

HELEN COX

Essay Excellence

Write better essays and improve your grades

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This little book is dedicated to the memory of my mother and father. They both believed in the power of education in order to change lives. They had the most incredible work ethic, which they instilled in me. I will forever be grateful to them.

You don't have to be anything but yourself
to be worthy.

Tarana Burke

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	The four types of sentences	2
3	Crafting powerful introductions	10
4	Constructing cohesive paragraphs	15
5	Seamless transitions for fluid writing	21
6	Writing strong conclusions	25
7	Conclusion	28

Introduction

My name is Helen and I am the founder of Aspire Global Education and Training Limited. I founded this company in order to help people who are studying courses in law, finance and/or accounts and who need that little bit extra in order to get the best grades possible.

Many university courses expect their students to be able to write essays or assignments and being able to write these well, will have a significant impact upon a student's overall grade.

This little book was written as a handy guide to help university or A-Level students improve their grades in their studies and feel more confident with essay/assignment writing in general.

I hope you find this book useful.

The four types of sentences

There are four main types of sentences that you might be expected to write during your studies. It will not be directly stated in your essay or assignment instructions, but the person marking your work will want to see you use different types of sentences, for example, not just simple sentences (which may not make your work look academic enough) or solely compound-complex sentences (which could stop your writing from flowing naturally). The key is to be able to use all four types of sentences and being able to construct them correctly.

Clauses

Before we start to study the four types of sentences, we very quickly need to learn about or review clauses. Why? The answer is because these will feature later on when we come to learn about the different types of sentences that you may be expected to write. It will be a considerable help to you to be able to recognise and use them now.

There are two main types of clauses; independent and dependent clauses. An independent clause has both a subject and an object and it shows a

complete thought. This means that an independent clause can be a sentence on its own.

You might have heard of English being described as an “SVO” language. This means that it contains a subject, verb and object. The subject is the topic of the sentence and is usually a noun or pronoun e.g. the city, she. The verb is the word used to describe an action (to eat), a state (to be hungry) or something that happens (to change). The object is the person or thing to which a feeling or action is directed e.g. She helped him. Here “She” is the subject and “him” is the object. An independent clause can therefore be a complete sentence.

Dependent clauses, on the other hand, do not begin with a subject. Instead, they start with a subordinator. These are words such as “who”, “that”, “because”, “if” or “when”, for example “because he did not study hard enough” or “if the recession continues for another two years”. Dependent clauses are not complete sentences and, as such, cannot be a sentence on their own. They are sometimes referred to as a “sentence fragment”. If you were to write a dependent clause in your work believing that it was a complete sentence, it would be a grammatical error.

The way to form a dependent clause is with a subordinator, subject and verb, for example:

Subordinator	Subject	Verb	Compliment
because	he	did not study	hard enough
if	the recession	continues	for another two years
when	the dog	ate	the bone

Hopefully, both independent and dependent clauses are now clear (or clearer) to you. Let's now move on to look at the four types of sentences that you could be expected to write in your essays or assignments.

Simple sentences

A simple sentence is one independent clause. For example, London is the capital city of England. Sometimes the sentences are longer and contain two verbs e.g. London is the capital city of England and also functions as a leading financial and legal centre. Here, we have the verbs "is" and "functions". This is still a simple sentence though, because there is only one clause.

Compound sentences

A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses that are joined together. According to Oshima & Hogue (2005), there are three ways that these clauses can be joined:

1. By using a coordinator
2. By using a conjunctive adverb
3. By using a semi-colon (this is more widely used in the USA).

Compound sentences with coordinators

These are formed by using an independent clause *and* a coordinator *and* another independent clause.

Example:

The food was served on smaller trays, so that people would eat less.

The word "so" is one of the seven so-called FANBOYS, which are the coordinating conjunctions using in compound sentences.

The seven FANBOYS are:

1. For – used to give a reason
2. And – used to give a similar idea
3. Nor – used to add a negative equal idea
4. But – used to give the opposite idea
5. Or – used to give an alternative possibility
6. Yet – used to show a continuation which is not expected or that is a surprise
7. So – used to show an expected result

Here, "but" and "yet" seem to have the same meaning. They are both used to give an opposite idea. When the two clauses are complete opposites, then "but" is preferred. "Yet" tends to be used when the information given in the first clause leads to a continuation that is not expected or is surprising.

Let's look at some sample sentences to get a clearer idea of the distinction.

I love the sunshine, but my best friend loves the rain.

I don't like heights, yet my sister wants us to climb a mountain next year.

Compound sentences with conjunctive adverbs

These are formed using an independent clause *and* a conjunctive adverb *and* another independent clause.

Conjunctive adverbs that give a similar or equal idea include;

- also
- besides
- furthermore
- in addition
- moreover
- as well
- too

Conjunctive adverbs that give a continuation which was not expected or was a surprise include:

- however
- nevertheless
- nonetheless
- still

Conjunctive adverbs that show a complete contrast include:

- in contrast
- on the other hand

A conjunctive adverb which gives an alternative possibility is:

- otherwise.

A conjunctive adverb which gives an unexpected result includes:

- Hence
- Thus
- Therefore
- Accordingly
- As a result
- Consequently

A conjunctive adverb which adds an example includes:

- For example
- For instance

(Oshima & Hogue, 2005)

Compound sentences with semicolons

This style tends to be used more in North America. These sentences are formed by using an independent clause *and* a semicolon *and* another independent clause. The two independent clauses need to be connected in meaning though. This type of structure will not work otherwise. If this is the situation, then there will need to be two separate sentences written.

Complex sentences

This type of sentence is formed with an independent clause and one (or maybe more) dependent clauses. In a complex sentence, one idea is usually more important than another one. The independent clause contains the more important idea and the dependent clause contains the less important idea.

According to Oshima & Hogue (2005), these complex sentences can be with adverb clauses, adjective clauses or noun clauses.

Adverbs tell us why, when, where or how. An adverb clause will begin with a subordinator that can answer those question words, such as, “although”, “while”, “when” or “because”. The dependent clause can come either before or after the independent clause.

An example here is “*Although this is supposed to be a first world country, I do not feel safe living here*”.

The clause in italics is the dependent adverb clause and the clause which is underlined is the independent clause.

An adjective clause describes a noun or pronoun. This type of clause begins with a relative pronoun, such as “who”, “which”, “that” or “whose”. It can also begin with a relative adverb, such as “where” or “when”.

For example, “She was studying in the kitchen, *when she heard a loud bang*”.

Here, the clause which is underlined is the dependent clause and the clause which is in italics is the independent clause.

Complex sentences with noun clauses begin with question words or “that”, “whether” or “if”. The noun has to be the subject or object of the independent clause.

An example of a noun clause would be “She spent the whole morning crying, *knowing that moving back there was the biggest mistake of her life.*”

In this example, the first section (which is underlined) is the independent clause and the second section (in italics) is the dependent clause.

Compound-complex sentences

This is the most technically complicated of the four sentences. Compound-complex sentences contain at least three clauses. Two

of these need to be independent clauses.

Examples of compound-complex sentences are:

He wanted to move back to Dubai as soon as possible *after he had passed his law exams*, however he needed to find a good job there first.

The first and third clauses are independent and the clause which begins with “after he had...” is the dependent clause.

This concludes our look at the four types of sentences. The kind of sentence that you write will depend upon what you are being asked to write. If you are aiming to write something which is quite academic, it may not be enough for you to solely write simple sentences. However, if you try and write an assignment answer that contains only compound-complex sentences, the structure may feel awkward to the person reading it. As Oshima and Hogue (2005) also point out, if you want to try and present your ideas as being equal, then use more compound sentences, however if you want to present the ideas in your writing as not being equal, then you should use more complex sentences.

Crafting powerful introductions

The introduction or introductory paragraph should always be the first paragraph in your essay or assignment.

There are three reasons why you should write a strong introduction:

1. When your introduction is well written, it makes the rest of the essay easier to write.
2. A strong introduction shows the examiner/marker what the structure of your essay is going to be.
3. A good introduction makes your writing more interesting to read.

A frequent question which students ask is how long the introduction should be. In general, introductions should be about 10% of the essay's total word length. Conclusions should be about 10% and the body should be around 80%.

For example, with a 2,000-word essay, the introduction should be around 200 words, the conclusion should be around 200 words and the body should be about 1,600 words.

The structure of your writing in academic English should move from the general to the specific. This is often known as the “funnel method”, because when you look at a diagram of this structure, it looks like a funnel (see below).



There are three main parts to an introduction:

1. The hook
2. The background information
3. The thesis statement

Let's look at these in a little bit more detail:

The hook

The hook is the most general sentence in the introduction and there are five main ways that it can be written:

- 1) Using a quotation.

- 2) Stating a fact.
- 3) Asking a question.
- 4) Telling a joke.
- 5) Saying an anecdote.

For academic essays, it is better to use either 1) or 2). Any of the five would be suitable for presentations.

The hook needs to be concise though. Remember that it is there to lead the reader into your introduction paragraph.

The background information

This is the main section of the introduction and it needs to give the background information to the topic of the essay/assignment. It enables the reader to understand the key problem(s) that is/are being addressed in this piece of writing.

Please include information that is relevant to the topic. The introduction is only 10% of your total word count, so you need to be on point and concise.

The background information section can contain definitions of key or ambiguous words, as these show the examiner/marker that you know what these words mean, and this can also help to avoid confusion or misunderstandings in your essay.

The best way to think about the type of content that is needed in this section is to think about the “W questions”. In the background information section, you are telling the reader about who, what, where,

why, when and how. It may help when making your essay/assignment plan to have the “W questions” written down and then try to answer them.

The thesis statement

This is the final section of your introduction, however, that does not mean that it is the least important. If anything, it could actually be the opposite! The thesis statement gives the marker/examiner a brief summary of the key point of the assignment/essay. It is not unknown for examiners, when marking, to go back to the thesis statement to see if it is mirrored in the body paragraphs of the essay.

If you go back and look at the structure diagram for an introduction, you will see that when writing in academic English, we move from general to specific. The hook (at the beginning) is therefore the most general part of the paragraph and the thesis statement (at the end) is the most specific.

A good thesis statement will start with a specific noun, followed by an action verb and finally have an assertive end to the sentence.

What does this mean? Let’s look at an example of a bad/weak and a good/strong thesis statement to clarify this point:

Bad/weak thesis statement: The economic situation is not good.

Although the sentence does start with a noun, there is a lack of description and it does not tell the examiner how the essay or assignment is going to be structured. The person marking this essay will want to know what arguments are going to be put forward to say why the economic

situation is not good.

Good/Strong thesis statement: The tax policies concerning income tax, VAT and council tax of the current government have led to an increased financial burden on the working and middle classes by ensuring that they have less money available to meet the cost of living.

A strong thesis statement will tell the reader not only the position that the person is taking, but it will also summarise their overall argument on the essay question. Here the marker of the essay has a firm idea of what the essay is going to discuss, namely that the stated tax policies of the current government (income tax, VAT and council tax) have led to an increased financial burden on the working and middle classes. The marker also knows how this argument is going to develop, because the writer has stated that the tax policies have left people in those income brackets with less money available to meet the cost of living. Each tax should therefore be analysed in turn with a discussion of their negative impact upon the members of the working and middle class.

One final tip here is to follow the three points of discussion named in the body of the essay. This would mean that the first tax to be discussed would be income tax, followed by a discussion of VAT and then finally an analysis of council tax.

Constructing cohesive paragraphs

Being able to write a good paragraph is critically important in academic writing. A badly written paragraph can have a negative impact upon a student's overall grade for that essay or assignment. This is especially the case, considering that in some universities, structure and coherence can constitute up to 20% of the overall grade awarded for that piece of work. Oshima & Hogue (2005: 2) define a paragraph as "a group of related sentences that discuss one (and usually only one) main idea".

There are four elements to a good paragraph, namely the topic sentence, supporting sentences, which firstly describe/present and then analyse/comment and a sentence that concludes the paragraph (this may not always be needed, especially if the essay is lengthy and a point needs to be further discussed in the next paragraph).

This way of structuring paragraphs is known as the IDAC system (Introduction, Describe, Analysis and Conclusion). Let's have a look at this in more detail...

Introduction

The first step in the IDAC system is to craft a compelling introduction. The purpose of the introduction is to engage the reader and provide them with a clear understanding of what the paragraph will be about. This is usually achieved by the use of a topic sentence.

The topic sentence is often the first element of the paragraph and it states the paragraph's main idea or focus. Therefore, it is the most important sentence in the entire paragraph. What happens if the paragraph has no topic sentence? A paragraph without a topic sentence can lack clarity and at higher education level, the lecturer (or person marking the essay) may take such omissions into account when awarding marks for that particular piece of work.

The topic sentence is usually the most general sentence in the paragraph, because it purely introduces the idea and does not give the reader any specific information (if you need to, have a quick look at the previous chapter where there is the picture of the funnel paragraph. The topic sentence therefore does two things, the first being that it tells the reader the topic of the paragraph and the second being that it limits that paragraph to one particular area.

Topic sentences can be broken down into two further parts; the topic of the sentence and the controlling idea (Oshima & Hogue, 2005). The topic of the sentence is usually at the start of the sentence, with the controlling idea coming at the end. An example would be "Swimming is a great way to keep fit for three reasons". "Swimming is the topic and "three reasons" is the controlling idea.

Topic Controlling idea

Swimming is a great way to keep fit for three reasons.

An example of a bad topic sentence is:

Swimming is a great way to keep fit for three reasons, which are that it exercises every part of your body, that it is a relatively cheap hobby once you have bought your costume and equipment and that it is low impact.

The reason why this is not a good way to write a topic sentence is that the writer has already stated the three ways in which swimming is a great exercise. Too much detail is given here. The focus of the topic sentence should be that swimming is a great exercise. The three main reasons why need to be developed in the body of the paragraph.

Topic sentences are usually, but not always, the first sentence in the paragraph. When a topic sentence is placed at the end of a paragraph, it is often because the person writing it has given a list of examples or facts etc beforehand. It is usually recommended that students only use topic sentences at the end of their paragraphs when they have become more experienced in academic writing and its conventions.

Description and analysis sentences

The second element in a paragraph is that of supporting sentences, which can be broken down into two further sections called the description and analysis. The role that these play in paragraph structure is that they develop the topic sentences (Oshima & Hogue, 2005). The way that they do this is to give more information about the topic. When supporting sentences are not written in paragraphs, there is a lack of evidence or support for the writer's ideas. For a student in Higher Education, this may well have a negative impact because it may lead to a loss of

marks.

There are various ways in which a description (of research) can be given in paragraphs, namely through the use of “examples, statistics and quotations” (Oshima & Hogue, 2005: 11). Although being able to give an example that relates to the essay question may seem to be the easiest option, it may not always be the best approach. The reason is that although they may be useful to put into your IELTS essays (particularly in the Task 2 writing), they are subjective and the aim of academic writing is to be objective. Therefore, for students in higher education, it is recommended that statistics or quotations are favoured as forms of description.

Statistics are most usually taken from another source (unless the student has undertaken their own quantitative research) and as such, are viewed as being more objective than examples. When using statistical evidence in a paragraph, the writer needs to be aware of two things; firstly, the date upon which the data was collected and where it was collected and by whom.

If there is a significant time difference between the date of collection and now, it could be argued that the statistics may no longer have any relevance and a university lecturer might wonder why the student has not found any more up to date data. This can particularly be the case where the data is over ten years old. Where the data was collected and by whom is also of significance because firstly, there may be cultural differences that may mean that the data cannot be generalised to all countries and cultures and secondly, that the writer may have been funded by a particular body or institution and there may have been pressure applied to that person to produce a certain, if not biased, set of results.

Quotations are the final form of support that can be given in the description sentences within a paragraph. One point of note here is that if quotations are going to be used in academic essays or assignments, it is advised that the student puts the page number that the quotation came from next to the year of publication (in the in-text referencing). Failure to do this, may result in an accusation of plagiarism or academic theft as it is also known. My own personal tip here is to make a note of the relevant page number for the quotation when making notes (either in the margin or in brackets next to the quotation itself).

Analysis

The section is where marks can be lost or gained. Why? Because this is where critical thinking is shown. The description section purely describes research that has been found. This section is where that research is applied to the essay or assignment question and there is some form of analysis.

One word of caution here is regarding the use of the copula verb “to be”. Be very careful about using this word in our academic writing, especially in the analysis section. Why? Because when you use this verb, you are saying that this is a fact, it is 100% the case. It only needs your examiner (who most likely knows this area in very considerable depth) to know one fact which contradicts this and your argument has started to fall apart! It is much better to use what is known as “hedging language”. These are words such as “may”, “might”, “could”, “should” “it is possible that” or “it is probable that” (this is by no means an exhaustive list). Using this language means that you are allowing for other possibilities to exist.

Concluding sentence

The final element in a paragraph is the concluding sentence. If there is one single paragraph, then a concluding sentence is recommended, however for essays, they do not always need to be used. Concluding sentences show that the paragraph is coming to an end and it also reminds the reader of the most important aspects of that paragraph via a summary or repetition. There are various words or phrases that can be used to show that this sentence is the concluding one, for example “To conclude”, “In conclusion”, “To sum up”, “Finally” or “Lastly” among others. One final word of advice is, do not put new ideas in your concluding sentence, they should be contained in the body of the paragraph.

To conclude, the IDAC system is a valuable tool for you to enhance the clarity and structure of your work. By implementing this systematic approach, you can create well-organized and coherent paragraphs and therefore essays, that effectively communicate your ideas to your readers. This could enable you to substantially improve the quality of your academic writing.

Seamless transitions for fluid writing

What are transition signals? They are one of the main ways to achieve cohesion and coherence in your academic writing. Transition signals show relationships between the ideas that you are putting forward in your academic writing. There are four main types of transition signals:

1. Additive transitions
2. Adversative transitions
3. Causal transitions
4. Sequential transitions

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

Additive transitions

These words or phrases serve to enrich your writing by introducing additional ideas of information and complexity.

Examples include the conjunctive adverbs “furthermore”, “besides”, “too” and “also”, the coordinating conjunction “and”, “additionally”,

the transition phrase “in addition” and other words such as “another” (Oshima & Hogue, 2005: 27).

In case you are wondering what coordinating conjunctions are, they are used to connect two independent clauses. These are your FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or yet and so).

Subordinating conjunctions are used to create complex sentences when the two clauses are of unequal importance, one is independent whereas the other is dependent.

Conjunctive adverbs are adverbs that are used to connect two independent clauses to each other. They show sequence, contrast, cause and effect, time, emphasis, a summary, illustration or comparison.

When strategically placed, these transition signals can transform a simple sentence into a nuanced and sophisticated expression of thought.

They act as bridges, connecting one idea to the next, allowing your narrative to unfold seamlessly and your sentences look more academic and less basic to the reader.

Adversative Transitions

These transitions come into play when you want to introduce a contrasting idea or present an opposing viewpoint.

Examples include, “on the one hand” and “on the other hand”, “in contrast”, the conjunctive adverbs “however”, “nonetheless”, “nevertheless”, “instead” and “still”, the coordinating conjunctions “but” and “yet”, the subordinating conjunctions “while”, “whereas”, “though”,

“even though” and “although” and other words such as “despite” and “in spite” (Oshima & Hogue, 2005: 27)

By acknowledging that there are alternative perspectives, adversative transitions add depth to your argument. This shows a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the topic you’re addressing.

Causal Transitions

These transitions show cause and effect relationships in your writing. Examples of these include “as a result”, “as a consequence”, “accordingly”, the conjunctive adverbs “hence”, “thus”, “so”, “resultingly” and “therefore” (Oshima & Hogue, 2005:27).

These transitions are instrumental in making the logical progression of your ideas crystal clear, allowing your readers to follow the thread of your argument with ease.

Sequential Transitions

These transitions help you organise your ideas chronologically or in a sequence. Examples here include “first”, “second”, “third” and “firstly”, “secondly”, “thirdly”, “next”, “the next”, “last”, “the last”, “finally” and “final” (Oshima & Hogue, 2005: 27).

These transitions act as signposts, guiding your reader through the natural progression of your thoughts. Mastering sequential transitions ensures that your narrative unfolds in a coherent and structured manner.

How to Use Transition Signals Effectively

Strategic placement is crucial here. Consider placing transitions at key points to maximize their impact. Consistency is equally important, maintain a uniform style throughout your essay to provide a sense of coherence. Additionally, don't be afraid to diversify your vocabulary because using a range of transition signals prevents your writing from becoming monotonous and enhances the overall reading experience.

Common mistakes to avoid

While mastering transition signals, it's essential to be aware of common pitfalls:

1. Overuse can be detrimental, too many transitions can clutter your writing and dilute their impact.
2. Incorrect usage is another trap to avoid. Ensure that the chosen transition fits the context and contributes meaningfully to the flow of your argument.
3. Lastly, beware of a lack of variety. Diversifying your transition word choices adds dynamism to your writing and keeps your reader engaged.

Writing strong conclusions

The conclusion is the final paragraph in your essay. What is its purpose?

A conclusion shows the examiner:

- a) That the question has been fully answered
- b) That the essay is at an end
- c) The main points of the essay
- d) That you have final thoughts on the topic

The number of words in your conclusion should be about 10% of your word count, therefore, for a 3,000-word essay, your conclusion should be around 300 words.

How does the reader know that this is your conclusion? The answer is to use a transition signal, such as "in conclusion" or "to conclude". If you don't signal to the reader that this is the conclusion, they will just assume that this is another paragraph in the body of your essay, which could have a negative impact upon your grade.

What is acceptable to be put in your conclusion?

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