

Educational Resource Center

**Workshop
for
College Writers**

by

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Part I Upgrading Your Writing Skills

Part II Correcting Common Grammar Errors

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Part I Upgrading Your Writing Skills

Writing is hard work. Few people can deny that starting a writing project is a daunting task. College writing assignments may seem overwhelming and more demanding than the ones you used to do in high school. There may be more essays to write, and the standards will be higher. However, if you follow a few simple rules, whether you are tackling a short essay for a writing class or a dissertation for a final course project, you should become comfortable with the essay format. The following discussion offers some basic but essential guidelines to help you with your writing projects.

The Essay

Keep the following criteria in mind when you write an essay of any length.

- (1) thesis statement (main idea)
- (2) logical organization and unity
- (3) adequate development, and
- (4) Formal Standard American English.

1. Thesis Statement

There should be a clear thesis (purpose or main idea); whether it is presented explicitly in the introduction, in the body of the paper, or at the end, the main idea should be the one guiding principle behind the writing. The thesis should be a general subject, not too narrow and not too broad, that can be developed and organized into a meaningful discussion. If the thesis is too broad, it may make the project unmanageable. If it is too narrow, the writer may run out of things to say. A topic sentence in each paragraph relates to the main idea and gives the reader an idea of what the paragraph will be about. Specific examples support the topic sentences. A summary of the thesis and each of the topic sentences should result in an overview of a unified and cohesive outline.

2. Logical organization and unity

The discussions which develop the thesis must be organized. It is tempting to begin an essay without any planning process. However, the result is usually a confusing jumble of rhetoric that is almost impossible for the reader to follow. By prewriting (using an outline, brainstorming or clustering), writers can organize their thoughts and use transitions to go from one idea to another (unity) to create a seamless and powerful discussion of the subject.

3. Development

The main ideas and supporting topics should in turn be developed with specific facts, data, examples, details and/or short anecdotes (stories) in order to support the topics and the one overriding thesis. A writer must avoid repeating the same general concepts over and over. Instead, specific examples will illustrate and clarify the main points the writer wants to make.

4. Formal Standard American English (FSAE)

Finally, the writing itself must be clear, fluent and intelligible to the reader. Although the writer should avoid inflated or pompous rhetoric, there should be a variety of sentence structures, from simple to complex. Adherence to correct grammar usage, punctuation and spelling is mandatory.

Overview of the Essay

Introduction

The introduction usually contains the thesis or the general main idea of the essay. It may also specifically cite the topics which will be discussed in the essay.

Topic #1

Each topic will be a more specific support of the thesis and will usually come in the form of a topic sentence in each paragraph. The paragraph will develop the general topic with specific examples, anecdotes, details, and data.

Topic #2

Examples, anecdotes, details, data support the topic sentence.

Topic #3, 4, 5, etc.

Examples, anecdotes, details, data support the topic sentences.

. . . The length of the essay depends upon the writer's purpose and the demands of the assignment.

Conclusion

The final paragraph should be an interesting ending to the discussion. It does not always have to reiterate the content of the essay; it can go provide an insightful and thoughtful discussion of the subject at hand, perhaps even a solution to a problem or issue.

Preparing to Write

As in most tasks, what you do by way of preparation is almost as important as the task itself. When we decide to paint a room, we must first decide on the color. Is the room small or large? Who will be using the room? What color(s) will fit with the rest of the house? We can pick out several color samples and spend a few days choosing which ones work best. Then we can purchase two or three colors and put them on the wall to view them in various lighting during the day. After choosing the right color and buying the paint, we have to wash down the walls, remove or cover the furniture, get rid of any remaining layers of wallpaper, and do any sanding or filling up of holes that may be necessary. Finally, we get to open the can and start painting. At this point the painting is actually easy and even enjoyable as we watch the room come to life. Our essay preparation is somewhat similar. We go through a great deal of prep work before we can write the essay. Thinking about your purpose for writing and your audience

Begin your essay by doing some thinking. Consider first why you are writing this document. Is it a letter to a friend? Is it a formal expository essay for a professor? Do you have to analyze a work of literature, compare and contrast the causes of two wars, synthesize the concepts of several theorists, or evaluate an argument? To whom are you writing? Your audience will control what diction (word choice), sentence length, tone and mood you use. The vocabulary and sentence structure for a third grade class would be much more basic than for a professor of Ancient Chinese Culture or a letter to an old high school buddy.

Follow the directions.

What exactly are you asked to do for this specific project? How long will the document be? What do you want the reader to get out of your discussion? Are you encouraged to offer your own opinions, to go beyond a simple exposition of the subject at hand? Do you need to take a stand and back up your claim as in an argument or persuasive essay? Again, follow the directions, make a plan, and get started writing as soon as you can, well in advance of the due date. If you are allowed to turn in a rough draft do so, and then put it away for a time. When you reread the document, you will have a fresh perspective from which to work. Your extra effort will ensure a better grade in the final draft.

Always prewrite!

Make a plan of what you want to say before you begin writing. You will need some kind of direction to keep you on task and to help you develop your main idea. Consider freewriting, outlining, mapping, or brainstorming (listing). Any of these methods will give you a plan to follow as you dive into the very difficult task of writing an essay or document of any sort. Make sure your thesis statement is precise and stated in a way that you can develop it clearly, concisely and thoroughly. Provide plenty of proof to back up your general topics in the form of examples, data, facts and anecdotes (short personal stories).

The in-class versus the out-of-class essay

The out-of-class assignment gives you time to collect your thoughts, to formulate a workable outline, and to edit the entire work carefully. However, the hardest part of an out-of-class assignment may be getting started. We all know what happens when we begin a four to five page essay on the night before it is due. So take advantage of your time, and begin thinking about the project as soon as it is assigned. Take notes, and start organizing your information. If the project involves research, decide on a working thesis as soon as possible to avoid wandering around endlessly on the internet. Set aside a certain amount of time each day for working on your first drafts.

An in-class essay demands that you think, prewrite and write a lot faster than you do an out-of-class essay, so it is a good idea to plan ahead. If you know the subject ahead of time, for instance if you have an exam which will be based on essay questions on the course, do your homework. Know your material. Memorize major concepts and some important facts so you can develop your answers with specificity. Refer to your texts, your notes and previous classwork assignments. Summarize major and minor points in your own words; you can't memorize the entire text. And finally, get a good night's sleep and come to class refreshed, somewhat relaxed and ready to write. Here are a few tips for writing in-class essays:



Hints to Help You Write the In-Class Essay

Writing an essay in a given amount of time, for any discipline, can be a challenge. Most upper division courses will require essay exams rather than the multiple choice or true false tests you may be used to. In many ways, the essay exam, whether done in class or outside of class, is easier than multiple choice, as long as you know your material.

1. When you write an in-class essay, think, prewrite, write, and then edit it, just as you do an out-of-class essay. There are two major differences, however, between the two writing assignments. One, you are under a time restraint, so you have to pace yourself, and two, you can't waste time rewriting your work, so write clearly and legibly as you go. This is why prewriting is so important. If you do make a mistake and need to cross it out, simply draw a line through the error. Write as legibly as possible the first time.
2. Before you begin to write, read the prompt carefully. Make sure you follow the instructions. Don't glance briefly at the assignment and then tear off into an essay that has no relation to what the instructor has asked for. Some prompts ask you to summarize a paragraph and then react to it. If so, summarize the passage in your own words and use quotation marks around any copied phrases.
3. After reading the instructions, do some prewriting, but no more than 5-10 minutes per hour of assigned writing. Decide what you will say before you write, so that you will have a definite plan of organization. Settle on a thesis. Then jot down some relevant topics and specific supports and organize the ideas. You can add and delete the items in your prewriting as necessary.
4. Maybe you get stuck. This may happen if the topic is a generic one testing your writing abilities and not your recall of a specific concept. But don't waste time staring at the paper. Start prewriting about anything that comes to mind, and perhaps one idea will lead to another, and you will come up with some workable concepts. If you can't get excited about the topic, do what you can. Perhaps you will become more enthusiastic as you get into the essay.
5. Now write the essay. Keep a steady pace as you generate ideas, and watch your time. You may not cover everything you had planned to, but get the essential concepts into your paper.
6. Finally, save ten minutes to edit your work and look at the essay critically. Is there a clear thesis? Do the topics develop the thesis and are they supported by facts, anecdotes and/or examples? Are the sentences clear and fluent or do they need revising for logic and clarity? Get rid of cliches, slang and jargon. Combine short choppy sentences. Fix grammar errors such as run-ons, comma splices and fragments, and finally, correct any spelling errors.
7. Put your name and date on the front page and turn in your paper.

Rhetorical Modes: Methods of communication used to develop essays and paragraphs

NARRATION is used to tell a story or relate events, to tell what happened. Narration can be fiction or non-fiction. An anecdote may illustrate a general idea.

DESCRIPTION uses the five senses: sound, sight, touch, smell and taste. A good descriptive paragraph or essay recreates the original situation or scene so well that the reader can easily visualize it.

AN ARGUMENT is used to make a claim or take a stand on a controversial issue. A good argument is an intelligent discourse based on logical reasoning which is backed up with reliable evidence. It will refute opposing viewpoints. It may or may not use emotional appeal and satire.

EXAMPLE ESSAYS (often called Illustration) explain and inform. The author "exposes" or illustrates his/her information, uses examples to make ideas more concrete and generalizations more specific. Anecdotes, examples, facts and specific details support general statements.

PROCESS ANALYSIS tells how something is done. Whether describing a complex legal case or how to make chili, the author can use a process analysis to explain the method.

DEFINITION: A definition may explain what a word means according to the dictionary (denotation), or it may be a personal point of view on what a term means (connotation). Definitions may vary. People newly immigrated to America might define the word "freedom" in very different terms than one who has been living in this country all their lives.

DIVISION AND CLASSIFICATION: Classification is a way to organize items with similar characteristics. A general class of items can be grouped according to type. One might classify different types of music or types of restaurants. Division deals with one item and separates it into its component parts.

COMPARISON/CONTRAST: Comparison/contrast essays show how two objects, people or situations are similar or different. Comparison indicates similarities, while contrast indicates differences.

CAUSE AND EFFECT essays try to determine the reason something happens and to answer the question "why?" They look at the results, or effects that occur because of the causes. (See the following instructions for writing the comparison/contrast essay.)

Writing the Comparison/Contrast Essay

The comparison/contrast essay format is one you will want to master. You may know all about your subject, but when faced with an in-class writing test which asks for a comparison and/or contrast of two different concepts, you may not know how to organize the vast amount of facts and ideas that are running around in your head. Here is a simple way to get started. First identify the two subjects under consideration. For instance, your professor might ask you to compare and contrast the causes of the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

Your two subjects would be

I The American Revolution, and II The French Revolution

*Then narrow down your discussion to relevant **specific points of consideration (or topics)**. In this case some workable topics might be*

- a. historical influences
- b. social implications
- c. economic considerations

Choose as many topics as you need for your purpose.

Next, you need to organize exactly how you want to set up your discussion. There are two ways to present the subjects and points in an organized manner so that the reader (and the writer) will not get confused. One method is to discuss each subject thoroughly, one at a time covering each point. This is a subject by subject organizational pattern.

*Here is an outline using a **Subject by Subject** format:*

- I The American Revolution
 - a. historical influences
 - b. social implications
 - c. economic considerations

- II The French Revolution
 - a. historical influences
 - b. social implications
 - c. economic considerations

***Or** you can discuss each point, one at a time, covering each of the subjects. Here is an outline presenting the information in a **Point by Point** format:*

- a. Historical Influences
 - I The American Revolution
 - II The French Revolution

- b. Social Implications
 - I The American Revolution
 - II The French Revolution

- c. Economic Considerations
 - I The American Revolution
 - II The French Revolution

Let's take another scenario. You could contrast two different levels of education, high school and college; in this case, you would have the following two SUBJECTS:

- I High School, and II College

Here are three POINTS that might develop this particular comparison/contrast essay:

- a) class schedules
- b) homework assignments
- c) teachers

*Here is an outline using a **Subject by Subject** format:*

- I High School
 - a) class schedules
 - b) homework assignments
 - c) teachers
- II College
 - a) class schedules
 - b) homework assignments
 - c) teachers

*Here is an outline presenting the information in a **Point by Point** format:*

- a) Class Schedules
 - I high school
 - II college
- b) Homework Assignments
 - I high school
 - II college
- c) Teachers
 - I high school
 - II college

FYI: In a short essay, the subject by subject method works well. However, in a longer paper, the point by point method will be easier to organize. Always use appropriate transitions to help guide your reader. (Note the following list of transitions you can use for continuity and cohesion in all your essays.)

Transitional Words and Phrases

In order to achieve cohesion and continuity, writers use TRANSITIONS. These words and phrases connect ideas. They are like bridges which give readers a signal, a sense of what is coming next as well as how one concept connects to another. Here is a list of some commonly used transitions.

ADDITION: again, also, and, as well as, further, furthermore, in addition, likewise, moreover, too

CAUSE: because, for, for this reason, since.

CHRONOLOGY: after, always, at last, before, briefly, currently, finally, first, second, frequently, in the meantime, meanwhile, next, soon, suddenly, then, until, now, when.

COMPARISON: all, and, as, both, like, similarly.

CONCLUSION: finally, hence, so, therefore, thus, to conclude.

CONTRAST: although, but, conversely, despite, difference, even so, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, though, unlike, yet.

EFFECT: as a result, consequently, for that reason, hence, resulting, so, then, therefore, thus.

EMPHASIS: above all, especially, indeed, in fact, yes, no.

EXAMPLE: for example, for instance, in other words, specifically, such as, to illustrate.

IMPORTANCE: finally, first, last, least, next, primarily.

REPETITION: again, as stated before, in summary, to reiterate, to repeat.

SPACE: above, adjacent to, alongside, among, around, below, beside, between, beyond, down forward, here, in front of, next to, on top of, over, there, under, where.

SUMMARY: finally, in brief, in short, on the whole, overall, in conclusion.

TIME: to begin with, first, second, third, next, then, before, when, after, eventually, finally

The Introduction

A good essay needs a provocative and insightful beginning, not just a brief and cursory introduction to the subject at hand. Here are some examples of ways to begin an essay. (Note: You may want to write your essay first, then go back and write the introduction.)

1) The most common type of introduction goes from a broad, general idea to a limited, narrowed subject. The specific topics discussed in the essay are included:

A recent epidemic has rocked our nation: Americans, for the most part, are overweight. Obesity can cripple our self-esteem, hamper our daily life styles and rob us of our looks. However, there is a worse threat: obesity is a life-threatening situation and is dangerous to our health. The media has picked up the pace; at least once a week a story on obesity or data on the increased weights of average American men and women appears in the news. In light of all the increased attention obesity has received, it's only logical that Americans reconsider their attitudes toward food. There are several ways to shed unwanted pounds: we can subscribe to one of the many existing diet plans, we can use diet pills and supplements, we can undergo surgery, or better yet, we can adopt a healthy eating plan and exercise regularly.

2) An anecdote or brief story can serve as an introduction.

As a child, I never got good grades in school. All my friends breezed through grammar school with "E" for excellent on their report cards. All I got was a comment like, "Karen can't seem to concentrate." Later on it got worse. In middle and high school I was accused of not trying and of being lazy. Even my parents just about gave up on me. Finally, when I started junior college and realized that all the time spent on my schoolwork was wasted, and it really wasn't my fault, I was tested for a common learning disorder: Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD. What a relief to learn that I wasn't "stupid" or "lazy." In a few short months after being diagnosed and getting help, I am now pulling a 3.5 average. My story is all too familiar to many youngsters who have ADD. More general information on the symptoms of this disorder and how to help a person with ADD should be available to the public.

3) A writer can dispel a common myth or stereotype.

There is an unfair stigma attached to junior colleges, also known as community colleges. Students who attend these schools are often labeled as lower achievers who can't get into a major four year institution. Community college students are looked on as not focused, as wanting to go to college only because their parents make them or because they want an easy way out while they party the year away. Even worse, it is thought that an AA or AS from a junior college will not look well on a resume. The truth is, many students attend their first years of college near

home so they can become accustomed to the college routine and can continue to maintain good study habits. The two years living at home can help save money for when they transfer to a four year school. Not only are most of these students focused and cognizant of their goals, but they face rigorous and challenging courses taught by credible and demanding professors. And as for resumes and transcripts, most state universities give preference to students who want to transfer as long as they maintain a decent GPA and fulfill the course requirements.

4) A famous or interesting quote will serve as a way to get started.

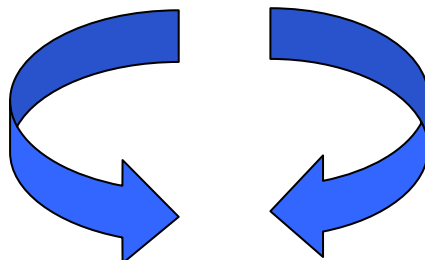
Martin Luther King once said, "Like the synthesis in Hegelian philosophy, the principle of nonviolent resistance seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites-acquiescence and violence-while avoiding the extremes and immoralities of both." Dr. King's message is more meaningful with each passing year. Citizens of a global community must not tolerate injustice and corruption, but they should not resort to war and violence as a means to maintain peace.

6) Use startling facts or statistics

Fifty-six thousand tickets for an upcoming concert at Dodger Stadium costing up to \$1,000 are almost sold out. According to Martha Duffy in Time magazine, the stage will be graced with two waterfalls, four stories high, and thirty truckloads of foliage, enough to create a small park. Who would have thought that three opera tenors, Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti, could be in such demand. Rock stars maybe, or superstar athletes, but not opera singers! The performance will be televised live for PBS, and if it equals the production given a few years ago by the same singers, a performance which was viewed by 800 million people around the world, we may be seeing more of such spectacles. These tenors are not the only performers to popularize the arts. Stars of the theatre and ballet as well as opera are popularizing classic drama, dance and music.

The Conclusion

Just as writers want their introductions to be interesting enough to continue reading, writers also want their conclusions to be satisfying, provocative and insightful. Stating in the introduction what the essay will be about, addressing the topics in the body of the paper, and then summarizing what has been said, is a good plan. However, a more sophisticated essay can conclude with a bit more insight: it might offer solutions or provide ideas for further research. The concluding remarks should always relate to the main idea. If an introduction begins with a quote, a reference to that quote might work well.



Leaps in Logic

When introducing a main idea, it is important to avoid quantum leaps in logic. Note the leap from one concept to the other in the following simple paragraph as the author tries to introduce the topic and then hurry on to the thesis statement.

Every Saturday, I go to the mall with my friends. We shop, and eat lunch, and even go to a movie if we have time. There are so many restaurants, shops, department stores and activities to choose from that we often split up and go in different directions. From McDonald's to a first class Japanese restaurant, the food courts are always popular. And high end stores like Dillard's and Macy's are my favorites, but Penny's is more affordable. I love to shop, and I can't imagine what a weekend would be like without a day at the mall. The history of the mall is a fascinating subject to research.

Here is a way to make a smoother transition from the above general discussion of the mall today to the main idea of the paper, the history of the mall.

Every Saturday, I go to the mall with my friends. We shop and eat lunch, and even go to a movie if we have time. There are so many restaurants, shops, department stores and activities to choose from that we often split up and go in different directions. From McDonald's to a first class Japanese restaurant, the food courts are always popular. And high end stores like Dillard's and Macy's are my favorites, but Penny's is more affordable. I love to shop, and I can't imagine what a weekend would be like without a day at the mall. However, neither I nor my friends, not to mention most of the shoppers at malls across America, ever stop to think about the fascinating beginnings of the idea of several shops located under one roof. The concept goes back several centuries and covers many countries. The story of how malls began and evolved into the malls we enjoy today is a fascinating bit of history.



Writing About Writing

From the simple summary to the more complex analytical evaluation, we are often asked to discuss other writers' works. Here are a few of the tasks we may be asked to do.

Summarize

A summary is a shorter, condensed version of an original work. We can summarize a book, a chapter, an argument, an essay, or a movie; almost anything we do and see can be summarized. A good summary includes the main idea and the main points of the original source written in your own words. Be sure to paraphrase and summarize in your own words. If you want to quote something the author says, you may do so, but use quotation marks around the direct quote, and do not misquote the author.

Analyze

When we analyze something (an essay, a work of art, literature, music, behavior), we take it apart and take a look at the various segments of the whole. To analyze an essay, we can break it down and look at such components as thesis, supports, methods of development, introductions and conclusions. We can answer questions such as "How does the author introduce his/her subject?" "What kind of sources does the author use?"

Evaluate (Critique)

Not only do we analyze essays, but we also evaluate them. It is often necessary to discuss the merits and/or the failures of a document. Perhaps the logic suffers or the supports used to develop the main idea are too vague. On the other hand, we may recognize the merit of logical reasoning, reliable sources and thorough evidence when we see it. Even if we don't agree with the stand the author takes, we may agree that the document is well constructed. We often need to follow some guidelines for an evaluation, [some specific criteria to use to judge the work](#).

Synthesize

Good research involves collating various points of view, sources and data in order to present a logical and credible argument. We can use the ideas from one essay and join them to concepts in another one and come up with a new, more comprehensive view. Martin Luther King extracted the strengths of the concept of acquiescence, or giving in, strengths such as patience and endurance when times are bad and joined those qualities to the best parts of violence: courage and willingness to stand up and fight for an ideal. The result of the combination, or his synthesis, is non-violent resistance: using patience and tolerance when courageously fighting for justice.

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GENERAL EDUCATION WRITING ASSESSMENT
Essay Sample Scoring & Placement Criteria

Each examinee's essay is read and scored by two readers, their scores averaged to determine placement. Essays that receive discrepant scores (off by two or more points) receive a third reading, the anomalous score nullified. Read the entire essay at a brisk, even pace to form an overall (holistic) impression based on the criteria that best describe the essay.

Scores & Probable Placement:

6 DEMONSTRATES CLEAR COMPETENCE AT A FIRST-YEAR COLLEGIATE LEVEL:

Exempt

- (a) Clearly & logically addresses all parts of the writing task;
- (b) Fully developed, given the time limit, and coherently organized;
- (c) Clearly appropriate details and examples support the main idea;
- (d) Consistently fluent, reads smoothly, displays syntactic variety;
- (e) Clearly free of grammar & punctuation errors, though it may have a few minor errors.

5 DEMONSTRATES ADEQUATE COMPETENCE RHETORICALLY & SYNTACTICALLY:

Exempt

- (a) Addresses some parts of the task more effectively than others;
Tutoring Recommended
- (b) Adequately developed and organized, with transitions;
- (c) Uses few details or examples, perhaps dwelling on the obvious;
- (d) Displays some facility with language & some syntactic variety;
- (e) Generally correct, though it may contain some minor errors, but few, if any, that obscure meaning.

4 DEVELOPING COMPETENCE, BUT FLAWED RHETORICALLY AND/OR SYNTACTICALLY:

WRIT 21

- (a) Addresses the writing task adequately but simplistically;
- (b) Underdeveloped and/or poorly organized, with few transitions;
- (c) Uses the details or examples, perhaps dwelling on the obvious;
- (d) Inconsistent facility with language and little syntactic variety;
- (e) Some grammar, punctuation, spelling errors that occasionally obscure meaning.

3 DEMONSTRATES MARGINAL INCOMPETENCE WITH SERIOUS ERRORS:

WRIT 19

- (a) Fails to address or misunderstands some parts of the task;
- (b) Underdeveloped, unorganized, and/or somewhat incoherent;
- (c) Inappropriate or insufficient details/examples (too general);
- (d) Inappropriate word choice/word forms & little syntactic variety;
- (e) Frequent grammar, punctuation, & usage errors, many that obscure meaning.

2 DEMONSTRATES INCOMPETENCE RHETORICALLY AND/OR SYNTACTICALLY:

WRIT 17

- (a) Fails to address or misreads significant parts of the task;
- (b) Seriously underdeveloped, disorganized, incoherent, repetitious;
- (c) Little or no detail, irrelevant specifics, obvious generalities;
- (d) Serious & frequent word form errors & patterns of syntax errors;
- (e) Serious & frequent grammar, punctuation, & usage errors, often obscuring meaning and confusing the reader.

1 DEMONSTRATES CLEAR INCOMPETENCE RHETORICALLY & SYNTACTICALLY:

ESL 15

- (a) Clearly fails to address or clearly misunderstands the task;
- (b) Severely undeveloped, unfocused, disorganized and incoherent;
- (c) No detail/examples, irrelevant generalities, prompt repetition;
- (d) Severe & frequent word form and sentence structure errors;
- (e) Severe & persistent grammar, punctuation, & usage errors that obscure meaning, confuse the reader, and force rereadings.

0 THE ESSAY CLEARLY REJECTS THE TOPIC OR THERE IS NO RESPONSE

(REASSESSMENT)