

Persuasive Essays

Suggestions to Fix Common Problems: Opening Paragraphs

“Hey! You can’t wear that at school!” Some people think we should have school uniforms. Some people don’t. Uniforms have some advantages and some disadvantages. In this paper, I will tell you about the dress code and why we need to change it. Don’t you think that’s a good idea?

What the #!! is this paragraph saying? Who is being quoted in the first sentence? Is it about uniforms or about the dress code? Is it in favor of something or against something? Why is there no attention getter? Where is the background information? Why does the writer care enough to put this on paper, and what effort does he make to get the reader to care? What does the writer want the reader to do? What is the point?*

If any of these questions occurred to you as you read the above paragraph, then you are a careful critic of poor persuasive writing. It’s a terrible example of an opening paragraph even though all the words are spelled correctly and the punctuation marks are in the right places. To help you avoid such awfulness in your own persuasive essays, check for these things in your introductory paragraph.

Attention Getter: Before you launch into a random, directionless tirade about your topic, give the reader a reason to continue past the first sentence. There are many effective ways to capture attention. You could describe a surprising situation, present some alarming facts or statistics that your readers may not know, or ask an intriguing question. Whatever method you choose, keep in mind that it has to *relate* to your topic in some way, and you have to make that relationship clear by providing the necessary background information in the following sentences. For example, if you begin with a quotation (like in the paragraph above), make sure to include the details the reader will need to understand it: *Who said it? To whom? When? Why?* The reader needs to know exactly what your topic is and why you care about it before s/he will be ready to hear your persuasive argument.

Background Information: After capturing attention, present the necessary background information so that your reader understands the issue in question. For example, if you are going to suggest a change in the school dress code, explain what part of the dress code is unfair so the reader understands the situation. Only then can the reader can make sense of your opinion statement.

Opinion Statement (Thesis Statement): Your opinion statement should be clear, simple, and direct. It should not be dependent on other sentences in the paragraph to make sense. As a statement, it should be able to stand on its own. It should not be question. The reader should not have to figure out what you are arguing for. It should be totally and unquestionably clear, usually the last sentence in the first paragraph. The example above contains no clear opinion statement.

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Suggestions to Fix Common Problems: Body Paragraphs

The dress code at this school sucks because there is no individuality. In the real world no one tells you what you can wear, and there is no hall nazi that chases you down and makes you put on a big oversized t-shirt that was worn by some sweaty fat kid in a P.E. class from twelve years ago! We should get to wear whatever we want. If our parents will let us leave the house in it, then the school shouldn't make us change.

That line about the 12-year-old sweaty t-shirt was pretty funny, huh? Well, too bad the rest of the paragraph sucks sewer gas! What is the point of this paragraph? Is it stated in a topic sentence anywhere? Is it clearly supported with specific anecdotes, details, and examples? Are there any transitions? A conclusion statement? C'mon!

The writer, and maybe even some readers, of this sample paragraph might say it's a good one because it seems to have a general point and it is sort of funny, but it is lacking many things a powerful persuasive paragraph needs:

Topic Sentence: There has to be a topic sentence (ideally, the first one) in each body paragraph that clearly states one reason in support of your thesis statement. This is the sentence that gives direction to the rest of the paragraph, and the other sentences in the paragraph will develop, explain, and prove this reason to be a good one. The example above seems to have a topic sentence: *The dress code at this school sucks because there is no individuality.* Besides the fact that the language is too informal to be persuasive, the sentence itself really isn't clear: *There is no individuality where? In the dress code? In the school?* Also, the paragraph isn't actually about individuality, so it isn't a genuine topic sentence. If this were the topic sentence, the rest of the paragraph would develop the idea that the dress code steals individuality. Because the paragraph has no real direction, the writer bounces from idea to idea, which is why the paragraph lacks *coherence*. A good paragraph has to be cohesive: all the sentences must work to support the topic sentence. This is not the case in the above example.

Specific Supporting Sentences: The key word here is *specific*. The most interesting sentence in the paragraph above is interesting because it has a specific image in it: that sweaty t-shirt again. But even then, the sentence itself is a generalization. It does not tell the story about an actual time the writer was forced to wear such a shirt. It provides no details. No clear picture is painted in the reader's mind, and no specific point is made. And the rest of the sentences are only vaguely related generalizations as well. The writer suggests many topics (individuality, real world dress codes, student choice in wardrobe, parental input) but develops none of them. Again, nothing is clear: lack of a clear topic sentence leads to vague, general, non-specific supporting ideas.

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Transitions: The writer of the above paragraph depends on the reader to do too much of the work. There is no guidance from one thought to the next, which is why the sentences seem almost unrelated. When one example has been fully developed (which none of the ones above are), a proficient writer uses a brief transition word or phrase to indicate that a new one is on the way. Here are some common transitions: *First, second, not only...but also, finally, most importantly, another example is....* Also (There's a transition now!), when a paragraph ends, there must be either a transition to the next reason or a conclusion statement that lets the reader know the details and examples are complete: *While it is true that the dress code makes it more difficult to express our individuality, it is not the only reason we should change it.* After such a transition, the reader knows that another reason is on the way. Transitions and conclusions are important to not only the organization of a paper, but also to the general "flow" of the writing. Don't forget your transition and conclusion statements!

Suggestions to Fix Common Problems: Conclusion Paragraphs

School uniforms and dress codes are not the answer to all our school's problems. It's not my fault that stores don't sell shirts that cover all the parts of me that the school wants covered. It's a private matter, and it should be handled privately, by parents not school officials. Why are we even paying someone to walk the halls and bust kids? Couldn't we buy some new computers for the library with that money?

Huh?! Is this the end of an essay about dress codes, uniforms, or the use of school funds? And what are those questions at the end supposed to make me think? Does that somehow hammer home a point that was raised earlier? I don't think so. Dang, I'm glad this paper is over, though!

A conclusion paragraph should do three things: 1) restate the opinion statement (thesis), 2) summarize the reasons that were developed in the body paragraphs, and 3) conclude with a powerful "clincher" or a "call to action" that will encourage readers to make the changes you have suggested. A conclusion paragraph should not introduce new information or descend into incomprehensible babble as does the example above. Because you only have to find a brief way to quickly express an idea you have already developed earlier in the essay, the conclusion paragraph is easy to write. So do it well!

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Suggestions to Fix Common Problems: Other Issues

Just say it: Young writers struggle to express what they really mean. They sweat, strain, and agonize over many of the details that don't really matter, and they ignore others that matter a lot. They skip from one thought to another with no effort to unite the ideas into a coherent essay and no specifics to develop the ideas. If you can speak it clearly, you can write it clearly. Just say it! (Then write it down.) *What is it you think needs to be changed? How does it need to be changed?* Okay, now put that together in a sentence: *The school dress code is unreasonably strict and should be changed.* It's concise, to the point, and clear. There's no question what this paper will set out to prove. If you read your first draft and find that you aren't really getting at any one particular thesis, try talking it out. Discover what you really want to say... and say it confidently. Remove the following phrases from your first draft: *I think...*, *In my opinion...*, and *It would be a good idea to....* We already know it's your opinion because it's your essay, so you don't need to soften the blow of what you are suggesting by couching it in such phrases.

Voice: Is your voice in the essay appropriate for your audience? In the sample paragraphs from the previous pages, the voice is inappropriate because the writer is arguing (badly) for a change in the dress code, but s/he is employing a voice that will not be convincing to the intended audience. Who can change the dress code? Administrators. How should you address them if you want to be taken seriously? For starters, you wouldn't use words like "suck" and "hall nazi." Administrators are more likely to respond to a fairly formal tone. This doesn't mean you always have to write persuasive essays in a formal voice, but you do need to consider your audience. If you are trying to persuade a group of your peers, an informal voice is fine. Audience determines voice. Notice how the italicized sections under the sample paragraphs on the previous pages are quite informal. Why? Because I know that the intended audience is made up of junior high school students. You guys will appreciate that voice better than the one you will likely find in a college textbook, right?

Word Choice: Be sure to use powerful, descriptive verbs and specific descriptive language.

Evidence: Try to include at least one expert opinion and/or collection of statistics or facts from a reliable source. (Cite the source at the end of the paper, too!) This will help your argument appear logical.

Final Suggestions:

- Do not capitalize the words *junior high* or *high school* unless it is part of the name of a specific school: Fairfield Junior High School.
- Address the counterclaims! Don't forget! Not everyone will agree with you, so don't pretend they do. Do, however, explain why they should.
- Retyping the outline or reprinting the rough draft without making any changes will not meet the requirements for a final draft. You have to make an effort to significantly improve the first draft. Revise. Rework. Rewrite. Resubmit.