

How to write better English

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ESSAY WRITING CHECKLIST¹

1. **Good** writing never flows effortlessly on to the page—it must be crafted. Ideas are generated by the mechanical process of writing, re-writing, and revision.
2. **Begin** an essay by writing the section of your plan that you feel most confident about. Write the introduction and conclusion last: they are the most important paragraphs in any short essay.
3. **Read** work aloud to pick up errors and problems in the flow of argument.
4. **Aim** for clarity. The marker is reading your essay not your mind. Be concise, cut out what is not essential.
5. **Engage** the reader by being direct, confident, and authoritative. Use fresh vivid language. Write formally in an academic environment.
6. **Place** your main point in the main clause: do not bury it in a subordinate clause. Vary the length of sentences and paragraphs. Using the active voice makes writing more forceful.²
7. **Keep** to the assigned word limit! Pace your writing so that the answer is thorough and balanced.
8. **Use** technical language where appropriate. Do not use jargon if not needed, avoid clichés, and colloquialisms.
9. **Check** carefully for spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors.³ Watch for incorrect tense changes and subject-verb disagreement. Check that your essay conforms to the required style guide. (Be consistent throughout your essay.)

Here is an RMIT video on Academic Language: [Academic style | Learning Lab \(rmit.edu.au\)](https://www.rmit.edu.au/learning-lab/academic-style)

ESSAY WRITING CHEAT SHEET⁴

Keep this information handy and use it to make your essays more interesting and well written.

CUES THAT LEAD THE READER FORWARD

To show addition		To show time	
again,	moreover,	at length	then
and	nor,	immediately	later
and then,	too,	thereafter,	previously,
besides	next,	soon,	formerly,
equally important,	first, second, etc.,	after a few hours,	first, second, etc.,
further,	lastly	afterwards	next, etc.,
furthermore,	what is more,	finally	and then

CUES THAT MAKE THE READER STOP AND COMPARE

Stop and consider	Compare	
but,	notwithstanding,	although
yet,	on the other hand,	although that is true,
and yet,	on the contrary,	while this is true,
however,	after all,	conversely,
still	for all that,	simultaneously,
nevertheless,	in contrast,	meanwhile
nonetheless,	at the time,	in the meantime,

¹ K. Rountree, *Writing for Success*, 68-69.

² See below for details of these concepts in the English Skills section

³ Use your spell check and grammar check, AND proofread. There is no excuse for miss-spelled words.

⁴ Adapted from the *Student Learning Centre*, University of Auckland, 1995.

CUES THAT DEVELOP AND SUMMARISE

To give examples	To emphasise	To repeat	To introduce conclusions	To summarise
for instance, for example, to demonstrate, to illustrate, as an illustration,	obviously, in fact, as a matter of fact, indeed, in any case, in any event,	in brief, in short, as I have said, as I have noted, in other words, that is,	therefore, hence, accordingly, consequently, thus, as a result,	in brief, on the whole, summing up, to conclude, in conclusion, overall

APOSTROPHES (')

It's = it is (the apostrophe shows that a letter has been omitted. 'it's [it is] raining')

Its = belonging to it ('Ah, my theology book! I love its thoroughness!')

Possessive pronouns (*mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs, whose*) **do not have apostrophes**. But these are exceptions! Most words used to show possession do have apostrophes.

More info: <https://theoatmeal.com/comics/apostrophe>

PUNCTUATION BASICS

- **Full Stop** only for the end of a sentence.
- **Comma** to indicate you need to take a 'mental breath.'
- **Semi-colon** complex sentences may need commas to separate sub-thoughts; on the other hand, a semicolon should be used to separate contrasting ideas, each of which should be able to stand alone as a complete sentence. More info: <https://theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon>
- **Colon** best used to introduce a list.
- **Dash** is informal and should not be overused in essays. It is used to set off and emphasise what follows. Dashes are stronger than parentheses or commas.

THE 29 MOST FREQUENTLY MISSPELLED WORDS IN BIBLICAL ESSAYS⁵

all right (two words)

altar (not alter)

anoint (one 'n')

argument (only 1 'e')

commitment

complement (*complement* make complete; *compliment* says something nice)

definite

dependent (when someone is *dependent* on you, they are a *dependant*)

eschatology

existence

Galatians

Many *gods* but only one **God**

immediately

indulgences

Isaiah

Israel

Judea or Judaea

led (is past tense of 'to lead')

to **loose** (means to loosen. To *lose* is to misplace)

necessary

occasionally

Pharaoh

publicly

receive

resurrection

Revelation

sacrament

separate

Yahweh

⁵ S. Roberts and D. Muir, *The Distance Learner*, 57.

Power Writing

Power writing includes seven main points that can help you in writing good essays. After a *four-step overview* of the essay task we shall work through these seven rules.

1. CREATIVE MAPPING

This idea works for some people but not others. On a blank piece of paper write the subject of your essay in the middle of the page. Now put down as many ideas as you have researched associated with the subject. All the main points and sub-points should be included.

Once you have done this now start a new "creative map." This time try and group related ideas together in bigger clusters. Each bigger cluster will be a theme you will develop.

2. FREE FLOW WRITING

Now with the organised "map" of your subject in front of you, start to write your essay. At this stage, just write. Do not worry about style, spelling, or grammar too much now. Just allow all your organised thoughts to flow down on the paper. Write up one cluster of ideas then move on to the next.

3. DO NOTHING

Good writing involves about 40% research, 20% writing, and 40% revision. Your first draft that you have completed will need to be re-written with spelling corrected, and all the thoughts logically stated. Before the re-write however, you need a period where you switch off and stop thinking about the essay. Do something completely different. Take a rest from the work. During this time your mind may fill in extra points. It may give you better ideas for expressing what you meant. But for a time, do nothing.

4. EDIT

After you have had a break you can return to your essay. Now is the time to be conscious about style. Now is the time to be critical. Approach your essay as if you were a stranger reading it. Is the meaning clear? Does the writing flow? Is it easy to read? Do you answer the question adequately? Do you make your point, then prove it, and finish with a short summary?

MASTERING "HOW"

The following seven rules provide an overview of what your essay should include:

RULE 1. CONSIDER THE AUDIENCE

Who will mark the essay? What do they expect? Knowing this can help you define the style, shape, and length of your essay. Most of the time the requirements of the essay will be clearly given in your course outline, if it is not or you do not understand—ask the teacher or another student, etc. for help.

RULE 2. GRAB THEIR ATTENTION!

The bad news is that most people do not want to read what you have written! They will give the benefit of the doubt during the first paragraph. So make the first few lines count. Grab the markers attention. Be interesting. Let us look at how *not* to do this, starting with a church history example. This is a boring example of an essay on Hudson Taylor (anything but a boring person!):

Missionary pioneer. Born in Yorkshire, the son of a Methodist chemist, he underwent at seventeen a deep conversion and soon felt a strong call to the almost closed empire of China. He landed at Shanghai in 1854... blah, blah, blah... yawn.

How dull! This introduction breaks rule 2 by being boring, see rule 3 for a better way...

RULE 3. GIVE THEM A REASON TO BE INTERESTED

The reader wants to know, “Why should I be interested in this?” So, write for the reader. This is not only true of history but of all your essays, including biblical ones. Here is how the essay might have started (this is an actual example from a student):

No one knew he was coming. Hudson Taylor got off the boat in Shanghai after a tedious voyage from England, and there was no one to welcome him. His brilliant missionary career was just beginning, but he had no place to stay. He knew no Chinese, and few of the Chinese could speak English. To top it all, there was a civil war going on, just outside the city.

This version sets up a scenario that the person reading the essay cares about—then draws you in. It is directed at the reader in natural, personal language. The same can be done for your biblical essays as we are all interested in deepening our understanding, our faith, and our commitment to God’s Kingdom.

RULE 4. TALK TO THE READER IN ACTIVE LANGUAGE

I have made this point a few times already so now I will explain it. Of the two examples below, which would you prefer to read?

Important advances have been made in brain research over the last decade. Universities as far apart as Harvard, Yale, and UCLA in the United States, and London and Oxford in the UK are reporting that intelligence is more complex than had been thought, and that it can be increased by the careful application of new ways of teaching and training.

Now compare it to this version:

You can increase your intelligence. Intelligence is largely a set of skills that can be learned and practiced. This is the conclusion from ten years of intensive research at leading American and British universities.

The first is passive and wordy. The second is active and engaging. The *active voice* is used when the *subject is performing the action of the verb*. For example, “I see the tall man.” See is the verb, which describes the action that is being done by the subject—“I.” The object of my seeing is the tall man.

Examples include: “I am seeing,” “I speak,” “The ball hit me.”

In the active, *the subject performs the action* of the verb.

When the verb is passive, the *subject of the sentence is receiving the action* of the verb. In the passive, the sentence we have just looked at would be worded, “I was hit by the ball.” The action of the verb is being performed by the “ball” (it is the ball that is hitting me) and is being done to the subject “I.”

A simple way to identify passive voice by placing “by” after the verb and seeing if it makes sense. “I was hit by what”—“I was hit by the ball.” “Was hit” is a passive verb.

RULE 5. KEEP IT SHORT

People respond to short sentences. They are easy to read. However, bear in mind the rule about not being boring. This is an excellent guide to how to vary your writing for clarity and interest:

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

So, write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

A general rule when re-writing your essays is that you can reduce the original draft by about **one third** of its length. This will ensure you keep your essays to the required word count. If you exceed the stated word count by more than 10% you will get marked down in your essay. If you are struggling to write enough to meet the word count then you are lacking depth in your work; you need to read more deeply.

RULE 6. MAKE IT LOOK INVITING

Presentation of your essays is important, check out Carey regulations for fonts, size, and line spacing. Plan your work, and in a longer essay, section headings may be helpful. If you take pride in the presentation of your work, it conveys a sense of worth to the essay.

RULE 7. CLOSE WITH A BANG!

Every essay must have three things: 1) introduction, 2) main body, 3) conclusion. You have opened with a grabber. You have deliberately used basic words, a variety of sentence lengths (rather than all complex sentences), and active verbs. You have written in a way that interests the reader. Now all you need to do is finish with a punchy close. In the conclusion you are simply *restating your main point* in a different way. Keep it short and interesting.

TO IMPROVE FUTURE ASSIGNMENTS

Read the comments your teacher makes on your assignment, both the comments and the final comment. These are here to help you learn what was good, what was not so good and needs work. Markers work hard to help you—so make the most of it. See it as having a personal coach.

English Skills

Good essay writing involves the use of good English. Good English style requires the ability to write in *clear, concise sentences and well-crafted paragraphs*. In this section we shall examine some of the elements of good sentences and paragraphs as they relate to writing essays. A good essay is one that presents itself to the reader as a unified whole with a clearly identifiable structure. Unfortunately, this structure does not happen automatically, main ideas contribute to the main argument or theme, and each one needs its own “space”, its own development, illustration, ranking and ordering. The ordering of the essay is made explicit by the way it is divided into sentences and paragraphs.

Here is an RMIT video that gives a brief overview on paragraphs: [Paragraphs | Learning Lab \(rmit.edu.au\)](https://www.rmit.edu.au/learning-lab/paragraphs).

SENTENCES

“A sentence is a microcosm of an essay. It needs to be intelligent and properly constructed. It must make sense, both in terms of the logic of its ideas and in the way these are translated into language. Form and content, or craft and substance, together contribute to the meaning the reader constructs from each sentence. To be understood, that is, for the reader to construct the meaning we intend, we need to learn to say exactly what we mean.”⁶

WHAT IS A SENTENCE?

A sentence is a conceptual unit that contains **one main idea**. This idea is placed in the main clause of the sentence. The main clause may be very short, containing only one subject and a verb. To be complete, a sentence must possess a subject and a verb in its main clause. i.e.:

- **Sarah is lecturing.**
- **You are listening.**
- **You will pass.**

We could add more information to the main clause as follows:

- **Sarah is lecturing *to a class on Luke’s Gospel*.**
- **You are listening *exceptionally hard to Sarah lecture*.**
- **You will pass *your assignments this semester*.**

CLAUSES

The main idea of a sentence may be added to by adding a **subordinate clause** or **clauses**. The words in italics above are the subordinate clauses of the sentences. A subordinate clause can also be introduced by a word such as:

which, who, whose, that, although, if, because, while, when, since, after

What is the difference between a main clause and a subordinate clause?

A subordinate clause *does not* constitute a complete sentence, for example:

1. **Sarah is writing her lecture notes for Luke’s Gospel *which are due before tonight*.**

Main clause

Subordinate clause

⁶ Rountree, *Writing for Success*, 151.

2. ***If you study hard over the next few months, you will pass your exams.***

Subordinate clause

Main clause

3. ***Although the driver took the corner slowly, the car crashed into a pylon.***

Subordinate clause

Main clause

As will be obvious by now—the main clause can *stand alone* in the sentence and still make sense—the subordinate clause *cannot* (as the italics above indicate).

To recap: A sentence must have a *subject* and a *verb*, and a *main clause* that makes sense on its own.

COMPLEX SENTENCES

Often sentences will contain more than one idea. Therefore, they become more complex sentences. When more than one idea is included in a sentence ***the ideas must be closely related*** to each other. Sentences that contain unrelated or only loosely related ideas are confusing and misleading. For example:

“In the Gospels Jesus Christ is implicitly recognised as being divine, **and he often entertained little children on his knee.**”

The sentence changes topic halfway through; the two halves of the sentence do not belong together. The reader is left in confusion trying to relate the halves to each other.

The following two sentences pick up on the two main ideas in the sentence above and develop them logically.

“In the Gospels Jesus Christ is implicitly recognised as being divine in a number of ways, including titular Christology as well as functional identity.”

“While being divine he also modelled compassionate humanity often entertaining little children on his knee.”

PARAGRAPHS

The organisation of the essay is now made complete with the correct use of paragraphs. Each paragraph ***introduces and develops one main idea***. The indentation or new line of each paragraph is a signal to the reader that a new idea is being developed. These physical divisions between paragraphs provide the visual clues which help the reader understand the structure of the essay and thereby assimilate the ideas more easily.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD PARAGRAPH

It introduces and develops one idea. All the sentences in any given paragraph must relate to this central idea. *The first sentence of the paragraph usually introduces and sums up the main idea.* It is the readers' reference point. By reading the first sentence of any paragraph a reader should be able to quickly grasp the main points and the overall thrust of the writing.

Along with each sentence agreeing with the main idea they must also be developed in a *logical order*. The main idea must be developed clearly and adequately. It is the writer's responsibility to convince the reader of the reasonableness of each main point in his or her essay. A paragraph may:

- explain the idea in full
- give examples or illustrations
- give evidence or proof
- give reasons or results
- trace a logical process
- narrate or describe

HOW LONG SHOULD A PARAGRAPH BE?

As long as it needs to be! However, a few guidelines; a “normal” paragraph is seldom longer than 200-250 words. Most paragraphs contain three to ten sentences. Paragraph lengths, like sentence lengths, should vary within an essay. You might follow a long, heavy-going paragraph with a shorter one to give the reader some relief.

LINKING PARAGRAPHS

The order of paragraphs is important. *Each one must logically flow into the next.* The main idea of each paragraph should be clearly related to the ones before and after it. In this way the essay becomes a unified whole. It is a good idea to summarise briefly the preceding paragraph before going on to your next main point or idea. In this way each paragraph has some element of overlap with the preceding one. While it is not essential to do this in every paragraph, regular use of this technique will give your essay an inner coherence.

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS

This is the **most important paragraph** of the whole essay. If it is poor, then your essay will be read through a negative paradigm (e.g., low marks). The aim is to make an excellent first impression. Many markers, especially those with heavy marking loads, give a tentative grade after reading the introduction and then adjust the grade up or down according to whether the essay improves or deteriorates.

The introduction sets the tone, style, and pace of the essay. The tone has to do with the writer’s “voice.” It should sound intelligent, reasonable, confident, and engaging. You must give the impression of being in control of the material. The pace of the essay should be energetic; good essays get on with the job of answering the question.

AN INTRODUCTION HAS THREE TASKS

1. Introduce the topic and comment briefly on its importance.
2. State the essay’s main argument/conclusion or the main issues discussed. Unlike a novel, in academic writing you put your discovery “up front,” rather than revealing it later.
3. State how you intend to answer the question. The introduction may be two paragraphs if this is needed to convey all of this information. It depends upon your subject material and the length of the essay.

Because the introduction is so important, it needs to be written, or re-written, once the body of the essay has been written and conclusions drawn.

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS

This is the second most important paragraph in the essay. It is the last thing the marker reads before deciding what grade to give the essay! Good conclusions have something important to say and should waste no words saying it. They are direct and authoritative, but not heavy-handed. It is imperative to finish on a strong, positive note.

THE THREE TASKS OF THE CONCLUSION ARE

1. Sum up the essay’s main points.
2. State the essay’s main argument/conclusions.
3. Satisfy the reader that the question has been answered.

SOME DON'TS

- Do not begin the concluding paragraph with “In conclusion...” or similar. The reader can see it is the last paragraph.
- Do not introduce new material (facts or ideas) in the conclusion.
- Do not end with a cliché or a meaningless generalisation.
- Do not rely on another writer (by using a quote) to conclude your essay. Your own “voice” should come through strongly in the final paragraph.

The following is an example of a well-written paragraph (written by a 17-year-old)⁷

“Of all the countries of the world, New Zealand is the finest (*key sentence in the introduction*). Any visitor from overseas will tell you this. For one thing, the scenery is impressive, whether it be the sub-tropical forests of Northland, the lush pastures of the Waikato or the Manawatu, or the rugged peaks or glass-blue glaciers in the Southern Alps. Secondly, there is the climate which is both pleasant and invigorating; the humid north competes with the many well-known Pacific beaches, while the crispness of an autumn morning in Canterbury sends the blood tingling through the body (*amplification and examples*). It is no wonder that the New Zealander is proud of his country.” (*Conclusions reaffirm the main idea*).

HOW TO WRITE GOODER (A LITTLE LIGHT RELIEF—ALSO EDUCATIONAL)

Here are several very important but often forgotten rules of English:

1. Avoid alliteration. Always.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid clichés like the plague. (They are old hat.)
4. Employ the vernacular.
5. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
6. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.
7. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
8. Contractions aren't necessary.
9. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
10. One should never generalise.
11. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: “I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.”
12. Comparisons are as bad as clichés.
13. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
14. Be more or less specific.
15. Understatement is always best.
16. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
17. One-word sentences—Eliminate.
18. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
19. The passive voice is to be avoided.
20. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
21. Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
22. Who needs rhetorical questions?

⁷ Coster, *Success with Study*, 81