

WRITING AN ESSAY—EXECUTION

By this time you should already have a thesis sentence, outline, and an idea for a conclusion. If you do not, then see the handout, "Writing an Essay I: Planning," before continuing. This paper shall examine the process of composition from the perspective of execution (actually writing the paper) in order to provide writers and their tutors with systematic means of completing an essay.

I. What is the relation of an outline to the written theme?

- A. The first important connection between the outline and the written theme is how the thesis is written. It might happen that, after you have decided on a thesis, the outline forces you to rewrite it, because the outline revealed some problem you hadn't expected (such as a lack of evidence) or suggested some improvement. Since one of the purposes of a good thesis is to give a general indication of the plan of the paper, this plan must be reflected in the final outline. In any case, the outline—and, of course, the theme written from it—must not contradict the thesis and vice versa.
- B. The other connection between an outline and the written theme involves paragraphs. How do paragraphs relate to parts of an outline? It depends. The theme that was written from the sample outline given in the handout, "Writing an Essay I: Planning," contained five paragraphs. In the sample theme, there is a separate paragraph for the introductory paragraph (see p. 3 above) and for the conclusion. Each major section (I, II, III) took one paragraph to complete. The paragraphs written from the outline for Sections I and II were, of course, the longest. Compare the outline for I and II with the paragraphs written from it:

I. Beneficial programs

A. Nature specials

1. Are realistic
2. Teach appreciation of all life

B. "Sesame Street" and similar programs

1. Develop interest in school
2. Encourage creativity

C. Christmas programs

D. Some commercials

The beneficial programs are mainly those that educate the young. There are often nature specials on animal life that are realistic, and that teach children an appreciation for all life. There are

a few regular children's programs, such as "Sesame Street" or "Electric Company," that develop the child's interest in school-type learning by stressing numbers and the alphabet, and that encourage him or her to be creative. Children's Christmas specials can offer a warm, wholesome form of entertainment, and the beneficial commercials, such as those on anti-smoking, anti-litter, and health, should be included in this category.

II. Harmful programs

A. Many commercials

B. Adult programs containing violence or sex

1. Confuse the child
2. Harden him to violence
3. Frighten him
4. Warp his attitudes

C. Many cartoons

On the opposite side are the shows which are generally harmful to children. Many commercials, especially those sponsoring the children's programs, are deliberately written to create a desire for an unnecessary product such as sugar-coated cereals and candy.

All adult programs that include violence or overdone sex scenes can at best fill a child's mind with confusing or misleading ideas, and could possibly harden the child to violence, leave him terrified, or warp his viewpoints toward human life and sexual love. Many children's cartoons should be classified as bad because of their constant ridiculing of all adults.

Looking at this, you can see why the theme was only 5 paragraphs long. The material is dealt with in an uncomplicated manner, and the evidence is mainly in the form of listing brief examples of programs. As a result, each major section of the outline (I, II, III) could easily be handled in one paragraph each. But imagine for a moment that section II. B. ("affects of adult programs containing violence or sex") interested the writer so much or was so important to understand clearly how harmful TV programs can be that it was expanded into a paragraph of its own. This expansion might have been required for various reasons: a need to emphasize the gravity of the problem, the discussion of psychological studies treating TV's relation to violence, inclusion of personal or anecdotal material, etc.

Thus, the answer to the question about how paragraphs relate to parts of an outline seems to be that the relation between the two depends on how accurately the outline reflects what is actually going to be written down. (For example, the imaginary expansion of II. B. would have to be based on material that doesn't appear in the outline since there's no mention there of psychological studies, personal experience, etc.) Another way to express this relation between the outline and the written theme is to say that the more precise the outline is, the closer it will reflect the theme that will

eventually be written from it. Outlines can be general and they can produce general papers. The outline and the paragraphs you have looked at illustrate that. General outlines can also produce very detailed writing, but that means more material has to be stored in the writer's head and not on paper, and that increases the chances of forgetting and confusion.

For college writers, a good rule in preparing outlines is to make them as precise and detailed as possible. The obvious benefits are that outlines offer more freedom to change and rearrange things and that a minimum of work remains after you're satisfied with a detailed outline. Notice that, given the outline for the simple theme on TV, the writer had only to write the individual sentences. Concentration didn't need to be divided among many different tasks at once (What do I say? What do I say after that? How do I say it?). It could concern itself solely with choosing the words for ideas that had already been decided on. This is not to deny that important ideas aren't discovered in the process of writing, but it's wiser not to expect too much from some hypothetical last-minute inspiration.

II. Are there adequate transitions between paragraphs?

A. What is a transition?

1. It is a word or phrase that is used to link paragraphs to each other and to clearly signal the beginning of a major unit of the paper (for example, the sections designated by roman numerals in the previous discussion of outlining).

It shows a logical relationship between the main idea of one paragraph and that of another.

Transitions are familiar to anyone who has read directions about how to do something. In these cases they usually show when one action ends and another should begin. So you always see things like "first you do X; then you do Y, and finally you do Z." The words first, then, and finally are transitions because they signal a change from one idea to another. They also show how the ideas are related. Here the actions X, Y, and Z are related by a time sequence; one happens after another.

2. Transitions can be grouped together according to the kind of logical relationship they indicate exists between two ideas. The following is a list of the more common transitions:

Time: later, then, next, after this/that, soon, in the meantime, meanwhile, following this/that

Addition to an idea: moreover, further, furthermore, besides, likewise, also, too, again, in addition, equally important, next, first, second, third, finally, last, in the first place, in the second place

Comparison: similarly, likewise, in like manner, in the same way

Contrast: however, still, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, after all, for all that, in contrast to this, at the same time, conversely, otherwise

Result: hence, therefore, accordingly, consequently, thus, as a result, then, for this reason, in conclusion

Illustration: for example, for instance, as an instance of this/that, as an illustration of this/that

B. How are transitions put into a theme?

Recall that one of the purposes of an outline is to establish the order of the ideas that the paper will discuss. The theme outline illustrated above (p. 6) is based on the simple pattern of a list: there are three main types of programs (according to the effects they have on children). The theme, then, will probably have the form of a list: first, second, and third. Such an outline pattern already suggests possible transitions to use. Notice above that there is a group of transitions indicating addition. Addition is the basic principle of a list. In fact, words like first, second, and third are appropriate transitions for such a theme, and each major section of the paper should begin with one of them. Signals like these are what the reader uses to know where he or she is in your discussion. They are rather like freeway signs that indicate the junction of two roads.

Not every theme, however, has a good form of a simple list, and even if your theme does, it is a good idea not to rely too heavily on very simple transitions like first and second. The reason for this advice is that themes can often degenerate into lists similar to grocery lists: all the things you want or need are there, but it's difficult to see any significant connection between teabags and foot powder. In order to avoid unconsciously developing your paper into a simple list, look at the outline you have made carefully to see if more significant logical relations exist also. Notice, for example, that in the outline already discussed, section II in some way opposes or contradicts the idea that TV programs are beneficial: section II brings up the other side of the coin, as it were. The result is a contrast, and you will notice that there is a group of transitions to express the idea of contrast. And the author of the sample theme chose such a contrast on the opposite side. (Notice that the phrase is not included in the above list. You can be creative about transitions so that they readily adapt to your special needs.)

Thus, before the theme is written, the logical relations between ideas and the transitions used to express them can be pretty well understood. In fact, it may appear from doing this kind of work that you need to re-think your ideas because you realize that the theme is a series of vaguely related but actually disjointed ideas. The failure to see clearly and make the most out of the connections between their own ideas is one of the most common problems of college writers.

C. Summary:

Transitions seem like little things, but they are of great importance in constructing a clear discussion. Many professors say that constructing a clear discussion is the most important element in a term paper. Remember: since your papers will rarely deal with original research (but instead with information generally known and accepted by the field you are working in), the chief values of your paper will be how it organizes the ideas in it and how sophisticated and insightful its connections between ideas are. This cannot be emphasized too much. The paper that only has the correct information in it will be (by the standards of most professors) only an ordinary paper. It is also of crucial importance to remember that the thinking about these connections should largely be done before you begin writing.

III. Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence and a definite purpose? Is the paragraph coherent?

A. What is a topic sentence? A topic sentence is

- normally the first sentence of the paragraph (and contains any transitional material when appropriate) and
- gives the main idea for the paragraph that it begins and thus gives a clue about what we expect to see in the paragraph.

A topic sentence is a generalization. It has the same general relation to the paragraph that the thesis has to the entire theme. Like a thesis, a topic sentence will generally indicate the subject of a paragraph. The remainder of the paragraph (like the remainder of a theme) will provide evidence to support or clarify that idea.

As a general rule, then, every paragraph should have this basic form:

generalization (topic sentence)

evidence

Look again at the first sentences of the second and third paragraphs of the sample theme:

The beneficial television programs are mainly those that educate the young. On the opposite side are the shows that are generally harmful to children.

Each sentence is a generalization, briefly but definitely indicating the kind of material that will follow. From the first you expect examples of programs that educate (and possibly some indication of how they do that); from the second you expect examples of harmful shows (and perhaps why they are harmful).

B. How can you make sure that the purpose of the paragraph is valuable?

Every paragraph in the essay should have a definite purpose, and this purpose is indicated by the topic sentence. It is also necessary, however, to make sure that each paragraph has a clear relation to the thesis of the paper. If it does not, the organization is said to be incoherent. The best way to check that each paragraph deserves to exist and to exist where it does is to make sure that it follows the outline you have prepared. Unless you have some better reason to change, no paragraph should violate the sequence of ideas predicted by the outline. The outline will generally indicate what the paragraph should be doing: defining and discussing a complex term ("liberalism"), citing and discussing examples of some previous idea, etc.

C. How is a paragraph coherent?

A paragraph, like a theme, is coherent when it doesn't get off the track of the main idea and the support needed for it. Thus, writing coherent paragraphs is partly a matter of attention to logic and common sense and of remembering that the paragraph should do only what the topic sentence indicates that it will do: define a term, give an example, make a comparison, etc. But coherency is also a matter of language, of choosing words and phrases that help the reader move from one idea to another without losing the way.

Look at the following paragraph and you will notice that some words and phrases have been underlined. These underlinings indicate places where the writer has used language to connect sentences. The words and phrases used for this purpose usually take the form of repeated words, pronouns (words like this, it, they, etc.), synonyms (words having meanings similar to those of words already used) or antonyms (words having the opposite meanings), and transition words or phrases (see the handout on Transitions for a list of these). In the first few sentences, lines have been drawn to show the connections between ideas established by the use of the underlined words and phrases. You should do the remainder yourself as an exercise:

A decision means giving up something you want in order to have something else you want more. If you crave both things, you may have to wrestle with your decision. If you care very little for one of them, you may not have a decision to make. The fifty-fifty choice is like the proverbial bottle of wine that can be seen as half full or half empty. Worry about the top of the bottle, and a decision can fill you with dread. Make up your mind quickly, and the wine is yours.

Next, read the following list. Pay attention to word choice.

1. What does it mean to be normal?
2. The word "normal" is used in more than one way.
3. It is used both evaluatively and descriptively.
4. When it is used evaluatively, a value judgment is made.
5. In this sense "normal behavior" means "good behavior," what you ought to do, what is acceptable or desirable.

6. "Abnormal behavior," then, means what is bad, undesirable, immoral or bizarre.
7. Thus certain sexual practices are referred to by some people as "abnormal acts," even though the majority of people have participated in them.
8. Masturbation is one sexual act.
9. What people mean when they call masturbation abnormal is that in their opinion it is not good or desirable.

Notice the use of repeated words (6, 9), of pronouns (3, 4, 5, 8), of antonyms (6), and of transition words (6, 7). All of us use these kinds of connectors quite automatically when speaking. It is very important that they are also present in your writing to prevent sentences from lacking any connection with each other. When you read over your paper, you should consciously look to see that paragraphs are coherent in this way; sentences that don't reveal some verbal or logical connection with those around them will have to be re-written. Reading your work out loud is sometimes a good way to perceive the lack of connections.

D. Summary:

There are thus two kinds of coherency:

1. Coherency within the theme as a whole: This depends on how well you have planned your outline and chosen your transitions and topic sentences. This kind of coherency can be achieved largely before writing begins.
2. Coherency within paragraphs: This is a matter of making sure one sentence clearly follows from another. "Clearly" usually means the presence of some kind of connecting word or phrase (in the form of repetition, synonym/antonym, pronoun, or transition word).

IV. Is there a useful conclusion to the theme?

It is important to point out right away that a conclusion does not simply summarize the paper. Yet this is the function most people associate with it. In fact, unless the paper is much beyond the average length of 7-10 pages, the conclusion should probably not summarize the paper. The reason is that a summary of a paper so short is simply not necessary and can give your reader the mistaken (?) impression that the conclusion has been carelessly stuck on at the end. It seems mechanical and overly simplistic.

A conclusion is most useful when it has one of the following forms.

1. It can restate the main idea. This is what most people should do instead of summarizing their papers. It is important to emphasize, however, that the restatement should NOT be identical to the original statement of the idea in the thesis paragraph. An example of this kind of conclusion is the following paragraph from a student essay on the Hemingway short story "A Clean Well-Lighted Place."

The thesis idea was that "the story points out that a small order can make a great difference in one person's life. The order makes belief as well as meaning possible." The conclusion restates this idea, but tries to do so from a slightly different perspective:

Thus, the cafe symbolizes a "still point" in a world that is violent and disordered. It is all the old waiter can point to and cherish, but it seems more enduring than the brash and brittle confidence of the young waiter. The small belief in something that the old man and the waiter can hold onto make a grim life endurable.

2. A conclusion can state your personal opinion regarding the topic under discussion. This can take many forms—perhaps as a suggested solution to a problem the paper has discussed or as a statement pointing out the importance or seriousness of the topic. The following conclusion is from a paper examining the evidence for the apparent breakdown of the American institution of marriage:

Better marriage relations in this country await an extensive re-evaluation of our attitude towards life and living. If our values are shabby and our attitudes adolescent, how can American marriage, made in our image, be anything but a monumental failure?

3. A conclusion can be used to briefly refer to additional relevant evidence that you have chosen not to discuss in the main part of the paper. The reason for doing this is mainly to show that you could have brought even more proof for your thesis than you did:

It seems clear, then, that the idea that language decays as social values decay underlies the crucial scenes of Richard II, but it also appears as a constant refrain in minor ones as well. In all of these, broken communication is explicitly referred to: in the parting of Richard from his wife, in the dialogue of the conspirators, and in Henry's brief but revealing "denunciation" of the murderer of the king he himself dethroned.

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