

RE-THINKING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

*“Start strong, finish strong.”
(Charles Euchner)*

*“The paragraph is a mini-essay; it is also a maxi-sentence.”
(Donald Hall)*

This paper addresses the issues of writing argumentative essays. It re-evaluates traditional approach to five-paragraph essays, and argues that there are more types of essays under the umbrella term “academic essay,” namely, non-critical analysis essays: narrative essays, explanatory essays, and persuasive critical analysis essays: expository essays, 5 paragraph argumentative essays, argumentative analytical essays. The article highlights the characteristic features of argumentative essays with relevant critical thinking issues in mind. It also considers their rhetorical aspects and structural elements. Relevant examples and writing resources are also provided.

Key words:

argumentative essay; analytical essay, expository essay; critical thinking; paragraph; logical connectors; writing resources

Essential skill of writing various types of academic essays is part of practically any curricula – ranging from high school essays to critical analysis (analytical) essays required of undergraduate, and especially tertiary educational levels [2; 5; 6; 8; 10; 17; 22]. Rephrasing Kenneth Burke, who was writing about literature [7], we may also say that knowing how to write essays is a valuable “equipment for living.” Metaphorically speaking, it’s a long and winding road to *eventually* mastering scientific discourse *per se*. Still, with a plethora of teaching materials and tons of relevant information at hand – can we claim – restating George Orwell’s phrase – that all essays are equal? And is there any room for improvement, for that matter?

This paper will critically review the state-of-the-art of writing argumentative (persuasive), critical analysis (analytical) essays and will suggest our take on the issue. We will also provide some relevant resources and teaching advice on the matter.

Let's start with one of the most important traits of essay writing. It is about **clear purposes** of writing, namely:

- **informative** (possible answers to a question, preferably based on new information)
- **persuasive** (convincing the readers using reason and evidence)
- **analytical** (explaining and evaluating possible answers to a question, and choosing the best answer [21]).

All types of essays should have:

- ✓ a focused thesis statement
- ✓ clear and lucid writing, every point should be thoroughly explained
- ✓ logical structure, i.e.:
 - **introduction**, that
 - catches attention
 - provides background
 - has thesis statement
 - **body** (paragraphs support the thesis statement)
 - **conclusion** (summarizes and paraphrases the thesis statement).

The writer should:

- ✓ keep on the topic (not digress elsewhere);
- ✓ read the task carefully;
- ✓ analyze the question: it's very important not to misread the essay question (key words are the clue!)
- ✓

But before writing any essay, it is important to *understand* its task.

We've slightly modified the list of such tasks suggested elsewhere [1]:

- *discuss* – give opinion on a subject (your own and those of other authors; give information and evidence on specific aspects of the topic);
- *analyze* – break the subject into parts and show how they relate to each other and to other subjects;
- *examine* – similar to “analyse”, with a little more emphasis on judgment/appraisal;
- *argue* – systematically support or reject a position by providing evidence;
- *define* – provide definitions (see ways of doing so in the table below)
- *categorize* – classify or group things;

- *explain* – interpret meanings clearly by analysing events or systems, give reasons, describe how things develop – the focus is on the “*how*” and “*why*” of an issue, NOT so much on evaluation or criticism;
- *comment* – express a view or interpretation of a statement contained in the question/task;
- *support* your view with argument and/or experience;
- *compare* – express similarities between two or more objects, systems, ideas or arguments;
- *contrast* – demonstrate differences between two or more objects, systems, ideas or arguments;
- *criticise* – make judgments, favourable and/or unfavourable, using fair argument and balanced evidence;
- *evaluate* – make judgments using argument, opinion and evidence; it’s similar to “criticize,” but places more emphasis on quality issues;
- *enumerate* – present material as a list or an outline, usually without comment(s);
- *illustrate* – use figure, picture, diagram or concrete example to explain/clarify a problem;
- *outline* – a systematic listing of information or argument giving main points and subordinate points in order, omitting details.
- *review* – examine a subject critically, deal with a number of explanations or theories; list and relate a series of events that are being used as evidence for a theory;
- *summarise* – give a brief statement or account that covers the main points in sequence; without critical comments.

There are various ways to structure your ideas, and this will depend on the question. You can list your ideas by:

- order of importance or priority (e.g. most significant or important factor/issue to least significant or important one...)
- logical order or causality
- (e.g. A causes/leads to B causes/leads to C...)
- chronological order by time or stages (e.g. Phase 1, Phase 2 ..., or 1920s, 1930s, 1940s...)
- comparison/contrast to look at the similarities and differences
- global to specific or vice versa (e.g. big picture to small picture),
- abstract to concrete, like specific application examples.

The umbrella term “essay” covers several types of such writings. Let’s summarize them below:

ESSAYS

narrative	explanatory	5-paragraph argumentative	expository	argumentative analytical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tell a story full of action and excitement <p>✓ <i>start from the past, then return to the present moment</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain ideas • inform • describe (create a vivid picture) • give examples (to illustrate the point) <p>✓ <i>give the reader a balanced account of a subject,</i></p> <p>✓ <i>use neutral, objective tone</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discuss advantage(s) and disadvantage(s) • give pros and cons, • agree/disagree • express preference <p>✓ <i>convince the reader of the validity of your point of view; express your opinion; appeal to the reader’s logic rather than emotion,</i></p> <p>✓ <i>clearly state your position;</i></p> <p>✓ <i>begin by making points that support your position, then present and refute opposing argument (or refute possible opposing arguments after each supporting argument);</i></p> <p>✓ <i>distance your own voice from the opposing argument(s)</i> (USE: <i>On the other hand/ However,...; It has been argued that..., Several writers point out...</i>).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain (give cause and effect) <p>✓ categorize, classify or group together objects that have the same characteristics</p> <p>✓ define (give definitions via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ simple definition (<i>X is Y</i>) ▪ classification (<i>several types of X...</i>) ▪ comparison and contrast (<i>X is not Z</i>) <p>✓ <i>expositions contain an argument</i></p>	<p>✓ examine and evaluate information;</p> <p>✓ compare and contrast (<i>state the similarities between the objects or describe the first object, then move to the next one</i>)</p> <p>✓ <i>what</i></p> <p>✓ <i>where</i></p> <p>✓ <i>when</i></p> <p>✓ <i>why</i></p> <p>✓ <i>how</i></p>

Narrative and explanatory essays do NOT call for critical analysis, while argumentative and expository essays require critical analysis. By critical analysis we do NOT mean expressing some negative points, but rather considering all sides of the argument.

A broader classification of academic essays is based on educational level criterion [19]:

High School Essays	University-Level Essays
Topic often broad or general.	In-depth analysis of focused topic.
Thesis must be stated in one sentence.	Thesis indicates that the essay will explain and give evidence for its claims, but has no specific length.
Five-paragraph essay with three main points.	No fixed format; the number of paragraphs depends on the argument.

Now let's concentrate on *argumentative* essays *per se*. We will also call them persuasive, or argumentative/persuasive essays since *argumentation* is all about *persuasion*. And persuasion, in turn, is about *influencing* other people so that they'll see us as credible and trustworthy.

Persuasion could be achieved by employing three elements that Aristotle had discovered many years ago. They are: *logos* (logical proof), *ethos* (author's reputation) and *pathos* (feelings involved) [3]. Such approach still remains viable and valuable today, because it helps us to create the mental balance between emotion and logic.

On the other hand, persuasion could be viewed as a powerful tool of convincing the audiences, that ultimately results in voluntary, peaceful cooperation and *conflict-solving*. Unlike traditional Aristotelian argumentation as an adversarial form of debate, such conflict-solving technique, suggested by the US psychologist Carl R. Rogers and also known as the Rogerian method of argument, is a form of discussion based on finding common ground [16].

An important aspect of effective persuasion is about achieving *expressivity*. To be expressive enough, one should seek to create and resolve some cognitive dissonance, termed so by Leon Festinger [11]. Cognitive dissonance is based on the rule of *contrast* that exploits the human need to compare two (or more) choices, to consider all pros and cons, to juxtapose poor idea vs. good idea, and so on. We master the tricky art of expressivity by using "hooks" and attention grabbers to keep the reader interested. It's also OK to use high impact linguistic devices, like strong, active verbs, vivid adjectives (including superlatives).

But most importantly, for effective argumentation, one needs to have complete understanding of the subject matter and principles of *critical thinking*. That involves, among other things, discerning *fact(s)* vs. *opinion(s)*, recognizing *logical fallacies* (like sweeping generalizations etc.), *pseudo-argumentation*, *prejudice*, *bias*, and *manipulation*.

First and foremost, let's concentrate on *critical thinking* issues. Critical thinking skills necessary for critical writing have got a decent amount of attention from scholars over time, but perhaps the best explanation is given by Linda Elder and Richard Paul [9]:

- ✓ We are always making **observations**.
- ✓ From our observations we establish **facts**.
- ✓ From facts we draw **inferences**.
- ✓ From our inferences we make **assumptions**.
- ✓ We use our observations, facts, inferences and assumptions to form our **opinions**.
- ✓ We then create **arguments to defend our opinions**.
- ✓ We use **analysis** to **critique** our own and other people's observations, facts, inferences, assumptions, opinions, and arguments.

Allyson Skene notes that every argument consists of premises and a conclusion. The premises are particular statements that provide the reasons or evidence supporting the conclusion. *An argument is an effort to justify a particular conclusion*. The justification should be strong enough to persuade others that the conclusion is the correct one [18].

G. Randolph Mayes emphasizes two kinds of rationale: *argument* and *explanation*. An *argument* is a rationale in which *the reason functions as evidence in support of the conclusion*. Its purpose is to provide a rational basis for believing the conclusion to be true. An *explanation* is a rationale in which the conclusion represents an accepted fact, and the reason represents a cause of that fact. Its purpose is to help us understand how or why that fact occurs. The best way to remember the difference between arguments and explanations is to think of them as answering two different questions:

An *argument* answers the question: *How* do you know?

An *explanation* answers the question: *Why* is that so? [15].

What are common problems in argumentative critical essays writing? It is also important *to link data and claims*. Surprisingly often, authors present insufficient evidence for their claims: the data and argument of the manuscript are at cross-purposes with each other [5].

Ursula Windate [22] argues that students come to university with partial or incorrect concepts of argument. She also points out other mistakes frequently encountered in low achieving essays:

- ✓ lack of criticality or analysis (ineffective use of sources, lengthy reports of the literature without discussion, reproducing ideas instead of discussing them)
- ✓ lack of structure and progression towards a meaningful conclusion (essay looks like a list of seemingly unrelated points, without progressing)
- ✓ inconsistent and insufficient argumentation;
- ✓ obscure, vague language.

Perhaps the most effective and comprehensive model of argumentation was suggested by Stephen Toulmin. This model should definitely be taught to students to overcome the drawbacks mentioned above. Toulmin argues that a good argument needs good justification for a claim. In “The Uses of Argument,” he suggests the following components for analyzing arguments:

- ✓ **obligatory:**
 - *Claim* (thesis statement)
 - *Grounds* (facts, evidence, data that answer the question “why?”)
 - *Warrant* (implicit connection between the claim and the ground, or why the evidence supports the claim)
- ✓ **additional:**
 - *Backing* (extra proof)
 - *Rebuttal/Reservation* (counter-arguments and counter-examples)
 - *Qualifier* (linguistic devices conveying various degrees of certainty and possibility).

A helpful approach was suggested by Monroe Beardsley in his book “Practical logic” [4] An argument can be represented as an argument map (such approach it is also known as “Beardsley-Freeman method of argument mapping”).

Beardsley suggests the following:

- ✓ Separate statements by brackets and number them.
- ✓ Put circles around the logical indicators
(*in the example below, we’ve boldfaced them*).
- ✓ Supply {in parentheses} any logical indicators that are left out.
- ✓ Set out the statements in a diagram in which arrows show the relationships between statements.

Like in the following example:

Though (1) [people who talk about the “social significance” of the arts don’t like to admit it], (2) [music and painting are bound to suffer when they are turned into mere vehicles for propaganda]. **For** (3) [propaganda appeals to the crudest and most vulgar feelings]: {for} (4) [look at the academic monstrosities produced by the official Nazi painters]. What is more important, (5) [art must be an end in itself for the artist], **because** (6) [the artist can do the best work only in an atmosphere of complete freedom].

Beardsley notes that:

- ✓ Statement (2) is the *conclusion*.
- ✓ Statement (4) should be rewritten as a declarative sentence, e.g. “Academic monstrosities were produced by the official Nazi painters.”
- ✓ Statement (1) points out that the *conclusion isn’t accepted by everyone*, but statement (1) *doesn’t support the conclusion*.
- ✓ The *logical relation* between statement (3) and statement (4) is *unclear*, but *statement (4) could be viewed as supporting statement (3)*. [4]

In similar vein, Maralee Harrell [13; 14] suggests “argument diagramming” to teach critical thinking in writing courses. She emphasizes the importance of identifying author’s claims, premises, sub-conclusions and the main conclusion, missing and implied conclusions, as well as and implied premises. She also concentrates on:

- ✓ necessary vs. sufficient conditions;
- ✓ deductive vs. nondeductive arguments;
- ✓ visual representation of reasoning,
- ✓ understanding argument structure;
- ✓ interpreting arguments
- ✓ objections and replies.

Now let’s proceed with essential *elements* (or *building blocks*) of the argumentative essays. Part by part, section by section.

ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS’ WRITING BLOCKS

I N T R O D U C T I O N	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ start with a “hook” ✓ main (thesis,topic) sentence is the “roadmap” of the essay ✓ provide background or context (why is it important?) ✓ sentences should be logically connected 	<p>a “hook” is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a famous quote (but NOT a long one!) ▪ a definition ▪ a little known or striking fact ▪ statistics ▪ a rhetorical question ▪ a joke ▪ a statement which stresses the importance of the topic ▪ contradiction – someone else’s opinion (opposite of yours) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ thesis statement is NOT a fact, it’s the author’s <i>specific</i> opinion
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<p>B O D Y</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ each paragraph has only one thesis statement (one point of view) ✓ every paragraph sufficiently supports thesis statement, explains “why” and “how” ✓ the first paragraph should tell us a <i>pro</i> (<i>on the one hand...</i>) and the second a <i>con</i> (<i>on the other hand</i>) ✓ the second paragraph should state something of greater significance (<i>more importantly, ...</i>) ✓ when stating <i>pros</i> and <i>cons</i>, state <i>cons</i> in a paragraph right before the conclusions ✓ sentences in paragraphs should be logically connected ✓ mix short and long sentences ✓ avoid obscure, vague language ✓ avoid diverting from the topic (NO digressions) ✓ do NOT use phrases undermining author’s credibility (<i>If I’m not mistaken, I’m not an expert in ...</i>) ✓ NO repetition of ideas! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a brief definition may belong in the introduction, but a more detailed one belongs in the first paragraph after the introduction ▪ paragraph structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ topic sentence –support sentences; ○ general to specific to more specific statements or ○ specific to general or ○ known to unknown or ○ least important to most important ▪ each sentence should clearly relate to the one before it. USE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ synonyms to restate ideas ✓ logical connectors (discourse markers): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>of succession:</i> <i>First, / To start / First of all / To begin with ... ; Second,... Finally...; Most importantly, ...;</i> <i>forecasting statements:</i> <i>(Now) let’s turn to.../take a look at...</i> <i>to state pros and cons:</i> <i>on the one hand,... on the other hand,...</i> <i>to show the result:</i> <i>therefore, thus, consequently, as a result,</i> <i>to show contrast with the previous idea:</i> <i>however, nevertheless, on the other hand</i> <i>to give an example of the previous idea:</i> <i>for example, for instance, to illustrate</i> <i>to add a more important idea:</i> <i>more importantly, what's more</i> <i>to add another idea:</i> <i>in addition, furthermore, also, moreover, what’s more</i> <i>to emphasize an idea – in fact, in particular</i>
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C O N C L U S I O N	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ summarize thesis statement ✓ NO new and detailed information! ✓ sentences are logically connected. ✓ show importance of the topic ✓ write effective closing statement ✓ show the significance of your findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ paraphrase and summarise the main argument of the essay ✓ the conclusion is a general statement ✓ make a final strong comment on the topic (“wow statement”) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ end with the significance of your point ○ relate your conclusion to the hook sentence(s) from the introduction ○ end with a prediction or a recommendation
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Some brilliant ideas for writing effective essays were suggested by Charles Euchner [10]:

- ✓ the golden rule for sentences and paragraphs: “start strong, finish strong”;
- ✓ “climb the arch” in most paragraphs: make sure each paragraph takes the reader to higher and higher ideas; with each line, reveal something new, something more important; save the strongest argument for last (finish with your strongest argument);
- ✓ preview the next paragraph to ensure smooth transition;
- ✓ give every sentence “an action packet,” use the verbs “to be” and “to have” sparingly (especially in passive constructions), replace them with verbs that convey action (e.g. instead of *She had (possessed) an impressive library* say: *She had accumulated an impressive library*)
- ✓ alternate short and long sentences (Ernest Hemingway style), make some sentences more complicated (to explain more complex ideas)

Let us add more hints that we find especially useful and highly recommend:

- ✓ keep subject and verb close together;
- ✓ prefer verbs and gerunds to nouns (instead of “*the meaning of ...*” say: “*this means ...*”; in place of “*productivity improvement through the prioritization of service delivery*” say “**improving** productivity through **prioritizing** service delivery” [8].

And some more points from Lynn Gaertner Johnstone:

- ✓ one purpose per message.
- ✓ one idea per paragraph.
- ✓ one idea per sentence [12].

A paragraph is the heart of an essay. Let's emphasize its traits one more time. The essential parts of the paragraph are:

- (1) topic sentence,
- (2) supporting details (like pros – (and/or cons),
- (3) concluding sentence (optional),
- (4) transition word(s) or sentence.

What are the Functions of Paragraphs? They

- ✓ help with understanding, by signaling some of the changes we saw just above;
- ✓ give the reader a break – literally and figuratively – to process information;
- ✓ make the page more inviting to read.

How Long Should a Paragraph Be? If you forget everything else about writing, remember this: a page should have at least three paragraphs.

While you want to break up your material into manageable chunks, you also want to maintain the thread – the smooth flow of information between paragraphs, rather than jumping from one topic to another. It is all about highly effective progression of ideas. The technical term for this is cohesion, which we can define as: ways of connecting sentences or paragraphs – to each other. Think of links in a chain; each link connecting one sentence to the next, or one paragraph to the next, like

- ✓ forecasting statements;
- ✓ synonyms, pronouns;
- ✓ repetition of a key noun;
- ✓ discourse markers or logical connectors;
- ✓ other lead-ins, such as rhetorical questions [8].

At this point, let us have a look at the sample argumentative essay. Its paragraphs compare two main ideas – managers and leaders. We've underlined the first topic (managers) and boldfaced the second (**leaders**). As you can see, most of the paragraphs are joined by a simple repetition of the two key terms. However, paragraph 2 connects to the next one with a forecasting statement (“*Let's take a look at the difference...*”). And paragraph 4 is being smoothly developed – with all the sentences logically connected – thanks to a rhetorical question (“*But what are the traits of a leader?*”).

The dotted line in the introduction and in the conclusion indicates restating the main idea. We have also marked logical connectors and synonyms. The opening has a “hook” and the final lines sound rather strong.

All in all, not much variety. But it works – the paragraphs hold together pretty well [8].

Good Manager or Great Leader?

Managers or leaders? Does it really matter? Good managers contribute to the success of the company by using their “positional power” to direct, supervise and manage the resources of an organization. A **leader** has a much more complex role – they inspire and influence people so that a company’s vision can be achieved. The competitive and global nature of today's business environment forces organizations to make the most of their assets, their resources and their people. Otherwise they start to fall behind their competitors.

With that in mind, let’s take a look at the differences between managers and **leaders**. We’ll start by comparing their definitions. A manager is someone who is responsible for managing someone else in a company or business, someone who controls resources and expenditures. A **leader** is the person who makes decisions that other people choose to follow or obey, a person who guides or inspires others. The major difference between the two is that a manager is a person that achieves company objectives through the actions and efforts of their subordinates.

This example implies that managers belong to a formal organization structure and their power is based on their position. In other words, the organizational position defines the manager’s power and the influence they have over their subordinates is based on their company position. Managers provide a link between business objectives and the employee’s efforts. One way of being an effective link is to communicate the department’s mission to their staff. This allows the employees see how their department and personal objectives support and contribute to the bigger picture. A good manager also needs to be able to evaluate their subordinates’ skills, knowledge and abilities. This talent gives them the ability to assign tasks and responsibilities to the appropriate team member so department objectives can be achieved successfully. Although managers have many other responsibilities like assigning resources, handling grievances, solving problems, and writing reports – let’s focus on those things that affect people. The best managers are “people” persons and they realize that each and every person has a role to play within their department. And how do you become a good manager? Experience and training are important factors in developing management skills, but personal motivation also plays a key role. Self-development is one of the strongest tools a person has to improve their management skills.

So what's the difference between a manager and a leader? Will a good manager naturally evolve into a great **leader**? Unfortunately, some people believe that **leaders** are born and not developed, but I disagree. Given enough motivation, a desire to improve and a willingness to help their fellow man - every person has the ability to become a **leader**. But what are the traits of a **leader**? To start with, **leaders** apply the same practices that good managers use, but what sets them apart is their caring attitude. In addition to providing feedback, they also listen to what their subordinates say and they take the time to discover the underlying issues. They help employees solve their own problems by providing an environment where people know they are accepted. Leaders also demonstrate their commitment in both words and deeds because it takes a long time for people to hear, understand and believe in what a **leader** says. The trust a **leader** demonstrates in his staff builds the employees’ motivation and commitment. Great **leaders** also have a knack for building teams by setting realistic goals, providing guidance and feedback and empowering the team to do its best.

Leaders practice the five “Ls” – they look, they listen, they learn, they lead and they laugh with their team! These are the traits that inspire people to do their best. By doing so, they gain the respect and support of their staff. Good leadership skills make people want to achieve their very best rather than just meeting a day-to-day objective. In fact, a **leader** that is honorable and trustworthy will always “Do the Right Thing,” and their staff will willingly follow them anywhere!

There is no lack of useful resources (like the ones mentioned in this article) on essay writing and scoring, including online sites. We’ve tried to select the best ones in the sea of Web. And recommend the following:

✓ *on writing:*

Harvard College Writing Center

<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/strategies-essay-writing>

<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/topic-sentences-and-signposting>

The University of Manchester Academic Phrasebank

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

University of Leicester Writing Resources

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/science>

✓ *on scoring:*

The Official SAT Study Guide (March 2016 & Beyond))

<http://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-get-a-perfect-sat-essay-score>

GRE scoring and sample essay with analysis

https://www.ets.org/s/gre/accessible/gre_practice_test_3_writing_responses_18_point.pdf

https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/scores/how/argument_scoring_guide

Every day, we all persuade others in some way, or at least try to do so, in both oral and written communication. American poet, writer, editor and literary critic Donald Hall once remarked: “When I take a sentence in my hand, raise it to the light, rub my hand across it, disjoin it, put it back together again with a comma added, raising the pitch in the front part; when I rub the grain of it, comb the fur of it, re-assemble the bones of it, I am making something that carries with it the sound of a voice, the firmness of a hand. Maybe a little more.” This subtle skill of adding “a little more” really makes a difference. It is about skills and mastery of harnessing the word. Like precise word choice, effective “hooks,” clever examples, and critical thinking skills: insightful analysis and sophisticated arguments. The rest is technology of writing good sentences and paragraphs – smoothly tied together in meaningful chunks – to convey a bigger idea.

Writing takes time, patience and practice. Is that all? Not quite. To become a good writer you have to be a good reader. But that's another story for another time.

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