

Constructing a Cohesive Essay

Writing is a process*

A successful academic essay must be worth reading, and **essays that are not interesting or are poorly written are not worth reading**. For most of us, our first draft is pretty lame (a first draft is akin to sight reading): interesting and well-written essays only emerge through a process of revision (revision is akin to careful practice) that systematically addresses the factors explained below. **If you are not consciously attentive to these things (thesis, evidence, analysis and reflection, structure, and style), you are working in a high school mode.** Most students need help to produce competent college writing, to advance your writing through the steps of later-stage revision. This will save time, buttress your own skills of writing, and lead to higher quality work. And yes, this all translates into a better grade. Review the following components of a cohesive essay; and before that, think about these definitions, explaining what a "cohesive essay" really means:

cohere v. *intr.* 1. To stick or hold together in a mass.

2. To be logically connected. *tr.* To cause to form a united or orderly whole.

essay n. 1. An attempt; endeavor.

2. A testing or trial of the value or nature of a thing.

3. A short literary composition on a single subject, presenting the view of the author.

Thesis

An effective essay has an effective thesis, one that respects the subtleties and/or complexities of the essay's topic. A **thesis** should not be confused with a topic, which represents only the **subject** area of an essay. A good thesis says something of interest about the topic. Further, it must be **arguable**; there must be intelligent ways to disagree with it. Arguability distinguishes a good thesis from a **fact** (clearly demonstrable in the text) or an **observation** (an interpretation so obvious that no intelligent reader would challenge it). **Finding and articulating a thesis is the key task of revision**; most students only announce their topic in a first draft: **it takes work to identify the thesis that harbors an essay's real potential**. This work is an expectation of college writing.

Problem or Question

In academic essays, the problem usually arises from a current misunderstanding of an important issue. The author of an essay promises to clarify something that would otherwise remain obscured or mistaken. Establishing the problem or question is the primary role of an essay's first few paragraphs. If it doesn't promise to illuminate, deepen, or solve a problem, an essay risks irrelevance.

Evidence

An **effective essay** argues on the basis of specific ideas and statements put forth by the author(s) it addresses; **these ideas and statements are used as evidence. This is the point of quotations.** Quotations are used as evidence; they serve an important role in an essay, just like the evidence used by a lawyer serves an important role in a court trial. **Quotations (which always must be cited) should be used to substantiate the essay's claims-and to prove its thesis.** The most careful arguments also employ counter-evidence as defense against criticism that might undermine and assault the essay's thesis. Counter-evidence grapples directly with facts, patterns, or passages that resist or complicate the essay's main argument.

Analysis & Reflection

A writer turns **evidence** into argument with **effective analysis and reflection**; **analysis and reflection show the reader how the evidence supports, develops, or extends the essay's thesis**. Since a thesis must be arguable, no evidence in a good academic essay can speak for itself. All of it must be processed by the writer for the reader's benefit. **Analysis** highlights significant details of the **evidence** to focus a reader on **specific ideas, facts, or other points of argument**. When working with written evidence, observe the rule of two: the writer should supply at least two words of analysis for every word of a citation, and usually more. **Never let a quotation speak for itself.**

Analysis generally **refers directly to the evidence** (e.g., "Describing his actions with such words as 'growled' and 'stalked' suggests an underlying animal savagery"), while **reflection builds upon analysis to support larger claims** (e.g., "This imagery seems to contradict the narrator's stated assessment that Paul is a 'gentle soul'"). **Reflection** should be offered outright, but it is also found in definitions or refinements of terms and assumptions, qualifications of previous claims, and consideration of a counter-argument. **Reflection is important throughout an essay**. It should be crafted with extra care **in between sections of the argument and in the essay's conclusion**. You should be able **to clearly identify the sections of analysis and the sections of reflection in your essay**. A key task of later-stage revision is **to craft every section of reflection hand-in-hand with the essay's thesis**. The deliberate interrelation of these sections is the hallmark of a cohesive essay.

Structure

The sections of an essay are organized and stitched together by the way they are structured. College essays are frequently organized either by **repetition** (where each paragraph develops evidence of the same proposition: "X is clearly present") or by **chronology** (where evidence appears in the essay in the same order that it appears in the text): **both of these patterns are inadequate**. Beware, then, when either **listings** or **narrative** form the architectural base of your essay. Rather, a strategy of argument must determine an essay's structure. **A strong essay must proceed logically, developing the implications of its thesis more deeply as the essay progresses**. The reader should understand how each new section extends the argument that has come before and prepares for the argument that is still to come. **Reflective sentences at moments of transition often guide** this review/preview; similarly, the introduction of a well-structured essay frequently provides the reader with some indication of the strategy of argument.

Style

Because **style is a personal matter of taste**, no single style defines what is appropriate for an academic essay. Nonetheless, stylistic concerns can make all of the difference, either compelling your reader to agree with, or at least respect, your argument, or providing him/her with ammunition to undermine and deflate your own claims. To ensure the former, **your style must, above all, exert control over your reader so that s/he follows your progression of thought**. Your writing must steer your reader by keeping him/her on a short leash. Your writing must resolve your reader's questions as they arise; **if it gives rise to questions that are not addressed and resolved, your essay loses its force—thereby losing your reader**. To work on these things, you must put yourself in your reader's shoes as you write: you **know what you mean to say, but have you really expressed your meaning clearly?** All too often what seems clear to you as an author might in actuality be very confusing to your reader! **This is why feedback is so important**. Have a friend read your essay, or peer edit your writing. **Clarity is the key, and concision (i.e., being concise!) is the key to clarity**. If you can state your thought more simply and more directly it will usually be clearer to your reader, too. Another imperative: carefully use and control your terms. Select them with care (evoke different terms for different shades of meaning), define them with care (as needed), and respect their meaning (use them consistently). Your thesis, evidence, analysis, and reflection are all anchored by terms that you must command with complete control. Later-stage revision yields this control. It won't happen on its own!