Paragraphing Tips for the WPE

One of the things that the readers of the Writing Proficiency Exam are evaluating is the students’ ability to express their ideas in reasonably well-developed and well-organized paragraphs. In most writing situations, you have the chance to revise your paragraphs numerous times, enabling you to make your arguments, ideas, and evidence as clear and convincing to your readers as possible. In a timed writing situation, however, you have very little opportunity to revise; consequently, it becomes more important to take plenty of time to plan your essay, and perhaps even to write a rough outline, before you begin the actual composing.

As a way of learning how to organize essays into paragraphs, many students have been taught the “five-paragraph essay” format: an introduction, consisting of a thesis statement (or main idea) and a list of three points; three body paragraphs, developing each of the three points; and a conclusion, summarizing the thesis and the three points. However, the five-paragraph essay is generally not a good format to employ. It is never the best choice, and in some cases, it is completely inappropriate, with the writer’s attempts to make it work often resulting in an unsatisfactory essay.

Instead of trying to use a predetermined format like the five-paragraph essay, pay attention to content rather than form: rather than following a formula that probably won’t work very well, think about your message. Focus on what you want to say about your topic and on what your audience needs from you to understand your argument and your ideas.

In the WPE, even though you have very little opportunity to revise, you can still work to make your paragraphs as unified and developed as possible, and make use of clear and effective transitions. As you brainstorm for ideas and plan your essay at the beginning of the exam, keep in mind the following aspects of good paragraphs:

1. Unity: A unified paragraph is one in which all of the sentences relate to a single idea and work together to develop that idea.

2. Development: Effective writing is distinguished by the amount and quality of the details, the specifics that make an essay memorable. Writing detailed and well-developed paragraphs is especially important when you have so little time to revise and make corrections, because the more interesting and engaging your essay is, the less noticeable small lapses and errors will be.

3. Transitions: These are words or phrases that show the relationships between ideas as you move from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph. The right transitions are very important in making your ideas clear and convincing. Here are a few example:
   - To show alternatives and additions: and, or, also, furthermore, besides, in addition.
   - To indicate contrast: but, yet, or, however, nevertheless, on the other hand.
   - To show a cause or result: because, so, for, therefore, consequently, as a result, then.
   - To provide a summary: in other words, to sum up, in short, in fact.

Make sure you take a few minutes at the end of the exam to make corrections and to add, delete, or move things around, using arrows or an asterisk (*) to show where you want to put something. Just try to make the changes and corrections as clear as possible.