
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION

and

LESSON 1:

INTRODUCTION TO THE MULTI-PARAGRAPH ESSAY

Supplies: “Hourglass Writing Model,” “Kinds of Essays,” “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: 3 sessions

SESSION 1

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.

Out of necessity much of this course will be academic, focusing on skills and concepts that may seem to you like I am preparing you only for papers that you will write for future classes. In reality, though, the skills you will learn in this course are ones that all writers need to master. It doesn't matter what purpose or audience you are writing for; these lessons will serve you well for the rest of your life in all writing situations.

It is true that the writing teachers typically want usually looks very different from professional writing. In fact, many non-fiction articles, essays, and even books that you

might consider good writing wouldn't pass muster with some teachers, because they don't meet certain criteria that teachers ask for. The most important example is the five-paragraph essay. Most schools require their students to learn how to write a good, solid, well-supported, well-developed "five-paragraph essay." The fact is, however, this type of essay doesn't exist outside of school. It is a formula that students learn to help them master basic skills; it is not one that professionals use.

Because I seek to prepare you for real-world writing, whether it is literary, technical, or anything in-between, you will not learn the five-paragraph essay in this course. But you *will* be able to write one, if required. You will learn the foundational skills that allow you to create any type of writing of any length and style. My goal is that when you finish this course, you will be able to approach any writing project with confidence, if not enthusiasm.

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 a track star. 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 and helps us grow.

One final note before we begin...this course has a literary component that will require you to purchase one book: *The Seagull Reader: Essays*, by Joseph Kelly. You will need this beginning with the first lesson of unit 4. Until then, you will need your writing notebook (the same as for level 1), writing utensils, your computer, printer, and scanner.

A word about your notebook, if you did not work through the level 1 course, *Before Papers Come Paragraphs...* You will need a composition book divided into two parts. I suggest dividing it so that the first half is the front of the book labeled “Writing Exercises.” Then flip it over so that it is upside-down and the last page is now first. Label this page (again, this is now the first page of the second half of the book) “Writing Notes.” Throughout the course, you will write all warm-ups and hand-written pieces of your essays and lessons in “Writing Exercises.” In “Writing Notes” you will add notes about any rules and techniques that you learn in the lessons.

Quote of the Day

“Don’t write to produce writing. Write to produce reading.”—Avi, children’s book author and Newbery award winner (*Crispin: The Cross of Lead*)

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 free and generally unrestricted opportunities to write without fear of criticism. In fact, no one even needs to read your journal exercises, unless you wish it. 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 each time: a specific question or topic to discuss, a certain type of journal response that allows you more choice, or the option to simply free-write (writing without any guidelines at all). Journal exercises should ideally take you 10-15 minutes and be checked by your parent just to

see that you've completed them with reasonable effort (see lesson planner for more details).

At the end of each unit, you will write a timed essay instead of a journal entry. These timed essays will be a casual, simple way to practice the skill of writing an entire essay within a set amount of time. Your prompts will be like those for journal exercises, until later in the course when it is time to prepare for the more challenging prompts you will face on college entrance exams and possibly other tests. By the time you take one of these tests, you will be more comfortable with the pressures inherent in this type of 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. For today only, however, you will not be given a warm-up.

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. You can get a sense of the wide variety of writing tasks you may complete during your life by studying the handout, "Kinds of Essays," although even this long list is not complete.

STOP and open "Kinds of Essays." Read the handout, ignoring the teacher note at the top. Circle the essay types that you have already written, and place a box around those you have yet to try.

When projects like these arise, you'll want to be comfortable with writing multi-paragraph papers. This means you need a lot of practice to master the writing process and to develop your own writing style, as I discussed in an earlier lesson. These skills aren't all, though. Being able to write well also requires a mastery of the basic structures underlying various types of papers.

Don't underestimate the importance of solid structure in writing. Style and content are indeed important and will be a big part of *Before Epics Come Essays*, but without good structure your paper will be like a poorly-built house (an image I introduced in *Before Papers Come Paragraphs*). 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, support, arguments, and anecdotes that writers use to convey their ideas. The basic structure of your paper as a whole is like the foundation of a house, and the structure of the individual paragraphs—with their topic sentences, transitions, and so on—is like its frame.

Structures vary with different types of papers, but all non-narrative papers* (such as comparison/contrast and persuasive essays) are based on the structure of the “expository” essay, or what I like call the “basic essay.” This is the type of structure you will master in this unit, but before we tackle it, you may find it helpful to understand exactly what you are doing when you expand your horizons to multi-paragraph papers.

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

*narrative= story or account of events

students about the flexibility of paragraphs. I showed you 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, detail, and explanation that the paragraph needs to be divided into more paragraphs. You can see what I mean in one of the handouts you should have received.

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

In these models you can see how a paragraph can be expanded from a well-developed paragraph to a well-developed, multi-paragraph essay simply by adding more detail and a full introduction and conclusion. 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.

If you tend to write too little in your essays, keep in mind that there is almost always more you can say about a topic by getting more specific in your body and by adding on to your introduction and conclusion. Likewise, if you struggle with limiting yourself to a certain length, you can almost always just remove sentences, as long as they aren’t essential. But what if they are essential, and your essay is still too long? Then it is time to combine ideas, generalize, and use words more efficiently. It’s not

easy, but the truth is that a piece of writing can almost always be condensed or expanded through careful and skillful revision.

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. I do *not* mean the essay that is most correct, since essay structure can vary a great deal.

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), projected plan (a hint about what the essay will cover). Every essay is different, though, so they won't always contain all of these parts. 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 (and maybe a projected plan) 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 the where the writer expands on the thesis statement, providing support and examples for it. Unlike the "bulb" above it, which should be kept to a single paragraph in most

essays, the “shaft,” or “body,” can vary in length. It can range from one to many paragraphs.

At the end of the shaft of the hourglass, the paper funnels into a wide 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 in some way, perhaps restating it in different words or making hints to remind the reader of where we began. As the bulb expands, the writer makes closing statements about that thesis through broader statements that summarize, challenge, surprise, persuade, or otherwise clinch the essay in some way.

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. For example, I recall reading an essay once where the introduction was of average length, but the conclusion could have hardly been shorter. It was only about a dozen words! Yet it worked well, because the writer had developed the skills that enabled him to see that breaking the rules that time would help his essay end on a powerful note. 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! 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.

END OF SAMPLE