

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING

All effective writing, whether in a book, an essay, or a report, displays four characteristics: *unity*, *coherence*, *emphasis*, and *development*.*

To Achieve Unity, Compose a Central Idea, and State It Early. Without a central idea, you have no basis for making your composition effective. A central idea provides control over what to include in the composition and what to exclude, where to begin and where to end, and what arrangement of thoughts is best. If it is to provide this guidance, the central idea should be clear to you *before you begin writing*. It saves no time to rush headlong into a composition expecting to find an idea somewhere along the way and then, half an hour later, after much head scratching and eyebrow furrowing, to decide that you are hopelessly lost or at a dead end. Never assume you know what you want to say. Put it down in a clear sentence or two; change it several times, if necessary, to be sure it is what you want to say; and refer back to it for direction while you are writing.

To Achieve Coherence, Choose a Recognizable Pattern of Organization and Follow It. Immature writers have the idea that the world is waiting breathlessly to hear from them. Their attitude is “if the readers have trouble figuring out my meaning, let them struggle to do so; my thoughts are worth the effort.” That attitude is naive. Readers of your writing will react to incoherence just as you do when you encounter it in others. In other words, they’ll think to themselves, “This person is confused; if she couldn’t make her meaning clear, I’m not going to waste my valuable time trying to figure it out.” Then they’ll cast it aside.

To avoid such a reaction and make your writing coherent, you must be sure that the order of your ideas is sensible. Whenever possible, you must also finish one idea before moving on to the next (so that your readers don’t have to jump back and forth between ideas unnecessarily) and provide helpful connecting words or phrases to signal significant shifts from one idea to another.

To Achieve Emphasis, Give Each of Your Ideas the Degree of Prominence It Deserves. There may be occasions when every idea in a composition has exactly the same degree of importance as every other. But those occasions are extremely rare. Much more often, the ideas differ significantly in their importance. To determine the relative importance of the ideas in a piece of writing, consider their exact relationship to your central idea. The larger the role they play in communicating that idea, the more important they are. Use these approaches to give greater emphasis to more important ideas.

1. Assign an important idea more space; that is, treat it in greater detail than you do other ideas.
2. Whenever possible, give important ideas the positions of greatest emphasis. The end is the most emphatic position, and the beginning is the next most

*In a very brief piece of writing—for example, a memorandum—*development* may not be necessary.

emphatic. Thus, if you had four points or arguments in the body of your composition, you'd put your most important point last, your next most important point first, and the others in the middle.

3. Repeat key words occasionally, or use echo words. The latter are words that do not repeat the key words but whose sense is similar enough to call them to mind. In a composition about love, words like *respect*, *devotion*, and *affection* would be echo words. One caution, though: both repetition and echo words must be used judiciously or they will make your composition seem inflated.

To Achieve Development, Elaborate on Important Ideas. Not every idea warrants extended treatment. To honor the principle of emphasis, be sensitive to the development necessary to elicit the response you want from your readers, and then provide that development—for example, by using cases in point, descriptions, definitions, explanations, and so on. When your purpose is to *persuade* your readers, many of your ideas may require considerable development.

A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO COMPOSITION

Planning

In this stage, you create a blueprint to follow in the writing stage. It is easier to experiment with different formats when ideas are in rough, abbreviated form than when they are fully developed in sentences and paragraphs. This is no small concern in situations (such as in the applications in this book) in which you are dealing with a large number of complex ideas and a number of different perspectives. These are the steps you should follow in planning your compositions.

1. *Assemble your ideas.* After you have completed producing and evaluating ideas, gather the material you will use in your presentation. There's no need for complete sentences here, or for concern about neatness and correctness. A list of your ideas or a collection of note pages is sufficient. This list is not a draft of your paper, just a gathering of its ingredients—that is, the results of your creative and critical thinking.
2. *Choose the arrangement.* Decide what arrangement of your ideas will be easiest for your readers to follow and most effective in persuading them. The following ways to organize ideas in a persuasive composition are among the most common. (Long or complex compositions often employ two or more of these organizational patterns.)

Conclusion-to-evidence order, in which the conclusion is presented first, followed by the evidence that supports it. This is easy to follow, saying in effect, "This is what I believe, and here is why I believe it."

Evidence-to-conclusion order, in which you lead your readers to your conclusion step-by-step. This is the preferred pattern whenever you are disputing a popular and well-entrenched view.

Cause-to-effect order, in which the causes of a phenomenon, such as the Great Depression, are discussed first and then the effects. (The reverse order, effect-to-cause, may also be used.)

Order of importance, in which the supporting arguments are presented in ascending order from the least to the most important. A variation of this is modified order of importance, in which the second most important argument is presented first, and the most important, last. This arrangement is designed to evoke both a good first impression and a good last impression from the readers.

When you have decided how you will arrange your ideas, number them accordingly, so that you can follow your plan easily when drafting the composition.

3. *Choose your introduction and conclusion.* Prepare readers for your central idea and its development. How can you do that best? Here are some effective ways to *introduce* a composition.

Ask a salient question and discuss possible answers.

Tell a brief anecdote that will illustrate the problem or issue you are addressing.

Use a quotation from a respected person, one that leads into your central idea.

Concede a point to the opposing side of the issue; in other words, cite a point that those who differ with you have made and that you agree with, and use that as a lead-in to your disagreement.

Here are some effective ways to *conclude* a composition.

Recommend an action consistent with the argument presented in the body.

Elaborate on something mentioned in your introduction; in other words, answer a question raised there or comment on an anecdote or a quotation.

Use another quotation that reinforces your central idea or a main point.

Present a new anecdote, being sure that it reinforces your central idea *but avoids raising issues not covered earlier*.

State the benefits that will result if your ideas are implemented or the harmful consequences that are likely if your ideas are not implemented.

State, briefly and stirringly, why your audience should endorse the argument you have presented.

4. *Note which ideas need support and how you will support them.* Intelligent people are persuaded not by mere statements of opinion but by the quality of the evidence supporting them. If you have examined the issue carefully and fairly, you will know which of your statements are open to question and what evidence is most relevant and compelling. (That evidence will have guided your own judgment.) Check each of your assertions and decide what evidence you have for it; then present the assertion in one or more of the following ways.

Present factual details, such as statistics.

Describe someone or something.

Offer a summary of an article or book.

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Quote or paraphrase an authority.

Trace a historical development.

Offer a brief or extended narrative of a real or hypothetical event.

Present a definition, literal or figurative.

Detail a process or procedure.

Compare or contrast, explaining similarities or differences.

Analyze causes or effects.

Evaluate someone's argument, demonstrating its strengths and/or weaknesses.

Drafting

In this stage, you carry out your composition plan and produce a rough draft. Complete the entire draft at a single sitting, with as few interruptions as possible. Choose your words as carefully as you can, write complete sentences, and break your writing into paragraphs. But do not let yourself get bogged down in doing these things. If the right word doesn't come to mind at once, write a similar word that does. If you aren't sure whether a paragraph break is appropriate, make a tentative decision. Never pause during the writing stage to look up the meaning or spelling of a word or to check some rule of usage or grammar. These are important tasks, but the time for them is later. The more carefully you follow this advice, the better the flow of your writing is likely to be.

Revising

Your purpose in this stage is to transform your rough draft into a polished composition. Begin by reading your rough draft critically, preferably aloud, since hearing plus seeing will reveal flaws more readily than will seeing by itself. Ask yourself the following questions, and make marginal notes wherever the need for revision is indicated.

How else might I express my central idea to make it even clearer? What part of it, if any, needs fuller explanation to be meaningful to my readers?

How can I improve the coherence of my composition? What rearrangement of my sentences and paragraphs would make the progression of thoughts easier to follow? Where might I add transitions (connecting words) to signal the movement from one idea to another?

Which of my ideas, if any, deserve more emphasis than I have given them? Which deserve less emphasis? What is the best way to change the emphasis?

For which ideas, if any, have I failed to provide adequate support? Which techniques will best provide that support?

Editing

Your purpose in this stage is to find and correct lapses in grammar, usage, diction, spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing. Word processor programs that check spelling and grammar are helpful, but they are no substitute for your editing.

For best results, proofread your composition not once but a number of times: one reading for errors in general, followed by separate readings for each of the errors that tend to recur in your writing. Consult a dictionary and a composition handbook, as necessary. Write your final draft.

DEVELOPING A READABLE STYLE

As a literate person, a college student, you have done considerable reading. You have encountered a variety of prose styles, some of them so awkward and difficult to follow that you have almost wished you'd never learned to read, and others that have delighted you and made you sorry to come to the end of the work. Perhaps you've concluded that writing style must be a matter of genetic endowment. There's probably some truth to the idea; after all, some people do seem to have a special talent for verbal expression, just as some have a mechanical aptitude. But writing is essentially a learned activity, so habit is more significant than heredity. If the habits you have acquired through trial and error or imitation are bad habits, you will be a poor writer. If they are good habits, you will be a good writer. Observing the following guidelines can help you build better habits.

1. *Make your writing sound natural.* Many people who write poorly speak fairly well. In fact, some are lively and interesting conversationalists. If you are such a person, you can improve your writing by making it reflect your speech. This doesn't mean, of course, all the little flaws of speaking—the *um*-ing, *ah*-ing, pausing, and repeating yourself. It means the rhythm of your speaking voice. To accomplish this, read your rough draft aloud and note passages that don't sound natural. Revise them so that you feel comfortable saying them aloud.
2. *Strive for brevity.* The idea of brevity may seem inconsistent with writing longer papers and developing your ideas. But it is not inconsistent at all. A paper may be long because it has a lot of unnecessary words in it or because it is filled with ideas. You can develop your thoughts fully and still have your writing be a model of brevity. Simply express each idea in as few words as you can, consistent with conveying the meaning and creating the understanding you intend.
3. *Express your ideas in simple language.* This doesn't mean to avoid all big words, just the ones that are *unnecessarily* big. George Orwell said it best: "Never use a long word where a short word will do."
4. *Put some variety into your sentences.* What is the most boring quality in a speaker? Most people would say speaking in a monotone. A monotone is the use of a single, unvaried tone of voice. The word is derived from the same Greek word that gives us *monotonous*. Monotones are monotonous. The equivalent of monotone in writing is sentences that begin the same way, have the same structure, and are the same length. They are perfectly

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A SAMPLE

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predictable; that's why they put readers to sleep. To get the monotony out of your writing, begin some of your sentences differently, vary their structure, and include an occasional short sentence among a series of longer ones (or vice versa).

5. *Paraphrase more often than you quote.* Quotations are valuable, but used too often, they shift the focus from your style to someone else's. Whenever it is possible to paraphrase (to express the other writer's idea in *your* words) without making the idea suffer in the process, do so. You must, of course, give the same credit for paraphrased ideas as you do for quoted ideas—that is, by mentioning the person informally in your sentence or by including a formal footnote.
6. *Be lively.* Purge your writing of bland, mechanical expression. Try to express your ideas colorfully and imaginatively. Your writing will take on a new vitality when you do so. Here are two brief examples of lively, imaginative expression.

a. As you turn the pages of that American history book, the story gets more and more polluted. The pilgrim lands in the New World and discovers a land that is already occupied. How do you find something that somebody else has and claim you discovered it? And we talk about crime in the streets!

That is like my wife and I walking down the street and seeing you and your wife sitting in your brand-new automobile. Suppose my wife says to me, "Gee, I'd like to have a car like that." And I answer, "Let's discover it." So I walk over to you and your wife and say, "Get out of that damned car. My wife and I just discovered it." The shock and surprise you would naturally feel gives you some idea of how the Indians must have felt.¹

b. Only a very soft-headed, sentimental, and rather servile generation of men could possibly be affected by advertisements at all. People who are a little more hard-headed, humorous, and intellectually independent see the rather simple joke and are not impressed by this or any other form of self-praise. If you had said to a man in the Stone Age, "Ugg says Ugg makes the best stone hatchets," he would have perceived a lack of detachment and disinterestedness in the testimonial. If you had said to a medieval peasant, "Robert the Bowyer proclaims, with three blasts of a horn, that he makes good bows," the peasant would have said, "Well, of course he does," and thought about something more important. It is only among people whose minds have been weakened by a sort of mesmerism that so transparent a trick as that of advertisement could ever have been tried at all.²

A SAMPLE COMPOSITION

The following analytical paper illustrates how your responses to the end-of-chapter applications can be presented in traditional composition form, observing the principles of writing explained in this chapter. The composition is a response