

Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary

Writing Helps Manual

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How To Write Good Paragraphs

A good paragraph is a mini-essay. It should demonstrate three components:

1. Introduction, i.e., a topic sentence
2. Body, i.e., supporting details
3. Conclusion or a transitional sentence to the paragraph that follows.

A good paragraph is characterized by unity, coherence, and adequate development.

Unity: State the main idea of the paragraph in a clearly constructed topic sentence. Make sure each sentence is related to the central thought.

Coherence: Arrange ideas in a clear, logical order. Provide appropriate transitions to the subsequent paragraph.

Adequate development: Develop your paragraphs with specific details and examples.

Strategies for adequate development:

Elaborate: Spell out the details by defining, or by clarifying and adding relevant, pertinent information.

Illustrate: Paint a verbal picture that helps make or clarify your point(s). Well illustrated pieces are easier to read and follow than those on a high level of abstraction.

Argue: Give the reasons, justifications, and rationales for the position or view you have taken in the topic sentence. Draw inferences for the reader and explain the significance of assertions or claims being made.

Narrate: Relate the historical development of the phenomenon at issue.

Process: Describe how something works.

Describe: Observe without preconceived categories.

Classify: Organize phenomena or ideas into larger categories that share common characteristics.

Analyze: Divide phenomena or ideas into elements.

Compare and Contrast: Show similarities and differences between two or more phenomena or ideas.

Relate: Show correlations and causes (beware of logical fallacies, however!)

A paragraph should be neither too short nor too long. A good paragraph in a Trinity exercise should be 5-6 sentences long. As a general rule, avoid single-sentence paragraphs. If your paragraphs run longer than a page, you are probably straining the grader's thought span. Look for a logical place to make a break or reorganize the material. Indent each new paragraph five spaces.

How To Write Correct Sentences

Master the essentials of the sentence as an aid to clear thinking and effective writing. Writing a good sentence is an art, and you can master that art by developing your awareness of what makes a sentence work. As you become more familiar with the relationships among sentence elements, you will strengthen your writing skills and will be better able to make your meaning clear to your reader (i.e., your grader!).

The most common sentence problems in student writing are: comma splice and fused (or run-on) sentence, sentence fragment (or incomplete sentence), agreement, and shifts. If you are unfamiliar with these terms and others such as subject, verb, object, complement, phrase, main clause, independent clause, subordinate clause, coordinating conjunction, number, person, etc., you are strongly encouraged to research their meanings and application in a standard English grammar book. Please see the list of recommended books in this Survival Manual or consider enrolling in a local or distance writing course.

Keep a few simple principles in mind:

COMMA SPLICE AND FUSED (OR RUN-ON) SENTENCE

Do not link two main (independent) clauses with only a comma (comma splice) or run two main clauses together without any punctuation (fused sentence).

Examples:

Comma Splice: The wind was cold, they decided not to walk.

Fused Sentence: The wind was cold they decided not to walk.

To correct comma splices and fused sentences: 1) Place a period after the first main (independent) clause and write the second main clause as a sentence; 2) use a semi-colon to separate main clauses; or 3) insert a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) after the comma; or 4) make one clause subordinate to the other.

Revisions:

The wind was cold. They decided not to walk.

The wind was cold; they decided not to walk.

The wind was cold, so they decided not to walk.

The wind was so cold that they decided not to walk.

SENTENCE FRAGMENT

Avoid sentence fragments. The term fragment refers to a group of words beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period. Although written as if it were a sentence, a fragment is only a part of a sentence – such as a phrase or a subordinate clause.

Examples:

Larry always working in his yard on Saturdays.

Because he enjoys his flowers and shrubs.

Which help to screen his house from the street.

For example, a tall hedge with a border of petunias.

Eliminate fragments by making them into complete sentences or by connecting them to existing sentences. One way to eliminate many sentence fragments is to be sure that each word group has at least one subject and one predicate.

Corrections:

Larry always works in his yard on Saturdays.

He enjoys the flowers and shrubs.

OR: He enjoys the flowers and shrubs that help to screen his house from the street – for example, a tall hedge with a border of petunias.

AGREEMENT

Make a verb agree in number with its subject; make a pronoun agree in number with its antecedent.

A singular subject takes a singular verb, and a plural subject takes a plural verb.

Singular: The **car** in the lot **looks** shabby. [car looks]

Plural: The **cars** in the lot **look** shabby. [cars look]

When a pronoun has an antecedent (an antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers), the noun and pronoun should agree in number.

Singular: A **dolphin** has **its** own language. [dolphin – its]

Plural: **Dolphins** have **their** own language. [dolphins – their]

SHIFTS

Avoid needless shifts in person and number.

Shift: If a **person** is going to improve, **you** should work harder. [shift from third person to second person]

Better: If **you** are going to improve, **you** should work harder. [second person]

OR If **people** are going to improve, **they** should work harder. [third person]

OR If **we** are going to improve, **we** should work harder. [first person]

GENDER REFERENTS

Avoid awkward “his/her” and “he/she” gender constructions.

Awkward: The client is usually the best judge of his or her counseling.

Better: The client is usually the best judge of the value of counseling. [Omit gender referents.]

OR Clients are usually the best judges of the value of the counseling they receive. [Change to plural]

OR The best judge of the value of counseling is usually the client. [Rephrase the sentence.]

How to Write a Research Paper

The Steps You Need to Write a Research Paper

STEP ONE: CHOOSE A TOPIC

Select a specific, focused topic to research. Where do topic ideas come from? If ideas are not suggested in your study guide, you can often find a topic by looking through your textbooks, particularly in the sections that list suggestions for further reading and study. You can go through lecture notes, examine books and articles in the library, look through subject catalogs, or refer to encyclopedias. Often the most interesting topics for you personally are drawn from your own experience – your personal knowledge, interests, and beliefs.

STEP TWO: NARROW YOUR TOPIC BY DEVELOPING SOME RESEARCHABLE QUESTIONS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ANSWER

Rather than beginning with a preconceived thesis (a truth claim) that you then must rationalize, narrow your topic by developing a set of questions related to it. You might start with the classic journalists' questions Who? What? When? Where? How? Why? Or ask, What is positive about "X"? What is negative? What is merely interesting?

Consider your topic from different perspectives. The static perspective focuses on what is. The dynamic perspective looks at action and change. The relative perspective examines relationships and systems. Ask, for example: How can "X" be systematically described? How has "X" changed over time? What other factors are related to "X"? How is one element of "X" related to another?

Other strategies for question development can focus on narration, process, cause and effect, definition, classification and division, or comparison and contrast. For example: In what sequence of events does "X" manifest? What precedes and what follows "X"? Is it possible to say what causes "X"? How can "X" be systematically defined? What classes and subclasses of "X" exist, and how are they significant to the whole of "X"? How does "X" compare and contrast with "Y"?

Some ideas will seem worth pursuing; others will seem inappropriate for your purpose, audience, or occasion. You will find yourself discarding ideas even as you develop new ones.

STEP THREE: SURVEY THE FIELD

Create a tentative bibliography of your topic by searching relevant databases, library catalogues, and existing bibliographies in books. For computerized indexes, carefully choose key words that best capture the essence of your topic. Seek the help of a local professional librarian or Trinity's librarian if necessary.

Skim all of the works on the tentative bibliography to acquire a clearer idea of the topic and to ascertain which are most useful for your paper.

Find the passages in the books and articles that are most germane to your needs. Revise your research questions in light of what your literature survey reveals. Search and revise again if necessary.

STEP FOUR: WRITE THE PAPER

The following is a general structure to follow for many kinds of research papers. Adapt it to specific assignments as appropriate.

Introduction

Announce the subject, set the tone and gain the reader's attention and interest. Provide some general information on the background of your topic.

Statement of the Problem

Announce the purpose of your study. Give the reader a firm sense of what you're doing and why. List the questions that you will address. List your assumptions, those self-evident conditions that you take for granted. Describe your rationale, the underlying principles, and the logical basis for your study. Define the scope of your work and discuss any weaknesses that you can perceive in your approach. Define the key terms that you will use in your paper. Stipulate meanings for ambiguous terms.

Summary of Investigation

Identify the principal works and authors, the main ideas dealing with your topic, and any generally accepted concepts and explanations. Organize your review by themes, systematic propositions, historical sequences, or other important ideas relative to the research questions that

you asked. Take note that this is a creative exercise. Do not merely cite a reference, write a few sentences about its content, and then repeat the procedure for the next reference. Organize your summary of the thinking on your topic in such a way as to clarify for your reader the commonly accepted ideas, the current points of debates, and aspects of the topic yet to be investigated adequately.

Analysis of Findings

You must do more than ask and answer questions. You must show how your questions are answered differently and try to say why. You must be able to point to books and articles that support your classification of answers. In a research paper, the solution to the problem or the answer to the question often is found in the ordered discussion itself rather than in any set of assertions about it. Once again, identify any contradictions, gaps, uncertainties and controversies that you uncovered. Sort, arrange, and define the issues that arise. If a question is clear, and if you can be reasonably certain that authors answer it in different ways, then an issue has been defined. It is the issue between the authors who answer the question in one way and those who answer it in another opposing or variant way. Classify the authors according to their views on the issues. An issue is truly joined when two authors who understand a question in the same way answer it in contrary ways. Remember, however, that differences in answers can often be ascribed as much to different conceptions of the question as to different views of the subject.

Maintain objectivity

Remember that none of the opinions in conflict may be wholly true. Try to see all sides fairly. Make a deliberate effort to balance question against question, to forgo any comment that might be prejudicial, and to check any tendency toward overemphasis or under-emphasis. Avoid animosity and ad hominem arguments. Do not cite authors out of context. Accompany interpretation of authors' views with actual quotations from their texts.

Conclusion

Ask yourself, What conclusions and implications can I draw from my study? Synthesize new information and personal insights in a way that is uniquely yours. Draw on your own insights, make connections, note similarities, discern what is true. Evaluate your findings with respect to your own theological and philosophical perspectives. However, avoid polemics, triviality, and weak theorizing. Make suggestions for future studies if appropriate.

How to Write a Précis

A précis is a concise restating of a book, journal article, or some other work. The word comes from the Old French and means to “cut short” (dictionary.com), so this is essentially what writing a précis entails. The purpose is to explain the main points, the supporting points, and the outline of the original work, but in a truncated manner. A précis is not a critical analysis or evaluation of the work, nor a personal evaluation of the work. Rather, it is objective in nature and demonstrates that the material has been understood and represented accurately.

When writing a précis, one should begin by reading the assigned text. As one goes through the text, it is helpful to take notes along the way and summarize in a couple of sentences the main point or each section, as well as make notes on any supporting evidence used to support the main point. Be sure to restate the author’s points in your own words.

It is helpful, especially with larger works, to build up your précis paper as you go along. Read a chapter, follow the steps above, and then write that portion of the précis from the notes made from that section. Be sure that your précis paper follows the outline of the original work.

When you structure your précis, the introductory paragraph should state the nature and purpose of the author’s work being, describe the discipline and field of the work, and what the main purpose of the work. The subsequent paragraphs should be summaries of the various sections of the work, and then the concluding paragraph should state the author’s concluding thoughts and also restate the main thesis of the work over all.

How To Master Diction, Rhetoric, and Style

DICTION

How To Master Diction, Rhetoric, and Style Diction refers to precision and clarity in word choice as well as appropriate levels of usage. Make certain that every word means exactly what you intend it to mean. Eliminate ambiguity. Avoid informal, colloquial, regional, dialectical, nonstandard, archaic, and cliché expressions.

RHETORIC

Rhetoric is the art of using language effectively. Rhetoric involves the writer's purpose, the consideration of audience, the arrangement and organization of thought, smoothness, clarity, logic, and economy of expression.

Purpose

The clearer your purpose, the better your writing is likely to be. The purposes of nonfiction writing may be classified as expressive, expository, and persuasive. These purposes are often combined in an extended piece of writing. Expressive writing emphasizes the writer's subjective feelings and reactions. Expository writing focuses the reader's attention on the objective world. Persuasive writing is intended to influence the reader's attitudes and actions. Most writing is to some extent persuasive; however, it is usually called persuasive if it is clearly arguing for or against a position.

Audience and Occasion

Keep in mind the audience and the occasion for which you are writing. Your understanding of audience and occasion will determine your choice of words, examples, details, and tone. Tone is a reflection of your attitude toward your subject. It must be appropriate to your purpose, audience and occasion.

Arrangement and Organization of Thought

Thought units—whether single words, a sentence or paragraph, or longer sequences—must be orderly. You must aim for continuity in words, concepts, and thematic development from the opening statement to the conclusion so that readers (i.e., graders) will understand what you are presenting.

Continuity can be achieved in several ways. Punctuation marks contribute to continuity by showing relationships between ideas. They cue the grader to the pauses, inflections, subordination, and pacing normally heard in speech. Neither overuse nor underuse one type of punctuation, such as commas or dashes.

Continuity is also achieved through the use of transitional words. A pronoun that refers to a noun in the preceding sentence serves as a transition and also helps avoid repetition. Other transition devices are time links (then, next, after, while, since); cause and effect links (therefore, consequently, as a result); or contrast links (however, but conversely, nevertheless, although, whereas).

Smoothness, Clarity, and Logic of Expression

Aim for clear and logical communication. Sometimes when you spend much time close to your own material, you lose objectivity and may not see certain problems, especially inferred contradictions. Avoid setting up ambiguity, inserting the unexpected, omitting the expected and suddenly shifting the topic, tense, or person. These devices can confuse or disturb graders.

Economy of Expression

Say only what needs to be said. Tighten overly long papers by eliminating redundancy, wordiness, jargon, evasiveness, circumlocution, and clumsiness. Weed out overly detailed descriptions, gratuitous embellishments, elaborations of the obvious, and irrelevant observations or asides. Use no more words than are necessary to convey the meaning. Direct, declarative sentences with simple, common words are usually best. Short words and short sentences are easier to comprehend than long ones (although variety in sentence length can be helpful for readers). Similar precautions apply to paragraph length. Single-sentence paragraphs may be abrupt. New paragraphs provide a pause for the grader – a chance to store one step in the conceptual development before beginning another. If your paragraphs run longer than a page, you are probably straining the grader's thought span. Look for a logical place to make a break or reorganize the material.

STYLE

Style is the author's individual choice and arrangement of words, sentence structures, and ideas as well as less definable characteristics, such as rhythm and euphony. To a limited extent, style can be thought of as the written expression of a writer's personality and quality of thought. In academic writing, personality may need to be subordinated to clarity, simplicity, orderliness, and sincerity.

SOME STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

1. Write from an outline. Sometimes coming up with an outline might prove difficult. In those cases, simply write on a piece of paper whatever comes to mind regarding a topic—questions, impressions, feelings, reservations, etc. From this free-style exercise, you should note how various thoughts might be rearranged into an outline. Then write your essay from this initial outline. At this stage do not be concerned about punctuation, spelling, or diction. Then go to suggestion #2.
2. Put the paper aside and reread it later. If you read the paper aloud, you have an even better chance of finding problems. After this, proofread the essay to correct spelling and grammar. Change sentences around as needed to make your paragraphs clearer.
3. Get critiques from one or two colleagues.
4. Hire professional editorial help if necessary.

How To Write a Critical Paper

“CRITICISM”: n. The art, skill or profession of making discriminating judgments and evaluations.

THE ESSENCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Ask Four Basic Questions as You Read / Listen:

- What is the book/message about as a whole?
- What is the author/speaker saying in detail, and how is it said?
- Is the book/message true, in whole or in part?
- What is the significance of the book/message?

ELEMENTS OF A CRITICAL PAPER

The following is a general structure to follow for the body of a critical paper. Be sure to include a suitable introduction and conclusion, as described in the previous section, How to Write a Whole Composition.

Adapt it to specific assignments as appropriate.

PART ONE: DESCRIPTION

- Classify the book/message according to kind and subject matter.
- *Very briefly*, state what the whole of the book/message is about.
- Enumerate the major parts of the book/message in their order and relation.
- Define the problem or problems that the author/speaker is trying to solve.

PART TWO: INTERPRETATION

- Find the important words (terms) in the book/message and determine the author's/speaker's meaning of these terms, with precision.
- Identify the most important sentences (propositions) in the book/message, the ones that express the judgments on which the whole book/message rests. These are the foundational affirmations and denials of the author/speaker. They must be either premises or conclusions. State them in your own words.
- Construct the author's/speaker's arguments, beginning with any assumptions and/or self-evident propositions. An argument is the author's/speaker's line of reasoning aimed at demonstrating the truth or falsehood of his or her claims, that is, the coherent series of reasons, statements, or facts that support or establish a point of view. If the arguments are not explicitly expressed in the book/message, you will need to construct them from sequences of sentences.

- Determine the author's/speaker's solutions to the problem or question that he or she posed. Ask: Which problems were solved and which were not? Did the author/speaker know which were not solved?

PART THREE: CRITICISM

General Pointers.

From this point on, you will have a chance to argue with the author/speaker and express yourself, but keep in mind the following general maxims of scholarly etiquette:

Do not say that you agree, disagree, or suspend judgment until you have adequately interpreted the book/message. Do not begin criticism until you are able to say, with reasonable certainty, "I understand," i. e., I have done an adequate job with parts one and two. Complete the task of understanding before rushing in.

When you disagree, do so reasonably and not contentiously.

Demonstrate that you know the difference between knowledge and personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any critical judgments that you make.

Three conditions must be satisfied if controversy is to be well conducted:

Make an attempt at impartiality by reading/listening sympathetically.

Acknowledge any emotions that you bring to the dispute.

State your own assumptions explicitly.

Determine, wherever possible, the origins and the consequences of the author's/speaker's arguments.

Try to locate the origins of the author's/speaker's ideas in the larger picture of history. What movements, currents of thought, or other thinkers might have influenced him or her? Then carry the author's/speaker's ideas to their logical conclusions. To the best of your ability and given the academic background that you already possess, relate the author's/speaker's ideas to those of other authors with whom you are familiar.

Judge the soundness of the author's/speaker's arguments.

As called for, show where the author/speaker is *uninformed*. To support your remarks, you must be able to state the knowledge that the author/speaker lacks and show how it is relevant, i.e., how it affects the conclusions.

As called for, show where the author/speaker is *misinformed*, where assertions are made that are contrary to fact. This kind of defect should be pointed out only if it is relevant to the conclusions. To support your remark, you must be able to argue the truth or greater probability of a position contrary to the author's / speaker's.

As called for, show where the author/speaker is illogical, where there are fallacies in reasoning. In general fallacies are of two sorts. There is the *non sequitur*, which means that the conclusion simply does not follow for the reasons that are offered. Then there is the problem of inconsistency, which means that two things the author/speaker has tried to say are incompatible. To make either of these criticisms, you must be able to show the precise respect in which the author's/speaker's argument fails to be forcibly convincing. Be concerned with this defect only if major conclusions are affected by it.

In addition, show where the author/speaker fails to draw any conclusions that are implied by the evidence given or principles involved.

If you have not been able to show that the author/speaker is uninformed, misinformed or illogical on relevant matters, you simply cannot disagree. You must agree, at least in part, although you may suspend judgment on the whole. If you have been convinced, you should admit it. If, despite your failure to support one or more of these critical points, you still honestly feel unconvinced, perhaps you should not have said that you understood in the first place!

Judge the *completeness* of the author's/speaker's arguments.

Define any inadequacy precisely. Did the author/speaker solve all the problems he/she started with? Did the author/speaker make the best use of available materials and resources? Did the author/speaker see all the implications and ramifications of the problem? Did the author/speaker make all essential or relevant distinctions in his or her presentation?

Judge the *value* of the book / message.

Your final evaluation must be concerned with the truth and significance of the book/message for a given purpose, i.e., its value. This judgment must be based on definite criteria. These criteria should be internal (soundness and completeness) as well as external (relevance to some purpose).

PART FOUR: (OPTIONAL) INTEGRATE THE ACADEMIC AND THE PERSONAL

Engage the key idea(s) that are most provocative and alive for you. Consider how your experience is similar to or different from what you read. Identify any spiritual issues as they arose for you and your way of responding to or struggling with them. Describe which key ideas, if any, might be applied in your ministry.