

# Transformative Moments: Academic Writing Template

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Academic writing can be a nightmare to teach if essay parameters are not correctly set. I learned the hard way by initially being lax with my essay parameters and assuming my students already knew what was required of them (e.g. writing an introduction with a thesis statement, topic sentences, details supporting the topic sentences, concluding sentences and a conclusion). It soon became very apparent that students, no matter what their ability level or year, needed review and reinforcement of the basic structure of academic essays. Rather than ripping my hair out with each essay for each student, I set up a system that regulated the basic parameters of academic essays consistently for all students. I designed templates that set out the main parts & sub-parts of entire essays. My eureka moment was when I realized how templates could reinforce essay structuring and how much time I could save by using them.

A few years ago, I found myself lost when reading through my students' academic writing. In reflection, I think my biggest fault was assuming my students already knew how to correctly structure a complete essay. I found myself frustrated with the excessive amount of time it took to go through and decipher each essay, so I knew that I had to either find a way or make one to reduce frustration and the amount of time each essay was consuming. I wanted to standardize every essay that I read so there was consistency and so that I could maintain my sanity.

My eureka moment came to me as I was thinking about standardization, forms and templates. I wanted a template that signposted everything that I believed was required in an essay and for the students to fill it out like a form. This way I could clearly see what was going on where, determine whether anything was missing, and avoid getting lost.

The essay template (see Appendix A) presented at the TD-CUE Forum is designed for a persuasive essay assigned in a Writing Skills 4 course consisting of second- year students who meet once a week at Dokkyo University. Most work is done on a personal computer and all materials are downloaded from a class blog. Appendix A shows that the essay's generic structure is divided into three main parts: the introduction, body and conclusion, which almost all students have no problem with. However, difficulty occurs when identifying and writing the sub-parts. For example, in the introduction you can see four sub-parts: Background information, State purpose, State outline

and State thesis. Also, there are prompts in the latter of these three sub-parts to help students start their writing. The essay template assists students by logically laying out the organization of the sub-parts within the introduction, body and conclusion. Students can clearly see holistically what is required where and how the entire essay should fit together. Another advantage of the essay template is that questions, instructions, further information and a word count can easily be inserted into any part to help standardize writing and assist the students.

The essay template is a scaffolding step, a concept adopted from Genre-Based Teaching, between planning and the final draft of an essay. Teacher input is initially high as the class moves through each main part step-by-step with explanations of each sub-part and examples shown. Then, gradually teacher input decreases and student input increases as the students take command of the template and the content. The content is controlled by the students, so there is freedom and creativity to write what they like, especially in the Introduction (background information) and 1st and 2nd Body Paragraphs (details supporting the topic sentence); the only rule is that it must be done within the generic structure.

The essay template frees up time to focus on one-on-one conferencing and I do this with each student for the introduction only. This ensures that: (a) students are following the template, (b) students are off to a good start, (c) I can understand what the rest of the essay should be about and (d) time is saved during final grading.

Once the essay template is complete (approximately 4 lessons), the students copy all their content from the template and paste it into a final draft, which is the final product. Students do many peer-review rounds in class to revise, edit and polish their essays before submission of the final draft.

In my opinion, essay templates standardize writing formats, reinforce the basic generic structure of academic essays and help students by signposting all the main parts and their sub-parts. Most importantly, my eureka moment reduced frustration and gave me more time to focus on conferencing and assisting students. I hope it can also do the same for you.

Appendix

The essay template is also available online at <<http://darrenvanveelenswebsite.yolasite.com/>>

<b>Essay Type</b>	Persuasive (persuade the reader to agree with you)		
<b>Title</b>			
<b>Student Name</b>			
<b>University Name</b>			
<b>Introduction</b> 200 words	<b>Background information</b> (Get reader's interest: 5 techniques)		
	<b>State purpose</b> (Why are you writing?)	The reason I am writing is because...	
	<b>State outline</b> (Map/plan)	First, I will write about... Second, I will write about...	
	<b>State thesis</b> (Your position FOR or AGAINST the issue)	I am for / against... because...	
<b>Body</b> 450-500 words	<b>1st Paragraph</b> Argument FOR and evidence (225-250 words)	<b>Topic sentence</b> (ONE sentence only)	
		<b>Details supporting the topic sentence</b>	
		<b>Concluding sentence</b> (ONE sentence only & link to next paragraph)	
	<b>2nd Paragraph</b> Argument AGAINST and evidence (225-250 words)	<b>Topic sentence</b> (ONE sentence only)	
		<b>Details supporting the topic sentence</b>	
		<b>Concluding sentence</b> (ONE sentence only & link to conclusion)	
<b>Conclusion</b> (no new details) 150 words	<b>Restate your main points</b>		
	<b>Restate your thesis</b>		
	<b>Ask a question, suggest a solution, make a recommendation</b>		
<b>References</b> (alphabetical order)			



Bio: Darren Van Veelen (M.ED TESOL) has been teaching English in Japan for 13 years. His areas of interest are developing speaking strategies, critical thinking skills, motivation, and keeping it real in the classroom.