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# Some Tips for Compelling Essays

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## 1. Objective

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It's been a long time since I had to write a "traditional" essay, but I've been writing professionally for over a decade now. Since my days in high school English class, I've been the editor of a campus magazine, had articles published in national and digital publications, started and finished multiple successful blog projects, self-published three books, and make a living writing marketing/sales copy. From all that experience, I can say that the most important thing to keep in mind with your writing is your objective. People have limited time, attention, and patience. They won't read something if they don't know what it's about, or what they'll get out of it. For this reason, it's important for you to be clear on your objective so that shines through in your writing.

## Argumentative

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As we all probably know, the point of an argumentative essay is to prove a point or to argue for a certain point of view. Your "objective", in this context, is to have a well-defined thesis, often explicitly stated early on, and then to prove it in the course of your essay. In a standard high school essay, you will have three main "pillars" to your argument. In more complicated essays, or in other contexts such as exams, your structure may vary. However, your objective remains the same: to mount a clear and convincing argument for your thesis (statement).

## Expository

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In an expository essay, your role is not to convince the reader of a certain point, but to demonstrate your knowledge of a topic... and perhaps educate the reader as well. In order to decide on an effective objective for your essay, you are required to have a detailed understanding of the subject matter – no shortcuts! This is because an exceptional expository essay will not only have a clear central focus, such as "the events leading up to World War II", but it will also be able to situate your essay's topic within the broader context of the subject matter. Depending on the class, an essay about the causes of World War II might take an economic focus, a technological focus, a cultural focus, or something else, and use aspects of world history surrounding the beginning of the war to add depth to the piece. An expository essay with a strong objective and clear focus will be more interesting to read and easier to write.

## Narrative / Reflective

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This type of "essay" is essentially a story with a point. This is deceptively challenging, as not only do you have to tell an engaging story, it has to have some kind of theme or takeaway that is obvious and useful to the reader. Both the rules of good storytelling and good essay-writing apply here. It is best if you begin with an introduction of what your story is about – in social contexts, this is usually something as simple as "oh man, let me tell you about that time at band camp", but in an essay, you will likely want to allude to what your point is. Unless you're a gifted storyteller who can play with conventions, your story must have an inciting event, a sequence of events where the action and stakes escalate, a climactic event, and a conclusion. Typically, your takeaway, point, key learning, or central idea will be found *implicitly* in your story's events, and then discussed explicitly in the conclusion. Having a clear objective in mind before you begin writing will help your narrative / reflective essay retain structure.

## Descriptive

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In this type of essay, you are describing something. Therefore, you must get clear on *what* it is you are describing and why it is relevant to your reader. For example, if you are describing a vacation you went on, you could focus on the culture of the country you visited, or the geography of the country, and so on. What can you speak with authority on, and what would be novel and interesting to your reader?

## 2. Perception

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Most advice about writing essays focuses on the actual craft of writing. However, I find that troubles at the writing stage can often be indicative of a lack of comprehension during the reading stage, whether due to lack of time or interest in the assigned material. These are some helpful tips that should aid you in developing an understanding of your subject matter.

### Context

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If you are writing an essay about a book, obviously you have to read the book. I'm not going to tell you that. However, it helps to know the context of the book – how it was written, why, by whom, and so on. For example, the famous poem *In Flanders Fields* is partially famous because of the circumstances of its authorship – on the front lines during World War I. In general, I find it helpful to know the following details when thinking about a work to review or write about:

- **Dates:** When was the book written and published? What were things like during that time?
- **Author:** Who wrote the book? What were their influences? What was their life like?
- **Reception:** What did people think of the book when it first came out? Why?
- **Purpose:** What was the author trying to accomplish/express by writing that particular piece?

### Interpretation

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Although I did my undergraduate degree in engineering physics, my understanding is that postmodernist-driven critical theory is rather popular in the humanities and social sciences today. As a result, the prevailing attitude in school is that *your* interpretation of a text is just as valid as anybody else's, and that furthermore, the author's original intent is less interesting than their potential subconscious or "secret" motives. Personally, I do not like this style of interpretation. I believe that a book, event, speech, or other historical artifact needs to be understood on its own terms *first*, then placed into its historical context. Following these two necessary steps, one's own interpretation can then be applied.

In order to understand a work on its own terms, it helps to understand its context, as mentioned above. Knowing details about the author, their inspirations, and their life, in particular, can help shed a great deal of light on a piece of assigned reading and give you a couple of useful details that will make your essay more interesting.

### Notes

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If you have to write about a book, event, or topic, don't just passively consume the information. If you own the novel, feel free to dog-ear special pages or highlight useful passages if you're comfortable doing so. This makes it easier to find the information later on. In my scholarship, I have a Word file, sorted by subject, book, and chapter, with useful quotes that I have retyped. I find that writing down or typing a passage helps me remember it better. Also, include page numbers in your notes!

### Limits

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Less experienced writers may make bold statements, mistaking assertiveness for persuasiveness. In your writing, it is usually best to acknowledge the limits of your own knowledge – or of knowledge in general. Avoid saying things you cannot thoroughly back up, and if you make a surprising or unorthodox claim in an essay, be prepared to devote at least a paragraph to unpacking it or you'll make yourself an easy target for the dreaded red pen.

### 3. Diction

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*“He who controls the language controls the masses.” – Saul Alinsky*

Although this may seem like an odd quote to include in a document about writing, it may be interesting to note that in some cultures and languages, they lack words for colours that we have language for. In one extreme case, one indigenous tribe only refers to things as “light” or “dark”, ignoring colour altogether! These oddities are presented to you in order to illustrate that *the language you use has implicit power*. Having more words for things allows you to think in more nuanced ways.

One clear example of this is a common practice in therapy for people who struggle with understanding their emotions. Therapists will sometimes go through lists of emotionally descriptive words with clients and give them new terminology for describing their emotions – and this helps! So it shall be with your writing.

#### Clichés, Idioms, Catchphrases

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When one has 600,000 words in the English language to string together in novel and interesting ways, using a cliché (or something like it) causes your writing to go over like a lead balloon. Cynical readers will judge you as unoriginal or incompetent, teachers will dock you marks for originality, and you do yourself a disservice by using the “hive mind” to express yourself instead of your own mind.

#### Repetitiveness

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Consider the following passage: *“Fifth Business is a book about the complex impacts of choices and the complex roles we play in each other’s lives. The book’s inciting event sets into motion a string of events that affect a whole town for decades.”*

This isn’t bad writing, per se. However, consider that in this very short passage the word “book” appears twice, the word “complex” appears twice in the first sentence, and the word “event” appears twice in the second. Having the same word appear multiple times in close proximity can make your written word seem uninspired, hasty, or amateurish. In this example, the word “novel” could be substituted for book, and the second sentence could stand to be rewritten entirely. After you finish writing your first or second draft, taking some time to go through your essay with a thesaurus can help add an extra layer of polish.

#### Pretentiousness

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Although we often think that using longer, flowery words makes us seem smarter and more credible, such a practice only serves to make your writing harder to read and understand. Have you ever read a book from the 1700s, where key words in the sentence didn’t make sense? Although it’s important to use unique language, the simpler the better, with occasional exceptions.

#### Innovation

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Given that your thoughts have a personal quality and are unique to you, it stands to reason that when you put your thinking on paper – which is what you do when you write – your writing can (and should) be distinct as well. You might have heard of such a thing as a “writer’s voice”. This is something that happens when you develop patterns in your use of language that are unique to you. It could be words or mini-structures that can be found throughout your work, or the favouring of a particular rhetorical device, or so on. This develops over time, and with practice writing different types of things.

## 4. Logic

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This is where the rubber really hits the road for writers, especially in academic or activist contexts. Does what you're writing make sense? Can you walk people through a line of thinking without them getting confused or lost? Does one thought naturally lead to the next?

### Essay Structure

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A common piece of advice I have seen directed towards amateur writers is to “write at least 250 words per day”, with the implication being one has to just “sit down and write”. However, one of the worst things that amateur writers can do is begin their career by freewheeling, in my opinion. Experimentation has its place, but writing an essay, article, book, or some marketing material requires more of a process for most.

Here's why: if you don't know what you're going to write, at least in a general sense, your lack of skill isn't going to make up for your lack of structure. Just as only skilled musicians can improvise, only skilled writers (or lucky ones) can sit down and let their inspiration take them away. What I do is figure out a theme for the piece, then a thesis or central idea, then a title that goes along with that thesis that reinforces the theme. Then, I sketch out the structure of my book/article/essay and fill it in with my early thoughts – “introduction will contain XYZ, paragraph one definitely needs to mention A”. Then, I can start from the beginning with a rough idea of where I need to get to by the end.

### Context, Point, Proof, Explanation

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In grade school, we learn “point, proof, explanation” when it comes to using quotations or references. This is good advice, but I have a useful addendum that I picked up during my time in marketing: “tell ‘em what you're gonna tell ‘em, tell ‘em, then tell ‘em what you told ‘em”. There are two things to take away from this – one is repetition of message, which is good to keep in mind concerning your thesis. However, the more relevant one in terms of logic is *context*. People want to know the *why* of something before they learn the *what*. We see this all the time in high school, as students will always ask when they are going to use this information in real life.

What you can do about this is explain the value of the quotation before you introduce it, and then reinforce the importance afterwards. An example of how to introduce a quote: “... *we see this appeal to common humanity throughout the greatest thinkers and communicators of all time, such as Martin Luther King Jr. We also see it in Shylock's questions to Salarino in Act 3 Scene 1...*”

### Common Fallacies & Errors

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- **Tautology:** “No true Christian would be a bad person, therefore all Christians are good people.”
- **Falsifiability:** “The Flying Spaghetti Monster exists.”
- **Facts-to-Values Switch:** “Capital punishment doesn't deter crime, therefore it is immoral.”
- **Argument-by-Nature:** “Intersex people exist naturally, therefore the gender binary is pointless.”
- **Argument-by-Authority:** “I have a Ph.D in this subject, therefore I am right on this matter.”
- **Appeal to Emotion:** “Do you not care about human rights?” (only effective in some contexts)

The final, and most important, fallacy that I would like to address is the strawman. Anytime you state an opposing argument in a way that the “other side” would not agree with, you are making a “strawman” and then debating against that instead of the actual issue. A “steelman” is when you *strengthen* the opposing argument and then mount arguments against it, and is highly preferable.

## 5. Rhetoric

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*“Rhetoric then may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.” (Aristotle)*

### Persuasion

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Some businesspeople believe that every interaction is a sale. Putting your clothes on in the morning is intended to help you make a certain kind of impression throughout the day – that’s a sale. And so on. Regardless of your thoughts on the matter, it is true that writing needs to be persuasive. An easy way to get started with becoming more compelling is to put yourself in your reader’s mind. What might they believe, think, and feel before reading your piece? Why do they believe, think, and feel those things? How would their lives be more enriched after reading your writing, and what specifically are the items you need to change their mind on?

### Framing & Reframing

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Amateur rhetoricians focus on deploying flowery language and clever arguments in service of their goals. On the other hand, good propagandists know that framing is everything. This can be done deceptively, like when scientists contort data to fit their hypotheses – there is something called a “replication issue” in the social sciences that is exactly this.

However, this type of rhetorical manoeuvre can be done powerfully and productively in the form of a *reframe*. If you need to challenge someone on an issue, instead of rushing into the argument right away, appeal to first principles – “what’s the REAL problem here?” – and then develop your argument using input from diverse sources to paint a new picture of the situation. This type of approach, especially in an argumentative or debate context, is often unexpected and can provoke a positive response.

### The Musicality of Language

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This sentence has five words. Sentences of the same length suck. They are boring to read. It feels like a telegram.

This sentence has five words. However, this sentence has a few more words than the last. This is called pacing. If you create variety in the length and style of your sentences, using commas and punctuation when needed, you can add variety into your writing and make it more enjoyable to read. I tend towards longer sentences and short lists, but you will find your own style. Good luck!

### Devices to Avoid

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- **Rhetorical Questions:** Aren’t these things overused?
- **Appeals to Morality:** Putting someone on the spot about a moral issue is a bad move.
- **Ad Hominems:** Attacking someone’s character (“you’re a racist!”) is poor sportsmanship.
- **Redefining Words:** If you read the above and thought “racism is just a word for the systemic power structures that benefit white men at the expense of BIPOC and women”, you are redefining a word that literally everyone knows to mean “someone who hates [a race]”. No.
- **Motte & Bailey Doctrine:** This is a relatively new term, based on a type of castle (look it up) for something that has become commonplace. When someone makes an outrageous or bold claim (called a bailey, e.g “men and women are a social construct”), and then when challenged retreats to a more easily-defensible position (the motte, e.g “the way we define gender roles is a social construct”), that’s the motte & bailey in action.

## 6. Examples

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Here's a few examples of compelling writing, from both fiction and non-fiction sources. If you can get your hands on books by any of these authors, I'd recommend it. One of the best ways to become a better writer is to consistently read good material.

### Excerpt from "Another Kind of Monday" (William E. Coles, Jr.)

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The hundred-dollar bills were so new that Mark had had to pinch them apart. With the eraser at the end of his pencil, he slid one to the top of his desk blotter and centered it. Then he carefully aligned the other two bills seamlessly below the first. Leaning forward over his folded arms, he stared straight down into the mild eyes of each of the Benjamin Franklins. It was then that he noticed the serial numbers on the bills were consecutive.

A sudden gust of December wind rattled sleet against his bedroom window, bringing his head up. Maybe there were more.

The two deliberately stuck-together pages of the library book that had hidden the note and the money had resealed. Beginning at that point, Mark went through the last quarter of Dickens's novel, turning one page at a time. Nothing. He went back to the note. It was typed on very thin paper.

### Excerpt from "The Art of Game Design" (Jessie Schell)

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The second danger of introspection is the one we must take seriously. With the first peril, we get a "Get Out of Jail Free" card because we are designers, not scientists. But we can't get away from this one so easily. This peril is the peril of subjectivity and a place where many designers fall into a trap: "I like playing this game; therefore, it must be good." And sometimes, this is right. But other times, if the audience has tastes that differ from your own, it is very, very wrong.

### Excerpt from "Preachers and Preaching" (Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

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The business of the preacher is not to present the Gospel academically. This again is done frequently. The preacher can analyse it and show its parts and portions, and show how excellent it is; but still he is saying things about the Gospel, whereas we are called to preach the Gospel, to convey it, and to bring it directly to the individuals who are listening to us, and to bring it to the whole man. So let us be clear that we are not to talk about the Gospel as if it were something outside us. We are involved in it; we are not to look at it just as a subject, and to say things about it; it itself is being directly presented and conveyed to the congregation through us.

### Excerpt from “The Inevitable” (Kevin Kelly)

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Today the paper sheets of a book are disappearing. What is left in their place is the conceptual structure of a book – a bunch of symbols united by a theme into an experience that takes a while to complete. Since the traditional shell of the book is vanishing, it’s fair to wonder whether its organization is merely a fossil. Does the intangible container of a book offer any advantages over the many other forms of text available now?

Some scholars of literature claim that a book is really that virtual place your mind goes to when you are reading. It is a conceptual state of imagination that one might call “literature space”. According to these scholars, when you are engaged in this reading space, your brain works differently than when you are screening. Neurological studies show that learning to read changes the brain’s circuitry. Instead of skipping around distractedly gathering bits, when you read you are transported, focused, immersed.

### Excerpt from “Free Women, Free Men” (Camille Paglia)

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“History moves in cycles. The plague of political correctness and assaults on free speech that erupted in the 1980s and were beaten back in the 1990s have returned with a vengeance. In the United States, the universities as well as the mainstream media are currently patrolled by well-meaning but ruthless thought police, as dogmatic in their views as agents of the Spanish Inquisition. We are plunged once again into an ethical chaos where intolerance masquerades as tolerance and where individual liberty is crushed by the tyranny of the group.

... The liberal versus conservative dichotomy, dating from the split between left and right following the French Revolution, is hopelessly outmoded for our far more complex era of expansive technology and global politics. A bitter polarization of liberal and conservative has become so extreme in both the Americas and Europe that it sometimes resembles mental illness, severed from the common sense realities of everyday life.”

### Excerpt from “Wizard’s First Rule” (Terry Goodkind, a dyslexic)

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It was an odd-looking vine. Dusty variegated leaves hunkered against a stem that wound in a stranglehold around the smooth trunk of a balsam fir. Sap drooled down the wounded bark, and dry limbs slumped, making it look as if the tree were trying to voice a moan into the cool, damp morning air. Pods stuck out from the vine here and there along its length, almost seeming to look warily about for witnesses.

It was the smell that first had caught his attention, a smell like the decomposition of something that had been wholly unsavory even in life. Richard combed his fingers through his thick hair as his mind lifted out of the fog of despair, coming into focus upon seeing the vine. He scanned for others, but saw none. Everything else looked normal. The maples of the upper Ven Forest were already tinged with crimson, proudly showing off their new mantle in the light breeze. With nights getting colder, it wouldn’t be long before their cousins down in the Hartland Woods joined them. The oaks, being the last to surrender to the season, still stoically wore their dark green coats.

## 7. More Resources

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**“The Day You Became a Better Writer” (The Dilbert Blog, Scott Adams)**

- [https://dilbertblog.typepad.com/the\\_dilbert\\_blog/2007/06/the\\_day\\_you\\_bec.html](https://dilbertblog.typepad.com/the_dilbert_blog/2007/06/the_day_you_bec.html)

**“Jordan Peterson’s Essay Writing Guide” (Dr. Jordan B. Peterson)**

- [https://jordanbpeterson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Essay\\_Writing\\_Guide.docx](https://jordanbpeterson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Essay_Writing_Guide.docx)

**“Politics and the English Language” (George Orwell)**

- <https://faculty.washington.edu/rsoder/EDLPS579/HonorsOrwellPoliticsEnglishLanguage.pdf>

**“Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life” (Anne Lamott)**

- [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12543.Bird\\_by\\_Bird](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12543.Bird_by_Bird)

**36 Writing Essays by Chuck Palahniuk (author of Fight Club)**

- <http://litreactor.com/essays/36-writing-essays-by-chuck-palahniuk>

**“The War of Art” (Steven Pressfield)**

- <https://stevenpressfield.com/books/the-war-of-art/>

**“The Ultimate Sales Letter” (Dan Kennedy)**

- [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/112466.The\\_Ultimate\\_Sales\\_Letter](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/112466.The_Ultimate_Sales_Letter)