

UNIT 5

Essay Writing Skills

Essays are essentially arguments. The word *essay* comes from the French word meaning *to try*. The writer tries to show or prove something to the reader. The audience for students' essays is their professor or teacher. The purpose is purely academic; instead of giving new information (the purpose of most written communication), student essay-writers are charged with the task of showing what they have learned, synthesizing information, and explaining the thesis in a way that shows their understanding of the subject. Students are being tested on both their thinking and their communication skills, so essay-writing requires logical organization of ideas.

Even though students may never be asked to write essays outside school, the skills that are developed in essay-writing are applicable to most work communication tasks—communicating clearly, organizing ideas, and giving relevant arguments.

Understanding Essay Structure

The essay structure often taught in school is the five-paragraph essay of about 500 words in length. It has an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Even though this type of essay is rarely seen outside the classroom, the form is adaptable to other kinds of writing. Business reports, for example, are longer than five paragraphs, but they too have an introduction, a body divided into different ideas, and a conclusion. Moreover, the five-paragraph essay model can be expanded by simply adding paragraphs to the three basic sections.

In a five-paragraph essay, the first paragraph is the **introduction**. It provides background for the reader, gets the reader's attention, and prepares the way for the thesis statement. The thesis gives the main argument of the essay and comes at the end of the introduction.

The thesis statement is supported in the **body paragraphs**. The arguments are divided so that each paragraph has a different main idea. The body paragraphs start with a topic sentence giving the main idea of that paragraph. A good body paragraph has support for the points made, has unity (only one main idea), is coherent (the sentences flow and follow logically), and has transition markers (to signal the relationship between ideas). These features are explained in Unit 4.

The **conclusion** generally starts with a restatement of the thesis and goes on to present a “so what?” idea to lead the reader back out of the essay. The conclusion should not provide new ideas to support the thesis. In a short essay, the conclusion should not summarize the essay; that would be too repetitive.

Sometimes this type of essay is referred to as a “hamburger essay,” with the introduction and conclusion serving as the bun holding the meat of the essay (the body) together. This analogy simply tells students that the introduction and conclusion hold everything together and that the body of the essay is the most important part.

Comparison of the Paragraph and the Essay

Unit 4 focuses on the structure of a paragraph. An independent, developed paragraph is like a mini-essay. Instructors often start by having students write paragraphs to practise the important skills of making points and supporting them before moving on to full essays. Moreover, this type of paragraph is similar to the body paragraph of an essay, so what students learn from writing a developed paragraph can be applied to essay writing.

A developed paragraph can be expanded to essay length. You need to expand on the ideas and write introductory and concluding paragraphs. Compare the independent paragraph below and the five-paragraph essay on the same topic that follows (the word counts are supplied to give you an idea of comparative length). You can consider the questions and examples that follow the essay to guide your analysis.

Topic question: *In the modern world, is cooking still an important skill?*

Even with the wide variety of prepared foods available today, cooking is a worthwhile skill for anyone to have. The most important reason is that home-cooked foods are more nutritious than processed foods, which contain high amounts of salt, sugar, and fat. People who cook at home have control over the ingredients. They can tailor the dishes to their family’s tastes and avoid allergens. Second, being able to cook is a useful social skill. Inviting friends over for dinner is a time-honoured way to entertain. In Canada, home-cooking has an added dimension when immigrants can share food from their native country with people of a different ethnic background. For example, many Canadians would enjoy trying home-cooked Chinese food, especially if all they know is the food-court version. Finally, knowing how to cook is important for self-sufficiency. As much as possible, people should be able to take care of themselves and not have to rely on others. It costs money to have others do the work, and cooking is not that difficult. People should start learning to cook when they are children, but it is never too late to start acquiring the skills required. [193 words]

The Value of Home-Cooking

With the modern busy lifestyle, people seek to save time in meal preparation. They often eat out, whether at fast-food places or upscale restaurants. They buy prepared foods from the deli counter of the supermarket or frozen meals that just have to be warmed up in the microwave. Today it is possible to survive without knowing one end

of a chef's knife from the other, so cooking is becoming a lost skill. However, the ability to prepare a home-cooked meal is a valuable skill.

The most obvious benefit of home-cooking is the ability to control the quality of the food. Processed foods contain high amounts of sugar, salt, and additives, while fast food is high in fat. Cooks choose their own raw ingredients and control the seasonings, so they can ensure freshness and make the dishes to their taste. This is especially important for people with allergies or restricted diets. Furthermore, cooks supply their own labour and can thus spend their food budget on superior ingredients. The same quality of food would not be found in most affordable restaurants.

Cooking is also a valuable social skill. Hosting a dinner party is a time-honoured method of entertaining guests. Even for casual get-togethers, it is gratifying to be able to serve food that is homemade. In the dating game, moreover, cooking is useful. It is said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and women also find competence in the kitchen an attractive quality. Parents may also expect their adult children to cook well enough to contribute to holiday dinners and to carry on their family traditions. For immigrant families, preparing ethnic foods is a way to keep their native culture alive.

In addition to the social rewards, cooking has psychological benefits. People can feel personal satisfaction when they produce a delicious meal. Self-sufficiency is a goal in itself because it is humiliating to have to admit to an inability to provide the basic necessities of life. Cooks can also exercise their creativity: They can tweak recipes and even develop new flavour combinations. The simple tasks of working with food can be pleasurable, especially when people avoid modern gadgets in favour of working by hand. For example, kneading bread dough and whipping cream can relieve stress as well as give muscles a workout.

These many benefits of cooking show that it is still an important skill despite the proliferation of restaurants. Even people who grew up in homes devoid of the heady aroma of home-cooking are turning to the kitchen. The popularity of cooking shows on television, how-to videos on YouTube, and expensive, illustrated cookbooks shows that cooking is not entirely disappearing from modern life. If foodies can convert more people to the benefits of home-cooking, everyone will live better.

[462 words]

Analyzing Essay Structure

1. Consider the thesis statement: “the ability to prepare a home-cooked meal is a valuable skill.”
 - Note that the thesis is the last sentence of the introduction. It is a full sentence.
 - The adverb *however* at the beginning of the sentence links the thesis to the rest of the introduction.
 - The thesis answers the topic question (“In the modern world, is cooking still an important skill?”). The answer is essentially *yes*, and the essay explains why cooking is important. (For a yes-or-no essay question, you must choose one answer and explain the reasons for your choice.)

- Note that the thesis is similar to the topic sentence of the developed paragraph (“Even with the wide variety of prepared foods available today, cooking is a worthwhile skill for anyone to have.”). A topic sentence is essentially a thesis for a paragraph, but we use the term *topic sentence* when we are discussing paragraphs.
2. Examine the introductory paragraph. It gives background for the reader by explaining why the topic is an issue at all. A hundred years ago, no one would have asked this question, because cooking was vital to everyday life. You could not readily order pizza delivery or buy frozen meals in the supermarket.
 3. Note that the topic sentence of each body paragraph also answers the question, giving one reason. The topic sentence is fairly general. It tells the reader what the main idea of that particular body paragraph is. The third topic sentence (“In addition to the social rewards, cooking has psychological benefits.”) starts with a transition referring to the argument of the second body paragraph (the social rewards).
 4. Each body paragraph expands on the main idea given in its topic sentence. For instance, the first body paragraph explains the different nutritional benefits of home-cooking.
 5. The conclusion starts with a restatement of the thesis. It goes on to consider the future by saying that the skill is being kept alive in society.

Planning an Essay

An essay requires more planning than an independent paragraph. Writers must make sure that the essay is well balanced. For example, the three body paragraphs should be approximately the same length. Each paragraph should have different ideas with no repetition or overlap.

Writing is generally a three-stage process: planning, drafting, and editing. The planning stage includes researching, thinking about the topic, brainstorming ideas, and putting together an outline. The drafting stage is when the actual writing is done. The final stage involves rereading the draft, revising, editing, proofreading, and correcting. However, writing does not always proceed in such a clear-cut way. For instance, writers may revisit the outline once they start writing because they think of a better way to organize it. People who compose on a computer may find they move between the three stages, adding ideas and editing as they write.

Students often spend too little time in the first and third stages; they rush to get words on paper without thinking about how they want to develop their ideas, and they are too easily satisfied with what they have written, reluctant to delete sections that do not work or to proofread carefully to catch mistakes. Granted, students are often put into writing situations in which they do not have the luxury of time to plan or edit. If they are required to write a 500-word essay in an hour, they must concentrate on getting words down as quickly as possible. However, if they have practised writing an essay with the three stages, they can work more efficiently when they are under tight time constraints.

Choosing a Topic

The first step is choosing a topic. Usually, teachers give their class a choice of topics, perhaps related to assigned readings or current events. Often, the topics are discussed in class before students have to write about them. Some topics focus on general knowledge, while some require background reading and research.

Students should pick the topic they are most comfortable with. They probably have choice within the topic, such as agreeing or disagreeing with a statement (for example, “Assisted suicide should be made legal in Canada. Agree or disagree”). They may have to narrow down the topic, perhaps talking about a specific immigrant group in Canada instead of immigrants in general.

Sometimes students are asked to come up with their own topic, but this is usually done as part of a process, not out of thin air. For instance, students may start with a subject they are interested in, do some background reading, and then consult with their instructor to narrow in on a topic.

Activity

In groups, make a list of essay topics you would like to write about. Exchange your list for another group’s, and rate the other group’s list as to which topics you would want to write about. Discuss different possible approaches to the topics and ways they could be narrowed.

Understanding the Essay Question

It is important to understand what the topic is asking you to do. Essay prompts can be in different forms.

Yes-or-no essay questions (such as “In the modern world, is cooking still an important skill?” or “Should religious schools be funded in Canada?”) require you to choose one side and give reasons to support that position. It is important not to waffle or sit on the fence. You need a clear position to argue from.

Sometimes essay prompts require some **set-up**, so they might begin with a few sentences of explanation before the actual topic question or direction:

A secondary school education is the minimum requirement in today’s world. Even for physical labour, workers may need a high school diploma. However, many students do not finish secondary school. They drop out because of a lack of motivation, poor grades, or personal problems. Educators try to keep such at-risk students in school long enough to graduate. What changes can they make to keep such students in school?

This essay prompt explains what the problem is; your job is to offer solutions.

Sometimes instructors give a quote from a reading and ask you for your take on it. This makes for a more difficult topic because it is open-ended.

Peter Singer quotes Andrew Carnegie's dictum: "The man who dies rich dies disgraced." Agree or disagree with this statement.

In this essay, you need to take a position and support it. If you agree, you would argue in favour of philanthropy, that the rich need to give to charity. If you disagree, you would probably say that the rich deserve to keep their money.

Peter Martyn says, "Words matter. They indelibly colour our perceptions." Discuss.

This topic hinges on finding good examples of the power of language. It is not a topic you can actually disagree with.

As mentioned in Unit 1, most academic essays are impersonal. Essay topic questions will generally show whether a more personal response is required:

What are the benefits of doing volunteer work?

Here you can talk about the benefits that anyone can experience, with examples of specific kinds of volunteer jobs.

What have you learned from doing volunteer work?

This question is asking you to recount your own experience.

A standard five-paragraph essay is about 500 words. Some topics are wide in scope—too wide to be adequately treated in an essay. Instructors usually leave room for students to **narrow a topic** to focus on what they are comfortable discussing. For instance, an international student writing about high school students preparing for college can write about students in his or her native country—this focus would be made clear in the introduction and thesis. An essay question may ask, "What support should parents give children who are in college or university?" but instead of using unwieldy phrases such as "college or university" or "post-secondary education," a college student can just write about college and a university student can just write about university.

For the question "What are the advantages or disadvantages of online courses?" you are being asked to take one position in your essay—either for or against online courses. However, you could easily narrow this topic down further by looking at it either from the students' point of view or the administration's. Thus, you could focus your essay on the advantages of such courses for the school or the disadvantages for students. These are just two of the possible approaches. If you wanted to talk about advantages for the school, you could even focus on the administration or on the instructor.

Activity

In small groups, look over a list of essay topics, and discuss what you would write to answer the question. You can use the list you generated in the Activity in the previous section, Choosing a Topic (the list of questions for Essay-Writing: Practice Topics on page 155), or another list you may have. For instance, you can search “essay topics” online and get lists of sample questions from standardized tests like the TOEFL test.

Generating Ideas

Before you start writing your essay, be sure you have enough to say. We use the term **brainstorming** to refer to the act of coming up with ideas. Brainstorming involves writing down preliminary thoughts about the topic. It can be accomplished alone, in consultation with an instructor, or in a group with other students.

One of the best ways to brainstorm is just to jot down point-form ideas about your topic:

What should parents teach teenagers to prepare them for living on their own?

- budgeting
- cooking nutritious meals
- keeping track of their bank balance and credit card purchases
- saving money on food purchases
- cleaning rooms (bathroom, kitchen, living areas)
- doing their own laundry
- dealing with utilities (hydro, gas, cable)
- dealing with emergencies in their home, such as toilets flooding and power failures
- using basic tools (hammer, screwdriver, paint brush)
- performing first aid
- taking care of a car

With the ideas you have generated in your brainstorming, you have the raw material for your essay. Without the brainstorming, you might write your essay on the first three ideas that come to your mind, but it would be difficult to write a whole paragraph on just doing laundry, for instance. However, once you have many ideas listed, you can see what goes together and organize the ideas in paragraphs (as shown in the next section). For example, a paragraph on household chores can include cooking and cleaning tasks; laundry would be just one example in the paragraph.

If you have a controversial issue that has two sides, the topic question usually asks you to choose one. However, it is best to brainstorm for both sides. One reason is that it helps you to generate more ideas; coming up with one argument often reminds you of the counterargument. Moreover, you can actually write your essay for the side for which you have more to say.

What are the advantages or disadvantages of online courses?

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – no commuting time for students and teachers – no transportation costs – can do the work on their own schedule (especially good for parents and disabled students) – convenience – cost-effective for administration—no classroom required – course could be cheaper – more students in one class – with fewer instructors, more standardization of course delivery and examination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lack of human contact – no real socialization with other students – hard for students to motivate themselves without regular classroom routine – high failure rate – easier to discuss course material in person than to write in discussion boards – some students do not have the equipment or the knowledge to use online material – students might find it difficult to work at home because of distractions – some students may lack the reading skills required – easier to have someone else do the work for the student (cheating)

Brainstorming in this manner is an efficient way to start your essay-writing process, but there are other ways of generating ideas. People who think visually may use bubble diagrams for their points with lines to connect related ideas. Free-writing is a method in which students just write what comes into their heads and then look through the writing for an argument they can develop. Some writers ask themselves questions about a topic (“Why does this happen?” “What can this lead to?” “Who is affected?”) to generate ideas. Asking questions can also be used within the other methods.

You may need to experiment to find out what works for you. Whichever method you use, it’s important to think about the topic thoroughly to generate enough ideas to choose from and not just use the first three arguments that come to mind. Effective brainstorming requires critical thinking about the subject. Consider the topic from different viewpoints. For instance, if you are asked to come up with a solution to a problem, make sure you spend enough time considering the problem itself and the different ramifications.

In brainstorming, there is no such thing as a bad idea. You do not have to worry about using every idea you come up with. You do not have to worry about correct grammar or spelling. It is just a matter of getting ideas on paper or on the screen. However, if you find you do not have enough to say on one topic after you have brainstormed using the suggestions mentioned, then it is a good idea to go back to the topic choices and consider doing a different one.

Activity

With your instructor and classmates, discuss the techniques you have found helpful for getting started with an essay or for getting past writer's block. Consider different ways of brainstorming.

Organizing Ideas

Once you have enough ideas to work with, you need to organize your ideas into paragraphs. Think of it as packing belongings in boxes. You want to put the items that fit together in one box and then label the box. The box is like a paragraph, and the label is the topic sentence.

Consider this example:

How can at-risk students be encouraged not to drop out of high school?

- a) tutoring for students who are failing
- b) alternatives to regular courses (co-op, independent study)
- c) visits to post-secondary schools, work sites
- d) speakers from the work world, former drop-outs
- e) counselling
- f) arts courses (music, drama, art)
- g) variety of courses, both academic and hands-on
- h) extracurricular activities to engage the students
- i) mentoring with graduates who have gone on to post-secondary education
- j) financial support so they will not have to work long hours part-time

First, look for ideas that go together. For instance, points a), e), and i) all deal with offering personal support with academics. Points f) and h) focus on offering other activities in the school to attract students.

Just as there is not one right way to pack your belongings, there are different ways to organize ideas. For example, point i), mentoring, could go with tutoring and counselling, but it could also fit with c) and d) in a paragraph on how students need inspiration from others. It would depend on how you want to develop your ideas.

Furthermore, you do not have to use all your generated ideas. Some good ideas may just not fit in your essay. Therefore, just as you may have to abandon a piece of furniture that would not fit in your new apartment, you may have to leave out some of the ideas from your brainstorming.

Activity

Choose one of the three examples of brainstorming given in this section and the previous one (on preparation for living alone, online courses, or at-risk students). With a partner, discuss possible ways to organize an essay from the point-form ideas.

Writing a Title

A title is not always necessary, but writing one can help you start your essay. It gives you a perspective and helps you to limit the scope of your paper. If you need a title

for your essay, make sure it is appropriate and relatively short. Do not just put the essay topic question on your cover page.

Generally, titles are phrases, not full sentences or questions. For example, a story in this book is called “Why My Mother Can’t Speak English” rather than “Why Can’t My Mother Speak English?”

Newspaper articles have headlines rather than titles. They generally give the main idea. Short forms are common to save space. Often a telegraphic style is used, leaving out grammatical words such as articles and auxiliary verbs. The only words capitalized are the first word and proper nouns. This style is not appropriate for essay titles.

Activity

In small groups, look over the titles of the sample essays in Units 5 and 6. In addition, look at the titles of the readings in Part 2 as listed in the table of contents. Discuss the titles. Which ones give you a good idea of the contents of the essay or article, and which do not?

Exercise 5.1

Write some appropriate essay titles for the following topics (you may have different titles for one topic, depending on the point of view of the essay):

1. Would self-driving cars make the roads safer?
2. Should religious schools be funded by the government?
3. Why do people get tattoos?
4. What can people do in their everyday lives to lessen environmental damage?
5. What kind of adjustments do adult children and their parents have to make when the children move back home after college or university?

Writing an Outline

An outline is a plan for an essay. Following the plan keeps you on track as you write. An outline can be very detailed or very simple. It can be written in full sentences or in point form. A basic outline for a five-paragraph essay would give the thesis and the three topic sentences; these sentences could be revised as you write the draft. You can also include the supporting points in your outline.

Instructors may ask you to complete an outline and submit it for feedback before you write your essay. Sometimes they prescribe a format, with a specific numbering system. They may give you a printed sheet to fill out. They may assign part of your essay grade to the outline.

Here is an example of an outline for the essay “The Value of Home-Cooking” (pages 128–29):

Topic question: *In the modern world, is cooking still an important skill?*

Thesis: The ability to prepare a home-cooked meal is valuable.

1. food quality
 - a) processed foods contain sugar, salt, fat
 - b) cook chooses raw ingredients
 - c) avoid allergens
 - d) cheaper
2. social skill
 - a) hosting dinner parties
 - b) attracting opposite sex
 - c) keeping immigrant cultures alive
3. psychological benefits
 - a) personal satisfaction
 - b) self-sufficiency
 - c) creativity
 - d) satisfying physical activity

An outline is a map for you to follow. It makes writing the essay easier. However, it does not have to be set in stone. You can revise your outline as you write.

Activity

Choose one of the sample essays at the end of this unit. With a partner, write the outline for the essay.

Writing a Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is the most important sentence in the essay.

A thesis statement should

- answer the topic question
- be a supportable idea, not just a fact
- show the point of view of the writer
- be one sentence
- be a statement, not a question
- be the last sentence of the introduction
- be concise
- have parallel structure

Study these examples of poor and good thesis statements:

Topic question: *Should exotic pets be banned in Canada?*

Many people keep exotic pets such as monkeys, pythons, and tigers.

poor thesis:

This is a fact, not a supportable idea.

Exotic pets should be banned in Canada.

poor thesis:

This just repeats the wording of the topic question.

In this essay, I will talk about exotic animals as pets in Canada.

poor thesis:

This is called an announcement thesis—one that uses *I* and the word *essay*.

Should we be able to keep exotic pets in Canada?

poor thesis:

A thesis should **answer** the question, not ask one.

I like my pet tarantula.

poor thesis:

While this is an opinion, it cannot be argued; it is also too narrow.

Pets are important to human life.

poor thesis: too broad

Exotic animals make dangerous pets.

poor thesis: too narrow; gives one reason

All jurisdictions in Canada should have rules severely restricting the keeping of exotic animals.

good thesis: clearly states the position (Note that the word *should* indicates an opinion. Without this modal verb, this statement would be a fact, not an opinion.)

Canadian law should allow people to keep exotic animals as pets.

good thesis: clearly states the position

Writing a Three-Pronged Thesis Statement

For a five-paragraph essay, students may be asked to write a focused thesis statement that lists the three arguments that will be explored in the essay. This type of three-pronged thesis only works for short essays; the statement would become unwieldy if it had to include more than three arguments. Moreover, this kind of thesis statement can be difficult to write because it has to be concise and have parallel structure. However, some instructors prefer that students use a three-pronged thesis statement.

To see how the three-pronged thesis statement works, we can revisit the essay “The Value of Home-Cooking” (pages 128–29):

Thesis statement: *However, the ability to prepare a home-cooked meal is a valuable skill.*

Topic sentence #1: *The most obvious benefit of home-cooking is the ability to control the quality of the food.*

Topic sentence #2: *Cooking is also a valuable social skill.*

Topic sentence #3: *In addition to the social rewards, cooking has psychological benefits.*

To write a three-pronged thesis, you need to incorporate the ideas of the three body paragraphs into the thesis:

The ability to prepare a home-cooked meal is a valuable skill because it gives the cook the ability to control the quality of the food, because it is a valuable social skill, and because it has psychological benefits.

Cooking is a valuable skill because it gives the cook the ability to control the quality of the food and because it has social and psychological benefits.

Cooking is a valuable skill because it has nutritional, social, and psychological benefits.

first draft of a thesis: We can see that this thesis statement, while grammatical, is long and hard to follow; moreover, the words *skill* and *valuable* are repeated.

second draft: The repetition of “valuable skill” has been eliminated and the words *social* and *psychological* have been linked because they are both adjectives referring to an advantage.

third draft: By paraphrasing the idea in the first topic sentence, we can find an adjective that is applied to food quality and balances with “social and psychological benefits”

Sometimes students write a four-sentence thesis. This should be revised to make one statement:

Swimming pools in school are a good investment for three reasons. First, swimming is so important that all children should learn how to swim. Second, having pools on-site is very convenient for lessons. Third, the community can use the pool after school hours, making it more economical.

Swimming pools in school are a good investment because of the need for basic swimming skills, the convenience of the on-site facility, and the potential for community use.

incorrect:

A thesis statement should be one sentence.

correct:

Note that this thesis is one sentence with parallel structure: *because of* connects the three nouns *need*, *convenience*, and *potential* (which are each completed by a prepositional phrase).

A thesis statement may have to be revised to ensure that it is concise, with parallel structure:

The family meal means that people can share food, spending time together, and good behaviour can be learned at the table.

incorrect:

The structure is not parallel.

The family meal provides people with an opportunity to share food, spend time together, and learn good behaviour at the table.

correct:

The parallel structure here can be seen in the series of verbs in the infinitive form: *share*, *spend*, and *learn*.

In a five-paragraph essay, the thesis statement may state the three main ideas to be discussed in the body, but in a longer essay this is not practical and a less specific thesis is presented:

Teenagers often conflict with their parents on their social life, appearance, and household responsibilities.

This is a three-pronged thesis statement; it's good for a five-paragraph essay.

Teenagers' relationship with their parents is often full of conflict.

This is a more general thesis statement; it works for a longer essay.

Whether you use a focused thesis statement or a more general one depends on the topic, the length of the essay, your personal preference, and the assignment instructions. For instance, if the topic question asks "why?" it is often better to give your three reasons in the thesis:

Topic question: *Why do people eat fast food?*

People eat fast food for many reasons.

incorrect:

"for many reasons" is the type of vague phrase that should not be used in a thesis.

People eat fast food because of its taste, price, and convenience.

correct:

This three-pronged thesis gives a clear idea of what the essay will argue.

If you do use a thesis statement that gives the three arguments, keep the same order of presentation of arguments in the body of the essay.

Study the sample essays at the end of this unit. Identify the thesis statement.

Exercise 5.2

For each topic, choose which sentence would work best as a thesis statement. Explain why. Look for the statements that actually answer the question. Discuss why the statement is appropriate or not for a thesis.

1. Topic: What factors determine how readily immigrants assimilate into Canadian society?
 - a) Canada is a country of immigrants.
 - b) Immigrants should learn the language, participate in social activities, and learn about their new country.
 - c) Some immigrants do not assimilate into Canadian society because they are too shy, too attached to their native culture, and too busy working.
 - d) How well immigrants settle into life in Canada depends on their background, their environment, and their personality.
 - e) Immigration is a difficult process.
2. Topic: What support should parents give children who are in college or university?
 - a) Parents are very important to the learning process.
 - b) Parents of university students should help with finances, give general academic advice, and provide moral support.
 - c) This essay explains the role of parents of college students.
 - d) Parents should let their children make their own decisions about college or university.
 - e) Students should choose a good program, establish a network of friends, and enjoy the experience to succeed in college.
3. Topic: In Canada, single adults now outnumber married ones. There is less pressure to get legally married today. Women are not financially dependent on men, and religious and social pressure to marry has diminished. Can marriage survive as a vital social institution?
 - a) Today people do not get married or stay married long.
 - b) In this essay, I will show that marriage can survive as a vital social institution.
 - c) Despite its usefulness, marriage is unlikely to continue to be essential in Canadian life.
 - d) Marriage is a social institution in Canada.
 - e) People get divorced because they fall out of love, they change their outlook on life, or they get tired of staying with one person.
 - f) Today there is no reason to get legally married in North American society.
 - g) People get married because of financial, social, and religious reasons.
 - h) Marriage will remain important in Canadian society because of tradition, legal incentives, and the human desire to mark life events.
 - i) People do not have to get married anymore because our society accepts unmarried couples.

Exercise 5.3

Here are incorrect four-sentence theses. Rewrite each into one concise, grammatical thesis statement. Make the sentence concise by deleting any information that can be explained in the body paragraphs.

1. For students who are at a loss during a teachers' strike, these are things they can do. They can read their textbook and review their notes. They should complete any assignments given before the strike so they will be up-to-date and maybe even ahead when the strike is over. They could do extra reading on the subject material to truly master it.
2. There are three main reasons for leasing a car. First, the monthly payments are lower. Second, you can always drive a new car after the three-year lease is over. Third, I don't have to worry about breakdowns as usually everything is covered under warranty.
3. There are several basic types of TV commercial. One is the lifestyle ad where advertisers want consumers to think they will have the kind of life depicted in the commercial if they use the product. Another kind is the humorous commercial that tries to make the consumer laugh and therefore remember the product. Third, there are straight information commercials that tell the consumer what he needs to know.
4. The transportation system can be fixed if everyone co-operates. First, the public transit system needs to be improved to make it more convenient to use. Second, more goods need to be shipped by rail instead of by truck. Finally, use of personal vehicles needs to be controlled with fines or incentive programs.

Writing an Introduction

The function of an introduction is, of course, to introduce the topic to the reader. In a five-paragraph essay, the first paragraph is the introduction, while in a longer essay or report, the introduction may extend to several paragraphs or a whole section or unit. The introduction leads the reader gradually to the thesis, provides any background information the reader may need, and narrows the topic. In an essay, the introduction generally ends with the thesis statement.

What is actually in the introduction depends on the topic. For instance, an essay discussing solutions to a problem should have an introduction that explains the problem for the reader. In an essay discussing one side of a controversial issue, the main opposing arguments can be mentioned briefly in the introduction as a lead-in. If a reading (for example, a book, a story, an article) is a point of departure for the essay, the point of view of the reading's author may be mentioned before the essay writer goes into his or her own thesis.

In addition to examining the sample introductions in this section, you should look at the full essays in this book and in other essay resources you may be consulting. Look at the introductions you like, and think about why they work.

Sample Introductions

Sample A. In an essay that discusses the effects of overwork, it would be appropriate to explain the causes first:

Although it was once predicted that technology would result in too much leisure time for workers, the opposite seems to have happened. Instead of working fewer hours, we are working harder than ever. Downsizing has put pressure on surviving employees. Smartphones keep workers in contact with clients and their work at all times. As a result, stressed-out workers are showing signs of physical, mental, and social problems.

Sample B. In an essay in favour of euthanasia, the main arguments against it could be mentioned in the introduction:

Even though euthanasia is already practised in Canadian hospitals, many people do not want the procedure legalized and controlled. They fear that it would lead to the “murder” of the terminally ill, the elderly, and the disabled. They think that life and death should be in the hands of God. However, mercy killing can mean a more humane way of dying, a return to a natural lifecycle, and a measure of control for those whose life spans are at an end.

Sample C. This introduction establishes that starting college is both exciting and challenging, before explaining the difficulties:

Graduating from high school and going off to college is an exciting time. Students look forward to being on their own and pursuing the studies that will lead them to a career. However, many find that this is not as easy as they thought it would be. First-year students may even drop out when they find they cannot make the transition to college successfully. College students have to adjust to living on their own, being responsible for their studies, and coping with financial limitations.

Sample D. In an essay that responds to a reading, it is useful to recap the author’s arguments:

In “If the Artists Starve, We’ll All Go Hungry,” Elizabeth Renzetti points out how artists are suffering in the new economy. The Internet has created an environment where people expect to get videos, music, and books for free. It is not surprising that artists are giving up creative work, knowing they cannot make a decent living from it. However, the work they produce is vital to our economy and the health of our society. In order to save it, we have to devise a whole new way of paying artists for their work.

Students often struggle writing the introduction. It is helpful to remember that an introduction does not have to be written first—it appears first in the essay, but it might be easier to write it when the body of the essay is drafted, as long as the writer has a thesis as a beginning point. Because the introduction and conclusion often contain ideas that do not fit the body, writing the introduction later can work. Moreover, writers who are blocked at the introduction might find that drafting the body can cure this block.

One common mistake is starting the introduction with the thesis—this leaves no room to do anything else but proceed to the arguments of the essay. Here is an example for the topic “What are the benefits of studying abroad?”

When it comes to the benefits of studying abroad, it is often said that people who have an opportunity to study abroad will have a new life and a bright future. Because of the development of the global economy and education, an increasing number of students choose to study abroad. This phenomenon has become more common than it was 30 years ago. Studying abroad can help students to learn a new culture, have friends from different countries, and acquire an advanced education.

Choosing to take a university year in another country is an increasingly popular option. Even though it can be expensive and difficult to arrange, many students take advantage of the opportunity to study overseas. They realize that the benefits are worth the effort. Studying abroad can help students to learn a new culture, make friends from different countries, and acquire an advanced education.

This introduction lacks a linear progression of ideas; it zigzags, giving an advantage of studying abroad, then explaining that the phenomenon is increasing, and then going back to advantages. Note also that the writer keeps repeating the phrase “studying abroad.”

This improved introduction ends with the thesis statement. It uses synonyms for “studying abroad.” It starts with a general fact about the phenomenon before moving to the benefits.

Study these examples—two unsuccessful introductions followed by a third one that works better:

Technology has advanced greatly through the years. We rely on technology. We cannot live without it. Banning cellphone use in class is unfair.

Smartphones are vital to everyday life. They are much more than a phone. Students can use them to communicate, to find information, and to take notes. Therefore, a ban on cellphone use in class is unfair.

This introduction starts with too broad an idea because “technology” can refer to anything from a pencil to a supersonic jet.

While this introduction starts with a narrower topic, it is also unsuccessful because it gives the reasons that the ban is unfair. In other words, it starts arguing the thesis before the body of the essay.

Smartphones have come under a lot of criticism from educators, who say that students are addicted to the devices, that they use them to cheat on tests, and that the phones distract them from the real world. Therefore, teachers want to ban them in class. The ban is short-sighted, however, because the phones are useful in the education process.

This is a better introduction because it prepares the reader for the essay by giving background information—that educators want to ban the phones and why. Now the writer is set to argue against this.

Another problem students sometimes have with introductions is that they try to say too much. For instance, they want to give the whole history of the subject as background. However, an introduction should not be too long; it should be shorter than a body paragraph. It should catch the readers' attention and prepare them for the essay, and that is enough.

Examine the introduction paragraphs for the sample essays at the end of this unit. What kind of background information is given? How does the introduction lead to the thesis?

An introduction should

- gradually lead the reader to your thesis, which is the last sentence of the introduction
- give background information to the reader or prepare the way for your thesis
- not mention arguments in support of your thesis (i.e., it should not repeat statements that are in your body paragraphs)
- not be longer than a body paragraph, in most cases

Writing Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs in an essay are similar to the developed paragraphs discussed in Unit 4. Each starts with a topic sentence giving the main idea. The rest of the paragraph explains that idea with supporting points (usually two to four points). A body paragraph, however, is generally shorter than an independent paragraph, and it does not require a concluding sentence.

In an essay, the topic sentences of the body paragraphs take their cue from the thesis statement. In other words, they should relate to the thesis by taking the same general idea but narrowing it down for the focus of the paragraph. The wording should be different so that the sentences are not repetitive. If the three arguments are listed in the thesis, the body paragraphs should be in the same order.

Study this example:

Thesis statement: *Public transit is a worthwhile investment because it is good for citizens' health, finances, and quality of life.*

Topic sentence #1: *Public transit leads to health benefits for the whole population.*
[health]

Topic sentence #2: *Investing in a better transit infrastructure ultimately saves money for everyone.* [finances]

Topic sentence #3: *Citizens' quality of life improves as more people use public transit and the number of cars on the roads decreases.* [quality of life]

A common problem found in essays is the use of a topic sentence that does not focus on the arguments of the thesis:

Cars produce a lot of pollution.

This topic sentence does not directly state a reason why public transit is worthwhile. Instead, it mentions a problem. This sentence could work inside the body paragraph as part of the explanation, but it is not a good topic sentence because it does not relate directly to the thesis.

Public transit leads to health benefits for the whole population.

Note that this topic sentence directly states an advantage, giving a reason why transit is worthwhile.

One of the problems students have when they are writing a body paragraph is that they write an introduction of one or two sentences before they give the topic sentence:

Cars produce a lot of pollution. Their exhaust is made up of toxic gases that lead to respiratory problems. Therefore, cutting car use by increasing public transit makes a healthier environment.

The topic sentence idea is actually the third sentence here. Moreover, the idea that cars cause pollution is well known and does not need to be stated.

The topic sentence of each body paragraph should be clear on its own. Use nouns, not pronouns, in the first sentence of a paragraph. For example, Topic sentence #1 above cannot read “It leads to health benefits for the whole population” because the “it” cannot refer back to a noun (public transit) in the previous paragraph. Each paragraph is a new beginning, so nouns should be clearly identified.

The topic sentence sometimes links to the previous paragraph. For example, an alternate topic sentence for the second body paragraph of the essay outlined above could be, “In addition to health benefits, public transit has financial advantages.”

Do not overload your topic sentence. Remember that you have a whole body paragraph to explain the idea.

A successful life is one that also makes a mark on society. People can do this through their work but also through other achievements, such as participating in political movements or doing volunteer work. Raising children to become valued members of society is a way of making a difference in the world. Having friends and helping those in need are important aspects of human existence. Human beings are social animals above all else, so lives spent in isolation cannot be viewed as valuable as those that involve reaching out to people.

This body paragraph is from the essay “The Definition of Success” on pages 151–52. The topic sentence is relatively short. It introduces the idea, but does not try to explain the idea—that job is left to the body paragraph.

Body paragraphs in an essay do not need concluding sentences, especially concluding sentences that just repeat the topic sentence. However, you can use a concluding sentence in the paragraph if it is necessary and works well, as in this example:

The skills I learned in the food service industry carry over to everyday life. . . . These may not be skills vital to my existence, but I take pride in them.

This is the beginning and end of a body paragraph from “What McJobs Have Taught Me” (page 154). Note that this body paragraph does have a concluding sentence, but it does not just repeat what was said in the topic sentence—it adds the idea of pride.

Explore the sample essays at the end of this unit. Analyze the structure of the body paragraphs. See how the topic sentences relate to the thesis. Identify which topic sentences have links to the previous body paragraph. Determine which body paragraphs have concluding sentences.

A body paragraph should

- begin with a topic sentence that relates to the thesis statement and introduces the main argument of the paragraph
- give two to four points in support of that main argument
- have each point explained and/or illustrated with examples
- have coherence and use transition signals to logically connect ideas
- have one main idea that supports the thesis (in other words, it should have unity and not go off topic.)
- have a concluding statement only when necessary to add something to the general idea

Exercise 5.4

Here is an introduction with a thesis statement. For each possible body paragraph that could follow, choose the best topic sentence of the four choices given. Explain your choice.

Personal vehicles have long been recognized as major sources of pollution. While it is relatively easy to give up driving a car in major cities that are well served by public transit and have other initiatives such as car-sharing, a personal vehicle is a necessity for most Canadians. Even if they must drive, however, they can reduce the harm caused by their car by changing what, when, and how they drive.

1.
 - a) Bigger vehicles such as SUVs burn more gas and therefore emit more toxic gas.
 - b) Canadians should choose a more fuel-efficient vehicle.
 - c) All Canadians should buy hybrid cars because they produce less pollution.
 - d) People should take public transit instead of driving.
2.
 - a) Most Canadians can reduce the number of trips they take by car.
 - b) Car-pooling is a good method to reduce the use of personal vehicles.
 - c) The government should improve the public transit system.
 - d) When should people use a car?
3.
 - a) Most people drive too fast and too far, so they burn too much gas.
 - b) In addition to using public transit, Canadians should walk and cycle more.
 - c) Using a GPS system can prevent getting lost and driving too much.
 - d) Good driving habits can also lead to a reduction in the polluting effects of cars.

Exercise 5.5

Write three topic sentences for each of the following thesis statements:

1. Students should pick a post-secondary program based on their interests, their skills, and the job prospects.
2. History courses are important because they teach critical thinking skills, explore life lessons, and inform students about their heritage.
3. How easily immigrants adapt to their new country depends on their educational background, their language skills, and their personality.

Writing a Conclusion

Conclusion paragraphs are similar to introductions in that they are not developed as body paragraphs are. Like an introduction, a conclusion should not contain ideas

that support the thesis. Essentially, a conclusion is like an upside-down introduction, starting with a restatement of the thesis and then moving on to broader ideas.

A conclusion can give the “so what?” idea, showing the significance of what has been argued in the essay. It can offer suggestions for improvement or predict the future. It is the last thing said to the reader, so the conclusion should have a memorable idea.

Here are sample conclusions for the same topics as the sample introductions on page 143:

Conclusion A

With all these harmful effects of working long hours, we should make a change in our work habits. Even though cutting hours would result in lower pay, we have to value our health above anything else. We need to make sure we lead a balanced life and not work ourselves to death.

Conclusion B

Euthanasia must be considered now that life and death is no longer a simple matter. Society must come to grips with the issue, and people must acknowledge that it already happens. Physicians play an important role, as does technology. We cannot turn back the clock, so we must accept dealing with a complex issue in a complex world.

Conclusion C

If students can make these adjustments to college life, they will be successful in school. Moreover, they will have gained maturity and learned to deal with responsibility. This will be as valuable as their education in their future life.

Conclusion D

These different ways of paying artists will have to be combined. It should not be left to one sector of the economy to insure that artists have enough to live on. With a stable income, artists can focus on creative work and not have to worry about the commercial value of what they produce. In this way, we will gain symphonies rather than jingles and public art installations rather than company logos.

The conclusion starts with a restatement of the thesis, but that is the only repetition, and it should not be in the same words.

In longer essays, you can write a short summary in a conclusion, but this is not advisable in short essays because it is too repetitive. Similar to the introduction, the conclusion should be shorter than the body paragraphs.

A conclusion should not suddenly reveal a preference or point of view to the reader, because this should have been clear in the thesis statement. A conclusion should not apologize for brevity (for example, “These are only some of the problems teenagers face”) or make new points to support the thesis.

Study the conclusions in the sample essays in this book.

A conclusion should

- start with a restatement of the thesis statement—one sentence
- go on to give a “so what?” idea—showing the relevance of what has been proved, predicting what will happen in the future, or suggesting a plan of action, for instance
- not mention arguments in support of the thesis (it should not repeat statements that are in the body paragraphs)
- not be longer than a body paragraph, in most cases

Studying Sample Essays

Read the following sample essays, examining the structure. For each, identify the thesis statement, and see how the topic sentences relate to it. Look at the support given for the points made in the essay. Examine the introductions and conclusions. You can also make a point-form outline of the essay to help you see the structure.

Other sample essays to study can be found in Unit 6, at the end of each non-fiction reading unit (Units 9–15), and in Appendices C and D.

Essay 1 Prompt: *Why is dining together as a family so important for children's development?*

The Family Meal

In today's hectic lifestyle, many meals have become little more than pit stops. People grab something on the run, often fast food or processed foods, and rarely take the time to sit down and enjoy a meal together with the most important people in their lives—their families. However busy their lives become, people should take the time to gather together for meals. The family meal provides people with an opportunity to share food, learn good behaviour, and spend time together.

Because a meal is primarily about the food, a shared dinner offers many health benefits. The food is generally more nutritious, since it is more likely to be home-cooked. It is usually consumed more slowly—which is also good for the digestive system. In addition, children are introduced to foods they might not eat if they are accustomed to having individual meals. Shared dinners often feature food that is traditional to the family and its ethnic culture. Moreover, children may learn how to appreciate and prepare such foods.

The family meal also offers opportunities to learn good behaviour. Children can practise proper table etiquette when they share a relaxed meal at home rather than grabbing a burger at a drive-through. These good manners will serve them well later when they are attending business lunches or wedding receptions. The meal also offers a good opportunity for family members to share the chores of preparing and serving the meal and cleaning up afterwards. Children who have learned to work together in this way grow up to be more considerate and less likely to sit around expecting to be waited on.

Finally, dinnertime is an occasion for enjoyable, relaxed conversation. Because the meal is at the end of the day, everyone will have news to share, so it is the best time for conversation. Children can describe what they learned at school, and parents can relate events from their workday. They can discuss current events and exchange opinions. They can even discuss problems and find solutions. Not only will they practise communication skills but also problem-solving techniques. With everyone leading such busy lives, a shared meal is a uniting element, giving family members an opportunity to communicate with one another.

The benefits of a shared family meal are so profound that people should not eliminate it from their lives, no matter how busy they get. Modern families must take a good hard look at their schedules and take some time off from business meetings, extracurricular activities, and clubs to spend time together as a family sharing a meal. Even if they find it impossible to arrange to eat together every evening, they should schedule a family meal once a week at the very least.

(You can compare this essay to Paragraph C on page 125.)

Essay 2 Prompt: *What is the meaning of success?*

The Definition of Success

Many people equate success with wealth. They think that if someone has a mansion and a fleet of luxury cars, that person must be successful. However, few people ever attain that degree of affluence. Nevertheless, many people can look proudly upon their many achievements. Success means making worthwhile contributions in work, finding a place in society, and gaining contentment in life.

Because work is so important in human life, people need to do a worthwhile job to be considered successful. It does not matter whether the job is running a global corporation or cleaning the streets; all work contributes something to society and needs doing. Some work may not pay very well, such as artistic endeavours, but it should still be recognized as valuable. Artists contribute memorable performances, written works to educate and entertain, and sculptures and paintings to satisfy the aesthetic needs of their audiences. People need to take pride in their work and do it to the best of their ability to be deemed a success.

A successful life is one that also makes a mark on society. People can do this through their work but also through other achievements, such as participating in political movements or doing volunteer work. Raising children to become valued members of society is a way of making a difference in the world. Having friends and helping those in need are important aspects of human existence. Human beings are social animals above all else, so lives spent in isolation cannot be viewed as valuable as those that involve reaching out to people.

Aside from what they contribute to society, people are not successful if they have not achieved some measure of contentment in their own lives. This may not involve vast sums of money or numerous possessions but enough to have their basic needs met, such as a home and a family. Studies have shown that people in poorer countries actually have more joy in their lives than those in rich Western countries. Moreover,

people who gripe and complain about every facet of their existence must be judged as failures.

When people want to evaluate the success of their lives, they must look at what they have accomplished through work, through their contributions to society, and in their individual existence. A life well-lived is one that has made a mark as well as one that satisfies the person living it. People only get one chance at life—they must do what they can with the time they are given.

Essay 3 Prompt: *Why do people get tattoos?*

Body Art

Human beings have been tattooing their skin for thousands of years, mainly as a tribal practice. In North America during most of the twentieth century, tattoos were sported only by rebels, such as bikers and criminals. A sailor might get inked at the end of a night of drinking and carousing. Tattoos had an element of freak show to them, and they were viewed as not quite respectable. Today, however, tattoos are everywhere—on lawyers, teachers, and grandmothers. The reasons that body art is so popular stem from artistic pursuits, personal expression, and group affiliation.

Tattoos can simply be viewed as another form of human decoration, one that is permanently inscribed on the skin. Body art has its place beside makeup, hairstyles, jewellery, and fashion—ways that people enhance their physical attributes. Tattoos can be elaborate works of art, such as dragons breathing colourful flames stretching over the back. On a smaller scale, an inked hummingbird on an ankle can be considered just a pretty picture. Tattoos draw attention to the body, something people have sought to do since prehistoric times.

Some people get tattoos to express their personal interests and attachments. For example, a tattoo can show the name and image of a loved one who has passed away and thus serve as a permanent memorial. A chef might have an image of his favourite food inked on his forearm. People can get tattoos to show their hobby or their favourite rock band. On a more spiritual side, Chinese characters are popular tattoos, usually ones that express a concept the person admires, such as “joy” or “wisdom.” The tattoo shows what the person believes in.

Tattoos can also show group membership. This is probably the most traditional of reasons to get inked. Certain tribes or religious groups would have specific symbols that branded members. Biker gangs and criminal groups sported tattoos that showed permanent affiliation. A marine might get the motto “Semper Paratus” inscribed on his arm. Even teenagers rebelling against their parents or trying to look cool are showing that they are part of their peer group.

The motivations behind tattoos vary, but they are currently very much in style with no signs of the fad waning. However, anyone contemplating a tattoo should think long and hard about it. Many people later regret getting their tattoos. Their body art may not look as crisp with the passage of time, or their interests and passions may change. Removal is a complicated, expensive, and often painful process, and anyone who invents a simpler way to accomplish it can look forward to booming business.

Essay 4 Prompt: *How are reality television shows made?*

Reality, Manipulated

Unscripted television is dominating the program schedule for many networks. Lifestyle shows give lessons on cooking, decorating, or buying real estate. Competition shows have contestants battling it out using their wits, athletic ability, or performance talents. Some of these programs are informative time-wasters that fill up the daytime schedule for networks, while other shows carve out high ratings in prime-time spots. No matter what the format, unscripted shows have to succeed as good television. Even though these programs are called “reality television,” the reality they portray has been staged and manipulated through the casting, filming, and editing process.

The first step in creating reality television is casting. The participants in the program have to be telegenic, as do the locations. The audience wants eye candy—to watch attractive people on lush tropical beaches. Good television also depends on conflict. For instance, the survivors on the island have to be a mix of characters that are naturally going to butt heads. The researchers casting the show go through hours of video of prospective participants, looking for those who are good-looking, articulate, and unreserved. A good back-story also makes for good television. A contestant who has overcome trauma is someone the audience can root for.

Even though the participants have no script to read from, they are manipulated during the filming process. The director stages situations to get the reactions he needs. For example, he may delay part of a participant’s home renovation to see how the participant copes. In addition, participants often do confessionals during which they talk directly to the camera to explain what has been happening in the action part of the show. In these confessionals they are answering leading questions from the director, who is off camera. For instance, the director will try to extract negative statements about the other participants. All of this is to try to get emotional reactions to make the story more dramatic.

Editing is an essential part of making reality television. The producers go through transcripts and hours of video to put together a few minutes of television. They have to find a story to tell and make sure that all the elements needed to tell that story have actually been captured by the camera. The editors cut together the footage, choosing the best shots to illustrate the story, and show reactions from the participants. The end product has to tell a clear, entertaining story that fits the time limits.

The process of making reality television shows how much the programs are crafted—unlike real life, television reality does not just happen. Even though critics deride such programming as cheap television, they are the result of many hours of work by skilled artists. Moreover, there is no sign that the popularity of such shows is waning.

Personal and Impersonal Essays

Some instructors assign personal topics to their students in an effort to engage them more in their writing. Others want students to practise writing objectively and impersonally as training for the work world. You should be able to handle both kinds of essays and know what is called for. The topic question usually indicates whether it requires a personal response.

Here are two essays on the same topic, the first personal and the second impersonal. See pages 10–11 for more on writing impersonally.

Essay 5 Prompt: “McJob” is the term coined by author Douglas Coupland to refer to low-paying, often menial jobs that frequently involve serving the public, based on the model of working at McDonald’s. *What have you learned from working at McJobs?*

What McJobs Have Taught Me

As a high school and then university student, I had my share of McJobs. I worked as a waitress, a cashier, and tour guide. Although some of my friends sneered at my jobs and chose to get into debt with student loans instead, I found that working like this was a good experience. My jobs taught me valuable skills in time management, food and drink preparation, and speaking to the public.

My work experience taught me how to use my time and energy profitably. Not only did I have to balance my studies, work hours, and social life, I learned how to get the most out of my work hours. In the restaurant, I never went anywhere empty-handed; I had enough miles to walk without having to do them twice. If I took plates of food or drinks to the tables, I went back to the kitchen with empty plates from other tables. Even today, as I clean house, I find that I work as efficiently as I did in my days as a server, making sure I am carrying something both coming and going.

The skills I learned in the food service industry carry over to everyday life. Sometimes I had to mix drinks, so I picked up some bartending skills that still come in handy at parties. At times I had to help the kitchen staff, so I learned to cook and plate food. I did not even know how to cook eggs before I had to help prepare breakfast at a truck stop restaurant where I worked. When we have large family dinners, my skill at balancing plates is impressive and useful. As a cashier, I became adept at handling money for everyday transactions. These may not be skills vital to my existence, but I take pride in them.

Probably the most important skills I acquired were people skills. As a waitress, I had to deal with rude and picky customers. Serving food for a catering company took me to formal functions at embassies and government buildings where I had to contend with a demanding clientele including celebrities and dignitaries such as the prime minister. As a tour guide, I learned to project my voice and keep my audience interested—skills that later helped in my career as a teacher. Because I worked in Ottawa, I had to be bilingual, so my fluency in French increased.

Even though working part-time made it difficult to spend enough time on my school work, I do not regret the hours I worked because of all I learned. I probably would have wasted more time if I had not had those jobs, and my marks would not have been much better. Moreover, I gained much more than just the income.

Essay 6 Prompt: “McJob” is the term coined by author Douglas Coupland to refer to low-paying, often menial jobs that frequently involve serving the public, based on the model of working at McDonald’s. *What can students learn from working in such jobs part-time and during the summers?*

The Benefits of McJobs

Students often work at part-time or summer jobs to pay their way through school. These positions are usually “McJobs”—low-paying labour, often involving serving the public. While many people disdain such menial work, students can actually benefit from such jobs in more than monetary terms. Students can learn time management, practical skills, and personal skills.

By working part-time, students learn to manage their precious time. First, they have to balance their school and work responsibilities. They know they cannot procrastinate with their academic assignments because they have little time to waste. They cannot spend free time on video games. Moreover, students learn to be punctual because bosses are less accepting of tardiness than teachers are. Finally, they learn to get their work done efficiently and use their time productively. McJobs often require that a number of tasks be accomplished even during downtime. For example, servers have side duties cleaning equipment, stocking supplies, and preparing plates, so they are busy even when the restaurant is almost empty.

Students can acquire a wide range of practical skills on the job. These skills can be carried over to other jobs or even to everyday household chores. For example, students who work as landscapers will be able to take care of their own yard and garden when they become homeowners. Restaurant cooks learn how to run a kitchen and can serve their future families good meals. Cashiers become adept at handling money and learn the physics of packing groceries into bags or boxes. Even if such abilities are not used in future careers, no skill is useless.

Since so many McJobs involve dealing with the public, student workers develop valuable people skills. They learn how to be polite and cheerful and how to listen to a complaint without losing their temper. Because they deal with such a wide range of people, they have a better understanding of humanity. For example, a cashier in a fast-food restaurant will see people struggling to come up with a few dollars to pay for a meal. Camp counsellors learn how children develop and learn. As a result, students develop the compassion and emotional intelligence that will serve them well throughout life.

Part-time and summer jobs allow students to grow and acquire skills. Students have to make sure that they do not take on too many hours, because their school work is still the priority. However, learning does not stop at the classroom door, and students should be open to these experiences that they may not have a chance at again.

Essay-Writing: Practice Topics

Essay-writing, of course, requires practice. All the reading selections in Part 2 have Discussion questions and Assignment topics that can be used as a base for essay-writing. Here are some general essay topics, some of which you may have already done some work on in this unit:

1. Write an essay on one of the topics your group generated in the Activity Choosing a Topic on page 131.
2. What are the benefits of doing volunteer work?
3. Would self-driving cars make the roads safer?
4. Should religious schools be funded by the government?
5. What kind of adjustments do adult children and their parents have to make when the children move back home after college or university?
6. Should textbooks be replaced by e-books?
7. Why should students study history?
8. What are the advantages or disadvantages of being famous? (Note: Focus on fame alone, not wealth.)

Essay checklist

- A five-paragraph essay has an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- The introduction provides background information and leads the reader to the thesis.
- The thesis statement is the last sentence of the introduction. It is one sentence. It states the main argument, which is a supportable idea. It can be a general thesis, or it can give the three arguments of the essay (concisely and in parallel structure).
- Each body paragraph starts with a topic sentence that relates directly to the thesis and gives the main focus of that paragraph.
- Each body paragraph contains points that are supported by specific examples or explanation.
- The arguments in support of the thesis are only in the body paragraphs—not in the introduction or conclusion.
- The conclusion starts with a restatement of the thesis. For a short essay, this restatement is the only summary required.
- The conclusion ends with a “so what?” idea, explaining the relevance of the argument or taking the idea to a possible future but not giving more arguments in support of the thesis.