

What is wrong with writing a five-paragraph essay with a broad, general treatment of a topic? Why is “The Life of Bob Dylan” a poor choice as the focus of a short essay? Why shouldn't a five-paragraph essay on healthy living address three main points: food, sleep, and exercise? These questions came up in class as we reviewed the first batch of drafts. They deserve a clear, cogent answer, an answer that will illuminate the goal and process of writing such that students will not only understand the problems with general and unfocused essays, but also avoid those problems by applying specific and practical writing skills.

The notion that an essay should begin with a general statement and then focus in on the topic merits harsh criticism and rejection – no matter how often it appears in slick, well-marketed writing texts. An introduction should accomplish three things: focus the reader's attention on your topic and purpose, clearly indicate your content, and set the tone and style of your writing. Although a general statement may sometimes work, students rarely handle them well. Students over-generalize, making vast and vacuous statements such as “Computers are very important in our world today” or “A country must defend itself and over time the means for doing so have developed incredibly”. Do either of those statements titillate your mind? Can you predict where the writer might be going? Has the writer begun with a voice that you want to continue hearing? Why not select from a range of possible strategies, choosing one well-suited to your context and purpose? Did you know that student essays opening with a general statement usually lack focus and that a general opening is an almost certain indication that the paper would earn a fairly low grade? Writing such an opening dulls your own mind as a writer (and later, your reader's mind), thwarts your task of defining your purpose and content, and sets your writing persona as someone writing because they have to say something rather than someone writing because they have something to say. Have something to say, think it through, and – rather than going backwards towards stating the general or obvious – begin strong.

Along with general introductions, students also tend to have a broad, general focus for their essay. How much can you say in five minutes? If you have something to say, and you have only five minutes to say it, would you waste your time speaking of generalities or stating the obvious? Would you try, in such a short time, to cover a large, complicated topic? A typical five-paragraph essay can cover content equivalent to a five-minute speech; at 200-words a minute, you can utter 1000 words in that time, which is a generous word-limit for a five-paragraph essay. So, you have to narrow your purpose. Focus. Decide. Right from the start, say something pithy. You get only five paragraphs – that's really just three main points along with an introduction and a conclusion. Say you want to write an essay entitled “The Life of Bob Dylan”. Whatever you might say about Dylan in 1000 words, it would not cover his whole life. Moreover, attempting such an essay with such a broad scope would turn you away from the intellectual and academic value of writing an essay. You have to have something to say, and to be able to support what you say with examples, explanations, analogies, or any of the other 25 or so methods for developing an idea. Furthermore, the writing process helps you clarify and refine your thoughts. Writing broad, general ideas does nothing for you as a writer, and nothing for your reader. Ultimately, you will have to write to win an argument – and the central question may be life-changing, such as “why should you accept me into this graduate program?” or “why should you fund my research project?” or even “why should you hire me?” If, at that point, you have no strategies for focusing your thoughts, presenting them with a cogent development, and displaying your well-honed persona as a writer, you might as well go back to school and try to deal with the entire life of Bob Dylan in five paragraphs.

Focus seems a rather blurry notion. What is wrong with focusing an essay on healthy living on three main points: food, sleep, and exercise? The problem lies in a student's sense of focusing on a point. “Food” is a topic, not a point. What is the point? How much can you say about healthy food in one paragraph? Who needs to be told that sleep is necessary and good for you? Doesn't everyone – at least everyone in your academic audience – know that exercise keeps you strong, reduces stress, and improves your energy? You are supposed to make three points, and the body of this essay would be like the introduction, pointless and obvious. And again you would miss the intellectual and academic value of writing. We write to communicate. We write to someone. We have something to say. We write in a context, with a purpose, and using well-chosen strategies. A five-paragraph essay stating that to be healthy, we must eat right, sleep well, and exercise often – what is that communicating, who is the audience, what is the context, what is the purpose, has the writer or reader gained anything from the essay? Looked at in that light, the proposed essay seems like filler, just filling the page, fulfilling the assignment – and leaving both the writer and the reader unfulfilled.

Generally speaking, writing is a process, a process with a goal. In an academic context, the goal is two-fold: learning and communicating. Students learn to think through writing and rewriting, they learn to clarify and support their ideas with cogent, properly developed strategies. Also, academic writing communicates knowledge. The student communicates to the teacher that they have acquired the knowledge required in the course. Graduate students and researchers communicate their work and findings to the wider academic and professional community. Lest I end with such general – although perhaps not so obvious – statements, let me present a sharp, specific final image (which is one thing a good conclusion must do!): beginning an essay with an obvious, general statement (something that an advanced writer may be able to make work) and then proceeding to write about a topic that could easily fill hundreds of pages will double your frustration and work as a writer, cut your grade in half, and reduce the educational value of your writing to zero.