Improve Your Writing

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Session Outline

1. Discussion
2. Planning your writing
3. Common writing issues and strategies
   a. Sentence-level
   b. Paragraph-level
   c. Overall structure
4. Revisions with a reverse outline
5. UTSC Writing Support and Resources

What are some common pieces of feedback you get on assignments?

What parts of your writing do you want to improve?

Planning and Revising

1. <u>Understand the overall assignment format (**_goalposts_**): some kinds of papers/reports have a standard layout</u>
   a. Eg. 1: analytical paper: summary of an article → discussion of strengths & weaknesses → evaluation
   b. Eg. 2: policy report: description of findings/research → critical analysis using literature → implications
   c. Eg. 3: scholarly publication: literature review → methodology → findings → analysis
2. <u>Organize your ideas (**_pre-writing_**):</u>
   a. Sentence vs topic outline (latter references topics to discuss, but leaves working out the argument to the writing stage)
   b. Hierarchical outline: accumulate notes, quotes, paraphrases → identify key points and arrange notes into different sections → use this to build/interweave into paper (keep separate notes and outline docs for your own clarity) (use apps like Microsoft OneNote, Google folders, Excel sheets)
   c. Circle/visual diagram outline: for getting all ideas onto same page (use app like MindNode)

Sentence-level

Issue	Example of problem sentence	Improved sentence
Convoluted sentences (jargony, unclear)	Beyond the sorrows of being afflicted with these perturbing maladies, the individuals in question were systematically discontented by the torments of the vexatious disease.	Nearly every person who was exposed to the outbreak in the cafeteria reported additional adverse effects, including psychological distress.
Incomplete sentences (fragments)	Whereas eating lunch is an important aspect for mental health.	However, eating lunch regularly is linked to mental health benefits for youth.
Using language of opinion over claim/argument/evidence (use of false binaries)	The ensuing mental health crisis would not have happened if the university cared about students instead of their public reputation.	The audit findings showed the outbreak could have been prevented with better safety procedures and, importantly, that residence staff could have done more for those affected in the immediate aftermath. This exposes gaps in the university's preparedness and suggests a strong need to examine how priorities were set in responding to the crisis.
Overstated/unsubtle language	All hell broke loose as a result of the media exposing the outbreak.	After news began to emerge about the outbreak, some began to panic and soon misinformation spread. Two days later, a rally on campus ended in a riot and several injuries.
Quotation issues & weak authorial voice	As per the CDC, "Among university students ages 18-24, the survey found that 55% had skipped lunch while studying in the prior week" (CDC, 2023).	The CDC's latest report finding that 55% of university students skipped lunch to study (CDC, 2023) is concerning because research has shown that routine eating habits are important for youth mental health (cite; cite).

Paragraph-level

Common Issues

- Unclear flow
- Too many ideas in one paragraph
- Topic sentence doesn't match the rest of paragraph
- Paragraph is too long or too short

Paragraphs:

- Grouping of related sentences that communicate a single idea
- Has a beginning, middle, and end

Paragraph purpose:

- Organizes your different points and ideas
- Provides pauses for reader to support understanding

Good Paragraphs

Focus: main idea you are trying to communicate
Unity: whole paragraph concerns itself with main idea
Development: adequate explanation / description / evidence that the reader is convinced of idea; logical order
Coherence: flow across sentences; easy to follow from point to point

Topic sentence
Explanation/description/evidence
Explanation/description/evidence
Concluding sentence & transition
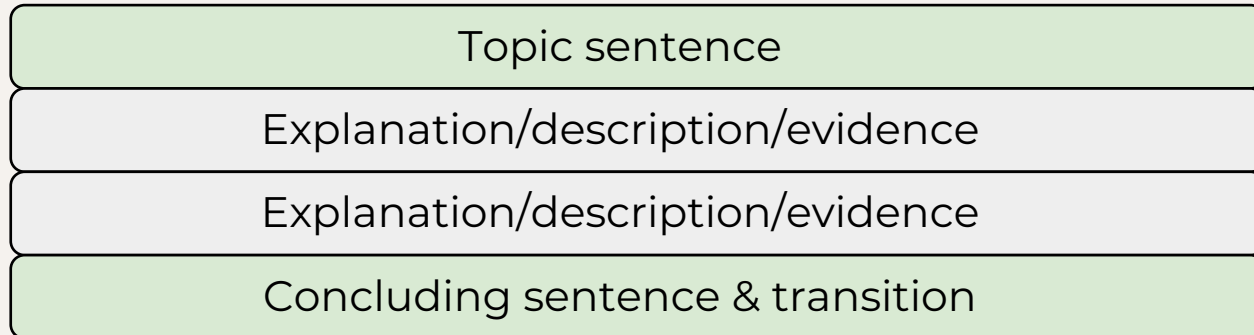
Paragraph length?

Example:

The **analysis or classification paragraph** develops a topic by distinguishing its component parts and discussing each of these parts separately.

Topic sentence!

Policies of privatisation should be considered as responses to several distinct pressures. First, privatisation is a response by the state to internal forces such as increasing fiscal problems (O'Connor, 1973). It provides a means of lessening the state's fiscal responsibilities by encouraging the development of private alternatives which, theoretically at least, do not draw upon the state's financial reserves. Second, the promotion of private sector activity is a response to pressures originating 'outside' the state apparatus. These include demands from people who see a large state bureaucracy as inefficient and wasteful, demands from business interests who claim that they can overcome these inefficiencies, and pressures from client groups who seek to reduce their dependency on the welfare state by having more control over the services on which they depend. Clearly, this variety of calls for privatisation means that it is not a process with a uniform outcome; there exists a correspondingly wide variety of forms of privatisation.

Concluding/significance

—Adapted from Glenda Laws, "Privatisation and the Local Welfare State"

Overall Structure

Theses	Framing	Flow and coherence
Makes a definite and limited assertion that needs to be explained and supported by further discussion Shows awareness of difficulties and disagreements, and your methodology Does not necessarily need to be one sentence or placed at the end of intro (could be more complex) Does not need to be perfect before you begin writing Not always necessary (ie. reflection, some reports)	Intro and conclusion = usually necessary regardless of type (i.e. essay, reflection, policy report) Roadmap: overview of argument, tells reader the order of ideas Intro does not need to be written first (often revised) - depends on *your process as a writer* Length of intro depends on length of overall paper Topic sentence - get to the point (don't begin with a tangential topic hooking to the main topic) Conclusion: implications, not just summary	Flow: the way paragraphs move from idea to idea Coherence: connections between paragraphs Use transition statements to make connections between paragraphs (before topic sentence)

Revising strategies

1. Edit in order of largest to smallest levels = (i) structure level issues, (ii) paragraph, (iii) sentence
2. Read through your assignment looking for the previous issues we just went over!
3. Read your assignment out loud (Word has a function where it will read it to you)
4. Have someone not in your field read through it and note sentence that don't make sense to them
5. Read through focused on citation (using a style guide; citation manager like Zotero or Mendeley)
6. Do a **reverse outline**
   a. The best tool to revise and clarify ideas after writing!
   b. Reduces pressure on preparing 'perfect' outline!

The Reverse Outline

Neo-Vagrancy Laws in Canada as a Spatial Exclusion Technique

The Canadian state has long been concerned with eliminating the visibility of poor, homeless, and other marginalized people, such as sex workers and other precarious workers, from public spaces under rationales of public order and safety (Towle 2022, chap. 4 in this volume). The presence of anti-homeless legislation in Canada can be historically traced to centuries-old English vagrancy laws, which governed a host of issues including "poverty, labour, crime, religion, public health, and even entertainment and leisure" (Ranasinghe, 2015, p. 59). The 1892 *Criminal Code* of Canada wrote the "vagrant" into Canadian law, a criminalized status defined as a "loose, idle or disorderly person" that was unemployed and had no visible means of subsistence (*R. v. Heywood*, 1994). This remained virtually unchanged until the 1950s, when vagrancy law was reconceptualized: the crime of *being* a vagrant shifted to the crime of *committing* vagrancy through acts such as wandering, trespassing, begging, and loitering in public spaces (Ranasinghe, 2015). Vagrancy law then met its eventful end in the early 1970s, when virtually all sections of vagrancy in the *Criminal Code* were abolished (Ranasinghe, 2015). The disappearance of the "vagrant" and "vagrancy" in Canadian criminal law was largely attributed to reimagined legal norms attempting to correct their unconstitutionally vague form and overly broad applicability (Ranasinghe, 2015). Despite this, status-based offences associated with the vagrant person were redefined in new terms: as features of public disorder, shifting the predominant site of legal regulation and social control from the federal to provincial and local levels of governance (Graser, 2000; Hermer & Mosher, 2002; Ranasinghe, 2015).

Urban anxieties over public disorder became especially emboldened through strategies of "broken windows" policing that emerged in the 1990s throughout North America. This resulted in greater policing in under-resourced neighbourhoods because of associations between crime and scattered, untidy, or broken homes (Feldman, 2006; Hermer & Mosher, 2002; Ranasinghe, 2015). The broken windows movement heightened fears about the visibility of disorder in public spaces—in turn, minor offences committed by "disorderly" people were perceived as major threats to the social and economic order (Beckett & Herbert, 2008; Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

Broken windows policing and the politics arising from fears of disorder gave municipal governments a "broad and flexible" mandate to use local spatial regulations to curb disorder (Beckett & Herbert, 2008, p. 8). This same broadness and flexibility had been afforded to the state in upholding status-based vagrancy laws (Beckett & Herbert, 2008). Rather than explicitly targeting individuals, these local regulations prohibited activities and behaviours considered unwanted by other urban residents or viewed as potential precursors to more serious crime (Beckett & Herbert, 2008).

Thesis:

Stated roadmap:

Section 1: Background		Issues/revisions to do
-	Para1: laws that criminalize poor people have long been on the books in Canada, although they shifted from explicit status-based prohibitions to more pernicious forms of spatial regulation as a result of constitutional amendments	- Could make clearer the question of why this is the case, as a transition to next few paras
-	Para 2: increased social anxieties about public disorder in cities drove and was driven by a policing motivation and movement called 'broken windows' theory beginning in the 1990s – this made people more fearful of 'disorderly people'	- No transition from prior paragraph - Could split up ideas in this into two paras: one about the broken windows theory and policing, the other about anxieties – but consider what purpose of the paragraph is: to talk about the theory or to highlight anxieties about minor offences (better lead to next paragraph)
-	Para 3: city governments got a broad mandate to make spatial offenses because of broken windows policies and anxieties	- Flows from previous paragraph

Final Thoughts on Revisions

- Start from overall structure and move to sentence-level
- Split up the tasks you need to do
- Use your notes as a checklist of revisions
- Review and revise the roadmap from your introduction

Writing Centre Resources

https://q.utoronto.ca/courses/264288/pages/writing-support-resources

One-on-one appointments

Drop in hours

Tues and Thurs 12-1pm AC313

Writing Retreats

Quercus Resources

Thank you for attending :)