

Chapter 1 Staring Down the Topic

What the hell, Yatesie, do you mean staring DOWN the topic? Gunfighters and Samurai stare one another down. Right. You must do the same. You stare down the topic until it blinks. You must gaze at the topic long and hard to prevent it from tricking you, and select a couple of keywords to use in your introduction.

Check out this topic:

Which is your least choice as a spectator: a basketball game, an automobile race, or a ski race? Clearly explain why.

We've had students crash and burn on this topic in more ways than you can imagine. Some thought it was asking them to say which one they would not like to participate in. But the word spectator sits there like a landmine. Others thought the topic wanted them to compare and contrast these sports. Wrong again.

Let's find a way into this ridiculous topic right now. First, you can indicate at the top of your paper what you are going to do by writing: "*Topic: Which is your least choice as a spectator: a basketball game, an automobile race, or a ski race? Clearly explain why.*"

Or you can use your own title: "Why I Would Hate to Be a Spectator at a Ski Tournament." You do not increase the type-size

This is important because many examinations and assignments have more than one essay prompt.



Note that you must capitalize every word in your title except internal articles, conjunctions, and prepositions.



of your title; **you do not put it in italics, nor bold it, nor underline it, nor change to another font. Is that perfectly clear?** If not, have no fear: this book will repeat and repeat until you get the idea.

Okay, the topic is asking me which (as in Pick One) sport I would LEAST enjoy watching, on or near the playing field. Well, I have skied, and I guess I still do, but I didn't get on skis until I was 65. I sure as hell wouldn't want to watch myself ski. So, let's pick skiing.

Being a spectator means I'll be standing there up to my ass in snow behind the bales of hay and the rubber mesh fences. I'm not at all sure I trust such provisions to protect me, so I'll make my first point—danger.

How else can I be nasty toward skiing? Comfort is a factor. There is no place to sit down. I have to stand there and freeze my *cojones* off—and I still have use for those. My feet will have the same problem. So that makes things worse.

The third point can be the nuisance: since places to ski seem always far away in the high mountains, it is a huge bother to get there to watch whatever is going on. Because the weather is likely to be very cold, you have to prepare all kinds of clothes to keep you warm, etc.

Now you know where I am going.

Remember, to end up with a five-paragraph essay, we need an introduction, three paragraphs of development, and a conclusion. Each developmental paragraph should contain a separate supporting point.



Why I Watch Ski Racing Only if Coerced

I have, unfortunately, been a spectator of ski-racing; I would go to great lengths to avoid a repeat of this experience. The forest of British Columbia is full of **dangers** enough without adding another; when one goes to a ski-race, he leaves all semblance of **comfort** behind; although some would say that it is fairly convenient for me to get to ski slopes, I say it is a **nuisance** which eats an entire day for forty-five minutes of danger and possible disaster.

The forest is full of menacing wild-life: wolves, cougars, grizzly and black bears, lynx, wolverines, and sometimes grouchy moose. In the winter, add to this avalanches and crazed, drunken and drugged skiers with sharp-pointed skis and **ski-poles**. There is no safe place in a downhill ski race for a spectator—except, perhaps behind a tree: a self-defeating proposition. The price in the coin of danger for the few moments of cheering your favorite racer is entirely too high.

As for comfort at a ski-race, banish the thought. To see the race, you will have to hike and sweat in winter gear over humps and hills to find a place at a dangerous corner to watch the action. The “dangerous corner” refers to both competitor and spectator. As the skiers come down the mountain—at around seventy miles per hour—and try to make the

The introduction should be no longer than four sentences in length. Let the reader know what to expect and be sure to refer to yourself or your experience in this paragraph.



**Point #1: danger;
point #2: comfort;
point #3: nuisance.**

Note all the images which stimulate your eyes, ears, taste, touch, and hearing. Nietzsche says that the more abstract the truth you are trying to convey, the more you must seduce the senses to accept it.

Do not let your conclusion be a mere summary of your essay; bring in a related idea or two to leave the reader with something to think about. Television, refrigerator, and bathroom have not been previously mentioned.



Never dream that if you make the essay longer, the teacher will be more impressed. Most of the time, the more you write, the more you hang your ass out in the wind to be shot at.

turn, you'll be thrilled by those who make it, and almost killed by those who don't. So you stand there on adrenal high-alert in case you have to dive behind the guy next to you. There is no place to sit. You stand shifting from foot to foot on snow which keeps shifting as the temperature changes. Should nature call—remember the beer and hamburgers?—your situation will be suddenly dire.

Think of the whole day. You will have rolled out of bed at four or five in the morning to avoid traffic—and traffic has rolled out of bed at the same time to avoid you. So you crawl along for around 100 kilometers on roads which have black ice in patches only to get to the destination where all the great parking is under ten feet of snow. Getting to the race track was mostly downhill: getting back to the car is uphill and tiring and even more sweaty—and the daylight is failing.

As you come down from the mountains—again at a snail's pace—toward Vancouver at nine or ten at night, you remember the television channel which carried the race and envision yourself sitting in comfort with the refrigerator close by and the bathroom with no line standing in front of it.

..... 471 words. LPI Essay. I used a few more words this time to pack the essay with sensory data. You should shoot for 350-450 words.

So you see it is not hard to write a good essay once you know exactly what to write. Unfortunately, many people misinterpret their topics.

Here is another example. The topic is

In order to find a good job, which three important skills do you think you should have?

A student wrote the following introduction for his essay: “In my opinion, the three most important skills one should have in order to find a good job in the present day world are: persistence, confidence, and enthusiasm towards working.”

Now of course, persistence, confidence, enthusiasm, etc. can help people find work, but are they skills? According to *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, a skill is the “ability, coming from one’s knowledge, practice, aptitude, etc., to do something well.” Thus, the above-mentioned factors can’t be counted as something acquired through learning and practice. They are only personality traits, not skills. If you can keyboard at more than 100 words per minute, that is a skill. If you can sell almost anything to anyone, that is a skill. If you can speak English fluently, that is a skill (This means being able to say OUTSIDE instead of OW-SIGH). If you can make change quickly and accurately at a till, wow; this is a much sought-after skill. However, something like persistence is a faculty good to have, but not a skill.

Check out more mistakes in the following examples to see how people thought they did an excellent job—yet they misread the topic and botched the essay.

Mistake 1: Off topic

For the topic “*Beauty can be found in simple things*” Student A wrote: “If I’m simple [note that the word “simple” carries a connotation of “mentally retarded”], then I’m beautiful. Everything is beautiful, but in order to make things beautiful, they have to be nourished. The steps of growing are beauty.”

The key words of the topic are *beauty* and *simple things*. One can find three simple objects such as a tree, a book, and a picture, and then show how beautiful they are. Student A didn’t focus on *simple* and *beautiful*; instead, he goes on to talk about the steps of growing, which are not simple at all. Now you can predict that no matter how interesting his essay is, he is not going to get a good mark for it.

Mistake 2: Misunderstanding the key words

For the topic “*What techniques do you use to get what you want?*” Student B wrote: “In order to get what I want, I always use three major techniques. Thinking is the first technique I use. I also believe good manners or mood can make things easier. Never giving up is the third technique I use to help me achieve success.”

This is a well-structured introduction, but the problem is that we don’t usually treat *thinking*, *manners*, or *persistence* as techniques. You can say “I persuade, I bribe, and I play tricks to get what I want.” That will be more like it.

Mistake 3: Not answering the question directly

For the topic “*In your opinion, what represents the Canadian way of life?*” Student C wrote: “Foreigners often think Canada is a place occupied by Eskimos. They believe Canada’s weather

is extremely cold, and that the people here are all obsessed with hockey and worship Queen Elizabeth II. Yet, the Canadian way of life, as I and other Canadians see it, is diverse, relaxing, and active.”

Again, this is not a bad introduction. However, the question is *what represents the Canadian way of life*, not what the Canadian way of life is like. You can simply say, “celebrating multiculturalism, camping, and playing hockey represent the Canadian way of life,” and go from there.

Mistake 4: Ignoring the S

For the topic “*What aspects of your own culture would you like to keep, and what aspects of Canadian culture would you like to adapt to?*” Student D wrote: “Every culture has some unique rituals or festivals that are worth to keep or learn from. Since I am an immigrant from China, Chinese language is the aspect of my own culture that I hope to retain. On the other hand, I have already adapted to Canadian food.”

She went on and wrote a nice four paragraph essay, but to her surprise, she didn’t get a good mark. She missed the “s!” The question is *What aspects, not what aspect, of your own culture would you like to keep, and what aspects of Canadian culture would you like to adapt to?* She should have mentioned at least two aspects of her own culture and the Canadian culture, respectively.

This is why you need to stare down the topic until it blinks.

Read the topic at least five times, underline each key word, watch for the tense if it is a verb, and pay attention to singular or plural forms, if a noun. Once you start to write, go back often to check the topic, making sure you are answering the right question, not something else.

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