Composition and Academic Writing

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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Chapter 1: Writing Is Thinking — The Process Behind the Page

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

1. Describe writing as a process of stages — gathering, planning, drafting, revising — rather than a single act of inspiration.
2. Use three gathering techniques: freewriting, listing, and questioning.
3. Explain why a first draft is allowed to be imperfect, and what it is for.
4. Produce a working plan for a short essay from raw notes.

1.1 The Myth of the Single Sitting

Beginning writers often believe that good writers sit down and produce finished prose in one flowing act, and that their own halting drafts prove a lack of talent. The belief is false, and it is harmful. Experienced writers produce *more* drafts, not fewer; they simply know what each draft is for. The first draft discovers what you think. The second gives it a shape a reader can follow. The third makes the sentences worthy of the shape. Trying to do all three jobs at once is the single most common cause of the frozen, blank-page feeling.

This chapter teaches the process as a sequence you can trust. Follow the sequence, and the page will fill.

1.2 Stage One: Gathering

Before you plan, gather — get material outside your head and onto paper, where you can see it. Three techniques cover most needs.

Freewriting. Set a time — ten minutes is enough — and write continuously about your topic without stopping, correcting, or judging. If you stall, write the last word again until thought returns. Freewriting is not drafting; it is mining. Afterwards, read it with a pen and underline anything alive: a phrase, an example, a distinction. Expect most of it to be discarded. The gold justifies the gravel.

Listing and grouping. Write down every point, fact, example, and objection connected with your topic, in any order, one per line. Then group the items that belong together and give each group a working label. Groups often become paragraphs; the label often becomes a topic sentence. A list that will not group is telling you something: the topic may be two topics, or a group may be empty because you need to read more before writing.

Questioning. Interrogate the topic with the journalist's questions — who, what, where, when, why, how — and then with the scholar's three: What is at issue? What is the

strongest opposing view? What would change my mind? The opposing-view question is the one students skip and examiners reward.

1.3 Stage Two: Planning

A plan is a promise you make to your reader about the order in which ideas will arrive. It need not be formal. For a short essay, a numbered list of paragraph-points under a one-sentence thesis is a complete plan. What a plan must do is settle two things before drafting begins: the destination (your thesis — see Chapter 3) and the route (the order of your points, arranged so that each prepares the next). Order is an argument in itself: strongest point last is the classic arrangement for persuasion; chronological order suits narrative; order of importance, descending, suits reports.

Plans can change during drafting — discovering a better order is a sign the process is working — but change it consciously, in the plan, rather than letting the draft drift.

1.4 Stage Three: Drafting

Draft from the plan, in the plan's order, at a steady pace, leaving gaps rather than stopping. If a fact needs checking, write a bracketed note to yourself — [check date of second edition] — and keep moving. If a sentence resists, write it badly and keep moving; a bad sentence on paper can be fixed, while a perfect sentence in the head cannot be read by anyone. Draft the body before the introduction: many writers find the introduction easiest to write last, when they know exactly what they are introducing. This is not disorder; it is the process acknowledging that introductions are promises, and promises are best written when you know what you can keep.

1.5 Worked Example: From Notes to Plan

Topic: "Should a university library open through the night during examinations?"

Raw list (gathered): students revise late; some have crowded homes; night staff cost money; safety walking home; other libraries do it; quiet space is the real need, not books; online resources are available anywhere; cleaners and security; a trial period could test demand; examinations last only a few weeks.

Grouped: (A) Need — late revision, crowded homes, quiet space the true need. (B) Costs and risks — staffing, security, safety on the way home. (C) Alternatives and tests — online resources do not supply quiet; a trial during examination weeks limits cost and measures demand.

Thesis (draft): "The library should open through the night during examination weeks only, on a trial basis, because the need is real but seasonal, and the costs are justified only when demand is proven."

Plan: 1. The need (A). 2. The honest costs (B) — conceding these strengthens the case. 3. Why the seasonal trial answers both (C). 4. Conclusion.

Notice what the process did: the thesis was not known at the listing stage. It *emerged* from grouping. That is writing as thinking, in action.

Exercises — Chapter 1

Exercise 1. Freewrite for ten minutes on this topic: "A skill every student should learn before leaving secondary school." Then underline the three most usable ideas in what you wrote.

Exercise 2. Make a raw list on the topic "Mobile phones in the lecture hall," group it, label the groups, and draft a thesis that the grouping suggests.

Exercise 3. Explain, in a short paragraph, why drafting the introduction last can produce a better introduction.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 1

5. The exercise succeeds if the freewriting is genuinely continuous and the underlining is selective. If everything is underlined, nothing has been evaluated — repeat the underlining, choosing only three.
6. A workable grouping: learning benefits (note-taking, quick reference), disruption (attention, fairness in tests), policy options (bans, silent modes, designated use). A thesis the grouping suggests might run: "Phones should be permitted in lectures under a silent, face-down rule, because their learning uses are real but depend on removing their power to interrupt." Other theses earn full credit if they genuinely arise from the groups and take a debatable position.
7. Strong answers: the introduction promises what the essay delivers; written first, it promises what the writer hopes to deliver, and the two often diverge. Written last, it can name the actual argument, the actual order, and the actual conclusion — so the promise and the performance match.

Chapter 2: The Paragraph — The Working Unit of Prose

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

8. Identify and write a topic sentence that controls a paragraph.
9. Build a paragraph from the pattern: point, evidence or example, explanation, link.
10. Achieve unity (one controlling idea) and coherence (sentences that visibly connect) in a paragraph.
11. Use linking words accurately — for addition, contrast, cause, example, and sequence — without overusing them.

2.1 What a Paragraph Is For

A paragraph is a unit of thought, marked for the reader's convenience. It makes one main point, develops it, and stops. When readers say a text is "hard to follow," they usually mean its paragraphs are doing too much (three points competing) or too little (a point announced and abandoned). Master the paragraph and you have mastered the load-bearing structure of all academic prose, because essays, reports, and theses are paragraphs organised at a larger scale.

2.2 The Topic Sentence

The topic sentence states the paragraph's controlling idea. In academic writing it usually comes first, where it serves as a signpost: the reader knows at once what this paragraph will establish, and every following sentence can be checked against it. A topic sentence is not a topic label. "Another point is education" labels; "Free primary education fails its purpose when classrooms hold more children than any teacher can teach" states a controlling idea — one that the paragraph must now support, and that a reader could dispute. Disputable is good: it means a claim exists.

Not every fine paragraph in literature opens with its topic sentence — narrative and descriptive writing often delay or imply it — but in academic work, learn the explicit form first. It is the form examiners can reward and the form you can diagnose when a paragraph goes wrong.

2.3 Developing the Paragraph: Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link

A reliable internal pattern:

- **Point** — the topic sentence.
- **Evidence or example** — the fact, example, quotation, or observation that grounds the point.

- **Explanation** — your commentary: how the evidence supports the point. This is the sentence students most often omit, and its absence is why their paragraphs feel thin even when their evidence is good. Evidence does not speak; the writer speaks for it.
- **Link** — a closing move that either completes the point or hands over to the next paragraph's point.

2.4 Unity and Coherence

Unity means every sentence in the paragraph serves the controlling idea. Test each sentence: if it were removed, would the paragraph's point lose support? If a sentence neither supports nor explains, it belongs elsewhere — however interesting it is. Interesting irrelevance is the hardest fault to cut and the most necessary.

Coherence means the sentences connect visibly. Three instruments produce it. *Linking words* signal logical relations: addition (furthermore, moreover), contrast (however, by contrast, whereas), cause and result (therefore, consequently, as a result), example (for instance, namely), sequence (first, subsequently, finally). *Repetition of key terms* — using the paragraph's central word again rather than hunting for synonyms — keeps the thread visible; elegant variation, changing the word every sentence, is a fault in academic prose, not a grace. *Pronouns and reference words* (this, such, these measures) tie a sentence to its predecessor — but only when the reference is unmistakable.

Use linking words like signposts, not like wallpaper. A paragraph in which every sentence begins with a connector reads as mechanically as one with none. One or two well-placed signals per paragraph usually suffice, supported by key-term repetition.

2.5 Worked Example: Building a Paragraph

Topic sentence (point): "A market town's weekly market day shapes the town's whole rhythm, not merely its trade."

Evidence: "Shops that open at eight on other days open at six on market day; the council schedules no roadworks; even the clinic moves its outreach table to the market square."

Explanation: "These adjustments show institutions planning around the market as around a tide: the market is not an event in the town's week but the event by which the week is organised."

Link: "If the market organises time in this way, its decline — the subject of the next paragraph — is a loss of structure, not only of income."

Read the paragraph again and notice that removing any sentence breaks a function: point, evidence, explanation, link. That functional completeness, in about ninety words, is the standard to aim at.

Exercises — Chapter 2

Exercise 1. Which of these is a topic sentence, and why? (a) "This paragraph is about examinations." (b) "Frequent short tests improve learning more reliably than one final examination, because they force regular revision." (c) "Examinations have existed for a very long time."

Exercise 2. Write a paragraph of about one hundred and twenty words on the point "A good dictionary is a teacher that fits in a bag," supplying evidence, explanation, and a link.

Exercise 3. The following sentences form a paragraph but are out of order. Arrange them and name each sentence's function. (i) "It therefore deserves a place in every student's training, not as an ornament but as an instrument." (ii) "Public speaking is the skill students most often avoid and most often need." (iii) "The graduate who can explain a project clearly to a room of strangers carries her knowledge further than the graduate who merely has it." (iv) "For instance, employers in every field report that clear spoken presentation decides between otherwise equal candidates."

Answer Guidance — Chapter 2

12. (b) is the topic sentence: it makes a disputable claim with a reason attached, which the paragraph can then develop. (a) merely labels a topic. (c) states a fact too broad and inert to control a paragraph's development.
13. A strong paragraph might offer as evidence the dictionary's definitions, examples, pronunciation, and usage notes available at the moment of need; as explanation, that unlike a teacher it answers instantly, privately, and repeatedly without impatience; as link, a move to the next point (for example, the limits of dictionaries, or the habits that make students use them). Any evidence genuinely supporting the point earns credit; missing explanation is the fault to watch.
14. Order: (ii) point — the claim about avoidance and need; (iv) evidence — employers' reports, introduced by "for instance"; (iii) explanation — why the evidence matters, contrasting explaining with merely having knowledge; (i) link/conclusion — "therefore" gathers the paragraph and states its consequence. Award full credit for this order with correct functions; the pair (iii)–(iv) reversed is acceptable only if the student justifies it.

Chapter 3: The Essay — Thesis, Structure, and the Architecture of Argument

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

15. Write a thesis statement that is debatable, specific, and provable in the space available.
16. Structure an essay in introduction, body, and conclusion, and state the job of each part.
17. Organise body paragraphs by point rather than by sequence of events or sources.
18. Handle a counterargument fairly and answer it without weakening your own position dishonestly.

3.1 The Thesis Statement

The thesis is the essay's central claim, stated in one or two sentences, usually at the end of the introduction. Everything in the essay exists to support it; anything that does not support it is a candidate for removal. Chapter 1 introduced the three tests — debatable, specific, provable — and they bear repeating here in applied form.

"Weak: 'Social media has advantages and disadvantages.' " This is not debatable (no one disputes it), not specific (it fits any essay on the subject ever written), and it commits the writer to a shapeless list.

"Strong: 'For university students, social media's chief academic cost is not distraction during study but the fragmentation of the long, unbroken reading on which advanced study depends.'" This can be disputed — good. It names a specific cost and ranks it above the obvious one — good. It can be supported in a short essay with two or three developed points — good.

A thesis may also forecast the essay's route: "...because it shortens reading sessions, rewards skimming, and makes sustained texts feel unusually effortful by contrast." A forecasting thesis is a kindness to the reader and a discipline for the writer: the body now owes exactly three points, in that order.

3.2 The Introduction

An introduction has three jobs: engage the reader with the issue, narrow from the general subject to the precise question, and state the thesis. A dependable shape is the funnel: open on the broad territory in one or two sentences, narrow to the problem or debate, then land on the thesis. Avoid three common openings: the dictionary definition ("The Oxford dictionary defines..."), the dawn-of-time sweep ("Since the beginning of

history, mankind has..."), and the apology ("This essay will try to discuss..."). Each delays the argument while announcing nothing about it. "This essay argues that..." is plain and acceptable; disguising the thesis does the reader no service.

3.3 The Body

Body paragraphs follow the paragraph pattern of Chapter 2, scaled to the essay: each carries one point of the argument, in an order chosen deliberately. Standard orders include: order of importance (building to the strongest), problem then solution, claim then implication, and — for literary essays — order of the argument's logic rather than the plot's chronology. Transitions between paragraphs matter as much as transitions within them: the first sentence of each body paragraph should make its relation to the previous point audible, whether by contrast, extension, or consequence.

One point per paragraph is the rule; two related sub-points may share a paragraph if one clearly serves the other. When a paragraph grows beyond roughly two hundred and fifty words, check whether it is secretly two paragraphs.

3.4 The Counterargument

An essay that never meets an objection persuades only the persuaded. The counterargument paragraph — placed usually after your main points and before the conclusion — states the strongest opposing view fairly, in its best form, and then answers it: by conceding the part that is true and showing it does not reach your thesis, by showing the objection rests on a case your thesis already excludes, or by outweighing it with a consideration the objector has missed. Concession is not weakness. "It is true that night opening costs money; the question is whether examination-season demand justifies a seasonal cost" is stronger than pretending the cost does not exist. What you must not do is state the objection more persuasively than your answer, or answer a weak version nobody holds — the straw man, which alert readers always detect.

3.5 The Conclusion

The conclusion restates the thesis in the light of the argument — not word for word, but as something now earned — and then widens, briefly, to the implication: why this conclusion matters, what it changes, what follows from it. It introduces no new evidence and no new points; a conclusion with a new argument is a confession that the body was incomplete. End on a sentence with some finish to it — a clear final judgement, not a trailing summary and not a rhetorical flourish unrelated to the argument.

3.6 Worked Example: An Essay Plan in Full

Question: "Is a printed book still worth its cost to a student who owns a phone?"

Thesis: "For sustained study, the printed book remains worth its cost to the phone-owning student, because print protects long reading, fixes a stable text for citation, and imposes no competing demands on attention."

Body point 1: Long reading — print's fixed pages and absence of interruption support the multi-hour sessions advanced study requires; the phone's design fragments them. Body point 2: Stability — a printed edition's pagination is fixed, so notes, references, and classroom discussion can locate the same passage exactly; a flowing digital text shifts between devices and updates. Body point 3: Single purpose — a book does only one thing in the hand, so the student's attention is not bid for by messages and feeds on the same surface. Counterargument: cost and weight are real, and for quick reference the phone is superior — conceded, and answered: the thesis concerns sustained study, not reference, and a small working shelf of core texts is cheaper than the fees of a repeated course. Conclusion: restate; implication — the question is not print versus phone but matching the instrument to the kind of reading.

Observe that every element of Chapters 1 and 2 is present: the plan came from grouping, each body point is a paragraph writ large, and the counterargument has its assigned place.

Exercises — Chapter 3

Exercise 1. Improve this thesis: "Pollution is a serious problem in many cities." Rewrite it so it passes all three tests for a short essay about one city you know.

Exercise 2. Write the counterargument paragraph (about one hundred and twenty words) for the library essay planned in Chapter 1: state the case against night opening fairly, then answer it.

Exercise 3. A classmate's conclusion introduces a brand-new example. Explain what is wrong and what the example should have done instead.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 3

19. A passing rewrite names a specific mechanism and claim — for example: "In this city, the chief pollution harm to schoolchildren comes not from factories but from morning traffic idling at school gates, because exposure is concentrated at the hour and place where children gather." Debatable (the ranking can be disputed), specific (one city, one mechanism), provable (evidence about traffic and exposure can be marshalled in a short essay).
20. A fair statement: night opening requires paid staff and security, endangers students travelling in darkness, and spends scarce funds for a few weeks' benefit. A good answer concedes the costs, then deploys the trial and the seasonal limit: costs are

bounded, demand will be measured, transport can be grouped, and the decision can be reversed if the trial fails. Credit fairness first — an answer that caricatures the opposition has failed the exercise's main test.

21. New evidence in a conclusion cannot be examined, weighed, or answered; it asks for belief without argument. The example belonged in the body, in the paragraph whose point it supports — or, if the body is complete without it, it should be cut.

Chapter 4: Sentences That Work — Clarity, Variety, and Common Faults

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

22. Diagnose and repair the four most common sentence faults in student writing: the fragment, the run-on, the comma splice, and faulty parallelism.
23. Prefer the active voice for clarity while recognising where the passive is correct and necessary.
24. Cut deadwood: phrases that add length without meaning.
25. Vary sentence length and opening deliberately, for rhythm and emphasis.

4.1 The Sentence as a Contract

A sentence promises the reader a complete thought with a subject and a verb in a settled relation. Faults are broken promises. Learn the four below by name, because faults you can name you can find in your own drafts.

The fragment is a piece of a sentence punctuated as a whole: "Because the rain had flooded the road." The reader waits for the main clause that never comes. Repair by joining it to its main clause: "Because the rain had flooded the road, the buses stopped running." Note that skilled writers use deliberate fragments for effect in narrative and rhetoric; in academic prose, treat every fragment as an error until you can prove it is an effect.

The run-on crowds two or more complete thoughts together without adequate punctuation: "The lecture ended the students left the hall was empty by noon." Repair by separating or subordinating: "When the lecture ended, the students left; the hall was empty by noon."

The comma splice joins two complete sentences with a comma alone: "The results were clear, the committee acted at once." A comma cannot do a full stop's or a semicolon work. Repair in any of three ways: full stop, semicolon, or a joining word ("The results were clear, so the committee acted at once").

Faulty parallelism breaks a pattern the sentence itself set up: "She likes reading, to write, and painting." The list promises matching forms and breaks the promise. Repair: "She likes reading, writing, and painting." Parallelism matters beyond lists: in comparisons and paired constructions ("not only... but also"), the forms on each side should match, because the reader processes the second half using the grammar of the first.

4.2 Voice: Active First, Passive Where It Belongs

In the active voice, the subject performs the action: "The committee rejected the proposal." In the passive, the subject receives it: "The proposal was rejected by the committee." The active is usually shorter, clearer, and more honest about agency — it says who did it. Default to it.

The passive has three legitimate uses. When the doer is unknown or irrelevant: "The bridge was built in the colonial period." When the receiver matters more than the doer, as in much scientific reporting: "The samples were heated for two hours." When tact requires softening agency: "Mistakes were made" — a use to recognise, and to be wary of, since it can also evade responsibility. In your own academic writing, a paragraph of passives with no human agent anywhere should provoke suspicion: someone chose, measured, argued, and concluded, and your reader deserves to know who.

4.3 Cutting Deadwood

Deadwood is phrasing that occupies space without adding meaning. Standard specimens, with their repairs:

- "due to the fact that" → "because"
- "at this point in time" → "now"
- "in the event that" → "if"
- "a large number of" → "many"
- "in order to" → "to"
- "it is important to note that" → (delete; then note it)
- "the reason is because" → "the reason is that" (or restructure)

Cutting is not impoverishing. Every deleted empty phrase raises the value of the words that remain, and shortens the distance between your reader and your meaning. A second family of deadwood is the redundant pair: "each and every," "first and foremost," "various and sundry." Choose one member of the pair; the other was only echoing.

4.4 Variety and Emphasis

Clarity is the first virtue; rhythm is the second. A page of sentences all of the same length and shape — subject, verb, object; subject, verb, object — lulls the reader even when each sentence is correct. Vary length: a short sentence after several long ones lands with emphasis, because the reader's ear has been set a pattern and the break announces importance. Vary openings: begin sometimes with a subordinate clause ("Although the harvest failed,..."), sometimes with a phrase, sometimes with the subject straight. Place what you most want remembered at the end of the sentence, where stress naturally falls, and at the end of the paragraph, where it lingers. Compare: "The trial failed, despite the

team's care, in its final week" with "Despite the team's care, the trial failed in its final week." The second keeps the blow for the end.

4.5 Worked Example: One Paragraph, Repaired

Before:

> "The survey was conducted by the students, it covered three villages, because transport was limited. The findings were surprising and they showed that wells were nearer than clinics, which mattered. Due to the fact that water is carried daily, distance to water shapes the day, in order to plan work, women rise early, they are rising before dawn."

Faults: a comma splice ("students, it covered"); a fragment trailing ("because transport was limited" left doing duty it cannot do alone — here it is attached but misplaced, blurring cause); deadwood ("due to the fact that," "in order to"); a second comma splice ("early, they are rising"); repetition without emphasis.

After:

> "The students conducted the survey in three villages, the number transport allowed. The findings surprised them: wells were nearer than clinics, and the difference mattered. Because water is carried daily, distance to water shapes the whole day; to plan their work around it, women rise before dawn."

Every repair is mechanical and learnable. That is the encouraging truth of this chapter: sentence quality is not a mystery of talent but a checklist applied with patience — which is why Chapter 7 gives revision its own method.

Exercises — Chapter 4

Exercise 1. Name and repair each fault: (a) "Studying the map carefully before the journey." (b) "The bell rang, the candidates opened their papers." (c) "His duties included filing, to answer letters, and receipts."

Exercise 2. Rewrite in the active voice, keeping the passive only if you can justify it: "The decision was taken by the board after the report had been read by all members."

Exercise 3. Cut the deadwood: "At this point in time, a large number of students, due to the fact that fees have risen, are in the process of seeking part-time work in order to continue their studies."

Answer Guidance — Chapter 4

26. (a) Fragment — no main verb for a subject: "Study the map carefully before the journey" (imperative) or "We studied the map carefully before the journey." (b)

Comma splice: use a full stop, a semicolon, or "and when the bell rang..." restructuring: "The bell rang, and the candidates opened their papers." (c) Faulty parallelism: "filing, answering letters, and keeping receipts" — all forms matching.

27. "The board took the decision after all members had read the report." Both verbs are better active: agents are known and relevant. A justified passive would require the doer to be unknown or irrelevant, which is not the case here.
28. "Many students are now seeking part-time work because fees have risen, so that they can continue their studies" — or more tightly: "Because fees have risen, many students now seek part-time work to continue their studies." Full credit for removing all four specimens of deadwood without losing content.

Chapter 5: Using Sources — Summary, Paraphrase, Quotation, and Honest Citation

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

29. Distinguish summary, paraphrase, and quotation, and choose the right one for a given purpose.
30. Paraphrase a passage genuinely — changing structure and wording, not merely swapping synonyms.
31. Explain what plagiarism is, including its unintentional forms, and how to avoid it.
32. Cite a source in a simple author–date style and build a short reference list of real works.

5.1 Why Sources at All?

Academic writing is a conversation conducted in print. Your sources are the other speakers. You use them for evidence (a fact your argument needs), for authority (a finding established by research), for opposition (the view you answer), and for method (a way of analysing that you adopt). A source used for none of these purposes is decoration, and decoration is the first thing to cut. Every citation in your work should be able to answer the question: what job are you doing here?

5.2 The Three Ways of Using a Source

Summary compresses a whole work or a long passage into its main points, in your words, at a fraction of its length. A summary of a chapter in two sentences keeps the chapter's conclusions and drops its examples and steps. Use summary to give background and to position your argument among others.

Paraphrase restates a specific passage at about its own length, in your words and your sentence structure, preserving its meaning exactly. Use paraphrase when the idea matters but the original wording is not special — the normal case for most scholarly prose.

Quotation reproduces the original words exactly, in quotation marks, with a citation. Use quotation sparingly, when the wording itself is the evidence: a definition being disputed, a line of poetry being analysed, a formulation so precise that paraphrase would blur it. A page crowded with quotations suggests a writer who has not yet digested the material; your examiners are examining *you*.

5.3 Paraphrase Done Properly

A genuine paraphrase changes two things at once: the words *and* the structure. Changing only words — walking through a sentence replacing each term with a synonym — produces what examiners call patchwriting: the original's skeleton wearing new clothes, still recognisably the original's work, and still requiring citation as quotation-adjacent borrowing. The safe method: read the passage, close the book, write the idea from understanding, then open the book and check that you have preserved the meaning and invented nothing. If a distinctive phrase of the original survives in your version because no other wording will do, put it in quotation marks inside your paraphrase and cite it.

Worked example. Original (written for this book, standing in for a source): "Night opening of the library, though popular in surveys, benefits chiefly the minority of students who already possess quiet rooms, since those with the least space are also those who live farthest from the campus and cannot travel safely after dark."

Patchwriting (faulty): "Evening opening of the library, although liked in questionnaires, helps mainly the few students who already have quiet rooms, because those with the smallest space also live farthest away and cannot travel safely at night." Structure identical; synonyms swapped. Not acceptable as paraphrase.

Genuine paraphrase: "Surveys favour longer library hours, but the benefit would be unevenly shared. Students who already study in quiet rooms — usually those living near the campus — could use the extra hours, while students in crowded homes, who need the library most, tend to live too far away to reach it safely at night." Same meaning; new structure, new emphasis, the writer's own sentences. Cite it still — paraphrase of an idea always carries a citation — but the writing is honestly yours.

5.4 Plagiarism and How Honest Writers Avoid It

Plagiarism is presenting another's words, ideas, data, or structure as your own. Its deliberate form — copying an essay, buying work, transcribing a source unmarked — is dishonesty. Its unintentional forms are more common among students and are prevented by method, not merely by intention: patchwriting (above); the lost citation, where a note copied from a source is later mistaken for your own sentence; and the unmarked idea, where a distinctive argument is used without acknowledgement because "everyone knows it." What everyone genuinely knows — that rain falls, that examinations are stressful — needs no citation. A named scholar's framework, statistic, or interpretation always does.

The practical defences are habits of note-taking: keep quotation marks in your notes around anything copied; record the source beside every note at the moment you take it;

and draft from your notes with sources closed, checking afterwards. These habits cost minutes and save degrees.

5.5 Citation in a Simple Author–Date Style

Styles differ in detail — your institution's style governs your submitted work — but all share one logic: a short pointer in the text, and a full entry in the reference list. In author–date style the pointer is (Author, year) for paraphrase and summary, and (Author, year, page) for quotation. Below are teaching examples using real, classic, public-domain works. Study their shape: author, year, title, place or publisher where the style requires it — and notice that honest references need no invented numbers of any kind.

In-text examples: A paraphrase — "Aristotle treats plot as the most important element of tragedy (Aristotle, trans. Butcher, 1895)." A quotation — "Johnson holds that nothing 'can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature' (Johnson, 1765)."

Reference list examples (simple form):

- Aristotle (trans. S. H. Butcher, 1895). *The Poetics of Aristotle*. London: Macmillan.
- Arnold, M. (1880). *The Study of Poetry*. In *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*. London: Macmillan.
- Coleridge, S. T. (1817). *Biographia Literaria*. London: Rest Fenner.
- Johnson, S. (1765). *Preface to Shakespeare*. In *The Plays of William Shakespeare*. London: J. and R. Tonson and others.
- Shakespeare, W. (1623). *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* [the First Folio]. London: Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount.
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Keep one style consistently through a piece of work. Consistency is not pedantry; it is how a reader verifies you, and verifiability is the whole point.

Exercises — Chapter 5

Exercise 1. Classify each as summary, paraphrase, or quotation: (a) a two-sentence account of a thirty-page article's conclusion; (b) a passage restating one paragraph's argument in new words and structure, with a citation; (c) a sentence reproduced word-for-word in quotation marks, with a citation and page.

Exercise 2. Paraphrase genuinely (structure and words both changed): "Examinations reward not the student who knows most, but the student who can display knowledge fastest under pressure, a skill related to knowledge but not identical with it."

Exercise 3. A student copies three sentences from a website into an essay, changes five words, and adds no citation, believing the changes make it hers. Identify everything wrong with this.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 5

33. (a) Summary. (b) Paraphrase. (c) Quotation. The distinctions: length relative to source, fidelity to a specific passage, and exactness of wording.
34. A genuine paraphrase might run: "What examinations measure best is speed of display under pressure. The best-informed student does not always win, because performing knowledge quickly is a separate skill from possessing it." Credit any version that reorders the ideas and rebuilds the sentences while keeping the meaning — including the crucial "related but not identical" point — intact.
35. Three faults: the words are substantially the source's (patchwriting at best, copying at worst); there is no citation, so the borrowing is presented as original; and the belief that small changes transfer ownership is itself the misconception to correct. The remedy: quote it properly with citation, or paraphrase genuinely with citation — one of the two, always with the source named.

Chapter 6: Academic Style and the Research Essay

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

36. Describe the features of academic style — precision, formality of a functional kind, hedging where evidence is limited, and economy — and distinguish them from mere pomposity.
37. Plan a research essay: question, search, selection, note-taking, and synthesis.
38. Synthesise sources — put them into relation with each other — rather than reporting them one by one.
39. Write an abstract and a list of keywords for an essay you have written.

6.1 What Academic Style Is — and Is Not

Academic style is a set of choices made for a reader who must be able to check you. **Precision:** words chosen for their exact sense; quantities given as quantities; "soon" replaced by the actual interval when it matters. **Functional formality:** full forms rather than contractions, complete sentences, a vocabulary chosen for clarity rather than display. Formality is functional when it removes ambiguity and social noise; it becomes pomposity when long words are chosen to impress rather than to mean. "Utilise" where "use" suffices is the classic symptom. **Hedging:** honest calibration of claims to evidence — "the results suggest," "in this sample," "it appears that" — used where the evidence is partial. Hedging is not timidity; overclaiming is the true weakness, because a single exposed overclaim discredits the careful claims around it. **Economy:** nothing present without a job (Chapter 5's rule for sources applies to every sentence).

Two further marks deserve attention. Academic prose prefers the specific verb to the vague verb plus noun: "decided" rather than "made a decision," "investigated" rather than "carried out an investigation into." And it defines its terms: when a word carries the argument — "literacy," "development," "tradition" — the academic writer states the sense in use, because readers cannot check a claim whose terms shift.

6.2 The Research Essay: From Question to Plan

A research essay begins with a question, not a topic. "The novel in the nineteen-thirties" is a topic; "How did the economic depression change what the English novel treated as a happy ending?" is a question — it has edges, it can be answered well or badly, and it tells you what evidence to seek. Narrow the question until a short essay could actually answer it; a question that needs a book will produce an essay that gestures at everything and establishes nothing.

Searching follows the question. Use the library catalogue and bibliographies of works you already trust; follow references forward from the best source you find, since scholars cite the work they build on. Select ruthlessly: relevance to *your* question, reliability of the source, and currency where currency matters (for literary history, an older classic may outrank a newer summary; for statistics, recency is a condition of trust). Take notes by the method of Chapter 5: quotation marks in notes, source beside every note, notes organised by the point they will serve — not by the order in which you read. Notes organised by source produce essays that report sources; notes organised by point produce essays that argue.

6.3 Synthesis: The Mark of the Research Essay

The beginner's research essay is a procession: "Author A says... Author B says... Author C says..." Each source is reported faithfully, and nothing is built. Synthesis puts the sources into relation: where do they agree, where do they conflict, and what explains the conflict — different evidence, different definitions, different periods? A synthesised paragraph might run: "On the question of why the heroine refuses the marriage, critics divide by generation. Earlier readers treated the refusal as pride; later readers, attending to the settlement described in the same chapter, treat it as arithmetic. The disagreement is not about the scene but about what counts as a motive in fiction — a feeling, or a sum." That paragraph could only be written by someone who had read the critics against each other. It is also, not coincidentally, a paragraph with a thesis of its own.

Organise the essay by points and bring the sources in as witnesses to each point, agreeing and dissenting. Your voice is the organising voice; the sources support, qualify, and oppose — they do not take turns holding the pen.

6.4 The Abstract

An abstract is a complete miniature of the work: the question, the method or approach, the main finding or argument, and the conclusion, in that order, in roughly one hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty words for a student essay, written last and in the present or past tense as your style guide directs. Its purpose is triage: a reader decides from the abstract whether the work serves their need. Therefore it must contain the conclusion, not tease it; an abstract that ends "and the results are discussed" has failed its only job. Keywords — three to six terms under the abstract — name the work's concepts and field for indexers and searching readers; choose the terms a stranger would type to find your essay, not the terms that merely sound grand.

6.5 Worked Example: An Abstract, Annotated

Essay title: "The Cup on the Table: Domestic Routine as the Language of Grief in Three Short Stories."

Abstract: "This essay asks how short fiction represents grief when it refuses scenes of weeping. It reads three short stories closely, attending to repeated household actions and the objects they centre on. It argues that in all three, grief is carried by routine maintained past its purpose — a place set, a coat kept, a chair unmoved — and that the routine, not any speech, is where each story locates the size of the loss. The essay concludes that domestic routine functions in these stories as a grammar: small, regular, and capable of saying what declaration cannot."

Annotation: Sentence one — the question. Sentence two — the approach (close reading of three named-type texts). Sentence three — the argument, stated, not teased. Sentence four — the conclusion and its larger claim. Four sentences, four jobs, nothing else present. Imitate the discipline, whatever your subject.

Exercises — Chapter 6

Exercise 1. Rewrite this overclaim with honest hedging, preserving its content: "This proves that all students everywhere learn better in the morning."

Exercise 2. Turn this topic into a researchable question, then narrow it once more: "Proverbs in everyday speech."

Exercise 3. Write an abstract (about one hundred and fifty words) for the printed-book essay planned in Chapter 3, following the four-sentence discipline of the worked example.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 6

40. A calibrated version: "In this study, the results suggest that the students tested recalled more when taught in the morning — a finding consistent with some, though not all, previous work." Note the moves: scope limited to the study, "suggest" for "prove," the population named, the wider literature acknowledged.
41. First narrowing: "What work do proverbs do in everyday argument — do they settle disputes or merely decorate them?" Narrower still: "In market bargaining, are proverbs used to close a negotiation, and what happens when one is answered with another proverb?" Credit questions that can be answered with gatherable evidence in a short essay.
42. A strong abstract states the question (is print worth its cost for sustained study?), the approach (argument from the properties of the two media, with the counter-case considered), the argument (print protects long reading, fixes a citable text, and

removes competing demands), and the conclusion (the choice is matching instrument to reading-kind, not a war of media). Penalise abstracts that summarise the plan ("First I will discuss...") instead of reporting the work.

Chapter 7: Revision, Editing, and Proofreading — Three Different Jobs

Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

43. Distinguish revision, editing, and proofreading, and perform them in the right order.
44. Revise for structure and argument using reverse outlining.
45. Edit at sentence level with a personal checklist built from your own recurring faults.
46. Proofread systematically, and prepare a clean final copy with a complete reference list.

7.1 Three Jobs, Three Passes

Students often "check" an essay by reading it once, quickly, fixing whatever catches the eye. The result is a corrected spelling standing in an essay whose second paragraph contradicts its fifth. The remedy is to separate the three jobs and do them in order, largest first.

Revision (re-seeing) concerns the argument and the structure: Is the thesis the one the essay actually proves? Does each paragraph serve it? Is the order right? Is anything essential missing — a definition, a counterargument, a piece of evidence? Revision may delete whole paragraphs and move others. It is done with the whole text in view and no attention yet to commas.

Editing concerns sentences and words: the faults of Chapter 4, deadwood, voice, precision, transitions. It is done paragraph by paragraph.

Proofreading concerns the surface: spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, numbering, references, names spelled the same way every time. It is done last, slowly, and ideally aloud or with a ruler under each line, because the eye reading for meaning glides over the surface it already understands.

Doing them in this order is economy, not fussiness: there is no profit in polishing a sentence that revision will delete.

7.2 Reverse Outlining: The Reviser's Instrument

To revise structure, make a reverse outline: read the finished draft and write, beside each paragraph, a five-to-eight-word note of what that paragraph actually does ("defines the term," "gives the cost figures," "tells the story again"). Then read the notes alone. The essay's real structure stands exposed. Look for: paragraphs whose note duplicates another's (merge or cut); a note that names no function ("some background") — a

paragraph in search of a job; a gap between notes where a step of the argument is assumed but never made; and an order in which a later note is needed to understand an earlier one. Most structural faults announce themselves in the reverse outline within minutes. It is the highest-value ten minutes in the whole writing process.

7.3 Your Personal Editing Checklist

Generic checklists help; personal ones transform. Keep, in the front of your notebook, a list of *your* recurring faults — every writer has a signature set — gathered from marked work. One student's list might read: comma splices after "however"; "their/there" confusion; paragraphs that open with "Also"; quotations dropped without comment. Edit by searching for your items one at a time. Searching for one fault at a time is slower to describe and faster in practice than reading generally and hoping to notice everything, because attention set for a single pattern finds it reliably.

Sentence-level editing questions, to ask of every paragraph: Which is the longest sentence here, and does it still parse? Which verbs are vague ("is," "has," "shows") where a specific verb exists? What can be cut without loss — apply the test to every "very," "really," "actually," and "in fact" first.

7.4 Proofreading Method

Proofread on paper if you can, or in a changed font or size on screen — the change breaks the familiarity that hides errors. Read aloud: the ear catches the missing word and the doubled word that the eye supplies silently. Check the mechanical systems separately, one pass each if time allows: spelling of names and repeated terms; punctuation of quotations; numbering of sections, figures, and references; consistency of capitalisation in headings. Then check the references as a system: every in-text citation has a reference-list entry, every entry is cited, names and years match exactly between the two. Examiners forgive a typo; a citation pointing nowhere reads as carelessness about evidence itself.

7.5 Worked Example: Reverse Outline in Action

A draft essay argues that school gardens teach more than gardening. Its reverse outline reads: 1. Introduction and thesis. 2. History of school gardens. 3. Gardening skills learned. 4. The garden as a science laboratory. 5. Another historical example. 6. Gardening tools and their cost. 7. Conclusion claiming lessons in patience and cooperation.

The outline exposes three faults instantly. Paragraph 5 duplicates paragraph 2's function and sits in the argument's middle doing nothing — cut or move to join paragraph 2. Paragraph 6, costs, serves no step toward the thesis — cut, or the thesis must change to

include economics. And the conclusion claims patience and cooperation, which no paragraph has argued — either add the missing paragraph (the garden's shared work and slow seasons) or shrink the conclusion to what was proven. Three structural decisions, each obvious from eight short notes, each invisible while reading the full prose. This is why revisers outline.

7.6 A Final Word: The Writer You Are Becoming

Composition is not a gift distributed at birth; it is a set of learnable operations — gather, plan, draft, structure paragraphs, build sentences, use sources honestly, revise in order — and this book has tried to name each operation plainly enough to be practised alone. Practise them on small tasks weekly rather than on large tasks yearly. Keep your marked work; your checklist grows from it. Read good prose with a thief's attention, noting how effects are made. And remember the order of loyalties that every chapter has assumed: first to the truth of what you have to say, then to the reader who must follow it, and only last to the impression you make. Writers who keep that order are trusted, and trust is the whole currency of academic life.

Exercises — Chapter 7

Exercise 1. A student proofreads first, then discovers the essay's argument needs restructuring. Explain, in terms of the three jobs, what went wrong and what it cost.

Exercise 2. Make a reverse outline of any essay you have recently written (or of the appendix essay below). Report one structural fault it reveals, or state why it reveals none.

Exercise 3. Begin your personal editing checklist: from your own past writing or from this book's exercises, list three faults you actually commit, each with its repair in a few words.

Answer Guidance — Chapter 7

47. The jobs were done in reverse order. Proofreading perfected sentences that restructuring then deleted or moved — the labour was wasted, and worse, polished sentences resist deletion ("it reads so well") even when the argument needs them gone. Correct order: revision (largest), editing, proofreading (last), each pass protecting the next from wasted work.
48. Credit any specific finding: a duplicated function, an unemployed paragraph, a conclusion outrunning the body, an order fault. "It reveals none" earns credit only if the outline notes are actually supplied and each paragraph's function visibly serves the thesis — the outline itself is the evidence.

49. The checklist must be personal and mechanical — faults the student can search for — not aspirations ("write better"). Model entries: "Comma after 'however' mid-sentence — check each one"; "'its/it's' — expand to 'it is' and test"; "Paragraphs opening 'Also' — rewrite the opening as a real transition."

Appendix: A Model Short Essay with Commentary

Title: The Market Bell: What a Small Sound Organises

In many market towns, the trading day is opened by a bell. It weighs little, costs little, and is heard by everyone; yet this essay argues that the market bell is not a decoration on the town's commerce but one of its governing instruments, because it creates a shared beginning, certifies fair dealing, and gives the trading day a shape that memory can hold.

A shared beginning is a practical thing before it is a symbolic one. Where no bell rings, trading leaks into the early hours: the well-connected buy before dawn at prices the rest never see, and grievance follows. The bell abolishes the advantage of the early insider by making the start simultaneous and public. Everyone hears the same sound at the same moment; the market, in the strictest sense, opens when it is heard to open. [Commentary: the first body paragraph develops the thesis's first point — shared beginning — and explains its mechanism, not merely its existence.]

The bell also certifies. A bargain struck before the bell is a private arrangement; a bargain struck after it is a market transaction, witnessed in principle by all present and governed by the market's rules. The sound therefore does moral work: it marks the line between private dealing, where caveat emptor stands alone, and public dealing, where reputation and the market's officers can be appealed to. Traders who might shave a measure in a compound at dawn will not shave it under the bell. [Commentary: the second point — certification — is distinguished from the first. Note the Latin phrase is used once, precisely, and the paragraph explains behaviour, not just symbolism.]

Finally, the bell gives the day a shape. Human beings remember shaped time better than unshaped time: the opening bell, the midday lull, the last buying before evening compose a rhythm by which traders plan credit, meals, transport, and prayer. Remove the bell and the day does not merely start later; it loses the joints by which it is organised, and with them a part of the trust that rhythm quietly builds. It may be objected that phones now tell the time to the minute, making the bell redundant. But a phone tells each person a private time; the bell's whole function is that its time is common. Precision was never its gift; publicity was. [Commentary: the third point is developed, and the counterargument — phones — is stated and answered inside the same paragraph, by distinguishing private precision from public simultaneity.]

The market bell, then, is a small technology of trust. It synchronises strangers, certifies their dealing, and shapes the day they share. Towns that keep it are not being quaint; they are maintaining, at almost no cost, one of the instruments by which a crowd becomes a market. [Commentary: the conclusion restates the thesis as earned — "a

technology of trust" gathers the three points — and ends on the implication, the revaluation of the bell from ornament to instrument. No new evidence appears.]

Further Reading

- Aristotle (trans. S. H. Butcher, 1895). *The Poetics of Aristotle* — for the structure of a well-made whole, which applies to essays as to plays.
- Johnson, S. (1765). *Preface to Shakespeare* — a model of plain, forceful critical prose.
- Coleridge, S. T. (1817). *Biographia Literaria* — for the chapters on language and imagination.
- Arnold, M. (1880). *The Study of Poetry* — for standards of seriousness in writing about literature.
- Any well-edited collection of essays in your field: read one essay a week with attention to its paragraphs, not only its content.

All works listed are public-domain classics. Your institution's writing centre and library guides will supply its preferred citation style; learn that style's reference-list form exactly, and use this book for the principles beneath all styles: honesty, consistency, and verifiability.

End of Composition and Academic Writing — From the Library of Maggie Enow. This book is FREE. Download it freely, read it, and share it.