

The Levels System¹

The Levels System is a personalized, step-by-step process for becoming a better writer. The system works like a video game: each time you master one type of assignment (or “level”), you unlock the next one, which is slightly harder. Unlike traditional essay assignments, The Levels System is backed by hundreds of studies on what works in education.² By the end of the semester, you’ll be a confident, skilled essay writer.

Four Levels. There are four “levels”: an argument in “standard form” (you’ll learn what this means), a one-paragraph paper, a one-page paper, and a two-page paper.

Seven Attempts. You have seven attempts total to progress as far as you can through the levels.

September 22	attempt one due
October 1	attempt two due
October 20	attempt three due
November 5	attempt four due
November 19	attempt five due
December 1	attempt six due
December 7	attempt seven due

Everyone starts on Level 1. If you do not complete Level 1 on attempt one, you retry Level 1 on attempt two. Once you complete Level 1, you move on to Level 2 for the next attempt, and so on. To complete a level, your attempt must be submitted on time, follow all of the instructions, and be of excellent quality.

Grades. To earn an A on the levels, you must complete all four levels. Otherwise, your grade is determined by the quality of your best attempt at the highest level you attempt, where the higher the level, the higher the grade.³

If you complete...	then your levels grade will be at least ...
Level 4	A
Level 3	B
Level 2	C
Level 1	D

New Attempt = New Topic. For each attempt, you will write on a new topic, regardless of whether you are retrying a level or starting a new one. Thus, you will write seven different papers, on seven different topics (unless you complete all four levels in fewer than seven attempts). On average, each student writes about 10 or 12 double-spaced pages total for the semester.

Practice Attempts. Before any attempt, you may submit a “practice” attempt: just email it to me and sign-up for an office hours appointment to discuss it.

¹ Created by Dustin Locke with inspiration from Jane McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011).

² The Levels System is built on the well-established principles of Mastery Learning (Taveggia 1976, J. A. Kulik 1976, J. A. Kulik, Jaksa, & Kulik 1978, Guskey & Gates 1985, and C.-L. C. Kulik, Kulik, & Bangert-Drowns 1990).

Level 1: An Argument in Standard Form

To complete this or any level, your attempt must be submitted on time to the proper location, follow all the instructions, and be of excellent quality.

Purpose

In this level you will learn how to identify arguments, determine their structure, uncover hidden premises/conclusions, ignore extraneous information, and state things in clear, concise, and accurate language.

Overview

- (1) Find a medium-sized argument in a passage from a reading assigned for one of your courses and put the argument into 'standard form'.
- (2) Medium-sized = between 5 and 10 numbered steps.
- (3) Your standard form should be clear, concise, accurate, and easy to follow.
- (4) Below your standard form, copy and paste the specific passage from which you are extracting the argument (you may need to insert a photo if you're taking a passage from a hardcopy text) so that I can read it.
- (5) Each attempt must be on a different passage, but (for this level) you can write more than one attempt on the same text.

Pro-tips

- (1) Choose a passage that contains an *argument* and not something else (for example, not an explanation of an idea or an explanation of why some historical event happened).
- (2) You don't need to quote the original text in your stand form. In fact, you often need to dramatically change/simplify the wording in order to make the argument clearer or more concise.
- (3) Typically, not everything said in the passage is part of the argument.
- (4) Typically, not everything that is part of the argument is said in the passage. In other words, there are 'hidden' premises/conclusions. Figure out what these hidden premises/conclusion are and put them into your standard form.
- (5) Don't forget the info in parentheses at the end of each line of your standard form.
- (6) **Draw intermediate conclusions, and then use those intermediate conclusions to draw further conclusions, whenever you can.** In other words, don't wait to draw a conclusion from a whole bunch of lines. For example, this would be bad:

1. Blah blah blah (premise)
2. Blah blah blah (premise)
3. Blah blah blah (premise)
4. Blah blah blah (premise)
5. Blah blah blah (from 1, 2, 3, 4)

Very few humans can hold *four* premises simultaneously in their mind and then see whether a conclusion follows from them. Instead, you should break the argument up into multiple, smaller inferences. For example, **maybe** something with this structure:

1. Blah blah blah (premise)
2. Blah blah blah (premise)
3. Blah blah blah (from 1 and 2)
4. Blab blah blah (premise)
5. Blah blah blah (premise)
6. Blah blah blah (from 4, 5)
7. Blah blah blah (from 3, 6)

The exact structure of the argument will vary—it probably won't be just like this one. The point here is that your argument should, one way or another, be divided up into

several smaller inferences, rather than one or two big ones. Yes, this way of doing it will have more numbered steps. But this breaks the argument up into smaller chunks, which makes it much easier for the reader to follow (in the above example, the first chunk is “1, 2, therefore 3” and the second chunk is “4, 5, therefore 6” and the third chunk is “3, 6, therefore 7”; notice that the last chunk uses the intermediate conclusions established by the first two chunks.)

- (7) Don’t add lines just for the sake of reaching the minimum five! That’s a sure way to not pass the level. Instead, choose a new argument—one that is actually at least five lines long.
- (8) Except for the last line (the main conclusion), every line must be used to support another line. You can easily check this by making sure every line number (except for the main conclusion) shows up in the parentheses at the end of some other line.
- (9) Don’t repeat premises in conclusions. For example, if a premise is X and a conclusion is Y, don’t write the conclusion as “because X, Y”. Just write the conclusion as Y. And then indicate that it comes from X by putting the line number of X in the parentheses at the end.
- (10) Keep your terminology/phrasing consistent throughout the argument. For example, if one line refers to “streets”, don’t say “roads” in another line—say “streets” if you still mean streets. This will make the argument much easier to follow. (Authors often use shifting terminology. Watch out for this! When you spot it, translate what they are saying back into consistent terminology.)

Instructions for All Levels

- (1) Double-space.
- (2) Submit as a .docx file.
- (3) Save your document as “YOUR NAME Attempt X.docx”, replacing “YOUR NAME” and “X” appropriately. Inside your document, write “Z attempt at Level Y”, replacing “Z” and “Y” appropriately.

For example, if your name is “Zhang Weili” and you are submitting your 1st attempt at Level 3, and this is your 5th overall level attempt, then you would save your document as “Zhang Weili Attempt 5.docx” and inside your document you would write “1st attempt at Level 3”.

Pro-tips for All Levels

- (1) Follow ALL of the instructions to complete a level.
- (2) It’s always easier to put in the extra effort to complete a level than it is to have to start all over and try the level again!
- (3) That said, ‘trying again’ is what the levels system is all about, so you should expect to have to retry most of the levels at least once!

Level 2: One Paragraph Demonstrating Some Writing Basics

To complete this or any level, your attempt must be submitted on time to the proper location, follow all of the instructions, and be of excellent quality.

Purpose

In this level you will demonstrate your ability to follow basic writing conventions with respect to mechanics, formatting, and citations.

Overview

- (1) Follow the **instructions for all levels** listed under the instructions for Level 1.
- (2) Choose a reading that was assigned in this class since the previous level attempt was due and write one-paragraph about some aspect of it (it's up to you what to write).
- (3) Your paragraph must be between 100 and 150 words.
- (4) **Mechanics:** your paragraph must be completely free of typos, spelling errors, and grammatical mistakes.
- (5) **Formatting:** use standard academic formatting (double-space, 12-point font, etc.). This includes attending to the *visuals* of your paper. For example, skip a line between your header and your title, and skip another line between your title and the first sentence of your paper. Put your title in **bold**. In general, just make your paper look like you actually care about the experience your reader will have when reading it. If you're not sure what to do here, you may want to Google 'standard academic formatting'.
- (6) **Citations:** use a standard academic citation format of your choosing. But also...
 - a. Include a works cited page.
 - b. Demonstrate both the ability to (i) cite at least one quote from the text and (ii) cite at least one part of the text that you are not quoting but just referring to. (Note: your Level 2 paper must contain *both* types of citations, so that I know you know how to do both. Level 3 and 4 papers must have proper citations, but do not necessarily need to include *both* types of citations.)
 - c. Always cite specific page numbers, unless the article doesn't have page numbers, in which case cite paragraph numbers (you'll have to count them).
 - d. If you have already learned a standard citation format, great, use it! If you haven't, you can cite like this: "Blah blah blah (Author's last name, publication year, page number)." For example, like this:

Judith Thomson argues that abortion is morally permissible (Thomson, 1971, p. 5).

Note that the punctuation mark—in this case, a period—goes *after* the parenthetical citation. Also, note that in this^ citation I'm not quoting; I'm just referring to a part of the text. If you're quoting, do it like this:

Judith Thomson argues that "it would be wrong to prevent someone from having an abortion" (Thomson, 1971, p. 5).

Note how there's no punctuation mark at the end of the quote. The order goes: quotation mark, parenthetical citation, punctuation mark. The punctuation mark—in this case, a period—is always last.

- e. If you have a quote that is three or more lines long, turn it into a "block quote" (Google this is if you don't know what I mean).
- f. If there are multiple authors on a single text, list all of their names in your works cited. However, in the body of your essay, refer to them by stating the first author's name and then using the phrase 'et al.', which is an abbreviation for a Latin phrase meaning "and the others". So, for example, if Judith Thomson,

Sharon Street, and Amy Kind wrote a paper together, you would refer to them like this: "Judith Thomson et al. argue that..."

- g. Use an author's first and last name the first time you refer to them—after that, just use their last name.
- h. To save space, you can use a publication year instead of a title to refer to a text. For example, instead of writing:

In "A Defense of Abortion" (1975), Judith Thomson argues that...

You can instead simply write:

Judith Thomson (1975) argues that...

Level 3: A Very Short Paper that is Clear, Concise, and Focused

To complete this or any level, your attempt must be submitted on time to the proper location, follow all of the instructions, and be of excellent quality.

Purpose

In this level you will use the skills you learned on Level 2 and add to them the ability to write an essay that is clear, concise, and focused.

Overview

- (1) Choose a reading assigned in this class since the last attempt was due and write a very short paper about some aspect of it (it's up to you what to write about).
- (2) Your paper must be between 250 and 300 words.
- (3) Follow the **instructions for all levels** listed under the instructions for Level 1.
- (4) Following the **mechanics, formatting, and citation** instruction from Level 2.
- (5) **Write clearly.** More specifically...
 - a. Don't try to sound "fancy": explain things clearly in plain English, the way you would to a friend.
 - b. Don't assume your reader knows anything about the topic/essay you are discussing. You may want to start with something like, "In such and such essay, so and so argues that..." and include a proper citation.
 - c. Be clear about *whose* ideas you are explaining (e.g., say things like "Sharon Street concludes that...").
 - d. Illustrate abstract ideas with specific examples.
 - e. Organize your paper into meaningful paragraphs with clear transitions between them.
- (2) **Write concisely.** More specifically...
 - a. Make your sentences short and punchy: divide longer sentences into multiple shorter sentences.
 - b. Find a way to say things using fewer words. For example, this is bad: "In Frank Jackson's, 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', the author argues..." And this is good: "In 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', Frank Jackson argues..."
 - c. Don't repeat yourself, unless doing so helps to clarify what you are saying.
- (3) **Write a focused paper.** More specifically, make sure there is exactly *one* thing you are doing in your paper. In your introductory paragraph, you should introduce the general topic of your paper and then clearly and explicitly say what the one thing you will do in the paper is. To do this, you should have a sentence at or near the end of the paragraph that says something like "In this paper, I will..."

Pro-tips

- (1) Level 3 is building on Level 2. Thus, anything required for Level 2 is also required for Level 3.
- (2) Above all else, it's your job as a writer to make things as easy as possible for your reader.

Level 4: A Short Paper Explaining an Argument

To complete this or any level, your attempt must be submitted on time to the proper location, follow all of the instructions, and be of excellent quality.

Purpose

In this level you will use the skills learned on Levels 1, 2, and 3 and add to them the ability to clearly explain an argument to a reader who is unfamiliar with the topic.

Instructions for Drafts

With your draft, include at the top of the document a standard form of the argument you are explaining. The purpose of this is to help you make sure you are understanding the argument you are trying to explain, and to help your partner (on workshop day) understand what argument you are trying to explain and whether you've understood it. To do this you will draw on the skills you mastered for Level 1.

Overview

- (1) Follow my #1 most important tip for succeeding at the levels (top of p. 2 above).
- (2) Choose one particular argument from the readings assigned for this class since the last attempt was due and clearly and accurately explain that argument in a short paper.
- (3) Your paper must be no longer than 400 words.
- (4) Follow all of the **instructions for all levels** listed under the instructions for Level 1.
- (5) Follow all of the instructions for **mechanics, formatting, and citations** from Level 2.
- (6) Follow all of the instructions for writing **clearly, concisely, and 'focusedly'** from Level 3.
- (7) Make sure that the *one* thing your paper is explaining is an **argument** from one of the assigned readings (by completing Level 1, you should be in a good position to tell what is and what is not an argument).

Important Details

- (1) I am **not** asking you to explain the entire reading or the "main" argument from the reading. Most articles we read consist of a *series* of arguments, and I am asking you to explain just one of the arguments in the series—that is, find one particular place in the reading where the author is trying to give a reason to believe something. The argument you explain might (or might not) be found in a single paragraph in the reading.
- (2) You may **not** choose an argument that has already been put into standard form for you (either in the reading, by me, or by another student in class).
- (3) At the beginning of your paper, include an introductory paragraph that briefly introduces the topic, clearly states the main conclusion of the argument you're going to explain, and explains how your paper will proceed. Just as in Level 3, your introductory paragraph should end with something like: "In this essay, I will..."
- (4) When your actual level attempt is due, remove the standard form you submitted with your draft.

Pro-tips

- (1) Remember, Level 4 is building on Levels 2 and 3. Thus, anything required for Levels 2 or 3 is also required for Level 4.
- (2) The organization of your paper will not necessarily follow the organization of the standard form you create for the argument.
- (3) Also, you'll need to include things in your paper that you wouldn't include in a standard form. Most importantly, you'll need to provide your reader with all and only the

background information they will need to understand the argument you will be presenting.

- (4) Sometimes the “background information” a reader needs is another argument. This happens when, for example, the argument you are explaining in your paper is specifically a *critique* of another argument. In that case, you will have to explain the criticized argument before you can explain the argument you are trying to explain.
- (5) Remember that, above all else, it’s your job as a writer to make things as easy as possible for your reader.
- (6) Remember that this is **not** your argument, so make sure to not explain it as if it is. So, for example, don’t just say “blah blah blah”. Instead, say things like “Thomson argues that blah blah blah”, “Thomson begins by assuming that...”, “Thomson uses the following example to make her point...” and so on.
- (7) This paper is too short to require a summary at the end.
- (8) You should, however, explicitly arrive at the conclusion you advertised in the beginning of your paper.

Instructions for Drafts

Before each level attempt is due, you will submit a “draft” (exception: you will not submit a draft for attempt one). In class, I will pair you up with a partner and you will read and write comments on each other’s drafts.

- (1) A draft is a complete and polished version of your level attempt.
- (2) There are special instructions for drafts for Level 4 (see instructions for Level 4).
- (3) Save your draft with the file name “YOUR NAME Attempt X Draft.docx”, but replace “YOUR NAME” with your name and “X” with whatever attempt you are on. For example, if your name is “Zhang Weili” and you are submitting a draft for your 5th overall level attempt, you would save your document as “Zhang Weili Attempt 5 Draft.docx”.
- (4) Bring to class either a hard copy or an electronic copy on your laptop (not your phone—your partner needs to be able to write comments on your draft).

Instructions for Edits

After you receive your “graded” level attempt back from me, you will do edits. These edits will not count towards completing the level—their purpose is rather to help you understand my feedback before your next level attempt. What if you completed the level? See instruction (6).

- (1) Open the file you received back from me with comments.
- (2) Copy and paste your entire paper right below your paper—so now you have two copies of your paper in the same document.
- (3) Edit the second copy of your paper and leave the first one as it is, with my comments, so that I can easily look back at it while reviewing your revisions.
- (4) Save your document as “YOUR NAME Attempt X Edits.docx”, but replace “YOUR NAME” with your name and “X” with whatever attempt number you are submitting edits for. For example, if your name is “Zhang Weili” and you are submitting edits for your 5th overall level attempt, you would save your document as “Zhang Weili Attempt 5 Edits.docx”.
- (5) **You must do edits regardless of whether you earned a ‘complete’ on your level attempt.** If there is feedback from me, revise your attempt according to the instructions here. If there is literally no feedback from me, you must still submit a document (this makes bookkeeping easier for me), but the document should simply say “It do be like that sometimes”.