

Something Else from Mom to Ignore **A Step-by-Step Approach to Writing Assignments** **For My Children, in College**

- 1) Make sure you have a clear understanding of what is expected. If you don't, ask
 - whoever made the assignment. The best time to do that is immediately after the assignment is made. Don't be shy. Remember, you're not stupid. If you're confused, other people probably are too. You will help everyone by making sure the assignment is clear. But if you get confused by the assignment after you start into it, it's perfectly fair to go back for clarification.
 - someone else who has to do the assignment.
 - just anyone who might help you understand it

Don't go past this step until you feel you understand what you need to do.

- 2) Think about who will read what you write. If you're writing for several people, imagine a "typical reader." Consider whether the person is likely to
 - be more attuned to facts and reasons or to feelings,
 - already know something about the subject,
 - be critical or tolerant of your perspective,
 - be able to understand something complicated, or need it simple, and
 - appreciate a well-turned phrase or be happy with just getting the information straight.

If the length of the assignment isn't given, consider how much time a person will have to read your work.

- 3) Gather your material. This usually means doing research. Jot down anything that you find interesting or relevant. Don't try to filter or organize things yet. Write each separate fact or idea on a separate line or card or something.
 - Capture where you got the information. It will be much stronger to say, "According to the Brookings Institute, most people prefer to live in the suburbs." Than just to say, "Most people prefer to live in the suburbs."
 - Collect specifics and details. It is stronger still to say, "Sixty-eight percent of people say they prefer to live in the suburbs."
 - If you copy five or more words in sequence from a source, put them in quotations so you can quote them. Don't forget to note the source. If you use the words of others without quoting them, that's called plagiarism; not a good thing. (There's simply no reason to plagiarize. You get as much credit for recognizing and citing someone else's good idea as you do for coming up with it yourself.)
 - Write down any of your own ideas that come to you as you're doing this work.
 - Use different sets of search terms. Look for synonyms. Follow interesting leads wherever they take you.
 - When your new sources are telling you the same sorts of things that your old sources did, you're about done with this step.

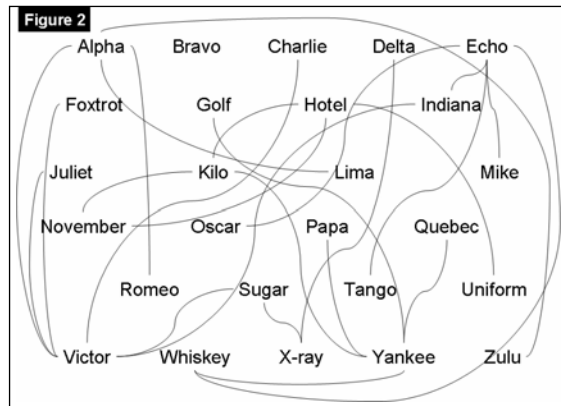
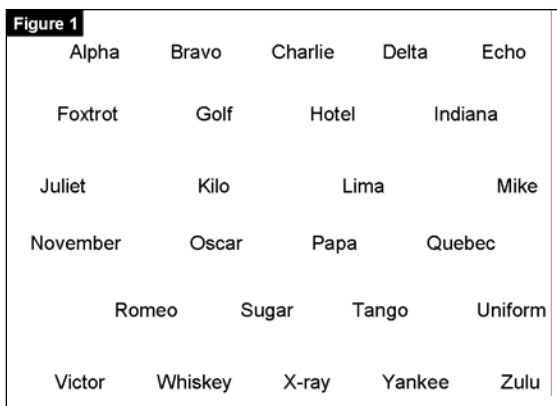
- 4) Look for gaps in your research. Ask yourself the reporter's basis questions:

- **Who.** Who are the authorities, inventors, personalities? Is there any name that keeps coming up again and again? If so, search on that person. Are there any organizations that have a special concern with this subject? If there are different viewpoints, for example on a controversial issue, who represents each viewpoint?
- **What.** What are the components of your subject, the elements, the events, the details, the statistics, the big ideas, the important nuances.
- **When.** Does your subject have a beginning or ending? How did things change in time? Was there ever a heyday? Was it out of vogue for a time? Does it have a future? Were there critical times, events, or discoveries that changes the way things were done?
- **Where.** Is there a geographic locus of activity? Did key events happen in a particular region? Does it have a special impact on any area?
- **Why.** What is the cause or reason behind this? Did something enable it? Is something inhibiting it? What will it affect, and how important is that affect? Is that affect good or bad, and why?
- **How.** How do the bits and pieces interact with each other. Where did they come from? What influences what?

You don't have to have answers to all these questions. This list is just to stimulate your thinking, to see if you have any gaps that could make it more difficult to write something good. When you find gaps, go back to Step 3,

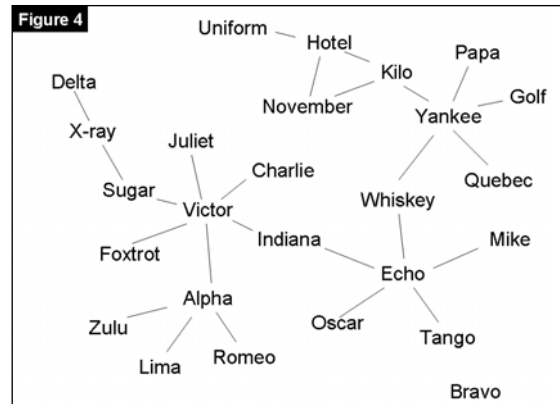
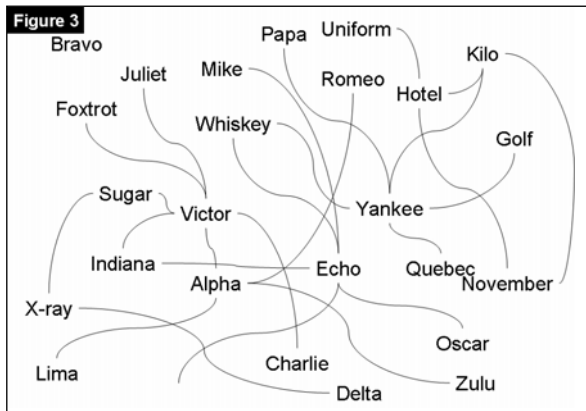
5) Organize your facts with a spider diagram.

- Per Figure 1, lay out all the individual pieces on a large, flat surface, such as a piece of paper if you're working from notes or a table if you're working with cards. Software with a simple graphics capability, like Microsoft PowerPoint, may be useful if you don't have too much information.



- Per Figure 2, draw lines that connect things that go together. They could be members of the same group, or causally related, or sequences, or just about anything. Don't strive to be consistent yet. If any two things strike you as related, hook them up. If you're using something like PowerPoint, use the "connector" function.
- Study your diagram. You will see some elements have lots of connections, for example Echo and Victor in Figure 2, and some only have one, like Charlie, Uniform, and Juliet. Some, like Bravo, may have no connections. Things that have lots of connections are likely to be most important.

- Per Figure 3, rearrange things so that the item with the most connections are in the center. Move things closer to those they are connected to. If something has only one connection, move it to the outside of the thing it's connected to.
- Rearrange your diagram again and again until you have the shortest distance between the connected ideas and no lines crossing (ideally). It might end up looking something like Figure 4. (This is where having software really helps; it took me less than an hour to work the items in Figure 1 into the diagram in Figure 4. And actually, it's kind of fun.) This is a good time to cut some of the connections if some ways of connecting are weaker than others.



- Study your diagram and see what it's telling you. For example, Figure 4 clearly shows that there are three central ideas, Victor, Echo, and Yankee. Victor has two sub-ideas, Sugar and Alpha. Since Indiana connects Victor and Echo, it can serve as a transitional idea. Since Bravo doesn't fit anywhere, it might be okay to leave it out.

6) The next thing you need is a perspective. The perspective helps you build the story, and it helps your reader follow where you're going. There are a few generic perspectives that are easy to adapt to almost any subject:

- [The subject] is good / bad
- [The subject] is important / overrated
- [The subject] is part of [something important]
- [The subject] is changing from [something] to [something else]
- [The subject] is like [something else]
- [The subject] has been misunderstood

If none of these ideas work in your case, try something else. Finding the perspective is the most creative part of writing your essay. Once you have done that, it's all down hill. Really!

No idea? Sleep on it – literally. Look over all your notes and the diagram just before you go to sleep at night. As you wait to fall asleep, think about it. Your brain has ways of organizing ideas while you sleep. When you wake up, remind yourself of your problem, and see if anything has come from your subconscious during the night.

Still no idea? If you've tried for a couple of days and you just can't find a perspective, return to Step 3 and do more research. Sometimes you can't make all the pieces fit because you're missing some of them.

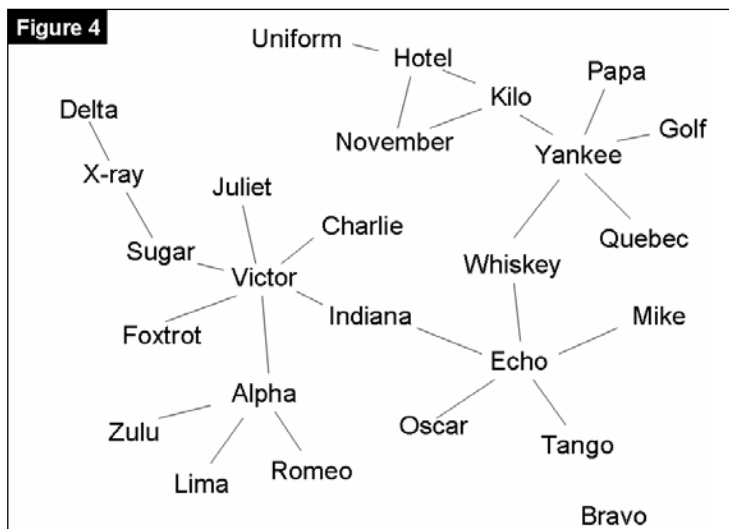
7) When you have a perspective, write it in a sentence or two, then leave it for a while. When you go back to it, see if it still makes sense. **DON'T SKIP THIS STEP.** Some things that seem really brilliant at one time look pretty dumb later. If you're not happy with it, revise it or go back to step 6 and try again.

8) Once you have your perspective written down, revisit your spider diagram and see if it still makes sense. The perspective may suggest new connections or make old ones meaningless. Revise your spider diagram as necessary.

9) Decide on a sequence of items in your assignment. Your spider diagram will show you how to connect ideas, but it won't tell you which should go first. For that you need a sequence that supports the perspective. A couple common ones are these:

- Cause then effect. This is a straightforward way to present a logical discussion.
- Effect then cause. This is a little more dramatic. First describe what is, then show the things that went into making that way. This is good if you need to help the reader understand the problem.
- Chronological sequence. Good for describing something that changes over time or for relating a narrative.
- Best to worst. Put the best material first, such as your strongest argument or most interesting point, then your next best, and so on, to your weakest. This is good for a busy reader because it gets to the meat of your message right away.
- Build to a climax. Start with your weakest point, and build to your strongest. This can be a bit more dramatic, but you risk boring the reader.

10) Use your spider diagram to outline your work. The outline based on Figure 4 might look something like this:



1. Victor
 - 1.1. Charlie, Juliet, Foxtrot
 - 1.2. Alpha
 - 1.2.1. Zulu
 - 1.2.2. Lima
 - 1.2.3. Romeo
 - 1.3. Sugar, X-ray, Delta

Transition: Indiana
2. Echo: Mike, Oscar Tango

Transition: Whiskey

3. Yankee
 - 3.1. Quebec, Golf, Papa
 - 3.2. Kilo
 - 3.2.1. November
 - 3.2.2. Hotel, Uniform

11) Based on the length your assignment should have, decide which outline level should be a paragraph.

12) Write a topic sentence for each paragraph.

13) Fill in the details of each paragraph using material from your outline. The first time through, just stuff it in. Then rewrite it to make it smoother and more coherent. Repeat as necessary. Don't hesitate to change your mind about decisions you made earlier if the exercise of writing them out suggests a better way. Reorganize, write new topic sentences, even change your perspective if you think make the work better. However, it's wise to save earlier versions in case you don't like the way it's working out.

14) After you have written the body of the work, write your introductory paragraph(s). *The last sentence of the introduction should be the sentences you wrote to capture your perspective in Step 7.*

15) After you have finished everything else, write your conclusion paragraph(s). These should return to the perspective and summarize how the major items in your assignment support the perspective.

YOU'RE NOT DONE YET!!!

16) Go over your notes and see if you left anything important out. If so, put it in.

17) Think about the reader you envisioned in Step 2. While that reader is in your mind, read through your assignment, trying to imagine how the reader will react to what you have written. Add anything you need to make it more clear. Rearrange things if it makes sense to do so, now that you can see it all together. This would be a good time to throw out your spider diagram. From here you should be guided by what reads well, not some aid.

18) Make sure that either the first or last sentence of every paragraph is a transition sentence. (A transition sentence ties the two paragraphs together by containing the ideas of both.)

19) When you have put everything you can think of into your work, it's time to start cutting it down. Do a word count, and set yourself the goal of cutting 25%. (Yes, really!) **Note:** the best guide to good writing that you can possibly have is *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White, known everywhere as "Strunk and White". It is less than 100 pp long, can be read in an hour, and if followed religiously leads to superior writing every time.

20) Look at each paragraph and judge whether it supports the perspective. If it makes it stronger, keep it. If not, take it out.

21) Look at each sentence in a paragraph and see if it supports the topic sentence. If it doesn't, take it out (or change the topic sentence).

22) Look at each word in the sentence, and see if it makes the sentence clearer. If it doesn't, take it out or replace it. If you use the test strictly, you will quickly see that we use a lot of standard phrases with unneeded words. For example, we will say "make a decision" when we really mean to say "decide". *Hint*: you almost never need the word *very*. Look for a synonym that strengthens the main word. So "very strong" might be "brawny" and "very happy" might be "delighted." The same is true for *not*: "not strong" is "weak" and "not happy" is "upset". These tricks improve clarity and brevity at the same time.

23) Wherever possible, reorder words in your sentences into a simple subject-predicate-object from using active voice. This usually reduces the number of words you need to say something: "Fascination with the drama was felt by everyone in the audience," vs. "Everyone in the audience felt fascinated by the drama."

24) Wherever possible, eliminate the verb "to be" (am, are, is, was, were). It's not as hard as you think. Try condensing the thoughts in a sentence into a phrase, then combining phrases into a new sentence. So instead of, "The day was sunny. He was feeling good." say, "The sunny day made him feel good."

25) Examine how ideas flow between sentences. The last idea in one sentence should be reflected in the first idea in the next sentence. For example, instead of saying, "They painted the room blue all afternoon. The hall filled up with empty blue paint cans," say, "All afternoon they painted the room blue. Empty blue paint cans filled up the hall." The idea of *blue paint* ties the sentences together smoothly.

26) Look at the long words in the sentence, especially words that end in -tion, and see if you can replace them with shorter words. This may involve rewriting the sentence a little. Use common words instead of stuffy ones. Instead of saying, "He gave me the information ...," say "He informed me..." or better still, "He told me..."

27) Continue to cut things that are the least important until you get within reach of your word count goal. Check to make sure that you didn't cut out something important. If you did, restore it, and don't worry about your word count goal any more.

28) Think about your reader from Step 2 and read through your document again.

- Make sure each individual sentence would be clear to your reader.
- Make sure each paragraph completely develops the idea in the topic sentence.
- Make sure ideas flow smoothly from one to the next across sentences and paragraphs. Pay particular attention to your transitions.
- Make sure it has the right tone for your reader. Add or remove rhetorical flourishes based on how you imagine your reader will respond to them.
- Check your grammar and word choice. If you are unsure about anything, look it up. If you're still unsure, change it to something you know is right.
- Make sure you have cited your sources correctly. *Don't plagiarize!*

Fix anything you find.

29) Repeat step 28 until you can read from beginning to end at two times in a row without finding anything else to fix. Leave it for at least an hour (better to leave it overnight), and read it again. Still like it?

OKAY, YOU'RE DONE.