

Techniques for Writing Better Essays

B.W. Van Norden

(version of February 20, 2015)

*“Some people have a way with words, and other people...uh, not have way, I guess.”
– Steve Martin*

Although Mr. Martin is correct that some people seem to have a way with words, writing well is certainly not something people are born doing. We get better at writing with practice, coaching, and the application of good techniques. The particular techniques I describe below are primarily intended to help in writing persuasive essays. However, they are often useful for a variety of other kinds of writing.

Plan ahead.

Don't start writing until you have some idea of the thesis you are arguing for, and how you will structure your paper to convince the reader of it. Through the process of writing and revising, you will get new ideas and change your mind about some points. However, it is hard to write well without starting from a tentative plan. In order to achieve this goal, many good writers begin with a tentative outline of the essay, in which the thesis sentence of each paragraph corresponds to a roman numeral on the outline.

Organize your essay.

Your essay should have an overall thesis that you are trying to convince your reader of. If you cannot state what the thesis of your essay is in one sentence, you probably do not have a well organized essay. In addition, each paragraph in your essay should have its own thesis, which contributes in some way to establishing your overall thesis. Finally, each sentence in every paragraph should play some role in establishing the thesis of that paragraph. Imagine that your essay is like a machine, with the sentences and paragraphs as gears. Make sure that every gear connects with something and contributes to the performance of the whole.

Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite!

Suppose you have written your essay. Congratulations! Now you are ready to *begin* the hardest part of writing. The most important technique for writing well is to produce a rough draft and then rewrite the rough draft as many times as you can. At a minimum, you should write a first rough draft of your paper, and immediately re-read and rewrite that draft to improve it. Ideally, you should then set the draft aside for a few hours or even a day, and re-read and rewrite it yet another time, with fresh eyes. James Joyce is one of the great masters of English prose, and his short story “The Sisters” is a small masterpiece. However, if you read the original draft of “The Sisters,” you will be stunned by how much it improved as a result of his rewriting.¹ If James Joyce needs to rewrite his rough drafts, so do you.

Adopt the reader’s perspective.

One of the most valuable techniques for improving a rough draft is to get out of your own head and read the essay as someone else would see it. Imagine a reader who is intelligent and sympathetic, but also thoughtful and constructively critical. Will this idealized reader understand what you are saying and find it plausible? It often helps to imagine a specific individual as your idealized reader. Whether you use a friend or even your instructor as an imagined reader, you may be surprised how many helpful suggestions he or she has to improve your essay. Another trick to adopt the reader’s perspective is to read your essay out loud. You will often hear things that you have trouble seeing. The basic point of this technique is that we should, in the words of best-selling author Kurt Vonnegut, “pity the readers,” because “they have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and identify them immediately.”² This is hard work, and we have to make it as easy for them as possible.

Use the right word.

When rewriting, make sure that you have chosen the most appropriate words to express your meaning. Simple, everyday words are often the best choice. Of course, if a more unusual word expresses the meaning you want, use it. But make sure that the word has the right nuance. For example, if I read, “Meryl Streep learned to emote while a student

at Vassar,” I would wonder why the author used “emote” instead of “act.” “Emote” is used to describe histrionic overacting, which is not what the author meant to convey. In contrast, if I read, “I am annoyed by William Shatner’s tendency to emote in every role he plays,” I would understand the use of the term (even though, as a Trekker, I would disagree).

Be concise.

Good writers are ruthless in deleting unnecessary words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs when they rewrite a rough draft. One of the classic guides to writing well enshrined this as a basic principle of composition: “Omit needless words.”³ If a word or phrase is repetitive or simply isn’t necessary to convey your point, cut it out. The philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal paid homage to the importance and difficulty of being concise when he apologized, “The present letter is a very long one, simply because I had no leisure to make it shorter.”⁴

When in doubt, write an introduction and conclusion that are simple summaries of the essay.

Introductions and conclusions are actually quite difficult to write well. Since they typically summarize the content of the essay, your introduction and conclusion should be the last paragraphs you write. When in doubt, simply use the introduction to give the reader a “roadmap” of the essay, explaining the thesis you will be arguing for, and the steps you will be taking toward that thesis. Then recapitulate that roadmap in the conclusion. For a brief essay, it’s a good idea for the thesis of each paragraph to be stated in the introduction. A more ambitious introduction might explain why the topic is important or interesting. However, it is a common mistake to write introductions with broad, unsubstantiated generalizations, like “since the dawn of time, humans have debated whether human nature is good or evil.” No they did not: at the dawn of time humans debated who was going to lead the charge to kill the sabre tooth tiger.

Get help.

Don't hesitate to seek help in writing better. If you were training to be a boxer or gymnast, you would expect to need a coach to help you perfect your technique. It's the same with writing well. Fortunately, there are many resources available to help you write better. Your instructor, for example, is available during office hours, and also by appointment if you cannot make his office hours. (Email me to schedule an appointment if you need one.) You can bounce ideas off me, show me an outline, or give me a rough draft. If you want me to read a rough draft, I ask that you print it out and bring it to our meeting for me to read there and give you immediate feedback. (For other courses, ask the instructor for his or her policy on rough drafts.) For Philosophy Department courses, you can also go to the department Interns, senior majors who have done particularly well in their philosophy courses. The Interns can give you help with any aspect of your philosophy coursework, including help with rough drafts. (Check with the Philosophy Department, Rocky 209, x5530, for the Interns' contact information.) Vassar also has an excellent Writing Center (Thompson Memorial Library, Room 122, x7683), which can help students at all levels and in every major.

¹ An early draft of "The Sisters" is included in Don Gifford, *Joyce Annotated*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

² Kurt Vonnegut, "How to Write with Style," in Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* (New York: Dial Press, 1999).

³ William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1979), p. 23.

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Provincial Letters*, Letter XVI. (English translation taken from <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/pascal/letters-c.html#LETTER%20XVI>, accessed 25 February 2013.)