

Secret

STRATEGIES TO RAISE YOUR ESSAY SCORES

Part 1: The Hook

"This fantastic e-book provides essay writers with a wealth of ideas that helps them save a lot of time and effort."

-Dr. Hany Ibrahim

"Definitely a useful tool for learners preparing for English proficiency tests. I will recommend it to my friends."

- Amaya Perez Villate

ELAINE SAMBUGARO

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Hello, and thanks for downloading my e-book.

It is the first in a three-part series.

I wrote it for learners like you who are actively seeking real strategies and shortcuts to improve essay-writing scores on the TOEFL iBT, IELTS or CAEL.

Let's face it: most English proficiency tests push the limits of the human brain. The difficult subject matter combined with the added pressure of time can overwhelm even the most well-prepared student, causing that student to overlook important details.

These details make all the difference.

Attention-getting sentences, for example, are considered to be nonessential in an essay for the vast majority of learners.

What these students do not realize is that attention-getting sentences are part and parcel of a thesis statement.

They matter, a lot.

A writer's controlling ideas start with the very first words of an essay. This means that if attention-getters are written effectively, they will guide the examiner smoothly and easily towards the governing idea and, in fact, make the entire line of reasoning in your essay more compelling.

One of the quickest routes to writing an effective attention-getter, also known as a *hook*, can be found here.

The thirteen (13) strategies and fifty (50) sentence shortcuts in these pages have a dual purpose: first, to help you understand the different types of attention-getting strategies that are available; and second, to help you match those attention-getting strategies with academic essay topics.

A word of caution: The attention-getters in this e-book should **not** be memorized word for word. In fact, memorization may produce less-than-stellar test results, particularly if the sentences are used incorrectly or in the wrong context. Spend time **understanding the strategies** and **studying the sentence shortcuts**. Choose the strategies that you are most comfortable with and practise them with a qualified English-language instructor.

Strategy #1-AA: Ask a question. Answer the question.



Beginning an essay with a question is one of the easiest ways to engage a reader. Of course, the question must be phrased properly. Remember to front with an auxiliary verb or start the question with an interrogative pronoun. Once you have asked your question, follow it up with an immediate answer. A simple sentence works best. But two sentences are equally good, depending on the subject matter. Here are a few examples:

AA 1: Topic: Society: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live in a stress-free world? I have. I don't think I would like it very much.

AA 2: Topic: Education: Is college a waste of time and money? Many people think so. But I am not one of these people.

AA 3: Topic: Employment: What are employers really looking for in today's job market? The answer may be surprising. Recent online surveys suggest that authenticity is one of the most sought-after attributes.

AA 4: Topic: Money/Finance: How low can the euro go? It is hard to predict. Currency markets have taken us on a wild roller-coaster ride this year. International investors, importers and exporters may all have to brace for more volatility.

Strategy #2-A2Q: Ask two questions consecutively, followed by a one-word or multi-word opinion.



Two questions asked consecutively also works well. This time, however, try following them up with a one-word opinion which you will carry forward throughout the essay. Alternatively, you can take a middle-of-the-road position by using words like "It depends" or "Perhaps" or "I have yet to decide."

A2Q 1: Topic: Culture: Should all museums charge admission fees? Is this fair practice? It depends. [On the one hand ...]

A2Q 2: Topic: Justice: Is punishment required to teach children right from wrong? Should parents have the right to spank their children? Never.

A2Q 3: Topic: The Environment: Should we reduce, reuse and recycle? Are there practical benefits from these activities? I have yet to decide. [On the one hand ...]

A2Q 4: Topic: Education/Finances: Did I want to return to school? What did I want to be: a full-time or a part-time student? Not surprisingly, the key consideration was money.

Strategy #3-QEPSC: Use a quotation/expression/proverb/slogan, followed by a short comment about that quotation/expression/proverb/slogan.



This strategy is relatively straightforward. But selection becomes problematic. Learners have a rich repository of proverbs and quotations from their own languages of origin. They draw from these expressions and proverbs, assuming that direct translation into English is possible. Most often, it is not. If you are going to use Strategy #3, try your best to find an equivalent expression or proverb in the English language. If you cannot find one, perhaps it is wise to avoid this strategy on the written component of the examination. It may confuse rather than enlighten.

QEPSC 1: Topic: Immigration: Everyone has heard the saying "The grass is always greener on the other side." I never expected this expression to apply to me.

QEPSC 2: Topic: Pets/Gender Equality: It has been said that a dog is man's best friend. These loyal companions are a woman's best friend, too. Dogs don't discriminate.

QEPSC 3: Topic: Journalism/Fake News: The Canadian author Farley Mowat once wrote, "I never let the facts get in the way of the truth." The author's words made me think more deeply about the newspaper articles I read every day.

QEPSC 4: Topic: Mindset: Thomas Edison is famous for having said, "Genius is one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration." He took the words right out of my mouth.

QEPSC 5: Topic: Memorable Moment: "*Trick or treat, smell my feet give me something good to eat!*" I'd shout this saying with sheer abandon every Hallowe'en. I'm sure my neighbours didn't appreciate it.

QEPSC 6: Topic: Advertising: *Just Do It.* This is the slogan of the world's largest supplier of sporting goods. It sells everything from athletic shoes to sports equipment and street fashion. The secret of this company's success is simple: it makes consumers feel empowered.

QEPSC 7: Topic: Philosophy/Progress: A wise person once said, "Sometimes we need to go backwards before we can walk forward." I don't think this saying means living in the past. I think it means looking to your past experiences to extract knowledge that can be used in the present and in the future.

Strategy #4-SIM: Use a simile. This is figurative language.



Similes are used to make comparisons by using the words "like" or "as." This can be an excellent strategy, particularly if you have a vivid imagination. If this is a strategy that appeals to you, it's important to practise writing interesting similes before the exam. Start by finishing phrases like: "as messy as ..." or "as exciting as ..." or "as confusing as." A word of caution with similes: avoid obvious ones. You don't want to bore your reader. Do not write: "As green as the grass." Everyone knows that the grass is green. This is not a very interesting comparison. Instead, you might write: "As green as a field of four-leaf clovers on St. Patrick's Day."

SIM 1: Topic: Violence: The argument supporting gun control seems to be as tangled as my grandmother's knitting yarn. It is just about as thin, too.

SIM 2: Tourism/Travel: The Prairie provinces are as flat as yesterday's Coca Cola. But that didn't stop me from vacationing there. I discovered that some of the best Canadian restaurants dot the landscape in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

SIM 3: Television Shows/Habits: Watching old sitcom repeats on Saturday night is like wrapping myself in a comfy blanket. These shows make me feel cozy; they put a smile on my face no matter how many times I watch them.

Strategy #5-MET: Use a metaphor. This is figurative language.



Metaphors are also used to make comparisons. They differ from similes because they do not use the words "like" or "as." Instead, metaphors create a more direct comparison, sometimes by using the verb "to be." Consider this sentence: The camel is the ship of the desert. The camel is a ship only in a metaphorical sense. It is not really a ship. But a comparison has been made between a ship and a camel, as well as the ocean and the desert. Please don't forget that the attention-grabber that contains the metaphor must be followed up with one or two more sentences.

MET 1: Topic: Society/Politics: The wheels of justice turn slowly. This is especially true in Canada. Courtrooms are backlogged with cases, and there are too few judges.

MET 2: Topic: Technology: Waves of spam flood our inboxes every day. Whenever I turn on my computer, I feel as if I'm inundated with trash.

MET 3: Topic: Business/Employment: The job was cancerous for my hopes and dreams. Neither upward mobility nor professional development opportunities were offered.

Strategy #6-STAT: Use a thought-provoking statistic or fact.



People like to read and reread information that makes them think twice. That's why breaking news is so engaging; it has shock value. If you are a foreign-trained accountant, doctor or engineer and can easily recall interesting facts or statistics that the reader may not be familiar with, then definitely use strategy #6. Reach into your repository of factual knowledge. The data that you choose, however, must be accurate and must be connected to the question that you are being asked to answer. If you are asked to write about the best invention of the 20th century, for example, providing an employment statistic would be inappropriate and would create confusion.

STAT 1: Topic: Behaviour/Smoking: Tobacco use killed 100 million people around the globe in the 20th century. Incredible, isn't it? The death toll is higher than that of World War I and World War II combined.

STAT 2: Topic: Consumer Spending: More than seventy per cent of shoppers believe that they will get a better deal online than they will in a retail store. This may be a false assumption.

STAT 3: Topic: Technology: More than forty per cent of the world population has an internet connection; in 1995, that number was less than one per cent. In a few years, I suspect that the entire global population will be online.

STAT 4: Topic: Health/Obesity: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), forty-one million children under the age of five were overweight or obese in 2014. That is jaw-dropping.

STAT 5: Topic: Environment: Breathing the air in Beijing for one day is the same as smoking 40 cigarettes. I read this piece of information on the Berkeley Earth website, not in the National Enquirer.

STAT 6: Topic: Journalism/Economics: Dire prediction from the world of Canadian journalism: thirty community newspapers are scheduled to close in 2018. The print model of local newspapers is falling prey to a more cost-effective alternative: digital media.

Strategy #7-DEF: Use a definition.



Definitions are a wonderful way to entice your reader. Little-known medical terms or financial terms - followed by a quick explanation of what the word actually means - is effective. This strategy works particularly well with questions that ask you to discuss broad terms such as "culture." Culture means different things to different people. As a result, a definition would bring clarity and specificity to your writing.

DEF 1: Topic: Health: Hypertension: the medical name for this condition is frightening. It means high blood pressure. Medical terms often make a disease sound much worse than it is.

DEF 2: Topic: Inventions: The iPhone, a revolutionary mobile phone, made its debut on January 9, 2007. This technology changed the world: its touchscreen technology, its "apps" and its portability were ground-breaking.

DEF 3: Topic: Transportation: At one time, the word "hybrid" meant a cross between two established varieties of a plant or an animal. For most people today, the word "hybrid" means a fuel-efficient, low-emission vehicle.

Strategy #8-TASS: Tell a short story or anecdote.



*When I say short, I mean short. This strategy carries with it the great danger of veering off topic. If you don't keep the narrative short in your introductory paragraph, you run the risk of losing sight of the question that must be answered. What's more, chances are that you will not complete your essay because you spent too long on your story. What advice can I give you here? Well, if you are a great storyteller and you want to use Strategy #8, give yourself a **4-sentence limit**. Practise writing your story or anecdote as succinctly as you can.*

TASS 1: Topic: Social Media: I had to do a lot of soul searching, but after four years on Twitter, I decided that it had to be done: I clicked "delete." I cancelled my account. My tweets, my pictures and my followers were gone. It was time for a change.

TASS 2: Topic: Transportation: It takes me about an hour and a half to get to work every day, but I only live two kilometres away. Subway delays, combined with overcrowding and the crush of rush hour traffic, make the commute unbearable.

TASS 3: Topic: Advertising: Last month, I received an invitation in the mail to a fitness club. They offered an irresistible deal on a yearly membership, so I responded. I should have known better. It was a scam.

TASS 4: Topic: General Behaviour: All right, I admit it: I'm obsessed about getting to class on time. I have to be there at least a half an hour before the professor starts the lecture. It's part of my daily routine.

TASS 5: Topic: Education/Financial Literacy: I will never forget January 30, 2001. The next-to-last-day of the first month was not exactly my finest hour. This was the day that I looked closely at my credit card statement and shuddered at the prospect of being buried in debt for the rest of my life.

Strategy #9-CPO: Challenge public opinion.



Good readers and good writers challenge commonly-held opinions. Doubt and healthy skepticism are part of being a good reader and a good writer.

This strategy is effective because it demonstrates critical thinking. It is evidence of a sharp mind, and perhaps an equally sharp tongue. Individuals with strong convictions can argue that a commonly held opinion is false, and their arguments may ultimately capture the admiration and esteem of the reader, provided that facts can also be marshalled to support the individual's point of view.

CPO 1: Topic: Art: Michelangelo was a hard worker. He displayed natural genius, but genius alone did not catapult him into near-mythical fame. He worked until his hands bled and his knees buckled.

CPO 2: Topic: Immigration: I was born in the United States, but I do not think like most American citizens. I believe that immigration has a positive effect on the economy of a nation.

CPO 3: Topic: Drugs/Addiction: Unhappiness is always the root cause of addiction, even though experts say that no one is immune to dependencies. Still, it is difficult to believe that a happy person would drown their happiness in a bottle of bourbon.

CPO 4: Topic: Science/Opinion Polls: Data from a recent poll showed that an overwhelming majority of Canadians do not have faith in science. They think that it cannot be trusted because it is always changing. I'm not like most Canadians.

CPO 5: Topic: Society/Arranged Marriages: The vast majority of Canadians do not believe in arranged marriages. They are referred to as "forced" marriages and "relics from a patriarchal past." But I am Canadian. Having my parents arrange my marriage is an important part of my heritage.

Strategy #10-HUM: Use humour, when appropriate.



All readers appreciate a healthy dose of humour - in the right place, at the right time. Humour is playful; it's refreshing. It puts a smile on a reader's face because it reveals information about a writer's personality or shares a common human experience.

However, it is important to stress the words "in the right place" and "at the right time." Obviously, choosing to use a joke as an attention-getter for a serious academic topic would be inappropriate. For more light-hearted questions on exams, however, it may be an excellent approach. Relaxed and entertaining topics where Strategy #10 might be appropriate include: hobbies, holidays, family, friends, campus-related interaction, and general social observations.

HUM 1: Topic: Social Behaviour: I like to change my name every time I place an order at Starbucks. Some mornings I feel like a Cleopatra. Sometimes I feel like an Anastasia. The barista can't figure me out.

HUM 2: Topic: Vacations/Travel: My trip to New York: 15 excruciatingly wonderful hours in the car with a screaming child, a gassy poodle and a squinting husband who forgot his sunglasses on the kitchen table. Oh joy, oh bliss!

Strategy #11-3SEQ: Write 3 or 4 short sentences in sequence and add a twist.



The first time I realized the power contained in three short opening lines, I was twelve and I was reading Judy Blume's book "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." The book begins with the following three sentences: "We moved on the Tuesday before Labour Day. I knew what the weather was like the second I got up. I knew because I caught my mother sniffing under her arms." The first three sentences caught my imagination: they drew me in and they left me wondering. If I wanted to discover why Margaret was talking to God, where she moved from, where she moved to or what the weather was like, I had to continue reading. It was that simple. As far as I'm concerned, Judy Blume is a master attention-getter. Here are a few more examples of some excellent short sentences in sequence:

3SEQ 1: Topic: Medicine: **Excerpt from Dave Barry's essay "Dentistry Self-Drilled":** I bet you rarely stop to think how important your teeth are. This is good. America is in enough trouble as it is, what with inflation and all. We just can't afford to have people stopping to think how important their teeth are, especially on major highways.

3SEQ 2: Topic: Film/Entertainment: **Excerpt from David Annandale's essay "Legacy of Betrayal: The Trouble with Film Adaptations of Video Games":** Presented, for the reader's consideration: a study in contrasts. Two bigger than life characters, iconic in their respective art forms. Both are fabulously wealthy and based in gigantic mansions. Both are adept at hand-to-hand combat.

Strategy #12-PUNC: Use punctuation to change the pace.



Punctuation is used to structure and organize writing. But it also has a secondary and more interesting function: it is used to create stress and rhythm. *It. Can. Slow. A. Reader. Down.* Of course, we don't always write this way, but we can play with semi-colons, colons, commas and parentheses to create visual impact or balance. Punctuation can make the first two or three sentences of an introductory paragraph more memorable. Consider how Jessica Mitford used punctuation in the opening lines of her essay **"Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain."**

She wrote: "The drama begins to unfold with the arrival of the corpse at the mortuary. Alas, poor Yorick! How surprised he would be to see how his counterpart of today is whisked off to a funeral parlor and is in short order sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged and neatly dressed - transformed from a common corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture."

Mitford used commas with eleven verb choices, and she added a dash and a twelfth verb in the sequence for good measure. She quoted from Shakespeare's Hamlet and she used punctuation to her advantage. This strategy is quite advanced. I have included it here for those English-language learners who are always looking for the next challenge on their learning journey.

PUNC 1: Topic: Hobbies: **Excerpt from Rick Groen's essay entitled "The Magic of Moviegoing":** What movies to watch; with whom to watch; where, when and why to watch. Of course, we got it covered, and so does everyone else. Turn to your favourite newspaper or magazine and, on any given week, this cinematic 5 W's will all be lined up and duly addressed. ¹

[1. 5W's refers to the 5 interrogative pronouns: who, what, when, where and why.]

Strategy #13-CMBO: Use the strategies in combination.



They say that variety is the spice of life. Why should you be discouraged from tasting the excitement that can come from mixing and matching attention-getting strategies? Try using Strategy #10 with Strategy #8. Combine Strategy #5 or #6 with Strategy #8. Strategy #7 and Strategy #9 also work nicely together. After you have completed your playful experimentation with language, it is important to get real time feedback from a qualified English-language instructor.

Not all combinations work equally well together. I strongly encourage experimentation in order to understand what is possible - and what is not.

CMBO 1: (#8 Anecdotes/#10 Humour) Topic: Embarrassing Moments/Family: Last year, my better half decided to start a new Thanksgiving tradition by barbecuing "the bird" on the rotisserie, just like the commercials on Swiss Chalet. A small culinary miscalculation caused the bird to cook only on one side because it was too heavy for the rotisserie's motor. There I was: a half-cooked bird, family at the doorstep and one big turkey to contend with.

CMBO 2: (#9 Challenge Opinion/#10 Humour) Topic: Shopping/Retail: Most people believe that IKEA's slogan should be: "Killing Marriages Piece by Piece." Not my spouse. Light and bright, inexpensive and welcoming, the outlets offer her a fun shopping experience. Whenever we shop at IKEA, she loads up her cart with impulse buys and gleefully impersonates the lady in the television commercial: "Start the Car!".

CMBO 3: (#1 Ask Question/#9 Challenge Opinion) Topic: Society: ***Excerpt from Betty Rollin's essay "Motherhood: Who Needs it?":** Motherhood is in trouble, and it ought to be. A rude question is long overdue: Who needs it? The answer used to be (1) society and (2) women. But now, with the impending horrors of overpopulation, society desperately doesn't need it. And women don't need it either.

CMBO 4: (#1 Ask Question/#7 Definition) Topic: Philosophy:
**Excerpt from Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "Existentialism":* Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, the name we are labelled with when charges are brought against us. But what do we mean by this, if not that man has a greater dignity than a stone or table?

CMBO 5: (#5 Metaphor/#7 Story/#3 Short sentences) Topic:
Education: **Excerpt from Maya Angelou's essay "Graduation":* The children of Stamp (a town in Arkansas) trembled visibly with anticipation. Some adults were excited too, but to be certain the whole young population had come down with graduation epidemic. Large classes were graduating from both the grammar school and the high school.



A final word of caution: remember that writing a good attention-getter will **not** guarantee a high score on the written portion of your examination, **if** the rest of your essay is poorly written. An attention-getter can be perfectly crafted, but if the body of your essay lacks support or if your paragraphs are disconnected from one another or if your conclusion is non-existent, the presence of the most brilliant opening lines will not stave off a low score.

However, if you already have a good understanding of the form and function of an essay, and you simply have not been incorporating attention-getters either because you did not know about them or because you could not write one fast enough, these strategies should put you on the right path. With practice, your writing and your writing scores should exceed your expectations.

If you have any questions or comments about the strategies in this e-book, please email elaine@englishcoachingonline.com.

I'd be delighted to hear from you.

Elaine

Oh, I almost forgot ... I have one more piece of writing advice that I would like to share. Turn to the next page.



Matching an attention-getting strategy with an academic essay topic is a lesson in creativity, open-mindedness and precision. Writers must think like artists who ingeniously select the colours and textures that appeal to viewers. But they must also think like surgeons, relying on calculated risk, organization and foresight. The right combination of artistic creativity and organized meticulousness applied to the process of matching an attention-getting strategy to an academic question can produce extraordinary results.

As you prepare for the main essay-writing section of your test, explore the attention-getting strategies; in fact, do more than explore: play with them as a child would play with a new set of building blocks. Decide which ones you like and can use effortlessly, and which ones may not be in your comfort zone at this time. This playful interaction should increase your ability to trust your personal judgement and to produce a good match.

About the Author



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