



Easy Formulas for Exceptional Writing¹

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The people who study writing are beginning to agree that writing itself has become an 'unnatural' act, something we normally don't do. As a result, people who almost never have to write outside of school are unwilling to invest the effort necessary to memorize the rules and develop the writing skills needed to become truly exceptional writers. And, because a lot of people mistakenly feel that they are already 'good' writers, they don't believe it is especially important for them to worry about developing those skills and abilities further. As a result, writing becomes an 'unnatural' act that is avoided by depending on telephones and the writing skills of secretaries and receptionists.

Instead of writing poorly but infrequently, you can learn a simple, effective writing formula that matches the skills and abilities that you already have. Writing formulas are strategies that prevent the three most common writing errors:

- 1) disorganized planning and subject arrangement,
- 2) awkward or improper sentences and paragraphs, and
- 3) lack of transition and development.

A writing formula allows you to avoid these problems by providing you with an organizational structure that you don't have to agonize over. Why is it that reporters can rap out a story in seconds, but

when we write it takes hours? Because reporters use news style — a writing *formula*.

A Writing Formula

The idea of a writing formula is a simple one. When you write, you are presented with a collection of facts that are related to your central idea. However, when you write you have three problems:

- 1) What goes first?
- 2) What goes last? and
- 3) In what order are the facts in between?

Once you've solved these three problems, writing becomes a fairly simple process. But how do you get over this initial impasse? You do what others do when they have an artistic problem. After all, when Claude Monet went out to paint each day he didn't have to start at square one! No. He knew a lot about what he was going to do before he even decided on a subject.

For instance, when Monet went out to paint he knew what kind of paint he would use, what kind of strokes he would use, what brushes he would use and so forth. There was never a chance that he would haul off and paint like Paul Gauguin. Monet was an impressionist and Gauguin was an expressionist. Monet painted by a formula that he chose. When you

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write, you can use a formula and then, just like Monet, all you have to determine is the subject.

Writing formulas are based on the elements of the 'average' good sentence and paragraph. People who use writing formulas concede that their writing style won't be overly creative because writing formulas produce 'good' writers by suppressing the tendencies that result in exceptional writers (both exceptionally good and exceptionally bad). However, they know that by using the formula they can produce average but acceptable sentences and paragraphs that are interesting, clear and concise. As a result, their writing style becomes both readable and inconspicuous.

The Five-Paragraph Method

One of the simplest writing formulas is the five-paragraph method. The five paragraph method is based on the idea that if you can provide some type of order to your writing, it will be easier to write. As you know, the problem you face when you write is the fact that there are thousands of different ways you could write everything that you write.

How can you decide? Maybe a good starting point is to try to set some order. That's what composers do when they write symphonies! Listen to a symphony. It sounds so complex that your first reaction is that no one could write something so complex. Listen to the thousands of notes. Listen to the hundreds of bars of notes. Sounds complex doesn't it? Actually, it's not. No matter how complex it sounds, the whole piece is only based on seven notes. It sounds complex because the seven notes are being made by one hundred instruments at once, but the truth is there are only seven notes. And how do they get in that order? The composer chooses four or five notes and bases the whole symphony on those notes. Take Beethoven's fifth symphony. It's based on only four notes: Da DaDa DUM. Beethoven chose them and then wrote the symphony around them. As a matter of fact, when Beethoven wrote most of his best symphonies he had already gone DEAF! He didn't have to hear the notes, he knew how he wanted them organized and he chose that order.

When you write you can do the same thing. Try to reduce your subject to three parts and then tack on an Introduction and Summary. For instance, if you are

writing about writing, you would reduce your essay to three parts:

- 1) Prewriting (everything associated with deciding on the subject and style, outlining the materials, and analyzing the audience).
- 2) Writing (everything associated with word choice, sentence construction, paragraph development, and the efforts you make at writing clearly and precisely).
- 3) Postwriting (everything associated with editing, revising and planning your writing to make it more effective).

Then, all you have to do is write your Introduction and Summary. What are they about? They are simply an introduction and summary of prewriting, writing, and postwriting.

Sounds too easy? Well, in many cases you can't reduce your subject to three parts — it will naturally have two, or four, or six parts. However, once you find out the number of logical parts it has, you just develop a new formula. Maybe your formula should be the SEVEN paragraph formula (the five natural subjects, plus an Introduction and Summary). Or maybe it should be a four paragraph essay (two natural subjects plus an Introduction and a Summary).

By doing this you give yourself a formula to follow (thereby making writing much easier) AND you follow Aristotle's rule for writing (Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, tell 'em, and tell'em what you told 'em.).

A Four-Part, Six-Section, Ten-Page Essay

Section one: an introduction of the four parts (one page)

Section two: the first of the four parts (two pages)

Section three: the second part (two pages)

Section four: the third part (two pages)

Section five: the fourth part (two pages)

Section six: a summary of the four parts (one page)

Example topic: The Potential Negative Effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Florida Agriculture.

Section one: An introduction that defines NAFTA and lists its four probable effects (decreased agricultural production in Florida, increased agricultural production in Mexico, increased prices for agricultural products in America, and decreased profits for American agricultural producers).

Section two: Decreased agricultural production in Florida (especially vegetables). Decreased sales of agricultural equipment and supplies in Florida by American producers. Decreased use of low-income Floridians to work in the agricultural industries.

Section three: Increased agricultural production in Mexico. Increased initial sales by American producers. Decreased illegal immigration from Mexico. Increased employment opportunities for low-income Mexicans. Increased use of chemicals in agricultural production in Mexico. Increased environmental problems in Mexico.

Section four: Increased prices for agricultural products in America. Less control of the amount of chemicals used in the production of food consumed by Americans. Food availability can be adversely affected by distributors in America and Mexico. Food quality standards will not be mandated by the U.S. Agriculture Department. Food standards will be lower.

Section five: Competition with producers in Mexico will force Americans to cut costs and reduce profits. Mexican producers have cheaper employment costs. Mexican producers can use cheaper, less regulated chemicals. American producers will have to reduce their costs by lowering standards. American producers will have to advertise more frequently, thereby raising their costs.

Section six: a summary that reviews NAFTA and lists its four probable effects (decreased agricultural production in Florida, increased agricultural production in Mexico, increased prices for agricultural products in America, and decreased profits for American agricultural products).

Good writing is a skill that comes from effort and practice. However, many people are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to be good writers because they write so infrequently. Instead, they seek an easier solution. For those who are willing to learn to write effectively, there is the problem of writing acceptably while they are mastering their new skills. For both of these groups, formula writing offers an effective alternative: learning to write acceptably with little time and effort. By using a writing formula you can learn to overcome the 'unnatural' act and write in a readable, inconspicuous and effective style.