussion subtopics, keep the following simple principles in mind:

1. as you think about the paper during the preliminary stages, an order will begin to seem logical and necessary to you. Follow this intuition.

2. if you're writing narrative (recounting events in order), the organization will most likely turn out to be chronological.

3. as you're thinking about organization, it's usually a good idea to put your strongest point last. Go out in a blaze of glory. If you have a good reason for putting the strongest point first (in news stories, the most important point is supposed to come first, because readers are considered not to have the staying power for the whole article), by all means do it. Whatever order you chose for your subtopics, the development of the discussion should seem "natural," and you can accomplish that by attending to **COHERENCE**.

4. COHERENCE

Coherence is the effective use of transitional words and/or phrases, between paragraphs and from sentence to sentence. **TRANSITIONAL WORDS AND PHRASES INDICATE THE LOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN IDEAS AND GIVE YOUR PAPER A SENSE OF "FLOW**," **or CONTINUITY**.

THINK OF THEM AS *CUE WORDS* OR *TRAFFIC DIRECTORS*: THEY LET THE PROFESSOR (OR ANY OTHER READER) KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING AT NECESSARY POINTS IN THE DISCUSSION.

THUS, THEY KEEP IDEAS FROM GETTING LOST IN THE SHUFFLE OR FROM CRASHING INTO EACH OTHER. WRITING IS NOT A *DEMOLITION DERBY.*

Effective transitions can make almost any organization of subtopics seem natural.

HERE IS A LIST OF COMMON TRANSITIONAL WORDS AND PHRASES, WITH EXPLANATIONS OF WHAT RELATIONSHIPS THEY INDICATE BETWEEN THE IDEAS THEY CONNECT:

A. letting the professor know that ideas are being added

and, also, besides, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, next, too, first, second

B. telling the professor you're giving examples

for example, for instance, to illustrate, in fact, specifically

C. telling the professor you're stating a similarity (comparing)

also, in the same manner, similarly, likewise, by comparison, by contrast

D. telling her or him you're stating a difference (contrasting), or setting up some kind of opposition

but, however, on the other hand, in contrast, nevertheless, still, even though, on the contrary, yet, although

E. indicating that you're summarizing or concluding

in other words, in short, in summary, in conclusion, to

sum up, that is, therefore

F. indicating time relationships

after, as, before, next, during, later, finally, meanwhile, then, when, while

G. indicating directional or place relationships

above, below, beyond, farther on, nearby, opposite, close, to the left (right, side, front, etc.)

H. indicating logical relationships

if, so, therefore, consequently, thus, as a result, for this reason, since

CAUTIONS ABOUT USING THESE WORDS AND PHRASES.

1. Avoid the grab-bag approach. Sometimes students seem to put all the transitional words/phrases in a hat, close their eyes, and select a transition at random.

But you can't do that. Words like "morever" and "furthermore" indicate specific relationships between the ideas they connect. Don't treat them as though they are interchangeable with "in addition" or "however."

2. Not all transitions can be accomplished with this list of words. At times you have to invent a transitional phrase or sentence for a particular context. How will you know? As with paragraph length or which way to phrase an idea, **you have to develop a sense of judgment**. This is where your writing teacher can be particularly helpful.

3. Because transitions should express the *logical* relationships between ideas, numerical transitions ("first," "second," "third," and so on) are

not the most effective way of putting a paper together. You may have been told at one time or another that numbering points will always work, but that is a lazy, "one-size-fits-all" technique. It is good for speeches, where the audience needs a simple scheme because they're listening, but in a paper you should exploit the opportunity for more complex thinking.

4. Don't be lazy with transitions. Other poor ways to connect points are, "As long as we're talking about . . ."; "By the way, I wanted to mention . . . ," or "Oh, and while we're on the topic . . . ."

Arbitrary, ad hoc connections weaken your paper. Also, don't betray that you've just remembered something you should have put earlier in the paper by using a transition like "to return to what I was saying earlier."

Part of "substantial thought" (the grading criterion I put first) is what I'll refer to as "intellectual force." Along with a good, solid college-level vocabulary, solid connections between well-supported ideas constitute another aspect of "intellectual force." This makes your paper persuasive.

5. You don't need a transition to connect every sentence. The purpose of transitions is unity and coherence. Sometimes pronouns effect this; sometimes what you say in one sentence is clearly related in content to the preceding sentence. Use transitional words and phrases only where necessary. Don't beat them into the ground.

5. FOCUS: THE CONCLUSION

When you've finished your discussion, bring your paper to a close. Don't just stop--that's too abrupt. The same principles apply in the conclusion as in the introduction. There, you eased your reader in; the conclusion eases your reader out. This is the "warmdown," the writer's final chance to clarify points.

For the sake of avoiding monotony, especially in a short paper, don't simply repeat your discussion points. The reader can remember those. Look into the future, perhaps, or refer the discussion to some larger context. When stuck for a way to end your paper, refer to the strategies for starting out an introduction. They will work here too--describe a scene or anecdote, quote an authority. Just don't sound tired or mechanical. That affects the quality

of your writing, implies a ho-hum attitude, and ultimately brings down your grade.

FINAL REFLECTIONS ON BASIC ESSAY STRUCTURE

There are rules, and there are rules.

One of the secrets of good writing is learning when to apply rules and when to be more flexible about them. Different writing situations and audiences will affect your choices. Obviously, a lettter to a friend will be different from a business letter; a paper analyzing a poem or discussing a historical figure will call for different kinds of phrasing than a grocery list or a report on water pollution. So, be aware of the following:

1. **This guide is for a standard school and academic essay.**

It is what most professors are looking for most of the time, and it provides a convenient structure for your ideas, hopefully not a constricting or mechanical one. Machine-like correctness is not your objective; your professors want you, within the boundaries of clarity and coherence, to show originality, independent thinking, energy, and intensity. Think how many papers they read throughout their careers. You're doing them a favor by using my suggestions as the *basis* for good thinking and writing.

2. If you decide, through the process of brainstorming, writing, and revising, to develop your own format, keep in mind that any instructor's grading criteria will still be whether your discussion is clear, organized, vigorous, and coherent--whether it has substance and **intellectual force**. No matter what format you choose, your writing must not seem arbitrary, scrambled, wordy, vague, uncertain, or mechanically incompetent. These are not the elements of originality; they are the elements of **BAD WRITING**.

3. Don't confuse kinds of writing: as I stated under "Some Theory and Definitions," college essays come under the category of "expository writing." "Creative writing" is for poems, plays, short stories, novels, etc.

On the other hand, both kinds of writing use many of the same techniques, and expository writing should be creative and original. If you regard expository writing as dull and academic, that is because you are letting it be that way for you.

4. **TIME:** One of the things we all wish we had more of.

A student recently moaned that she had spent *so* much time on her paper--about ten hours for 4 1/2 pages. She was concerned that she was spending too much time--that other people didn't have to work so hard.

SURVIVAL PRINCIPLE: multiply the number of pages in the assignment by three to get the amount of time you should allow (i.e., a four page assignment should get at least twelve hours of actual writing time--that is, *after* the reading and research--more if necessary).

Writing is hard work. (Being in school is hard work if you do it right.) Learning and the personal growth that goes with it take a major commitment of time and energy. Some people may be able to write an acceptable paper in a short amount of time, but a really good paper should take about **three hours per page, if not more.** If you are already spending that much time, it isn't because you're a bad writer, it's because having ideas and getting them on paper is as hard as any physical labor, and you have to work at it until it's right.

That's why I said at the outset, don't even think about submitting a paper you've hurried through in one draft. Plan. Allow plenty of time to let your ideas and discussion mature. As you improve you'll be able to brainstorm, organize, and move from draft to draft more efficiently. You won't have to panic so much trying to fit class assignments in with work, family obligations, emergencies, and social life. But like everyone else, you do have to go through the struggle. In the long run, the expressive ability and self-confidence you gain make the effort very rewarding.