A SHORT COURSE ON COLLEGE WRITING

by

Aaron Benanav
Harper-Schmidt Fellow
The University of Chicago
INTRODUCTION: THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF A COLLEGE ESSAY

High-school papers often take as their model the standard five-paragraph essay composed of an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The introduction is sometimes described as an inverted pyramid, which starts with more general statements and ends with specific ones. In high school essays, the thesis statement is backed up by examples. Each of these examples is relegated to a single paragraph in the body of the essay. The conclusion simply restates the thesis and then moves from specific statements back to more general ones, often concerning humanity.

College essays are different. There is no set number of paragraphs. Essays are as long as they need to be in order to lay out an argument. For our purposes, an argument is defined as a persuasive chain of reasoning. Body paragraphs are not structured around examples supporting a thesis. Rather, body paragraphs each represent one step in that unfolding chain of reasoning.

Introductions and conclusions are also different. The introduction should discuss an existing problem or debate and should give the reader some sense of your position (thesis) with respect to that problem or debate. Conclusions do not simply restate the thesis. They explain its significance – why it matters. Neither the introduction nor the conclusion needs to be limited to a single paragraph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Papers</th>
<th>College Essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction Paragraph</strong></td>
<td><strong>Introductory Section</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General statement</td>
<td>Describe a PROBLEM (P) or debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific thesis</td>
<td>Explain the terms of the problem or debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of examples</td>
<td>State your THESIS (T) and overall reasoning, that is, state your own position with respect to the problem or debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body Paragraphs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Body Paragraphs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¶ Example 1</td>
<td>¶ Step 1 in your ARGUMENT (A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¶ Example 2</td>
<td>¶ Step 2 in your argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¶ Example 3</td>
<td>¶ Step 3 in your argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion Paragraph</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conclusion Section</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restate thesis</td>
<td>Restate your thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New general statement</td>
<td>Explain its SIGNIFICANCE (S)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Helpful tips:

★ Never begin or end an essay with a grandiloquent phrase such as “Since the dawn of time…” 😥
★ Never end an essay with an overly general conclusion, such as the following:
  “As I have shown, man has always been torn between two competing passions.” 😥
★ Never provide dictionary definitions: “Merriam-Webster defines ‘corruption’ as…” 😥
1. THE FIRST COMPONENT OF A COLLEGE ESSAY: THE PROBLEM (P)

The problem tells the readers what is at stake in the essay. It explains what is troubling us intellectually, politically, or scientifically. The problem tells the readers what the debate is we want to enter, or what the question is we want to answer. In fact, the problem can usually be stated as a question. Should we do this (or that)? how does this work? why doesn’t that work? or even just: what is this?

Note that the problems discussed in college essays do not have to be practical problems (for example, how do we solve the problem of global poverty?). They can also be, and usually are, theoretical problems (for example, what causes global poverty?). In the university, we often discuss things that we don’t understand. We hope that better understandings will lead to better solutions.

Problems frequently concern opposed understandings of natural or social phenomena. For that reason, a problem is something about which there is, almost always, an already ongoing debate. Sometimes we debate problems that have definite answers. By what mechanism does HIV infect cells? Did real wages move up or down during the Industrial Revolution? Other times, we discuss more open-ended problems, which have no definite answer. What is the best form of government, for complex societies such as our own? What is the best way to reduce global levels of inequality?

When you discuss a problem, you want to give some sense not only of what is at stake or at issue, but also, of what has been said – or has not been said – about this problem already. If there is a debate, here, how would you frame the debate? That is to say, how would you describe the relevant sides in the debate? It is important to recognize that different people may frame the same debate in very different ways. When you write your own essay, you get to decide how you want to frame the debate. You get to decide what people are really debating, what the relevant “sides” are.

For example, if you wanted to discuss the upcoming presidential election, you might decide that the election is really about healthcare reform, and that the two sides of the debate are organized around whether or not healthcare is cheaper now than it was before. Not everyone will see the healthcare debate as being about costs: they might think the key dividing line has to do with, e.g., moral assumptions (whether it is more important to help others in need, or whether people should be made to take responsibility for their own health). Moreover, many people will see the election entirely differently: they may think the election is really about the state of the economy.
2. THE SECOND COMPONENT OF A COLLEGE ESSAY: THE THESIS (T)

In an argumentative essay, you are expected to put forward a position on some topic or question. Such positions do not come from nowhere. No matter what the topic, there is already a conversation or debate about it, which delimits the range of positions that one can reasonably adopt. Your “thesis” is your intervention into some debate, or your answer to some question.

To make a strong intervention, you need to make it on the terms of a debate that is already happening. In other words, you want your thesis to be the answer to a question that other people are already asking and debating (or that you think they really should be asking or debating). Remember what was said above: although these debates are already ongoing, you get to frame the debate however you want. Once you figure out what your position is, you will want to frame the debate in a way that is relevant to the position you are trying to put forward. Take some time to get the readers onto the track (or line of questioning) that will guide them towards your position.

Now, you are ready to put forward your thesis, which should be easier, since you’ve provided some context. Make sure your thesis is an argument: make sure you take a position of some kind. In a sense, a thesis is a one or two (or three) sentence summary of the overall point of your paper.

To make a strong thesis, or take a strong position, you should do three things:

1. Take a non-obvious position. The reader should be able to say, “I would need to be convinced of that claim.” A quick way to tell whether or not your position is obvious is to look at an opposed position. Could you imagine someone arguing against your thesis?

2. Explain your position. Don’t say, “We need more regulation in the economy”; instead, say, “Markets need to be regulated because unless market competition is regulated, it generates negative results, such as mislabeling and the adulteration of ingredients.” Explain what you want to say, without laying out your entire argument in advance.

3. Demonstrate that you are aware of the limits of your thesis, or possible objections to it. Think about how you might qualify your thesis. Taking the example above, you might begin by saying, “Although too much regulation can stifle innovation …”
3. THE FINAL COMPONENT OF A COLLEGE ESSAY: SIGNIFICANCE (S)

In high school essays, conclusions often seem to be completely unnecessary. They are merely tacked on the the body of the essay, hanging there like a wet rag. Why write a final paragraph, where the only point is to restate what you’ve already stated in your introduction?

In college essays, conclusions have an actual purpose. They are an essential component of the essay. The conclusion is where you draw out the implications of the argument you have made. In essence, the conclusion is where you answer the question “so what?” You’ve proved your thesis, but “so what?” What are the implications of your thesis? Why is it significant?

Answering these questions will be much easier if you have already put forward an interesting thesis. If you are having trouble answering the question, “so what?” then you probably need to revise your thesis, to make it more interesting. A good thesis has strong implications. A strong argument convinces readers not only that you are right, but that you are right about something that matters.

In writing a strong conclusion, it helps if you have already situated your thesis in the context of an ongoing debate. If you framed the debate at the beginning, then, at the end, the implications of your argument should be clear: it alters that debate in some specific way. That is, it advances the conversation, whether by proving some other position to be wrong (or right), or by altering the terms of the debate in some significant way, which pushes the debate in one direct or another.

Please note: your answer to the question “so what?” does not have to be an answer; it can also be a question. Sometimes, that’s the best way to end a paper: by explaining what new questions open up or by pointing to further research that will have to be done, on the basis of your thesis.

Also note: to explain the significance of your thesis rarely means to explain its significance, for all of mankind, in all times and all places. Reject grandiloquent statements. Make sure that, when you explain the significance of your thesis, you do not exaggerate its significance.

So you see, the conclusion isn’t a wet rag. In some ways, it’s the most important part of your essay! In the conclusion, begin by restating your thesis, but now, in a fuller way. After all, your readers have already read through all the steps in your argument. They understand your argument much more completely than they did when they read your introduction. Then, lay out the significance of your argument, in a few sentences or even a few paragraphs. Finally, finish with a strong concluding sentence (or sentences) that powerfully reflects on your argument and its significance.
4. ON ARGUMENTATION (A): THE STRUCTURE OF A BODY PARAGRAPH

You might think of the body of your essay as a battlefield, where you advance and defend your argument in combat with others. Or you might think of it as a kind of obstacle course, which you need to get through in an allotted time. In any case, it is important to remember that you need to bring your readers along with you, every step of the way. Your readers need to follow your argument, so they are right there with you when you finally reach your conclusion.

The body paragraphs do the work of holding the reader’s hand and walking them through your argument, while protecting them from the slings and arrows of the conversational battlefield.

Body paragraphs include five components:

1. A topic sentence
2. Logical reasoning
3. Evidence
4. Warrants
5. A transition

The most important part of a body paragraph is the topic sentence. The topic sentence puts forward the main point of the paragraph. Everything else in the paragraph should be related to this point, which moves your overall argument forward by one step. If you lose track of your argument, or if a paragraph is getting too long or unwieldy, that is a sign that you need to stand back and add or alter some of the steps. Make sure that you also add or alter your topic sentences.

After you’ve put forward your main point, in a given paragraph, you need to back that point up with logical reasoning and evidence. Remember that persuading the reader isn’t about bombarding them with facts. You want explain your points, while encouraging the reader to agree that each new point follows, logically, from the ones you’ve already made. Along the way, provide evidence, but that evidence should be used to back up your reasoning. An essay that foregrounds evidence over reasoning looks like a jumble of facts instead of a cogent argument supported by them.

In essays for this class, your evidence will consist of quotations from the reader. Evidence doesn’t only mean facts and statistics. If you are reconstructing an argument, your evidence will consist of quotations that back up your interpretation of a given text. Note that you don’t always need to quote directly. Paraphrase when possible. That is, use your own words (however, remember that paraphrases still need citations). Only quote the most important passages, passages where the author states a point in such a way that the specific phrasing seems to matter for their argument.

Whenever you provide evidence, you need to provide a warrant, as well. A warrant explains how a specific piece of evidence supports the point you are making. For example, you might present the following evidence: “Towns in which Walmart’s open tend to have higher poverty rates, five years later, than comparable towns without Walmarts.” But what does that prove? What conclusions are you drawing from this fact? You need to tell your readers: “Walmarts clearly affect local pop-
ulations for the worse. However, since Walmarts offer lower prices, they cannot be creating poverty among consumers (whom they actually help). Walmarts generate poverty because, in order to offer lower prices, Walmarts pay lower wages to their workers. Walmarts also put competing retailers out of business. Those retailers generally offer higher wages. Thus, it is through employment effects, not through consumption effects, that Walmart creates poverty.”

A simple way to ensure that your evidence does not go unwarranted is to never (or rarely) leave a quotation hanging at the end of a paragraph. A quotation should be introduced by a point, for which it provides the evidence. Quotations should then be followed by a one or more points that explain the relevance of that evidence. Those points should explain what the quotation proves.

Finally, the last component of the body paragraph is the transition. Transitions do not always need to be made explicit. Sometimes paragraphs flow easily from one to the next. In fact, if you’ve worked out the steps in your argument in advance, paragraphs should mostly follow as if naturally, since each paragraph represents one step in a coherent argument. But no matter how well planned out your essay, it sometimes happens that a transition from one paragraph to the next seems abrupt. In that case, you need to work on the last sentence of one paragraph—and sometimes also on the first sentence of the following paragraph—to link them together.
5. TYING IT ALL TOGETHER: HOW TO WRITE A RECONSTRUCTIVE ESSAY

When you write, you should never find yourself staring at a blank page at 9pm, trying to figure out what you are going to say for an essay due the next morning! Writing is like cooking. There is a lot of prep work to be done before you throw anything into the pan: you need to choose a recipe, see if you have all the necessary equipment and ingredients, chop up the vegetables and retrieve spices from your spice cabinet. The same is true of writing. When you sit down to write, you need to have all the necessary materials already in place. In fact, the writing process should begin at least a week in advance, when you read the readings for the first time.

Follow these steps to move from active reading to a polished essay.

1. Read the assigned readings.
2. As you read, mark up the text (underline, highlight, make marginal notes, etc).
3. Now, figure out what is being asked of you in the essay prompt. If you do not understand what is being asked, make sure you ask your instructor (don’t wait until the last minute!).
4. Re-read the passages you have already emphasized, with the prompt in mind.
5. Make sure you understand the arguments of the authors whose work you are evaluating. Answer the following questions (not necessarily in writing):
   - What is the topic of this text?
   - How would you describe the debate into which the author is intervening? What is at stake?
   - Who is the author arguing against and who is he or she arguing with, in this text?
   - What is the author’s thesis, his or her main argument?
   - What are the major points in the author’s argument?
   - What evidence does the author provide, in support of that argument?
   - Do you agree with the author? Is his or her argument sound?
   - What would happen if everyone thought like the author does, or did what s/he says we should do?
   - What is the author missing?
   - Are there any unstated or questionable assumptions in his or her argument?
   - What is the significance of the author’s argument? What are its implications?
6. Try free-writing about your essay for twenty minutes. That is to say, put aside your notes and try to write down your main points, without looking up and references. Don’t stop until the time is up!
7. Now, organize your ideas into a more or less detailed outline, even if it is only a few lines long.
8. Finally, it’s time to sit down and write. Use the free writing and outline to help you write a rough draft.
9. Print out your rough draft and—after taking a break—edit it.
10. Revise your draft, which sometimes requires a lot of rewriting and sometimes only proofreading.

Please remember to use 1” margins, 12 point font, and double space.
Also, when you turn your paper in, make sure you’ve stapled it and included page numbers.
6. TRANSITIONS BETWEEN IDEAS
(partly adapted from the online ‘Guide for Grammar and Writing’, available at: grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/)

To read well, an essay must flow, at two levels. First, individuals sentences should flow, from one to the next. To check if your sentences flow nicely, it helps to read over a complete paragraph, either in your head or aloud or even to a friend. Second, paragraphs also need to flow from one to the next. Make sure that your body paragraphs flow nicely in both senses!

To do so, use transitions to guide your reader through your argument. There are four basic ways to transitions between ideas: 1. use transitional expressions, 2. repeat key words and phrases, 3. use pronoun reference, and 4. use parallel forms. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

1. Transitional expressions tell your reader how you intend to connect ideas together. Are those ideas moving in the same direction, or are you changing directions? Are you introducing an example or an exceptional case? Here is a partial list of transitional expressions:

   addition: again, also, and, and then, besides, further, furthermore, in addition
   comparison: also, in the same way, likewise, similarly
   concession: granted, naturally, of course
   contrast: although, at the same time, despite that, even so, in contrast, nevertheless
   emphasis: certainly, indeed, in fact, of course
   illustration: after all, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, in short, thus
   time sequence: again, also, and then, as long as, eventually, meanwhile, now, since

   Note: do not overload your text with transitional expressions! Use them wisely. And note that, despite what you may have heard, you can begin a sentence with “and.”

2. Generally, you should avoid unnecessary repetition. But that doesn’t mean that you should never repeat words. Using some phrases multiple times builds bridges between ideas. You might say, “When high-school students form cliques, individuals students often find themselves isolated.” Then, to form a connection between ideas, you could begin your next sentence as follows: “This isolation can be detrimental to learning”. Isolated, isolation: that’s the bridge.

3. Make sure pronouns have clear referents. If you use “they” or “this”, make sure that there is only one such “they” or “this” preceding the pronoun. If the referent is unclear, then consider spelling out the reference (for example, not “this” but “this isolation”, as above).

4. Using parallel constructions is a nice way to compare or contrast ideas. When comparing or contrasting, use the same grammatical form in sentences that are linked together. For example, if you want to say something about why protestors are taking to the streets, you might begin by saying, “When protestors take their message to the halls of Congress, it is sometimes easy for politicians to ignore them.” Then, in the following sentence, say, “By contrast, when protestors take to the streets, they cannot be ignored because …” The form “When protestors do X … ; by contrast, when protestors do Y … ” grammatically links the two opposed ideas.
When referring to something that someone else has said, you have two options. You can use a *direct quotation*, or you can *paraphrase*. You only want to use a direct quotation under three conditions: (1) if you’re establishing another person’s position, (2) if you’re using a particular statement as a piece of evidence for your argument, or (3) if that person has said something more clearly than you can. Otherwise, paraphrase: summarize what the author said in your own words.

Now you have some quotations or paraphrases in your text. How should you cite them? You have two options. Here are some examples, discussing Ashley Montagu’s book, *The American Way of Life* (taken from Purdue OWL). The first is a paraphrase, and the second is a direction quotation.

(1) Montagu claims that American men have a diminished capacity to be human because they have been trained by their culture not to cry (248).

(2) One anthropologist calls the male’s reluctance to cry “a trained inability” (Montagu 248).

You can either (1) refer to the author by name in the sentence that introduces the quotation (or that paraphrases). Put the page number, in parentheses, after the quotation or paraphrase. Or (2) if you don’t mention the author by name in the sentence, then put both the author’s name and the page number – with one space and no commas – in parentheses at the end of the sentence.

At the end of your paper, you need a separate page that says Works Cited at the top, in the center. It should list the cited works, in alphabetical order by author’s name, in the following format:

For books: Lastname, Firstname. *Title of Book*. City of Publication: Publisher, Year of Publication.


See the Purdue OWL page, mentioned at the top, for more detailed information.

Remember this, above all. If you cite evidence from another author, *you need to explain how that evidence supports the point you are making*. For example, you might present the following evidence: “Towns in which Walmart’s open tend to have higher poverty rates, five years later, than comparable towns without Walmarts” (Fishman 34). But what does that prove? You need to tell your readers: Walmarts affect local populations for the worse. However, since Walmarts offer lower prices, they cannot be creating poverty among consumers. Walmarts generate poverty because they pay low wages to their workers. Walmarts also put competing retailers out of business, who offer higher wages. It is through employment effects that Walmart creates poverty.

A quotation should be introduced by a point, for which it provides the evidence. A quotation should then be followed by points that explain its relevance. Here are some models:

- X states, “_____.”
- As claimed by X, “_____.”
- In her article _____, X suggests that “_____.”

Now that you’ve successfully used the quotation in your sentence, it’s time to explain what that quotations means. Here are some models for explaining quotations:

- In other words, X asserts _____.
- In arguing this claim, X suggests that ___.
8. EXAMPLES OF GOOD WRITING

As you learn to write, you should begin to develop a style that is clear as well as graceful. You want to be funny at times and clever at others. You want to write about powerful ideas in a way that tells your reader how powerful they are. In addition, you want to develop a distinct voice as a writer. These are no easy tasks. They come only with time. Writing is an art, not a science. It is something you get better at with practice, just like drawing or playing a sport. The best way to become a good writer is to keep writing. But it is also helpful to read the good writing of others.

As you read a book or an article, ask yourself, is this text an example of good writing? If it is an example of good writing, what makes it so? How does the writer make you sad or angry, or merely interested? Why do you sometimes have to read certain passages multiple times, to get their meaning, while other passages seem to flow together so easily that it seems as if the author is in the room, speaking to you directly? If you are looking for some examples of good writing, I would recommend that you look at reviews of books. These journals contain essays that reconstruct and evaluate the arguments of recently published books, written by a variety of authors. In that sense, the essays in these “reviews” are similar to the essays you are writing for this class.

Some examples of reviews are:

6. The Times Literary Supplement - http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/