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Writing an Essay in English

Paper, report, composition, project, and essay: these terms all refer to a nonfiction piece of writing that exposes the truth about a subject. Research based essays also include evidence that your intended readers would find reasonable and verifiable. In your classes, you will be assigned essays and research papers so you can demonstrate mastery over a subject; however essays also reveal your command over Standard American English and your credibility as an ethical and trustworthy researcher, writer, and student, and in addition to content, you will be assessed on these aspects of writing as well. Although, in your profession, you may not write using the same organizational design as an essay, the basic concepts will still apply. Most professional letters, proposals, articles, appeals, plans, and reports, even your resume cover letter, will need 1) a thesis, 2) an argument, 3) an appeal to the reader, and 4) audience awareness. Approaching all writing as a process will additionally ensure that your final product is clear and meaningful.
**Thesis.** All papers need a thesis, which is the paper’s main idea. The thesis evolves throughout the writing process. During the prewriting stage, you write what you already know about a topic then brainstorm new ideas that lead to your main idea. A person snorkeling and spear fishing (Image 1: Snorkeling for Fish), illustrates the search and discovery process that happens when narrowing prewriting to one main idea.

The thesis is the reason the essay exists; it is both the possibility that you want to substantiate and the claim that you want to convince readers to accept. Do you see the paradox? The thesis is both an uncertainty and a conviction, which is why the writing process is so important; it resolves this contradiction. During the drafting stage, the thesis is the premise that guides your search for information and your new understanding about a subject. During revision, however, you solidify your thesis so that it is the unifying point in the paper that determines your purpose, organizational plan (the thesis statement) and your argument (the supporting reasoning and evidence).

**Argument.** The content of an English paper is the "argument." Essays argue a point. An essay’s argument is not a battle, fight, or even a disagreement. The goal is not to win. Rather, an essay’s argument exposes a new way to understand a subject, taking into consideration any existing or different perspectives on that subject. An argument is therefore like a conversation, and your purpose is to make
clear your position within this conversation. To do this, you will want to **state your position early in the paper, such as at the end of the introduction**, and then **sustain this viewpoint throughout the essay**. While doing this, to keep the reader engaged, you must also show that you are being fair and reasonable by taking other viewpoints into consideration and conceding or refuting those other viewpoints. Research based essays, for example, should include expert opinions or authoritative examples such as statistics, research study results, or historical facts to help support your argument and appeal to your readers.

**Appealing to your Readers.** Here are some strategies you can use to appeal to your American readers. Use them when appropriate given your particular subject matter, audience, and purpose:

- **Facts:** verifiable data or statistics believed as true; the details of an event that happened
- **Opinions:** interpretations of facts such as predictions or analyses
- **Anecdotes:** narratives of one time or recurring events
- **Assertions:** a forceful statement that something is so
- **Allusions:** a reference to a literary piece or a cultural or commonly known event
- **Analogies and metaphors:** direct or indirect comparisons of two or more things or ideas
- **Authority:** the opinion of an expert or famous person

Vocabulary choices also affect an essay's appeal. The best way to develop your academic vocabulary is to read academic or professional papers and to write and have your work read by native speakers such as peers or Writing Center Tutors (who are Kaplan University Professors). Native speakers can provide feedback on the areas that may need further clarification due to inappropriate phrasing choices.

ELL writers can however write with confidence knowing that Kaplan University is a growing, multicultural, and global educational institution. It is not expected that anyone lose his or her accent entirely or compromise any features that make a person’s voice unique. Additionally, the more you write for native speakers, the better you will become at making choices that appeal to their sensibilities. Native speakers must do the same as the social and political climate, the hot topics, and even the American audience and what appeals to them changes with the times.

**Audience Awareness.** Awareness of your audience or readers is essential to the success of your essay. Try to avoid seeing your reader as only your professor or your classmates who are writing the same assignment. Instead, write beyond the assignment; make it your own, and consider your readers
educated professionals from the American public who care about you and what you have to say. Your readers may have opposing viewpoints too, and they are the ones you are writing to convince, which is why audience awareness is so important. The reader needs to believe what you are saying, feel connected to the argument, and consider it logical. These three appeals, historically known as "ethos" (credibility), "pathos" (emotion), and "logos" (logic) are rooted in the philosophy of Aristotle (Greece, 384 BC – 322 BC,) who is revered by many as the founder of democracy.

In some cultures, it might not be acceptable to make an argument that is critical of the government, but in America, questioning and being critical of those in power is a fundamental element of democracy. Writing in your classes thus prepares you for expressing your voice in a democratic society. The skills required for writing effective arguments in English are the same critical thinking skills needed to engage in your professional communications and in America’s social and political debates as an informed, American citizen.

Essays are therefore exercises in questioning authority, not just the government but any institution that creates public policy and professional practices. In fact, your professors will expect you to take positions on controversial social, political, and professional issues. If this makes you uncomfortable, consider your essay as a new way to think and see a subject. Most people, after writing an essay, come away with completely new or renewed viewpoints. One’s thesis and argument need not be an absolute and unwavering proclamation that defines who you are but rather, one valid viewpoint among many on a controversial issue.

**Writing as a Process**

Writing as a process means writing in stages over time rather than all in one sitting. In this way, writing is like dating or getting to know a new friend. While the final product is the way you introduce your new friend to others, the process allows you to get to know your friend or in the case of writing, your subject or topic, first. Another way to think of it is by using the definition of “essay.” The English term “essay” comes from the French verb *essayer*, which means “to try.” In French, an *essai* is an attempt. In Spanish too, the verb *ensayo*, meaning "essay," also translates to “to try.” What does the verb for "essay" mean in your native language? The meaning “to try” or “attempt” carries over to English whereas an essay is an attempt or way to figure something out. Each stage in the process helps you to become more familiar with your subject and further determine your viewpoints on it, which also means you will have more to
say about it, resulting not only in a longer essay but a deeper one that shows critical and creative thinking.

Like sailing (See Figure 2: Navigating at Sea), the writing process allows you to navigate the waters of your imagination while keeping your eyes fixed on one main idea or destination.

Editing Your Essay

After you draft your essay and revise to solidify your thesis and organize an argument that is logical and appeals to your readers, you will want to focus on your sentences and edit them for clarity and concision. The following checklist covers aspects of the sentence most problematic for English language learners.

1. Do my sentences have the correct Word Order?

   Word Order is different in various languages; however, almost always “word order” refers to the position of the Subject and Object in relation to the main Verb. The English sentence is said to have a Subject Verb Object (SVO) order. Therefore, when composing a declarative sentence (an affirmative sentence), the subject of the sentence comes first, the verb second, and the object comes next if the
sentence uses a transitive verb which is a verb that takes a direct object directly, without a preposition before it. For example, Mice ate cheese. “Cheese” is the object that received the verb.

The Subject (S) of the sentence states who or what performs the main Verb. In the English language, the Subject is most often a noun or noun phrase that comes in the beginning of a main clause or simple sentence. There are some exceptions to this rule as in the case of a question sentence or imperative sentence. Question sentences in English have a particular word order that should be carefully studied. You may want to refer to the “Trouble Spots with Verbs” for more information. Furthermore, command sentences are written using the simple present tense and have an omitted subjects. For example, "Close the door." In this command, the subject you is understood but omitted from the sentence.

The Main Verb (V) of the sentence conveys the action performed by the Subject. In English, the Verb usually comes right after the Subject. Some tenses use auxiliary verbs to complete the action. For example, "She will come tomorrow." In this sentence, will is the auxiliary verb for the future tense, and it is required to express an action expected in the future.

The Object (O) of the sentence is a word or phrase that refers to the person or thing receiving the action of a transitive verb. For example, "The boy hit the ball." In this sentence, "ball" is the part of the sentence that receives the action; therefore, it is the Object of the sentence. Not all sentences have an object. Only sentences that use transitive verbs have an Object.

2. Are my adverbs positioned properly?
Adverbs, which qualify verbs, are usually placed after the verb and often end in with the suffix –ly.

Examples:
She drove carefully. (Carefully ends in -ly and follows the verb)
Robert spoke softly. (Softly ends in -ly and follows the verb)

Trouble Spots with Adverbs

Adverbs of “manner” usually follow the verbs they qualify. For example, “He runs very fast.”

Adverbs of “frequency” go between the Subject and the Verb. For example, "She always comes early."

Adverbs with “to be” verbs (am, are, is, was, were, been) follow the verb. For example, "He is always on time."
Adverbs with Compound Verbs go between the helping verb and the main verb. For example, "He will rarely come to class late."

3. Are my adjectives positioned properly?

Adjectives, which qualify nouns, are usually placed before the noun.

Examples:

He has a brand new red car.

The nice girl came to the party.

Adjectives with “to be” verbs (am, are, is, was, were, been) follow the verb. For example, "The car is new."

Trouble Spots with Adjectives

Adjectives used to compare two nouns.

For short adjectives (one or two syllables), add –er to the adjective. For example, Mary is older than Lucy.

For long adjectives (more than two syllables) add “more” to the adjective. For example, Mary is more beautiful than Lucy.

Adjectives used to show an object is "the most" out of many.

For short adjectives (one or two syllables), add –est. to the adjective. For example, Mary is the oldest child in her family.

For long adjectives (more than two syllables) add “most” in front of the adjective. For example, Mary is the most beautiful of all the children.

4. Are my word forms correct?

Word Forms relate to a word’s function in a sentence. The function of a noun is to name something; the function of a verb is to show action; the function of an adjective is to modify something, and so on.

There are techniques you can use to overcome misusing a word form (such as using a noun or adjective in place of an adverb).
1. Read your draft aloud sentence by sentence, and listen for the main words such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjective and connecting words. Reading to a native speaker, or having a native speaker read aloud to you may also help you to identify any word form errors.

2. Become familiar with word families. Here are some examples of word families:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Adverb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obsession</td>
<td>Obsess</td>
<td>Obsessive</td>
<td>Obsessively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation</td>
<td>Create</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Creatively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Checking for correct Word Form and Word Order often goes hand in hand. So, the next time your sentence does not “sound” right, be sure the forms for each part of the sentence are correct. This is the perfect place for you to use your dictionary if you have questions. The Writing Center’s Q&A Center is also open 24 hours.

5. Are my sentences complete? Are there any fragments?
A sentence is a group of words that expresses a complete idea. A sentence must have a subject and a conjugated verb. The verb expresses the action and the subject performs the action. In addition to your Grammar Check program, there are some techniques that you can use to check for sentence accuracy. For example, you might print a hard copy of your work, and go through each of your sentences highlighting your subjects one color and your verbs another.

Example: (1) Mary traveled to Mexico last year. 2) Once, arrived she called her friend Jose Luis.

*In sentence (1), we see a Subject (Mary) before the Verb (traveled.) This is a well structured sentence because it meets the requirement of a sentence having a subject and verb. In addition, this sentence presents a complete idea.

*In sentence (2), we see two verbs (arrived, called) with one Subject (she) in between the two verbs. Since this violates the English SVO Word Order, this group of words should send up a red flag that something is wrong with its structure.

Revised, this sentence would read: Once she arrived, she called her friend Jose Luis.

Trouble Spots with Sentences
Sentence Fragments are passages that begin with a capital letter and end with a period or other end mark but do not have all the elements needed for a complete sentence or clause. There are two types of fragments:

A phrase fragment is a group of words that do not have a subject and verb.

Examples:

Came home late. (No subject)

The man on the street. (No verb)

A clause fragment is a group of words that contains a subject and verb but cannot stand alone because it begins with a connecting word such as since, because, or when.

Examples:

Because I love to bake. (not a complete thought. “Because” indicates this clause needs to be connected to another clause such as “I bought a new oven because I like to bake.”)

When it stopped snowing. (not a complete thought. “When” indicates this clause needs to be connected to another clause such as “They plowed the roads when it stopped snowing.”)

6. Are my verbs in the correct tense and form?

Verbs convey the action of the sentence. The action can be physical, mental, or a state of being. The sentence, “He is happy” illustrates a state of being. Notice that because “he” is a singular subject noun, the verb is also in its singular form. The sentence “They are happy” uses plural subject and verb forms. The verb must always “agree” with the subject in this way. Verbs also convey the time an action took place such as whether it was in the past or the present. All sentences require a verb.

Trouble Spots with Verb Forms and Tenses

Subject-verb agreement. Every Subject is either a noun or pronoun, so Subjects are either in the plural (two or more) or the singular (one) form. Therefore, the Verb that follows the Subject must agree in number with the Subject by either being in the plural form or singular form. For example, “The boy studies hard.” In this sentence both the subject and verb are singular.
**Tense** is a verb conjugated to convey the time of the action: past, present, or future: They ran; they run or they are running; they will run. **Tense Switching** (a problem for ELL students) is when there is an unintentional switch of tenses during discourse.

Example: Lawrence studies and works very hard every day. Yesterday, he got up at 6 am and go to work for eight hours. After work, he went to visit his friend and go out to dinner.

(The simple present and past simple tense are not used accurately)

An edited version would be the following: Lawrence studies and works very hard every day. Yesterday, he got up at 6 am and **went** to work for eight hours. After work, he went to visit his friend and **went** out to dinner.

**Helping Verbs.** “Do or “did” are used as auxiliary verbs for the simple present and simple past tenses. They help these tenses to form negatives and questions.

Examples: Leonard eats dinner at 7 pm every day. (Simple present tense)

Does Leonard eat dinner at 7 pm every day?

Leonard does not eat dinner at 7 pm.

Leonard ate dinner at 7 pm yesterday (simple past tense)

Did Leonard eat dinner at 7 pm yesterday?

Leonard did not eat dinner at 7 pm yesterday.

**7. Are my proper nouns capitalized appropriately?**

In English, you capitalize all proper nouns, which are nouns that name a particular person, place, thing, animal or thing. Sometimes it is hard to tell what a proper noun is. One way to know is to ask how many things, persons, things, or ideas are there with the name.

For example: She lives in a white house. (There are many white houses in the world.)

She lives in the White House. (There is only one White House in Washington DC)

In addition to proper nouns, you capitalize proper nouns and other nouns like the months of the year (June, July, or March), the days of the week (Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday), but you do not capitalize the seasons of the year (spring, fall or summer.)
8. Are my possessive nouns accurately written?
Possessive nouns use an apostrophe (’) and an –s at the end of the noun to show possession.

Examples: I know that student’s name. (Use (’s) with singular form nouns)

I know those students’ name. (Use (’s) with plural from nouns)

An irregular plural noun is a plural noun that does not end in –s. With this nouns, use (’s.)

Example: The children’s toys were all over the floor. (The noun “children” is an irregular plural noun that does not end in “s,” so the possessive form uses (’s) at the end of the noun.)

9. Am I using the correct pronouns to replace my nouns?
Pronouns are words that take the place of a noun. There are many kinds of pronouns. They are categorized according to the noun you want to replace and the place of the sentence the noun is found.

Trouble Spot Various Types of Pronouns
Due to the various types of pronouns in the English language, it is easy for ELL students to get confused as to which pronoun to use.

Personal pronouns replace the nouns that name persons.

Example: Mary loves to watch movies.

She loves to watch movies. ("She" replaces the noun Mary.)

Note: I, you, he, she, we and they replace nouns that generally are found in front of the main verb of the sentence. I, you, he, she, it, we and they are generally found after the sentences' main verbs.

Examples: Mary gave Joseph a present. (Mary and Joseph are both personal nouns.)

She gave him a present. ("She" replaces the noun Mary and "him" replaces the noun.)

Reflexive pronouns indicate that the person who performs the action of the verb is the same person who receives the action.

Examples: Mary cut Mary. (Mary performs the action and receives the action.)

Mary cut herself. ("Herself" refers to Mary as the receiver of the action.)

Reflexive pronouns: Myself, yourself, herself, himself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves.

Possessive pronouns are place in front of the noun they qualify, and they indicate possession. Example:
Lidia lives in my house. ("My" tells whose house it is.)

The Possessive Pronouns are my, your, his, her, its, our, their.

**Editing and proofreading** your essay allows you to bring all the details into focus so that your work and writing as a whole puts forth a unified and convincing argument that appeals to your readers. This shell art (see Figure 3: Sculpture and Counter Made of Shells) illustrates how every element of your work from your stylistic choices to the structure and organization combine for a common goal.

![Figure 3: Sculpture and Counter of Shells (Image Credit: Chrissine Rios)](image)

*Figure 3: Sculpture and Counter of Shells (Image Credit: Chrissine Rios)*