

How to Write a Composition

Grades 6-10

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This resource is designed as a companion piece to How to Write an Essay and How to Write a Paragraph. Its aim is to help students write various kinds of compositions from grades six through the first years of secondary school. It will be helpful for students at higher levels of education who have had difficulty with writing in earlier years.

The resource contains many work sheets which can be used individually by students or in groups. Many of these work sheets are most useful if completed by pairs of students. It is also advisable for students to discuss the ideas generated by the work sheets in larger groups.

Much of this resource is written from a students perspective, so that teachers may give students the pages which they need or so that students can purchase the resource to use as they write their compositions at home.



1. WHAT IS A COMPOSITION?

To compose is to make up, invent or put together something. A **composition**, then, is the thing composed. It can be a piece of writing or a piece of music, made up, invented or put together by the composer.

A composition usually refers to a series of connected paragraphs. Of course a single paragraph is *composed* by its writer, but normally the word composition means a longer piece of writing.

Each paragraph in the composition must possess two important qualities: **unity** and **coherence**.

Unity means that there is only one idea in each paragraph. This means that all the sentences in the paragraph will talk about only one main idea. Sentences which discuss other ideas will not be included in the paragraph. This main idea is included in the **topic sentence**. Usually the topic sentence is the first sentence in the paragraph, but it does not have to be. Sometimes the topic sentence is placed in the middle of the paragraph or at the end, but it is a good idea for writers to place the topic sentence first in the paragraph; that way the reader knows exactly what the paragraph will be about. The **concluding sentence** is not only the last sentence in the paragraph, but it has another job: it sums up the main idea of the paragraph. A writer who pays attention to both topic sentence and concluding sentence will ensure that the paragraph possesses unity.

But the sentences in the paragraph also have to be arranged in an order that makes some sense. This arrangement of sentences is called **coherence**. If a paragraph possesses coherence, then one sentence will lead logically to the next; the writer will not skip around from one idea to another.

Finally, a composition requires **emphasis**. This simply means that the important ideas in the composition are emphasized. Emphasis can be achieved by placing important ideas in the most important places in the composition—usually at the beginning or at the end or in both places.

As a well written single paragraph possesses the qualities of unity and coherence, so a series of connected paragraphs possesses these qualities also, both **within** each paragraph and **within** the entire piece of writing. This means that each paragraph will possess unity; each paragraph will be concerned with one idea. All of these ideas together make up one topic and the writer does not include ideas or paragraphs which are off topic. Each paragraph can be considered as a subsection of the overall topic. If each paragraph possesses unity and if each paragraph discusses one aspect of the topic, then the entire composition will also possess unity.

Similarly, coherence will be gained within the composition through the arrangement of the paragraphs and the connections between them.

There are several ways in which paragraphs may be arranged in a composition. Some of these are:

- chronological order
- physical order
- order of importance
- order of climax

These specific methods of arrangement are discussed in more detail in the resource, *How to Write a Paragraph*, SSR1-09.

If the writer thinks of a composition as a train, with each paragraph representing a car, then, just as the train needs a coupling to attach the cars, a composition needs something to connect the paragraphs. These connections are called transitions. Transition words and phrases are words which refer to earlier or later parts of the composition; by doing so, they provide connections between the paragraphs and create a smooth flow of ideas. They create coherence.

The chart on page 5 provides examples of transition words which can express various types of arrangement in a composition.



1. WHAT IS A COMPOSITION?

Chart: Examples of Transition Words and Phrases

TYPE OF ARRANGEMENT	EXAMPLES	
TIME	then later during now presently	next before afterwards meanwhile eventually
PHYSICAL ORDER	to the right above under in the distance straight ahead	to the left below beside
ORDER OF IMPORTANCE	more importantly to some degree to a lesser extent	
SIMILAR IDEAS	in addition also and in the same way	similarly likewise moreover
DIFFERENT IDEAS	on the other hand on the contrary however nevertheless yet	but otherwise still
CONCLUSION	therefore so for this reason	thus hence

These are only some of the many transition or connecting words available in English.



1. WHAT IS A COMPOSITION?

Three major types of compositions are dealt with in this resource:

- exposition
- narration
- description.

Each of these three types of writing has a different purpose, and therefore each one is planned and constructed differently.

TYPES OF COMPOSITIONS

TYPE OF COMPOSITION	DEFINITION	PURPOSE
EXPOSITION	a detailed explanation which involves facts or opinions	to explain or inform to convince or persuade
NARRATION	a story with a plot, setting and characters	to entertain to inform or teach a lesson
DESCRIPTION	a detailed picture of the characteristics of an object, person or place	to inform to entertain

The writer of a composition must decide what type of composition he or she is writing. This will depend on the topic chosen and the purpose of the assignment. Students should note that many pieces of writing involve characteristics of all three types: A short story, for example, may include explanation (that is, exposition) and description. Similarly, an exposition may develop part of its explanation by telling a story or may use description. However, for most assignments in school, students will not go wrong if they decide to use one of these types of compositions.

Before beginning to write, students should ask themselves:

- What is the purpose of the writing assignment?
- What type of composition will best achieve this purpose?

Often the question or assignment will make this decision for the student. The assignment may be, for example, to write a short story or to write an explanation.