

ANATOMY OF A COHESIVE ESSAY
Designed for the Criminal Justice Professional
By Amy Mitchell

There are various layers involved in writing a cohesive essay. To learn to write well, one must write (and rewrite) until these layers are refined and become second nature.

CRITICAL THINKING: We often hear the term “critical thinking” as it relates to writing. The bottom line to integrating critical thinking into an essay and the development of your *thesis*, is to ask the question, “So what?” Meaning: *what is the significance of what I am about to report?* If you keep the end-goal in mind while constructing your essay, chances are, you will reach it and your essay will be more cohesive. The word, “thesis” is derived from the Greek origin of *lowering of the voice* or the *act of laying down* (presumably the foundation of a proposition to be proved). In advancing or maintaining an argument, objectivity plays an important role in reporting facts obtained through competent research.

Anatomy of Research: *Problem formulation—Research design—Data collection methods—Analysis and presentations of findings—Conclusions, interpretations and limitations.*

WHERE DO I BEGIN TO WRITE?

1. Brainstorming (what you know about the topic)
2. Mapping (also known as a “Clustering” of primary subtopics; see “OUTLINING” below)
3. Free-writing (getting a sense of where the essay is leading)

LAYER #1 -WHO’S THE AUDIENCE?

Decide your purpose for writing the essay. Note: You can have more than one style within your essay, however, only one style should dominate the essay.

- **Explanation:** explains, analyzes or interprets an issue by reviewing the facts.
- **Argumentation:** Persuade: attempts to persuade the reader (a “call to action”) or convince them of the writer’s position. Both sides of the argument should be addressed.
- **Narration:** To inform: tells a story by relating a sequence of events (e.g., the events that led up an officer’s alleged misconduct).
- **Description:** focuses on one event, person or object and depends upon details, images and statements.

LAYER #2 - THE THREE (3) PARTS OF THE ESSAY

Tell them (the reader) what you’re going to tell them, tell them, then, tell them what you told them.

1. **Introduction:** States your *thesis* (what you’re attempting to prove). Should be 1-2 paragraphs providing a *brief* overview of the essay.
2. **Body:** 3-5 paragraphs: presents evidence in an orderly manner.
3. **Conclusion:** 1 paragraph which restates your thesis and brings a finality to the essay. This could include a call to action and the effects of what a failure to act may bring about. Ask yourself, “Did I achieve the *so what?*”

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OUTLINING YOUR ESSAY: Before you begin this journey, you need to have a road map.

1. To map your essay, take the major topic and put it at the center of a circular pie chart or at the top of a matrix. Next, brainstorm approximately 5 categories (one in each piece/square).
2. Number the categories to determine what order they will be appear in your essay.
3. Further, write bulleted subtopics of issues that fall within those 5 categories.
4. A central theme should emerge which will help you develop your thesis (i.e., objective).
5. Now you can begin to conduct your research.

RESEARCH & CITATIONS: When conducting research be sure to quote and cite other sources accurately. Give credit where credit is due. (See APA or MLA formats.)

INTRODUCTION: Focus in on one main TOPIC as your thesis. Examples include:

1. TOPIC (too broad): “Use of force”
2. TOPIC (could still be too broad): “Police Misconduct”
3. TOPIC (more concise): “Addressing re-training issues following incidents of excessive use of force.”

OPENING STATEMENT: Should “hook” the reader in.

- a. **Rhetorical question:** (Ex: How many people believe that police officers practice a “code of silence?”)
- b. **Myth vs. Fact:** (Ex: Most police pursuits end in death or injury)
- c. **Shocking Statement:** (Ex: Last year, our police department paid out \$1 million in damages from complaints of police misconduct.)
- d. **Literary Quotation:** (Ex: In 1742, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, wrote, “There is no crueler tyranny than that which is perpetrated under the shield of law and in the name of justice.”)
- e. **Humorous or Personal anecdotal story:** should related to your topic.

LAYER #3 – THE BODY OF THE ESSAY

BUILDING PARAGRAPHS: In the opening *introductory* paragraph, start with the general and move to the specific. Identify the subtopics that will be discussed in the essay. In the supporting paragraphs, you can employ a variety of styles. An acrostic to aid in remembering the types of paragraphs is: “**I D – E – C – I – D – E**”

Introduction

Definition (define unfamiliar concepts)

Examples (anecdotal stories to put a face on the objective of the essay)

Compare/Contrast (Comparing the similarities and Contrasting the differences)

Investigation (process analysis)

Division (classification)

Effects (this could be the call to action and a means of persuasion)

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EXAMPLES OF PARAGRAPH TYPES FOR AN ESSAY ON “Police Misconduct”

Introduction: Inform the reader of the issue (Example: Police officers are committing acts which constitute excessive use of force)

Definition: What is excessive use of force? What does the penal code and case law have to say on the topic?

Examples: Specific cases of excessive use of force.

Compare/Contrast: Citizen’s view vs. law enforcement’s view on excessive use of force.

Investigation: What needs to be done to address the underlying causes of excessive use of force (Rampart Report findings on supervisor’s lack of oversight) and potential red-flags.

Division: Classification of various levels of police misconduct (from accepting gratuities to committing murder).

Effects: If nothing is done to address police misconduct, ultimately, there will be civil unrest.

LAYER #4 – REWRITING AND COHESIVENESS IN PARAGRAPHS

- **Unity:** Sentences (within a paragraph) should relate to one another.
- **Balance:** Sentences should vary in length.
- **Topics:** Each new subtopic should be delineated by a new paragraph.
- **Transitions:** Paragraphs should transition smoothly into each other. The last sentence of one paragraph should introduce the topic in the next.
- **Energy:** Vary the placement of the subject within each sentence.
Example #1: On the horizon are computer software programs designed to catch “at-risk” patterns of behavior.
Example #2: At-risk behavior patterns are detectible through newly developed software programs.
- **Conciseness/Doublespeak:** Don’t be overly wordy to appear profound:
Good Example: Two major goals of policing are to prevent crime and control crime.
Too Wordy: Police agencies have long struggled with balancing the need to prevent criminal activity from occurring and addressing the fallout of crimes, once they have occurred.
- **Euphemisms:** Can make the writer’s intent vague and overly soft: Example: They took the suspect to a correctional facility (substitute: jail).
- **Punctuation:** Proper placement of commas, semicolons, parentheses, etc.
(See separate handout on “Punctuation.”)

LAYER #5 - FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

- **Similes:** Expresses a subtle comparison by using the word “like” or “as”
Example: It was as if he was on a mission from God.
- **Metaphors:** Expresses a subtle comparison between one topic and an unrelated action: “A peek into the dark side of policing reveals stories of misconduct.” Metaphors add color to an essay by juxtaposing topics (placing them side-by-side) so as to make a complex issue more easily understood (i.e., speaking in parables). Example: Just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, police supervisors must be aware of potential indicators of police misconduct to avoid a breakdown of the entire organization.

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- **Parallelism:** is a repetitive strategy to bring home a point. Example: Police supervisors must not allow this conduct to go undetected; they should not allow citizens to be subjected to it; and our society cannot allow this upset to the balance between individual freedom and government control.
- **Avoid Occupational Stereotypes and Sexist Language:** Example: A police officer is the first line of defense—he should take that responsibility seriously (Note: he should be replaced by he or she.)
- **Avoid Overused Cliches:** Example of an overused phrase often seen in police reports, “I made a routine traffic stop.”)
- **Avoid Slang or Jargon--Spell out any Acronyms:** The first time a term is used, spell it out in its entirety, then place the acronym in (parentheses). You can use the shortened version from that point forward. Example: Community Oriented Policing (COP).