

THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE EXPOSITORY WRITING

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1. Quality of Content

The purpose of expository writing is to explain something, that is, to provide readers with information worth knowing and thinking about. Thus, the phrase "quality of content" refers to the significance of the writer's topic, the depth of the writer's knowledge and analysis of the topic,* and the appropriateness of the writer's discussion and treatment of the topic.

*Depth of analysis is also the main feature of strong development.

2. Clarity of Thesis

A thesis concisely states the central point of the essay. It is often called the controlling idea or main idea because every subsequent part of the essay should support it. The thesis usually appears in an essay's opening paragraphs so that the reader will know exactly what point the essay will discuss. Often, professional writers state their topic and *direction* in the introduction but reveal the full thesis as the essay progresses.

3. Organization

(1) Introductory Paragraph with Thesis Statement

Introductory paragraphs attempt to arouse reader interest by providing background information on the topic, stressing the significance of the topic, or presenting one or more startling facts. Introductory paragraphs should lead logically to the thesis, which usually appears at the end of the introductory paragraph or paragraphs, though not always.

(2) Middle (Supporting) Paragraphs

Each middle paragraph has its own main point and supporting sentences that support that point. Often the main point can be found in a topic sentence, which may appear anywhere in the paragraph or be implied. Of course, all middle paragraphs must ultimately support the essay's thesis.

(3) Concluding Paragraph

The concluding paragraph of an essay may draw a conclusion, make a prediction, provide a summary, or use a combination of these strategies.

4. Development

A well-developed essay demonstrates depth of analysis and discussion. It includes a sufficient number of representative and accurate **facts, examples, details, and explanations** to convince readers that the thesis is significant and worth their consideration. The reasoning must be clear, logical, and free of error (no important information or assumptions are left out; compared things are comparable; generalizations are qualified and based on sufficient evidence).

5. Unity and Coherence

Unity: All sentences in a paragraph must relate to and support the point of the paragraph; all paragraphs in an essay must relate to and support the thesis of the essay. Irrelevant material disrupts the reader's attention.

Coherence:

When paragraphs and essays have coherence, readers can easily understand the relationship between the ideas in one sentence and those in the next and between the ideas in one paragraph and those in the next. In order to achieve coherence, writers should always place their sentences and paragraphs in a **logical order**. In addition, writers should provide **smooth transitions** between two sentences or paragraphs in one or both of the following ways: (1) by using **connective words** and expressions, such as *in addition to* or *in contrast* and (2) by **repeating or referring to key words, phrases, events, or ideas that have already been introduced**.

6. Word Choice

Writers should choose words that are **consistent with standard English** usage and **appropriate for the context**. They should also be sure that the words they choose **convey the meaning intended**. Slang, clichés, vague words (*nice, fine*) and the overuse of any one term should not appear in the writing.

7. Sentence Variety

Writers who use the same length and type of sentence to express each thought miss two vital points: variety helps convey meaning and increases reader interest. In the paragraph below, the writer uses a variety of sentence lengths and types to convey an important message.

The best students are not always those who memorize every fact in their school books, score well on multiple-choice tests, and raise their hands during every lecture to pin down each definition. The best students are thinkers. These are the students who grasp the larger picture, filling in details as they relate to the whole. They look for connections, differences, patterns, and analogies among ideas. They ask about causes and effects, never consider any answer complete or final, and never stop wondering. The best students combine logic and imagination to propose, test, and refine ideas; they are constantly revising their picture of the world. The best students understand that learning how to think is the most important thing to know.

8. Tone

The tone of an essay conveys the writer's attitude toward the subject and the audience. The tone may be enthusiastic, optimistic, humorous, friendly, matter-of-fact, serious, sincere, concerned, impassioned, cynical, pessimistic, or hostile, to name just a few possibilities. Tone results from the combined effect of word choice, sentence style, imagery, emphasis, and rhythm. It is important for writers to be aware of their tone because tone is often a deciding factor in how well their ideas are received.

9. Emphasis and Rhythm

Emphasis Writers emphasize their most important ideas by developing them well. They also use the three rules below to their advantage.

1. The sentence or paragraph that contrasts most in length or structure usually receives more emphasis than surrounding sentences or paragraphs.
2. When Ideas are arranged in climactic (ascending) order, the resulting contrast underscores the importance of the final point. Notice the difference in the following two sentences:
 - a. The hurricane ravaged the beaches, destroyed hundreds of homes, and took at least fifty lives.
 - b. The hurricane took at least fifty lives, destroyed hundreds of homes, and ravaged the beaches.
3. Independent clauses receive more stress than dependent clauses. Notice the shift in emphasis in the two sentences that follow.
 - a. The supporting actors, who seldom get the recognition or pay they deserve, received excellent reviews from the critics.
 - b. The supporting actors, who received excellent reviews from the critics, seldom get the recognition or pay they deserve.

Rhythm: A rhythmic essay reads smoothly. Its pace may vary from quick to slow, but at all times the writing should flow gracefully. In addition to strong coherence and appropriate emphasis, other factors that interact to produce a pleasing rhythm are variations in word and sentence length, variations in sentence structure, and parallelism.

Parallelism refers to the use of similar constructions to express equal or closely related ideas. Here are two examples:

The author is **clear**, **creative**, and **enthusiastic**.

Writing well involves **understanding** the audience, **knowing** the subject, and **working** hard to bring the two together.

A Final Note: An essay should have a pleasing rhythm because readers are more likely to respond favorably to a clearly written, rhythmic essay than to one whose sentences are choppy and whose thoughts seem disconnected.

10. Grammar and Sentence Clarity

Grammatical errors, illogical constructions, and choppy sentences make writing difficult to read and, therefore, unconvincing. During the revision process, writers should attempt to make the intended meaning of each sentence clear by experimenting with a variety of sentence structures until the best structure by which to express each idea is found. During the proofreading process writers should look carefully for all of the errors listed below. Beginning writers should look for only one or two of these errors at a time, a task which unquestionably takes patience but which must be done if the writer is a serious student and wants his or her work to be effective.

- a. Sentence Fragments
- b. Run-Together Sentences (Comma Splices and Fused Sentences)
- c. Subject-Verb/Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement Errors
- d. Incorrect Verb Forms
- e. Pronoun Usage Errors
- f. Adjective and Adverb Errors
- g. Lack of Sentence Variety
- h. Wordiness
- i. Awkward or Confusing Constructions
- j. Parallelism Errors
- k. Misplaced or Dangling Modifiers
- l. Omitted Words

11. Punctuation and Mechanics

The use of proper punctuation is important not because it reflects the writer's sophistication, but because it serves as a guide to the reader by conveying intended meaning. A period, for example, tells a reader that a thought has been completed. Similarly, a semicolon (;) indicates that two thoughts are closely related, and a colon (:) tells the reader that an explanation of the previous thought is to follow. Commas are especially important in keeping thoughts from becoming confusing. Notice the difference between the two following statements:

- a. After everyone sang the song that won first place in the contest was announced.
- b. After everyone sang, the song that won first place in the contest was announced.

Proofreading for correct punctuation and mechanics should include the items listed below.

Punctuation

- a. The Comma
- b. The Semicolon
- c. The Colon
- d. The Apostrophe
- e. Quotation Marks
- f. The Dash, Parentheses, Brackets, Ellipsis Marks

Mechanics

- a. Capitalization
- b. Abbreviations
- c. Numbers
- d. Italics (Underlining)
- e. Spelling
- f. The Hyphen
- g. Manuscript Form

12. Reader Adaptation

If a paper is well adapted to the reader, it provides **all** needed information and states that information in a clear, convincing manner that is **appropriate** for the intended audience. All too often beginning writers insist that what they have written is perfectly clear, not realizing that they possess much more knowledge about what they intended to say than their readers do. Remember this rule:

All good writers learn to look at their work from the reader's point of view.