

SAMPLE LESSON FROM WORDSMITH CRAFTSMAN

PART THREE: THE ESSAY

No student can escape THE ESSAY. Essays are everywhere: on tests, in the newspaper, in fat leather-bound volumes of "Collected Works," in literature textbooks and magazines of every sort. High school and college students are continually asked to read, analyze, and eventually write them. What's the big deal about essays?

An essay is the written expression of the author's thoughts, conclusions, or findings on any given subject. If that seems too broad a definition, let's take a moment to consider what the essay is *not*.

- It's not fiction because an essay is based on the thoughts, experiences, and sensations of an actual person in the actual world.
- It's not poetry because the ideas are not arranged in poetical form and do not rely on "poetical" language or imagery for their impact.
- It's not a simple narrative because the ideas are structured around a more complicated form than mere sequence.
- It's not a news article or report because the overall tone is more personal.
- It's not a recipe, caption, resume, or instruction sheet, because at first glance it appears to have no practical application!

But even with all these exclusions, essays can be about anything and run in length from a few paragraphs to many pages (John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* covers two volumes!). The essay is excellent practice for all types of writing and a great exercise for planning, organizing, and thinking.

Essay writing is more than a school exercise, however. Any written expression of your thoughts centered around a single theme or idea can be considered an essay. Throughout your life, just such a written expression may be exactly what's required to get you into the college of your choice, secure the job of your dreams, remove an obstacle from your path, or change someone's mind about an important issue. In Part Three of this book, you will learn how to put together a well-written essay.

Are you excited yet? Let's get started.

ESSAY STRUCTURE

Every piece of writing must have some structure or form in order to make sense. Picking your way through an unstructured page is almost as difficult as finding a word in a dictionary that's not arranged in alphabetical order. Neither would have much reason for existing. Fortunately, the basic form for an essay is so simple you can memorize it right now. Here it is:

Introduction
Body
Conclusion

Think of it as a parade. First come the drum corps, the veterans with flags, the police car, or the high-stepping majorettes with a banner—any or all of which will clear the street and capture the attention of the crowd. The body of the parade can be two miles or two blocks long, and varied in color and pitch, but all of it moves in the same direction. Finally, a good parade should wind up with up with a designated conclusion—usually a cleanup squad with "pooper-scoopers." After they go by, the crowd spills into the street, understanding that they will not be run over by a renegade float because the event is over.

Within this basic outline of Introduction, Body, and Conclusion, almost all essays can be classified according to four familiar types: descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive.

Although you have learned to identify individual paragraphs as descriptive, narrative, expository and persuasive, classifying

an essay is not always simple. Most essays contain a *mixture* of narration, description, exposition, or persuasion—or all four. But only one type will characterize the overall essay, and with a little practice you should be able to classify a piece according to the dominant type.

EXERCISE. Many of the articles in general interest magazines (such as *Readers Digest*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *World & I*, or *Atlantic Monthly*) might be considered essays. Page through an issue of one of these magazines and find five short articles (two pages or less). Mark each paragraph with a "D," "N," "E," or "P," according to type. Some may be difficult to classify—take your best guess! Then determine the type of the entire essay.

BRAINSTORMING IDEAS

Many students believe that writing is hard for them because they have nothing to write about. It may surprise you to learn that the very opposite is true—the problem is not that you have too little to write about, but that you have too much!

Think about it. After living through your childhood, you have become proficient in *all* the basic skills necessary for a successful life: walking, taking, reading, writing, arithmetic, and much more. You have had literally thousands of experiences—exciting, depressing, joyful, educational, warm—you name it. You have formed numerous relationships with other people, and learned quite a bit about human behavior. If there's something you don't know, you probably have a good idea how to find out or whom to ask. You've seen, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled sensations that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

But when you are told to sit down and write, you may find that the words don't come. Worse, the ideas don't come. Write? About what? That blank piece of paper staring up at you looks as empty as your mind feels.

But your mind is not empty; just the opposite. It's crammed so full of thoughts, memories, ideas and experiences that you can't tell where one begins and another leaves off. It *looks* like a blank wall, but actually it's a treasury of material, packed very tightly. Your job is not to conjure subject matter out of the air, but to shake loose and organize the material that's already in your head.

I won't pretend it's easy. But it *can* be done, if you are patient and painstaking and willing to practice. Anyone can learn to write an essay; the secret is to break the process into steps, and to concentrate on one step at a time.

PART 3: THE ESSAYS—OVERVIEW

1. THE TOPIC

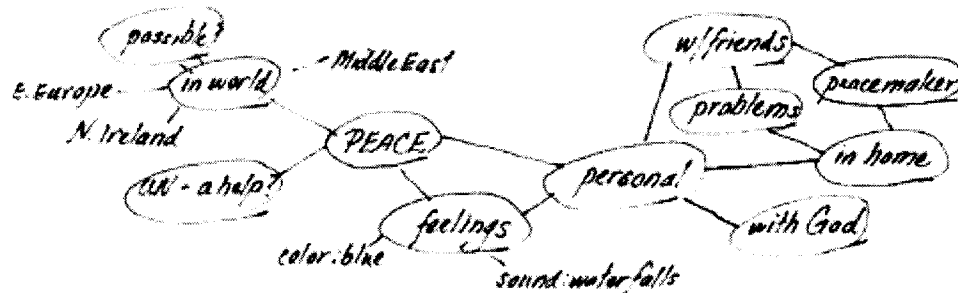
The first step is determining what to write about. If you are told to write an essay on; "love" or "friendship," don't try to start on an introductory paragraph right away. You don't yet know what to write about. What you have is only a **subject**: a general area which could be approached from dozens of directions. Your first step, given a subject, is to narrow it down to a **topic**. The topic is what you will write about.

One technique for narrowing the subject is called **clustering**. Clustering is not the only way, but it's worth practicing because it can give you a visual picture of your thoughts. Here's how it works:

Find the word PEACE in the diagram below. This is the subject, and like most subjects it's very broad. Further thoughts about "peace" could lead in many different directions. The point in clustering is to write down *every* word or phrase related to peace that comes to mind, and form connections between them.

My first thought is about inner peace and how that might be achieved. But what about the rest of the world? Is peace even

possible? When we look around us and listen to the news, the outlook for worldwide peace seems discouraging. But what about peace in my own family or within my circle of acquaintances? That might be more within reach because much of it depends on me. If I am at peace within, I am more likely to be a peacemaker with those around me. And what feelings are created in me by the thought of peace? If it were a color, it would be as blue as the sky on a cloud-spotted day, warm spring day.



After only a few minutes, I've come up with a map of my current thoughts on the subject of peace. Any of the "destinations" on this map would make an acceptable topic, but some are better than others. The most important rule for choosing a topic is, *make it specific*. The farther away you can get from the center of the diagram, the better your essay is likely to be. In practical terms, you'll find your best topics by exploring the outer "branches" of the cluster.

Thinking further about the idea of peace in the family, I decided to focus on common courtesy as a way to maintain it. Of course there are other ways to this goal, and being at peace with myself will help me be courteous with others, but I must stay focused. The next step will provide a tool to keep this focus.

2. THE THESIS STATEMENT

A thesis statement is a clear, concise statement of the main point of the essay. It could actually appear in the text, but not necessarily--that's your decision. A thesis statement takes a lot of thought, but once you've written it, your focus is established.

Here are two possible thesis statements for my essay on peace in the family:

1. Those little acts of courtesy, even though they seem so insignificant, can be the "oil" that helps the family run smoothly.
2. Sometimes I don't feel like answering politely, but our family life has been much more peaceful since I started making the effort.

Each of these sentences will lead in slightly different directions. An essay built on the first sentence will concentrate on the idea that little things make a big difference. The second thesis statement is a variation on that theme: my personal responsibility to act courteously even when I don't feel like it.

If the topic of "peace in the family" doesn't appeal to you, notice how other branches in the cluster could be developed.

Topic: Peace in the Middle East

Thesis Statement: The centuries-old conflict in the Middle East goes so deep that any "peace" will probably be temporary.

Topic: Peace among friends

Thesis Statement: Even the closest friendships hit some rough spots, so I've learned to be prepared for hurt feeling and misunderstandings.

Topic: The color of peace

Thesis Statement: The deep unchanging color of the sky that day reflected the new sense of serenity that I had discovered.

EXERCISE. Choose three of the general subjects listed below. Cluster first, then select a topic and write a thesis sentence on each of the subjects.

food
adventure
education

health
responsibility
war

childhood
friendship
work

Before moving on to writing essays, let's take one apart to see how it works.

EXERCISE. Study the essay below, then follow the directions.

1. Determine the type (N, D, E, or P) of each paragraph, then classify the essay as a whole.
2. Write the thesis sentence.
3. Write a one-paragraph summary of the entire essay.
4. List three ways that the author supports his thesis.
5. What makes the essay interesting? (List 3 or 4 specific items.)

HOW TO FIND TIME by Dale Turner

1. A commercial flashing on our TV screens shows men and women trying to buy a bit of time. It catches the plight of most of us in our hurry-scurry world. "I don't want a 40-hour week," says Nicholas Murray Butler, former president of Columbia University. "I want a 40-hour day."

2. I never cease to marvel at how some people, working with the same number of hours we have, seem to get so much more done. How do they do it?

3. For one thing, they don't squander the bits and pieces of time that punctuate our days. Rather than wasting energy getting irritated waiting for a phone call or a repair person, they capture those moments creatively. They keep tools handy—a pen, a book, a pair of scissors, a needle, whatever.

4. Clement C. Moore was a teacher of classical languages. In the course of his career, he published a Hebrew dictionary and was a major benefactor of the General Theological Seminary in

They never brought Moore a penny, but they did bring him immortality.

7. Such constructive use of time is available to us all. A Seattle businessman carries a briefcase in which he has paper and envelopes for penning letters. In odd moments he keeps countless friendships alive.

8. A woman I know memorized the Sermon on the Mount while commuting. A bedspread in our home was quilted by my mother-in-law who, though extremely busy, found minutes to prepare a beautiful gift full of memories for her family.

9. Remember, most time is wasted in minutes, not hours. The average person diddles away enough minutes in ten years to have earned a college degree.

10. Thinking of this reminds me of a verse from my childhood by Julia Fletcher Carney:

*Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean
And the pleasant land.*

New York City.

5. But it is not for the seminary or his dictionary that he is remembered. It is for a set of verses dashed off in 1822 in an hour of yuletide inspiration – verses that he stuffed away as if of no importance.

6. The magic lines begin: "'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house..."

Do you recall the next four lines?

*So the little minutes,
Humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages
Of eternity.*

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