

# **How to Write an Essay**

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## INTRODUCTION

Every student, in every country around the world, has something that he or she would like to say. As she attends classes, as she reads the literature, as she pursues her research, all in preparation for an essay that she must write, she develops her own opinions. She wants to learn, but she also wants to speak with a voice of her own.

More and more in this international world, students are required to write in English. But though the hard-working student may be taught so speak English, and to read English, and to write a sentence with correct English grammar, few students are ever taught how to write an essay. Thus, when asked to write an exam question, a term paper, or a job application, in English, many students feel completely unprepared. They have never rendered their thoughts into clear paragraphs in English.

The essay, at first, seems to be something long and complicated; it must be filled with a lot of information and ideas. When the student tries to write the first paragraph, her sentences become long and complicated. The information is not well organized. The ideas are unclear.

And her own opinions are lost. Her own voice does not speak.

This short booklet will enable you to write clear sentences in English. Then we will build a solid paragraph. Finally, we will craft a dynamic essay. Once you can write an essay, you will be able to write a research paper, a thesis, and even a book.

As your skills develop, your voice will become strong and clear.

With a doctorate in literature from Stanford University in 1974, John Slade has taught high school and university students for 25 years, in the United States, the Caribbean, Norway, and Russia.

He believes that the first global generation in human history is ready to build a future based on unprecedented international cooperation. He would like to help the members of that generation to develop their voices, so that they can speak clearly, and understand each other.

# I. The Sentence

Every sentence contains a **subject** and a **verb**. The subject is a *something*, and the verb is *what that something does*.

Here are some examples:

**She thinks.**

The **bird flies.**

The **sun is shining.**

Yesterday, **he told** a story.

Every once in a while, **I like** to sing.

During the rainy season, the **hills become** green, the **ponds fill** with water, and the **frogs croak** their love songs.

In your own writing, begin each sentence with a clear subject and verb. You may start the sentence with a phrase indicating time, but in the main part of the sentence, begin with a clear subject and verb. This simple structure will enable you to formulate more clearly, and more easily, what you want to say.

The curling **wave crashed** against the rocks.

From the top of the mountain, **Benjamin could see** many of the mountains of Vermont.

A long time ago, giant white **pinetrees towered** above all the other trees in the forest.

**She whispered** to herself to be calm, be calm, as she walked away.

The two **friends whistled** back and forth to each other.

Be sure that your *subjects are definite*, and that your *verbs are strong*. We could write, "It went over the fence." But we do not know what went over the fence, nor how it went. Much better is the sentence, "The **horse jumped** over the fence."

We can build on that sentence with more detail: "The wild **horse jumped** over the fence with astonishing grace." We can build even further: "The wild **horse**, discovering that it was trapped in a large corral, **galloped** across the trampled earth and **jumped** over the rail fence with astonishing grace."

In each sentence, we have a subject that is clear and precise, and a verb that is strong and precise.

Whenever you write, mark each subject with a *yellow* highlighter, and each verb with *orange*. Your paper will thus be covered with pairs of yellow-orange: actors, and action. Run your eye down the page, reading each pair out loud. Is each pair as clear and strong as it could be? The job of fixing these pairs is much easier than the job of trying to fix long complicated sentences.

You will help yourself enormously if you write short sentences. Do not try to put an entire idea into one sentence. Use several sentences to put an entire idea into a paragraph.

When I read the first batch of essays from my students in September, I find that almost every essay is a bucket of snakes. The sentences are long and winding, sometimes twisted into knots. Two or three sentences may be connected with a variety of punctuation into one long monster. The snakes have swallowed their subjects, so that I have great difficulty finding them. They snakes have also swallowed their verbs, and thus every snake now has two lumps in its belly, subject and verb, often with a long and wriggling distance between them.

Reading through an essay in September is like reaching into a bucket of snakes and pulling out the horrible creatures one by one. With a freshly sharpened knife, I cut their heads off.

A sentence should not be like a snake, but like a bird. Each bird has a body: the subject. Each bird has wings: the verb. And each bird has a tail: the rest of the sentence. Every bird is distinct as it flies across the blue sky, and yet birds may fly together in a flock: the paragraph.

As a training exercise, *limit your sentences to ten words*. Study each word, to be sure that you need it. Cut what you do not need, especially any repetition.

Practice by writing a description of your favorite place in the world. As you describe the top of a mountain, or a football stadium, or a church, craft each sentence to make it short and clear. The first dozen sentences may be a challenge; the next dozen will be much easier. You will find your rhythm: subject, verb, and important details. Subject, verb, and important details.

You will discover how much easier it is to write short clear sentences, than to wrestle with a bucket of snakes.

Of course, once you have mastered the simple sentence, you can develop your writing according to your own style. If you are able to write a clear and beautiful melody, you can develop that melody with a multitude of variations, until you have written a complete symphonic movement. But first, you must be able to write the initial melody, the initial sentence, so that it says exactly what you want it to say.

When my students hand in their second essay in October, I should see yellow and orange spots covering every page. If I do not see bright spots of color, I refuse to accept the paper.

When I take an essay into my hand, I glance at a paragraph in the middle of the first page. If I read three or four short clear sentences, I keep the paper. If I find even one snake, I return it to the student who seems to like reptiles.

Once you have mastered the short clear sentence, with a specific subject and a strong verb, you are one third of the way on your journey to become an excellent writer.

But you are much further than that on your quest to be able to speak with your own voice. For as you craft every sentence, you make it say exactly what is in your mind, what is in your heart. Sentence by sentence, you are telling the world who you are.

## Exercises

- A. Turn the following monsters into short, clear sentences. Some snakes may become two or three sentences. Use specific subjects and strong verbs. Cut all unnecessary words.
1. This is something I had been thinking about, a vacation, like maybe in Spain.
  2. It was sort of interesting to think that I could learn to play the violin.

3. So like I was running down the hill when I sort of saw something somewhere in the distance, and it was brown and big and looked like maybe it was a horse.
4. Maria and Josephine were talking with each other and then suddenly she left the room.
5. It was just yesterday when I thought about it, wondering if it was a good idea to get it started.
6. Mikhail, upstairs where he often spent his afternoons reading in his favorite chair, unless he was out fishing in the river that wasn't all that far from the house, keeping his feet warm with good wool socks, and with a cup of tea, was reading a book about fishing.
7. Consequently, if everything is taken into account, it was something that would be remembered as very special.
8. Just inside the door, where an old mop stood leaning against the wall (beside it was a bucket half-filled with dirty water), water that would soon freeze if someone did not start a fire in the stove, except there wasn't any firewood to start it with, a cat, one of the original five kittens, mostly orange with white paws, meowed to ask about, where was its bowl of milk?
9. If you look closely at the map, you—don't forget to put your glasses on—perhaps will discover that Krasnodar is a city where they grow sunflowers, somewhat close on the map to the Black Sea.
10. While she was writing a letter to her, about which I could only guess, Martin, lying quietly on his bed, on top of the blue blanket which his mother had made for him on his birthday some years ago, and thus a bit worn, heard a bird outside the open window, open because it was a nice warm day in May.

B. During the course of a day, write ten sharp sentences which describe your surroundings.

Read them the following day. Can you cut unnecessary words? Can you add important details? Can you change words to make them *more specific*, *more powerful*?

C. As you read a textbook, a newspaper, or a magazine, underline the subject and verb of each sentence in three of four paragraphs. Could you improve the writing?

D. Write a sentence using each of the following subjects.

1. hummingbird
2. bolt of lightning
3. turtle
4. ice cube
5. paint brush
6. spirit
7. question
8. history
9. laughter
10. silence

E. Write a sentence using each of the following verbs.

1. howls
2. was eating
3. would have forgotten
4. flew
5. became
6. is sleeping
7. knows
8. will travel
9. should not have paid
10. was ice skating

## II. The Paragraph

Each paragraph is a box in which you keep an idea. That idea should be stated clearly in one sentence, the **Topic Sentence**. The other sentences in the paragraph support that Topic Sentence with **examples, statistics, a relevant quotation, or further information**. The Topic Sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. The other sentences support that idea with evidence.

Each paragraph has its own unique collection of information. Paragraph by paragraph, idea by idea, these boxes follow each other in a sequence. They take the reader step by step through a description, an argument, a process, a period of time, or a debate. All the boxes in an organized row, all the ideas in a logical sequence, all the steps in a clear path, form the essay.

For example:

**I don't think my girlfriend likes me.** The first time I tried to talk with her, three weeks ago, she said, "Drop dead, creep." Last week, when I tried to give her a red rose, she backed away as if I were trying to give her an eel. And today, she returned my dog tag, a little silver disk with my name on it. I put it on her homeroom desk this morning, but at noon, right after third period, I found the silver disk on its silver chain in the wet dirt at the bottom of my locker, between my rubber boots. She must have slid the dog tag through the ventilation slot at the top of my locker. She even stuck chewing gum over my name. I can see the print in the pink gum of her thumb.

Here is another example:

**The weather in Bodø on the western coast of Norway is always changing, and always extreme.** If the wind is from the southwest, it brings driving rain from the sea. Two days later, when the wind blows from the north, the sky becomes completely clear. Puddles turn to ice, and at night, northern lights ripple like green ribbons across the entire sky. Then the wind swings again, clouds sweep in from the south, and soon

everyone is out shoveling a half-meter of heavy wet snow. Magnus Nielsen, a fisherman who moors his boat at the Bodø wharf, has battled the weather along the Norwegian coast for sixty years. “I sleep in my raincoat and mittens,” he says over a cup of steaming coffee. “If I take them off, I just have to put them back on again.”

Paragraphs do not have to be long. They can be as short as two or three sentences. Often a long paragraph can be broken into two shorter paragraphs, but each one must have its own Topic Sentence.

The topic sentence is often the first sentence of a paragraph. It thus introduces the idea. It can also be the last sentence, when information, serving as evidence, leads to a conclusion. Sometimes the topic sentence appears in the middle of a paragraph, surrounded by relevant details.

I ask my students to underline the topic sentence in each paragraph of everything that they write. I also ask them to list these key sentences on a separate page at the end of the essay. The topic sentences, all alone, should follow each other in a logical progression of ideas. These interlocking ideas, link by link, form the chain of the essay.

For some students, the easiest way to write an essay is to begin by writing a sequence of topic sentences. If a student can first put together a row of boxes, then she knows exactly into which box to put her information. The ideas flow, and the information builds in a convincing way.

## Exercises

A. Write a topic sentence, “I like \_\_\_\_\_ for several reasons.” Fill in the blank with anything of your choice: your favorite food, sport, music, place, occupation, or person. Now develop the paragraph with evidence, examples, quotations, a stunning statistic.

Over the course of a day, write five such paragraphs.

B. Open one of your textbooks to the beginning of a chapter, then underline the topic sentence in each paragraph on the first two pages. Are the sentences clear and strong? Could you write them more clearly?

The first paragraph of an essay, the **Introduction**, must contain a statement of the essay's main idea. The topic sentences that follow, in paragraph after paragraph, should develop or explain that main idea. They lead to a conclusion at the end of the essay, the last, inevitable link of the chain.

Therefore, when a student is asked to write an essay, she should begin by writing, in one clear sentence, *the main idea of her paper*. She may spend an entire day, while attending classes and working after school, thinking about that one sentence. When she has defined, for herself, exactly what she will write about, then the rest of the job becomes much easier.

Let's say that you have to write an essay about a novel that you have read. You have spent three months reading seven hundred pages about two characters, Benjamin and Genevieve. Because the book is an historical novel, you have learned a lot about the American Revolution. But what will you write about in your essay?

Many stories involve a decision. The character must decide what to do, which way to go, or whether or not to do something. Focus on one character as he makes that important decision. What are the reasons for his decision? Are some reasons personal, while others are forced upon him by events in the world? Are some reasons good, some bad? How does his decision affect his future? How does it affect other characters?

Now you have one main idea, the character's decision, which you can examine in a series of topic sentences: each topic sentence will state a reason for that decision. Thus, you can explore the decision from many angles. You should use short quotations from the novel to provide evidence for each reason. Your argument will be very clear, and very powerful.

For example, you may state in the opening paragraph, **“Despite his initial determination never to become a soldier, Benjamin is compelled by his growing belief in the American rebellion to join General Washington’s army.”** You continue with a brief description of your method of analysis: “This essay will examine the transition from Benjamin

as a pacifist on board the frigate, to Benjamin as a raging warrior on Breed's Hill." Then, paragraph by paragraph, with quotes from the story, you would outline the steps of Benjamin's transition.

Here is another example:

The topic sentence in the first paragraph may state: "Five major events during the first half of the Twentieth Century brought about the creation of the United Nations in 1945." The following sentence, still in the first paragraph, lists these five events: "World War One, the creation and demise of the League of Nations, the Depression, World War Two, and the invention of atomic weapons all led people around the world to see the need for some institution which would enable nations to resolve their conflicts in a peaceful manner."

In a short essay, the first paragraph, which serves as the **Introduction**, would be followed by a series of five paragraphs in the **Body** of the essay: each paragraph would be devoted to one of the five major events. In a longer essay, several paragraphs would be devoted to each event.

The final paragraph of the essay, the **Conclusion**, contains a statement about the original main idea. Thus, all of the topic sentences, from the Introduction, through the Body, to the Conclusion, should follow each other with a clear logic.

## Exercises

A. Write your own **Main Topic Sentence**, followed by five or more secondary topic sentences which support, explain, or develop the main idea.

For example: "I decided to attend \_\_\_\_\_ University for five good reasons." You can now state each reason in a topic sentence. Very quickly, you have built the skeleton of your essay.

Another example: "My religious belief is based on seven important principles."

Another example: "I have eight good friends, each of them a unique and talented individual."

Write five more Main Topic Sentences, followed by a series of secondary topic sentences. You may even write the Concluding Topic Sentence at the end. You do not need to go into detail. You are writing only the topic sentences, one for each paragraph: you are building *the skeleton of your essay*.

B. Describe a place by first introducing it, and then, paragraph by paragraph, box after box, by adding details from a number of viewpoints. You can describe your favorite lake at dawn, at mid-morning, at noon, at late afternoon, at evening, and at night. You can describe your university as you approach it from the street, as you enter the front door, as you walk along a corridor, as you enter a classroom, as you take your seat, and as the lecture begins.

**Whenever you write, write about something that you care about. Your passion will give energy to your sentences.**

### III. The Essay

The first paragraph of the essay is the **Introduction**. It must contain a **Main Topic Sentence**, which states the theme, or main idea, of the entire essay. The introduction may also explain *how* the writer is going to develop that idea.

For example:

**“Many countries have changed their energy policies in response to global warming.** This essay will examine the shift to clean energy in five countries, located on five different continents around the world.”

You will help your reader, and yourself, if you state *what* you are going to write about, and *how* you are going to develop your argument. You can use phrases such as, “This essay will examine . . . will analyze . . . will explore . . . will follow step by step . . . will discuss both sides of the issue.” Your *subject*, and your *method*, should both be very clear.

The following paragraphs, in the **Body** of the essay, develop the main idea. They explain it, present arguments for and against it, examine it piece by piece, or show how the subject has altered over time. The first paragraph introduces the idea; the Body then *does* something with it.

You will help your reader to follow your argument if you use key words, like signposts, along the way. You can use the words **First, . . . Second, . . . Third, . . .** at the beginning of your paragraphs. You can clarify the relationship between paragraphs by using specific **connecting words**. For example:

On one hand, . . . On the other hand, . . .

In contrast, . . .

Accordingly, . . . Therefore, . . . Thus, . . . Consequently, . . . Hence, . . .

As a result, . . .

Finally, . . . Ultimately, . . . In conclusion, . . .

Use these connecting words to clarify the logic of your essay.

The last paragraph of the essay, the **Conclusion**, summarizes your argument. It may contain a decision based on the evidence. It concludes the logic of your essay with a now inevitable verdict.

You should be able to read your Introduction, then your Conclusion, and see a clear connection between them.

Sometimes a student has read the literature and done the research before she starts her essay . . . but still has no idea what to write. She knows only that she must turn in a three-page paper tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, or her teacher will cut her head off.

What should you do if you don't know how to get started?

Put down your pen, turn off the computer, leave the desk heaped with books, and go for a walk. While you amble through a park, ask yourself, "What is the main thing I learned from that story?" "What do *I* want to say about wind turbines?" "What is the Big Picture?" Forget all the details. Try to find the main idea of your essay: the idea that *you care about most*. Then state that idea in one clear sentence.

Walk a while longer with your sentence. Do you like the idea? What can you do with it? Can you break it into components? Can you describe a step-by-step progression? Let your thoughts flow until your Idea has a life of its own.

Do not return to your desk until you know the main idea of your essay, and can state that idea *with your own voice*. Do not replicate your teacher's voice, nor the voice of some dreary textbook writer. Speak with your own voice. Then, hopefully, every topic sentence that follows will also ring with the vibrancy of your unique voice. The information will fall into place. You will write an essay which is based on your research, but which ultimately comes from You.

Now give your essay a **Title**. It may be a straightforward title, such as:

**An analysis of "Wuthering Heights",  
a novel by Emily Bronte**

Or it may be more imaginative, such as:

## **Thwarted Passion on the Heath**

The title should relate in some intriguing way to the central theme of your essay.

The essay can have many different forms, each with a specific purpose.

1. **Persuasive argument:** a reasoned attempt to persuade the reader.
2. **Book report:** an analysis of literature.
3. **History report:** a description, with analysis, of past events.
4. **Process:** a step-by-step description of how to do something.
5. **Compare and contrast:** an examination of two related subjects.
6. **Debate:** an examination, for and against, of both sides of an issue.
7. **Research paper:** an essay based on information from many sources.
8. **Description:** a portrait of a person or place.

Your first essays should be short, only two or three pages long. Once you have mastered the three-page essay, you are ready to write a document of any length. You are even ready to write your first book, for a book is a series of chapters: a series of essays.

**The world is waiting to hear your voice.**

We will now take a look at examples of three kinds of essays. Study the topic sentences, and the supporting sentences. Study the flow of ideas. Study the introductions, and conclusions.

# 1. The Persuasive Argument

## The Four Components of a Real Education

The traditional education is acquired inside a classroom. The students learn from their teachers and from their books; only rarely do they venture outside the school. Their goal is to pass the exams, to gather enough credits, and then to graduate. Such an academic education, limited to the confines of the classroom, is far from complete. **Young people today must prepare to become citizens of the world.** This essay will briefly examine four important components of a complete education, components which are too often missing.

**First, students should spend a significant amount of time outside of school, working as volunteers in their community.** By visiting elderly people, students can learn about the history of their community. By working at an animal shelter, they can develop a sense of responsibility. Volunteer work at a hospital, a newspaper, or a local business can introduce a student to a possible career. Most important, students gain rich experience by visiting real people in the real working world. Every high school student, and every college student, should work as a volunteer in the community for at least one hundred hours, as a requirement for graduation.

**Second, students should work as volunteers in the natural world.** No student can fully appreciate the importance of nature unless she is outside exploring, with binoculars and boots. We depend on our human communities, but we depend as well on the healthy Earth. We must learn about both, and work to benefit both. Every student should develop a project which requires outdoor research, and some constructive work, in the field of ecology. While cleaning up a wetland, a group of students could build a set of birdhouses, and possibly a walkway for visitors. An outdoor ecology project should be a requirement for graduation in every school.

**Third, students must reach out from their community, and their country, to other students around the world, so that together we can build a better world community.** With the Internet, students who live in

the mountains of Norway can share an ecology project with students who live in the mountains of Peru. Students from Sweden can discuss an election in their country with students from South Africa. Students in Canada can share their stories and their music with writers and musicians their own age, but who live on the other side of the equator. They might even write a newspaper together. Schools can thus build a global research network, based on personal communication. Over the years, shared projects could lead to a much healthier global community, and a much healthier Earth.

**Fourth, students need to visit other cultures, other countries, where people speak a different language and think about the world in a different way.** Even one trip out of our day-to-day world shows us that other worlds exist, and that they can be just as important, just as valuable, as our own world. Students should explore new ways of thinking, new styles of education, new attitudes toward the community. Although traveling can be expensive, every student should try to acquire a passport, with at least one stamp in it, before graduation.

**In conclusion, a true education must reach beyond the classroom, to the local community, to the global community, to the local ecosystem, and to the global ecosystems of planet Earth.** Only such a complete education will enable us to become citizens of the world, living together in peace, health, and prosperity.

\* \* \*

You could expand this essay to ten pages, or to one hundred. You could provide examples of community projects, or sister schools, already in operation. Short quotes from teachers and students whom you interview might liven the text. You could quote as well from a Greek philosopher. Statistical information on governmental funding for cross-cultural education would be helpful. What programs exist in other countries? What difficulties does a school face when it tries to extend education beyond the classroom?

Your essay can develop in whatever direction you choose, as long as it has a **clear purpose** and a **logical structure**.

## 2. Book Report

### **Becoming Alive in the Wild Mountains Of Norway**

In John Slade's novel, "A Journey Out of Darkness," one character emerges from years of anger and depression, while the other character emerges from death itself. Set in an old log house beside a Norwegian fjord, as well as in the neighboring mountains, the story follows these two characters as they enable each other to become more and more alive. (By the time they part from each other at the end of the story, they have both become vibrantly alive.) However, before Michael can become fully alive, he must make a major decision. Anna Sofia, his guide through the mountains, helps him along the way. **Without such a decision, the novel implies, we live only half a life.** This essay will examine Michael's journey from the darkness of a life without purpose, to the growing light of a bold new future.

**Michael Lanes, an American English teacher, came to Norway to find a fresh start in life.** He tells Anna Sofia, ". . . something was missing in Florida. Or, something in *me* was missing, in Florida. I kept thinking, maybe there's a part of me that's Norwegian, that I'll never find in Florida. Maybe there's a piece of me in Norway, and I've got to climb a mountain to find it." (24) Anna Sofia, who died in 1917 in this log house at the age of twenty-two, comes alive in Michael's presence, for his enthusiasm awakens her. (He is renting the log house while he teaches at the College of Bodo.) Michael is a photographer with a keen eye for the pinks and oranges in the snow on the slopes of towering mountains lit by the polar sun. As he awakens into his new life, he enables the spirit of a girl, who once had a keen eye for the pinks and oranges on the white slopes of her beloved mountains, to awaken as well. Together, they live. She teaches, he learns, and though she is a spirit, a ghost, they both fall very happily in love.

**Anna Sofia first teaches Michael**, while taking him to a mountaintop where he sees a pair of eagles, **to purge himself of the old gloomy thoughts, and to turn instead toward something more positive.** Because she is a spirit, Anna Sofia can feel only what Michael feels: she shares his emotions exactly. Thus, she will not allow Michael to feel disappointed. She simply won't allow it. He, in turn, does his best to follow her, with his backpack and boots, up every slope (though he is terrified of heights), across every jagged ridge, to every wind-swept peak in the mountains where she had hiked and camped as a girl. As Anna Sofia guides, and Michael explores, he takes pictures of her in her mountains, pictures in which she, as a ghost, will never appear.

Later in the story, they spend Christmas in Oslo, or in Kristiania, as Anna Sofia had known the city in her time. She had been a fisherman's daughter in a tiny village beside the fjord, far above the polar circle, and thus in her short life she had never visited Kristiania. Before beginning his present job at the College of Bodø, Michael had studied Norwegian in a summer school program in Oslo. He now offers to be Anna Sofia's guide in modern Oslo at Christmas. The result is a nightmare, and a major decision. **Faced with Anna Sofia's raging anger, Michael decides to start reading, to start learning, to go back to college in a completely new field.** He wants a graduate degree in solar engineering, so that he can help to move the world out of the Dark Ages of Oil.

**But reading books is not enough, though Michael proves to be an excellent student.** Throughout this novel, the story of a two journeys, each awakening, each deepening of feeling, leads eventually to a further awakening. Anna Sofia leads Michael on skis at night up a moonlit slope, to a snow-capped dome of granite. They must take off their skis and climb in their boots up a jumble of rocks to the top of the snowy dome; the knee-deep snow glows radiant white in the moonlight. Then, for several minutes, Anna Sofia becomes the Angel of Death. Michael feels not only his own death, but the death of the living world. Like the moon, a sphere of dead rock, the earth could become empty of all life. This one time, Anna Sofia does not feel Michael's living; rather, Michael feels Anna Sofia's slow dying in 1917.

**On his knees in anguish, he feels something else, something which he had never felt before.** "In that moment was born in me a love more powerful than any love I had ever known. My heart opened to the

mountains and took them in; yes, there was room for all of them. The lake and its island I could have scooped up in my arms and hugged against me. A slender birch nearby, its trunk gleaming white as it rose to its crown of black branches, became vivid, sacred.” (145)

**Then he is ready.** He writes an essay for his university application with both determination and confidence. He has found his goal, and now he can work toward it: he will help to harness the sun, in order to provide clean energy to a dirty planet.

**Together, Anna Sofia and Michael climb one last mountain.** Steigtinden is a steep slab of jagged black rock, jutting into the sky like the blade of an axe. Never has Michael been more terrified than when he stands near the edge of the blade and stares straight down a thousand feet at the smashed boulders below; Anna Sofia loves that feeling of fright.

As the golden sun of June 21 circles low over the sea to the west, and then to the northwest, swinging toward due north at midnight, **Anna Sofia knows that something is about to happen.** But she does not know what. I will leave that to the reader of this fine novel to find out.

In conclusion, though Michael has a long road still ahead of him, **he will be guided by his purpose: to preserve the living earth.** He will not live half a life, dull years that stretch on and on, but will live an increasingly full life, from awakening to awakening, from mountaintop to mountaintop, hoping that he too might guide someone else along the way.

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Sometimes the best way to begin a book report is by finding a dozen quotes from the book. When you read, mark passages that you may want to use later for a quote in an essay. Once you have chosen a dozen good quotes, look at them together: can you wrap a theme, an idea, around them? Do you see a pattern, or a sequence of steps?

You do not need to use all twelve quotes in your essay. Two or three will do. But it may be easier to think about a few key quotes while you write, than to try to think about the whole book.

Do not be discouraged if the first essay which you write in September comes back with a lot of red marks on it. I usually empty three or four red pens while I go through a batch of September essays. If a paper is really bad, I just dunk it into a bucket of red paint.

Your paragraphs do not have to be as long as those in the sample essay. A paragraph can be as short as two sentences, although three is better. If you write with three to five sentences in your paragraphs, you will learn to build paragraphs as solid as bricks.

### 3. The History Report

Perhaps the most difficult type of essay to write is the History Report. Students usually try to examine too large a period in history, rather than one important moment. No student could describe the entire American Civil Rights Movement in three pages, but she *could* describe the day in 1955 when the Movement began.

Once you have read enough to develop a general understanding of a period of history, focus on *one important event*. Writing the essay will be much easier if you limit yourself to *one dramatic moment*, which you can describe in detail.

How is that moment relevant to events in the world today? You could discuss this connection in your conclusion.

In a History Report, as in other types of essay, you will probably gather information from several sources, such as books, magazines, the Internet, and people whom you interview. You must give credit to your sources, for several reasons. One, if we borrow information, then we should say “Thank you”. Two, we may be legally required to give credit; otherwise, we would be *stealing* the information. And three, your footnotes and bibliography will enable the reader to check your information, and maybe to read further about the subject.

If the quotations in your essay are all from one book, you may indicate the page of your quote in parentheses, right in the text. “. . . in this manner.” (32) But if you have two or more sources, you must use footnotes.

Each sentence which contains information from a specific source, whether that information is a fact, an idea, or a quotation, must be followed by a footnote. (1) This number, in parenthesis at the end of the sentence, refers to a number on a page entitled **Footnotes** at the end of the essay, where all the footnotes are listed. On that page, each footnote provides the name of the author of your source, and the page on which the information can be found.

1. Robinson, page 23.

If no author’s name is provided, as may be the case with a newspaper article, then use the name of the newspaper, the date, and the page.

2. **The New York Times**, January 3, 2011, page 32.

Complete information about all of your sources can be found in your **Bibliography**. On this page, which follows the Footnotes page, you must provide at least five pieces of information about each source: author, title, publisher, place published, and date of publication.

Branch, Taylor, "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63," Simon and Schuster, New York, 1988.

If your source is a magazine or newspaper article, provide the titles of both the magazine or newspaper, and the article. If no author's name is given, begin the listing with the title of the magazine or newspaper.

"**The New Yorker**," March 13, 2000, "Showcase: March from Selma," pages 58-59, New York.

On a computer, you may use **boldface** for the title of the **magazine**, and quotes for the title of the "article."

If your source is a person whom you have interviewed, provide the person's name, position (at a company, within the government, etc.), and the **place** and **date** of the interview. If you quote that person, be sure that you use his exact words: best to take notes during the interview.

If your source is a website, provide the appropriate information, so that your reader will be able to find it. Be sure to note the **date** when you visited the website.

With the information in your Bibliography, the reader should be able to find your sources in a library or bookstore, or on the Web. Then, using your Footnotes, he can find the exact page that you referred to, and the information which you used in your essay.

Footnotes and Bibliography are a way of saying, "Thank you".

## The Courage of Rosa Parks

The American Civil Rights Movement, a peaceful rebellion which took place from 1955 to 1968, greatly diminished the evil of racism in the United States. The Movement was led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, until his death by assassination on April 4, 1968, at the age of thirty-nine. (1) Although Dr. King became the voice of the Movement, he did not start it. Late in the afternoon on Thursday, December 1, 1955, a tired seamstress named **Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus** in Montgomery, Alabama. (2) This essay will examine the events of the first five days of December, so that we can better understand the initial spark of the rebellion.

**In the American South, until the Civil Rights Movement changed both the laws and a way of life, blacks had to ride in the back of the bus.** White passengers sat in the front of the bus. Blacks could sit in the middle, until a white man wanted to sit in a middle seat. When one white man sat down in the middle of the bus, all the blacks who had been sitting there had to get up from their seats and move to the back of the bus.

After working all day as a seamstress in a downtown department store, Rosa Parks did not get on the first bus that came to her stop; it was crowded, and she did not want to stand. So she waited for the next bus. When it came, she saw that the seats in the back were filled, but that the middle seats were empty. So **she sat in the middle**, tired, thinking about the chores she would have to do when she got home.

After a few stops, the seats in the front of the bus were filled, and a white man wanted to sit in the middle section. That meant that four black passengers, Rosa Parks among them, would have to stand at the back of the bus. Three of the four stood up and moved, but **Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat**. She even asked the driver, "Why do you push us around?" (3) The driver got off the bus to call the police. A policeman boarded the bus, arrested Rosa Parks and took her to jail.

At the police station, **Rosa Parks was allowed to phone her mother**. Her mother phoned a black leader in Montgomery, who phoned a white lawyer. Together, E. D. Nixon and Clifford Durr, along with Durr's wife Virginia, hurried to the police station, paid the bail and got Rosa Parks safely out of a very dangerous situation. (4) They took her home, where her husband, Raymond, a barber, had been extremely worried about her.

**But the incident did not end there.** News traveled quickly through the black neighborhoods of Montgomery: a black woman had refused to move to the back of the bus. A boycott of the bus company was planned for Monday, December 5. (5) On Sunday morning, December 4, in black churches throughout Montgomery, ministers spoke about segregation, about Rosa Parks, about the boycott. (6) They announced that a meeting would be held in the Holt Street Baptist Church on Monday evening, after the one-day boycott, so that the community could plan the next step.

**On Monday morning, December 5, 1955, the buses traveling through the streets of Montgomery were almost entirely empty of black passengers.** (7) The blacks were greatly heartened that everyone was cooperating. Nothing like this had ever happened in Montgomery before.

On Monday evening, over five thousand blacks assembled at the Holt Street Baptist Church to discuss what they would do next. **One of the speakers that evening was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a pastor at another church in Montgomery.** Speaking from the pulpit, he told the crowded church, “You know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.” (8) He spoke, however, not only about oppression. He spoke as well about the method he recommended to resist that oppression: nonviolent protest. He had studied the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, and he wanted to put Gandhi’s techniques to work in America.

The blacks of Montgomery decided to continue their boycott. During further meetings, **they decided on four demands.** (9) First, the bus company must allow passengers to sit wherever they could find an empty seat. Second, the company must hire black drivers. Third, the company must extend bus routes into black neighborhoods. And fourth, the company must offer equal courtesy to all passengers. Until these demands were met, the blacks would walk to work. Those few with automobiles would drive them as taxis for people who had difficulty walking. Although the bus company thought that the blacks would soon become tired of walking, the boycott lasted until December 21, 1956, a little over a year. (10)

**Parallel to the boycott was a court case: black lawyers filed a suit claiming that Montgomery’s segregation laws on city buses were unconstitutional.** The case rose to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled, on November 13, 1956, that Alabama’s law requiring segregation on buses was unconstitutional. (11) Thus, a combination of human courage and

legal authority forced the bus company to integrate its buses, hire black drivers, expand its routes, and offer its services with equal courtesy to all customers.

The Civil Rights Movement, with Dr. King as its spokesman and leader, spread first across the American South, then across the entire country. **When Dr. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963, people across America and around the world were listening. (12)** Dr. King told his audience, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Though Dr. King was killed in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968, many people around the world keep his dream alive today.

In conclusion, the desire for freedom had lived for so long in so many hearts among the black people of America, that only a small nudge was needed for that collective desire to become a steadily growing movement. **Rosa Parks, one of the common people, provided that nudge.**

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You may have marked the topic sentences differently, depending on your understanding of the main idea in a paragraph. That is fine, as long as each paragraph has a key sentence.

## Footnotes

1. Shulke, page 21.
2. Schulke, page 25.
3. Schulke, page 25.
4. Branch, pages 120, 129.
5. Branch, page 131.
6. Branch, page 133.
7. Schulke, page 29.
8. Branch, page 139.
9. King, Coretta Scott, page 62.
10. King, Martin Luther, "Where Do We Go From Here?", page 181.
11. United States Information Agency, "The Civil Rights Movement," page 3.
12. King, Martin Luther, "Strength to Love," page 56.

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Because electronic sources are continually changing, refer to your source in a way that will enable your reader to find it. Be sure to include the date.

We are waiting, we are waiting, we are waiting to hear **your voice**.