

The Clustering Approach to Better Essay Writing

Second Edition

Instructor Manual

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Introduction

As a teacher, I wanted a system for teaching students how to write essays. I wanted a system that would work—one that teachers could use to help students feel more confident about their writing. I wanted a system that enabled students to see improvement in their writing. I needed a system that would provide immediate feedback for students, teachers, and parents so that students' strengths and weaknesses could be dealt with immediately, not a week or two later.

After twelve years of teaching essay writing to high school freshmen and sophomores, I devised the concept of essay clustering. By using a series of boxes and connectors, students can map out their ideas quickly and know exactly where they are going in their answer to an essay question.

I introduced the approach to my high school freshmen and was excited by the results. Not only did I see improvement in their writing at an earlier point in the year, but also students were no longer intimidated by the word *essay*. Some of my students remarked that this method was so much easier and asked why they hadn't learned it earlier. I had to tell them that the approach had just been invented!

After sharing the approach with some of my colleagues, they, too, appreciated the approach's simplicity and clarity. They were also impressed with the improvement in their students' writing.

For these reasons, I decided to put the idea into writing. This book focuses on an integrated approach to essay writing in English and social studies in an effort to promote consistency and continuity of good writing habits between the two subject areas and to dispel the famous cry by students: "I don't have to write well for social studies; it's not English!" I hope that this method will help you and your students find the success with essay writing that I have.

Benefits

Benefits to Students:

1. It becomes immediately easier for students to determine and then organize the content that needs to be included in an essay. They can visually box out the material and know the order and number of paragraphs necessary for answering a question.
2. By following the boxes and connectors, students avoid simply summarizing the story or event.
3. Students cannot forget to write an introduction and a conclusion.
4. Reading comprehension and conceptualization increase. In order for students to box the information for their essays, they must be able to understand what they are being asked to do. This approach teaches them how to answer the question completely.
5. Students will be able to determine from the information that they have written in the boxes whether the examples they have chosen are appropriate for answering the question.
6. Students will save time organizing and arranging the material for their essays and can spend more time focusing on writing good sentences because the information necessary for answering the question has already been written in the model. They need only to take the information and write it in sentence form.

Benefits to Instructors:

1. Instructors will write better essay questions. By mapping out models for their own questions, they can determine whether the questions are stated clearly and logically.
2. Instructors will know immediately how their students are conceptualizing ideas. Just by looking at their clustering sheets, it is possible to determine whether the students understand the question and what their thought processes are.
3. Grading becomes easier because instructors can tell what each students' ideas are by looking at their clustering sheets before reading their essays.
4. Instructors can provide immediate feedback to students and help them to make corrections before they rewrite. This avoids rewriting mistakes.
5. Instructors can use the students' clustering sheets to help them when communicating with parents to show exactly where their children's strengths and weaknesses in writing lie.
6. This approach can be used for teaching essay writing, report writing, and outlining.

Through communication and understanding, we can help students learn the important steps to take when writing essays, as well as the elements that must be included in them. When students feel confident and productive about their writing, their writing will improve.

Procedure

Teaching the clustering approach to essay writing is not difficult. Simply follow the steps in this book, and soon your students will be able to map out simple outlines that will enable them to write practical and thorough essays. Be sure to be flexible in your teaching and in your grading to accommodate the varying skill levels of individual students.

Take the students through the following steps, and have them copy the information into their notebooks:

1. Review the purpose of an essay and how it differs from a creative composition. The major difference is that an essay question asks the students to prove something using facts to support an answer. Therefore, students need to be selective and use only information that will answer the question.
2. I have divided the essay question into two parts: situation and directives.
 - a. Situation: This information is located in the first sentence or two of the essay question. If students find it difficult to begin the topic sentence or introductory paragraph, have them put this information into their own words. This becomes the first sentence of the introductory paragraph. For a literature essay, students will need to cite the TAG (title, author, genre) and the thesis statement (argument to be presented).*

For a social studies essay, students might cite areas to be discussed in the body of their essay. This provides them with at least two sentences for their introduction. Of course, older students or those whose skills are more developed will produce more.

- b. Directives: These are words that tell the students exactly what they need to do in order to answer the essay question. Some frequently used directive words include *explain, cite, tell, describe, demonstrate, refer, examine, show, choose, provide, give, compare, contrast, define, how, why, and what.*

Note: Sometimes essay questions include only directives. In such instances, students need to create their own situation based on the information that the directives are asking. However, for students who have trouble developing an introductory paragraph, it is important that the situation be included in the essay question (see Model Questions).

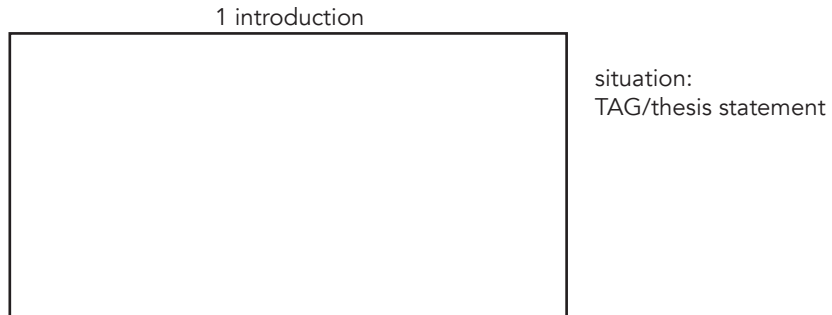
At this point, explain to the students that what they will be seeing next is a way to map out their essays visually. They will use a series of boxes and connectors; the number of boxes will vary according to the number of directives given in the essay question. Two boxes that will remain constant are the introduction and the conclusion. The key to the success of the approach is that, for each directive given in the question, students should draw a connector and a box and then label the box. Connectors are used to link boxes where information is related.

Next, write on the board an essay question that you have already used with the students, either for paragraph writing or essay writing. Using a question with which they are familiar makes it easier for them to comprehend the approach the first time. If you prefer, you can use the example provided on the next page instead.

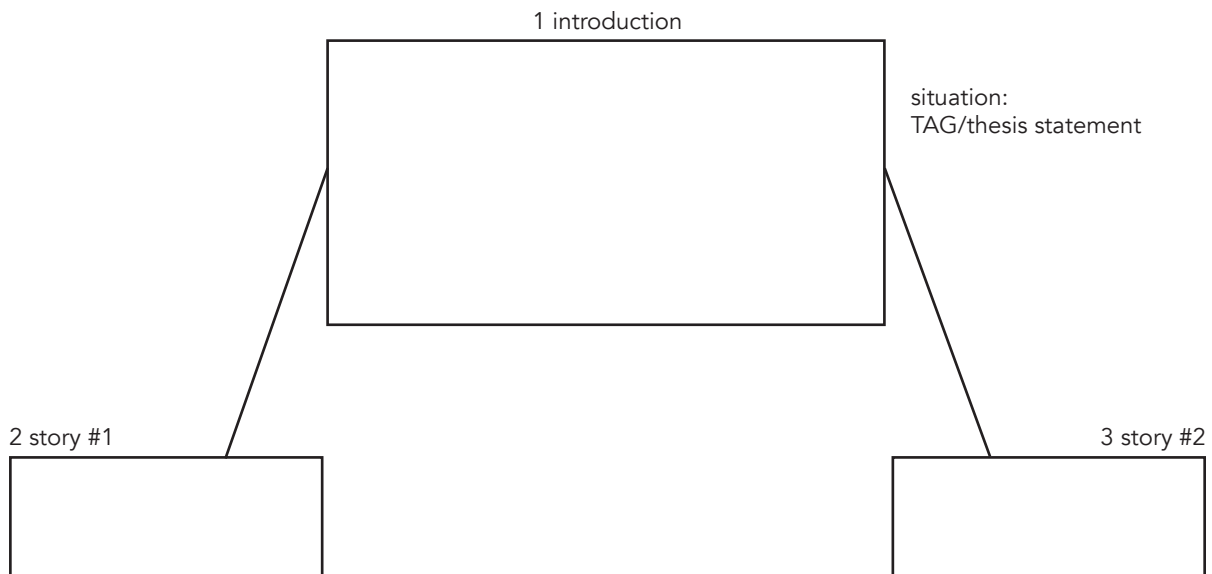
Sample literature essay question:

People often make decisions that affect others. From your reading this semester, choose two stories and a character from each. Tell what decision each character made and how it affected someone else. Provide an example for each to support your ideas.

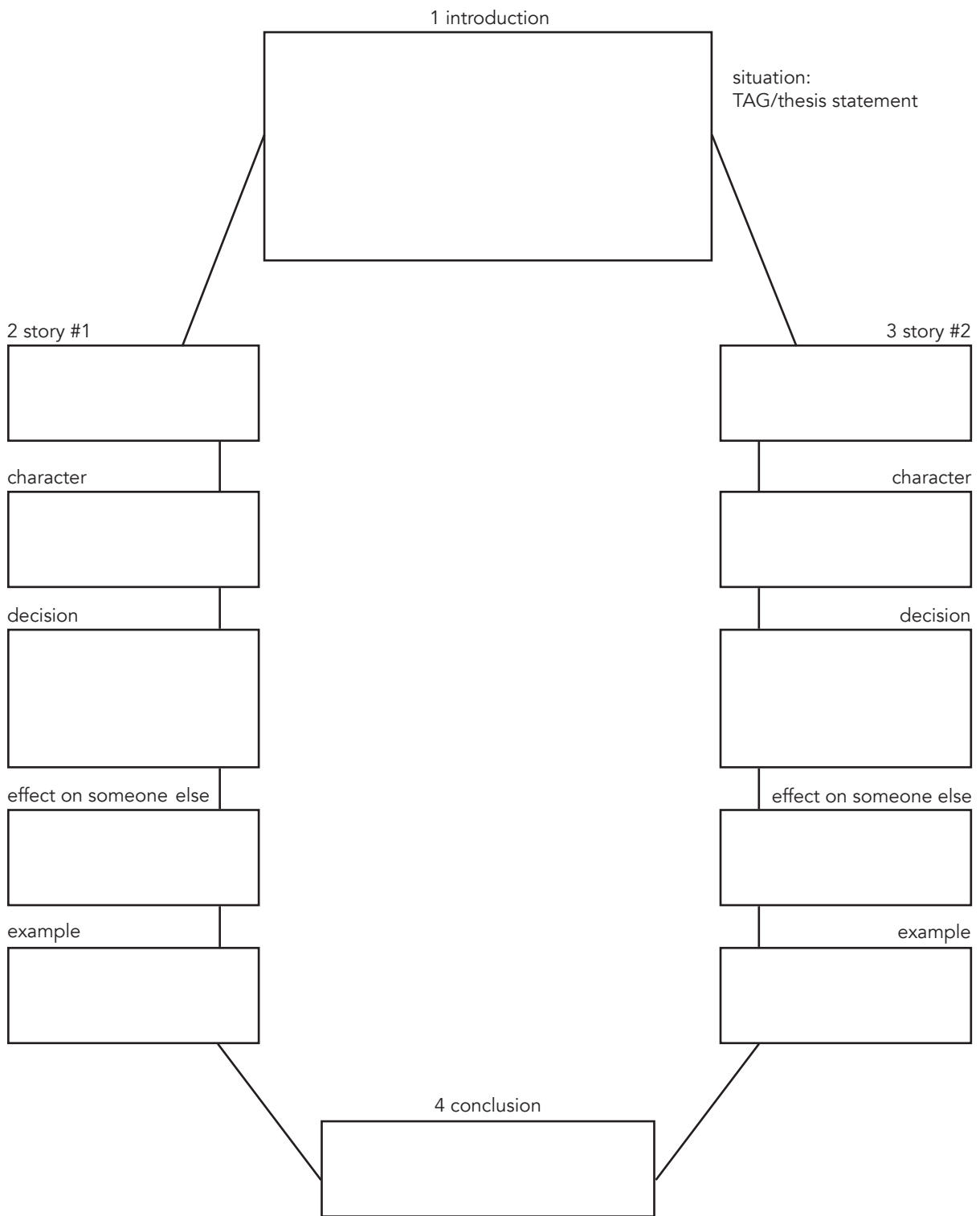
3. Ask the students to find the situation. They should respond with, “People often make decisions that affect others.” Have them draw a box in the center of their paper toward the top and label it “1 introduction.” Then have them write “situation” and “TAG/thesis statement” to the right side of the box.



4. Ask the students to find the first directive: “choose two stories.” Have them draw a connector and a box from each side of the introduction and label the boxes “2 story #1” and “3 story #2,” respectively.



5. Next, have the students locate the remaining directives and draw the appropriate number of connectors and boxes, labeling the boxes along the way. After all of the directives have been used, have them draw connectors from the last box on each side of the diagram to a single box below them and label the last box “4 conclusion.” The model will look like the one on the following page.

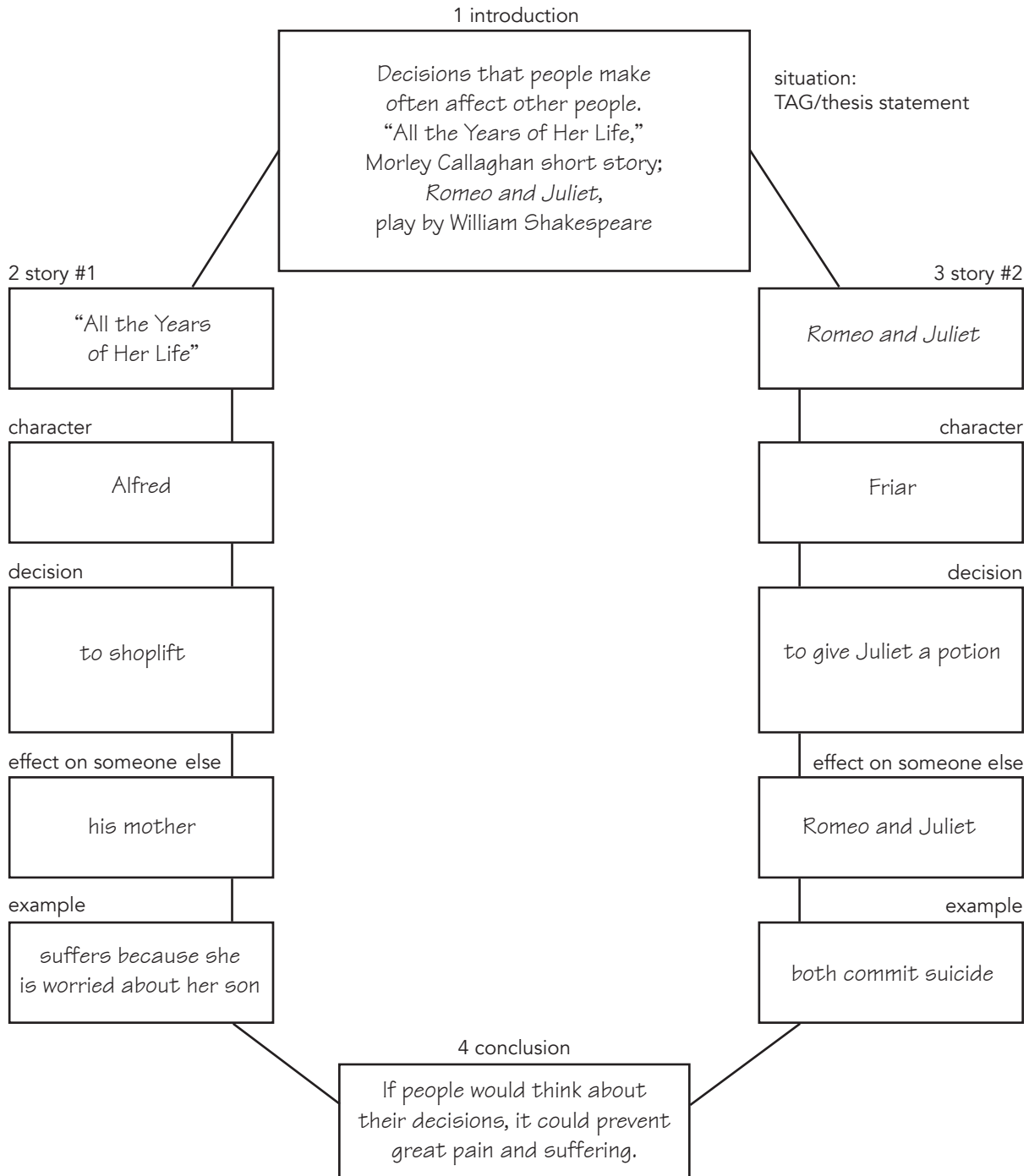


- Once the diagram has been completed, have the students fill in the boxes as briefly yet as completely as possible. Writing complete sentences in the boxes will negate the purpose of the approach and will require students to write the same essay twice. Encourage them to use key words and phrases in the boxes instead.

Students generally experience difficulty filling in the boxes for one of two reasons: either they don't know enough of the material, or they chose a poor example for answering the question.

7. After the students have filled in the boxes, they are ready to write the essay. Have them write following the order of the boxes, putting the information into complete sentences. For example, the words or phrases in the introduction box will now be written in sentence form and will become the introductory paragraph. Then the students will move to paragraph two and follow the order of the boxes, taking the information and putting it into sentence form. They will continue the same process with paragraphs three and four. A clustering sheet and essay using the sample essay question may look something like the two examples on the following pages.

Sample A Clustering Sheet



Sample A Essay

The decisions that people make often affect those around them. This idea is presented through the short story "All the Years of Her Life" by Morley Callaghan and the Shakespearean play *Romeo and Juliet*.

In the short story "All the Years of Her Life," Alfred, a teenager, is caught shoplifting from the store where he works. His boss calls his mother, who comes and talks the boss out of calling the police, although Alfred is fired. When they get home, Alfred sees that his mother is upset and worried about his future. He hadn't realized that before, and this helps him understand that his decision to shoplift didn't just affect him. It also caused hardship for his mother.

In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo and Juliet are lovers who are not allowed to be together because of a feud between their families. Juliet consults the Friar, a friend of Romeo and Juliet's, to see if he can find a way for them to be together. The Friar decides to give Juliet a potion that will feign her death. After she is laid to rest in a crypt, the Friar is to come and reopen the crypt so that she can secretly be with Romeo. Romeo does not find out about the plan; he believes that Juliet is really dead and commits suicide in his grief. When Juliet awakens from the supposed death, she finds Romeo dead and commits suicide herself. Only after both of their deaths does the Friar realize the terrible decision he made to give Juliet the potion before making sure that Romeo knew the plan. Although he was trying to help, his decision had terrible consequences.

Often, people make decisions without thinking through the possible consequences. This is apparent in both stories. If both the Friar and Alfred had thought about what could happen as a result of their decisions, they could have prevented a great deal of pain and suffering to the people around them.

Sample B Clustering Sheet

