

A Strategic Approach to Writing for the Classroom

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Most students are more than capable of writing a most excellent essay. Even if they have difficulties with the more mechanical skills of writing—spelling, grammar, and punctuation—they are usually still quite capable of constructing sentences and stringing them together to make coherent paragraphs. However, undergraduates almost universally abhor this seemingly simple task. More often than not, the mere mention of a paper or essay exam in a syllabus is enough to start a stampede to the registrar’s office to beg for a different class. Even for the better students, a simple essay assignment may be a daunting, almost Herculean task. Why, if students are capable of writing these essays, does writing cause such a visceral reaction? And why do birds continue to fly south every fall when they could just land on the top of a southbound semi and ride I-95 to Florida?

Though there are probably several complex social and psychological processes that combine to cause both students and birds to behave irrationally, one of the biggest and most constant sources of the students’ fear seems to stem from a more straightforward source: uncertainty over the content of an essay. There are several books and other types of guides that tell a student how to write an essay—formats, styles, citations, and such—but when it comes to what to put in those properly formatted sentences and paragraphs, the vast majority of students, even the studious and hardworking students, are clueless. A few have a natural knack for it, an intuitive feel for what a professor or a boss wants to see in there, but for most, it is a shot in the dark and they all end up trying to hide it all behind the selection of a tasteful Book Antiqua font.

Combining the often-divergent insights derived from teaching introductory composition courses, teaching writing-intensive political science courses, and watching documentaries on bird migration, a lecture-style description of a strategic approach to writing is presented here. The primary objective is to provide students with something they can use to help focus and organize the content of a brief, report, or other type of essay. Obviously, every paper is going to be different, and it is impossible to tell a student what he or she should put in any specific essay. However, just as it is possible to teach a mechanic methods and techniques to more effectively use the tools of the trade to attain an end, such as fixing a car, it is possible to outline a method students can use to more effectively construct an essay. By focusing on the effort to persuade the reader and adding a few other suggestions regarding the content of writing, students can make the whole process easier and more effective.

THE GOAL OF WRITING

Writing is a goal-oriented process, a means to an end, and it needs to be approached as such. In short, you are not just writing an essay; you are trying to accomplish something with your essay. Specifically, in writing an essay you are presenting an argument. You are trying to convince the reader of something. At the very least, you should be trying to persuade a reasonable and open-minded reader that what you are arguing, what you are trying to say, the position you are trying to defend, the opinion you are trying to express, is reasonable. When you are writing for a boss, or judge, or banker, or client, you are not filling pages so you can get enough and stop typing; you are trying to convince them to sell this widget, to let your client go, to loan you this money, to follow this advice. When you are writing for a professor, you should also keep in mind that you are doing more than regurgitating the information that has been delivered to you throughout the course. We call that brain vomit. Professors don't like brain vomit any more than they like any other form of vomit. Professors want you to use that information in a novel way. They want you to take what you have been given and form it into an argument that will convince your professor that you understand the material and its application. You have to use that material to convince your professor of two things: you know the topic well enough to be writing an essay about it, and that he, she, or it should take your argument seriously.

How does this focus on convincing the reader of something translate into a strategy for writing an essay? Perhaps the simplest starting point is to use this goal as a point of reference throughout the writing process. When you are faced with the task of writing, ask yourself this question: What am I trying to convince my reader of? Often this will help determine what material should go into an essay and how it should be organized.

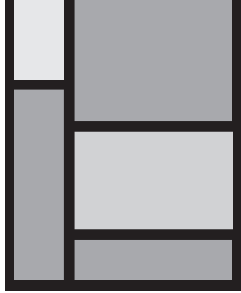
For example, pretend you are sitting across the dinner table from your less-than-bright uncle Larry. Everybody has that grudgingly tolerated relative who occasionally shows up for a holiday meal here or there. Everyone has that uncle who talks with his mouth full and is just a little slow on the uptake but who does not let either get in the way of a good debate.

"Why do you have to go off to college? You don't need to go to college. I did just fine working at the gas station," Uncle Larry's mashed potatoes say.

You sit there, and for some unknown reason, you feel compelled to explain to Larry why you went off to college. It is that effort at explanation that captures the essence of what you should be trying to do every time you write.

What do you do? You probably start with something along the lines of, "Going to college was the best thing for me to do."

A statement like this is more or less the topic sentence that everyone talks about when they try to teach you to write. Whether it is called a thesis, hypothesis, proposition, or something else, a topic sentence for an essay is nothing more than a simple statement of what you are trying to convince the reader to believe; in this example, you are trying to convince Uncle Larry that going to college was a good thing. In a way, this statement or



proposition is merely the simplest version of your argument you can make. You know, of course, that Larry is going to challenge your assertion, so you need more support and examples to work with.

A crucial aspect of making an argument is to explain why your reader should believe your thesis. Describe the basic logic, the reasons why the reader should consider your argument to be reasonable. What reasons do you give to Larry to make him believe that going to college was the best thing for you to do? This can be thought of as the “because” portion of the argument, and a simple set of statements starting with *because* can be an easy way to get yourself used to thinking in this way as you write.

- Because—People who attend college, on average, make more money than people who do not.
- Because—People who go to college are more likely to find a job that provides full benefits such as health care, vacations, and retirement plans.
- Because—People who go to college tend to do less physically demanding work and are more likely to be healthier in their old age.
- Because—Going to college is the only way that I can get the job I want.

You have just laid out several reasons why Uncle Larry should agree with your assertion that going to college was a good choice. You have also just outlined your essay. In fact, you have almost written the first paragraph.

When you approach an essay for an exam or a short paper, you should employ this same strategy. You start out by saying, as clearly and simply as you can manage, this is what I want to convince you of. For an essay exam, this can be as simple as “this is the best answer to the essay question.” Don’t be afraid to simply answer the question being posed. For example, a sociology exam that asks the question, “Is the Internet good for society?” is begging for a straightforward answer. An effective response to this question could start by simply answering the question: The Internet is good for society. The writer then goes on to say that the reader should believe this answer because . . . and states what that reason is and adds a second reason, and a third reason, and possibly even a fourth reason.

That is your first paragraph. It clearly and blatantly states what you are arguing and why it should be accepted as reasonable. That first paragraph also outlines your essay. You can call it what you want—topic paragraph, introductory paragraph, or whatever—but that is all there is to it. Now, if you think about it, this is pretty much the same thing your high school English teacher taught you about an introduction to an essay, but what was probably missing in high school was the part about what actually goes in an introduction. What is the logic behind a topic sentence? What is it supposed to accomplish? How can you write a topic sentence if you don’t know what it is supposed to accomplish? How can you write

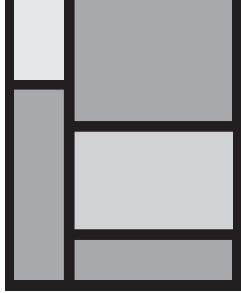
that first paragraph if you don't know what you are trying to use it for? The first sentence of the first paragraph unambiguously lays out what you are arguing, then the remainder clearly states the logic so that the reader knows exactly what to expect from the rest of the essay. If this is done properly, a professor should be able to grade the entire essay just by reading the first paragraph. This emphasis on directness and clarity is one very important way in which this strategic approach might differ from the way composition is often taught.

When you are using writing as a tool for making an argument, subtlety is bad. Outside of literature, subtlety just doesn't work; it can't work. Why? Well, there is a practical reason. First, think about your professor. He, she, or it is probably going to have to sit down and read at least twenty of these essays— more than likely twice that many, and sometimes hundreds. What are the chances that anyone, Cylon or human, could sit down in front of all those essays and be able to tease out subtle details or catch understated nuances? Similarly, your boss isn't going to want to take the time to eek out subtle allusions from a strategy document. And do you really want to take the risk that he or she misses them? Be clear, be direct, and by all means state your argument early.

There is also a very practical, psychological reason for presenting the logic of your argument clearly and unambiguously at the beginning of the essay. Human cognition works by sorting incoming information according to logical frameworks or logical constructs. If you provide a reader with *your* logical framework at the beginning of that thing you are calling a term paper, then the reader is almost certain to use that framework or something quite close to it to sort through the narrative atrocity that follows. The reader will actually help you connect the information you provide to the argument you are making. If you don't provide that logical framework at the beginning, readers will pick or create their own, and who knows what kind of logic a clinically insane university instructor is going to use to try to make sense of a collection of grammatical errors so horrific that the result is almost poetic?

If a clear statement of the point being argued and a succinct outline of the logic constitutes your first paragraph, what comes in your next paragraph? Think of your next paragraph as your first “evidence” paragraph. What you do is you take this first reason, the first because statement, and give the reader the evidence. Give the details, and explain how this evidence demonstrates what you are trying to convince the reader of.

In your effort to convince Larry, the first reason you gave him to explain why people should go to college was that they make more money. In your second paragraph, you should tell him how much more money college graduates make. How do you know this? How quickly will that extra income make up for the costs of college and cover the costs of not working for the seven and a half years it will take you to graduate with your certificate in TV and DVD repair? Anticipate Larry's questions and critiques. Tell the reader the answers to unasked questions. Convince them that you have thought it through, give the details, and most important, explain why it supports your argument. Explain why that evidence should make the reader believe.



You do this convincing with about one or two paragraphs for each one of the points you made in your first paragraph. Each *because* you offered in the introduction paragraph should have at least a paragraph worth of evidence and explanation. If you cannot fill a paragraph, perhaps you should revise your *because* statement to be slightly broader, or perhaps you should add something to it. If you cannot fit all of the explanation for the *because* statement into a couple of paragraphs, perhaps you should try to split it up or narrow it to make it a little more exclusive. Overall, you should probably have at least three *because* statements and three evidentiary paragraphs to support your argument. If you fall short, you might want to consider revising your argument to be a little broader or try searching for some other evidence and other reasons it should be believed. Similarly, you should probably try to avoid going beyond five or six reasons, or seven or eight long evidentiary paragraphs that support your argument. If you have more than that, you might want to think about splitting up the argument, narrowing the focus, or using some form of larger organizational scheme like the one discussed near the end of this essay.

It seems simple, but that is almost it. That is really all there is to writing an essay. If you put together a first paragraph that lays out your argument with some specific reasons for the reader to consider it reasonable and then write a handful of evidentiary paragraphs, you are just a concluding paragraph away from finishing an essay that is about the right length for a one-hour, in-class, essay exam.

That leaves just one thing left to talk about. What should you do with your last paragraph? If asked, most students who think a great deal of their intellectual abilities will quickly say, “Restate your hypothesis like your composition teacher told you in high school.”

Wrong. Absolutely not.

Your hypothesis is your topic sentence, the statement of what you are trying to convince the reader to accept as reasonable. If the reader gets to the last paragraph, if your professor gets to this last paragraph, and does not already know what you are trying to argue, you have pretty much failed. Actually, if your reader gets to the end of that first paragraph and does not know exactly what you are arguing and the logic you are offering to support your point, if he, she, or it does not finish the first paragraph knowing exactly what is coming, you have not done your job. The reader should know your argument from the very first paragraph—often the very first sentence. It should be absolutely clear and unmistakable.

Instead of restating something the reader should already be quite aware of, you should instead remind yourself that everything in an essay must contribute to the effort to convince the reader. Don’t waste space, and don’t waste the reader’s time.

Does restating a hypothesis add anything for your reader?

Instead, what you should do is use that last paragraph to accomplish something. But what?

Well, here is where you have some options, and what you choose to do will depend a great deal upon what you are arguing and who you are trying to convince. The last paragraph is where you can do some additional tailoring to fit the audience you are trying to convince. You could add little tidbits of evidence that don’t require much if any explanation and don’t

fit in with your larger evidence paragraphs. This is particularly effective if you have something you know will strike a key with your reader or readers.

Here's an example: "And Larry, there's a party every night at college."

Larry will buy that. You wouldn't use that to convince your mother, but for Uncle Larry, that might work.

Another thing that often works well is to use the last paragraph to demonstrate that you know both the strengths and the weaknesses of your argument, the scope, and limitations.

For the going-to-college argument, you also could acknowledge that college isn't for everyone. If we were making this argument to Uncle Larry, we might use the example of a good friend from high school. He was more than capable of going to college—honor student, good SAT scores, and all that—but he was passionate about cars. Instead of going to college, he decided to go to England for a couple years and work in a mechanic's shop. He came back and opened up a shop that repairs and restores British sports cars. For what he wanted to do, college wasn't the right choice. By showing Larry that you understand the limits of your argument, you demonstrate that you have thought through the entire argument, and your argument should be more convincing overall.

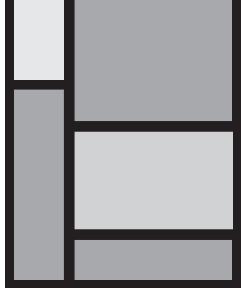
Keeping a constant and conscious focus on making an argument will almost certainly make your essays easier to write. Whenever you get blocked, whenever you have a question of what to put in, what to say, how to word something, just remind yourself to think of the argument, the effort to convince. In many cases, just that focus can improve the quality of the essays. It will give you instant coherency because you are constantly organizing what you are writing around this goal of convincing the reader of something. This ties everything together because whenever you are not sure, whenever you have a question about how to handle something, you are constantly referring back to that goal of making an argument, convincing the reader of something.

LONGER ESSAYS

This strategy for developing the content of an essay, when combined with the structure outlined previously, gives you an essay that is about five to ten paragraphs long, which is just about the right size for an in-class essay exam. What do you do if you need to write something bigger?

To write a longer essay, you should still keep the focus on making an argument, keep the conviction that everything in the paper should be part of that effort to convince, and keep the basic strategy. All you really need to do differently is adjust the structure to something that can accommodate a lengthier, more complex argument. One of the best ways to do this is to nest several related five- to ten-paragraph arguments within a similar structure that makes a larger argument.

Take a look at your evidence paragraphs; isn't each evidence paragraph really an argument? In each one, you are making an argument that explains how this evidence supports



the overall point you are trying to make. Well, there is no reason that the arguments regarding the evidence cannot be made in the essay form outlined previously. In other words, look at the outline for the essay, then replace each evidence paragraph with an essay-length argument that makes a point supporting the overall argument. Do that, and before you know it, you have a ten-page essay. Repeat that three times to create three essays that fit together to converge on a point you are trying to make, and you have a twenty-five-page paper, nest those within an even larger argument, and you are approaching a dissertation. You have built a pyramid crafted out of these small essay chunks.

Don't believe us? Fair enough. Most people don't until it is too late, which is why we never did very well as crossing guards. Fortunately, in this case, there are no large trucks involved, and you don't have to believe us. Look at well-written research articles, and we will bet that some form of this structure is exactly what you find. You will discover something akin to the nested sets of essays described here. The research article is split up into small sections, and each section makes an argument that it is trying to convey information to the reader. A research article starts with an introductory section that states the question being researched. This is immediately followed by an argument regarding why this subject or approach to this subject is important. Then there is a section that presents a nested set of arguments regarding what other research is relevant, how it is relevant, why it is relevant, and how it relates to the question at hand. The next section is an argument that states how the author(s) decided to research the question, and that section also probably tries to convince you that the chosen approach is reasonable. The next section goes into what is discovered and why you should consider it reliable or useful. Finally, the article concludes with a section that includes arguments for how it all fits together and why the finding is important or what implications it has for the question being addressed.

This research article is simply the nesting of small arguments within the context of a broader question. Nesting arguments like this has the added advantage that you can take this monster essay you have to write, such as a senior thesis, and break it down into a bunch of small, manageable parts that you can tackle one by one.

CONCLUSION

Using a strategic approach to the content of an essay can help many, if not most, students tackle writing more effectively, with less effort and better results. Though focusing on making an argument and organizing your essay as suggested previously is effective, it is not a cure-all. Writing and translating your thoughts and ideas first into language and then into written form is such a complex process that the only real way to learn to write better is by writing. This strategy, or any other help that might be offered for writing, can only be effective if applied, repeatedly.

Just write, then write some more. Your first assignment is to explain why birds don't ride on the tops of semi trucks.