

How to Pass
the Georgia Regents' Essay Examination

Dr. Gary B. Cohen, 1995

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HOW TO PASS THE REGENTS' ESSAY EXAMINATION

QUICK TIPS AND GENERAL OVERALL IDEAS

A. SKIP LINES. It may seem just too simple but skipping lines does three things:

1. It makes it easier for the Regents' readers to read your paper.
2. It makes your paper look longer than it really is.
3. It makes it easy for you to make corrections.

B. WRITE LEGIBLY! If they (the readers) can't read it, they will NOT give you the benefit of ANY doubts. If your handwriting is that bad, PRINT.

C. SPELL WORDS CORRECTLY. Nothing will lose you credit faster than misspelled words, especially since you are able to USE A DICTIONARY during part of the exam. Be smart. Keep a list of your frequently misspelled words and learn them NOW, before it is too late. On the essay exam, a few spelling errors is all it takes to lower a passing 2 score to a failing 1.

D. THINK BEFORE YOU WRITE ANYTHING. Lack of an adequate structure—**DIRECTION**—is one of the biggest reasons for student failures on the Regents' Test. Spend at least 5-10 minutes “brainstorming,” or whatever it takes for you to know approximately what you are going to say before you say it.

** In this regard, the single most important thing you can do is have a well-thought-out **THESIS** (see below) and subsequent **TOPIC SENTENCE** derived from that **THESIS** (also see below).

E. READ THE QUESTIONS CAREFULLY—AT LEAST TWICE—before you attempt to write anything. One of the biggest mistakes students make is to misread or misinterpret

the original question prompt. For instance, look at the following:

1. “Should an introduction to art, music, and drama be part of every college student's education?” (#33). Notice that this is an all-or-nothing question. You must talk about an “introduction” to all three (art, music, drama) and you also need to consider how such an “introduction” would help (or hurt) EVERY student's education. To merely talk about art only or how it might help a few students would be TO GO OFF THE QUESTION and might cause the paper to fail instantly! In like fashion, look at the next question:
2. “Do you like being in the presence of small children? Discuss why or why not” (#396). Note here the question is asking you whether or not you like being in the presence of small children. A number of students having chosen that question strayed by talking about teenagers or six-year-olds, etc. The question specifically talks about SMALL CHILDREN (i.e., children who are two or three or four).

F. PICK THE RIGHT QUESTION. Most of the time you will be given two different types of questions.

1. One will be a general, slightly formally phrased question, such as: “What can be done to prevent violence and crime in the public schools? Discuss” (#53) or “Why are there more female than male public school teachers? Explain” (#84) or “Should the United States pass gun-control laws? Discuss” (#142).
2. The other type of question tends to be far more personal, usually containing the “you” as in the following: “Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?” (#224) or “What is your favorite holiday?” (#312) or “What is the dumbest thing you ever did? Explain why you did it” (#402).
3. Most students have less trouble with the latter type of question. It allows you to be

personal, to use facts from your own life (or to make them up), and to use the personal pronoun “I” (and “me”) which is a lot easier to use than any other pronoun. It thus avoids many pronoun problems as well.

4. Of course, there are places throughout the more “formal” type of question where an “I” would also be appropriate, though too much of it there should be avoided. Moreover, the first type (the more formal type) calls for a least some outside knowledge (though not an awful lot). Remember that in answering these types of questions too, you can make up some facts, figures, and statistics—just do not go overboard with ridiculously impossible facts or outrageous statistics. For instance, it would be absurd to write “last year 38% of all women were raped”—how could anyone possibly know such a statistic? Not all rapes are reported, etc. Just be logical.
5. Some questions, of course, can be answered formally or not, as in “Has the space program been of benefit to the average American? Discuss” (#323). Here you could talk about some benefits of the space program in general terms, then narrow down your focus into how you personally, have benefited from the space program (for instance, how you use “Velcro” when you sew—a product of the space program, etc.). Or you might have chosen #316: “Is there anything that teachers can learn from students? Discuss.” Here, again, you might begin by discussing a few of the things teachers might learn from their pupils, and then give some specific examples of teachers you had and what they could have learned from you, etc.

G. DO NOT USE THE WORD “YOU” IN YOUR ESSAY! This type of error is very easy to fall into, and, once started, is hard to stop and correct. But use of the word “YOU” is just about NEVER CORRECT, so avoid it. There are, moreover, myriad ways to reword

to rewrite your sentences to remove the word “you.” For example, look at the beginning of this paragraph taken from an essay:

“Another way to prevent crime in the schools is to stop the sale of drugs there. If you walk into any high school, you will see drug pushers in every corner, near every locker. And once you let them take over the halls of the schools, there is no way you can keep schools as places of learning”

Revised, the beginning of the paragraph might look as follows:

“Another way to prevent crime in the schools is to stop the sale of drugs there. If one walks in to any high school, he (or she) will see drug pushers everywhere And once the school system (or the authorities) lets these pushers take over the halls of the schools, there is no way that schools can remain places of learning”

H. D U C K S—Remember that the essays are graded holistically; the graders do not “nit-pick”; they are looking for clear, literate, legible essays with no major problems in the following five areas. Just remember your paper should be full of D U C K S:

Development—using adequate examples, etc. Shows knowledge of the subject.

Unity—sticking to your THESIS and your TOPIC SENTENCES. Stays on subject.

Coherence—using good connections between thoughts; using transitions.

Knowledge of Grammar Rules—making no major errors in fragments, etc.

Structure—showing logical order of ideas; using THESIS and TOPIC SENTENCES.

I. CHOOSE A TOPIC CLOSE TO YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE.

J. AVOID ANY TOPICS ABOUT WHICH YOU HAVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS.

STRUCTURE

The major reasons for a failing student grade on the Regents’ Test are lack of adequate—or any—order, organization, STRUCTURE. And while it is the last of the **D U C K S**, it is

really appropriate to begin with it.

I. Here is an overview/outline of two typical papers. One uses a two-part THESIS (and thus has a total of four paragraphs); the other paper uses a three-part THESIS (and thus has five paragraphs, hereafter abbreviated as ¶s). Note their differences:

A. Paper using a two-part THESIS:

¶ 1: General Introduction leading up to a two-part THESIS (i.e., “Two places where cheating is getting out of hand are at school and in the workplace.”)

3-5 sentences total.

¶ 2: Begins with a TOPIC SENTENCE taken from the THESIS (i.e., “At school, cheating seems to be everywhere.”)

Support # 1 (Reason. Example, etc.)

Detail (fact, statistic, description, story)

Support # 2 (Reason, etc.)

Detail (fact. . .)

Support # 3 (Reason, etc.)

Detail (fact. . .) 7-9 sentences total.

¶ 3: Begins with another TOPIC SENTENCE, again taken from the THESIS (i.e., “One does not have to look very hard to find people cheating at work also.”)

Support # 1 (Reason, etc.)

Detail (fact. . .)

Support # 2 (Reason, etc.)

Detail (fact. . .)

Support # 3 (Reason, etc.)

Detail (fact. . .) 7-9 sentences total.

¶ 4: Conclusion. 2-4 sentences.

Paper Total: 19-28 sentences.

B. Paper using a three-part THESIS:

¶ 1: General Introduction leading up to a three-part THESIS (i.e., “In order to succeed in school, a student should take good notes, come to class prepared, and participate in class discussions.”) 3-5 sentences total.

¶ 2: Begins with a TOPIC SENTENCE taken from the THESIS (i.e., “The first thing a student needs to do is take full and adequate notes in class.”)

Support # 1

Detail

Support # 2

Detail 5-7 sentences total.

¶ 3: Begins with another TOPIC SENTENCE, again taken from the THESIS (i.e., “A good student also needs to be prepared class begins.”)

Support # 1

Detail

Support # 2

Detail 5-7 sentences total.

¶ 4: Begins with the last TOPIC SENTENCE, taken once more from the THESIS (i.e., “Finally, to do well in school, a student should not be afraid to participate in class.”)

Support # 1

Detail

Support # 2

Detail 5-7 sentences total.

¶ 5: Conclusion. 2-4 sentences

Paper Total: 20-30 sentences total.

[Note that if you choose the slightly smaller 2-part THESIS, your body ¶s will need to be longer and show more DEVELOPMENT (see below). Now let us concentrate on the THESIS and the TOPIC SENTENCES.]

II. The THESIS

A. The THESIS is the main point or controlling idea of the entire essay. It is usually one sentence long (though it may be two or even three) and comes at the END—THE VERY END—of the first ¶. A THESIS frequently answers the questions “What is my opinion of subject X?” and “What am I going to argue (or illustrate or define or explain) in the essay?” A good THESIS should also include the major subdivisions of your paper, that is, be divided into 2-3 parts.

1. For instance, in answer to # 335, “What animal do you like (or dislike) the most? Why?” you might have written: “My favorite animal is the cat because of its intelligence, playfulness, and independence.” [Note that this is 3-part THESIS, so this paper would have a total of five ¶s.]

2. Or, suppose you chose # 329, “What do you do to cope with stress?” Here you might write the following: “When stress becomes a problem, I either head out for a workout at the gym or curl up with a good, exciting book.” [Note here is a two-part THESIS, so this paper would contain only four ¶s.]

B. The Requirements for a Good THESIS SENTENCE:

1. It states the essay's subject and the major subdivisions of the topic.
2. It states the writer's clearly defined opinion on the subject. In other words, tell

the reader what you think. DO NOT dodge the issue. Present your opinion specifically and precisely. For example, in response to the question, “Should the 55-mile-an-hour speed limit be retained? Explain,” you might write:

POOR: Many people have different opinions on whether our country needs a 55 mile-an-hour speed limit law, and I agree with some of them. [Vague—no clear stand on the issue.]

POOR: The question of whether we need a national law governing speed limits is a controversial issue. [No—still avoids a clear opinion or stand.]

POOR: I want to give my opinion on the 55 mile-an-hour speed law and the reasons I feel that way. [All this sentence does is ANNOUNCE the writer's intentions; it does not, however, state any real direction, opinion, etc.]

BETTER: The government needs to retain the 55 mile-an-hour speed limit; it would save money, lives, and jobs.

3. It makes a general statement—one that leads to further development and supporting detail. It is NOT merely a statement of fact that leads nowhere.

4. It uses specific language and avoids vague words.

5. It asserts only ONE main idea. Many essays drift into confusion because the writer is trying to explain or argue two different large issues in one essay. Pick ONE main idea and argue it in convincing detail.

POOR: The government needs to retain the 55 mile-an-hour speed limit, but it should think of raising it in some places in order to save people time. [Take ONE position and stick to it!]

BETTER: The government needs to retain the 55 mile-an-hour speed limit in order to save lives, to save money, and to save American jobs.

6. A good THESIS is limited to fit the 350-500 word essay assignment! Your THESIS should show that you have narrowed your subject matter to an appropriate size. One cannot re-fight the Vietnam War or discuss all the problems of poor city services. Focus your essay on an important part of any broad subject. POOR: A study of art and literature will do a lot for American students. [Far too vague. What does “a lot” mean?]

BETTER: Art classes in high school will help students become more creative and teach them about the world outside their classrooms and TV sets.

C. Avoiding a Poor THESIS:

1. Do not merely make an announcement of your subject or a description of your intentions:

POOR: The subject of this paper is the reasons I would like to live in a small town rather than in a big city.

POOR: I am going to describe the reasons I would like to live in a small town.

BETTER: I would rather live in a small town because it is quieter, safer, and friendlier than a larger city.

2. Do not clutter your thesis with such tired expressions as “In my opinion,” or “In this essay I will argue that. . .” or “I think...,” etc. All of these will make you sound uncertain. This is your essay, so the opinions expressed here are obviously yours. Saying “I think” (or the like), therefore, is really just repeating yourself.

Be forceful and speak directly.

POOR: In this essay I will give the reasons that horse racing should be legalized in Georgia.

BETTER: Horse racing should be legalized: it would bring money to the

government as well as excitement and beauty to the people.

3. Do not be unreasonable. Making irrational oversimplified claims will undercut your entire THESIS. To the question, “Should schools establish dress codes? Discuss.” (#422):

POOR: Fascist school boards should let teenagers wear whatever they want to avoid bloodshed in the schools.

BETTER: Dress codes in the schools would impinge on the students' rights and stifle their natural creativity.

4. Do not merely state a fact! A THESIS is an assertion of an opinion that leads to a discussion which may be proven by facts. Do not, therefore, select an idea that is self-evident:

POOR: Child abuse is a terrible problem in our country. (Of course! Who would NOT agree with this assertion? Far too obvious a THESIS.)

BETTER: To prevent child abuse, we need to teach our children how to avoid possible danger and keep offenders locked up in prison.

5. Beware of an obvious, mechanical THESIS:

POOR: Football is my favorite pastime for three reasons. The three reasons are exercise, competition, and fellowship.

BETTER: Exercising my body, competing against the opposition, and fellowship with my friends are only some of the reasons I enjoy playing football.

POOR: I would make a good parent for three reasons. The reasons are love, understanding, and money.

BETTER: Love of children, a desire to understand their problems, and enough money in the bank to raise them makes me a good candidate for the “parent of the

year” award.

** Do NOT underestimate the value of a GOOD THESIS. Not only will it tell your reader your precise stand on a subject and the direction your paper will take (as well as the order it will take), but it will tell YOU too! Far too often students rush in and start writing without any idea what they are going to say or (if they know what they are going to say) the order of their papers. Nothing guarantees a failure on Regents’ Test like the lack of a good THESIS does.

III. TOPIC SENTENCES

A. Next to the THESIS, nothing makes (or breaks!) a paper faster than good (or bad) TOPIC SENTENCES. Think of a TOPIC SENTENCE as if it were a small THESIS. The difference is that a THESIS gives the idea and the direction of the entire paper; a TOPIC SENTENCE gives the idea and direction of an individual paragraph.

Remember, however, one crucial difference: The THESIS comes at the end of the paragraph (the introductory paragraph, that is), but a TOPIC SENTENCE comes at the very beginning (the first sentence, in fact) of each body ¶ (see below).

B. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A TOPIC SENTENCE? (TOPIC SENTENCE=TS)

1. It supports the THESIS by clearly stating a main point in your discussion (in other words, in a three-part THESIS, each TS will cover ONE of the parts).
2. It informs the reader of the TOPIC of that ¶ (by expressing the main idea of that ¶).
3. It controls the subject matter of the ¶. The entire discussion—using examples, details, explanations—in a particular ¶ must directly relate to and support the TS. The BODY ¶ is thus a mini-essay, and the TS, therefore, is, in a sense, a smaller

THESIS. And, just as all the ¶s of an essay must relate directly to the THESIS, so too must all the sentences in a ¶ relate directly to the TS.

4. It states a definite opinion or attitude.

5. It gives the ¶ a direction that both the reader and the writer can follow.

C. THE INGREDIENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE TOPIC SENTENCE:

1. It states an OPINION that can be supported by details, examples, etc. Just remember that you are supposed to prove your TS.

POOR: Many people die each year on the nation's highways. [That is a fact and thus CANNOT be a TS.]

BETTER: One reason to keep the national speed limit at fifty-five miles per hour is to save lives. [Now you can talk about why the lower speed limit saves lives, how many lives are saved, etc.]

2. It is specific enough to be clear, interesting, and allow for adequate development. Remember a vague TS stifles development.

POOR: Fall is a pretty season. [HO hum! Who wants to read such boring stuff?]

BETTER: The vibrant colors of the trees and mountains are another reason to like the fall season.

POOR: Another thing I look forward to after graduation is having a good job.

BETTER: Second, I plan to become Assistant Loan Manager at SunTrust Bank two years after my graduation.

3. It gives a definite DIRECTION to your ¶.

POOR: I went on vacation to Hawaii last winter, and it was nice. [Vague and directionless—"nice" could mean anything. The reader has no idea what is going to come next.]

BETTER: First, the people in Hawaii are the friendliest I have ever met. [Ah, now we can see what the ¶ is going to be about: friendly people on the islands. Now the reader is expecting some examples of this friendliness, perhaps a story, etc.]

POOR: I own a cat named Sherman. [So what?]

BETTER: Another reason I love my cat is the fun we have playing games together.

4. It comes directly from your THESIS (and in the same order as your THESIS). For example, if your THESIS is “My favorite vacation spot in the world is definitely London: I love it for its theatres, its restaurants, and even its weather,” your TOPIC SENTENCES might look like the following:

TS ¶1: Nothing is as exciting as the theatre district in London.

TS ¶ 2: The theatres are great in London, but so are the restaurants.

TS ¶ 3: Most of all, however, I like the cold, drizzly weather London is famous for.

Note that each TS reiterates and restates ONE part of the THESIS, but each TS does NOT just mechanically repeat the THESIS. And note also that since the order of the THESIS is theatres, restaurants, and weather, that is (and must be) the same order as your paragraphs (and thus your TS's).

Again, suppose your THESIS is “I love living in the South for its great food, its sports rivalries, and its pleasant, year-round weather.” Look at these:

POOR: Chicken is a great Southern food. [Too specific—narrows down the focus too much and does NOT allow for any expansion of ideas in the rest of the paragraph. In fact, since this TS mentions “chicken,” this ¶ can talk about

nothing else but chicken!]

BETTER: Southerners eat the best food in the world. [Now you could talk about different Southern “food,” such as chickens, grits, honeyed ham, etc.]

POOR: I love the weather in the South. [While you might not realize it, this TS too is a fact as stated and needs to be revised. And since it is the third part of the original THESIS, it also lacks any COHERENCE—transitions—to connect this ¶ to the rest of the paper.]

BETTER: Finally, warm weather and plenty of sunshine make the South my favorite place to live.

D. DON'TS FOR TOPIC SENTENCES

1. Avoid factual TS's:

POOR: I loved the people I met in Hawaii. [A fact as written]

BETTER: Another reason to visit Hawaii is the great friendliness of the people there. [Now you can write a story or give examples to prove the TS.]

POOR: The average temperature in Hawaii is 78 degrees. [Another fact which you cannot expand on or even support—since a fact needs no support; it IS support. Save this fact for the middle of the ¶—as support.]

BETTER: Another reason to visit Hawaii for a great vacation is the fabulous weather there. [Now the “78 degrees” can be used to support this TS.]

2. DON'T GIVE TOO MUCH AWAY IN YOUR TS—KEEP IT SIMPLE! Too often students try to write their entire ¶ in their TS's and are left with nothing to say in the rest of their ¶s.

POOR: Southerners are known for their great food, like chicken and rice. [By putting “chicken and rice” in the TS, this ¶ MUST be about “chicken and rice”

and nothing else!]

BETTER: Anyone who likes to eat will love the great variety of Southern foods.

[Now you are able to talk about “chicken and rice” as well as any other foods you care to talk about.]

For example, as a response to # 224: “Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?”

POOR: Another reason I chose nursing is the pay, which can amount to \$50,000 a year. [No! By writing a TS this way, you can talk about is that \$50,000 a year pay check, which will fill up an entire ¶! You have tried to say too much in your TS and will pay the consequences.]

BETTER: Another reason I chose nursing is the good wages and benefits I can expect. Now you can talk about starting out at, say, \$30,000 a year, getting up to \$50,000 as well as all the different monetary benefits nursing might allow, like retirement after only twenty years, etc.]

3. DO NOT ASK QUESTIONS IN YOUR TS.

4. Do NOT use VAGUE or MEANINGLESS WORDS in your TS. Like a THESIS, the TS should be specific and concise with something to prove.

POOR: One reason I love Melanie is that she is wonderful. [Words like “wonderful” are too vague to mean anything anymore.]

BETTER: One reason I love Melanie is her great sense of humor.

** Since lack of STRUCTURE is the single greatest reason for student failures on the Regents’ Test, the best thing a person can do is study the kinds of questions asked and practice writing THESES and TOPIC SENTENCES on them. And since many of the topics are on similar subjects, practice on a few is equal to

practice on many.

IV. Exercise # 1: For the following topics make up a THESIS and 2-3 TS's.

A. (#157) "Should every college student study history?" [Now look at some other topics which show striking similarities:

1. "Should college students have complete freedom to choose their own courses?" (#179)
2. "Should American students be required to learn a second language? Why or why not?" (#30)
3. "Which of the college courses you have &id do you consider the most beneficial? Why?"
4. "Should college students be required to take physical education courses? Why or why not?" (#198)

Note how many of these lend themselves to the same structure. Indeed, with just a little work, a student would have little trouble using approximately the same INTRODUCTION and CONCLUSION!]

B. (#61) "What can parents do to prepare their children for school?" [Again, look at some similar topics:

1. "What are the essential characteristics of a good parent? Discuss." (#166).
2. "Should children be disciplined by physical punishment? Discuss." (#117)
3. "What are the most important skills and/or other values that children learn from their parents? Explain." (#212)
4. "Do you think that you have the qualities of a good parent? Discuss." (#206)]

C. (#25) "What are the characteristics of an effective newscaster? Explain?" [Notice how many of the following key in on the idea of a person's qualities:

1. “Discuss the most important characteristics an elected official should have.” (#122)
2. “What are the essential characteristics of a good parent? Discuss.” (#166)
3. “What types of students do you like to have in your classes? Discuss.” (#444)
4. “What are the characteristics of a good college student? Explain.” (#178)

Again, note how often (and this is just a small sample) the idea of “characteristics” comes up. Practice writing about the qualities of certain types of people, and soon you will have the **STRUCTURE** to write about ANY sort of person.]

DEVELOPMENT

I. THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

(While a discussion of the **INTRODUCTORY ¶** could have easily been discussed in the section on **STRUCTURE**, it is included here because it is not the placement of the ¶ we are concerned with, but the contents of the ¶—what someone should include in the **INTRODUCTORY ¶** as a way of leading up to the **THESIS**.)

A. There are students who get bogged down before they even begin to write. They stare at the blank sheets of the exam and “choke up” unable to get going. The secret of beginning to write is to write!

Start right in. You have analyzed the question in your pre-planning (see remarks on **THESIS** above and **BODY ¶s** below). Now, in your **INTRODUCTION** you want to set down in clear sentences the topic you are going to write about, your particular “slant” or attitude on the topic, and the direction you intend to take in your essay (your two- or three-part **THESIS**). Since you have only five to eight minutes for this **INTRODUCTION**, it is often sufficient to accomplish these tasks in three to five

sentences—no more!

B. PUT YOUR BEST STUFF AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR ESSAY! In most essays, a writer saves his best ideas for the end—not so on the REGENTS' TEST. If you wait for the third or even the second body ¶ to put your best ideas forward, it could be too late! The graders of the Regents' Test have to read hundreds of essays at a time and are apt to make “quick decisions” on the essays they read. If you start out well—a good introduction, a good thesis, and a decent first body ¶—you will be in much better shape than those writers who save their best ideas for the last BODY ¶ and the CONCLUSION. NO matter how good the end will be, it CANNOT make up for a poor beginning. On the other hand, after a “good start,” the graders are apt to be far more “forgiving” about later errors you may make.

In short, remember that a “good” CONCLUSION never saved a “bad” essay and that a “poor” CONCLUSION never failed a “good” one. Get the opening right, and you won't go wrong the rest of the way.

C. Some Quick Tips for your INTRODUCTORY ¶:

1. **DO NOT REPEAT THE ESSAY QUESTION!** If, for instance, the essay question is (#11), “What do you think are the leading causes of divorce in today's society? Explain,” far too many students do the following:

POOR: Many people are asked what they think are the leading causes of divorce in today's society? I have often wondered about that myself, for I can see divorce everywhere. In my opinion, divorce is caused by. . . [Awful. The writer here does nothing to spur the reader's imagination or show that he or she has spent any time at all thinking the question out! An introduction like this one almost always assures a failure.]

BETTER: Divorce seems to be everywhere. Everyone knows at least one person who is divorced, is the child of divorced parents, or is going through a divorce at the present time. And the reason for many of these divorces seems clear. . . [Now you have caught the reader's attention, for I am sure that every reader does know a divorced person, etc., and would like to know why. This paragraph at least shows some promise.]

2. AVOID BEING CUTE OR SATIRIC, OVERLY EMOTIONAL OR

DRAMATIC! Some of the reader may not get any of the “jokes” you are trying to tell and may even misinterpret your “satire” or “irony.” For best results, play it absolutely STRAIGHT! You may well wish to appear sincere, clear, and straightforward.

3. Try in your first ¶ to let your reader know what your essay is going to deal with and what your controlling idea is (the THESIS). Each sentence should advance your topic and be interesting to your reader.

4. DO NOT BEGIN YOUR ESSAY WITH THE WORD “YES” OR “NO” in answer to your question. The intended audience for your paper is NOT the person who posed the question, so the words “yes” or “no” mean absolutely nothing to the person who is reading your essay; in fact, the use of these words only puts the reader off. Be smart and leave such words out of your essay (Elifson and Gordon 56).

5. DO NOT OPEN WITH JUST YOUR THESIS AND NOTHING ELSE! If all you have in your introductory ¶ is the THESIS and little else, you will surely fail the Regents’ Test. You have to lead up to your THESIS and provide a context for it.

D. TYPES OF INTRODUCTIONS (Different ways to lead up to your THESIS):

1. A PARADOXICAL or INTRIGUING STATEMENT:

(a.) Robot! The very term sets the imagination to work, conjuring up scenes of metal monsters killing off millions. Science fiction films, however, have done robots a great injustice. Robots are more than toys or killing machines. Soon robots will clean our house, drive our cars, and teach our children. (THESIS)

(b.) If you are an “I don't believe it” reader stop right here. Do NOT go on reading this essay, for what I am about to tell you will not go down right. You know all those stories about cigarettes being harmful? Well, they're all lies. Cigarettes are good for one's health since they prevent obesity, calm nervousness, and prevent tooth decay.

2. AN ARRESTING STATISTIC OR SHOCKING STATEMENT:

(a.) One out of every two people who get married today will be divorced in seven years or less. Yet people still get married daily thinking that their marriage is going to last forever. While the chances for a happy marriage are not great, the chances for a happy marriage would be increased if couples would talk more, share financial responsibilities, and never work together.

(b.) As you are reading this essay, five teenagers are committing suicide, and twenty more will attempt to takes their lives before the hour is over. There is hope, however. Friends and parents can stop teenage suicides if they will look for early warning signs: depression, drug use, and poor marks in school.

3. A QUESTION:

(a.) Are we murdering our old people? We don't like to use the word “murder”; that is generally reserved to describe crimes using guns or knives. I believe, however, that we are killing our people without bullets. We take away their respect by retiring them and treat them like convicts by putting them away in nursing homes. No wonder they welcome death when it comes.

(b.) Have you ever been to New York City? Hundreds of thousand of people bumping each other in the street, cursing at each other, even killing each other. I'd rather live in a small town because it's quieter, friendlier, and safer. [Note that in rhetorical questions the use of “you” is acceptable, but do NOT use it anywhere else in your essay—ever!]

4. A QUOTATION OR LITERARY ALLUSION:

(a.) Over forty years ago the head of the FCC called television “a vast wasteland,” but surely things have changed since then. True—they are worse! Today television is nothing more than violent sports, trash talk shows, and stupid commercials. [Of course, you do NOT have to use a famous quotation. You can use a line you heard on television last night, or something a friend said—it doesn't matter. As long as it is connected to the THESIS, you can use it.]

(b.) Shakespeare once wrote, “To be or not to be; that is the question.” He was, of course, speaking about suicide, and it remains as big a problem today as it was almost four hundred years ago. Today, however, there is a lot we can do to prevent possible suicides: talk to them, refer them to a

professional, and, as a last resort, report them to the police.

5. A RELEVANT STORY, JOKE OR ANECOTE:

(a.) Walking to my car downtown the other night, I was assaulted by two men who robbed me and then took my car. The police told me that my case was not unusual, that crime downtown was exploding. Something obviously needs to be done to cut the crime rate downtown, and I have some suggestions. To make it safer downtown, we should hire more police and put video cameras on all of the downtown street corners.

(b.) On May 27, 2003, Paul Turk and Lisa Garland were on their way home from their senior prom. They never got there. On the way home, their car was hit head-on by a car driven by Harold Smithers, who was not only driving home drunk; he was driving on a suspended D.U.I. license. We need to get drunks off the road through mandatory and required drunk driving classes.

(c.) What's the difference between snakes and lawyers? Answer: Not everyone wants to kill snakes! It appears that no one likes lawyers. Nobody! Yet lawyers are often misunderstood, and without them America would not be the great place it is. Lawyers, in fact, defend the Constitution, protect the consumer from "Big Business," and keep the innocent from going to jail.

6. A STATEMENT OF A PROBLEM OR A POPULAR MISCONCEPTION:

(a.) Many people believe that classical music was written by solemn, old men and that it has no relevance in today's rock and roll era. These people cannot imagine how anybody under the age of thirty could stand to listen

to a symphony or, worse, an opera. The truth, however, is that the writers like Mozart and Liszt were the young “rockers” of their own times, and that classical music is as fun and interesting to listen to as anything by Springsteen or TLC.

(b.) There are landfill mountains in everyone's backyard. Every day another dump is created; every day people throw out their junk and so it goes on and on. Yet each of us has the power to reduce the waste that has become the blight of America: all we have to do is reuse and recycle!

7. AN ANALOGY:

In Roman times, the crowd enjoyed watching people—usually Christians—being thrown to and often eaten by lions. It was a horrible, bloody spectacle, yet the crowd obviously loved it. In 1995 we have our own bloody spectacles, only now they are called “No Holds Barred” or “Tough Man Contests,” and like the Roman “games” they should be outlawed, for they are dangerous, are deceptive, and appeal to man's lowest emotion.

8. A MOVEMENT FROM THE GENERAL TO THE SPECIFIC:

(a.) Of all the emotions of man, the most common is fear. Everyone fears something. Some people fear snakes; some fear heights, while others fear public speaking. My fear is a bit more realistic: I fear growing old, looking bad, having no money, and being completely alone.

(b.) The world is full of wondrous places. There are sights and sounds out there to delight the young and amaze the old and jaded. Yet of all the places one can visit, none can so dazzle the senses or kindle the

imagination like the pyramids of Egypt: they are imbued with a sense of history as well as being amazing to look at and explore.

9. THE STRUCTURED OPENING (Thanks to Elifson and Gordon, Strategies for Passing the Georgia Regents' Exam, for this idea):

Here you begin “with one sentence designed to catch the attention of the reader followed by the THESIS sentence. Then it outlines one-by-one the support ideas for the stand taken in the THESIS” (67).

(a.) “Each time I travel the freeways I am shocked at how many Americans have stopped observing the 55 MPH speed limit. I believe that it is a good law and that it should be retained. In the years following the energy crisis conservation of gasoline is still important. In addition, since the lower speed limit has been in effect, fewer lives have been lost and fewer serious injuries have been sustained in highway accidents. These are compelling reasons to retain the 55 MPH speed limit” (68).

(b.) “My lifestyle as a student is very future oriented. If I knew I would only live a few months more, I would completely change my lifestyle. I would quit school in order to spend as much time possible with my family. I would throw self-discipline to the wind and do things I've always wanted to do. I would force myself to deal with the financial matters that I've put off in an effort to leave my family financially secure” (68).

[Note that in both of these last two examples the THESIS is not just one simple sentence. Indeed, the THESIS begins with the second sentence and continues on for the rest of the INTRODUCTORY ¶—a total of four sentences!

Remember that if you choose to use the STRUCTURED OPENING, you must be careful not to merely repeat the sentences in your THESIS as your TOPIC SENTENCES. You will need to rephrase these ideas in your BODY ¶'s or lose a lot of credit.]

II. THE BODY PARAGRAPHS

A. After lack of STRUCTURE, the most serious—and most common—weakness of essays by novice writers is the lack of adequately developed BODY ¶'s. The information in each ¶ must effectively EXPLAIN, EXEMPLIFY, PERSUADE, DEFINE, or in some way SUPPORT your THESIS and TOPIC SENTENCES.

B. The middle or BODY of your essay is composed of ¶'s that support your THESIS. By providing details, explaining causes, offering reasons, and writing examples in these ¶'s, you supply enough EVIDENCE to persuade your reader that the opinion expressed in your THESIS is a sensible one (not necessarily correct—only sensible). Each ¶ in the BODY develops and presents one main point in the discussion of the THESIS. Each new BODY ¶ signals another major point in the discussion. The main points from your THESIS will provide the basis for the body ¶'s of your essay.

C. One of the major reasons most students write poor BODY ¶'s is their lack of planning. Too often students begin to write before they have thought out their essays, before, in fact, they have discovered whether they have enough information to successfully complete their essays.

The key to “thinking out” an essay is to BRAINSTORM, to think on paper. If you can come up with enough ideas (examples, details, reasons, etc.), you can begin to write your essay. If, however, you find you cannot come up with enough to fill up your

BODY ¶s, perhaps you should look at another essay question; perhaps you have enough knowledge to tackle it instead.

Remember, in a four-¶ paper, you need two main ideas, but you also need three supports for each one. For example, suppose the question is “Why are many people afraid of growing old? Discuss” (#60). You might come up with the following:

Financial Problems

1. Can't get a job
2. Low Social Security payments
3. Poor or no Pension plan
4. High health costs

Loneliness

1. Death of spouse
2. Children moved away
3. Can't leave house to meet other senior citizens

[Note here you have more than enough information or ideas to complete two BODY ¶s, but that is a lot better than having too little. Now a person may choose the best

“supports” and details to write about. Here is a possible BODY ¶:

“One of my great fears about growing old is not having enough money. In order to have enough money, I believe I will have to work, but throughout the country there are many qualified people out of a job simply because they are too old. Even if I were still able to work, I cannot imagine a company hiring me over a healthy twenty-five-year-old. In addition, I am thirty-five but have saved almost nothing. Knowing how little social security payments are scares me to death. To make matters worse, there are horrendous health costs to consider. I have heard that senior citizens pay some 40% of their income on doctors and medical expenses. What will I have left to live on?”]

Now suppose the question is “What is your favorite holiday? Why?” Note the brainstorming this time:

Christmas

<u>Food</u>	<u>Gifts</u>	<u>Family Gets Together</u>
1. Mom's turkey	1. Giving	1. See people far way (Aunt Jane)
2. Cousin's pies	2. Receiving	2. Meet newborns, wives, etc.

[This writer has decided to write a five-¶ paper. Note, therefore, that there are three main ideas, but the writer only needs two supports for each ¶. Here is a ¶ that could have been written from this brainstorming:

“One reason I love Christmas is all the food I get to eat when my family gets together. Everyone makes his or her favorite dish. My mom, for instance, always makes the turkey. It is so plump and juicy that I can barely wait to sit at the table and grab a leg, my favorite part. However, I have to watch myself and not eat too much turkey, or I will miss my other favorite—Cousin Lenore's pies! Last year she made lemon, pumpkin, and key lime; I think I had two slices of each. I really am a pig!”]

D. Do's and Don't's of BODY PARAGRAPHS:

1. DO NOT JUST LIST YOUR IDEAS!

This is the most common error the graders see in the body ¶s. Many students have fine main ideas for support, but they include NO details. Without details the ¶s come out short, thin, and completely undeveloped. Here is an example of a ¶ ruined by bare listings:

“One reason I love Christmas is all the food I get to eat when my family gets together. Everyone makes his or her favorite dish. My mom, for instance, always makes the turkey. Then my aunt brings her great stuffing. Most of all I like my cousin's pies.” [Notice that there is nothing here—no details at all—and for that reason this ¶ (and possibly the whole essay) would fail! See the paragraph right

above for a much more detailed ¶ on the same topic.]

Here is another example of a thin “listing” ¶ ruined by a lack of detail:

“Maybe my favorite reason for liking Christmas is the fact that my whole family comes together for it. Thus, I get to see people from far away that I haven't seen all year. I am also able to meet all the cute little new husbands and wives who have married into the family as well as meet all the cute little newborns.”

[Another unacceptably thin ¶ devoid of any true development. Here is the above ¶ slightly rewritten with added details:]

“Maybe my favorite reason for liking Christmas is the fact that my whole family comes together for it. I get to see people from far away that I have not seen all year, like my Tennessee cousins. We start to talk about boyfriends and television and movies, and we laugh until our sides hurt. In fact, we have so much fun sometimes that we forget to eat. I also get to see my favorite uncle—Uncle Harry from Alabama. Best of all, I can meet all the new husbands and wives who have married into the family since last year. Cousin Frieda married a rich, older man during the summer, but I haven't met him yet, so this Christmas promises to be very interesting.” [Note the differences. Now there is detail, description, even some humor. This ¶ would pass easily.]

2. AVOID UNNECESSARY REPETITION AS YOU RESTATE YOUR IDEAS:

- (a.) “When you begin the support paragraphs, the opening of each ¶ may be a restatement of an idea from your INTRODUCTORY ¶, but at the least, it should be a fresh statement” (Strategies 80).
- (b.) Be careful that what you say in one BODY ¶ does not appear in

another BODY ¶. To eliminate that possibility, be sure you brainstorm ahead of time so that you know that your ideas will NOT overlap. (See BRAINSTORMING above.)

3. ANY EXAMPLE OR REASON OR STORY YOU GIVE OR TELL MUST PROVE THE TOPIC SENTENCE.

(a.) Students often choose good examples or other details that do NOT relate to the topic at all. Always check back and re-read your TOPIC SENTENCE often to see if you have stayed on the TS (for more information on this problem, see the section on UNITY below).

(b.) If you find that many of your examples and other details are off your TOPIC SENTENCES, do not despair. If enough of your examples are on the same topic (even though it is not your original topic), merely change your TS and your THESIS. That is a lot better than being off your TS and THESIS for the entire paper.

4. TRY TO BE MORE POSITIVE THAN NEGATIVE.

(a.) Rather, for example, than show how you failed out of college, show instead what steps you could take (or already took) to excel in school.

(b.) Even if your paper is written to point out problems in a particular area, be sure to include possible positive solutions as a balance. In other words, keep the graders in a positive mode and you will reap the benefits.

5. YOU MAY MAKE UP IDEAS, EXAMPLES, AND STORIES TO SUPPORT YOUR THESIS.

(a.) Be sure, however, that whatever you make-up or fictionalize is both reasonable and feasible. For example, you could say that you read an

article in Time magazine which stated that women are paid comparatively less than men for the same job; that would be believable. However, if you stated that an article in Time magazine stated that women are paid 34.5% less than men are, your reader might well wonder how you could memorize such a figure. Similarly, while writing a BODY ¶ about how to do well in school, you might make up a story about how you personally conquered a particular subject even if it is not true. Be careful, however, that you do not overdo it and start writing about how great a student you became. If your essay—now the very proof of just how you say you are—isn't “perfect,” the graders might just fail the essay in order to teach you a valuable lesson!

(b.) Again, while you can make up any number of things about yourself (and even a fictional friend or two), if someone is real (like President Bush or Michael Jackson), you cannot make up anything about him! Keep your fiction personal, and you can't go wrong.

6. KEEP TRACK OF THE NUMBER OF SENTENCES IN YOUR BODY

¶s:

(a.) Remember, that with few exceptions (like a “perfect” ¶ written by Hemingway or Faulkner), if your BODY ¶s have less than 5-7 sentences (depending on whether you are writing a four-¶ or a five-¶ paper), you will most likely fail the Regents' Test!

(b.) Note that with skipped lines, a paper with the proper number of sentences should cover two pages, minimum (the two inside pages of the test booklet, that is). Of course, students with large or small handwriting

will write longer and shorter papers, respectively, but if your paper is shorter than the standard two-page model, you are probably not writing enough!

7. A GOOD BODY ¶ LEAVES YOUR READER WITH NO UNANSWERED QUESTIONS.

You always want to use enough examples, stories, or reasons to truly prove your TS. If, for example, your ¶ is about the “great food” you eat at Thanksgiving, talking about the turkey alone is not enough. Your ¶ should include at least something about the stuffing, dessert, etc.

E. HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR BODY PARAGRAPHS:

1. USE EXAMPLES

(a.) EXAMPLES, that is, details, particulars, and specific instances which explain statements (TOPIC SENTENCES) are the easiest way to expand your ¶. Think of EXAMPLES as parts of a whole. Look at the following ¶s, all of which use EXAMPLES to expand upon and prove the TOPIC SENTENCE (and thus the THESIS):

(b.) “Children can be very cruel [TS]. Very early, for example, they learn that words can wound. Little three-year-olds in nursery school call each other ‘dumdum’ or ‘weirdo.’ Children also attack each other physically. Whenever a group of grade-schoolers troop home from school, there is a lot of pushing, tripping, punching, and pinching. But far worse than harsh words or physical violence is the emotional hurt children can cause their classmates. Often unpopular kids are shunned, and these youngsters endure a hurt that is worse than cruel words and fistfights. Obviously,

childhood is not the ideal time” [Adapted from John Langan, English Skills with Readings 118].

(c.) Another facet of growing old I fear is being completely alone. Often in old age one of the spouses die. If someone is seventy or eighty years old, it is not that easy to remarry. Similarly, many old people are alone because their children have moved far away. My friend, Barney, has two sons and a daughter. Unfortunately, all three married and moved to California. Now Barney gets to see the—at best—once a year at Christmas. [Notice how this fake story brings the EXAMPLE home.]

2. NUMBERS AND STATISTICS:

(a.) Remember that you can fictionalize some STATISTICS, but the key is reasonability. Note the way NUMBERS are used in the following ¶s:

(b.) In order to build up one's arms, there are a minimum number of exercises a person must do. For example, for the biceps, a person should do at least three sets of “pull- ups” with a barbell—ten repetitions or more. Once some progress is seen, a person should increase the weight by five pounds a week until he sees satisfactory results. For triceps, a person might try some “pull downs” on a Nautilus. Starting perhaps with fifty pounds, a person might try two sets of eight repetitions apiece and work up to a hundred pounds. Once he has worked up to one hundred pounds, he is on his way to great-looking arms.

(c.) Another horrible thing about old age is the possibility of financial problems. Some businesses force their employees to retire at sixty-five, leaving many older people relying solely on social security payments,

roughly \$650 a month today. There is, moreover, the cost of health care. Recent studies show that many older people spend about forty percent of their income just going to the doctors, getting their prescriptions filled, etc. With payments like those for health costs, it's no wonder so many old people have to survive on 49¢ cans of cat food! [Note the numbers and statistics here. They fill-up the ¶ with useful details which help to prove the TS.]

3. SENSES (USE OF DESCRIPTION)

(a.) One of the best ways to “fill-up” or expand your ¶ is through the use of DESCRIPTION (which of course involves using the five SENSES).

Description using your SENSES makes the ¶ come alive on the page, making it far more believable too. Look at how DESCRIPTION vitalizes the following ¶:

(b.) Another reason I cannot stand my brother is that he is a slob. For example, he never cleans up his room. On the floor are Coke cans, old Domino Pizza boxes, and unwashed clothes he took off more than a month ago. Moreover, he is a very sloppy eater. After a meal that is too disgusting to watch him eat, there is gravy on his pants, spinach on the floor, and even some hamburger meat in his hair! To make matters worse he seldom bathes. He smells so bad that I sometimes look forward to running over a skunk for some relief.

4. REASONS (THE CAUSE)

(a.) Keep your CAUSES simple and direct. Too often students pick out weird or very indirect CAUSES to explain things. Believable means

simple.

(b.) Bicycling is another great way to exercise. First, it is fairly inexpensive. After the initial cost of the bicycle (around \$250 for a good one), a person can continue to ride his or her two-wheeler for practically nothing. In addition, the bicycle provides a pleasant, even exhilarating way to exercise flabby muscles and clear clogged respiratory systems. A thirty-minute ride around the neighborhood can burn over 600 calories! Best of all, people on bicycles get to look at the world in a whole new way, not merely from their small, boxy cars. Now they can be calm and relaxed, closer to the trees, flowers and birds than any enclosed vehicle has allowed them to be.

5. INCIDENTS, ANECDOTES, OR STORIES

(a.) When all else fails, a short **STORY** or **ANECDOTE** is the fastest way to expand a ¶ and give it some convincing detail. A student can use a real **STORY** from his or her life or fictionalize one; remember if it could be true, it will be true enough for the graders.

(b.) There are two types of **STORIES** a writer can use in an essay. One is a really short **INCIDENT**, perhaps two or three sentences long, which illustrates a particular reason or example. These are the easiest to write and are highly recommended. The other type of **STORY** is longer; indeed it may be a whole ¶ in length. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with a good long **STORY** that illustrates or proves a **TOPIC SENTENCE**. Problems develop when (and if) the story is a little off the **THESIS** or **TOPIC SENTENCE**; that is to say, it is related to the **TOPIC SENTENCE**

but does not really prove it—and this type of problem is very common on the Regents’ Test. If one has written merely a bad two or three sentence STORY, the ¶ may not be completely ruined; however, if a student writes a ¶-length STORY which is off the subject, then the entire paper is in jeopardy. Here are some examples of the “good” use of a story:

(c.) Another reason I love living in a small town is the friendliness of the people. Once I was driving through Oneida, a small town in Ohio, and I got a flat tire. Within ten minutes three cars stopped and offered to lend me a hand. I had a flat in downtown Atlanta last year and spent an hour changing it—alone. Another time I was in a small-town restaurant and found I had no money. The owner told me not to worry, to enjoy my meal, and to send him the money when I had it. Perhaps the people in a small town are friendlier because everybody knows one another. If, for example, Sam doesn't help Sally, everyone else will know about Sam's selfishness by the end of the day, and then Sam won't be able to show himself in public. [Note here the writer has used two short STORIES and a REASON to prove his TS.]

(c.) One reason people over twenty-five go to college is to change careers. My friend George, for instance, used to work for Eastern as a baggage handler. When it folded, he was forced to re-train himself, so he enrolled at Clayton State and took some computer courses. He became so fascinated with computers he took every course in computers the college had to offer, then some more in computer maintenance. In three years he knew more about programming and computer repair than any teacher in

the school, so he decided to go into the computer business himself. Now he owns three computer stores and one of the largest computer repair services in Metro Atlanta. [Here the entire ¶ becomes proof of the TS.]

6. COMPARISON/CONTRAST

(a.) A number of topics on the Regents' Test lend themselves to ¶s written through COMPARISON/CONTRAST, for example, “Do you prefer shopping at a large shopping center or at downtown stores? Discuss” (#15), and “Would you prefer to raise a family in the city or in the country? Explain why” (#181). While there are any number of ways to write ¶s for these essay topics, only three are recommended. In the first pattern, the writer simply “forgets” about one part of the equation and focuses only on the other. For example, if the student is asked “Would you prefer to raise a family in the city or the country? Explain,” a student could write, say, only the joys of country living—the fresh air, low crime rate, etc. This method is perfectly acceptable.

(b.) Another method a writer may employ is ¶ alternation. Using this method, a writer could devote an entire ¶ to, say, the “joys” of country living, and then he would devote another entire ¶ to the “horrors” of living in the city. This method is also perfectly acceptable as long as the author remembers one all-important rule: Whatever one brings up or covers in one ¶, he must also cover in the other ¶. For instance, if the writer talks about the “fresh air” one finds in the country, he needs to cover the “polluted air” in the city. And the topics must be covered in the same order! If ¶ 2 (the first BODY ¶) covers people, air and crime—in that order—then ¶ 3 (the

second BODY ¶) will cover those same topics in that order.

(c.) One final pattern a writer can use (and it is perhaps the best, most common, and easiest method) is alternation within the ¶ itself. For instance, the writer might spend a few sentences on “A” (the city), then a few sentences on “B” (the country)—then back again to “A,” etc. until that TS is proved. The next ¶ proceeds in the same manner until the THESIS has been proved. Look at the following ¶ written in this pattern:

(d.) A big city also offers more cultural advantages than does a small town. A city like New York, for example, has twenty, even thirty art museums. There a person could see modern art, medieval art, Native American art, the list goes on. In a small town like Dalton, Georgia, one would be lucky to see one good exhibit a year at the local library. Furthermore, a big city—and not just New York—is a great place to see live shows and theatre. In Atlanta last year I saw Les Miserables at the Fox and a great comedy at the Alliance Theatre. In small towns, the best one can hope for is a revival of The Sound of Music at the high school. And while big cities often have libraries containing tens of thousands of books, small town libraries are content with a few thousand books, seldom the latest and never the odd or exotic.

III. THE CONCLUSION

A. This section will attempt to be like a good CONCLUSION: short and sweet. Too often students write long, wordy, and overblown CONCLUSIONS in an effort to throw in everything they should have written—but left out—in the rest of their paper. As mentioned earlier, good CONCLUSIONS cannot save bad essays; on the other

hand, if a paper is “borderline,” a good CONCLUSION can make the difference. Just follow a few guidelines, and you will seldom go astray.

B. Do's and Don't's of CONCLUSIONS:

1. NEVER, EVER JUST REPEAT YOUR THESIS IN YOUR CONCLUSION!

(a.) This error is the most common—and the most serious—that graders see on the Regents' Test. Avoid it like the plague. After all, your reader has read your THESIS less than five minutes and 400 words ago, and there you go writing it all over again “word for word.” What credit can a student expect to get if all he does is copy himself?!

(b.) If you do run out of anything “new” to say, you may “use” your original THESIS, but only if you restate and rephrase your original idea in a totally fresh way. Such a pattern is fairly easy if you practice it ahead of time, and it is much better than losing credit for unacceptable repetition. Here are some examples of “re-using” a THESIS to write a conclusion.

(c.) If your THESIS is “In order to succeed in school, a student should take good notes, come to class prepared, and participate in class discussion,” you might write:

“Doing well in school, therefore, isn't hard at all. If a student is willing to listen and take notes, read all the material when it is due, and say something in class, better marks are almost guaranteed. The only real failure would be not to try at all.” [Notice that this CONCLUSION is only three sentences in length, and the longest sentence merely “rephrases” the original THESIS, yet overall it is a perfectly acceptable ¶. Just do not repeat your THESIS just as you wrote it originally.]

(d.) If your THESIS is “I would rather live in a small town because it is quieter, safer, friendlier than a large city,” you might write:

“There is no doubt about it. Small towns have less noise, less crime, and nicer people than their larger cousins. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.” [Again, just three sentences and little more than a fresh restatement of the original THESIS—not a great CONCLUSION, but good enough!]

2. KEEP THE CONCLUSION SHORT:

(a.) A CONCLUSION of two to four sentences in length is fine.

Anything longer, especially if your BODY ¶s are on the short side (5-6 sentences), can lead to trouble. For instance, if you write a five-sentence BODY ¶ and a six-sentence CONCLUSION, a reader might wonder why you put so little into proving your THESIS and so much into summing things up. That does not mean a writer cannot use a longer CONCLUSION; just make sure your paper is proportionate: longer papers need longer CONCLUSIONS.

(b.) On the other hand, a CONCLUSION of one sentence is NOT ACCEPTABLE. Save at least something for the very end, some fine phrase or juicy tidbit and spring it on your reader at the last minute. Leave your reader thinking.

3. AVOID ABSOLUTE STATEMENTS. Try not to write such statements like

“This proves that...” or “If we take such and such action, the problem will be solved.” Be accurate and qualify your statements. You might write instead: “If we take this action, we will be helping to solve the problem.”

4. DO NOT APOLOGIZE FOR WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN. Don't ruin your paper by ending with a sentence like "Not that my opinion is really the right one," or "I could, of course, be wrong about what I have said." Sure, you could be wrong, but your reader is aware of different opinions. You are graded on how well you write your paper, not on whether you have solved world hunger.
5. DO NOT RENEGE OR TAKE BACK WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN. So you called Professor X the "worst teacher who ever lived"—leave it at that. If at the end of your paper you begin to wobble about your criticism, don't start saying that the Professor wasn't really a bad teacher after all. Such writing will completely undercut your whole paper. Your reader will not take anything you say personally, so go on and criticize! What counts is your writing.

C. HOW TO WRITE A CONCLUSION:

1. Use the "TYPES OF INTRODUCTIONS" (discussed above) as conclusions. One word of advice: Do NOT use the same method you used in your INTRODUCTION. For instance, if you used a RHETORICAL QUESTION in your INTRODUCTION, use another method in your CONCLUSION.
2. RESTATE (BUT REPHRASE) THE THESIS AND MAJOR POINTS OF YOUR ESSAY (see above).
3. CALL TO ACTION or MAKE A PLEA FOR A CHANGE:
 - (a.) If your essay is about some problem(s) in the world, one of the best ways to end your essay is to ask for a change of attitude or even for a specific action. For example, if your essay is about "the chief reasons students drop out of high school," you could write:

“There is hope, however. Many high school dropouts might be ‘reclaimed’ if programs were created specifically for them—programs which could get them decent-paying mechanical or technical jobs right after high school. It is up to the school system to implement them.”

(b.) If, on the other hand, your essay is about your “fear of growing old,” here is one possible CONCLUSION:

“We are all growing old; soon we may all be broke, alone, or dying from disease. The only possible hope for us is to get the government involved in the problems of the aged. Get them to raise social security benefits, build more social centers, and spend more on medical research. Maybe then we can all live long, happy, productive lives.”

4. A PROPHECY OR A WARNING BASED ON THE THESIS OF YOUR ESSAY:

Suppose your essay is on “How to cut crime in our schools.” Here is a CONCLUSION which could be used to make a strong closing statement:

“If nothing is done and done quickly, things can only get worse. Soon our schools will look like bombed-out buildings in Bosnia or abandoned tenements in South Bronx. With no one to stop the crimes or the criminals, learning in schools will eventually stop, and the low scores of America's children will only get worse. The choice is ours.”

5. DRAW THE NECESSARY CONCLUSIONS FROM WHAT HAS BEEN SAID:

“Drawing on the facts given in the essay, you may use the concluding ¶ to form judgments about the topic” (Steps in Composition 292). Say the

essay question is “If you could ban anything in the world, what would it be and why?” (#203) and you choose drugs to ban. Here is a possible

CONCLUSION:

“Thus it can be seen that the strong warnings about drug abuse heard on the radio and television and seen in newspapers and magazines are not an exaggeration. The evidence is overwhelming and only one overriding conclusion can be drawn: drugs are deadly and experimenting with them can lead people, and, in fact, our entire society to the point of extinction” (Troyka and Nudelman 292).

D. SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON CONCLUSIONS (and INTRODUCTIONS):

Do not be afraid of being “inventive” in your CONCLUSION. There and in your INTRODUCTION are the two places you can let yourself go a little and be truly imaginative. In the BODY ¶s a student must be careful to prove his THESIS, to be methodical, orderly, and logical. In the INTRODUCTION and CONCLUSION, while a person must still stay on the topic, he or she may have some “fun” with the topic—really, some fun! Remember, it's just an essay, and the graders are human. If you can get “excited” about your essay, so will your readers.

UNITY

In communication, UNITY means oneness: One subject, one controlling attitude. one tone. The key to UNITY is to keep focused on your limited, single subject—your THESIS! UNITY in writing is thus consistently maintaining the single, specific direction you take at the beginning of your paper (or ¶).

Remember, the THESIS provides the single direction to be followed throughout an

entire paper. Similarly, through its own specific controlling idea and attitude, the TOPIC SENTENCE provides the single logical direction each developmental ¶ follows in support of the THESIS.

I. KINDS OF UNITY

A. WHOLE ESSAY

1. UNITY is maintained throughout the whole essay by the simple use of TOPIC SENTENCES which relate to, and indeed come from, the THESIS itself (for more information on this idea, see STRUCTURE above).

2. Every time you are about to write another sentence, ask yourself two questions: Does this sentence relate directly to the TOPIC SENTENCE? And does this sentence relate directly to the THESIS? If you cannot say a very exuberant “yes” to both of these questions, cross it out! You can do better.

B. FROM PARAGRAPH TO PARAGRAPH (UNITY BETWEEN ¶s is usually and easily achieved by the use of transitional expressions and selective repetition. For a complete discussion of these methods, see the section on **COHERENCE** below.)

C. WITHIN THE PARAGRAPH

1. For a ¶ to be UNIFIED, all the details in the ¶ must support and develop the single point expressed in the first sentence—the TOPIC SENTENCE. Every detail, reason, name, statistic, or description must relate directly and specifically to the TS. If a student does not stay on his subject, his essay will suffer from a lack of UNITY, and that is a major reason for student failures.

2. The best way for a student to maintain UNITY is to BRAINSTORM ahead of time.

3. “Internal Unity is achieved with the use of certain words and types of wording

that link sentences and even paragraphs more successfully” (Troyka and Nudelman 373). These are, again, transitional expressions and selective repetition which are discussed below in the section on COHERENCE.

4. Perhaps the best way to understand UNITY is to see the problems that are created when a student violates it. What follows are the four most common errors in maintaining UNITY seen on the Regents’ Test.

II. THE LACK OF UNITY AND HOW TO CORRECT IT.

A. A SERIES OF GENERALIZATIONS:

1. Essays on the Regents’ Test often suffer from a great lack of focus. The writer comes up with a number of fine sentences, but they are all on a high level of generality. Instead of writing one general statement (The TOPIC SENTENCE) and then developing it with details, examples, etc., the writer decides to “string together a series of generalizations.” Even if all of them discuss the same main idea, they don’t really develop that idea. For example:

"Everyone is interested in preserving the quality of our environment and natural habitats. The beauty of nature is something almost everyone responds to. Respect for nature comes from a feeling we all share that the environment is something important to our well-being today, and to that of our children... tomorrow. Without a healthy environment, we will find ourselves ravaged by disease and deprived of the beauties of nature. Unless we do something about the environmental crisis in our society today, we soon won’t have a society to worry about.” (Hairston and Ruskiewicz 106).

[This ¶ lacks UNITY as well as direction. Though there are a number of decent

sentences here, almost all suffer from over-generalization. Indeed, any one of them could become a TOPIC SENTENCE for “a totally different ¶” (Hairston 106). However, there are no details here to develop anything—an unacceptable ¶.]

2. To avoid this type of error within a ¶, always look back after each sentence you write and see whether you are developing the TOPIC SENTENCE or not. If you are not writing details, then you know you are in trouble.

B. “RIDING ONE’S HOBBY HORSE”

1. Occasionally students write one paragraph when they really want to write another. This error usually occurs when they have a hidden agenda (though it may be an unconscious one); no matter how hard they try to write about one thing, they always seem to drift back to another. In other words, they ride their “hobby horse.” Look at the following ¶, supposedly about substitutes for cigarette smoking. The sentences are numbered for easy identification in the discussion that follows:

¹Many people who smoke have been forced to come up with some creative substitutes lately [TOPIC SENTENCE]. ²Smoking in many places has been banned, but cigarette smokers continue to disregard the health of others. ³They also persist in littering the streets with their butts. ⁴In many restaurants, there they are, sucking on an after-dinner mint rather than smoking. ⁵Other “would-be smokers” have taken to chewing gum a lot. ⁶The sale of Wrigley's and Dentyne gums have almost doubled since public places cracked down on smoking. ⁷However, smokers often ignore the signs against smoking and smoke anyway. ⁸And in places where fires easily start, they cause a lot of damage with

their carelessness. ⁹Many can even be seen biting their nails down to the quick; it's disgusting, but it's better than nothing.

[Notice how often this writer strays from his original topic. He is supposed to be talking of “creative substitutes” for smoking, but too often he writes about his dislike of smokers and the troubles they cause. For instance, look at sentences #2, 3, 7, and 8. All of them are off the TS. On the other hand, do not be deceived by sentence # 6. Many students think that it too is off, but it is not. In fact, sentence # 6 provides a detail for sentence # 5. The latter sentence talks about “chewing gum a lot,” and the next sentence proves it by giving details of just how much gum is being chewed across America. Indeed, it is this type of sentence that graders look for!]

2. To avoid this type of error in UNITY, a writer needs to be sure just what he or she is attempting to “prove.” There is nothing inherently wrong with writing a ¶ on “The dangers of smoking” or “the rudeness of smokers” as long as the TS prepares the reader for what is to come. Again, look back at the TS often, and you will be sure not to fall into this error.

C. WRITING ON A RELATED BUT DIFFERENT TOPIC

1. This error in UNITY is more common on the Regents' Test because it often creeps in insidiously and is therefore harder for the reader to catch. Now the writer subtly (usually unconsciously) shifts the focus of the ¶ as it is developing. Because the writer seldom has very much time to review the essay, this error is able to sneak in and go unnoticed. Look at the following example to see this error at work:

¹Plastic surgery is often filled with hidden dangers. ²One of the

dangers is scarring. ³Certain people do not heal properly, and their skin shows scalpel and needle marks the rest of their lives. ⁴Yet another problem associated with surgery is immune disease. ⁵Some people who have had chin or breast implants report terrible auto-immune reactions such as cancer as much as twenty years later. ⁶Others are afraid to go out and show their new faces or bodies. ⁷They are embarrassed by their surgery and afraid of the laughs and jeers of their friends. ⁸On the one hand, they desire to look better; on the other, they seem almost ashamed they were forced to resort to surgery to accomplish what nature did not.

[Once more we see a ¶ that lacks UNITY. Sentences 2 through 5 are all on the “dangers” of plastic surgery. In sentence # 6, however, the ¶ turns and begins to discuss a few of the personal problems associated with plastic surgery. No doubt there really are problems associated with cosmetic surgery worth discussing—but not here! Small problems are not dangers.]

2. Once more the way to avoid this type of error is careful re-reading. Take some time to go back and check for grammar errors, errors in reasoning, and, of course, errors in UNITY. You won't find them if you don't look!

D. GIVING REASONS OF REASONS

1. This violation of UNITY is perhaps the subtlest type of all and thus the hardest to catch. It is best explained through an illustration:

One reason I like to buy foreign is that they are better made. First, the governments of these carmakers often help in the research and development process, thus assuring the latest in design before their American counterparts. In America, the carmakers themselves have to bear the brunt

of such costs. Additionally, the employees of foreign carmakers are better paid. Giving them more money gives them more of a stake in their companies, so they try even harder to make better products. Most important of all is the fact that even the “lowest” employee is involved in the decision-making that goes into the design and production of each vehicle. In other words, fifty thousand heads are better than one.

[At first glance, there seems to be nothing wrong here; it seems a more than adequate ¶ on the reasons foreign carmakers make better cars than we do. What’s wrong—a lot. While this ¶ does discuss the “reasons” foreign companies do good work, that is NOT what this ¶ is supposed to be about! The ¶ purports to be about why “I like...foreign cars.” With such a TS, the reader expects examples of well-made foreign cars the writer may have owned, perhaps a story or two of good experiences the writer has had with foreign cars (as well, maybe, as bad ones with American models). What the reader receives, unfortunately, is a ¶ about the reasons foreign cars are well made, but that is not the issue. The issue is why this particular writer likes foreign cars. The reasons for their quality could be used in a paper about “why foreign cars are well made,” but not here. That is a completely other issue; in other words, it is off the original topic, ruining the UNITY of this ¶. It is close, but close is not good enough. Had the writer kept his focus on the key words “reasons I like...foreign cars,” this error could have been avoided.]

2. The key, as always, is careful rereading - before the paper is actually finished. If you do not catch these errors early, you may be stuck crossing

out entire sentences (another reason to skip lines!), but even that is better than no UNITY!

COHERENCE

When we talk about COHERENCE, we are talking about the connections, the “glue” that holds good writing together. An essay has COHERENCE when all the parts are linked and all the sentences flow together to make a logical clear point—everything thus works together to prove your THESIS. The reader should be able to follow what you have written and see easily and quickly how each sentence grows out of, or is related to, the preceding sentence.

I. ACHIEVING COHERENCE BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS

A. USING TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSIONS:

1. The easiest way to connect two BODY 7s is through the use of TRANSITIONS (see the list of TRANSITIONS below in section 11, “ACHIEVING COHERENCE WITHIN ¶s.” Note the examples of THESIS and TOPIC SENTENCES which follow here; the TRANSITIONS are underlined.

(a.) THESIS: “My favorite vacation spot would have to be Hawaii because of its friendly people, its array of water sports, and its fabulous night life.”

TS1: “The nice people all over the island are one reason to visit Hawaii.”

TS2: “Water sports are another reason to vacation in our fiftieth state.”

TS3: “Last, Hawaii is full of entertainment for the late night partier.”

(b.) THESIS: “In order to succeed in school, a student should take good notes, come to class prepared, and participate in class discussions.”

TS1: “The first thing a student needs to do is take full and adequate notes

in class.”

TS2: “A good student also needs to be prepared when class begins.”

TS3: “Finally, to do well in school, a student should not be afraid to participate in class.”

2. Using TRANSITIONS this way is the easiest and, unfortunately, the most abused method of linking ideas. Use TRANSITIONS, but use them wisely.

B. REPETITION OF KEY WORDS AND PHRASES:

1. Another, more sophisticated, way to connect ¶s is by using words or phrases from one ¶ and include them in the following TS. A “key word” (a major point in the preceding ¶) is repeated, thus linking the ¶s together. Here are the topic sentences from right above (A. 1. a-b) rewritten using this method:

(a.) TS1: “The nice people all over the island are one reason to visit Hawaii.”

TS2: “Besides the nicest people on earth, there are wonderful water sports throughout the island paradise.”

TS3: “If a person doesn't like the water, there is always the great late-night entertainment to keep him or her happy.”

(b.) TS1: “The first thing a good student needs to do is to take good and adequate notes in class.”

TS2: “Taking good notes is not enough; a student also needs to be prepared when class begins.”

TS3: “While taking notes and preparation are important, nothing will

help a student's grade more than a willingness to participate in class.”

2. Note that in the examples above, the links to the preceding ¶ are put in subordinating clauses, that is, into less important parts of the TS. Save the “new material” for the main clause of the TS.

3. Again, for this method to work, a student should use it wisely—and sparingly. When taking practice Regents’ Tests, a student should try both methods (TRANSITIONS and REPETITION) often, until he or she can use either for any essay. The best advice is the use both for the “real thing.”

The graders love writers who show some variety in their essays.

4. Do not forget that the most important way to achieve COHERENCE in your paper as a whole is through your THESIS and your TOPIC SENTENCES, which come directly from that THESIS. Spend some real quality time practicing writing a good THESIS and good TOPIC SENTENCES. Then, try to add TRANSITIONS to your TOPIC SENTENCES, and, finally, try linking the TS's through “Key Word REPETITION.” Practice!

II. ACHIEVING COHERENCE WITHIN PARAGRAPHS

A. USING TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSIONS:

1. While TRANSITIONS can be used to link ¶s together, their most important function is to connect main points and details within the ¶s themselves. Here is a ¶ written without any TRANSITIONS:

(a.) “Cigarette companies encourage teens to smoke. They distribute free cigarettes outside concert halls. Although cigarettes are not supposed to be given to anyone under 21, young teens are seldom refused cigarettes if

they ask for them. The companies encourage smoking by sponsoring events that teens love. At a rock concert, behind the group on stage is a gigantic sign advertising Marlboros. Cigarettes are equated with rock stardom. Companies advertise in magazines that appeal to teenagers, all showing attractive young models smoking.”

[This ¶ is hard to read; the sentences run into each other, making them difficult to follow. Indeed, it is almost impossible to separate one idea from another. Here is the same ¶ with TRANSITIONS strategically placed:]

(b.) “Cigarette companies encourage teens to smoke. For one thing, they distribute free cigarettes outside concert halls.

Although cigarettes are not supposed to be given to anyone under 21, young teens are seldom refused cigarettes if they ask for them. Another way the companies encourage smoking is by sponsoring events that teens love. At a rock concert, for example, behind the group on the stage is a gigantic sign advertising Marlboros.

Cigarettes are thus equated with rock stardom. Finally, companies advertise in magazines that appeal to teenagers, such as Rolling Stone, all showing attractive young models smoking.”

2. Although their use is important, too many TRANSITIONS are almost as bad as no TRANSITIONS at all. The overuse of TRANSITIONS tends to slow down your writing, and makes it seem sluggish and forced. The key is to strike a balance between using them and other methods to achieve

COHERENCE (for other methods, see the section that follows this one, below).

3. Here is a list of TRANSITIONS. Though not exhaustive, the list contains more than enough words to get someone through the examination:

To Write a Sequence

first second third next last finally

To Add a Thought

second (NOT secondly)		third (NOT thirdly)	in the second place
and	moreover	next	in addition
also	furthermore	further	again

To Introduce an Illustration

for example	for instance	to illustrate	namely
in other words	thus	specifically	

To Indicate a Conclusion or Result

therefore	to sum up	as a result	thus
consequently	in other words	hence	in brief
in conclusion			

To Make a Contrast or Qualification

on the other hand	however	but	on the contrary
by contrast	yet	or	conversely
nevertheless			

To Show Similarity

similarly likewise in the same way in like manner

To Summarize

finally in summary therefore in conclusion as a result

4. Be sure you know what a TRANSITION means before you use it. One of the most common errors graders see on the Regents' Test is the misuse of TRANSITIONS, that is, students using one type of TRANSITION when they should be using another. For example, a student might (incorrectly) write: "It's cold and rainy; thus, I decided to run three miles," when he meant to write: "It's cold and rainy; nevertheless, I decided to run three miles." See the difference?

B. REPETITION OF KEY WORDS

Important words and key phrases may be repeated throughout a ¶ to connect the thoughts into a coherent statement. Of course, too much REPETITION can be tedious, but "good" REPETITION can help your reader follow your thoughts. The following ¶ repeats several key words (underlined); note the results:

"Oddly enough, retirement can pose more problems for the spouse than for the retired person. For a person who has been accustomed to a demanding job, retirement can mean frustration and a feeling of uselessness. This feeling will put pressure on the spouse to provide challenges at home equal to those of the workplace. Often, these tasks will disrupt the spouse's well-established routine. Another problem arising from retirement is filling up all those empty hours. The spouse may find

himself or herself in the role of social director, expected to come up with a new form of amusement every day. It is no wonder that many of these partners wish their spouses would come out of retirement and do something—anything—just to get out of the house” (Langan 46).

C. SUBSTITUTUNG PRONOUNS FOR KEY TERMS

Pronouns (like he, she, it, they, that, etc.) are another way to connect your ideas within a ¶. Furthermore, “Using pronoun to take the place of other words or ideas can help you avoid needless repetition” (Langan 46). Note the PRONOUNS in the following ¶ and note how they help tie the ¶ together:

Another way my sister Jane was able to lose weight was to cut down on the fat she ate. And fat was everywhere; it was in just about everything Jane liked. It was in her favorite breakfast, of course. The ham and eggs she always ate were loaded with fat. Jane's lunch was usually loaded with it as well. She was always partial to Chick Filet sandwiches, and those had to go too. Her former favorite dinners were also off-limits. Jane used to love meals like spaghetti and meatballs, but these were now forbidden. Worst of all, Jane felt, was the fat she found in her desserts, desserts like cheesecake, ice cream, and blueberry pie. All of these, like so many of her usual foods, had to be eliminated—and palatable substitutes had to be found.

D. USING SYNONYMS FOR KEY WORDS.

Using SYNONYMS—that is, words that are the same in meaning—are another way to achieve COHERENCE. The SYNONYMS link key ideas together in the reader's mind.

E. USING PARALLEL STRUCTURE.

“PARALLELISM in a ¶ means using the same grammatical structures in several

sentences to establish COHERENCE. The repeated use of similar phrasing helps tie the ideas and sentences together” (Wyrick 54). (For an example of this method, look at the second and third sentence in the ¶ directly above—C. 1. a.).

KNOWLEDGE OF GRAMMAR

Although the Regent's Essay Test is marked “holistically,” that is, the graders do not count how many spelling errors you make or the number of fragments in your paper—they look at the whole paper, instead—grammar errors obviously count for a great deal on the test. No single error will cause a paper to fail, nor will two or three be enough to spoil your essay.

What the graders look for is a pattern of errors. If it is clear that the writer has no command of sentence structure or misspells too many words or has no idea when to put in or leave out a comma, then the paper could easily fail.

As important as Knowledge of Grammar is, however, this little pamphlet is not the place to discuss the full array of errors students are apt to make in their essays. A more sensible approach is to take one of the many diagnostic tests available in the Center for Academic Success (CAS). That will pinpoint quickly some of the major problems you may be having. Additionally, your Regents' instructor will go over your practice essays with you, perhaps pointing out additional grammar errors you may be having.

Once your problems have been identified, you will find a vast number of books, audio and video cassettes, and computer-assisted modules to help you, and all of these are located in the Center for Academic Success too. In addition, the CAS has trained staff to help you find everything you need. So get to work!

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