

The image shows the cover of a spiral-bound notebook. The cover is a light beige or cream color with a fine, woven fabric texture. A silver metal spiral binding is visible along the left edge. The text is centered on the cover in a black, serif font.

How to do the Basics

And Other Little Helpful Hints

What are the basics?

- Organization
- Development
- Expression
- Creating a thesis
- Introduction Paragraphs
- Body Paragraphs
- Conclusion Paragraphs

Creating a Thesis

- What is this thesis thingy?
- The thesis is a fancy name for your main argument or idea in an essay
- The thesis is called many other names:
In a science lab: it's called a hypothesis
In math: it's your proof
In English: it may be called a dominant idea or major premise
- In reality though, a thesis is just another name for reading something and saying "So What?"

So What?

- Every essay needs a “So What” Factor or SWF...It’s kind of like asking “So what’s in it for me? What’s your point?”
- Whenever you watch a movie, a commercial or TV show, there always has to be something in it for the audience to enjoy or learn from
- So, in your essay, or other writing assignments, make sure there is a main point you’re getting across
- There must be a reason why you’re writing in order for there to be a reason why it’s important for someone to read it
- Imagine your teacher reading your assignment and wondering, “So what? What’s your point? Why are you telling me all this information?”
- Bottom line: you have to have a meaningful purpose

Organization

- The key to organizing any written assignment is pre-writing out ideas before you start writing (Prewriting strategies can be found in the “Prewriting” section of this website)
- Organization is one of the biggest factors in a written document
- Think of a closet- you have to separate the shirts, the pants, the skirts, the sweaters etc in order to have access to them quickly.
- Well in an essay, your thoughts must be organized so your audience can access the meaning of the information
- In a closet, if you buy more shirts, you might even have to reorganize so that you separate long sleeves, short sleeves, collar shirts, tank-tops etc
- Also, in an essay, if your paragraph contains too much information on one main topic that can be divided again into more specific topics, then you must reorganize and separate them into two paragraphs

What if I still have problems with organization?

- If you pre-write your ideas, write your paper and still find that your paragraphs overlap with ideas and your sentences vary from topic to topic then you can try a color coding trick when you revise your essay
- Simply get 4 or 5 different colored markers or crayons and underline or highlight your sentences that represent specific points in your argument.

Example: Lets say you wrote an essay that discussed pollution but your points were all mixed up in different paragraphs. Highlight all the sentences that deal with health issues green; underline all the sentences that deal with mental issues blue; color all the sentences that deal with the economic issues in red; and so on. Once you've color coded your essay, you can see where you need to cut and paste to reorganize your paragraphs into specific points

- Remember paragraphs should be like buckets: one for water, one for sand, one for rocks- if you mix them together, all you will get is mud

Sentence Organization

- So now that you've mastered paragraph organization you need to see if your sentences are organized
- Ask: Do my sentences follow a chronological or logical order?
- Ask: Are my transition sentences in places that do not distract the reader?
- Ask: Are my examples backing up my statements and do my explanations tie into my thesis?
- Do any of my sentences stick out of my paragraphs or do they need revising?

Development

- Now that your points are organized, you must develop them for your audience to believe and/or understand
- A developed essay does not have a set amount of paragraphs or a magic number of pages
- So how long is long enough?
- Your essay is complete once you have thoroughly explained all of your points with credible examples and you have given critical analysis for those examples that all tie into your argument

How do I know if I've developed my points?

- Ask: Are there any paragraphs that visually stand out because they are so small?
- Ask: Do all paragraphs have specific examples that show, not tell, my reader how my point works?
- Ask: Do all paragraphs have transitions between points and examples?
- Ask: Have I answered all questions that my reader might have about this subject?
- Ask: Do all of my paragraphs have sentences that tie my information into my thesis?

Expression

- Expression covers all the little aspects of a written assignment that affects how a reader understands your ideas: grammar, syntax (sentence structure), diction (vocabulary), tone, citations etc
- Some teachers may call this style, grammar or something else but basically it's all the small items that can alter, confuse or change your intended meaning

Teacher's Top Ten Expression Errors that are Really Annoying

10. Overusing the exclamation mark!!!!!!

Unless you are writing a birthday card or a love letter to your significant other, exclamation marks are very distracting in a formal academic assignment and quite honestly they look childish

Example: *“In the course of Hitler’s Nazi Germany rule, over 6 million Jews were murdered!”*

Even though this is an astounding fact, the exclamation mark alters the tragic tone of the sentence into something exciting.

Top Ten Errors Continued...#9

9. Slang or profanity in your diction (vocab)

Again, unless you are writing a personal note to a friend, slang and profanity do not belong in a formal academic writing assignment

Example: “*So next, the special ops military busted out their gats on Iraq.*”

The language completely changed the serious tone of the situation expressed and the meaning was deteriorated

Top Ten Errors Continued...#8

8. Obvious transitions

Transitions should connect the ideas from paragraph to paragraph or sentence to sentence; they should not simply number the points of argument

Example: “*First, the student did not do his homework, second he failed his test and thirdly, he got grounded.*”

Numbering sentences and/or paragraphs do not create connections or meaning for the audience, they merely show a numerical order

Top Ten Errors Continued...#7

7. Extra Words- that are not needed

Words: that, like, and the are often included in our speech in order to create time for our brains to speak and think at the same time. However, when we write them in our assignments- they clutter our meaning and make it difficult to read

Example: “*No more money would be going to inmates that they would no longer exist.*”

Extra words confuse meaning- Keep it simple and say exactly what you want to say

Top Ten Errors Continued...#6

6. Overusing questions

Your goal in your paper is to get the audience to understand your points; therefore, you should not distract the reader by asking them questions that make them think about their own points.

Too many rhetorical questions in the middle of your paragraphs can completely ruin your goal.

Example: “*Why do Americans burn the flag they love? Why do they dishonor their history?*”

Don't ask your audience what they think; instead tell them what you think and be bold

Top Ten Errors Continued...#5

5. Overusing pronouns

When you replace too many of the nouns in your sentences with words: it, they, them, etc... it becomes difficult for the audience to follow your point because they cannot figure out who is who and what is what

Example: *“When students and parents fight about it then they get defensive and then they do it all over again.”*

The audience doesn't know what is going, much less, understand the point

Top Ten Errors Continued...#4

4. Clichés

Clichés are overused phrases and sentences that create boredom for the reader; they do not contain or help create meaning for the audience

Example: “*Since the dawn of time...*”

Clichés are usually cheesy sayings that distract the reader from your main point.

Top Ten Errors Continued...#3

3. Passive Voice

Whenever you overuse the “to be” verbs (be, are, is) in a sentence, it becomes verbose, wordy and difficult to understand.

Example: “*She is walking in the room.*”

The actual action verb for this sentence is walking so we don't need the “is.” It could be changed to “*She walks in the room.*”

- For more information on passive voice, look at the handout in this website

Top Ten Errors Continued...#2

2. Second Person

First person is when we use “I” in writing which is only appropriate in some cases so you should ask your teacher if it’s allowed. Second person is when you use “you, us, we, your etc” in writing. Third person is an objective point of view where you address specific audiences like “People, teens, parents” etc

Example of Second Person: *“You should not use second person.”*

Second person is useful for how to explain a process or give advise (like this power point) but it should not be used for formal academic essays because it could offend or distract the audience.

And the Number 1 Error that annoys teachers is...

1. Non-cited sources or citing sources incorrectly

When sources are not cited in the text and on a works cited page, it is plagiarism AKA cheating and you will face severe consequences. When sources are cited incorrectly, it can be distracting for your reader, you can lose credibility with your reader or your reader may not be able to access your sources

Example: “*3 out of 5 doctors prescribe aspirin*”
(www.aol.com)

Web addresses should not be put inside the text

- For information on citing sources, review the grammar links on this website or check out www.mla.com

Test Taking Strategies

- In-class essays can create anxiety
- Just remember to write as you would for an out-of-class essay- use all the processes
- Be sure to pre-write, write an introduction paragraph with an arguable and meaningful thesis, write several body paragraphs that support your thesis and write a conclusion paragraph that expresses the importance of all the information given
- Be sure to answer the question that is asked- review the handout on this website

Introduction Paragraphs

Imagine that an introduction paragraph is like an upside down triangle where you start with broad statements and then narrow your focus into your main point.

The following slides are merely suggestions or guidelines- they are not the end all be all of writing.

Introduction Paragraphs

Step 1: You must get the attention of your audience; this has many names: exordium, hook, attention getter, etc

You can get the attention through imagery, stories, quotes, statistics, similes, metaphors etc

Example of what not to do: “God is hard to define.”

(no duh- this is a truism) or “There are many types of sports.” (Boring)

Try something more exciting: “What a beautiful world this is until the very slight touch of bright sunlight sizzles the skin and boils the blood.” (very vivid- I’m interested on reading more)

Introduction Paragraphs

Step 2: Now that you have your audience's attention, you must give them background information so they will understand the focus of your thesis and paper.

The history of your topic, its current status, the definition of terms and narrowing of your topic are all important items to include in this section in order to build ethos with your audience.

Some teachers may also refer to this as narratio.

Step 3: Get to you point, your thesis AKA your "So What" factor

Body Paragraphs

Step 1: This has many names: statement, claim, topic sentence, etc. Regardless you should inform your reader what your point is

Step 2: This is sometimes called: examples, concrete details, evidence, data, etc. Basically you have to back up your point with specifics

Step 3: Sometimes this is called: warrant, explanation, analysis, commentary, etc. You just need to explain your examples and show how they work into your argument

Think of your body paragraphs as hour glasses: they start with broad statements, then they get more specific with examples and then they get broader by explaining how the examples tie into the overall thesis of the paper

Conclusion Paragraph

Step 1: Address any points your opposition might have against your argument or address any loopholes left in your argument

Step 2: Offer any insights or how your points can be used at a broader level

Step 3: Explain the significance of the information and how it can be useful or meaningful

Step 4: End with a statement full of pathos (emotion) but be sure that it is not a cliché

Remember

- Don't try to fix or do everything at once- you'll get overwhelmed and it won't remember what you learned for next time
- Do try to work on one problem with your writing at a time- set a goal
- Don't wait until the last minute or do a lengthy assignment all at once
- Do ask for help from a friend, a parent or a teacher
- Just work on the basics first- then use your creativity to write in your own distinct style