A Professor’s Guide to Writing Essays
The No-Nonsense Plan for Better Writing
Second Edition
Dr. Jacob Neumann
A Professor’s Guide to Writing Essays (2nd Edition) by Dr. Jacob Neumann

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HOW THIS BOOK WILL HELP YOU

I want to help you improve your writing. I’ve been teaching since 1996. Now I work as an associate professor at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where I teach people how to teach. I’ve taught at every level of schooling, and I’ve taught students from around the world. So I know what students need to learn to do to write good essays. I’m also a scholar who publishes in some of the top journals in my field (you can look up my work on Google Scholar). So I know what it takes to write good essays in the real world of academic writing. In this book, I boil down all of my experience as a teacher and as a writer into a plan that will help you learn to become a better writer.

In this book, I’m not going to tell you any cute stories about writing. Instead, I get straight to the point, with a step-by-step plan, practical explanations, and examples that show you how this information works in published academic writing. I’m going to show you how to write an essay from the outside-in. This means that we’re going to focus on the big picture and put our essay together in pieces. The purpose is to help you keep the big picture straight in your head. This will help the details make better sense. This method is different from what other books and teachers teach. But it works. I’m then going to show you some editing tips that will address some of the most common mistakes that students make when writing essays. At the end of the book, I include a long section on using citations, including specific examples of how to incorporate them into your writing just like a professor would.

In this updated second edition, I also give you a “quick guide” for writing an essay. This “quick guide” is an overview of the main points I show you in the book. It gives you a condensed version of these points so you can clearly see how the pieces of an essay are put together. This will give you an easy to follow model for putting your essays together.

As we go through this process, I want you to feel free to email me; my email address is dr.jacobneumann@gmail.com. I’m happy to address comments or questions that you might have as you work through the steps in the book.
STEP 1: MAKE AN OUTLINE

Most students don’t make outlines of the points they want to write about. Instead, they just start writing. Maybe they think it’s a waste of time or just not that useful. Whatever the reason, it’s a mistake to not write an outline. Outlines do a lot for you. Outlines keep your ideas organized. They help you to not repeat yourself. They also help you to not contradict yourself. To make an effective outline, first list all of the points that you want to make in an essay. Don’t worry about putting them into any order; just get them down on paper.

We’re now going to start our sample essay, the one we’re going to develop throughout the book. Our topic is “the difficulties in teaching Social Studies in elementary school.” I teach in a College of Education, and this is a topic that I might assign to my students. We’re not going to write a very long essay, but it’ll be long enough to illustrate the steps. I first want to write down things I think I might want to write about. Don’t worry about the order; we’re just trying to get down some thoughts. Here are my ideas:

- Standardized testing
- Lack of time to teach
- Lack of resources
- Too much content – what to teach?
- Does Social Studies even count?
- Pressure to teach just facts
- Schools focus on reading, math, etc

How do I know what I want to write about? Well, I’m drawing from my experience as a teacher, as a researcher, and as a professor. I’ve read a lot about the difficulties in teaching Social Studies in elementary classrooms. I taught elementary school a long time ago. I teach students who are thinking about becoming elementary teachers. And I know elementary teachers. So I’m going to draw on my knowledge from all of those sources to help me decide what to write about.

For your essay, you should carefully study the prompt that describes what you need to think about and write about. Then you’ll probably have to do
some research, some reading, and probably some more thinking. It doesn’t matter what “type” of essay you’re writing. You’ll need a number of points to explain/discuss/argue in any of the essay types. Right now I just want you to write down some thoughts. They can be details or big picture ideas. At this point it doesn’t matter; you just need to begin making a list of points you might want to make. Once you’ve made your list, then we can start to think about how we will order these points. Below, you’ll see my initial thoughts and those thoughts revised into an order I think I might want to use:

Initial Thoughts:
- Standardized testing
- Lack of time to teach
- Lack of resources
- Too much content – what to teach?
- Does Social Studies even count?
- Pressure to teach just facts
- Schools focus on reading, math, etc

Revised Thoughts:
- Standardized testing
- Pressure to teach just facts
- Lack to time
- Schools focus on reading, etc
- Does it even count?
- Too much content – what to teach?
- Lack of resources

You might be asking how I knew to revise the order of my ideas. Well, my knowledge and experience tells me that standardized testing is usually a big factor that influences teaching. And several of these other factors act as a result of standardized testing (pressure to teach just facts, lack of time, schools’ focus on reading, and does Social Studies even count). So, it makes sense to me to put it first. But if I was arguing different points, say only three points, then I might put the biggest point last to end on the strongest note. When you revise your initial thoughts into an outline, start by reviewing all of your notes and research on your topic. Then decide which order makes the most sense to discuss/explain/analyze the points
you want to make. There isn’t really any one best way to do it, regardless of what some teachers and books might tell you. It will vary depending on the essay you are writing and the points you are making. Instead of trying to find and follow the one “best” way, try to just decide what order might work best for the task in front of you.

With my revised thoughts, I now have an idea about body paragraphs for my essay. We’ll study paragraphs in depth later, but for now remember that each idea gets its own paragraph. So my body paragraphs might look like this (remember that we’ll also need an introduction and a conclusion, but we’ll work on that later):

**Version 1**
- Paragraph 1: Standardized testing
- Paragraph 2: Pressure to teach just facts
- Paragraph 3: Lack to time
- Paragraph 4: Schools focus on reading, etc
- Paragraph 5: Does it even count?
- Paragraph 6: Too much content – what to teach?
- Paragraph 7: Lack of resources

This paragraph order might work fine for my body paragraphs. But I can always change my mind if I think of a better way to organize my paragraphs. Maybe I want to do the following and reshuffle my ideas:

**Version 2**
- Paragraph 1: Standardized testing
  - Lack of time
- Paragraph 2: Pressure to teach facts
- Paragraph 3: Does it even count?
  - Schools focus on reading, math, etc
- Paragraph 4: Too much content
- Paragraph 5: Lack of resources

The more I think about it, the more I might want to change my outline. At the least, this gives me two options for ordering the content of my essay. I’m still thinking about beginning with standardized testing. But now I’m thinking about including a lack of time in the paragraph about testing.
Then I’m thinking about discussing the pressure to teach facts, because that is a common result of a lack of time to teach (teachers often feel that they must squeeze everything in). Then maybe I’ll group together “does it even count?” with schools’ focus on reading, math, etc. This is because the question about Social Studies counting is directly connected to their focus on reading and math. Then maybe I’ll discuss the amount of content and the lack of resources, just like the first version.

Whatever your topic is, it’s ok to give yourself some options as to how you want to organize your ideas. Assuming you’ve done good reading and research, you’re in the best position to make that decision. Just remember that your outline doesn’t have to be perfect the first time you put down your thoughts. It only improves after you put a lot of thought into it. You also don’t need to know, at this point, exactly what you will write about within each paragraph. That will come as you begin to write them. Write the topic of your essay, write what points you might want to make in your essay, and then try to organize them into an outline.
STEP 2: WRITE A THESIS SENTENCE FOR YOUR ESSAY

After you’ve made your outline, and before you write anything else about your essay, I want you to write a thesis sentence for your essay. A thesis sentence is a sentence that explains what your purpose is for your essay. This sentence should guide your thinking about the rest of the essay. Don’t worry if the language isn’t exact; you can change that later. For now, you just need a sentence that you can use to focus your thoughts. Make this sentence simple and to the point. Don’t use a lot of fancy words and definitely don’t use any “fluff” (words that people think might sound good but don’t actually mean anything). Let’s create some possible thesis sentences for our sample essay. We’re going to use the “Version 2” set of potential paragraphs.

Paragraph Outline
Paragraph 1: Standardized testing
   Lack of time
Paragraph 2: Pressure to teach facts
Paragraph 3: Does it even count?
   Schools focus on reading, math, etc
Paragraph 4: Too much content
Paragraph 5: Lack of resources

So, let’s ask a basic question: what are all of these paragraphs about? Our topic is “the difficulty of teaching Social Studies,” and all of these paragraph ideas focus on specific reasons why teaching Social Studies is hard. We need a simple way of saying that teaching Social Studies is hard for a lot of reasons. Here are three possible thesis sentences:

1. Social Studies is hard to teach for a number of reasons.
2. Teachers have a tough job teaching Social Studies.
3. A number of factors make Social Studies hard to teach.

Notice how simple these sentences are? To the point without frills or fluff. They are all pretty similar, and I can decide which one to use later. But they will focus my thoughts as I keep developing my essay. Some teachers, books, and guides will tell you that you need a “hook,” some