



Before Epics Come Essays

Unit 1: Beginning Well

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Multi-paragraph Essay

The Denim Beret
writing and literature
for teens

Welcome to the second level of The Denim Beret! This course, entitled *Before Epics Come Essays* is an introduction to multi-paragraph, non-fiction writing. In it you will learn how to take an idea and develop into a beautifully crafted essay that expresses your ideas with both clarity and artistic flair.

Much of this course will be necessarily academic, focusing on skills and concepts; however, I aim to be efficient and avoid anything superfluous. You will find no busywork or enrichment activities in this course. Everything I assign is something I feel is important to your growth as a writer, and they are lessons that will serve you well for the rest of your life.

Will you learn everything you need to know about good writing in this course? No, even if you took both this course and *Before Papers Come Paragraphs*, you will still finish with a lot to learn. Becoming a writer is like becoming an actor or musician. It takes much time to practice and develop your skills, style, and artistic judgments, and there is always something new to learn. As a professional writer, I, too, must keep learning and growing. With writing there is no ceiling for us to reach. Instead, there is something better than reaching a summit. New and often exciting paths always wait to be explored, each of which takes us deeper into the art of writing.

Let's begin lesson 1 now. Before you begin any lesson in this course, always read the box that precedes it to help you prepare. Do that now, and then you may read the lesson.

Supplies: "Hourglass Writing Model," "Stretch Your Paragraph into an Essay," and "Low Self-Esteem"; colored pencils

Goal: to establish a clear understanding of the structure of a multi-paragraph essay

Suggested Time: 2 sessions

Note: See the course syllabus for instructions on how to prepare the writing notebook you will need for this course.

SESSION 1

Quote of the Day

“Don't write to produce writing. Write to produce reading.”—Avi, children's book author and Newbery award winner

Warm-up

Beginning with lesson 2, each lesson in *Before Epics Come Essays* will be introduced with a journal exercise, which is a common activity of professional and amateur writers alike. Journal exercises are unrestricted opportunities to write without fear of criticism. In fact, no one even needs to read your journal exercises besides you. Taking time for unrestricted writing like this helps to keep the writer at ease with language and with expressing thoughts. This, in turn, can help keep the writer's creativity and unique voice flowing and natural when working on more difficult, structured writing projects.

For your journal exercises you will be given three choices, and your entry should ideally take you 10-15 minutes. Aim for a *minimum* of six (6) sentences in each entry. Your parent will confirm with me periodically that your journal exercises are complete and given a reasonable effort, and then I will give you a grade based on that feedback.

At the end of each unit, you will write an *ungraded* timed essay instead of a journal entry. These timed essays will be a casual way to practice the skill of writing an entire essay within a set amount of time. Your prompts will be similar to those for journal exercises, until later in the course when it is time to prepare for the more challenging prompts you will face on graded exams in future courses. By the time you take one of these tests, you will be more comfortable with the pressures inherent in timed writing.

You will need your writing notebook for all journal entries, and each entry should begin on a fresh page with the date and your choice recorded at the top.

Introduction

In the coming years you will be required to write many types of papers, mostly for school but possibly for other reasons, too. For example, if you choose to go to college, your entrance applications and exams may include essay sections. Your future career may require you to put your writing skills to use, as well, if your job requires tasks such as preparing business presentations, producing publications, or writing grant proposals. To get a sense of the wide variety of writing

tasks you may complete during your lifetime, consider this list of essay forms and types. And these are only a sampling!

- personal opinion
- cause-effect
- summary
- compare-contrast
- literary analysis
- research paper
- lab reports
- book reviews
- editorials
- persuasive
- argumentative
- personal narrative
- timed
- college entrance
- process/how-to
- expository
- classification
- descriptive definition
- business letter
- memos

When projects like these arise, you'll want to be comfortable with writing multi-paragraph papers. This means you need a lot of practice in order to master the writing process and to develop your own writing voice. Being able to write well also requires a mastery of the basic structures underlying various types of papers, as well as conventions of good style.

Because structure is so central in this course, I want to add a little more about that. Don't underestimate the importance of solid structure in writing. Style and content are indeed important, as you will see as you proceed through the course, but without solid structure your paper will be like a poorly-built house. A house may be beautiful in every way—big windows, polished floors, intricate wood carvings, strong doors, and so on—but if the foundation or frame is weak, the whole house will be weak. Compositions are no different. They, too, need a solid structure to undergird the statements, examples, details, arguments, and anecdotes that writers use to convey their ideas.

Structures vary with different types of papers, and there are many different types, as I showed you in the list above. They do, however, boil down to four basic types: expository (explanation), narrative, descriptive, and persuasive. In this course you will master what I call the "basic" essay, which is the simplest form of the expository essay structure. From there you will be able to expand quickly to any other kind of essay.

Lesson, part 1: The Accordion Essay

In *Before Papers Come Paragraphs*, I discussed the concept of the "accordion paragraph," a concept developed by educator Maureen Auman to teach her

students about the flexibility of paragraphs. I showed how we can take a simple, three-sentence paragraph and expand it into a well-developed paragraph of 6, 8, or even more sentences, just by adding more support, details, and maybe a hook. Likewise, if you have a long paragraph that you need to shorten, you can often remove one or more of these elements, while still preserving the basic idea of the paragraph.

In this way writers are like accordion players, who expand and contract their instrument as needed to make their music. Multi-paragraph essays work the same way. They are simply single-paragraph essays pulled out like an accordion as far as the writer needs to go. The writer expands the single-paragraph essay into a multi-paragraph essay by adding so much support and detail that the paragraph needs to be divided into more paragraphs. You can see what I mean in the following handout:

STOP and open the document, “Stretch Your Paragraph into an Essay.” Read the handout.

Note that it was necessary to break the paragraph into more paragraphs, because having too many sentences in a single paragraph is both hard on the eyes and difficult to follow. Paragraph divisions help readers receive the writer's ideas and information without feeling overwhelmed.

Lesson, part 2: The Hourglass Model

Now that you understand how a paragraph becomes a multi-paragraph essay, let's focus on the general structure of an essay. Before you continue, you will need the handout entitled “Hourglass Writing Model.”

STOP and open the “Hourglass Writing Model.” You will need to refer to it as you read the following section, so it may be easiest to print a copy.

As the title of the handout indicates, the structure of the basic essay looks very much like an hourglass (a kind of primitive timer). Hourglasses have two wide bulbs and one narrow shaft, and these compare to the parts of an essay. Note that when I use the term “basic essay,” I mean an essay that follows the most common structure.

In an essay the top “bulb” is the introduction. This is where the writer indicates in broad terms what the essay will be about. The parts of an introduction include the hook (an interesting beginning), thesis statement (main idea), and maybe a projected plan (what I call an “outline statement”). In a basic essay, the hook is at the widest part of the bulb, because it begins the

essay with a broad, general statement or two. It “narrows” into the thesis statement because the thesis statement is the most specific, most important part of the entire paper.

The “shaft” in an hourglass is what we call the “body” in an essay. This is where the writer defends or explains the thesis statement, providing support and examples for it. Unlike the “bulb” above it, which should be kept to a single paragraph, the “shaft,” or “body,” can vary in length. It can range from one to many paragraphs.

At the end of the shaft, the hourglass widens into a bulb again, where the structure of the top bulb is reversed. In a basic essay the narrowest part of the bottom bulb is where the author leads us back to the thesis statement by echoing it in some way. As the bulb expands, the writer makes closing statements through broader statements that summarize, challenge, surprise, persuade, or otherwise wrap up the essay.

Before I conclude the explanation of the model, I need to draw your attention to something that you might easily miss. If you compare the top and bottom of the hourglass, you will notice that the two bulbs are equal in size. While you are learning, I suggest that you try to make your conclusion balance in length with your introduction. This does *not* mean that you need the same number of sentences in these paragraphs. All it means is that you should aim to make them *similar* in length. A long introduction and an abrupt conclusion—or vice versa—throw your essay out of balance and can create a sense of disorder for your reader. When you are a more experienced writer, you do not need to follow this rule but should instead use your judgment about what would work best for your essay.

You will find, by the way, that most rules of composition can be broken with great effectiveness in the hands of a masterful writer. Always keep in mind that everything I teach you in The Denim Beret writing courses is designed to lay a foundation of skills on which you can build your own style and voice as a writer. You are not learning a science, remember, but an art, which means that you, too, can break rules once you are a skilled writer. While an art has many principles that can help an artist create excellent work and appreciate the work of others, the principles always serve the artist, not the other way around.

Lesson, part 3: The Hourglass Model in Practice

Now that we have studied the hourglass model diagram, let's compare it to a real essay. You may notice that this example follows the typical, five-paragraph format you have may have heard about in your school studies, but this is only a model. For an essay to fit the hourglass model, the number of paragraphs doesn't matter, only the overall structure. In fact, in the real world, the “five-paragraph essay” doesn't exist as an essay form.

STOP and print the handout entitled “Low Self-Esteem.” Then take out your colored pencils and follow the instructions below:

Analyzing the Hourglass Essay

For the following instructions, use **green**:

1. Write the word “Introduction” in the margin next to paragraph 1.
2. Draw a box around the second sentence in paragraph 1 (begins with “People...”). This sentence is the thesis statement (main idea) of the entire essay. It represents the narrow part of the bulb. This sentence is *the most important sentence in the entire essay*. All other sentences in the essay should directly relate to it.
3. Underline sentence 1 in paragraph 1. This is the hook the author uses to grab the reader’s attention.
4. Write the word “Conclusion” in the margin next to paragraph 5.
5. Draw a box around sentence 1 in paragraph 5. This sentence echoes the thesis statement.
6. Underline sentence 2 in paragraph 5. It is the opposite of the hook that you underlined in paragraph 1, because it is designed to wrap up the ideas and information discussed in the paper.

For the following instructions, use **yellow** and **orange**:

1. The three remaining paragraphs are the essay’s body. Each paragraph discusses a single point that defends the thesis statement. With your yellow colored pencil, underline the first sentence of each body paragraph. These topic sentences are the core of the body. The remaining sentences in each paragraph explain the topic sentences and provide further details.
2. With your orange pencil, circle the word(s) in each paragraph that help transition the reader into the next point the author wants to discuss. You will find them at or near the beginning of the paragraph, *as well as* within the paragraph.

STOP. Scan and share the finished exercise.

Conclusion

By giving you a visual model of the basic essay, I hope that you find your study of each of its parts a little bit easier to grasp. In the coming lessons we will take a look at each part in depth, and you will have opportunities to apply what you learn by writing “basic” essays. Once you can write a strong, well-structured basic essay, you will be able to write essays of any length or form.

SESSION 2

Complete the worksheet for Lesson 1.