

## Composition Guide

These guidelines for writing essays apply primarily to writing answers to essay questions on literature. Most of the principles discussed, however, apply equally to essay answers in other courses and to long essays, whether written for English courses or for courses in other departments.

### The Title

Although your instructor may not require a title for an essay written as an hour test, you must have a title for an essay written out of class. The title must be inviting and informative. Avoid dull and vague titles (An Analysis of *The Iliad* or Hamlet's Character). Instead use title which give your reader a clear idea of your subject (The Role of the Gods in *The Iliad* or Hamlet as a Tragic Hero). A title should not be a complete sentence, and it should not end with a period. You should, in fact, ordinarily avoid titles which require question marks or exclamation marks. Do not underline your own title or place it in quotation marks. If your title includes the title of a novel, play, or long poem, that title within your own title should be underlined or in italics; if your title includes the title of a short story or short poem, the title of the story or poem should be placed in quotation marks.

### The Introductory Paragraph

Your essay must begin with a good introductory paragraph. Such a paragraph must consist of at least three, and usually more, closely related sentences which clearly introduce your subject and which deal with the subject of the essay. You must avoid such statements as "Virgil is one of the world's greatest writers" (no short college essay could possibly treat that subject, and most college students are not so well-read in world literature as to be competent to make that statement, anyway) or "Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564" (you aren't going to be writing a biography of Shakespeare, after all). Everything in your introduction must clearly introduce the subject of the essay and not appear to be irrelevant to that subject. Include in these sentences facts that are relevant to your subject or give a view which opposes your position plus some evidence which you plan to develop fully later.

The introductory paragraph must also include the name of the author and the title of the work on which you are writing. If, as may happen on the final examination, you are writing on several works by several authors so that listing all of them may be cumbersome, you may mention only the authors' names in your introduction.

One of the sentences in your introduction must be a THESIS SENTENCE or THESIS STATEMENT (i.e., the central purpose or the controlling idea or assertion in your essay, a statement of what you intend to prove). The thesis sentence helps you decide what must be included in your essay and what must be omitted. Unless an essay has a thesis, it has no purpose for being. If you are unable to state your controlling idea in a single sentence, you are not ready to write your essay.

The thesis statement is not an announcement that you are going to say something ("I am going to write on the character of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*"). Nor is it a vague assertion about a broad topic ("In his adventures Odysseus displays several important virtues"). The problem in this last example is that the reader is not told what specific virtues you have in mind. Your thesis must be a concrete statement in which you set forth an assertion in a single, uncomplicated sentence ("Homer characterizes Odysseus as the ideal Greek king"). Since most essays are written to support your opinion, it might be helpful to think of the thesis as an arguable statement—one that someone may take exception to or argue about. At the very least, the thesis must make a point that calls for support.

Finally, the introductory paragraph must indicate the order of your argument to show how and in what order you will present evidence to support your thesis. If the purpose of the essay is to prove that Odysseus is a heroic figure, the thesis should simply read, "Odysseus is clearly a heroic figure." In another sentence you need to indicate the kinds of evidence you intend to cite and the order in which that evidence is to be presented (e.g., "Odysseus's heroic qualities include courage, cunning, and loyalty to family"). If your subject is an especially complicated one, you may not be able to indicate the order in a single sentence, and you should not try to do so if that sentence becomes unduly complicated. In such cases you should feel free to indicate the order of your essay in several sentences.

In any case, readers of your essay must know by the time they finish reading your introductory paragraph (1) the author and the title of the work on which you are writing, (2) your thesis statement—i.e., the point that you are making, and (3) the way in which you are going to organize the body of your essay. An introduction which does not make these matters clear is inadequate.

Study the sample introductory paragraph below and the analysis of the introduction which follows it.

Modern readers are often disturbed by the self-centeredness of Achilles, the hero of Homer's *The Iliad*. Achilles not only withdraws from battle and refuses to support his Greek comrades because of injured pride, but he even hopes that the Trojan enemies will defeat his fellow Greeks. Nevertheless, Homer means for us to see Achilles as an admirable, heroic figure. Homer clearly saw him as the greatest of the warriors at Troy because Achilles has the quality of excellence that was sought after by all Mycenaean heroes. To Homer this quality, commonly known as *arete*, included excellence in all the ways a man could be excellent: physical excellence, moral excellence, and intellectual excellence.

This paragraph contains all of the elements which a good introduction must have. It includes the name of the author and the title of the work on which the essay is being written (Homer's *The Iliad*.) The five sentences in the introduction are clearly related. The first notes that modern readers may not find Achilles to be very heroic (a position which the essay itself will seek to refute). The second sentence gives some evidence to

support the modern view that Achilles is not very heroic. The next sentence, introduced by that important word *nevertheless*, states the thesis—that despite what we moderns may think, Homer intends for his readers to regard Achilles as a hero. The next sentence explains briefly why Homer regarded Achilles as a hero—he possesses qualities of excellence admired by Homer and his contemporaries. The final sentence is more specific in listing the categories of excellence which the ancient Greeks prized, and the sentence indicates the order in which these categories will be taken up in the body of the essay. Based on the final sentence of the paragraph, the reader can expect to find one paragraph which will deal with physical excellence, a second on moral excellence, and a final paragraph on intellectual excellence.

### **The Body of the Essay**

The introductory paragraph will be followed by developmental paragraphs which make up the body of the essay. Many essay questions which you will be asked to answer lend themselves to organization in three parts. In the sample introductory paragraph above, the writer clearly intends to divide the body of the essay into three parts. Sometimes on hour tests you may be given a subject which can best be divided into two developmental paragraphs; sometimes you may prefer to organize in four or, especially on a final examination, more than four paragraphs.

Each developmental paragraph must include a topic sentence, which is often the first sentence in the paragraph. The topic sentence is to the paragraph what the thesis sentence is to the essay as a whole—it is the controlling idea that determines what can be placed in a paragraph and what cannot be placed in the paragraph. The topic sentence must be a generalization, never a narrative detail. If you were writing on Odysseus as an ideal Greek hero, your plan might be to emphasize such admirable qualities as Odysseus' courage, his physical strength, and his devotion to his country. Your topic sentence for the first developmental paragraph might read, "Examples of Odysseus' courage are found in nearly every book in which Odysseus appears." The rest of your paragraph would cite specific examples of his courage. You would not include in that paragraph examples of his strength or of his devotion to his country. To do so would be to violate the concept of unity.

Unity is achieved when a writer develops the topic sentence and does not deviate from it. If you digress, you merely confuse your reader. The topic sentence can help you maintain unity if you keep asking yourself if the example you are citing really is an example of your topic sentence.

Problems with unity sometimes come about when the writer summarizes the plot of a work excessively. Remember that an essay on literature is not a plot summary! You must be able to summarize mentally the plot of a work so that you can draw illustrations from your mental summary. You must not include in your essay details of plot summary which merely lead up to an example but which do not themselves include an example. Study the very poor paragraph below. The first sentence, which has been underlined, is the topic sentence.

Orgon's interest in Tartuffe is obviously excessive because it prevents Orgon from taking an interest in anyone else. Upon returning home after a brief absence, Orgon inquires into the health of the members of his household. Dorine, the maid, reports that Orgon's wife, Elmire, has been ill, and she describes the symptoms of Elmire's illness. But Orgon takes no interest in his wife's condition and interrupts Dorine to ask about Tartuffe. Each time Dorine mentions Elmire's health, Orgon interrupts to ask about Tartuffe. It is obvious that Orgon's interest in Tartuffe is excessive because it prevents him from taking as interest in the health of his wife.

There are at least three problems with the paragraph. First of all, the first two sentences which follow the topic sentence do not illustrate the topic sentence but merely lead up the third sentence, which does illustrate the topic sentence. In fact, the first sentence following the topic sentence seems to contradict the topic sentence. The two sentences provide too much plot summary and--because they do not directly illustrate the topic--violate the principles of unity; they are digressions. The two sentences which follow the topic sentence should have been subordinated and made a part of the third sentence. Second, the paragraph lacks adequate substance. The illustration is limited to a single incident, and it is not treated vividly and fully. Finally, the last sentence of the paragraph repeats the topic sentence. Remember that a paragraph should contain one generalization (which must be stated in the topic sentence) and it must not be repeated. Every sentence which follows the topic sentence must develop the topic sentence. You can easily test the unity of your paragraph by looking critically at every sentence to see if each one does indeed illustrate the topic sentence. Study the revised version below of the paragraph on Tartuffe.

Orgon's interest in Tartuffe is obviously excessive because it prevents Orgon from taking an interest in anyone else. When, upon returning home after a brief absence, Orgon inquires into the health of the members of his household and learns from the maid, Dorine, that Orgon's wife, Elmire, has been ill, Orgon interrupts to ask about Tartuffe. When Dorine goes on to report that Elmire's headache was so severe that Elmire could not eat her dinner, Orgon again interrupts to ask, "And Tartuffe?" Even when Dorine explains that Elmire had to undergo bloodletting to cure her headache, Orgon shows no concern and again inquires about Tartuffe's health. Orgon later shows the same indifference toward his daughter, Mariane, when he insists that she break off her engagement to Valere, the man whom she loves, and marry Tartuffe instead. Finally, Orgon shows his excessive admiration for Tartuffe when, upon becoming angry with his son, Damis, Orgon disinherits Damis and names Tartuffe as his heir.

In the revision above, every sentence illustrates the topic sentence. Moreover, while one incident is treated in some detail in three sentences, the two other examples from other scenes in the play are briefly cited to show that the point made in the topic sentence is not limited to an isolated situation. Note, too, that the paragraph illustrates proportion in that the best example--the scenes dealing with Orgon's return home--is treated in some detail while the other two scenes are treated in a single sentence each. Go back now and read

the revision again, noting how every sentence that follows the topic sentence contains an example of the point that the topic sentence makes. The paragraph is well unified. Be careful to avoid the temptation to use the work on which you are writing as the means to moralize. An interpretation of a work of literature should deal with the work and what the author of the work is seeking to do. If you include your own moral, political, or social views, you violate the unity of the paragraph just as surely as you would if you summarize parts of the plot which have no bearing on the topic sentence.

### **Substance**

A good developmental paragraph must have ample substance. Substance consists of the specific examples from the work which you cite in support of your thesis sentence and of the topic sentence of each paragraph. The revised version of the paragraph on Tartuffe has sufficient substance to prove the point made in the topic sentence. There are, in fact, five specific examples of Orgon's indifference to the members of his family because of his excessive interest in Tartuffe. Never have fewer than two very good examples in a paragraph; usually you will need to have more than two examples in order to persuade your reader that the assertions made in your thesis statement and in your topic sentence are accurate and can be supported by persuasive evidence. If you cite but one example or two weak ones, the reader will not be persuaded.

Good substance depends on more than the number of examples you cite. Your examples must be fully developed so that your paragraph won't read like a list or an outline. Remember your readers. You should assume that they have read the work on which you are writing, but you should not assume that they have read the work recently. It is important, therefore, to develop your examples with enough detail so that your readers can recall them. You should also include enough of the context so that readers can remember roughly where the incident or speech to which you are referring occurs. Quoting a key word, phrase, or larger element is an effective way to achieve good substance.

Read the paragraph below. It illustrates what too often happens when substance is not fully developed.

Zeus' anthropomorphic nature is clearly seen on those occasions when Zeus threatens physical violence to those who oppose him. At one point Zeus angrily tells Hera that she can do nothing about his pledge to help Achilles and that the other gods on Mt. Olympus are not strong enough to save her from his violence. Later Hera is again threatened when Zeus realizes that Hector has been wounded because of Hera. Zeus's most violent threat is made to any god or goddess who might consider opposing him by interfering in the course of the war. Such an offender, he says, will be severely punished.

The paragraph has a clear topic sentence and three examples. But the examples are not developed fully enough for someone who has not read *The Iliad* recently to be able to remember the scenes described or to remember the context in which the threats were

made. The first example is introduced with the phrase "At one point." That phrase is too vague. Actually, the example is taken from the first book of *The Iliad*; it would be better to write, "In Book I, Zeus angrily tells Hera. . . ." If you cannot remember which book (or chapter in a novel or act of a play) your example comes from, at least give some details about the context to help your reader recall the scene. The second example ("Later Hera is again threatened when Zeus realizes that Hector has been wounded because of Hera") hardly counts as an example at all. We are not told with what violence she is threatened, and we don't really understand why Hera is responsible for Hector's death. The reader of your paper will naturally want to be reminded with what Hera is being threatened and why she should be punished. It is the responsibility of the writer to provide answers to such questions. The final example ("Zeus's most violent threat . . .") provides neither the context in which the threat is ordered (a truce has been arranged between the Greeks and Trojans) nor an explanation for what the writer of the paper means by "severely punished." Be specific. Be concrete. Remember that to be persuasive, you must make clear to your reader that you know the details of the work. Don't just tell your readers something; show them what you mean with specific, concrete examples, details, and explanations.

The paragraph below is a revision of the paragraph above. Study it carefully and notice how it conveys much more information to the reader.

Zeus's anthropomorphic nature is clearly seen on those occasions when Zeus threatens violence to those who oppose him. When near the beginning of the epic Hera learns that Zeus has promised Thetis that he will help Achilles and chides Zeus for his promise, Zeus angrily tells Hera that all the gods on Mt. Olympus will not be strong enough to save her from his wrath if she interferes with his will. She is again threatened with his violence when Zeus discovers that, despite his earlier warning, Hera has continued to interfere with in the war and that Hector has been wounded because Hera diverted Zeus's attention. Calling her "mischiefmaker," Zeus reminds Hera how he punished her on an earlier occasion for disobeying him by hanging her by gold chains in the clouds with anvils fastened to her feet, and he threatens to thrash her if she continues to oppose him. Zeus's most violent threat is made during a truce between the Greeks and Trojans. That threat is addressed not only to Hera but also to any god or goddess who even considers interfering in the course of the war: He promises to beat such offenders severely or to hurl them into Hades.

The revised paragraph solves the more serious problems found in the original. Following the topic sentence, the writer introduces the first example by telling us something fairly specific about where that example comes from ("near the beginning of the epic"). That phrase is certainly more helpful than the "At one point" of the original draft. And the example itself is fuller; we are told that Zeus uttered his threat because Hera was angry because of his promise to help Thetis' son, Achilles. The second example is introduced with a reminder of the context in which Zeus's threat is made: Zeus has discovered that Hera, ignoring his warning not to interfere, has diverted his attention with the result that Hector has been wounded. Zeus's violent nature is made even more vivid by Zeus's

reminder of an earlier event in which he had punished Hera by hanging her in the clouds with anvils tied to her feet and by his latest threat to thrash her unless she stops interfering with the war. Compare the original ("Later Hera is again threatened when Zeus realizes that Hector has been wounded because of Hera") with the revision. The revision is obviously more detailed and informative. The revision is an example of good substance. The final example in the revision, too, is much more specific than the original. In the original version, the reader is told only that offenders "will be severely punished." In the revision, we are told that they will be punished by a severe beating or by being sent to Hades.

### **Organizing the Developmental Paragraphs**

Organization means orderly arrangement. In a well-organized paragraph the details used to substantiate the topic sentence are presented in an orderly sequence of sentences. The arrangement of sentences will largely depend upon the type of composition you are writing.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of order that may be used in the paragraph: Natural Order and Logical Order. If you arrange your sentences in natural order, you are following an order that seems to you to be inherent in the subject about which you are writing. Paragraphs of description and narration often follow natural order. Writers of descriptive paragraphs, for example, may present details seen from left to right or from top to bottom. Writers of narrative paragraphs frequently present details in the order of their occurrence; that is, they will use chronological order. Logical order is order which is determined by the writer's analysis of the subject. Such order is determined by the writer's reason. The writer must consciously will it, even force it upon the subject. It is not based on an order (either spatial or chronological) that seems inherent in the subject.

Examine the paragraph on Zeus's anthropomorphic nature. Notice that the arrangement here is logical. The writer has violated chronological order in so as to be able to place what seems to be the strongest bit of supporting evidence in the post prominent place in the paragraph--the final sentence. That evidence (that Zeus threatens not only Hera but also all the gods and goddesses) actually comes in Book Eight of *The Iliad*, long before the threat made in Book Fifteen, which is used as the second example. The writer has wisely cited the most effective example last. To have placed it earlier would have made any examples which followed it seem anticlimactic. In the case of the revised paragraph on Tartuffe earlier, chronological order was used because the first example cited--Orgon's return from a trip--deals with Orgon's first appearance in the play. That example establishes Orgon's blind devotion to Tartuffe from the first time the audience sees Orgon. Notice that in the model on Zeus's anthropomorphic nature there is movement from the general to the specific. The topic sentence, which is a generalization about one aspect of Zeus's anthropomorphic nature, is followed by three references to specific examples of Zeus's threats of violence in *The Iliad*.

## Organizing the Essay

Just as the individual paragraphs which make up an essay must be carefully organized to be persuasive, so, too, does the essay itself have to be organized in order to be coherent and persuasive. You need to keep your thesis sentence in mind throughout and to remember to select details from the plot to support that thesis but not to include anything which does not directly support the thesis. You need to think about all of the evidence which supports the thesis and to organize that evidence into logical categories. The categories will form the individual developmental paragraphs. These categories should be made clear to the reader in the introductory paragraph, and they will form the basis of the topic sentences in the developmental paragraphs.

The outline below should help you understand the principles of organizing an essay.

Title

Introductory paragraph	Includes 1. name of author and title of work being written on [when several works are involved, instructor may not require all authors and titles] 2. thesis statement 3. two, three, or more ideas or categories which will develop the thesis in the body paragraphs
Body of the Essay (three or more paragraphs of documentation as needed)	Topic sentence about one of the ideas or categories mentioned in the introductory paragraph. 1. specific detail (speech or action that supports the point) 2. specific detail (speech or action that supports the point) 3. specific detail (speech or action that supports the point) 4. continue with details as needed

Remember that the number of developmental paragraphs in your essay will depend on the way in which you organize your material. Frequently the essay question will lend itself to organizing into a four-paragraph essay (introductory paragraph plus three developmental paragraphs); sometimes the most logical method will result in a three-paragraph essay (introductory paragraph plus two very full developmental paragraphs). Consult your professor about a concluding paragraph.

### Special Problems Regarding the Organization of an Essay

The organization of an essay should not pose any particular problems when you are writing on such subjects as the anthropomorphic nature of Zeus, the qualities of an ideal hero such as Achilles, or any other subject about a single figure. A problem may occur when you write about more than one character or when you are writing about more than one work, such as occurs if you are required to compare two or more characters or works



or to contrast several figures or works. You may be tempted to devote a single paragraph to one figure, a second to another, and a third to still another; or, if you are writing an essay on more than one work, you may be tempted to treat one work in one paragraph and to treat another work in another paragraph. Such paragraphs rarely exhibit coherence. All you do is to write what you have to say about one character (or work) before you move on to write what you have to say about another character (or work). Although a skilled writer, using enough transitions and references, may be successful in treating figures or works separately, most writers fail because they lose the thread that should be tying their analyses of characters or works together.

If you are called upon to deal with several characters or works in an essay, you should find topics which will allow you to deal with several characters or works in the same paragraph. If, for example, you were writing an essay comparing villains in Shakespeare's plays, you would first need to decide which villains you want to treat; you would then need to decide what three or four qualities these villains have in common, and you would use each quality as the basis for a topic sentence. In each paragraph, then, you would deal with a particular quality and then treat each of the villains in such a way as to show how each demonstrates that quality. Finally, you would have to think carefully about your material in order to devise some logical pattern of development that would give the essay coherence.

Let us say, for example, that you have decided to write on such Shakespearean villains as King Richard in *Richard III*, Edmund in *King Lear*, and Iago in *Othello*. You would first have to consider what these characters do and say in their respective plays in order to determine what attitudes or qualities you see that these three have in common. You would certainly notice that all three sense that they have been wronged, either by circumstances beyond their control or by other people. You might then begin a developmental paragraph with the following topic sentence: "Each of the three believes that he has been injured, either by nature or by some individual." In the sentences that follow, you would then cite and develop such examples as King Richard's physical deformity, Edmund's illegitimacy, and Iago's being unfairly passed over for promotion in Othello's army.

You might then move on to note that these three villains are extremely ambitious. You might, therefore, begin another developmental paragraph by writing, "All three figures are ambitious to improve their positions in society." The sentences that follow that topic sentence would explain what each figure seeks to achieve. You might then go on to notice that none of these characters have any scruples at all about hurting others, and you might then begin your next developmental paragraph by writing, "In their attempts to achieve their goals, the three villains make clear that they are altogether unconcerned about the suffering they may cause others." That paragraph should illustrate how each character is indifferent to those whom he injures.

You would no doubt develop and emphasize throughout your essay a logical pattern of coherence: (1) their villainy begins within themselves with a belief that each is in some way a victim; (2) because of this belief, they feel a need to prove themselves superior to

others; and finally (3) they are so committed to proving themselves that they are indifferent to the harm they do to others. Some of the best writers make such patterns of coherence clear in their introductory paragraphs.

### **Transition**

A paragraph may have substance and unity and still not be completely effective if transition within the paragraph and transitions between paragraphs are not properly handled. Transition means passing over from one stage of development to another. Transition involves logical movement and development within the paragraph and from one paragraph to another. This movement and development are effective when sentences lead naturally from one to another and when each sentence refers naturally to the preceding one.

Often the close connection of thought in a paragraph will ensure proper transition. But the writer must often use transitional devices in order to obtain effective transitions. In the revised paragraph about the anthropomorphic nature of Zeus, smooth transition has been achieved by repetition. The topic sentence announces that the subject of the paragraph is Zeus's violent nature and his tendency to make angry threats. The second sentence contains the words "Zeus angrily tells Hera that all the gods on Mt. Olympus will not be strong enough to save her from his wrath. . . ." The next sentence begins, "She is again threatened with violence. . . ." The final example, which is treated in the last two sentences of the paragraph, begins, "Zeus's most violent threat. . . ." Repetition of key words or phrases can be a very effective device. However, if overused, repetition will become monotonous. When you repeat ideas, try to express them in different words.

Frequently words which have antecedents in preceding sentences or clauses can be used effectively as transitional devices. These words may be personal or demonstrative pronouns or adjectives that refer to nouns in preceding sentences or clauses. The words this, that, these, and those are the demonstratives that may be used as either adjectives or pronouns. The writer should be careful in using these words as pronouns. Each demonstrative pronoun must have a single word as its antecedent and should never refer vaguely to an action or an idea in a preceding sentence or clause.

There are several other expressions that can be used as transitional devices. These expressions may be either words or phrases that call attention to a relationship between the details in two or more sentences or which introduce another example within a paragraph. Some words that are frequently used as transitional devices include also, accordingly, afterwards, again, besides, consequently, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, moreover, nevertheless, next, otherwise, still, and therefore. Phrases used as transitions include as a result, at the same time, for instance, generally speaking, in addition to, and on the other hand. Be extremely careful about using transitional devices. Transitions should be natural and should never appear to be artificial. If you see a clear relationship between details and if you are writing effective sentences, you will probably achieve transition without making a conscious effort.

## Style

In addition to substance, unity, organization, and transitions, a paragraph or essay must be written in an effective style. Style is the manner in which ideas are expressed. Style includes such matters as diction (i.e., word choice), syntax, and sentence variety. Words should be chosen for their exactness; the sentences should be written in a natural, unaffected syntax (word order); there should be a balance of sentence types (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex). The best of ideas can be spoiled by inappropriate word choice, by artificial syntax, or by a series of simple sentences. You should train yourself to hear the sentences which you are writing mentally and to ask yourself how they would sound if they were read aloud. Avoid sentences that are awkward, wordy, ambiguous, pretentious, or artificial.

Writing that is done for college tests and papers is relatively formal. Therefore, you should avoid addressing the reader directly ("You can clearly see that Homer is a master in describing the horrors of war"), and you must avoid colloquialisms, slang, and jargon. Your writing should show that you have a good vocabulary and that you know how to use language gracefully and effectively. Good writing does not try to impress; rather, it seeks to communicate clearly. While it has some degree of sophistication, it is never pompous. The style should be that of a college-level student and not that of an eighth grader. The reader should sense that every word belongs in the paper--that each word contributes to the development of the central idea. The choice and arrangement of words should always reflect the writer's maturity in handling the language.

## Evaluation of the Essay

As soon as is humanly possible after you have turned in an essay or essay test, your instructor will read it several times, mark it, put a grade on it, and return it to you to see. The process may be painful to you, especially if you are unaccustomed to having your writing evaluated by college standards. Please accept the comments of your instructor as constructive criticism which is intended to help you do better in the future. Hard work and practice on your part and on the part of your instructor should lead to results of which you both will be proud.

Take notes on the matters that gave you problems and review them before the next test or essay so that you can benefit from the previous comments of your instructor. If after noting the comments on your paper, you still don't understand what you need to do to improve, see your instructor as soon as possible. The English faculty members assume that college students who are serious about wanting to do good work are mature enough to seek our help. We want to help all students do the best work they are capable of doing, but we assume that students who sincerely want to learn will take the initiative to get help. We also assume that students will use conference time with instructors constructively. We are not particularly interested in knowing how much better you did in high school writing classes; you are now being judged by college standards which are naturally more demanding than the standards of most high schools. And if you had a bad

background in English in your high school, complaining about that background won't help you overcome your weaknesses. Dwelling on the past or making excuses will only sap your energy and rob you of the time you need to improve. You have a chance to learn good writing habits now. Forget about the past!

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