

# A Peer Review Activity for Essay Organization

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## Background

I currently find myself teaching thirty-contact-hour courses in English essay writing to large university-level groups. There are limits to how much one can get across in these circumstances, and so I've chosen to focus more on the basics of clear essay construction than on the higher questions of style and register.

Coming from the British education system, I didn't know what a thesis statement or a topic sentence WAS until I began teaching writing courses, and initially I found the formula of thesis statement--topic sentences--conclusion rather "mechanical" and unimaginative. Well, it may be so, but I have come to appreciate its user-friendliness and clarity, and also the fact that it has become a kind of template for written material in many walks of life. Whatever its shortcomings, the "expository essay" formula is also a straightforward one for non-native apprentice writers to pick up. It helps students break away from their own culture's prose conventions, and it should even provide a reasonable basis for much of the English writing they may have to do after college.

So much for the rationale. What I want to show you here is an activity which I use to focus attention on the value of clear and tight topic sentences, but which can also be used to work on thesis statements. My aims here were to come up with a time-efficient activity which allows participants a high degree of "anonymity" (thus minimising embarrassment) and which gets students' output read and responded to by peers rather than by a teacher.

This activity can be used at two levels: that of individual paragraph organisation, and that of the structure of the essay as a whole. The focus at paragraph level is on how well the topic sentence introduces the reader to key information in the paragraph, and at essay level on how well the thesis introduces the paragraph topics. Ideally, this peer review activity should be part of the essay writing process, but failing that it can be used to review the most recent class assignment while it's still (perhaps) fresh in your students' minds.

I have found it useful to build into each class assignment an outlining stage, in which each paragraph has to be shown a full topic sentence, and individual "content" points in simple sentence form. This outlining format was originally designed to give me a quick but comprehensive overview of each student's essay-in-progress, but the fact that an outline can be used without rewriting also makes it ideal for the activity described here.

## Procedure

The procedure I have used is this: each student is given a code letter to identify his or her written material (If anonymity is important, the identifying letters can be handed out in random order.) and slips of paper. On each slip students write the topic sentence from one of their paragraphs. If students are transferring topic sentences from several paragraphs, each slip should also carry an identifying number, as in this example "topic sentence" slip:

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A1

Even in developed countries, however, there are various reasons why many children grow up in conditions of severe deprivation.

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You now distribute other, larger slips of paper--colour coding helps keep the two types separate--on which students write down the "content points" contained in a paragraph. They should note their code letter (and a number if required) on this slip too. Here is an example "paragraph content" slip:

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A1

- % The family may be a single-parent family.
  - % One or both parents may be unemployed.
  - % Parents may be dependent on alcohol or other drugs.
  - % The parents may have grown up in deprivation themselves, and so they think it is quite normal.
- 

This process is repeated until students have prepared "topic sentence" and "content" slips for each of their paragraphs. Be sure to check that they've added identifying numbers and letters!

Topic sentence and information-point slips are now gathered in and shuffled. The topic sentence slips are then handed out again at random, with students being asked to check that they have not been given back their own sentence(s).

You now ask the students to look at the topic sentence on a slip, and think about what they expect to find in the paragraph it introduces. This is best done by having students discuss each sentence in pairs or threes. When they have made their predictions, students either ask you for the matching content slip for that topic sentence, or pick it up themselves from a desk or table. They then consider how well or otherwise the paragraph's content matches the expectations generated by the topic sentence, and edit the topic sentence and/or content as they see fit.

Finally, you may choose to look at a few slips with the whole class (If you do plan to do this, you can save time by giving out slips of OHP acetate rather than paper.) or, alternatively, have slips returned directly to their authors. Most of the students with whom I have used this activity have said that the feedback from their peers was useful, if not always comfortable. That said, you should not expect everyone to be happy with the way others revised his or her topic sentences or paragraph content--their "improvements" can occasionally be nothing of the sort!

I don't need to go into much detail about how this activity can be used at "whole essay" level. Instead of topic sentence and content slips, here students simply put their thesis statement onto one slip, and on another the topic sentences of their essay paragraphs. These are then distributed in the same way, and students discuss how well the thesis covers the content of the paragraphs. Again, comments and revisions can be noted on the slips.

This activity has worked well for me, even with classes which have been sceptical of the value of the expository essay formula. If you try it, I would be happy to get feedback on how it went for you, and of course to know of any improvements you come up with.

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