LUC WRITING CENTER – “THE ESSAY-PARAGRAPH EQUATION”

While outlining, do you ever wish that you knew exactly how many body paragraphs should be in your essay? Since each body paragraph starts with a topic sentence (i.e. “point” that you will go on to prove) it would be nice to know how many topic sentences you need to write.

Actually, you CAN find and plan this out if you use a very simple mathematical formula that works for any paper of any length! All you need to write a much more solid outline is to have is the essay prompt, listing your teacher’s requirements for your paper and make the following 4-step calculation:

1) First, what is the page limit for your essay?
   If your essay prompt says 6-8 pages, that means at minimum your teacher requires a 6-page essay, and at maximum, an 8-page essay. For the purposes of this exercise, let’s say you will write a 6-page essay.

2) Secondly, how many paragraphs should you write per page?
   You should write between 1 ½ and 2 paragraphs in a paper that is less than 10 pages. (Above 10 pages a page can contain anywhere from 1-2 paragraphs.) Let’s say you are going to write 2 paragraphs per page.

3) So, make the following calculation:
   \[ 6 \text{ pages} \times 2 \text{ paragraphs per page} = 12 \text{ paragraphs total in your paper.} \]

4) But that still doesn’t give you the total number of topic sentence paragraphs. Which paragraphs do you already KNOW are going to be in your essay no matter what?
   Two, to be precise: your intro paragraph and your conclusion paragraph. So, to figure out the total number of topic sentences you need to write (i.e. how many body paragraphs will be in your essay) you need to minus 2 paragraphs from your total:

   \[ 12 \text{ paragraphs} - 2 \text{ paragraphs (intro and conclusion)} = 10 \text{ body paragraphs in your paper.} \]

Now you have two options. You can write 10 separate topic sentences that all make a new point that supports your thesis. You could also focus on the same theme for 2 paragraphs, meaning that the first topic sentence will raise the issue and the second paragraph continue exploring a separate facet of the same issue.

Either way, knowing that you have 10 body paragraphs can make the job of outlining a lot easier and help you keep your subject focused in the early stages of structuring your essay.

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