

Language Arts Series #1

1-2-3 Composition

Introduction

I know you've got better, more interesting things to do than read a paper on writing papers so let's get right to it and I'll skip the whole why-writing-well-is-important bit, OK?

Wouldn't it be great if you had an EASY way to just crank out a paragraph or an essay any time your mom or dad decided you needed to write one? A method that ensured your parental units would be thrilled with your effort, but you could get back to your LIFE with a minimal amount of suffering? 1-2-3 Compositions have been around since the ancient times, when your parents were in school. Use that as a defense if the parental units doubt the validity of a form of writing that appears so painless.

1-2-3 involves three elements: the sentence, the paragraph and the essay. Each contributes to the finished product equally, though none are difficult to master. How simple is this? By the time you finish this paper, which takes about an hour to get through when you include reading and the try-it-yourself sections, you'll be writing AMAZING essays, even if you've never written more than a so-so sentence before in your life.

How sure am I? Before you go any further, go make a bet with a parental unit about the outcome. Make it something reasonable, like getting out of some chores or having an extra scoop of ice cream after dinner. In exchange, you'll deliver to them a multi-paragraph essay of your own creation, without further complaint.

The Sentence

Face it, you can't write an essay without penning a few sentences. You know, those things that have a noun and a verb and express a complete thought. But did you ever come to a happy place with them? Are sentences your friend?

If you said yes, then you probably don't need this paper anyways. Now for the vast majority of you that screamed I HATE SENTENCES as a response, listen up. A sentence is a noun, a verb and a thought. Run Spot – that's a sentence. You got the noun, Spot, the verb, run, and the thought, Spot needs to run.

Try It Yourself

Grab a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Write a two word sentence. Make sure it has a noun, a verb and a thought. The easiest thing to write about is something you know, so if you get stuck, look around for something you like to (or would like to) boss around and write a two word order, like "Sam stop" or "Jump Joe."

The More Complex Sentence

Now that you've told Spot to run or Sam to stop, let's spice up that sentence a bit and talk about things in more detail. We'll focus on Sam and why he needs to stop.

Sam is both a real cutie and a terror to his brother. In this case, he's being a terror, which would be why he needs to stop. So we could spice up the sentence just by saying "Sam, stop being a terror to your brother." But what if you know more than one Sam? "Little Sam, stop being a terror to your brother."

Are you getting the picture? Every sentence starts as just a noun, a verb and a thought. Then you add more detail – which person, specifically what they are doing, or even a related thought joined by a conjunction (remember those?!)

Try It Yourself

Take your two word sentence and expand it. Add an adjective to the noun (adjectives describe nouns, among other things) and expand the verb to explain more about the thought.

The Paragraph

A paragraph is nothing more than two or more sentences about the same thought. Remember how each sentence needs a thought in addition to a noun and verb? It's the same with a paragraph. It's just a bunch of nouns and verbs, all talking about the same thing.

When last we spoke of him, Little Sam was being a terror to his brother and we wanted him to stop. Sam, though, is a head-strong kid (five year olds are like that) and will need reasons for stopping. Well, the brother he's torturing is in tears so there is one good reason. And that vein on Dad's forehead is starting to bulge and throb, signaling he's real close to getting involved, which could make the whole thing ugly for Little Sam. So we end up with something like this...

Little Sam, stop being a terror to your brother. He's already crying. Your father's forehead is bulging and he's about to start yelling.

And that, my friend, is all there is to a paragraph. Three sentences in this case, all about the same thought – Sam needs to stop.

Try It Yourself

Using your sentence from the last Try It Yourself as the opening, write a paragraph about that thought. Add at least two new sentences.

1-2 Paragraph

Think of each sentence as having a value. The sentence that sums up the thought – your starting sentence in this case – you call your #1 sentence. In our Sam example, “Little Sam, stop being a terror to your brother” is the #1 sentence. It can stand alone and still make sense, a necessary ingredient in #1 sentences.

Try It Yourself

Find your #1 sentence and write “1” above the first word.

1-2 Paragraph Continued

#2 sentences can’t stand alone, they don’t make sense. Their job is to support the #1, to give additional detail about the thought. In the Sam example, our #2 sentences are the ones about his brother crying and his father bulging. They need to be about the same thought as the #1 in the paragraph, keep that in mind and you can’t go wrong.

Try It Yourself

Find and label the #2 sentences in your paragraph. If they don’t support your #1 sentence, they don’t belong there.

The Essay

The essay is the easiest part as you’ve already learned all you need to know. An essay is a group of paragraphs, all on the same thought. Are you starting to see a theme here? I hope so. A sentence is just a thought, a paragraph is a thought, and an essay is a thought. The hard part is figuring out the thought in the beginning ☺

To turn your paragraph into an essay, you make each #2 sentence it’s own paragraph as well. Let’s revisit Little Sam. His brother was already crying. To make that into a paragraph, you would start with his brother crying as the thought for the paragraph. Then you write a couple more sentences about that thought like how he’s turning blue in the face from lack of oxygen or perhaps how said brother is about to bash Little Sam in the head with a golf club to stop him. You would do something similar with Dad and his bulging forehead, perhaps noting that he’s about to pause the TV during Cops™, which really angers him, or how the dog is starting to look at the man in a funny way.

Try It Yourself

Take one of your #2 sentences and turn it into a paragraph of its own. Do the same for each of your #2 sentences.

Essay Continued

The sentences that support your #2s in their paragraphs are your #3 sentences. They give the details about the thought. It's those details that make the difference between an essay that is just so-so and an essay that's GOOD. And you know your parents want the good kind.

The last paragraph in an essay is the summary. It restates your #1 and #2 sentences, just in case the reader somehow forgot what you were talking about. In the case of Sam, it might look like this.

Sam, your brother is crying and your father is mad, so stop being a terror.

Yes, it can just be one or two sentences. It is one of the few kinds of paragraphs that can be so short – most need at least three sentences to make sense. But summary paragraphs are just restating, so they get different rules.

Try It Yourself

Write a summary paragraph for your essay. Just restate the main thought and its main supporting points – otherwise known as your #1 and #2 sentences.

Summary

You have completed an essay, even if you've never written more than a sentence in the past. These same principals can be applied to writing sentences, paragraphs and essays in EVERY subject and EVERY style. As you gain experience in writing, you'll see how true that statement is and enjoy having the skills needed to write WELL every time. Now, go collect your bet!