DEVELOPING IDEAS IN AN ACADEMIC ESSAY

When professors write in the margin of a student's paper, "this idea needs to be developed," or "this essay isn't developed," they are referring to a basic convention of academic writing. The way in which a writer uses evidence to build towards a conclusion is what distinguishes academic persuasion from the persuasion in television advertisements or political campaigns. The building of ideas and the treatment of ideas -- this is what professors mean when they say "develop." Students and teachers often refer to development as "the essay's flow."

In academic essays, development proceeds differently from that of television advertisements, which develop arguments much more briefly, usually through a set of pictures and slogans. In academic writing, overall development usually includes a number of generalizations worked out through specific evidence, with each step of the thought made clear to the reader. Unlike the advertiser, the academic writer has to specify the connections between ideas in an explicit manner: we can't flash a number of related images quickly on a screen.

Writers establish relationships through organization. Organization includes finding a principle for ordering the paragraphs. Why is one paragraph placed before another; what is the logic for considering one point in the middle and another at the end? A writer could decide, for example, to move from the least to the most important point, or to move from personal experience to statistical evidence. Or a writer might offer contrasting views on a topic before moving to establish her own position. These would be ordering principles. Transitions also help to relate ideas (see handout on these). Transitional paragraphs will signal to the reader: here is where we've been; here is where we're going. Transitional words and phrases (for example; next; as we've seen) perform the same function.

Academic writers develop ideas through paragraphs. Locating topic sentences -- the main idea of a paragraph -- may help inexperienced writers to make sure that their paragraphs don't consider too many ideas at once, since a major idea deserves to be reasoned through before the writer considers another idea. Students should reread their paragraphs by comparing the first sentence in a paragraph to the last sentence.

Paragraphs usually don't function as isolated sets of sentences. Paragraphs exist in connection with other paragraphs. When the writer steps away from her paper to reread it, she should ask: where are the breaks in my paragraphs? Am I separating ideas in a clear way? Visually, what do the paragraphs look like on the pages? Can I summarize the main points in different paragraphs? Do some paragraphs chunk together as a section (organization)? Are there identifiable sections in my paper?
Finally, the conclusion should culminate the developed idea. Conclusions are really difficult to discuss in the abstract. However, writers can check the validity of their conclusions in three major ways by asking:

(1) Do I have a clear sense of where the conclusion begins?

(2) What do I want my reader to do when she finishes reading, to feel like, or to agree with?

(3) How does my conclusion compare to my introduction?

Related questions here would include asking:

- Does the conclusion simply repeat the introduction? If so, is this necessary, especially in a short paper -- does the reader want to hear it all again?
- Does the conclusion leap to an entirely new idea?
- Does the conclusion end too soon: does the reader need more information?
- How can I relate my last idea to the first ideas I presented?
- How can I leave a strong impression on the reader's mind?