

Developing an idea

When we develop an idea, we show the reader the full potential of an idea. We discuss the idea in a way that the reader can fully appreciate it.

We don't just present the idea in a statement and then go on to present the next idea. A general idea *by itself* is not worth much to intelligent readers. Intelligent readers want to see much more than the idea; they want to see the *development* of the idea. As Mina Shaughnessy said in her book *Errors and Expectations*:

“There is not a sentence,” wrote Whitehead, “which adequately states its own meaning.” The statement suggests that the quality of an idea is not to be found in a nucleus or thesis statement but in the sentences that follow [in deductive writing] or lead up to [in inductive writing] that statement. An idea, in this sense, is not a “point” so much as a branching tree of elaboration and demonstration.

“Developing an idea” means showing your reader an idea’s “branching tree of elaboration and demonstration.” It means to discuss an idea fully, to the intellectual satisfaction of an intelligent and inquisitive reader.

We can develop an idea with elaboration that gives clarity and credibility. We provide clarity by giving all the details that give the reader deep understanding, and we provide credibility by presenting ideas that back up our claims. A few of the methods that we can use for providing clarity are 1) detailed explanation, 2) comparison, 3) illustration of the significance of included details, and 4) examples. A few of the methods for providing credibility are 1) facts and figures and 2) testimony of an expert or someone directly involved.

Two methods for developing ideas

Showing significance

Let's look more closely at a development method that is usually ignored by student writers: providing clarity by giving illustration of the significance of included details. In English 1 Unit 1, in our composition, we addressed the question of David's strengths and weaknesses for getting the job of cameraman at WNYN-TV. “Born in New York and lived all his life there” has the potential of being significant if we use it well. We could tell the reader how the fact (detail) that David's being born there and living his whole life there is significant in relation to the job he is trying to get at WNYN: this fact makes him useful to WNYN. Why? Text 1 told us that “WNYN produces shows which are popular because they concentrate on local news and special events. The news department staff is also originating a series of special programs about problems and issues of particular interest to New Yorkers.” David would likely know about some of these problems; for example, he has probably seen how the subway system has been getting dirtier and dirtier over the last 20 years, and he might suggest a special on why the authorities aren't doing anything about this problem. In addition, he would know where to go to get the best video, what time to go there, and so on. Someone born and raised in another city would not know these things, and therefore wouldn't benefit WNYN as much as David could.

Last year, one student very effectively developed one supporting point (that David has been using the camera all his life) by showing significance:

. . . David has a lot of camera experience. He started using the camera at the age of nine, and since then, there is a big probability that he has learned to manage different cameras. This should be very useful for WNYN, allowing them to use the adequate camera for each situation. Depending on the weather or the target that the camera is aiming, David will choose the correct equipment. . .

Anticipation of questions and doubts

Above, we read about using detailed explanation to provide clarity. One way of providing detailed explanation is by anticipating the readers' questions and doubts and then answering them. Read another student's paragraph, written in Unit 2 (with language corrected by the teacher):

Our educational situation in the year 2010 will be better both in its circumstances and its qualities. In the first place, the educational circumstances here are getting better. The number of students for a teacher is decreasing and educational equipment is improving. Moreover, the compulsory education is getting enforced so that more students have opportunity to study. Secondly, the quality of education is also improving. The class is becoming more democratic and teachers don't command something one-sidedly anymore. And the elementary school children's English ability is improving as a result of help of

native speaking teachers. Also, the level of extracurricular work in school is rising. So we can save the costs for private lessons.

The paragraph above is a nicely written paragraph. It's easy to follow the writer's line of thought, because its structure is clear and its language is good. However, it's not developed fully. Let's look at just one of the ideas in this paragraph: "the number of students is decreasing." The reader will have many questions, which the writer should have anticipate.

- What are you referring to, secondary school or college?
- What is the number per teacher now?
- How many did there use to be per teacher?
- What is the average number of students there in a classroom?
- Can you give me a description of how it was when there were many students in contrast with how it is now?
- In real terms, how is this helping the students? Do the students have better moral or social guidance from the teacher? Are they learning better? If they are learning better, can you describe it in concrete terms?

As you can imagine, the writer could write one paragraph about the one small point "the number of students is decreasing." And it would be more worthwhile reading than the paragraph above, because it would be more informative. Remember this rule: To make your writing informative and interesting, provide concrete, specific details to support abstract, general statements.

abstract	→	concrete
general	→	specific