

## COMMENTS ON WRITING A CRITICAL ESSAY

In your introductory paragraph always state clearly (1) the thesis of your essay, (2) specifically how you plan to develop that thesis, and (3) specifically how you plan to defend it. If there are any key concepts (terms) in (1), then surely these will be mentioned in both (2) and (3). Your introductory paragraph serves as a "mini-outline" both for you and for the reader. In all instances avoid "fluff." For instance, it may well be that The Symposium is one of the greatest works in the Western canon, but your introduction is not the place to state this. The introductory paragraph is where you focus your essay. This paragraph is the one place that you have control of "setting the stage" for what is to follow. So, a strong introductory paragraph is essential for a strong essay.

Remember that there are at least three things which a writer needs clearly to tell his reader. First, "In the following essay I shall develop the over-all thesis that \_\_\_\_ ." Or, "I shall examine the position that \_\_\_\_ ." Second, the writer needs to tell the reader how this thesis, or position, is going to be developed. "In developing this thesis (position) I shall first \_\_\_A\_\_\_, then \_\_\_B\_\_\_, and finally \_\_\_C\_\_\_ ." In a TEST consisting of a critical essay you would want to make at least three "sub-points," each of these constituting a paragraph. The very good student will develop four to five such points. Certainly in a term, or research, paper there are more sub-points to be developed. Then, the writer needs to tell the reader how the over-all thesis is going to be substantiated. This is to indicate how the writer is going to ARGUE for "A," "B," and "C." Or something like this, "Based on the assumption(s) \_\_\_\_\_, I shall demonstrate A, B, and C."

In this way the introductory paragraph becomes, as it were, a "mini outline" for the entire essay.

After the well crafted introduction is completed, the rest of the essay, up to the conclusion, is simply filling out what is promised in the introduction. A great deal of this work will be supplying acceptable definitions for key terms in the thesis being proposed and constructing arguments for the sub-points supporting this thesis

There are several types of arguments that may be used to substantiate sub-points in developing paragraphs after the introduction. For instance, there are analogical arguments, statistical arguments, arguments from probabilities, converging arguments, and deductive arguments. Philosophers most often use deductive arguments, analogical arguments, and converging arguments. In deductive arguments one will often find relatively simple argument forms such as Modus Ponens, Modus Tollens, Constructive Dilemma, and Hypothetical Syllogism. In older writings there will also be found various Syllogisms used in substantiating various points to be made. While these types of arguments represent those most commonly found, there are others for which one must be on the watch. In every case, however, an argument always presents evidence (not mere belief) in support of some claim.

End your essay with a *concluding paragraph*. This is not merely a last paragraph. The

concluding paragraph is a summary of the more salient points of your essay. It is also the place where you may say that “these are further related topics” but not discussed in your essay. Further, in your conclusion you may well consider these three points. (1) The writer ought briefly to point out just where his arguments may be weak-- where his opponent may most readily strike back – and why. (2) The writer ought briefly to indicated (note that I say "indicate" and not "develop") ways in which such criticisms may be deflected. (3) The writer ought to mention at least a couple of points where his thesis is leading but for which there is now no time to pursue.

In a critical *essay test* you are writing against the clock. Previous preparation is critical. Time is of the essence. So, when actually writing the test essay, avoid straying from the test question. Stay focused. Usually there are many related, but tangential, issues to any particular essay question. Avoid the tangential. Also, again, remember to avoid “fluff” or “padding.” And do avoid repeating yourself. Your introductory paragraph, when well crafted, will help you to stay focused, help you to avoid tangential topics, and help you avoid repetition. Remember to focus on these issues – (1) here is my position, (2) here is how I am going to develop it, and (3) here is how I am going to support it. Do just that. Then introduce and develop your criticisms. You are, after all, writing critical essays and not merely descriptive ones.

Avoid series of generalities. Certainly your thesis, and subsidiary theses, is going to be a “general” statement. Be always aware, however, that any general statement needs to be supported or certainly marked as an assumption “for the sake of the argument.” If not an assumption from which to argue, then view a general statement as a conclusion for which you always need to present evidence related in an argument to the support of that general statement. Thus, always keep before you the question “WHY?” as the demand for evidence in support of a general claim. Far too often a student writes an essay which is nothing more than a series of unsupported general claims. Avoid unsupported generalizations in your writing.

Avoid generalities when developing your essay whether this is in a test or in writing a paper. For instance, you will want to make specific references to the appropriate texts and the comments to the translator/editor. Do not, e.g., merely write, “In *The Republic* Adeimantus says ----.” Rather say, “In *The Republic*, Book VI, 370(b), Adeimantus says ---.” In preparing for a test, be sure to have these sorts of references on mind to use when you are constructing your test essay question.

Always be mindful of structure, both of the overall essay and of each paragraph in that essay. A properly written introductory paragraph will be of tremendous help here. Always ask yourself how does any paragraph develop the paragraph immediately before it, how does it lead to the next paragraph, and how is all of this related to the overall essay thesis. Here both transitional sentences and topic sentences are critical. Within any paragraph always ask yourself how is it that the sentence which I am now writing clarifies, or furthers, the “thought” of the previous sentence? One sentence must “lead” to the next in a well organized whole under the guidance of the topic sentence. And all of these sentences are presented to clarify and/or support the topic sentence which represents one of the sub-points in defending the overall thesis.

So, both avoiding generalities and being mindful of structure will be of great help in staying focused – will help you to avoid topics, while broadly related to the test question, are, nonetheless, tangential to that question and, thus, useless in the essay. Furthermore, in a test situation such tangential remarks take up valuable time.

There is one final observation which needs stressing and that is always to observe the canons of correct grammar and rich vocabulary. There are two considerations here. One of these is that the way we write and the way we speak are very good reflections of the way we think. Speaking or writing poorly is a very good indication that we are thinking poorly. Speaking or writing clearly is an equally good indication that we are thinking clearly. These comments are closely tied to the following. Language is one of the essential tools whereby we express ourselves. As in the case of any tool using enterprise, if our tools are faulty, then that enterprise is going to be ill done. If I want to saw in two parts a piece of wood and my saw has “teeth” missing on its blade, I am not going to be able to accomplish this task as easily and as successfully, if I can accomplish it at all, as if I had a good saw. Language, grammar and vocabulary, give us tools for expressing our thoughts. Poor tools – poor thoughts. It is that simple.

These are good procedures and considerations not only for writing critical test essays but for research papers as well. Furthermore, these suggestions ought to be helpful not only in Philosophy, but in any critical class which you take. Indeed, these suggestions ought to be helpful when you are far removed from your formal college years and are then a productive member of the professional work force.

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