

How To Write an “A” Paper

KOJI FRAHM

WRITER’S COMMENT: I’m still not sure if I like this essay. But with that said, I will admit it was a ton of fun to write. This essay’s assignment, given in UWP 18 (Style in the Essay), was to parody/imitate another essay from either *Prized Writing 2004–2005* or *Best American Essays*. Originally, I planned to satirize Travis Perkins’s “The Quick and Easy Guide to Writing a Love Song” (already a parody), which I considered the cleverest of the assigned bunch. And so, with a foolish determination to parody a parody (for that’s how I saw the assignment), I set out to outdo Mr. Perkins. Using observation from over the years of all the garbage and terrible techniques people cram into their essays (the idea actually came while discussing Poli Sci papers with my friend), I molded the most ridiculous and multilayered piece I’ve ever attempted—this being the result. I still have qualms with it; it still doesn’t measure up to what I had in mind, and I don’t think by any means I outdid Mr. Perkins (besides, they looked nothing alike by the end). But for what it’s worth, it’s made people chuckle, and that, for me, was the greatest reward of writing this piece.

—Koji Frahm

INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: I have to admit I’ve had the hardest time writing an introductory comment to this piece; how to explain why I would give an “A” to a paper that tells how to get an “A” . . . and gives all the worst possible advice on how to do so? And how could I possibly match the level of wit and satire that Koji Frahm exhibits here? What can I say? Only that it made me laugh out loud. And . . . and there I go again—anything I say about this piece only detracts from it. So I’ll just say this: Koji wrote clever, intriguing, beautiful essays all quarter (one of them made Honorable Mention in this contest)—but he really outdid himself here. I would like to thank, in my turn, Kerry Hanlon, for her inspired writing assignments that elicited the two highly amusing and polished essays in *Prized Writing 2004–05* (by Travis Perkins and Jarrie Chang) that I assigned in UWP 18 (Style in the Essay) to give my students inspiration for their own satires. I’ll stop now—read on and learn . . . How (Not) To Write an A Paper.

—Pamela Demory, University Writing Program

BE NEBULOUS. Scratch that, be amphibological. The vaguer, the better. The reader should be thinking, *what the hell does that mean?* right off the bat. The first sentence is key. Make it short, deadly, and impossible to understand. Convuluted is the term to use here. And remember, I'm not talking indiscernible due to stupidity; I'm talking indiscernible due to smarts. You have to sound brilliant. Scratch that, perspicacious. Be as opaque as a dense fog settling in front of a concrete wall—let them see nothing. Make them understand that you're smarter than they are. The sooner you establish this, the better. Hitting them hard and fast on the first sentence is the quickest way to do it. Make them so unsure of their own acumen from the start that they won't question you afterwards. Get them on the ground, and keep them there. Your God-like intelligence should never be questioned by these mere mortals—that's how you should be writing. Look at your first sentence for a moment and consider this: Is it short? Is it vague? Does it tell the reader nothing about what's going on? If so—bingo. You're in the clear. You can't be marked off if they can't understand your higher parlance—and that's exactly what we're going for.

The end of the introduction means it's thesis time. If you really want to pull this off, end the introduction with no clear thesis. That way, they'll assume the thesis is lurking around somewhere later in the paper like a prowling hyena in Serengeti; and before you KNOW it, they'll forget what they were searching for. You never had one anyway. And if they're really keen for it, they'll probably just extrapolate something from the parts they don't understand later in the paper. You're Shakespeare, remember? You know best.

Be choppy. Scratch that, be desultory. Jump around like a rabbit on fire—never let the reader know where you're headed next. The transitions between your paragraphs should be sudden and unexpected; your sentences short and rapid fire. Your teachers always taught you to be smooth and transitional—screw that. Toss your reader around like a paper bag in a tempest; the only thing they should be doing is covering their heads. Confusion is the key term here. If your reader doesn't look flummoxed and bleary-eyed by paragraph three, you aren't trying hard enough. You're smarter, you're faster, and the only thing they can do is try to keep up.

Paragraph four, all right, now we're getting somewhere. This is the part of the essay where you're taught to bring out the big points. The "meat" of the essay is how teachers sometimes REFER to it. That's all garbage. You don't need a plethora of in-depth points or solid evidence to fill up your paper—you just need one. One point. That's all you need. Reiteration is the key term here. I can't stress this part enough. All you need to know is this: keep talking. Be the jammed cassette deck on repeat. Write as if you're a five-year-old kid with Tourette's syndrome who just discovered the word "crap" and a pound of Pixie Stix to go with it. Write as if you're being paid a dollar a word, and you have only thirty seconds to type. Just keep pushing through the same old stuff with different wording. Dress it up; do its hair; color its nails; I don't care. Repackage the old, make it look new. Novelty sells the car. Write frivolously. Scratch that, farcically. It'll seem like you're getting deeper and deeper into the topic with every word you say, but really you'll JUST be wasting their time. Analysis is overrated—just keep spitting out what you already said. Regurgitation is the key term here. Vomit your words out and eat them back up, then spit them out a minute later. You're the mother eagle, and the reader is your starving chick. To add weight to this empty package, make sure the paragraph you put your half-digested words in is one of the longest. Nothing says "important" like a hefty paragraph. You would know. You're the smartest.

The thesaurus is your friend. Scratch that, your soul-mate. This whole operation is FUELED by perplexing your reader. If you're the matador, the thesaurus is your cape—you're both coaxing the reader to charge through your charade. An essay is just made up of words, and that's the punch-line of this exploitation. Every word can be more sequestered; every syllable can be more ambiguous. Make reading your essay more difficult than solving a Rubik's cube in the dark. Don't write *elderly person*, scratch that off. Write *septuagenarian*. That woman isn't pretty; she's *pulchritudinous* for someone possessing your voluminous vocabulary. And don't worry if the definitions aren't totally the same; it's not as if the reader is going to know what's going on anyway. Obfuscate is the key term here.

Metaphors. It's always good to throw a lot of these in—teachers love this stuff. Make sure they're really random and sporadic, pop-

ping up anywhere and everywhere like ferns in the Amazon jungle. Whatever pops into your head at the time, make it a metaphor. Whether it's animals from the Nature Channel you were watching two hours ago, or a Rubik's cube that's sitting on your desk, anything is fair GAME. Forget about clarity or adding depth, your metaphors are there for the same reason neon lights exist—distraction. Your essay should be a patchwork quilt of random-as-crap metaphors, shrouding your essay from lucidity like the moon blocking the sun during a lunar eclipse. Just stick them everywhere.

Make errors. You heard right. Capitalize some random words throughout your paper. Attach a note to the final document explaining that your computer was on the fritz, and even during printing it was behaving idiosyncratically. *Proof-reading couldn't prevent it because it occurred during printing*, the note will say, and how can the teacher blame you? Your computer was haywire,; totally nuts. It was jumping off the walls and banging into the ceiling like a rubber ball fired out of a Civil War cannon, spitting and blasting unnecessary semicolons and punctuation errors into your work. You weren't responsible for what it did. And once you get that across, you can also blame the computer for for any typos or repeated words you may have left in my accident. Just type some OCCASIONAL caps-locked words now and then, and suddenly you're exonerated from all grammatical imperfections. Diabolical is the key term here.

By now you should be closing in like a school of piranha onto a drowning ox. You've probably written enough, so you might as well wrap things up. Conclusions are easy. All you need is a quote and your choice of any massive, tear-inducing flaw in society. Take your pick: consumerism consuming our culture, superficiality sucking out our souls, mankind's maniacal instincts, the government's dominance of society's free will, et cetera, et cetera. It doesn't matter. It doesn't even have to pertain to your topic. The beauty with conclusions is you can tie just about anything to anything. If you were writing about the mating habits of rhinos, you could probably conclude with an anecdote about world hunger. The point is that there is no point. Be as random as a herd of buffalo showing up to present the Best Picture award at the Oscars. Just pick something you can rant about for a good half-page and you're in business.

Now for the quote. This is the last thing the reader's nonplussed eyes will see—so make it good. This is the one time in the essay you want them to understand what's going on. After all this confusion they'll be ravenous for something transpicuous—and this is the time to dish it out. What's even better, they'll love you for it. Everyone likes being enlightened. And after your quote, your reader should be more sagacious than Buddha on heroin. Choose one THAT sounds inspirational and profound. Aristotle and Socrates are always solid choices. Once again, it doesn't matter if it actually pertains to your topic. As long as it's half decent, the reader will be grateful. Place this at the end in italics and you're home free.

Congratulations, you're done. Don't worry about proof-reading for typos—you took care of the errors, remember? That damn computer of yours. All you have to do now is make sure you turn it in on Wednesday. Sit back and relax; and have a triumphant smile and modest remarks ready for the teacher next week when he praises your work in front of the class. What could go wrong, anyway? We've covered all the bases. An "A" is inevitable. Scratch that, ineluctable . . . which reminds me.

I received a paper back this morning and I still haven't checked the grade. Excuse me for a moment; I have to confirm my "A." Consider this a testament to my guide to success. Confidence is the key term here.

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BE A VICTIM. Scratch that, be a scapegoat. Take the paper and crumple it, throw it away or tuck it away somewhere you won't see it. Who gives a shit anyway? This was a stupid assignment to begin with. It was a puerile assignment with an imbecilic teacher to grade it. What the hell does he know? Confusing Introduction. Lack of Content. Bad Transitions. *Excessive Grammatical Errors?! You told him the computer was going haywire. Didn't he see the note? What an IDIOT. Obviously it was too much. He probably didn't understand what was going on and decided to take it out on you. What a sucker. Scratch that, a simpleton. His lack of comprehension isn't your fault—the damn ignoramus. He's taking his confusion out on you, satisfying his own denial by giving you a shitty grade. He's just like everybody nowadays. No one takes responsibility for their own problems. People mess up their lives beyond all repair and*

still have excuses for everything. It's the whole damn world's fault before anyone will admit it's theirs. *He doesn't like me because . . . It's not my fault, she's the one that . . . I'm late because this stupid . . . blah . . . blah . . . blah . . .* How about a simple, "sorry, it's my fault"? It's like the entire bastard world would rather blame its problems on other things rather than fixing them. No one is willing to own up to their actions and take the consequences anymore. That's what this is all about. I'm just the hapless victim for all those ignorant fools out there. Those vainglorious dunderheads. Those egocentric imbeciles. It's like a wise man once said:

You must not lose faith in humanity.

Humanity is an ocean;

if a few drops of the ocean are dirty,

the ocean does not become dirty.

~Mahatma Gandhi