Guidelines on Essay Formatting and Organization

I. Formatting

A. PARAGRAPHS

- Every paragraph begins with an indentation of 1/2 inch (just press “Tab,” which is usually preformatted for 10 spaces or 1/2 inch).
- Each paragraph should have its own unique topic. Make sure to have a grasp of what each paragraph is about, so you can properly begin a new paragraph for the new topic of discussion. Anything unrelated to the paragraph that is nevertheless included within it is called a “tangent.”
- All paragraphs should be about the size of the paragraphs in the sample essay, although the introduction is often longer than the paragraphs that follow. Each paragraph must have at least three sentences and around ten lines; if shorter, the idea expressed within the paragraph might be incomplete, undeveloped, or too simplistic for a college essay. Each of the paragraphs should be basically equal in length, and no paragraph can be longer than one page in length. Generally, you will have at least one, usually two, and at most three indentations for paragraphs per page.

B. SPACING

- Throughout the essay, everything is double-spaced. Aside from the double spaces, no extra spaces are ever used, whether between the information at the top of the page and your title, between your title and the start of the paper, or between quotes and your own writing. This is true for the entirety of the paper: everything is double spaced, but nothing has an extra space. Before you begin, format your paper to be double-spaced, and never afterwards push return for more spaces unless beginning a new paragraph.
- There are two spaces between sentences, but only one space between words. Make sure to set MS Word to format the sentences properly. Under “Tools,” go to “Options,” click the “Spelling & Grammar” tab, and then click “Settings” to change the spaces between sentences to “2.” MS Word is often set up for business forms of writing, but your professors, unlike business people, have to wade through numerous essays at one sitting and thus prefer clarity to brevity. Two spaces also drastically increase the impact of your writing. Compare the following:
  
  “He came. He saw. He conquered.”

  “He came. He saw. He conquered.”

  Note: While you are in the “Settings” tab, also change the punctuation marks to be “inside” quotes because commas and periods go within the quotation marks—i.e. “2,” and “2.” not “2,” or “2”. The British format their quotes in the opposite fashion, but like driving on the left side of the street, putting punctuation on the outside of the quotation mark would seem highly irrational to American English speakers.

C. APPEARANCE

- The pages of the essay must be stapled. Your instructors get hundreds of essays at a time, do not risk having the pages of your essay mixed up in a bunch of other students’ essays. Buy a small, convenient-to-carry stapler.
- On your own computer, make sure that you know how to flush things to the left or right, to center them, and to justify them. You do not have to justify the paper, although it does look much better if you do. (Compare this un-justified paragraph with those paragraphs above and below.)
• The **information** at the top of the page (your name, the assignment, the class/section, and the date) needs to be flushed to the left, the page numbering flushed to the right, and the title centered. These icons look roughly like those that follow:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flush Left:</th>
<th>Flush Right:</th>
<th>Center:</th>
<th>Justify:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Icon" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Icon" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Icon" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Icon" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**D. PAGE NUMBERING**

• *All* pages, except the first (which is optional), should have your last name and page number in the header. (Note the **header** on the top of the second page of the sample essay.) It is important that you learn now how to format the page numbering on your own computer because you should do this the remainder of your college career. Your last name must be on each page to make sure the pages of your essay do not get lost or confused, especially the final page where the grade is usually located.

• Use the Sample Essay as a model for all papers to make the formatting easier for you: [http://people.emich.edu/acoykenda/300/samp.doc](http://people.emich.edu/acoykenda/300/samp.doc)

• For MS Word, under the “View” menu, pick “Header & Footer,” press the icon which flushes everything to the right of the page, and type your last name; then, under “Insert,” pick “Page Numbers,” uncheck the box which says “show numbers on first page,” and press “OK.”

  **Note** contrary to what it might seem, do not go immediately to “Insert” then to “Page Number” because, if you do, you will not be able to type your last name. Also do not just click on the # icon rather than going through the “Insert” menu because, if you do, you will not be able to uncheck the first-page header option.

• Other word processing programs vary, but most have a Help program within the word processing program to show you how.

**E. THE TITLE**

• The title is capitalized except for little words like prepositions (“of,” “from,” “to,” etc.), conjunctions (“and,” “for,” “but,” etc.), and articles (“the,” “a,” “an,” etc.). Only capitalize such words if they are the first word of the title or subtitle (e.g. “An Analysis of Identity: The Echoes of Sell in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*”).

• No underlining, bold, italics, extra font size, or quotation marks are needed for your title, only centering at the middle of the page. (See the **title** below.) You do not put your own title in italics or quotations because so often you must refer to the title of someone else’s work there.

• Aside from your own title, essay or short-story titles are in quotation marks and full-length books or anthologies are **either** underlined or italicized. Thus, Isak Dinesen’s short-story would be “The Dreamers,” not *The Dreamers*, and Bram Stoker’s novel would be **either** Dracula or *Dracula*, not “Dracula” or *Dracula*. You must make this distinction because otherwise your reader would be at a loss to find the work in the library’s catalogue: the short-story “The Dreamers” would not be listed there, but the title of the book from which it comes—*The Seven Gothic Tales*—would be listed there.

**F. THE FONT**

• The font and font size of the sample essay which follows may be considered normal, but different fonts vary in size: some may be abnormally big or small even though ostensibly size “12” like the
one in the sample essay. Consider this font the standard and try to adjust the one that you use to match.

- Large fonts look unprofessional, as if you are trying to write a much shorter paper than the assignment actually requires; small fonts leave little room to write comments and hurt the eyes.
- Use the same font and font size throughout the essay, even if inserting a quotation. The font type, font size, and line spacing must be uniform throughout the essay.

G. MARGINS

- On a computer, your margins will usually be preformatted to the proper proportions. One inch on each side, and one inch on the top and bottom. The header is placed inside the top margin, \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch from the top of the page.

H. GENERAL COMPUTER TIPS

- You can vastly increase the time that you spend writing an essay if you use pre-programmed commands from the keyboard rather than using the mouse to shuffle through the menus. If you push the “Control” key at the same time as the letter “S,” you will automatically save your document with little fuss. (Do this often. Should anything happen to the computer itself, you will have a recent copy of the document saved.)
- Other commands: Ctrl’O (Open), Ctrl’P (Print), Ctrl’X (Cut), Ctrl’C (Copy), Ctrl’V (Paste), Ctrl’A (Select All), Ctrl’I (Italic), Ctrl’U (Underline), Ctrl’B (Bold), Ctrl’Z (Undo), Ctrl’Y (Redo). Ctrl’A is useful when you wish to change the font of the document; Ctrl’Z is useful for testing out the options of your word processor while nonetheless retaining the ability to undo whatever actions you made should that experiment go astray.
- A good way to save your essay is to email it to yourself as an attachment, for you will have a copy of it on your own computer as well as within an account accessible by any computer and rarely prone to computer crashes or other mischief. In MS Word, select “File,” “Send To,” then “Mail Recipient (As Attachment).” If you email me any of your essays (which you should do only by permission or in an emergency), you must send them as attachments—otherwise all formatting will be lost.

II. Organization

A. THE TITLE AND TOPIC

- Every essay must have a title, one descriptive of what you discuss in the essay and one that provides both you and the reader with the scope and the subject matter of what you intend to address (i.e. the “topic”). Try to formulate a title before you begin in order to give yourself a general issue on which to focus; then, after you are done writing the paper, change the title to reflect the more specific topic that you ended up addressing.
- For example, you might begin with “Childhood in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” but then change it because you ended up discussing a more specific aspect of “childhood,” such as “The Influence of Parents in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” “Education in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” or “Domestic Homelife and Foreign Adventure in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein.” The last is the best title because it indicates not only a topic, but also an argument about that topic.
- Do not simply name your essay Frankenstein (or whatever text you are then addressing), for that title is already taken and you need your own unique title, one indicative of those issues that you find most important to address. Likewise, do not use clichés for titles (e.g. “Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover”), for they indicate next to nothing about your unique positions and views.
B. THE INTRODUCTION

- The introductory paragraph is the first, and most important, paragraph of your essay. The first sentence should solicit the reader’s interest by evoking the general importance of your topic. Each sentence that follows will be more and more specific (thus the narrowing lines for this paragraph in the essay diagram below). Within the second, third, or fourth sentence, you must name the novel(s), short-story(s), or essay(s) that you will use to support and illustrate your argument. The final sentence is your “thesis statement,” the argument that you are making about your topic. Your introductory paragraph thus needs at least three sentences:
  a. A sentence about how your topic plays out in the world generally;
  b. At least one, but usually more, sentences about how your topic plays out in the novel and/or essays;
  c. And, finally, a thesis statement.

- Within the second sentence, you must provide the full name of the author(s) and text(s) that you will be addressing. After this first reference to the authors’ names, refer to them solely by their last names (whether they be male or female).

- Often, in writing the essay, students will start discussing a new topic or perhaps only discover what they really wanted to discuss or argue towards the very end of the essay. Do allow yourself to write on a different topic or issue, but make sure to rewrite the first paragraph to better reflect this new and improved idea in the introduction and thesis statement.

  Note: Make sure to write your paper in advance so you have time to return to it with a fresh point-of-view. Once you do, you are likely going to want to revise the introduction, rewrite the thesis, and reorganize the essay to better reflect the increased understanding that you came to during the conclusion.

- The thesis statement is extremely important. You must have a thesis statement, and you should identify at least a provisional thesis statement in advance. Without a thesis statement, both the writer of the paper and the reader of the paper will be at a loss to understand what the essay will be proving.

C. PLOT SUMMARY AND DISORGANIZATION

One of two very undesirable things occurs when a student fails to identify a thesis before writing the paper: plot summary or disorganization.

- Plot Summary occurs when you simply re-tell the events of the story or re-echo the arguments of another author, rather than analyze those events or those ideas to prove your own independent point (thesis). You can identify when you do this easily: if you say anything that approaches “This happened, then this happened, and next this happened” or “She said, then she said, and next she said,” you are merely summarizing the plot and/or essay. This is a task for Soap Opera Digest, not a college student writing a paper expressing an intelligent idea. Assume your readers have read the text themselves and are familiar with the general twists and turns of the story or essay, but give your readers a new interpretation of that text, one that uses a collection of details other readers may easily have overlooked.

- Disorganization occurs in all levels of writers, but with a clear thesis statement and well-arranged topic sentences, it can easily be avoided. Tangents are, above all, signs of disorganization. Any hurrying hither and thither between ideas, no matter how good those ideas, interferes with proving your point successfully. When reading a disorganized paper, an instructor will presume that you spent very little time with it and give you a low grade without considering the value of your ideas.
D. BODY PARAGRAPHS AND TOPIC SENTENCES

- All the paragraphs, aside from the introduction and conclusion, are called “body paragraphs.” The first sentence of each of these paragraphs needs to be a “topic sentence.” A topic sentence is the equivalent of a thesis statement for that paragraph; it thus must be argumentative rather than descriptive, indicating some assertion that the paragraph as a whole has the burden of proving.

- If substantiated, the topic sentences will together prove your overall thesis statement, each detailing one specific aspect of your thesis. For the typical college essay, you should plan on five or six paragraphs: the introduction, three or four body paragraphs, and the conclusion. Such an essay will comprise roughly 5 pages. If you need a longer essay, simply increase the number of topic sentences and paragraphs.

- For the thesis statement in the essay which follows—“To prevent the perpetual generation of ‘public enemies’ within our culture, all parents, mothers as well as fathers, need to take responsibility for raising their children, a responsibility which includes not just providing ‘root over their heads,’ but a model for ethical behavior in their hearts”—you might have the following topic sentences:

  1. “Victor had most, if not all, of the material resources that a child would need to be healthy and happy, but these resources were not enough to make him a good member of his society”;
  2. “Because he values things, and even people, only in terms of how they might gratify himself personally, rather than their worth in and of themselves, Victor remains ignorant of the mutual giving and receiving that society requires”;
  3. “Considering nurturing as his right, rather than his responsibility, Victor failed to provide his own creation with the resources vital for proper human development”;
  4. “Even though Victor’s offspring made every imaginable attempt to provide himself with the resources that Victor denied him, the privation that he experienced inevitably made him seek retaliation or, in other words, actually become the monster everyone presumed him to be.”

The overall topic of the essay is “parental influence” (and, in particular, parents’ *moral* influence on their children) and each of these topic sentences cover a specific aspect of the overall topic: 1) Victor’s need for morals in addition to wealth as a child, 2) Victor’s lack of morals effecting him as an adult, 3) Victor’s lack of morals effecting his parenting, and 4) Victor’s parenting ultimately effecting the moral status of his own offspring.

If you prove all these phenomena to be true for Victor, you can, in the concluding paragraph, claim that they will likely be true for all people in similar circumstances (especially those of our contemporary society who so often encounter the same obstacles).

- There are always many ways to organize the various points of your essay, but each paragraph should focus on one point, prove that point, and together with the other proven topic sentences substantiate the more general thesis.

E. SIGNIFICANT DETAILS

- In order to prove each topic sentence, provide what are called “significant details” to substantiate your argument. For the first topic sentence above, you would have to prove two points:

  1. “Victor had all, if not more, of the material resources that a child would need.”
  2. Those resources “were not enough to make him a good member of his society.”

The first is easy to prove: you simply need to list and discuss the resources that Victor had growing
up (two parents, wealth, servants, university education, etc.). All of these details, when added up to prove your own unique point, would be “significant details.” You might also put in a quote where Victor says something to the effect that “I had everything a child would need.”

The second part of the proposition is more important, but more difficult, to prove than the first (where you can just list the significant details). Here you would have to show a cause-effect relationship, and all the significant details in the world could not add up to show cause and effect. You thus must rely on two things: quotes and logic.

- Follow this same procedure with each body paragraph: figure out the topic sentence that will, in part, prove your thesis and then figure out what significant details or quotes will prove that topic sentence.

- All of the sentences and significant details within each paragraph need to be relevant to the first topic sentence. If you find yourself broaching another subject, a.k.a. “tangent,” decide whether that subject is important and include it within another paragraph (one with a different topic sentence indicative of the new point) and change your thesis accordingly. Sometimes a tangent may become a far more interesting idea than the initial topic sentence itself. If so, you might simply make the tangent the topic sentence, move it to the top of the paragraph, and adjust the focus of the remaining sentences.

F. QUOTATIONS

- Quoting material from the text is one of the most effective ways to prove your points. However, if you do quote, make sure to

1) Introduce the quote by naming the author or speaker (e.g. “According to Dinesen, ‘bladdy blah blah’” or “Victor denies that ‘bladdy blah blah’”);

2) Contextualize the quote by briefly providing the information that your reader would need to know in order to understand the words cited;

3) Only quote the words relevant to your point by using ellipses and brackets;

4) After the quote (and always after long quotes), discuss the implications it raises in your own words and in a way that illustrates how it relates to and substantiates your own point.

- When you use a quote, you must cite the page and source from which you extracted the material. You do this by putting the author’s last name and the page number at the end of the sentence in parentheses (Shelley 25). If you have just used a quote from the same source or if you already have mentioned the author within the sentence, you omit the author’s last name (25). If you refer to two distinct pages from the same source within a single sentence, you insert a comma between the pages (Shelley 23, 25). If you refer to consecutive pages, use a hyphen (Shelley 23-25).

- If the words before the quote comprise a complete sentence, use a colon before the quote:

Victor portrays Elizabeth as if she is naturally elevated above her fellow creatures: she “appeared of a different stock. The four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants” (20).

- If the words before the quote are not a complete sentence, punctuate the sentence precisely as you would if there were no quotes in the sentence:

Victor wishes to be a god, to have a “new species bless [him] as its creator and source” (Shelley 39).

Victor insists that his “new species bless [him] as its creator and source” (Shelley 39).

According to Victor, Elizabeth “appeared of a different stock” (Shelley 20).
• You do not have to quote the full sentence of the authors, only that portion most relevant to what you have to say. Only put evocative words in quotations, and cut out all words that distract from your point with ellipses. If you are trying to prove that Victor “degrades himself in his attempt to exalt himself,” for example, quoting the whole passage which follows will interfere rather than strengthen your point:

Now I was led to examine the cause and progress of this decay, and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses. My attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of human feeling. I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life. (Shelley 37)

If you do quote a long passage, you must discuss that passage in detail below the quotation. It is far better to avoid quoting long passages and to re-work the passage into your own expressions. 

Thus, instead try:

> Victor degrades himself in his attempt to exalt himself: he “spen[d]s days and nights in vaults and charnel houses,” fixes his attention “upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of human feeling,” and ultimately, in “beh[olding] the corruption of death,” becomes himself like the corruption he witnessed (Shelley 37). Victor degrades himself in his attempt to exalt himself: he “spend[s] days and nights in vaults and charnel-houses” with his attention “fixed upon every object ... insupportable to the delicacy of human feeling” (Shelley 37).

Or try:

> Victor degrades himself in his attempt to exalt himself: he “spend[s] days and nights in vaults and charnel-houses” with his attention “fixed upon every object ... insupportable to the delicacy of human feeling” (Shelley 37).

Note how you can use [brackets] or ellipses (...) to adjust the phrases into your own wording.

• When you quote something that takes up more than three (non-indented) lines of the page, you must indent the quote 1 inch (or 20 spaces) from the margin as above (except for the single spacing), remove the quotation marks, and put the citation of the page number outside the sentence. To indent a section of text 20 spaces, or 1 inch, select the quote and push the following icon twice:

(Make sure to have a hard right on either side of the indented text so that MS Word will not move the rest of the paragraph along with the quote.)

G. THE CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

• The concluding paragraph should be more general than the body paragraphs (thus the widening lines for this paragraph in the essay diagram below). It should indicate the implications and importance of your thesis not just in terms of the novel or essay, but also in terms of the larger world in which we all live. Perhaps even recommend changes that could be made that relate to your thesis or address the negative or positive consequences of practices already in existence.

• Do not simply restate your thesis or introduction. This belittles the attention of your reader and will damage, rather than help, the effective presentation of your point. If you restate an idea, no matter how good that idea, you will seem unconvincing and defensive. Often with such repetition, the later statements are better worded. In that case, eliminate the initial phrasing and replace it with the improved phrasing that you discovered towards the end of the paper.

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H. FINAL REMINDERS


- A disorganized paper risks a low grade, so before turning in the essay, double check that
  1) Each body paragraph has a topic sentence as the first sentence of the paragraph indicating the scope and argument of the paragraph as a whole;
  2) All the sentences that follow relate to this first topic sentence;
  3) Each of the body paragraphs (and thus all of their sentences) relate to the overall thesis found at the bottom of the introductory paragraph.

- A paper that is comprised solely of plot summary, rather than ideas, or a paper that lacks an argumentative thesis statement and topic sentences also risks a low grade.

IV. ESSAY DIAGRAM
V. Key Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Body Paragraph</th>
<th>Plot Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Statement</td>
<td>Topic Sentence</td>
<td>Tangent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction &amp; Conclusion</td>
<td>Significant Details</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VI. SAMPLE ESSAY

Jane Smith
Essay One: Shelley
English 201, Section R1
January 27, 1999

Parental Influence in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

We often hear people decrying the “bad influence” that parents have on their children, but if television talk shows attest to anything, the children growing up with such negative influences are as numerous as the parents who moralize, deny, or condemn them. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the protagonist Victor Frankenstein attempts to reproduce a human being but, once successful, refuses to take responsibility for that creature’s upbringing. As a result, the so-called “monster” develops entirely without parental influence. Although the monster’s situation may be extreme, the demands he makes on himself and on his creator are representative of the needs of many children. Like the monster, children must to be carefully, and lovingly, educated when young in order to participate adequately as adults in the community to which they belong. Because Victor’s “child” has no protection, guidance, and support in adjusting to his culture, he becomes an antagonist, and even an
enemy, to that culture. To prevent the perpetual generation of “public enemies” within our culture, all parents, mothers as well as fathers, need to take responsibility for raising their children, a responsibility which includes not just providing “roof over their heads,” but a model for ethical behavior in their hearts.

Victor had most, if not all, of the material resources that a child would need to be healthy and happy, but those resources were not enough to make him a good member of his society. With parents who could afford to provide not only the best possible education but also the invaluable experience of traveling around the world, Victor certainly had everything that material wealth, and generous parents, could offer. Along with devoted parents, Victor had remarkably devoted friends: Henry Clerval, who delayed his own college education to restore Victor to health, and his “more than sister,” Elizabeth Lavenza, who “shone like a shrine-dedicated lamb in [his] peaceful home” (Shelley 21, 23). Victor, however, never truly appreciates the benefits that he receives. Spending more time divining the obscure tenets of metaphysics than interacting with his family and friends, Victor only values their assistance once their absence—and indeed even their very deaths—no longer pose an obstacle to his scientific achievements.

Because he values things, and even people, only in terms of how they might gratify himself personally, rather than their worth in and of themselves, Victor remains ignorant of the mutual giving and receiving that society requires. When his mother adopts Elizabeth, he interprets his mother’s charitable deed not as a benefit for Elizabeth, but as a benefit for himself. As Victor says, “when [my mother] presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, love, and cherish” (21). By misinterpreting his mother’s words and behavior, Victor turns her altruistic deed, her intention to “protect, love, and cherish” Elizabeth, into a deed of his own. Victor does acknowledge his possessiveness
towards Elizabeth: “All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own” (21). However, this possessiveness applies equally well towards his mother, for in taking this “gift,” Victor converts his mother’s selflessness into an attribute of (and reward for) his own supposed generosity and largesse.

Considering nurturing as his right, rather than his responsibility, Victor failed to provide his own creation with the resources vital for proper human development …