

# Mastering the Art Of **The English Essay**



By Jeremiah Bourque

## The English Essay

The word “essay” comes from a book written by French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, published in 1580, titled “Essais,” meaning *attempts*. This word was derived from the French verb *essayer*, meaning *to attempt, to try*. Michel de Montaigne was *attempting* to demonstrate his philosophical views to the public at large. Each short treatise was a distinct *attempt* in pursuit of this goal.

This is how the word *essay* entered into the English language.

The typical essay required of a non-native English speaker on a language test such as the TOEFL, the IELTS, and so forth, is written as an **attempt** to persuade the reader that a particular side of a given question is correct. These questions, or *essay topics*, can vary, but always demand that the writer takes a side.

Neutrality is not an option.





## Essay Structure

The English essay is divided into three distinct components.

- **The Introduction**
- **The Body**
- **The Conclusion**



## The Introduction

The modern English essay begins with the *introduction*. This is not only the beginning of your essay; it is a road map to the ideas contained within. A well-written introduction makes the reader **want** to read more. The writer must present the subject in an interesting way to cause the reader to open his or her mind to the writer's opinions.

Here are some tips to remember:

- **Never** write one-sentence introductions. A paragraph is a group of sentences, plural. Use at least two sentences.
- Do not make your introduction too long, either. The reader needs a warm-up, but you do not want the reader to get lost and lose enthusiasm!

More importantly, you must be aware that the introduction's purpose is to introduce the **theme** of your essay.

## Themes

A **theme** is a **recurring idea**. It is the mental backbone behind your thoughts. It is the master key to all doors.

Your essay's theme is like a country's flag and national anthem: a *representation* of the idea at the heart of your essay.

In many cases, your essay *topic* has been assigned to you. However, your *theme* is of your own creation. Your theme may be based on the topic, and may address the topic, but your theme is the angle, or spin, that you take on that topic.



## Examples

### **Topic: Are Cell Phones Good For Society?**

A writer looking at this topic has several options.

#### **Theme #1: Cell phones are a technological marvels that boost society.**

This theme clearly backs cell phones as positive influences on society. Through the course of this essay, the writer will demonstrate the various ways cell phones provide benefits to modern civilization and modern human beings.

#### **Theme #2: Cell phones have serious drawbacks that undermine society.**

This theme clearly attacks cell phones as negative influences on society. Throughout this essay, the writer will demonstrate the dark side of cell phones, including suspicions that they cause cancer and their role in taking away chances for human beings to rest and unwind.

#### **Theme #3: Cell phones are both good and bad, but are a net benefit to society.**

This theme carefully weighs the evidence and squeaks out a small victory for cell phones. Using this theme, the writer will make a point of seeming fair, acknowledging the counter-arguments but nonetheless coming down on the side of cell phones as a net benefit.

#### **Theme #3: Cell phones are both good and bad, but are a net loss to society.**

This final theme carefully weighs the evidence, but finishes with a negative view of cell phones. This view will state that cell phones may have benefits, but that these benefits are outweighed by negative consequences. If cell phones are not to be banned, perhaps they should be curtailed or restricted?

## Invalid Themes

### Example:

**Cell phones are both good and bad. Many people argue they are good; many others argue they are bad.**

This is a bad theme.

There is no gentle way to put this: **A theme must result in a conclusion.** An introduction that does not lead to a conclusion is **bad**.

This theme is indecisive. It does not take a side. It does not express an **opinion**. It does not **attempt** to make an argument at all.

An essay that is not an **attempt** to make an argument is not an essay at all. It is an incoherent waste of the reader's time.

Such an essay will be rejected.

### Sample Introduction

**Are cell phones good for society? Though cell phones have produced a backlash in some segments of society, they provide numerous benefits that make modern life easier, and better.**





## The Body

The body of the essay is where you do the hard work of presenting **facts** to support your argument. You want to demonstrate that your **opinion** is founded on **facts**. This makes your opinion more persuasive.

A **fact** is simply something that many people firmly believe to be true. While it is better to have objective, scientific evidence supporting your argument, this is not always possible. In practice, you will usually be presenting **facts** with specific pieces of **evidence** to support and strengthen those facts. This gives added weight to your **opinion**.

Before going any further, let's look at your main tool here: **The paragraph.**



## The English Paragraph

At its simplest, a paragraph is a group of sentences.

A sentence is **an expression of a single thought**. An idea, on the other hand, can require an entire essay, or an entire book, to present.

A paragraph is expressing **a group of related thoughts**.

In practice, each paragraph is written around its own **theme**. This theme represents *how the sentences in the paragraph relate to each other*.

### Example:

**Today, cell phones have many functions. They are used to send text messages, browse websites, and organize our schedules. In addition, an ordinary citizen with a cell phone who witnesses a crime can instantly call the police, aiding officers in their law enforcement duties. This acts as a deterrent against crime.**

What is the theme of this paragraph?

The theme of this paragraph is, **cell phones bring many benefits to society**.

You might not have been able to identify the theme from the first sentence, but that is all right. To be too obvious would be to make the reader think you have already made up your mind without caring about the facts.

In a perfect world, the writer can obtain statistical research showing these claims of benefits have a scientific basis. This is certainly not always possible. After all, where would the control group be? What identifiable group did not have cell phones that is at all related to the people who did? Cell phones are so common that this is a difficult thing to test. Nonetheless, there is a place for **opinion** in an essay.

More importantly, there is a place for **logic**. If something is logically correct, it can be argued. An essay is, after all, an attempt; it is an argument.

Also, the writer can simply be conservative in making claims. The above paragraph did not measure the size or effectiveness of the deterrent; it merely claims cell phones are **a** deterrent, rather than a decisive or effective or overwhelming deterrent against crime. Such claims would demand firm evidence that does not exist.



## Making Paragraphs Flow

In principle, the first sentence of the next paragraph should be linked to, or should contrast with, the last sentence of the existing paragraph.

Think of an essay as a single thread. The thread weaves left, and right; as the weaver works, the thread moves lower and lower on the page. Each paragraph is one section of textile. A single thread, barely visible, links the lower right of each paragraph to the upper left of each paragraph that follows, but they **are** linked.

In reality, you are not linking individual sentences... although this helps. You are linking together **themes**.

### Example:

**Today, cell phones have many functions. They are used to send text messages, browse websites, and organize our schedules. In addition, an ordinary citizen with a cell phone who witnesses a crime can instantly call the police, aiding officers in their law enforcement duties. This acts as a deterrent against crime.**

**Just as importantly, cell phones keep us in close contact with friends and family. Communicating by voice is faster and more personal than e-mail or text message. Thus, cell phones act as a bridge between all people, linking them together no matter who they are, or how far away they may be. Today, our loved ones are never far away.**

The phrase, "Just as importantly," provides *contrast* with the previous paragraph. There are two themes at work here.

**Theme #1: Cell phones provide these specific practical benefits to society.**

**Theme #2: Cell phones also provide these psychological, emotional benefits to us as individuals and families making up society.**

As you can see, these are **complimentary themes**. Indeed, the first theme cannot be worded in this way without the second theme to provide contrast.

By using two complimentary themes that both emphasize the positive aspects of the cell phone, the body of this essay supports a positive conclusion.







## The Conclusion

The **best** conclusions summarize without repeating. Conclusions should emphasize your essay's overall theme (the one from the introduction); they should also add the weight of your own personal view on top of the weight of the evidence provided so far.

### Example:

**The numerous benefits cell phones provide to people of all walks of life make them indispensable and precious to modern life. Accordingly, I believe cell phones are good for society at large.**

The words “accordingly” and “at large” are window dressing and flourish. The important thing is to present the conclusion as **the result** of the essay.

Here's something to remember when you read essays written by native speakers: **the first trick in the book is to decide on the conclusion first, then write an essay to make the conclusion seem to be the result of an objective thought process.**

An essay is not a neutral process of exploration. It is an **attempt** to **convince** another that you are correct. To do this, you must actually possess an opinion; you must then present that opinion in a way that invites the reader to arrive at the same opinion without feeling coerced.



## The Entire Essay

### Topic: Are Cell Phones Good For Society?

**Are cell phones good for society? Though cell phones have produced a backlash in some segments of society, they provide numerous benefits that make modern life easier, and better.**

**Today, cell phones have many functions. They are used to send text messages, browse websites, and organize our schedules. In addition, an ordinary citizen with a cell phone who witnesses a crime can instantly call the police, aiding officers in their law enforcement duties. This acts as a deterrent against crime.**

**Just as importantly, cell phones keep us in close contact with friends and family. Communicating by voice is faster and more personal than e-mail or text message. Thus, cell phones act as a bridge between all people, linking them together no matter who they are, or how far away they may be. Today, our loved ones are never far away.**

**The numerous benefits cell phones provide to people of all walks of life make them indispensable and precious to modern life. Accordingly, I believe cell phones are good for society at large.**





## What You Can Do To Improve Your Writing

In helping people with their writing, I (Jeremiah) prefer a hands-on approach. Rather than explain about writing *in general*, I much prefer answering *specific* questions related to your individual, personal needs.

As a professional language tutor, I answer small questions for free and without obligation. Many times, free help I give inspires me to write things that help many others. If you have a question, consider simply e-mailing me and writing "Essay" or "Lesson" in the subject line to make sure I see it.

[jeremiahbourque@gmail.com](mailto:jeremiahbourque@gmail.com)

I can be contacted on Skype at jeremiah.bourque . Please send a text message to introduce yourself rather than call out of the blue.

As the head of Learn Out Live's English department, I give sample lessons, either over Skype or simply with PDF documents or PowerPoint presentations, upon request.

Of course, as a professional tutor, you can also hire me for lessons over Skype:

<http://learnoutlive.com/languages/english>

If you have other needs, such as extended assistance with your writing skills over e-mail, things that do not fall under live lessons with Skype etc. (for essays instead of conversation, pronunciation practice, and so forth), feel free to e-mail me and ask. Of course, put "lesson" in the subject to help me see your message faster.



*Chiquitita, one of two family cats*

## Closing Thoughts

Learners without full English proficiency often have similar problems in writing essays. For some, their main issue is sentence, paragraph, and essay structure; others have difficulty with things like harmonizing plurals.

Most perilously, many come from different writing cultures where the English style of argumentative essay writing seems bold, brash, and most of all, **pushy**.

Well, yes. It is. That is how it will stay, too. Unfortunately, there really is no alternative but to get used to it. Tests like TOEFL and IELTS simply will not change for the preferences of people from cultures where exploring a topic's nuances, rather than using one's own opinion like a battering ram on another person's psyche, is the norm rather than a "mistake."

Having said this, the key to essay writing is **clarity**. Clarity of thought leads to clarity of writing. Clarity of grammar leads to clarity of communication. Clarity of communication leads to better understanding. This is a virtue that aids in conveying the content of a person's mind, and spirit, across cultural and linguistic barriers.

I hope I have done my part to help you cross these barriers successfully.

- Jeremiah Bourque

