Organization and Tone

Paragraph Length

As a rough rule of thumb, your paragraphs should be six or seven sentences long, with a total of 125 to 150 words. If most of your paragraphs fall below 100 words—50 or 60, say—the chances are they need more development. If your paragraphs run consistently to 200 or 300 words, they are probably too long and need to be shortened or divided. This gives you five or so paragraphs to develop your points.

Topic Sentences

A good topic sentence is concise and emphatic. It is no longer than the idea requires, and it stresses the important word or phrase. Too many writers back into what they have to say. If you have something to say, be direct about it.

Active vs. Passive

Verbs come in two types, active and passive. With an active verb, the subject of the sentence is doing something. With a passive verb, something is being done to the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting it happen. You should avoid the passive verb.

Passive: The returning heroes were cheered by the crowd.
Active: The crowd cheered the returning heroes.

Passive: The hymns were sung by the choir with enthusiasm.
Active: The choir sung the hymns enthusiastically.

Nouns and Verbs

Verbs signify action and movement, but are often buried under nouns and noun clauses.

Dead animals cause water pollution (noun-noun).
Dead animals pollute water (verb-noun).