

9.

A LITERATURE SCHOLAR TEACHES STRUCTURING PARAGRAPHS IN A RESEARCH ESSAY

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What You Will Learn in this Chapter

This chapter will provide you with a template for structuring effective body paragraphs in a research essay. It will also provide instructions for an easy and organic process to create these paragraphs, and it will discuss the basics of in-text citation for quotations and paraphrases. The goal of this chapter is to help you think about developing your body paragraphs as the primary task of your writing process. Following these instructions will help you think about writing as a process—not a product—and will help you tailor a process-based approach to writing that will work for you throughout college.

Key Terms

- Modular Approach to writing
- Rhetorical Situation
- Close Reading

In this chapter I will propose a method for organizing paragraphs that is built on the foundation of a **modular approach** to writing essays. By modular approach, I simply mean one that develops the components of the papers as modules, focusing on content development first and on sequencing later. This new way of writing—and thinking about writing—contrasts the mindset that attempts to write an essay straight through from introduction to conclusion. The “straight through” approach suited our needs in high school, but we will find it unsustainable at the college level. In contrast, our new modular approach can be used to write papers of any length and scope.

In this modular approach, paragraphs develop organically out of the loci of your interest identified in your research. I suggest developing all body paragraphs simultaneously from the prewrite stage through to the final draft by first establishing the topics of your paragraphs, then determining your paragraphs’ informational component, and finally moving on to the rhetorical aspect of your paragraphs. This method of constructing paragraphs is meant to help you develop the five components of every good paragraph:

1. Topic sentence
2. Relate topic back to thesis
3. Observation (Can be multiple sentences)
4. Analysis (Can be multiple sentences)
5. Transition



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Addressing Our New Rhetorical Situation

In high school, the dominant **rhetorical situation**—the context within which we communicate—that shaped our writing training was the standardized test. When we write for a standardized test, we often create a hasty outline and write straight through the paper from introduction to conclusion. This method suits composition within the time constraints of standardized testing but ultimately sacrifices depth and clarity of elocution as a byproduct. When we make this compromise, we tend to be less satisfied with the work we have created, and sometimes this taints our experience of writing so that we might assume we don't like to do it. As we shift into a different rhetorical situation—writing research essays in college—we should also shift our approach to fit that new context. The method that I propose here is meant to help us think about the writing process differently, help us organize effective paragraphs in our new rhetorical situation, and—hopefully, as a result—feel more satisfied with our writing.



Lego Grad Student @legogradstudent · Jul 20



Being impressed by scraps of text that he wrote and hated months ago, the grad student questions whether desperation is lowering his standards.



We can more easily develop an effective body paragraph if we don't try to write it all at once, straight through from first sentence to last. Effective body paragraphs are constructed so that each component fulfills one of a variety of objectives. As we have seen, there are five primary components that each paragraph should contain. Each of these should achieve its own objective. Our task becomes cumbersome if we try to switch between these five different mindsets continually while we work through our paper from first word to last. Instead, I suggest focusing on one task at a time. The first task of writing any paragraph is to choose what your paragraph will be about. This ordinarily begins with identifying evidence and developing ideas while in the research stage. By writing down this evidence and your ideas you begin to create the informational component of your body paragraphs.

Informational Component

When we write a paragraph, we need to break our overarching task into its constitutive elements. To do so, begin by developing the informational component of your paragraph before moving on to the rhetorical components. The informational component of your paragraph can be broken down into two subcategories: **1. The observation**, and **2. The analysis**. First, we will address the observational aspect. This observation can be either an original idea, a quotation from the text, or a paraphrase of information found in the text. The process I will outline here is general and meant to apply to paragraphs that include quotations as well as those that do not. Remember that we are building paragraphs from the inside out, so once your body paragraph is completed, this observation (written first) will be found towards the middle of the paragraph. When we build paragraphs from the inside out, around the key observation that you have made, we ensconce that observation at the center of the paragraph.

With my students I like to use a rather silly mixed metaphor to convey this point. Think of your observation, quote, or paraphrase as a beautiful jewel ensconced in an opulent setting. One cannot immediately or easily remove the jewel and make sense of the setting on its own. This contrasts to the sloppy and haphazard way we sometimes add a quote to a paragraph as an afterthought: like a pepperoni slapped onto a frozen cheese pizza. The cheese does little to prevent us from removing the topping and, though delicious, the pizza still makes sense without the pepperoni. We want to create paragraphs that are like diamond rings and not pepperoni pizzas. I did mention it was a silly comparison, but it conveys the notion that is important here: build your paragraphs around the information that is essential to your paragraph and to your thesis. When we think about it this way, it just makes sense to compose that information (your observation) first. —RS

As mentioned above, the informational component is best developed organically out of prewriting and then outlining. This doesn't need to be a formal pre-write, but rather a sketch of the loci of your interests identified while researching your topic. When we pay attention to our thoughts, we can notate the ideas that arise organically as we follow the path of our interests through our attention to the material we are studying. Eventually, we will realize our thesis organically by observing the thoughts we think while researching our topic. We can also identify quotations that buttress the ideas we are developing. Documenting both of these categories—1. Our original ideas and 2. Useful quotations/concepts to paraphrase—on our pre-write determines the kernels of our future paragraphs and saves a ton of time in the long run. The time I refer to here is that dreaded time spent staring at a blank page with a flashing cursor. Using this method, one should never have to waste time staring at a blank page with a flashing cursor again.

Now that you've sketched out your pre-write, including your thoughts and evidence gathered from the text, I suggest transcribing your observations one at a time into a fresh word document. After each transcribed idea, quotation, or paraphrase, hit enter four or five times. You now have the skeleton of your paper, around which you will develop your paragraphs. Technically, you have created an outline out of your pre-write, but using this method it feels more like an organic evolution than an artificial construction. Starting in this way ensures that each paragraph is organized around one idea. This fresh word document is the foundation of your entire paper. You will notice that working this way entirely circumvents the loathsome blank page with flashing cursor. Write your observation or paraphrase into complete sentences or transcribe your quotation precisely and you have completed your body paragraph's observational component. Save your word document (here, throughout, and frequently) and step away from your computer for some relaxation. When you return to your computer you will approach your next task, the analytical component of your body paragraphs. We will turn to the analytical component in a moment, but first, let's address the formal expectations for including a quote or paraphrase as your observation.

A note on embedding quotations and paraphrases: the basics

When the observation in your paragraph takes the form of a quotation or a paraphrase, it is customary to provide a short introduction to the idea that is not your own. To do so, we use a **signal phrase** that shows your audience that the following idea isn't yours. The simplest and most effective way to do this is to introduce the creator of that idea. Though this is only necessary in a paragraph that includes a quotation or paraphrase, in those instances it is essential to extend this professional courtesy to the originator of the idea you are discussing. Each quote or paraphrase also needs to include an embedded citation. In the current MLA citation style, that takes the form of a parenthetical

citation after the close of the quotation marks—or at the end of the paraphrase—but before the closing punctuation. If you choose not to introduce the originator of the idea you’re quoting, you must include their last name in the parenthesis, along with the page number of the quote. If you have introduced the author, you may omit their name and only include the page number in your parenthesis. Below is an example using the first sentence of this paragraph:

As Ryan Slesinger writes in “A Literature Scholar Teaches Structuring Paragraphs in a Research Essay,” “When the observation in your paragraph takes the form of a quotation or a paraphrase, it is customary to provide a short introduction to the idea that is not your own” (#).

There are different formatting requirements if you choose to include a longer quotation: more than four lines of prose or three lines of poetry. At that length, you would format your quotation as a **block quote**. To do so, write out your quotation in its entirety, then highlight it and indent it ½ inch from the left margin. The quote remains double spaced like the rest of your essay. Your parenthetical citation occurs outside of the final punctuation in this case. See the below example:

As Ryan Slesinger writes in, “A Literature Scholar Teaches Structuring Paragraphs in a Research Essay,”

When the observation in your paragraph takes the form of a quotation or a paraphrase, it is customary to provide a short introduction to the idea that is not your own. To do so, we use a **signal phrase** that shows your audience that the following idea isn’t yours. The simplest and most effective way to do this is to introduce the creator of that idea. (#)

Be judicious about your quote selection and try to limit your block quote inclusions. Remember that your audience is more interested in what you have to say about your topic than what your sources have to say. These basics of in-text citation should suffice for the purpose of your composition classes, but there is a lot more to learn about appropriate citation methods, including several other styles in addition to MLA. The Purdue OWL website is the go-to resource for all citation styles. If you need more clarification, owl.purdue.edu should be your first stop.

Analytical Component

The next step is to add your analytical component to each observation. Where the observation in each paragraph anchors that paragraph to the text in question, the analytical component provides commentary on why you’ve chosen to include the observation to support your thesis. Often when studying a text, this analytical component will take the form of what we in literary studies call a “close reading.” Close readings pay special attention to the literary elements of a text, including the word choice, imagery, tone, etc. Depending on the field and focus of your research you should create appropriate analyses. For instance, if you have provided a statistic, perhaps your analytical component will interpret the statistic for a general (non-specialist) audience. Regardless of which field you’re working in, the pattern is the same. The informational aspect of a paragraph is composed of your observation and analysis. No paragraph is complete without both. The proportion of both is important as well.

Our analytical component is the most important part of any body paragraph. But sometimes as writers we assume that our readers are on a wavelength with us and they intuitively understand why we’ve chosen to include our evidence/observation. This is not always the case. As a teacher of first year writing over the last fifteen years, I’ve seen many students fall into this trap. Remember that your audience (and in college, your instructor) cannot read your mind, and is ultimately most interested in what you have to say about your topic. So, when you’re choosing a quote, it should provide important information for your argument, but should not

stand alone within the context of your essay. Each paragraph should contain at least as much analysis as observation, and analysis should frequently outweigh observation in each paragraph. These are quantitative measures, but you should try to balance your paragraphs between analysis and observation. If an imbalance occurs, make sure that the scale tilts towards an excess of analysis. Your analysis is really the meat of your paragraph, and thus the meat of your essay.

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— SparkNotes (@SparkNotes) April 9, 2019

Fortunately, our new modular method of composition creates a failsafe that helps us avoid the temptation of dropping in stand-alone quotes: those pepperonis slapped on top of a frozen pizza. When we finished gathering our observational component of the essay, we created a document that serves as the backbone of our essay, including each observation/quote/paraphrase with four to five spaces in between. Our task now is to add our own commentary to that evidence. Move through the outline document adding your original, analytical thoughts to each of your observations, and before you know it, your analytical component will be complete.

Because each observational component is standing alone in this outline document, it is easy to make sure we add analysis to each quotation/paraphrase, and it is easy to make sure our analysis is balanced with—or outweighs—our observational component of each paragraph. We will also find that, since we are focusing on each type of task independently, and we have already completed our research and observations, our analytical thoughts come to us quicker. All we must do is write them down. Once you have added your own original thoughts to each observational component, you have completed the analytical component, and composed the informational component of your body paragraphs. Save the draft and walk away from the computer for a bit. When you return, we will switch gears entirely to the **rhetorical component** of each paragraph.



Rhetorical Component

Once you've added analytical comments to each observation, you have written most of each paragraph. That is, you have covered the informational component. Now it's time to turn to the rhetorical component. The rhetorical component frames your informational component and serves to contextualize the observations and analysis you have chosen to present to your audience. As you might expect from my phrase "framing," the rhetorical component goes before and after the informational. You have **three rhetorical tasks** to complete in every paragraph:

1. Introduce your topic
2. Relate topic back to thesis
3. Transition to next paragraph

Once composed, the first two rhetorical aspects will be positioned before your informational component and the third will conclude

each paragraph. One might notice that these tasks are relatively simple and easy to compose in contrast to the informational component of the paragraphs. However, the rhetorical tasks are crucial for your argument. Think of it this way: the informational component tells what you have to say, and the rhetorical elements tell us why what you're saying is important for your argument.



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<https://open.library.okstate.edu/whoteacheswriting/?p=35#h5p-5>

When working in our modular system, composing the rhetorical element of body paragraphs is even more accelerated than adding analysis to your observations. Again, I recommend going through these three components one at a time and saving your developing document after each one. First, go to each pairing of observation + analysis and add a topic sentence that informs the reader of the topic being discussed in that pairing. Do this for each paragraph. Then, go through and write sentences that connect that topic to your thesis and suggests its importance. Once you've done this your paper is basically written. Put your paragraphs into the order that they will appear in your final draft. Once you've done this, your final rhetorical task is simple: add a sentence to the end of each paragraph that creates a transition to the topic discussed in the next paragraph. With these tasks completed, all that's left to do is compose your introduction, conclusion, revise, and submit your essay.

Conclusion

By clarifying the many constitutive steps that make up the overarching writing process, we find that each step is easier to complete. Focusing on one step at a time, we watch as our essays develop out of our research before our eyes. This method takes the strain out of the way we write and helps us have a more fulfilling experience while composing. You'll notice that when you inhabit one type of thinking at a time, your thoughts arrive clearer, and your transmission of those thoughts to the page is sharper. The method I've presented here is not the only way you might split up the tasks of the writing process but trying it out is a good place to start. Each student is at liberty to follow their own thought process and writing habits to tailor this method to their own needs. We find that with a little discipline and time management we can make the once-dreaded writing assignment a pleasant and fulfilling task. Happy writing!

Discussion Questions

1. What are your current writing habits? Do you prefer to multitask, or split up tasks?
2. What is your existing strategy for organizing paragraphs?
3. What are some of the benefits to a modular, process-based approach to writing?

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Ryan Slesinger is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Oklahoma State University where he enjoys teaching a variety of literature and writing courses. Recently taught courses include, “American Road Narratives,” “Literature of the American Counterculture,” and “Race, Borders, & Intersectional American Identities.” He has published articles on John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, and the Grateful Dead, and his current book project addresses the importance of mysticism in the works of twentieth century American novelists Steinbeck, Kerouac, Anaya, Silko, and Morrison.