

## **Under Pressure—Writing Skills for Essay Tests**

### **Better Writing through Mechanics: Sentences and Paragraphs**

To understand sentence structure, we need to begin with a few definitions:

**Independent clause:** An independent clause contains a subject and a verb. It can stand alone as a complete thought and/or a simple sentence.

- Example: Chianti is an iconic Tuscan wine.

**Dependent clause:** A dependent (or subordinate) clause cannot stand alone. Like all clauses, a dependent clause has a subject and verb; however, it needs to be linked to the independent clause to make sense.

- Example: based on Sangiovese grapes
- Example: because it is based on Sangiovese grapes

There are four basic sentence structures (in English):

**Simple sentences:** A simple sentence is a sentence with just one independent clause.

- Example: Chianti is an iconic Tuscan wine.

**Compound sentences:** A compound sentence contains at least two independent clauses.

- Example: Chianti is an iconic Tuscan wine; it is produced in several of the region's most famous vineyards.

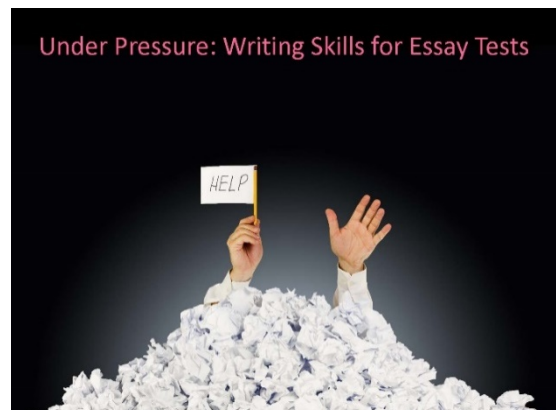
**Complex sentences:** A complex sentence contains an independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

- Example: Chianti is an iconic Tuscan wine based on Sangiovese grapes.

**Compound-complex sentences:** A compound-complex sentence contains two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

- Example: Chianti is an iconic Tuscan wine; it is based on Sangiovese grapes, but it often contains other grapes as well.

In timed writing it is best to emphasize concise, straight-forward sentences. However, it is still ideal to vary the sentence structure in your essay/short answer by using some complex (and compound-complex) sentences. Among other benefits, this will help to keep your reader's attention.



## Paragraphs: Unity, Order, Coherence, Completeness

A paragraph is a distinct section of a piece of writing that supports one main idea. A good paragraph has an introduction, a middle, and an ending. A solidly written paragraph takes its readers on a clear path, without detours.

A “model paragraph” is often described as five sentences: the topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. However, there are many other ways to craft a paragraph, and if the thesis is adequately supported, the paragraph is complete. As such, length and appearance do not define a paragraph; as a matter of fact, a paragraph can be just one sentence long.

**These four concepts will help you to craft solid paragraphs.**

**Unity:** Unity in a paragraph begins with the topic sentence or controlling idea. Every sentence contained within a paragraph should provide details and discussion relevant to the controlling idea.

**Order:** Order refers to the way you organize your supporting sentences. Order helps the reader grasp your meaning, follow along effortlessly, and avoid confusion. There are several ways to craft a well-ordered paragraph, including:

- Narration: Tell a story; proceed chronologically—from start to finish
- Process: Explain how something works, following a step-by-step sequence
- Spatial: When describing a place or thing—begin with a certain starting point and move in a specific direction
- Deductive: Move from general to specific information
- Most important: Confirm the topic sentence with one commanding fact by stating the most impressive example first; other examples provide substantiation
- Least important: Show a connection between the result and the events/facts that precede it by moving from the least important example to the most important

**Coherence:** Coherence is the quality that makes your writing understandable. Sentences within a paragraph need to maintain a consistent verb tense and point of view. In addition, sentences should connect to each other and work together as a whole. Transitional words and phrases—which can serve as a bridge from one sentence to the next—are important ingredients for coherence.

**Completeness:** Completeness means a paragraph is well-developed, with all the sentences clearly and sufficiently supporting the main idea. If insufficient information is provided and the thesis is not proven, then the paragraph is incomplete.