

## Organizing Your Ideas

The amount of information you gather while preparing to write an essay can sometimes seem overwhelming. **It is important to organize your thoughts and ideas so that your essay will be clear and convincing. Before you attempt to write your first draft, ask yourself the following questions:**

- What is my assignment? (It seems elementary, but knowing the *specific* guidelines for your assignment is crucial to the success of your essay.)
- What is my subject?
- What do I know, or what can I learn, about my subject?
- What specific statement can I make about my subject?
- On the basis of what I know about my subject, what specific items will best support and illustrate that specific statement?

## Brainstorming

A popular method for organizing your thoughts and ideas is **brainstorming**. **Brainstorming is the listing of ideas in association with a specific topic. This technique has two steps:**

- (1) **Make a list** – During this step, let your mind range freely. List all of the ideas that pop into your head *without* editing or eliminating any of them.
- (2) **Find Patterns** – After you have created a lengthy list, look for patterns in your ideas. Break your list into groups or categories and eliminate any ideas that do not fit into a group.

**Example:** Benefits of the Commercialization of Holidays

- people feel cheerful
- the economy is stimulated
- people give to charities
- strangers exchange friendly greetings
- everyone gives/gets gifts
- children love visiting Santa and the Easter Bunny
- festive atmosphere in stores
- sending greeting cards helps friends stay in touch
- arouses positive sentimental feelings
- stimulates goodwill

After breaking your list into separate categories, you may want to focus on individual groups and add more ideas.

## Creating a Thesis Statement

A **thesis statement** is the main message of an essay. When carefully composed, a thesis statement will inform your readers of the content of the entire essay. **In an academic essay, the thesis statement usually comes at the end of the introductory paragraph and is contained in one sentence.** When creating a thesis statement, consider the following:

**Be Specific** – Avoid vague words and broad statements.

<b>Example:</b>	Too Vague	The paintings of women are getting more attention.
	Specific	During the past ten years, the works of artists Mary Cassatt and Rosa Bonheur have finally gained widespread critical acclaim.

## State Your Essay's Major Subdivisions

<b>Example:</b>	Incorrect	There are many kinds of malpractice suits.
	Correct	Most people are familiar with malpractice suits against physicians, but an increasing number of suits are being filed against lawyers, teachers, and even parents.

**Once you have chosen your thesis statement, do not stray from it.** For instance, in the example above, the essay's three main points would be law suits against lawyers, teachers, and parents. The writer of this essay would not include a paragraph dealing with law suits against bus drivers because bus drivers are not in the thesis statement.

With all of these ideas in mind, you are ready to start planning your own essay. If you would like more information on Planning and Shaping, refer to the Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers located on the Communication Lab's bookshelf.

## Introduction Paragraph

**It is important to write an introductory paragraph which convinces the reader that the essay will be worth reading.** To be completed effectively, this opening paragraph must accomplish two things: it must **state the topic of the essay** and it must **capture the reader's interest.** Any one of several devices may be used to fulfill the latter purpose:

1. **Emphasize the importance of the topic.**
2. **Ask a provocative question.**
3. **Use an appropriate quotation.**

4. **State the divisions of the topic.**
5. **Use a stimulating incident or an anecdote.**
6. **Develop a contrast which emphasizes the thesis**
7. **Use material which disarms possible critics.**
8. **Define terminology.**
9. **Establish the author's credibility.**
10. **Proceed from a general situation to a specific instance -- the funnel.**
11. **Use a provocative statement to challenge a familiar belief.**
12. **Use a provocative statement to startle the reader.**

### **1. EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TOPIC**

The writer may impress the readers by explaining the current interest in the topic.

#### **For example:**

Brook Farm, an experiment in group living which attracted such literary figures of the nineteenth century as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles A. Dana, had much in common with Charles Manson's family.

*The writer indicates that the subject may influence readers' lives.*

#### **For example:**

According to the United Nations, over 240 million people, forty percent of them being children, are starving in the world today. In addition, this planet has already begun to experience shortages of gas, oil, and other important natural resources. These crises are even more frightening when one considers that the Earth's population is expected to double by the year 2000. Thus, it is clear that we desperately need to make plans to prevent fast-approaching global chaos and tragedy.

*The writer provides historical background to show the importance of the topic.*

#### **For example:**

The Romans called it cerevisia - gift of cares, goddess of grain. Ancient Babylonians, Chinese and Egyptians all concocted it; the god Osiris, in fact, is credited with being the world's first brew master. Hammurabi made laws about it. He invented the running tab, allowing his subjects to settle up at the local dram shop after they had harvested their corn. George Washington brewed it at Mount Vernon, Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. During World War II, Wilson Churchill

outfitted a floating brewery so that thirsty tommies fighting in the Far East could get their deli rations. Ethel Kennedy sips it with a shot of brandy or schnapps, while in Pittsburgh, steel workers use it as a “wash” for whisky. Last year,

Americans consumed an estimated 160 million barrels of beer – 90 quarts for every man, woman, and child in the U.S. Behind all those suds is a \$6 billion-a-year industry, and it is an industry in turmoil.

### **2. ASK A PROVOCATIVE QUESTION**

The reader’s interest can be stimulated by asking the question that does not have an easy answer. The essay that follows should then be concerned with finding a possible answer.

#### **For example:**

1. Fortunately, at the present time, only certain nations of the world are suffering greatly from the effects of overpopulation, pollution, and shortages of food and other natural resources. However, as the Earth’s population continues to increase at an alarming rate, all nations will eventually be gravely affected. As a result, how much longer can the nations of this planet afford the luxury of looking upon each other as separate when it comes to issues such as food supply or ecology? How long can we continue without global planning in areas crucial for human survival?
2. Have you ever seen those commercials with ladies in elegant gowns putting down a new floor in the red room? Have you ever felt you’d like to do the same? Don’t. It’s a long, complicated process.
3. What would happen if through a time machine we could get Muhammad Ali in the same ring as Jack Dempsey? Who would win? Would it be the quickest hands and feet of all time or the strongest punch?

### **3. USE AN EFFECTIVE QUOTATION**

A quotation is an easy and effective device to use -- if it is used sparingly. The daily newspapers are a good source of quotations suitable for current topics. If the subject is of a more general nature, the book Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, which you can find in the reference section of the library, may provide appropriate material.

#### **For example:**

1. “Our planet is in the midst of a terrible people explosion.” These words by Jean Libman Block, author of the essay “The Population Bomb and How to Defuse It,” remind us that unless the present growth rate for the Earth’s population is reduced, the world’s population will double by the year 2000. As we look ahead into the planet’s future, we can see not only a terrifying people

explosion, but also uncontrolled nuclear capability, depleted natural resources, and similar life-threatening problems. Unless there is global planning for the future of this planet, there is little hope of avoiding doom for us all.

2. “Heroin is a death trip. I really enjoyed it. But once you get the habit, you’re in trouble. One good friend is in the hospital with an \$80 a day habit. Another is almost dead from hepatitis. Two others I know, one a girl, died from overdose. Every time you stick that needle in your arm you’re playing with your life.” this statement was made by a nineteen-year-old who, like many of his friends, had tried drugs out of curiosity and soon discovered that he was experimenting with danger.

#### **4. STATE THE DIVISIONS OF THE TOPIC**

A brief idea of the plan of the essay, if stated in an effective manner, can hint at the interesting points which a writer intends to cover. This method should be reserved for lengthy, complex arguments.

##### **For example:**

The people of this planet need to plan ahead. Due to the rapid growth of the population and the rapid decrease in available natural resources to support life on Earth, all people are in danger. Surely such important problems as the food supply, health care, and environmental protection can be handled across national boundaries for the good of all people of the Earth.

#### **5. USE A STIMULATING INCIDENT OR ANECDOTE**

The use of an interesting incident or anecdote can act as a teaser to lure the reader into the remainder of the essay. Be sure that the device is appropriate for the subject and focus of what is to follow.

##### **For example:**

1. A young man named Darryl Stingley is laying in an Oakland, Calif., hospital bed, paralyzed from the neck down. At 26, Stingley was a pass receiver making a good living in football until a few weeks ago. Then, during an exhibition game between the New England Patriots and the Oakland Raiders, Stingley ran a slant pattern into the middle of the Raider secondary. As the pass arrived, so did safety Jack Tatum. Stingley lowered his head to meet the blow. Tatum delivered a clean and stinging hit, the kind that coaches usually like to see on the game films. It broke Darryl Stingley’s neck. In honor of Stingley and other victims, therefore, the NFL should take action this season.

2. When I was a kid in Philadelphia, I must have read every comic book ever published (there were fewer of them then than there are now). I zipped through all of them in a couple of days, and then reread the good ones until the next issues arrived. Yes, indeed, when I was a kid, the reading game was a snap. But as I got older, my eyeballs must have slowed down or something. I mean, comic books started to pile up faster than my brother Russell and I could read them! It wasn't

until much later, when I was getting my doctorate, that I realized it wasn't my eyeballs that were to blame. Thank goodness, they are still moving as well as ever. The problem is there's too much to read these days, and too little time to read every word of it. Now mind you, I still read comic books, in addition to contracts, novels, newspapers, screenplays, tax returns, and correspondence. I even read textbooks about how people read and which techniques help people read more in less time. I'll let you in on a little secret: there are hundreds of techniques you can learn to help you read faster, but I know of three that are especially good.

### **6. DEVELOP A CONTRAST WHICH EMPHASIZES THE THESIS**

The underlying idea of the essay may be heightened by contrasting it with circumstances of other times or situations.

#### **For example:**

1. Until a few years ago, humans could feel fairly smug about what was thought to be their unique ability to communicate with one another by using spoken language or symbols. Then psychologists at the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center in Atlanta taught two chimps named Austin and Sherman to "converse" by pushing buttons that displayed various symbols. For probably the first time, two animals were communicating by means other than their usual repertoire of gestures, grunts, and squeals.

2. Doctors have long accepted the fact that emotions can cause such illnesses as asthma, hypertension, ulcers, and colitis. But new research indicates that cancer may be another disease which has some emotional basis.

3. One hundred years ago Americans sought inner peace through the Bible, philosophy, or rugged individualism. Today we have the added options of psychotherapy, computerized astrology, macrobiotic diets, imported Eastern mysticism, encounter groups, scientology, Dale Carnegie courses, and scores of freaky psychologies. However, even with all these promises of instant nourishment, modern Americans are spiritually underfed.

4. If a doctor gives 100 patients who complain of a pain a simple sugar pill, he can be sure that 33 will feel better. This is the classic “placebo effect,” and it is usually attributed to psychological factors rather than phony medication. This week, however, three California pain researchers presented surprising evidence that inert placebo pills actually have physical effects.

### **7. USE MATERIAL WHICH DISARMS POSSIBLE CRITICS**

By anticipating damaging objections, the writer may disarm would-be critics.

#### **For example:**

Football has often been called a game for men who are all muscle and no brains. This charge may have been justified in the infant years of the game when it consisted entirely of running plays, and when the players used brute strength to crash through the opposite line. Today, a team may use as many as fifty different plays, involving complicated deception and a wide variety of passes.

### **8. DEFINE TERMINOLOGY**

An initial definition may clarify a key term.

#### **For example:**

1. Economists do not agree amongst themselves on what “automation” means. Some writers use the term for any type of large-scale mechanization of industrial or administrative processes. Others, more plausibly, use it in referring to the mechanization of planning, supervision and control.
2. Dismiss “fashion,” which is ephemeral and external. Dispose of “mode” or “flair,” both inadequate. Discard “stylish,” the word itself a turn-of-the-century evocation of ladies with very small waists, very large hats, and very narrow minds. These have nothing to do with styles, which I see as a way of speaking, walking, behaving, creating and being, which is both highly personal and yet—through its commanding presence—able to color the social and cultural climate of others.

### **9. ESTABLISH THE AUTHOR’S CREDIBILITY**

Biographical or personal comments may help establish the writer’s qualifications for dealing with his or her subject.

### For example:

I am a fan of science. My education is scientific and I have, in one field, contributed a monograph to a scientific journal. Science, to my mind, is applied honesty, the one reliable means we have to find out truth. That is why, when error is committed in the name of science, I feel the way a man would if his favorite uncle had taken to drink.

### **10. PROCEED FROM A GENERAL SITUATION TO A SPECIFIC INSTANCE**

The funnel-shaped opener begins with an assertion covering a broader area than the topic will; this gives the reader a wide perspective and a context for understanding the actual topic when it

is stated. Then, in perhaps two or three subsequent sentences, the funnel paragraph narrows to the topic, which is usually revealed just as the paragraph ends.

### For example:

1. Only a few politicians have taken a craftsman's pride in self-expression, and even fewer including Caesar, Lord Clarendon, Winston Churchill, and De Gaulle have been equally successful in politics and authorship. Of these, Churchill may be the most interesting, for he was not only among the most voluminous of writers, but also commented freely on the art of writing. He was in fact a writer before becoming a politician.
2. The words *job hunting* imply there are jobs out there and all you have to do is find them, which is often the case. But many of the most interesting jobs are created when someone sees a need for a service and convinces a prospective employer that she is the very person to meet that need. Creating your own job may require starting your own business, but not always. You may be able to get what you want within an organization that already exists. The important thing is to know what it is you want to do.

### **11. USE A PROVOCATIVE STATEMENT TO CHALLENGE A FAMILIAR BELIEF**

### For example:

1. Freedom in society is impossible. When the desires of two people do not agree, both cannot be satisfied. Who is going to be free to realize his desire—the man who wants to walk down the street shouting and singing, or his neighbor who seeks peace and quiet? Will it be the man who wants to build a new highway or the man who wants to retain the unspoiled natural beauty of the land?

2. Why waste four years going to college? In four years an ambitious high school graduate can become happily established with a company and have a sizeable lead on the road to fame and fortune over his former schoolmates. This is how I felt when I left high school. Three years of pursuing fame and fortune altered my thinking radically.
  
3. It has long been the American formula for success. It has been written, in various ways, on thousands of high school backgrounds. It's been sung, loud and long, by millions of parents, "go to college and get that degree." After you graduate, good jobs will await you. The world will be yours." Recently however, many young people have discovered that a college degree isn't the key to success that it once was.

### **12. USE A PROVOCATIVE STATEMENT TO STARTLE THE READER**

A sentence surprises the reader with frank or unusual information can often attract attention for the soon-to-follow presentation of a thesis.

#### **For example:**

1. This year's film festival at Cannes was overrated, underplanned, and completely schizoid...
2. I'm a Brazil nut. . .
3. I probably hold the world's record for the number of times anyone has ever taken beginning swimming. . .
4. Ann Lee was literally the Messiah who had come to earth in the form of a woman. At least that's what her followers believed. . .

**CHECKLIST FOR THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH**

- Does the introductory paragraph include the thesis statement?
- Does the introductory paragraph interest and attract the reader?
- Does the introductory paragraph establish the tone of the essay?
- Does the introductory paragraph use the most effective method of development?
- Does the introductory paragraph avoid these common errors?
  - a. Using the apology.
  - b. Echoing the title.
  - c. Using the dictionary definition.
  - d. Using important sounding declarations of a common place idea.
  - e. Using clichés and overworked quotations.
  - f. Using obvious expressions such as: “In this paper, I shall. . .” or “The purpose of this paper is to . . .”
  - g. Using meaningless questions.
  - h. Using overly long or overly short introductions.
  - i. Using colorless, summarizing statements.
  - j. Using unnecessary or irrelevant background material.
  - k. Using absolute diction.

**By the end of this paragraph, we know the topic will be Churchill’s writing, but we arrive at the knowledge by sliding down the funnel. Those politicians who took pride in self-expression, those who were equally successful in politics and authorship, the most interesting of these:  
Churchill. Churchill  
was a writer.**

## Concluding Paragraph

**An effective conclusion ties together different parts of a paper and reinforces its central message.** Avoid conclusions that are merely a lame restatement of points you have made abundantly clear. Instead, **make your reader feel that your conclusion was needed to make your paper satisfyingly whole.** Any one of the following methods may be used:

1. Use an appropriate quotation.
2. Ask a provocative question.
3. Use an anecdote.
4. Make a plea for a change.
5. Present a solution.
6. Make a prediction.
7. Make a provocative statement.
8. Use a memorable restatement of the thesis.
9. Summarize the major points.
10. Relate the thesis to a general trend.

### **1. USE AN APPROPRIATE QUOTATION:**

A quotation from a newspaper, magazine, interview, or another reliable source may be an effective way to conclude the essay. The writer should document the source.

#### **For Example:**

1. By the time it was all over, 100,000 people had come to Lake Placid, and private homes and hastily winterized hotels accommodated 15,324 overnight guests at the peak. Both NBC and CBS covered every event, and “as far south as Georgia and out to the Middle West, radio listeners thrilled to the reports of the announcers.” They heard Americans win six of the fourteen gold medals, four silvers, and two bronzes. Finally, they heard Count de Baillet-Latour, the president of the IOC, step to the awards podium and close the third Olympic Winter Games. He called the youth of the world to gather again in four years, expressing the hope that, at those future games, they might “display cheerfulness and concord.” As he spoke, dust fell and a blizzard swept down from the high Adirondacks. The snow swirled in across the nearby lakes and draped the crowd in white as the Olympic flag was folded.
2. For better or worse, divorce continues to split families at an alarming rate. The number of divorces has tripled in the last twenty years. Though parents,

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children, and professionals are struggling to deal with such new domestic realities as single-parent families, there are no longstanding precedents or established role models to draw from. Divorce and its aftermath can be a labyrinth of confusion and conflict, some of which may never be resolved. To divorce lecturer and author Rabbi Earl Frollman of Temple Beth El in Belmont, Massachusetts, divorce can be even more traumatic than death. “The big difference is, death has closure, it’s over,” says Frollman, who performs divorce ceremonies for families. “With divorce, it’s never over.”

### **2. ASK A PROVOCATIVE QUESTION**

A question must arise from the content of the paper. It should provoke thought.

#### **For Example:**

1. Even if no such catastrophe were to occur, say the people at Project MAC, the development of a machine more intelligent than man will surely deal a severe shock to man’s sense of his own worth. Even Shaky is disturbing, and a creature that deposed man from the pinnacle of creation might tempt us to ask ourselves: Is the human brain outmoded? Has evolution in protoplasm been replaced by evolution in circuitry?
2. The increasing divorce rate is not merely a colorful statistic. It raises disturbing questions. How great is the damage done to children? Does divorce solve a problem or only run away from it? Is marriage itself a dying institution? Can a society of broken homes be a healthy society? These and other questions will trouble this nation for years to come.

### **3. USE AN ANECDOTE**

A short anecdote helps reinforce the thesis.

#### **For Example:**

1. Doctors and patients alike are impressed with the emotional rehabilitation created by the operation. “Reconstruction changed my life more in a pleasant way than being sick changed it in a negative way,” says Susan Morgan. A Maryland woman, Patricia Gosselin, who had a mastectomy at 35, refused to let her husband look at her body for seven years; she wore her prosthesis and bra even to bed. When she came home from the hospital with a newly constructed breast and showed it to her husband, she remembers, “His eyes filled with tears of joy. He just couldn’t believe it. I feel as though I have been set free.”
2. There is another resemblance between skiing and politics that has nothing to do with ideology. I mentioned at the outset that I was skiing last winter. I did so until one bright Sunday when I went out in the company of another professor of mature years. It was a day of brilliant sun; the snow was good except for occasional bare patches. Precisely when I was least expecting it--when my feeling of confidence and my sense of mastery were greatest--I fell on a rock and

broke my behind. Exactly the same happens in politics and to a lot of men in an election year.

#### **4. MAKE A PLEA FOR A CHANGE**

The conclusion may ask that some action be taken to remedy the problem discussed in the essay.

##### **For Example:**

1. It is long past time that we began walking the middle of the road, which means accepting our full responsibilities as decent (and wealthy) world citizen, while leaving it to the people of every country to pursue their own destiny, socialist or otherwise.
2. Because love of sugar and sweet foods is deeply ingrained in American culture, it may seem severe to suggest that sugar be cut out of your diet completely. But many people are doing so, in order to get more food value for their calories. A few grams of sugar might not kill you, but just don't get trapped into equating a bottle of soda with mother love, even in your subconscious.
3. The real problem in the economy is that it doesn't pay to invest. Investment is too low because the profit ratio is too low. What you have to do somehow is to stimulate the economy and raise the profit ratio. But it certainly cannot be done by raising interest rates to 13%, which is what the government is trying to do now.

#### **5. PRESENT A SOLUTION**

The conclusion may suggest solutions or remedies for the problem discussed in the essay. This conclusion also implies or states a plea for a change

##### **For example:**

1. I have heard, I must admit, that there are some gifted, inspiring teachers who bring Shakespeare to life even for high school students, but they are the exception while the Miss Browns remain the rule. Therefore, I think Hamlet, Macbeth, and Julius Caesar should be eliminated from the high school curriculum. If this is done, the student can more profitably and more enjoyably spend his time on material that is less obtuse and oblique. In this way, he will not be taxed beyond his strength, patience, or ability, and in this way, Shakespeare himself will be saved from a fate and judgment he does not deserve.
2. I am committed to doing what I can to take guns away from the people. In my view, private ownership of handguns must be banished from this country. I

am not asking for registration or licensing or outlawing cheap guns. I am saying that no private citizen, whatever claim, should possess a handgun. Only police officers should.

3. We have to stop thinking about ourselves as separate groups of people and begin thinking about ourselves as an entire group of passengers on a “spaceship” called earth. We need to design cooperative programs to feed starving peoples, to provide universal medical care and to find ways to preserve our natural resources. Everyone has to work together so that the planet will progress through our planning for the good of all.

### **6. MAKE A PREDICTION**

A forecast or warning based on evidence developed in the paper may be an effective way to conclude the essay.

#### **For example:**

1. In education we have not yet acquired that kind of will. But we need to acquire it, and we have not time to lose. We must acquire it in this decade. For if, in the crucial years which are coming, our people remain as unprepared as they are for their responsibilities and their mission, they may not be equal to the challenge, and if they do not succeed, they may never have a second chance to try.
2. I think there’s a warning in this somewhere for the more militant feminists among us. I suspect that they should take a good look at life as we experience it today and compare it with what their mothers and grandmothers knew. Except in a few areas where change necessarily comes slowly, the event has already taken place or is moving inexorably in that direction.

**(Make sure to see Checklist for a Concluding Paragraph on the following page.)**

**CHECKLIST FOR THE CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH**

- Does the conclusion tie together all parts of the essay?
- Does the concluding paragraph reinforce the central idea?
- Does the concluding paragraph use the most effective method of development?
- Does it contain a transition that connects the conclusion to the preceding paragraph?
- Does the concluding paragraph avoid these common errors?
  - a. Introducing any new ideas
  - b. Using obvious expressions such as “In this essay, I have tried to....”
  - c. Using clichés, overworked quotations, and banal or trite remarks
  - d. Apologizing
  - e. Using absolute statements
  - f. Drawing unrealistic conclusions
  - g. Using overly long or overly short conclusions