

2 What It Takes to Write Effectively

Let's not make writing any more difficult than it has to be. (Easier said than done after our discussion in the introduction, right?)

Some people (you, maybe?) have this attitude toward writing: "There are good writers in this world, and I am simply not one of them."

That is simply untrue. Writing is maybe 20% art and 80% skill. Some people seem to be born with that 20% art, and for them it just seems to come easy. They naturally put words together in interesting ways, and people love to listen to them speak. I understand that Winston Churchill was one of these kinds of people.

And of course these people get great grades on their college essays without seeming to try. You might know such people. I do not like them, because I am not one of them.

But the fact is you do not have to be one of these people. Even if you want to be a professional writer, you do not have to be born with "the gift." Plenty of people who get published have had to work to develop the skill of good writing. I am one of these.

That's perhaps the best news of this entire textbook: you don't have to be a naturally gifted writer to be able to write well. Remember, even if you were not born with the 20%, you can still develop the other 80%. A skill can be developed by anybody who is willing to put in the time and effort.

It's like playing a piano. There are child prodigies who can play the most difficult pieces at 6 or 7 years old. But that doesn't mean that someone born without this gift can't learn to play difficult pieces as well. The more you practice, the better you become. If you are willing, you can do it.

At its most basic level, you really only need this to write effective college essays: you have to be able to write **CLEAR** and **CONCISE** prose.

Let's define these terms:

CLEAR: means you can see through the thing. If it is a window, for example, a "clear" window is clean of debris so you can see what's behind it.

In fact, let's think of "clear" exactly that way—in terms of a window. If you are standing in a room and you have a solid wall in front of you, you can't see what's outside.

It's the same with your head. You have ideas in there, but nobody can see them because your skull is in the way!

Therefore, with our room example, if you want to see what's outside, you have to install a window. (You could just punch a hole in the wall, but let's be a little more civilized than that!)

If you want people to be able to "see" what's in your head, you have to create access to what's in there. You need a "window" into your thoughts. With thoughts, we create that window with language. We turn our thoughts into words, and share them with others, letting them "see" what's in our head.

With me so far?

Let's go back to the idea of being CLEAR with our writing. If a window is clear, then you can easily see through it to what's outside. You are looking THROUGH the window at what's outside. You're not looking AT the window itself, right?

It's the same with our writing. If the writing is understandable and easy to follow, then it's CLEAR, and you can see the ideas that the writing is trying to share. You're reading the writing but looking **through** it to the ideas, just as you would look through the window to see what's outside.

Back to the window. If the window is filled with cracks or is covered with mud, for example, you can't see through it. Now you're looking AT the window at the mud or cracks instead of looking THROUGH the window at what's behind it.

Again, it's the same with our writing. If the writing is filled with grammar errors, misspellings, awkward sentences, and other distracting items, we start looking at the writing instead of the ideas it is trying to convey. For example, read this sentence:

Yesterday I had seen him because he wrote his bike all threw town.

It is hard to even picture what the author is writing about there, because the bad grammar and faulty word choice catches your attention, right?

This is like a dirty window: because you are looking at the "dirt" (the bad grammar), it is harder to see the idea behind it (the guy riding his bike).

Make sense?

CONCISE: this means that you say the most in the fewest possible words. For example, see if you can think of one word for this:

A water-based, sail-powered craft.
(A sailboat, right?)

How about finding two words for this:

Students who are in college, studying for degrees at the graduate level.
(Grad students)

Consider this sentence:

At the end of the day, in this world of ours nowadays, it's important to render aid to those who stand in need of our aid.

It can be tough to follow this sentence because there is so much useless junk (I call them "filler phrases") in it. For example:

At the end of the day: do you mean this is not true at the beginning of the day?

In this world of ours: I always assume you're talking about this world rather than some other world, and we do not own it.

Nowadays: if you are speaking in the present tense, it's assumed you are talking about today

To render aid: couldn't we just say, "to help"?

To those who stand in need of aid: isn't this sort of understood?

So let's be CONCISE:

It's important to help those in need.

Isn't that a lot easier to understand?

Think of being CONCISE in terms of "cutting the fat" from your writing.

Pretend you have two vehicles: a big GMC Suburban as well as a Kawasaki Ninja 1000 motorcycle. The Suburban has a 6.0-liter, V8 engine putting out about 350 horsepower, and the Kawasaki has a 1-litre engine putting out about 140 horsepower. The Suburban has a far bigger engine putting out far more horsepower than the motorcycle. If you were to race the two, which do you think would win?

Dumb question, right? The motorcycle would win. But how can that be, considering the larger engine and great horsepower of the Suburban? The motorcycle is much faster because it has very little "dead weight." Most of the motorcycle's weight is contained in parts that "make it go," such as the engine and the transmission—the drive train. The Suburban, on the other hand, has lots of dead weight, like seats, four-wheel drive components and a heavy chassis and body panels. Very little of the Suburban's weight is contained in the parts that "make it go." Make sense? Because there is so much dead weight, it moves more slowly.

Writing is the same. Every word in your essay should "make the essay go." Anything in the essay that does not advance your thesis or push your essay forward is dead weight and slows down your reader. Unneeded information and filler phrases are concision killers. Keep your essay lean; make every word count. I know this can be difficult, especially if you are supposed to write a 5-page paper and you only have 4 pages. The temptation is to add a bunch of filler to get to page 5.

I used to do this in grade school. I would have to write, for example, a 100-word report on George Washington, and once I was done with the important stuff, I only had 90 words. So I would look for 10 places in the essay where I could add a "very," and I had my 100 words.

We can't do this in academic writing. Writing teachers can spot filler, and will mark you down for it. Instead, think of additional arguments to support your thesis, or look for more evidence. But don't add filler!

THE ARGUMENT

In addition to CLEAR and CONCISE writing, the other thing we need to write well is an understanding of how an essay works. We're going to get into this in much more detail later, but for now, we want you to know that it's simply not as complicated as you have probably been led to believe. That's good news, right?

Nearly all essays are "arguments." In this sense of the word, we don't mean two people fighting over whose turn it is to take the garbage out. In this sense, we simply mean that

you take some sort of position on a topic—even if nobody would ever argue with that position.

In other words, most essays do two things, and ONLY two things:

1. Make an argument
2. Defend that argument

(FYI: you are going to see this a LOT in this book. Be prepared.)

Even an essay on a topic that is not controversial does this. For example, if you were given this essay topic:

“Describe a person who has greatly influenced your life, and tell the reader why he or she has done so.”

This would not be a traditional argument where someone would disagree with you. In other words, if you argued that your Uncle Frank greatly influenced your life, it is unlikely that any of your readers would say, “No he didn’t!”

However, you are still technically making an argument. See the two parts of the essay above, and see how you apply them here:

1. Make a point: “My Uncle Frank greatly influenced my life.”
2. Defend that point: “He did so through his kindness, his bravery, and his honesty.”

Nearly all essays follow this pattern. Learn it now, and much of the difficulty with essay writing is already behind you.

Later on, we will look at how basic essay organization and the pieces involved help you make your point and defend it.

The important thing to remember now is this: we’re not talking about anything new here. Think about what you do when you are simply talking to somebody, and as the conversation develops, it turns out that you disagree on something. Let’s assume this conversation.

Bill: Hey John, how are you?

John: Good, and you?

Bill: Well, not so great. I just saw that new movie, *Planet of the Blob People*, and it was awful.

John: No way, That was one of the best movies of the year!

Bill: Oh come on! The special effects were horrible, and acting stunk, and it had a horrible ending.

John: Well maybe, but the battle scenes were awesome and that actress who played the blob queen was gorgeous!

So let's analyze the arguments made by Bill and John. Remember the two things that nearly all essays do:

1. Make an argument
2. Defend that argument

So let's look at each of these individually. First, Bill:

1. Make an argument: "that new movie, *Planet of the Blob People*...was awful."
2. Defend that argument: "The special effects were horrible, and acting stunk, and it had a horrible ending."

Now John's argument:

1. Make an argument: "[The Planet of the Blob People] was one of the best movies of the year."
2. Defend that argument: "The battle scenes were awesome and the actress who played the blob queen was gorgeous."

This is not rocket science. We are constantly making arguments and then defending those arguments. And what you see between Bill and John here is not all that far off from a simple college essay outline. In fact, even with this short little make-believe conversation, we can create the outline of two different essays:

Bill's essay outline:

- I. Introduction
 - a. Thesis: The new movie, Planet of the Blob People, was awful.
- II. The special effects were horrible
 - a. (examples from the movie demonstration horrible special effects)
- III. The acting stunk.
 - a. (examples from the movie demonstrating the bad acting)
- IV. The move had a horrible ending
 - a. (an explanation of what made the ending horrible)
- V. Conclusion
 - a. Thesis restatement: Clearly, this was a terrible movie.

Now let's see how John's essay would be outlined:

I. Introduction

- a. Thesis: Planet of the Blob People was one of the best movies of the year.

II. The battle scenes were awesome

- a. (examples from the movie demonstration awesome battle scenes)

III. The actress playing the blob queen was gorgeous.

- a. (some sort of PG-rated description of this gorgeous actress)

IV. Conclusion

- a. Thesis restatement: Planet of the Blob People was without a doubt an excellent movie.

See how easily we can take nearly any discussion in which a person makes a point and quickly and easily turn it into an outline for a college essay? Of course, we would need to adjust some language (we might want more descriptive words than “awesome” and “stunk”), and we need to include the specific evidence, but the basic pieces are all there.

And here’s the good news: this is nothing we can’t do. The very nature of our communication patterns leads us to create arguments that are organized just like this. When it comes to college essay writing, it’s no different. We have to be a bit more formal in our language and get the grammar right and all of that stuff, but we’re doing the exact same thing.

The sooner you realize that, the sooner your fear of writing college essays will evaporate more quickly than the fake tears on the cheeks of the blob queen.