

# English as a Second Language

## **GENERAL REMARKS**

Different cultures have different ideas about what constitutes an appropriate academic paper. In some cultures, where it is politically dangerous to write arguments, students are often taught to piece together their papers from certain "approved" materials. In other cultures, where argument is considered to be an overly "subjective" medium, students are taught to report just "the facts" in their papers. Imagine the distress these students feel when they arrive in America and are asked to create an academic argument.

If you are an ESL student, you may have indeed found that you have written an essay that you felt was very good, only to be told that it somehow wasn't appropriate or clear. When writing the American academic essay, you, as an ESL writer, should be aware of certain rhetorical conventions that most American readers and writers take for granted. You should understand that these conventions are not *rules* that you have to follow at all costs; rather, they reflect an American reader's *expectations*. If you violate these expectations, the reader will be confused, and your essay will not hit its mark. Accordingly, here are some things to consider as you write. (Note: You'll want to make use of the links we've provided here. They provide more complete discussion of some of the points at hand.)

## **THE AMERICAN ACADEMIC ARGUMENT**

When we say that academic papers must possess an arguable point, we don't mean to suggest that these papers are in any way contentious. Rather, we are trying to distinguish between a report, which summarizes information, and an argument, which presents a point of view. When you are writing an academic argument, you will want to consider what your position is on a particular topic. For example, if you are asked to read several articles that discuss corporate donations to the environmental movement, you will want to do more than report on which corporation has donated what to whom. Rather, you will want to consider your position on these donations. Do you think that these donations do more harm than good to the movement by undermining its integrity? Or do you think that these donations are necessary to the movement's success, and that "the ends justify the means"? Once you've determined your position on the subject, then you can begin to think about how to use what you have read to support your position. You've begun the process necessary to creating an appropriate academic argument.

## **THE AMERICAN THESIS SENTENCE**

In all American academic essays you'll find a thesis sentence - i.e., a sentence that declares what it is that the essay intends to argue. While the thesis sentence might appear anywhere in the academic paper, American readers generally expect to see it at the end of the introduction.

Some students from other cultures find the thesis sentence to be awkward, simplistic, or offensive. After all, why would a writer want to tell a reader the point of his argument right up front, and then spend eight pages (or twelve or twenty) repeating and elaborating on this argument? Won't a reader be insulted - as if you think he's not capable of "getting" your point unless you spell it out for him? Isn't it better to think of an essay as an intellectual walk through an idea, with the "point" of the essay expressed in the conclusion?

While this notion of the essay is certainly valid - and while several essays in English can indeed be described as intellectual "walks" through an idea - most academic essays use a

thesis sentence. The thesis helps the reader to focus on your argument by declaring it immediately. The reader knows what you intend to argue; the "suspense" lies in whether you will be able to convince him of your position, and how.

## **THE AMERICAN PARAGRAPH**

You should be aware of a few of the fundamentals of the American paragraph. First, each paragraph is controlled by a single idea. Second, these ideas are expressed in a single sentence, called a topic sentence. Third, the topic sentence usually appears as the first sentence in every paragraph - although experienced writers will play with the position of their topic sentences for emphasis, sometimes putting them in the middle or at the end of paragraphs.

ESL students also often have questions about a paragraph's length. The average paragraph is approximately 2/3 of a page long. However, you will write paragraphs that are longer or shorter than this. You shouldn't measure a paragraph by how long it is; rather, you should consider whether or not you have provided adequate evidence, whether you have limited each paragraph to a single idea, whether you have presented your ideas coherently, whether you have made good transitions between your points, and so on.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF AN AMERICAN ESSAY**

Different cultures have different values when it comes to arguing a point. In Arabic cultures, for example, digression is a positive quality: the more eloquently you can digress, the more impressed your audience will be. In Asian cultures one might note a tendency to talk "around" a point, never quite arriving at a conclusion. In the west, we value several qualities in a good argument: it should be straight-forward and concise, linear and logical. Your essay should model itself on an arrow: straight, sharp, and swift. It should not zigzag; it should not move in circles.

Of all these qualities, perhaps the most difficult to master is logic. Essays in English follow one of two kinds of reasoning: deductive or inductive. There are also common logical fallacies that you will want to avoid. Familiarize yourself with the principles of logic so that you might strengthen your arguments in English.

When structuring an essay in English, you should also be aware that there are several typical kinds of essays, each with a structure of its own:

- ***Narration***: In narration, the writer tells a story, usually arranging details chronologically.
- ***Description***: In description, the writer relates to the reader what she sees, hears, tastes, feels, and smells. The details are carefully arranged so that a particular impression is made.
- ***Process Analysis***: In writing process analysis, the writer describes a sequence of steps necessary to a process. These steps are arranged chronologically.
- ***Definition***: In writing definition, the writer considers the meaning of certain words or ideas. The writer structures this kind of essay primarily with illustrations that make his definition clear.
- ***Division and Classification***: In division and classification, a writer groups ideas, objects, or events into categories. The categories themselves provide the organizational structure for the essay.

- **Compare and Contrast:** In a compare and contrast essay, the writer finds similarities and/or differences between topics. Compare and contrast essays tend to follow two organizational patterns: ababab or aaabbb. (In other words, the writer makes a point about "a" and immediately brings up a corresponding point about "b"; or the writer will make all his points regarding "a" before turning his attention to "b.")
- **Cause and Effect:** In a cause and effect paper, the writer explains why something happened, or the influence of one event upon another. In this sort of paper, the writer must be very careful to use logic and evidence to show the relationship between an event and its cause, or an event and its outcome.

## **THE ENGLISH SENTENCE**

The basic structure of the English sentence is simple: subject first, then predicate. (The predicate always consists of a verb, and sometimes consists of a verb AND an object or a complement.) Of course, there are many variations on this theme. You can add information to the beginning of this basic structure; you can add information to the end. You can combine sentences using coordination (and, but, or, for, nor or yet). You can combine sentences using subordination (turning one of the sentences into a dependent clause or phrase before combining them). Experiment with your sentences in English, but make sure that you never lose sight of your basic structure. If you want to learn more about the English sentence, read our page on Style. Consult Joseph Williams *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, or any good grammar handbook.

## **USEFUL LINKS**

- **Dave's ESL Cafe:** *This is a great site with everything you can possibly imagine. Of particular use are the Help Center, which will answer your ESL questions 24 hours a day; the Quiz page, on which you can test yourself on points of grammar; the Student Link page, which provides links to many ESL sites on the Web. Also fun to look at are the Idiom and Phrasal Verb pages.* <http://www.eslcafe.com/>
- **Online Writing Assistant:** *This site has very good, very thorough information about all aspects of writing, including: Writing Argumentative Essays, Organizing Your Essays, and Revising and Editing Your Essays.* <http://www.powa.org/>
- **Guide to Grammar and Writing:** *This whole site is very good. Unlike many grammar sites, it offers advice on sentences and paragraphs.* <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>
- **Online English Grammar:** *This site offers a complete grammar handbook.* <http://www.edufind.com/english/grammar/index.cfm>
- **ESL Resources: Handouts & Guides:** *This site offers comprehensive handouts and tutorial on a variety of esl-related topics.* <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/>
- **Virginia Tech's Grammar Gym:** *Excellent online practice guide.* <http://athena.english.vt.edu/~IDLE/Gym2/index.html>
- **Grammar Girl Podcast:** *A fun and interesting way to learn about grammar.* <http://grammar.qdnow.com/>

Please check out the "Writing Resources" link on our OWRC homepage for additional resources!