Developing Main Points

A Note on Developing Main Points:
With the potentially overwhelming task of writing an essay (the prewriting, the thesis, the introduction and conclusion, the grammar, etc.), students sometimes overthink their essays and become unnecessarily intimidated. One writing task students often psych themselves out about is developing main points. Really, though, if you’ve done your prewriting work and have developed your thesis statement, you shouldn’t have much trouble generating main points.

When you sit down to develop main points, you need to ask the following: “Why do I think what my thesis statement says I think?” You might have to take some time to look through all of your ideas and group them together, but based on your prewriting exercises, you should be able to come up with two to four main reasons to support your thesis.

As you develop your main points, remember that you may support each point with just one paragraph, or you might write two or three paragraphs for some points. If you find you have a lot to say about a couple of your points, you might just need two points to support the thesis. However, you may choose to have up to four points. Whatever the case, be sure to thoroughly develop and explain each point.

A Checklist for Your Main Points:
As you decide upon your main points, be sure each point meets the following criteria:

1. It directly relates to the thesis statement. That is, it should provide proof or explanation of your thesis statement. You should not have any points in the paper which do not serve to develop your thesis.

2. It makes a statement rather than asks a question. Readers are not looking for you to raise questions about the thesis, but rather to support it.

3. It engages the text. Since it’s supporting the thesis, the body should also respond to the professional essay and avoid tangents. Usually, you will mention what the professional essay says about your main point to help you develop your paragraph.

4. It’s not too narrow. If you find you have no examples or discussion to develop the point, then you might need to combine it with another point.

5. It isn’t too broad. If you find that you need two to three pages to prove just one of your main points, you might need to rethink your thesis and narrow your focus. In such a situation, your two to three page main point may become your new thesis statement if you have enough sub-points to develop it.
Sample Thesis and Main Points: Agree

In the following example, notice that the main points treat both parts of the thesis: the concession and the main argument. However, the concession component is brief (and would be about a paragraph or two at most) while the support for the main argument is more developed (and would be at least four paragraphs, as I have four main points). If I were using this outline, once I started writing I may even have to tweak my main argument to focus on just consumerism or entertainment-driven media to avoid having to write an eight page paper to support my claim. However, I may also start writing and realize that I want to cut a main point and keep my focus.

Thesis: While Edmundson may overlook some of the blame that lies with students and parents, he accurately and insightfully discusses a major cause of declining educational standards and performance: consumerism and the media.

Main Points:

1. **Concession:** Edmundson mentions but fails to fully explore students’ and parents’ roles in declining educational standards.
   a. He says parents train kids to be entitled, but could also discuss the ways they could protect kids from consumer and entertainment mindsets.
   b. He illustrates problems with students but could allow them more ownership for their own educational choices.

2. **Support for Main Argument:** He pinpoints and focuses on consumer-driven media culture’s major role in the problem.
   a. Consumerism motivates and informs nearly everything Americans do; of course, as Edmundson suggests, it impacts students and has far-reaching implications for educational institutions.
   b. He correctly asserts that definitions of what it means to be “cool” have permeated American consciousness and have dire effects in the classroom.
   c. Not only does media train students to expect entertainment, as Edmundson illustrates, but it distracts them both inside and outside the classroom.
   d. Furthermore, portrayals of daily life and ease of success on television and in films creates unrealistic expectations for students, and they transfer those expectations to the classroom.

Sample Thesis and Main Points: Disagree

Again, in this example as in the last, you’ll see that the main points address both parts of the thesis statement. And, again, just like the last example, the support for the main argument should be the largest portion of the body. If while writing I were to find it isn’t the largest portion of the body, I may need to tweak my thesis or concession.
Thesis: Despite some reasonable examples of cultural influences that tend to lead to students’ apathy and higher education’s decline, at the core of his argument Edmundson presents an unfairly bleak vision of both American college students and educational institutions.

Main Points:

1. Concession: His acknowledgement that cultural influences lie at the source of the problems in students and higher education offers one redeeming element in Edmundson’s essay.
   a. He aptly discusses the far-reaching influence of consumer and entertainment-driven media culture.
   b. He briefly discusses the role of parents and teachers in developing students attitudes and expectations.
   c. He even explores the ways educational institutions and faculty members have contributed to declining educational standards and effectiveness.

2. Support for Main Argument: Ultimately, though, Edmundson portrays students and the educational system unfairly and inaccurately.
   a. He includes only personal experiences to provide anecdotal evidence of the problems he sees and doesn’t back up his argument with sufficient research.
      i. By whose measurement have educational standards changed?
      ii. Does research show that an entertaining classroom cannot be a successful one?
   b. Apathy doesn’t pervade student culture as Edmundson says it does.
      i. Many students are excited to learn.
      ii. Many students put in time outside class and meet with instructors.
      iii. Although students may not speak up, it doesn’t mean they aren’t interested.
   c. Though students may be driven by a consumer mindset, so is the rest of society, and they are only preparing themselves to live and work in that society.
      i. A consumer mindset can positively encourage students to try so that they get their money’s worth.
      ii. In reality, college costs a great deal of money and has become a commodity.