# The Clustering Approach to Better Essay Writing

Second Edition

## Char Large

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# Introduction

Many students are intimidated by essay questions on tests. Short-answer questions that require them to fill in the blanks with a word or two are manageable, but questions that ask them to write a short essay about what they have learned about a topic can be enough to cause test anxiety and poor test performance—even when they know the material.

Other students, however, just don't know where to start when writing an essay. They need guidance so that they have a reliable way to set down their ideas in an organized form instead of simply as thoughts come to mind.

I developed the clustering approach to essay writing for students who struggle with both of these problems. I wanted a system that would help students feel more confident about their writing. 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.

The clustering approach offers the following benefits to those who use it:

1. It becomes immediately easier to determine and then organize the content that needs to be included in an essay. You will be able to box out the material visually and know the order and number of paragraphs necessary for answering a question.

2. By following the boxes and connectors, you can avoid simply summarizing the story or event.

3. You cannot forget to write an introduction and a conclusion.

4. Your reading comprehension and conceptualization will increase. In order to box the information for your essays, you must be able to understand what you are being asked to do. This approach teaches you how to answer the question completely.

5. You will be able to determine from the information you've written in the boxes whether the examples you've chosen are appropriate for answering the question.

6. You will save time organizing and arranging the material for your 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. You need only to take the information and write it in sentence form.

I hope that you will find success with essay writing by using this method.

# Procedure

The clustering approach to essay writing is not difficult. Simply follow the steps in this book, and you will be able to map out simple outlines that will enable you to write practical and thorough essays.

The purpose of an essay is to prove something using facts to support a position. Many of the essays you write will be in response to essay questions. Most essay questions contain two parts that will help you to answer them: the situation and directives.

- Situation: This information is usually located in the first sentence or two of the essay question. If you find it difficult to begin the topic sentence or introductory paragraph of your essay, you can put this information into your own words. This becomes the first sentence of the introductory paragraph. For a literature essay, you will need to cite the TAG (title, author, genre) and the thesis statement (argument to be presented).

  For a social studies essay, you might write about areas that will be discussed in the body of your essay. This provides you with at least two sentences for your introduction. Of course, you can always write more.

- Directives: These are words that tell you exactly what you 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, you will need to create your own situation based on the information that the directives are asking.

Let's look at an example.

> **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.

In this essay question, the sentence "People often make decisions that affect others" is the situation. There are five directives in the question: choose two stories, choose a character from each, tell what decision the characters made, tell how the decisions affected someone, and provide an example for each.

Once you have determined the situation and the directives for your essay, the next step is to map out your essay visually. You 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, you should draw a connector and a box and then label the box. Connectors are used to link boxes where information is related.

Here are the steps for creating a cluster for an essay question, using our sample question to illustrate them.

1. First, draw a box for the situation. This box should be in the center of your paper toward the top. Label it "1 introduction." Then write "situation" and "TAG/thesis statement" to the right side of the box.

1 introduction

situation:
TAG/thesis statement
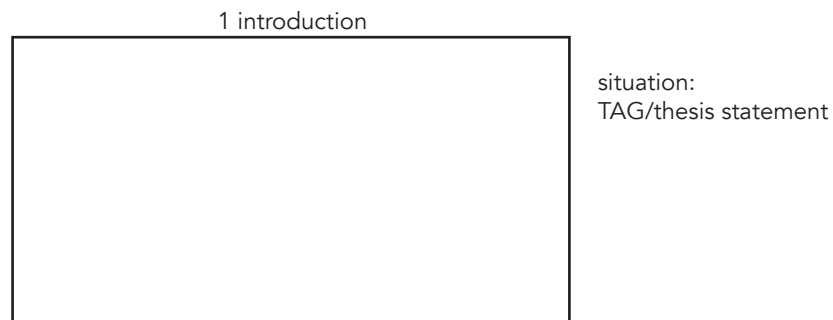
2. Next, find the first directive: "choose two stories." Draw a connector and a box from each side of the introduction, and label the boxes "2 story #1" and "3 story #2," respectively.

1 introduction

situation:
TAG/thesis statement

2 story #1

3 story #2
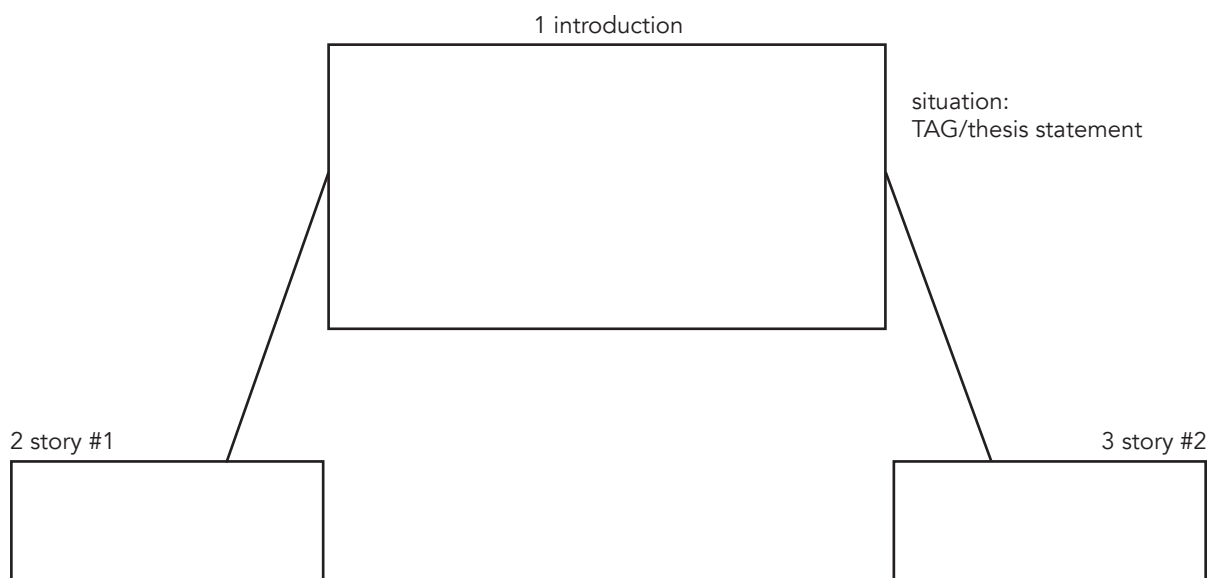
3. Draw the appropriate number of connectors and boxes for the remaining directives, labeling the boxes along the way. After all of the directives have been used, draw connectors from the last box on each side of the diagram to a single box below them, and label the last box "4 conclusion." The model will look like the one on the following page.

1 introduction

situation:
TAG/thesis statement

2 story #1

character

decision

effect on someone else

example

3 story #2

character

decision

effect on someone else

example

4 conclusion
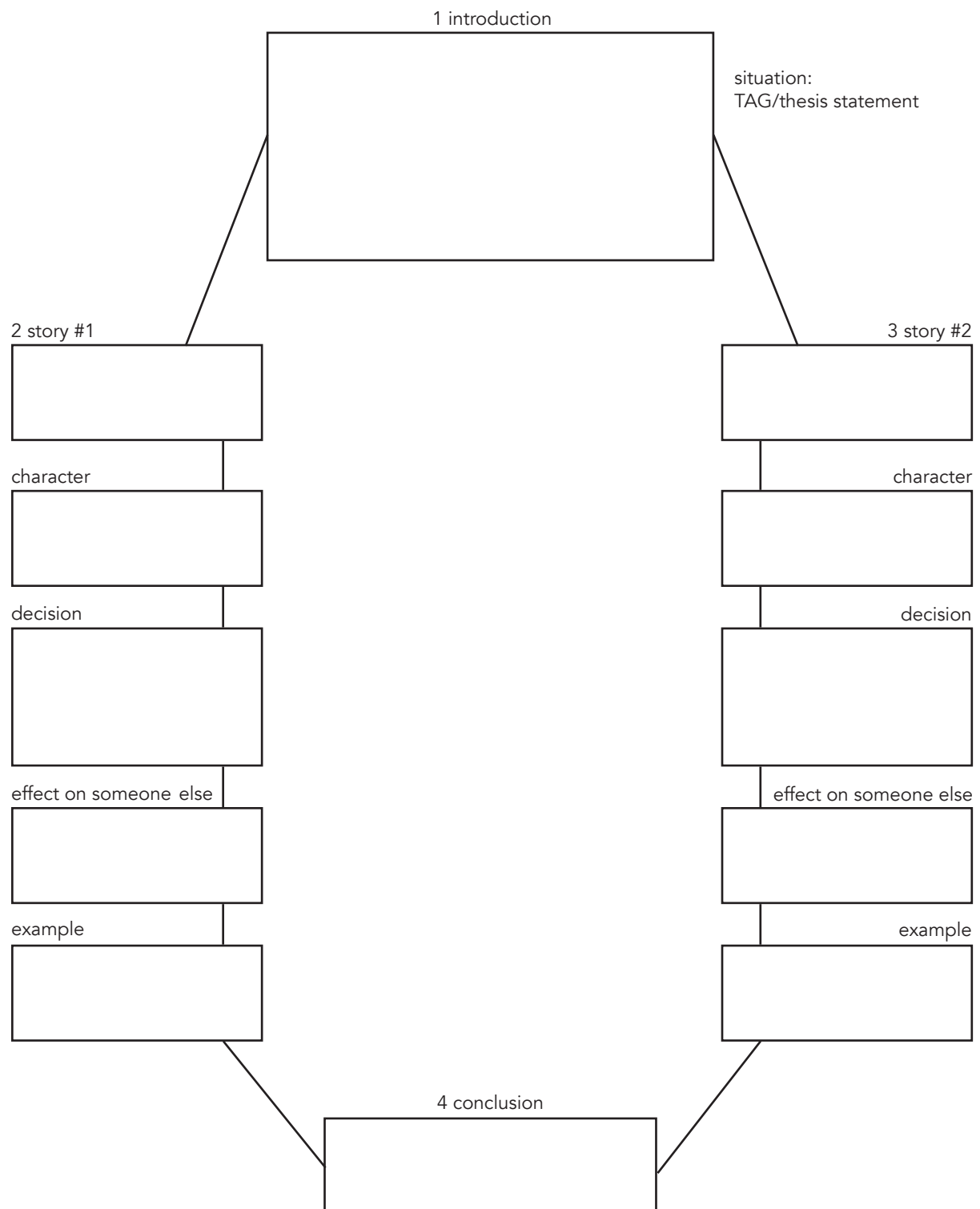
4. Once the diagram has been completed, fill in the boxes as briefly yet as completely as possible. Writing complete sentences in the boxes will negate the purpose of the approach and will require you to write the same essay twice, so use key words and phrases in the boxes instead.
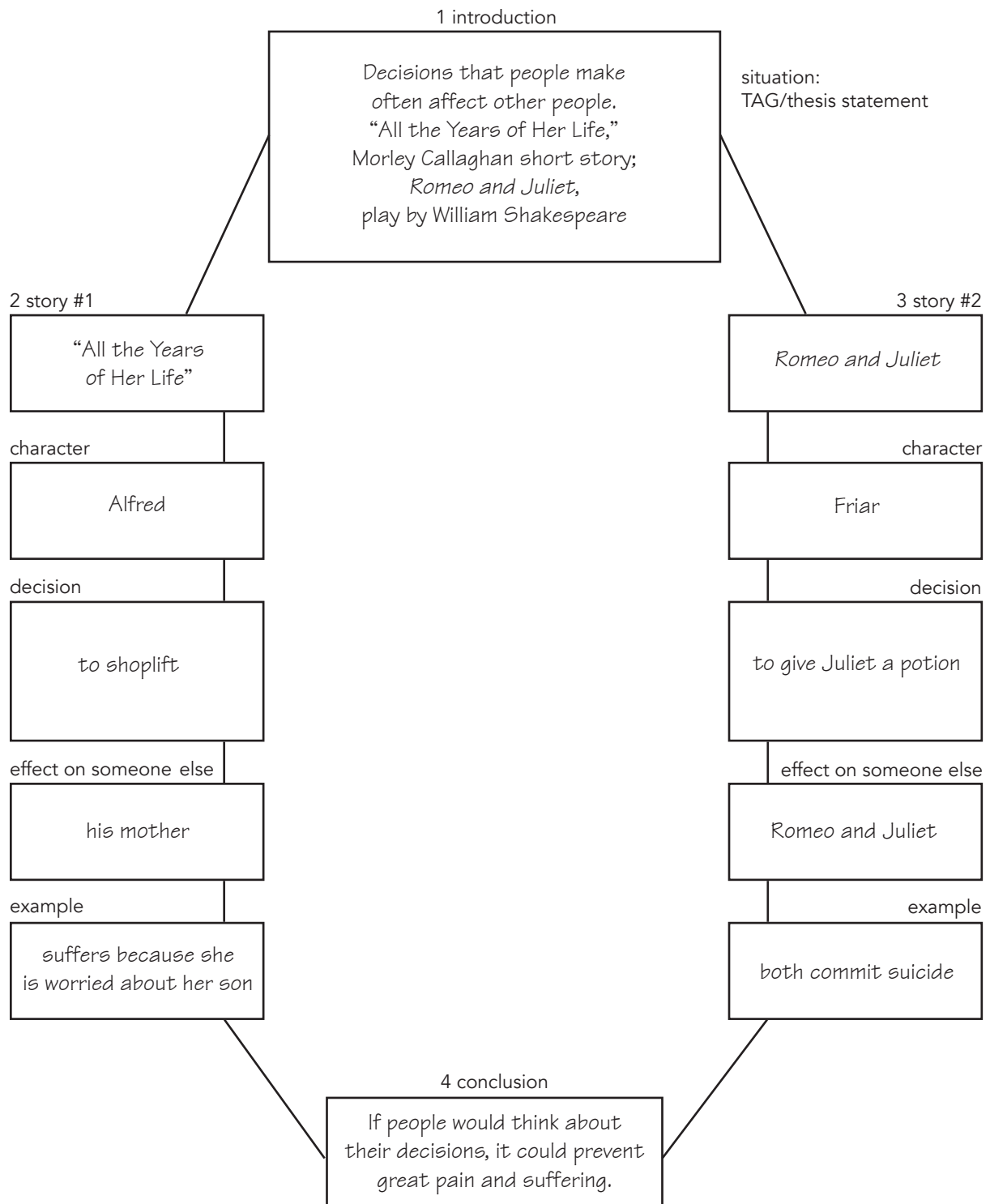
   If you are having difficulty filling in the boxes, it is probably for one of two reasons: either you don't know enough of the material, or you have chosen a poor example for answering the question.

5. After you have filled in the boxes, you are ready to write the essay. Write it 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 move to paragraph two, and follow the order of the boxes, taking the information and putting it into sentence form. Continue the same process with paragraphs three and four.

6. When you get to the point of writing the conclusion, review the following steps:

   a. Reread the essay question to familiarize yourself with what is being asked.

   b. Reread the central paragraphs to review important points. Ask yourself, "What important points are being made?"

If you practice following these steps using other essay questions, soon it will be easy for you to tell how many boxes you will need for each question.

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**

1 introduction

Decisions that people make
often affect other people.
"All the Years of Her Life,"
Morley Callaghan short story;
*Romeo and Juliet*,
play by William Shakespeare

situation:
TAG/thesis statement

2 story #1

"All the Years
of Her Life"

3 story #2

*Romeo and Juliet*

character

Alfred

character

Friar

decision

to shoplift

decision

to give Juliet a potion

effect on someone else

his mother

effect on someone else

Romeo and Juliet

example

suffers because she
is worried about her son

example

both commit suicide

4 conclusion

If people would think about
their decisions, it could prevent
great pain and suffering.

**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 Shakespearian 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**

1 introduction

effects of someone's decision
on another

*Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck;
*The Pigman*, Paul Zindel

situation:
TAG/thesis statement

2 story #1

*Of Mice and Men*

character

George

decision

kill Lennie before Curley
and ranch hands
get to him

effect on someone else

Lennie

example

Lennie is spared cruel
treatment and a painful
death by Curley and
other ranch hands

3 story #2

*The Pigman*

character

John

decision

have a party while Mr.
Pignati is in the hospital

effect on someone else

Mr. Pignati

example

Mr. Pignati doesn't
want to see John
anymore because of
violation of trust

4 conclusion

decisions affect both the people
who make them and others