

Aula 9

WRITER'S BLOCK AND THE WRITING PROCESS

META

This class aims at highlighting the importance of organizing details in a paragraph.

OBJETIVOS

At the end of this class, it is expected that the students:

Recognise the main parts of an essay

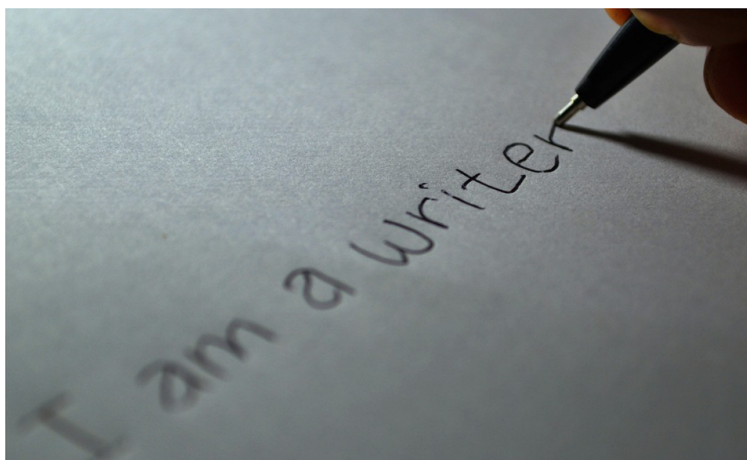
Write clear and concise ideas considering the levels of sentence detail in a paragraph.

PRÉ-REQUISITOS

Previous knowledge about paragraph structure and types of paragraphs.

Marcle Vanessa Menezes Santana

INTRODUÇÃO



Fonte: <https://theimpactnews.com>

Welcome to Class 9! In this unit, *we will talk about Writer's Block and The Writing Process*, two important topics for you, students of Written Expression in English Language.

For many people, writing represents some fear, especially when it comes to a foreign language. However, there are some ways to overcome this fear and write.

This is why you will read about writer's block and critical thinking so that you have some insight on the subject before diving into the process of writing an essay.

TAKE NOTES

In your opinion, *what's writer's block?*

Do you remember a situation when you had it? How did you overcome it?

OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK: THREE TIPS

Rowena Murray

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Academics tend to use procrastination as an explanation for writer's block, says Rowena Murray, but really, they are just avoiding asking for help.



Source: <https://i.guim.co.uk/img/static/sys-images>

A common thread in conversations about how difficult academic writing can be is the persistent feeling of not being ready to write. Or not being good enough to write. While academics and PhD students might not call this writer's block, they talk a lot about procrastination and perfectionism. They list displacement activities – checking email, Facebook, references, doing the laundry, cleaning the room, mowing the grass, watching it grow – and they know that all of these involve not writing.

It's a recognised problem. In his book *Understanding Writing Block*, Keith Hjortshoj says: "Writing blocks are most common among advanced undergraduates, graduate students, scholars, and other professional writers who are not supposed to need help with writing and do not need the kinds of writing instruction offered in the typical composition class."

But why is writer's block so common among academics? Is talking about procrastination just denying the need for help or instruction? Academics and PhD students are supposed to know all they need to know, aren't they?

Would a request for help be seen as a critical weakness? Or is writer's block caused by writing-related anxiety? Or unrealistic demands, leading to impossible writing goals? Or the absence of agreed writing time, creating workloads where written outputs are defined but writing processes are invisible? Or it is isolation? We write alone, and we don't talk about it.

Given this mix of forces – emotional, cognitive, behavioural, rhetorical – we should use three strategies to deal with, or avoid, writer's block.

- 1) Set realistic goals and monitor the extent to which you achieve them. Obviously! Perhaps that is the problem – the belief that writing is too complex to have such a simple solution. Surely high quality academic writing cannot be reduced to goals? But that is the problem – choosing not to use strategies that help.

There is a misconception that writing cannot be defined in the same way as other academic tasks, in terms of sub-goals and sub-routines. Once that belief takes hold, writing seems impossible.

Instead, think about writing in terms of levels of quality. For example, for writing a chapter, working on one level could involve writing about all the content, but not clarifying the argument. Working on another level could mean writing to make the line of argument explicit, but not adding or cutting anything. Another could be aligning the chapter summary and the contents. Each layer is a realistic goal.

This is not about lowering expectations – though it may feel like that at first – but defining writing in terms of sub-tasks. Working on all these levels at once would be an unrealistic goal. Achieving a realistic goal reduces anxiety and what one academic calls the “feeling of constant low-grade failure”, and prevents writer’s block.

2) Create dedicated writing time – when writing is all you do

Writers are more focused and less anxious when they are not multi-tasking. Even checking references – crucial as that is in academic writing – literally puts a stop to writing. The key is to write unplugged. Switch off all devices, quit email and internet and ignore other people’s writing (books, articles etc) for a specific time period. Set a realistic writing goal for 90 minutes.

Why does everyone not do this already? Probably because of anxiety about citing others’ work properly, not missing someone out and general anxiety about the quality of the writing.

3) Do social writing – write with others.

As with other academic activities, interacting with others about ideas and plans is valuable.

Social writing involves writing with others – not collaborative writing, but writing with others in the room. Writing with others, talking about writing-in-progress and sharing writing goals and achievements helps us to understand writing better. Social writing generates realistic goal-setting and dedicated writing time.

It also makes writing part of work and life. It is no longer something we only do in solitude. Discussing writing is interesting. Social writing reduces the main cause of writer’s block – anxiety – and stimulates writing. With social writing, there may be no need for help or instruction after all.

Professor Rowena Murray is director of research in the school of education at the University of the West of Scotland. She is author of *How to Write a Thesis* (2011) and *Writing for Academic Journals* (2013).

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com>

- 1) In your view, do these tips help? Why? Why not?
- 2) Have you ever used any of those tips before? Which one? If you haven't, which one do you find helpful for you?

Let's read about critical thinking, which is determining for writing an essay:

WHAT IS CRITICAL WRITING?

It is common for feedback on student writing to focus on the need to engage more critically with the source material. Typical comments from tutors are: 'too descriptive', or 'not enough critical analysis'. This Study Guide gives ideas for how to improve the level of critical analysis you demonstrate in your writing.

What is critical writing?

The most characteristic features of critical writing are:

- a clear and confident refusal to accept the conclusions of other writers without evaluating the arguments and evidence that they provide;
- a balanced presentation of reasons why the conclusions of other writers may be accepted or may need to be treated with caution;
- a clear presentation of your own evidence and argument, leading to your conclusion; and
- a recognition of the limitations in your own evidence, argument, and conclusion.

What is descriptive writing?

The most characteristic features of descriptive writing are that it will describe something, but will not go beyond an account of what appears to be there. A certain amount of descriptive writing is needed to establish for example:

- the setting of the research;
- a general description of a piece of literature, or art;
- the list of measurements taken;
- the timing of the research;
- an account of the biographical details of a key figure in the discipline; or
- a brief summary of the history leading up to an event or decision.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DESCRIPTIVE WRITING AND CRITICAL WRITING

With descriptive writing you are not developing argument; you are merely setting the background within which an argument can be developed. You are representing the situation as it stands, without presenting any analysis or discussion.

Descriptive writing is relatively simple. There is also the trap that it can be easy to use many, many words from your word limit, simply providing description.

In providing only description, you are presenting but not transforming information; you are reporting ideas but not taking them forward in any way. An assignment using only descriptive writing would therefore gain few marks.

With critical writing you are participating in the academic debate. This is more challenging and risky. You need to weigh up the evidence and arguments of others, and to contribute your own. You will need to:

- consider the quality of the evidence and argument you have read;
- identify key positive and negative aspects you can comment upon;
- assess their relevance and usefulness to the debate that you are engaging in for your assignment; and
- identify how best they can be woven into the argument that you are developing.

A much higher level of skill is clearly needed for critical writing than for descriptive writing, and this is reflected in the higher marks it is given.

FINDING YOUR ACADEMIC VOICE

When you engage in critical writing you are developing your own academic voice within your subject. Wellington et al. (2005 p.84) offer some suggestions for distinguishing between the academic and the non-academic voice. They suggest that the academic voice will involve:

- “healthy scepticism ... but not cynicism;
- confidence ... but not ‘cockiness’ or arrogance;
- judgement which is critical ... but not dismissive;
- opinions ... without being opinionated;
- careful evaluation of published work ... not serial shooting at random targets;
- being ‘fair’: assessing fairly the strengths and weaknesses of other people’s ideas and writing ... without prejudice; and
- making judgements on the basis of considerable thought and all the available evidence ... as opposed to assertions without reason.”

Wellington J., Bathmaker A., Hunt C., McCulloch G. and Sikes P. (2005). *Succeeding with your doctorate*. London: Sage.

Try to get into the habit of writing critically, by making sure that you read critically, and that you include critique in your writing.

STRINGING TOGETHER OF QUOTES

It can be tempting to string together quotes to support an argument, feeling that the more quotes you include, the stronger your argument. It is important, however, to remember that you also need to interpret the quotes to the reader, and to explain their relevance, discuss their validity, and show how they relate to other evidence.

STRATEGIC USE OF PARAGRAPHS

There are several ways in which you can use the paragraph to enhance your critical writing.

You can use paragraphs to make a clear and visual separation between descriptive writing and critical analysis, by switching to a new paragraph when you move from description to critical writing, and vice versa. This can help in:

- emphasising to the reader that you are including both description and critical analysis, by providing a visual representation of their separation; and
- pushing you to produce the necessary critical writing, especially if you find that your description paragraphs are always longer, or more frequent, than your critical analysis paragraphs.

A paragraph break can provide a brief pause for your readers within a longer argument; giving them the opportunity to make sure they are keeping up with your reasoning. Paragraphs that are overly long can require readers to hold too much in their mind at once, resulting in their having to re-read the material until they can identify the point you are making.

You can also use paragraphs to push yourself to include critical writing alongside descriptive writing or referencing, by considering each paragraph almost as an essay in miniature. Within each paragraph you would:

- introduce the point you want to make;
- make the point, with supporting evidence;
- reflect critically on the point.

IF IT'S WORTH INCLUDING, IT'S WORTH TELLING US WHY

A certain amount of descriptive writing is essential, particularly in the earlier parts of the essay or assignment or dissertation. Beyond that, however, there is a danger that too much descriptive writing will use up valuable words from your word limit, and reduce the space you have for the critical writing that will get you higher marks.

A useful habit to get into is to make sure that, if you describe some evidence relevant to your argument, you need then to explain to the reader why it is relevant. The logic of your explanation contributes to the critical component of your writing.

So, a sentence or two might describe and reference the evidence, but this is not enough in itself. The next few sentences need to explain what this evidence contributes to the argument you are making. This may feel like duplication at first, or that you are explaining something that is obvious, but it is your responsibility to ensure that the relevance of the evidence is explained to the reader; you should not simply assume that the reader will be following the same logic as you, or will just work out the relevance of the quote or data you have described.

LINE OF ARGUMENT

So far this Study Guide has considered the detail of what you write. The other key element in critical writing is the overall structure of your piece of writing. For maximum effectiveness, your writing needs to have a line, or lines of argument running through it from the Introduction to the Conclusion.

Just as you have used paragraphs on a micro scale to present your critical writing, so you need to consider the ordering of those paragraphs within the overall structure. The aim is to lead your readers carefully through the thread of your argument, to a well-supported conclusion.

EXAMPLE OF EFFECTIVE CRITICAL WRITING

The text below is an example of good critical writing, and is based on essay material supplied by University of Leicester's School of Psychology.

The author refers to the available evidence, but also evaluates the validity of that evidence, and assesses what contribution it can realistically make to the debate.

There are a number of inherent methodological difficulties in evaluating treatment efficacy in this area, and this has contributed to controversy within the research literature surrounding treatment outcomes for this group of

offenders (Marshall, 1997). Firstly, while there is no doubt that the primary criterion of treatment success is a reduction in the rate of re-offending (Marshall et al., 1999), reconviction data does not, in isolation, provide a realistic representation of actual levels of re-offending by this group. It is well established that there is a discrepancy between re-offending and reconviction rates: the latter underestimating the number of offences committed (Grubin, 1999). Indeed, a significant proportion of offences committed by offenders are either unreported, or do not result in the offender being convicted (Abel et al., 1987).

You can see how the author is considering the available evidence, but also the limitations on that evidence, and will be taking all of this into account in drawing conclusions.

CHECKLIST FOR AN OVERALL REVIEW OF YOUR WRITING

It is always worth taking a critical look at your own writing before submitting it for assessment. The kinds of questions that might be useful to ask at that stage are:

What is the balance between descriptive and critical writing?

While a certain amount of description is necessary to set the context for your analysis, the main characteristic of academic writing is its critical element. A useful way to check this balance in your own writing is to use two coloured pens and to mark in the margin whether the lines are descriptive or critical. The balance will change at different points, but you need to make sure there is enough of the colour that represents critical writing.

Why should the reader be convinced by what I've just written?

Remember that, just as you are asking 'Why should I believe what I've just read?', the readers of your work will be asking the same question of your writing. A critical read through your own writing may reveal gaps in your logic, which you can rectify before you submit it for the critique of others.

Is my conclusion trailed and supported sufficiently well by my preceding analysis and argument?

Check out the conclusions that you have drawn, then locate and check the supporting evidence you provide earlier on. This is a good way of making sure you haven't forgotten to include a crucial piece of evidence. It is also a way of checking that, when your reader comes to the end of

your writing, the conclusions make sense, rather than being a surprise, or an unconvincing leap of logic.

Have I included any unsubstantiated statements?

Sometimes a generalised, sweeping statement can slip through: the kind of statement that might be acceptable on conversation, but not in academic writing. There are three main ways of dealing with such statements:

- present the evidence to support the statement
- re-phrase the statement to sound more cautious e.g.: ‘it could be argued ...’ or ‘this suggests that ...’
- remove the statement

Which of the aspects related to critical thinking is the easiest/ the most difficult for you? Why?

PRACTICE

Throughout this discipline we read and practised, paragraph by paragraph, how to write an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. Thus, you are ready for writing an essay in English! This is your task:

Discipline is an ever increasing problem in modern schools. Some people think that discipline should be the responsibility of teachers, while others think that this is the role of parents.

Discuss both sides and give your opinion.

Source: <http://ieltsliz.com>



SUMMARY

In this class we talked about Writer’s Block and The Writing Process, two important topics related to writing an essay.

There is no secret to writing in any language other than writing, reading, rewriting, and so on. This is why we studied throughout our course how the essay should progress.

In the last class of this course, we will address to Writing an Essay from an overview perspective as well as writing another essay.



SELF-EVALUATION

Did I increase my knowledge related to writing an essay in English?
Am I able to develop critical thinking whilst writing in English?



NEXT CLASS

Next class, the focus of your studies will be on Writing an Essay. See ya!

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