

# Introduction: four types of discursive writing



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How to Write Articles and Essays Quickly and Expertly Introduction: Four Types of Discursive Writing From time to time people express amazement at how I can get so much done. I, of course, aware of the many hours I have idled away doing nothing, demur. It feels like nothing special; I don't work harder, really, than most people. Nonetheless, these people do have a point. I am, in fact, a fairly prolific writer. Part of it is tenacity. For example, I am writing this item as I wait for the internet to start working again in the Joburg airport departures area. But part of it is a simple strategy for writing you essays and articles quickly and expertly, a strategy that allows you to plan your entire essay as you write it, and thus to allow you to make your first draft your final draft. This article describes that strategy. Begin by writing - in your head, at least - your second paragraph (that would be the one you just read, above). Your second paragraph will tell people what your essay says. Some people write abstracts or executive summaries in order to accomplish this task. But you don't need to do this. You are stating your entire essay or article in one paragraph. If you were writing a news article, you would call this paragraph the 'lede'. A person could read just the one paragraph and know what you had to say. But how do you write this paragraph? Reporters will tell you that writing the lede is the hardest part of writing an article. Because if you don't know what the story is, you cannot write it in a single paragraph. A reporter will sift through the different ways of writing the story - the different angles - and find a way to tell it. You, because you are writing an article or essay, have more options. You have more options because there are four types of discursive writing. Each of these types has a distinct and easy structure, and once you know what sort of writing you are doing, the rest of the article almost writes itself. The four types of structure are:

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argument, explanation, definition, and description. So, as you think about writing your first paragraph, ask yourself, what sort of article are you writing. In this article, for example, I am writing a descriptive article. These are your choices of types of article or essay: Argument: convinces someone of something Explanation: tells why something happened instead of something else Definition: states what a word or concept means Description: identifies properties or qualities of things An argument is a collection of sentences (known formally as 'propositions') intended to convince the reader that something is the case. Perhaps you want to convince people to take some action, to buy some product, to vote a certain way, or to believe a certain thing. The thing that you want to convince them to believe is the conclusion. In order to convince people, you need to offer one or more reasons. Those are the premises. So one type of article consists of premises leading to a conclusion, and that is how you would structure your first paragraph. An explanation tells the reader why something is the case. It looks at some event or phenomenon, and shows the reader what sort of things led up to that event or phenomenon, what caused it to happen, why it came to be this way instead of some other way. An explanation, therefore, consists of three parts. First, you need to identify the thing being explained. Then, you need to identify the things that could have happened instead. And finally, you need to describe the conditions and principles that led to the one thing, and not the other, being the case. And so, if you are explaining something, this is how you would write your first paragraph. A definition identifies the meaning of some word, phrase or concept. There are different ways to define something. You can define something using words and concepts you already know. Or you can define something by giving a name to something you can

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point to or describe. Or you can define something indirectly, by giving examples of telling stories. A definition always involves two parts: the word or concept being defined, and the set of sentences (or 'propositions') that do the defining. Whatever way you decide, this will be the structure of your article if you intend to define something. Finally, a description provides information about some object, person, or state of affairs. It will consist of a series of related sentences. The sentences will each identify the object being defined, and then ascribe some property to that object. "The ball is red," for example, where the ball is the object and 'red' is the property. Descriptions may be of 'unary properties' - like colour, shape, taste, and the like, or it may describe a relation between the object and one or more other objects.