

## How can I improve my writing?

*It takes time and practice to learn to write well, and there is a lot of advice out there. Here are a few basic ideas to get you started:*

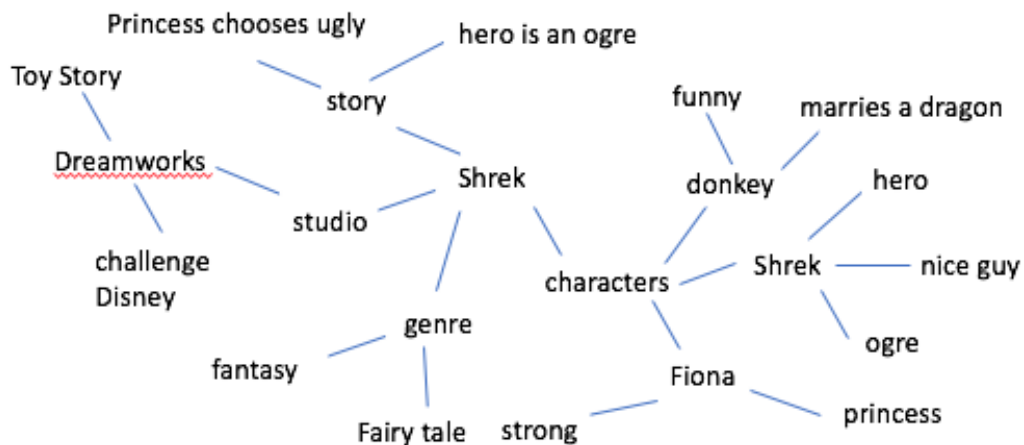
### 1. Use the writing process

Just like recipes in cooking, there is a process to writing an essay:

1. Start thinking about what you will write about. What is the question? What do you think? Will you need to do any research? How much do you think your readers will know?
2. What do you know? Write a paragraph or make a list of ideas. (This is often called brainstorming.) Take notes from any research you need to do.
3. Organize the ideas. Which notes answer the question best? Are there any links?
4. Make a first draft of the essay.
5. Go back and read it again. Have you made any mistakes? How can it be better? Edit your writing.

*Here is an example. Your teacher asks you to write a short essay about your favorite movie.*

1. *What will you write about? What is the question?* Make a list of movies you like. Choose one. The essay is short, so probably you only need to do some, not a lot of research.
2. *What do you know? Make a list of ideas.* Think about why you like the movie. Make a list of topics you could write about. For movies, that could include the story, setting, genre, soundtrack, characters, special effects or computer graphics, the action scenes, the love scenes, the actors, the director, the studio that made it, or how it makes you feel – did you cry? Use the list to map out your ideas. There are many ways to do this. You could make a “spider diagram” or “mind map” like this:



3. *Organize your ideas.* One of the good points of the “mind map” is it helps you organize your ideas. You could also think of links between the different parts of the “mind map”. You don’t need to use all the notes you make in your essay.
4. *Make a first draft of your essay.* Students sometimes find it useful to write out the first draft of their essay using a “scaffold” (an organized structure that can show you a pattern – this handout has information about this later.)

## 2. Have a clear structure that is correct for the situation

A lot of what your writing at university will be essays. When you write an essay, teachers will often say it is important to have an introduction, a conclusion, a clear argument and to use supporting evidence. What does this mean? Look at this conversation:

**John:** How was your weekend?

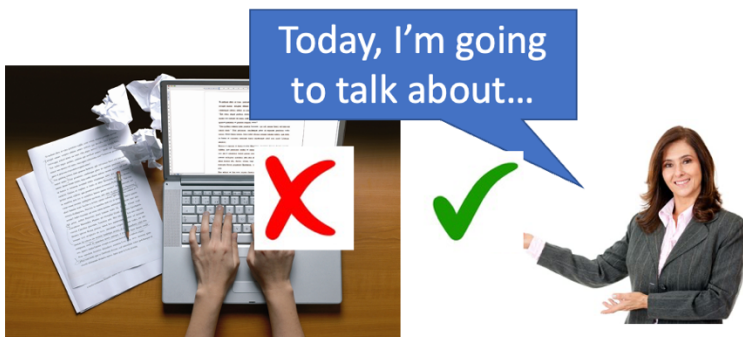
**Jane:** *Great! I had a really good time!* I went to see a movie with a friend on Saturday, had dinner with my boyfriend Saturday night, and spent Sunday relaxing at the beach. It was a wonderful weekend!



In this conversation, Jane answers the question directly and simply (*in italics above*), gives some detail, then concludes with a comment relating to the question (underlined above). This is exactly what a good essay should do. It should have:

- I. An introduction that shows you have heard and understood the question, as Jane shows when she says, ‘Great! I had a really good time!’
- II. A body (the main part of the essay) organized into paragraphs with supporting information (which can be called evidence). Jane’s supporting information or evidence is she went to see a movie, had dinner with her boyfriend and went to the beach. These are the reasons she had a really good time. In this conversation, the reasons are written simply, but if she wrote an essay she could have one paragraph about the movie, one about dinner and another about the beach.
- III. A conclusion that relates back to the question. In Jane’s case, ‘It was a wonderful weekend!’ shows she understands the question and answers it clearly. Question: ‘How was your weekend?’ Answer: ‘Wonderful.’

If the conversation or the piece of writing is short, the introduction or conclusion do not need to be paragraphs by themselves. As with Jane, they could just be one sentence or even one word. The important thing is to show that you understand the question in the introduction, and to draw your ideas together in the conclusion. Also, remember there are many different types of essay and presentation. Think carefully about what structure and language is best.



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY

*One important note:* At university, you will often write an essay and do a presentation about it. Don’t forget that spoken English and written English are different. Starting a presentation with “Today, I am going to talk about...” or “I am going to tell you about...” is good, but these are spoken English. Do not start an essay this way.

3. Use a pattern to write your essay (Essay scaffolding)

When a building company builds a new house, the first thing they do is put up scaffolding, like in this picture. Scaffolding for an essay is support for the structure of this essay – like a pattern. Here is an example:



Essay title My favorite movie

Introductory sentence/paragraph

Of all the movies I have seen, my favorite is a movie called Shrek. There are three reasons for this.

Body paragraph 1:

Topic (the genre) Shrek is a fantasy movie.

Supporting information/detail: I have always loved fantasy movies. They make me use my imagination.

Supporting information/detail: Shrek includes parts from many fairy tale movies, which are the best kind of fantasy.

Body paragraph 2:

Topic (studio) Shrek was made by DreamWorks.

Supporting information/detail: DreamWorks has made a lot of great movies, for example Toy Story.

Supporting information/detail: I don't like Disney movies and the studio DreamWorks was created to challenge Disney.

Body paragraph 3:

Topic: (characters) Shrek has many great characters.

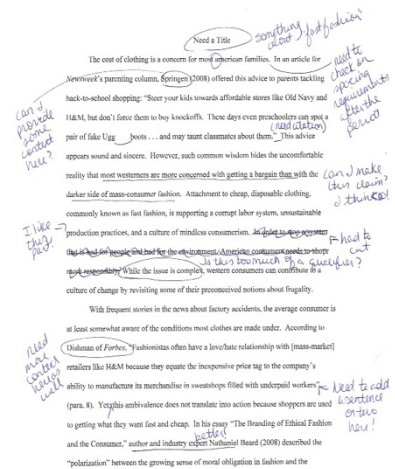
Supporting information/detail: Shrek is an ogre, but he is the main character and he is a nice guy.

Supporting information/detail: Fiona is a princess. She chooses to be ugly to stay with Shrek.

Concluding sentence/paragraph

Shrek is a very funny fantasy movie by DreamWorks. It has characters who make you think about stories in a different way, so it is my favorite movie.

When you have your plan, write it out in essay format. Go back and check it again. Make changes. Famous writers check and rewrite again and again and again. Add more. Take out some parts. Get a friend to help by reading it and giving advice. No essay is perfect - the writing process never ends. (Of course, this essay on Shrek is a very simple and short essay, but this helps you to see how you can plan any essay.)



4. **Back to the basics: Taking a closer look at your writing.**

You've thought through what you want to say, and you have a structure. When you go back and check your writing again, take a closer look at the sentence and paragraph level. Here is an example short paragraph.

I like Shrek. Shrek is great. My favorite movie is Shrek. DreamWorks is a famous movie company. Shrek was made by DreamWorks.

*A. Organize your writing into clear paragraphs.*

Paragraphs help the reader understand your message. Start by making your paragraphs clear. Put an indent (space) at the start of each paragraph of about 5 typing spaces like this:

I like Shrek. Shrek is great. My favorite movie is Shrek. DreamWorks is a famous movie company. Shrek was made by DreamWorks.

*B. Use different sentence patterns.*

If the sentences are all simple and the same pattern, writing can be boring to read. How about this:

Shrek, which is a movie made by the famous company DreamWorks, is a movie I like. I like Shrek because it is great. In fact, Shrek is my favorite movie.

There are now 3 different sentence patterns.

*C. Use a range of vocabulary.*

The essay repeats the words "Shrek" and "like" and many times. You don't need to say Shrek again and again – use pronouns (like it, he or she.) Also, use other words instead of "like" to show how much vocabulary you know. Try using a thesaurus (a type of dictionary that tells you words with a similar meaning.) thesaurus.com says "love" and "adore" are similar to "like". "Well-known" is also similar to "famous".

Shrek, which is a movie made by the well-known company DreamWorks, is one I adore. I love it because it is great. In fact, Shrek is my favorite movie.

*D. Give more detail when you can.*

Often the more detail you give, the more interesting your writing becomes (although you can have too much detail!) Compare the paragraph below to the original paragraph. Which is better?

Shrek, which is an entertaining movie made by the well-known production company DreamWorks, is one I adore. I love it because I feel close to the main character who just wants to live a quiet life, but becomes a hero. In fact, Shrek is my favorite movie of all time.

## 5. Use transition words to hold your ideas together

Look at these sentences:

- I got up. I got dressed. I ate breakfast. I brushed my teeth.

It is describing a morning routine. It is easier to understand if you write:

- First, I got up. Then I got dressed. After that, I ate breakfast. Finally, I brushed my teeth.

Words like this can also be used to give reasons or examples to support an argument.

- I think chocolate is great for many reasons. First of all, it tastes good. Next, it gives you energy. Finally, there are many kinds. For example, milk chocolate and dark chocolate.

These kinds of words are called transition words. They make your writing easier to read and understand. There are many types. For example, these could be used in the sentences above:

<b>Phrases or words showing time</b>	<b>Phrases or words listing reasons</b>	<b>Phrases or words giving examples or more information</b>
First	first	for example
Then	to start with	for instance
Next	to begin with	such as
after that	next	also
Later	another reason	that is
at the same time	in addition	in other words
meanwhile	also	another
as soon as	lastly	
while	finally	
during	most importantly	

You will also be asked to explain your reasons or actions.:

- I like chocolate. I like ice cream. They taste good. They are not good for your teeth. I only eat them sometimes.

Again, adding transition words makes this easier to read and understand:

- I like chocolate and ice cream because they taste good. However, they are not good for your teeth so I only eat them sometimes.

<b>Adding similar information</b>	<b>Giving reasons</b>	<b>Saying the other side</b>	<b>Showing effect or consequence</b>
and	because	however	so
in addition	for this reason	on the other hand	as a result
similarly	since	in comparison	therefore
also	due to	whereas	as a consequence

There are many more. If you put “transition words” into Google, you will find many lists and graphs that organize them in many ways. Make sure you look at how each word is used in a sentence.


6. **If you are writing an essay, use more formal English.**

Here is a basic paragraph from:

I like chocolate because chocolate tastes great. My favorite type of chocolate is milk. Glico, which is a famous Japanese chocolate company, makes great milk chocolate.

Here it is again, in a more formal style:

I greatly enjoy eating chocolate due to the fact that it has a superb taste. In particular, I favor milk varieties. Glico, a well-known Japanese confectionary company, produces truly first-rate milk chocolate.

The basic rule in English is longer words, phrases or sentences are often more formal. Here are some examples. Basic words like “said” can also be  more formal, and it is also important to know how to use any word you learn in a sentence. Look below:

<i>informal</i>	<i>formal</i>	<i>casual</i>	<i>formal</i>
<b>verbs (動詞)</b>		<b>abbreviations</b>	
<i>begin</i>	<i>commence</i>	<i>I'm</i>	<i>I am</i>
<i>get</i>	<i>obtain/purchase/receive</i>	<i>doesn't</i>	<i>does not</i>
<b>adjectives (形容詞)</b>			
<i>help</i>	<i>assist</i>	<i>lucky</i>	<i>fortunate</i>
<i>live</i>	<i>reside</i>	<i>wrong</i>	<i>incorrect</i>
<i>say</i>	<i>state</i>	<i>cheap</i>	<i>inexpensive</i>
<i>show</i>	<i>demonstrate</i>	<i>rich</i>	<i>wealthy</i>
<i>tell</i>	<i>inform</i>	<i>sick</i>	<i>unhealthy</i>
<i>use</i>	<i>consume</i>		

<i>informal</i>	<i>in a sentence</i>	<i>more formal</i>	<i>in a sentence</i>
said	My mother said she ate rice.	stated	My mother stated she ate rice.
		According to...	According to my mother, she ate rice.
maybe	Maybe she is happy.	it could be	It could be she is happy.
		there is a possibility	There is a possibility she is happy.
but	I like cats, but they are selfish.	However,...	I like cats. However, they are selfish.
		Unfortunately,...	I like cats. Unfortunately, they are selfish.
and	I like cats and dogs.	In addition,...	I like cats. In addition, I like dogs.
		Similarly	I like cats. Similarly, I like dogs.
so	I like cats so I have two.	Therefore	I like cats. Therefore, I have two.
		thus	I like cats, thus I have two.
because	I like cats because they are cute.	as	I like cats as they are cute.
		due to the fact that	I like cats due to the fact that they are cute.