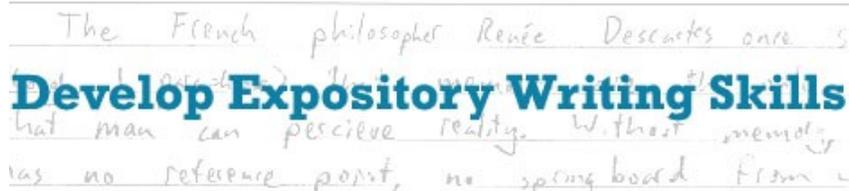


10 Ways Expository Writing Skills

10 Ways to...



With The New York Times

Have you been knocking your head against the proverbial wall trying to teach - or learn - expository writing skills? Take a fresh approach with these 10 tips! We encourage you to send us your thoughts about these suggestions by visiting our [feedback page](#).

1. Ditch the five-paragraph essay and embrace "authentic" **essay structure**. Times news and feature articles are excellent models for structure, including transitions and organization. Look at the [guide to forms of Times news coverage](#) to get started, and then deconstruct some articles to get a feel for how they are organized.

Classic news stories like [this one about conflicts over rebuilding ground zero](#) are written in the "inverted pyramid" format, starting with the most important information - the first paragraph or two answers the questions "Who?" "What?" "Where?" "When?" "Why?" and "How?" - and proceeding with the most important details, filling in the less important information as the article proceeds. This can be a useful structure for, say, newspaper articles based on the events in a play or novel, or relatively short research reports.

Feature stories pull the reader in with an engaging introduction and develop from there to explain a topic, issue or trend. Examples of this structure: [this article on gauging the national mood](#) by tracking popular songs, blog posts and the like, and [this column on the blankets-with-sleeves trend](#).

A sub-genre of the feature, the personality profile, is also a useful expository writing model, as in [this lesson on Dickens](#), which suggests using a profile of Bernie Madoff as a model for writing a character profile, and [this lesson on the literature Nobelist Naguib Mahfouz](#).

To take the idea of using newspaper story structures further, try [this lesson on comparing classic storylines with news reports](#).

2. Two traditional essay writing bugaboos are **introductions and conclusions**. The Times is full of creative ways to open and end a narrative, and these can help developing writers learn to avoid clichéd openings and repetitive endings. Here are some of the approaches Times writers take to begin and end their stories, together with examples of each one:

- Narrative opening: Telling a story that illustrates or encapsulates the issue at hand, like [this story about the dangers associated with riding in a taxi when the cabby is using a phone](#) and [this one about fans paying homage to Michael Jackson](#)
- Descriptive opening: Describing an element that is key to the story, like [this description of a high-end coffee machine](#) in a feature on the topic of fancy coffee makers
- Question opening: posing a rhetorical question that leads directly into the rest of the essay, like [this article about popular baby names](#)
- Frame: Bringing the essay full circle by starting and ending with elements of the same story, like [this article on Cuban doctors](#) unable to practice in the U.S.
- Quote kicker: Ending with a quote that sums up the essence of the essay, like [this one on raising chickens](#)
- Future action kicker: Ending with a look toward what may or will happen in the future, as in

[this article on fake art in Vietnam](#)

Looking for more inspiration? Read John Noble Wilford's [retrospective article about covering the 1969 moon landing](#), focusing on the section "Moonfall Eve," in which he recounts trying to figure out how to start his [article](#). The upshot: Simple is often best.

3. Informing and explaining - how things work or how to do something - is part of journalism's bread and butter. Good Times models for information/explanation essays include articles on [how dark energy works](#), [why and how Twitter can be useful](#), [how to make a soufflé](#) and [how to avoid heatstroke](#). To find more examples, good starting places are the [recipes](#) in the [Dining](#) section and the [Science](#) and [Health](#) sections.

One specific type of explanation essay is analysis - an examination of why and how an issue is significant. If you're looking for good models, The Times runs many pieces under the rubric "news analysis," such as [this article on the significance of steroid use in baseball](#) and [this one on President Obama's remarks on the arrest of Henry Louis Gates](#). Read these, or other articles marked "news analysis," and then try writing your own analysis of an event - perhaps something that happened at school, or perhaps something that happened in a piece of literature or in history.

4. In addition to information and explanation, there are a few **other key expository patterns**. Here are the most common ones, together with a Times models of each one, each paired with a related handout:

- Comparison - Technology article on [Bing vs. Google](#); [Venn diagram](#)
- Cause and effect - Health article on ["chemo brain"](#); [Cause and Effect Organizer](#)
- Problem and solution - Op-Ed on [how schools should handle flu outbreaks](#); [Problem-Solution Organizer](#)
- Extended definition - The On Language column, such as [this column on the use of "associate", "model" and even "the"](#) and the [Times Health Guide](#), a library of information on numerous health conditions; [Vocabulary Log](#)

For more fun with definitions, see the [Schott's Vocab](#) blog.

5. Whether you're writing a **descriptive** piece or incorporating description into a larger expository essay, specific details are vital, as in [this piece on a city mural](#) and [this one about Michael Jackson's signature dance moves](#).

Of course, one of the best places to find colorful descriptions is the Times' [Sports](#) pages, as in [this article about a tennis match played by Rafael Nadal](#). Use our [Play-by-Play Sports Descriptions](#) sheet to get a closer look at descriptive phrases in this or other sports articles.

6. "I've said all I have to say." "How can I possibly write three pages on this topic?" "What do you mean, develop my ideas?" Essay writers often struggle with adequate **development**. Times features are perfect examples of how to fully develop ideas. For example, you might read ["Drivers and Legislators Dismiss Cellphone Risks"](#) or [Michael Pollan's polemic on cooking shows and the decline of home cooking](#) in the Sunday Magazine. Then create a ["reverse outline"](#) to reveal how the writer developed the piece.

7. Like development, smoothly **incorporating supporting material** and evidence - including introducing and integrating quotations - can be a challenge for young writers. Add the requirement to follow MLA or APA style for citations, and for many students the challenge is insurmountable. Part of the problem may be that most students see few articles or other texts with academic citations in their daily lives. Using The Times for models can help.

You might suspend traditional academic style requirements, and instead try newspaper-style attribution or even the Web protocol of linking to the source of information - such as [this article on digital curriculum materials](#), which, among many, many others, shows both approaches. Other articles, like [this one about government recommendations to schools regarding swine flu](#), are good examples of how to integrate both partial and full quotations, as well as how to include

paraphrases.

8. Subject-verb and noun-pronoun **agreement** can trouble even established writers at the newspaper of record itself, as the After Deadline blog has [discussed](#), [more than once](#). Once you've reviewed agreement rules, test yourself by looking for errors in the daily paper. And given that Times style is to avoid using "he" as a universal pronoun, virtually any news article or feature provides examples of ways to write around the singular pronoun. Of course, it would help us all [if English had an all-purpose, generic pronoun](#), wouldn't it?

More on agreement and other grammar and language quirks can be found on the [Grammar and Usage](#) and [Reading and Writing Skills](#) Times Topics pages, as well as on our [Teaching with The Times page on Language and Usage](#).

9. News briefs and summaries are models of **conciseness and clarity**. Read a few briefs, like the ones about the [music video directed by Heath Ledger](#), the [death of a show-biz dog](#), and a [spate of squid attacks](#). And for the ultimate in brevity, look at [TimesWire](#) for one-sentence (or sentence fragment) summaries of the latest articles.

10. Can't use the first person in expository writing? No one uses second person? Third person is required, and must remain entirely neutral and objective? Pshaw! The Times regularly uses all three **perspectives**, in creative and effective ways. Here are examples:

- First person - "[Watching Whales, Watching Us](#)", a Sunday Magazine article in which the reporter included personal experience alongside research, and "[Finally, the Spleen Gets Some Respect](#)", Natalie Angier's scientific report on the spleen, in which she characterizes herself as splenetic
- Second person - "[Party On, but No Tweets](#)", and the Gadgetwise [blog post on a smartphone app for stargazers](#), which explains how the tool works, both of which repeatedly refer to "you," avoiding the clunky and unnecessarily distancing "one"
- Third person with a clear voice/personality - Rob Walker's "Consumed" column in the Sunday Magazine, such as [the one on the yoga "lifestyle" shop Lululemon](#) and the Style feature "[Hair, Hair, Hair, Hair, Hair](#)"

Use these and other Times models to learn how to write an expository essay that is compelling, convincing and authoritative as well as engaging to read.

The banner image above was based on a College Board image of sample SAT essays, from the article [Perfect's New Profile, Warts and All](#) by Tamar Lewin.