

How to Write an Essay

What is an essay?

Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (2nd ed.) defines an essay as “a short literary composition dealing with a single subject, usually from a personal point of view and without attempting completion.”

Kathleen McWhorter, author of *The Writer's Express*, defines an essay as “a group of paragraphs about one subject.”

Aldous Huxley called the essay “a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything.”

As you might have guessed from these passages, the essay may take many forms. Most of the essays you will write during your college career, however, will be what are known as **persuasive** (or argumentative) **essays**.

A persuasive essay takes a position on a topic and attempts to prove that position.

Structure of a persuasive essay

A persuasive essay usually consists of the following three parts:

1. **The introduction** starts with a fairly general opening statement which introduces readers to your topic (or subject) and gradually narrows to a specific **thesis**. The thesis, or thesis statement, tells the reader what you are going to say about your topic. Thesis statements often come at the end of the introductory paragraph. This movement from the general to the specific is referred to as a *funnel* paragraph.
2. **The body** is made up of the paragraphs which support your thesis. These paragraphs contain the evidence, arguments, and examples that support your thesis.
3. **The conclusion** starts with a summary of the specific points of your essay, followed by a restatement of your thesis (usually in a slightly reworded form), and ends with a rather general statement about the implications of your thesis. This movement from the specific to the general is just the opposite of that in the introduction, and is known as an *inverted funnel*.

Writing the essay

1. Choosing a topic

Choosing a topic to write about can be a difficult task. While in college, though, you will usually be given a topic by your instructor, so we'll assume that you have at least a broad topic to work with.

2. From topic to thesis

The fact that you have a topic does not mean that you know what you want to say about it. Remember, your topic is the subject you're writing about; your thesis is what you're saying about your topic, what you're trying to prove.

In moving from a topic to a thesis, you may have to narrow down your topic more than once. This narrowing is important, because if your topic is too broad then your thesis may also be too broad. If your thesis is too broad, then your essay will usually be weak and unfocused.

The thesis is the single most important part of a persuasive essay. Write a good thesis and you greatly improve your chances of writing a good essay. Write a weak thesis and you will almost certainly write a weak essay.

Some exercises that can help you move from a topic to a thesis.

1. **Free Writing:** Write nonstop on your topic for a short time, say, 3 to 5 minutes. Write whatever comes into your head, without regard to grammar or sentence structure. If you can't think of anything to write, keep writing, "I can't think of anything to write," over and over until you think of something. The important thing is to keep writing.
2. **Brainstorming:** Make a list of everything you can think of on your topic. Don't try, at this stage, to organize your ideas; just let them flow.
3. **Branching:** Write your topic in the middle of a sheet of paper and draw a circle around it. Around this topic write everything you can think of that's related to that topic. Next, draw a line from each related idea to the topic. These ideas become your primary branches. You can continue this process indefinitely by clustering new ideas around each primary branch.
4. **Questioning:** Write down all of the questions you or someone else might have about your topic. You might start with the standard Who, What, Where, Why, Who, and How questions.

Examples of narrowing from topic to thesis:

Topic: Football

Narrower topic: The 1969 Super Bowl

Thesis: The Jets won the 1969 Super Bowl because they had the best passing game, the best running game, and the best offensive line in either league.

Topic: Robots

Narrower topic: Robots in American industry

Thesis: The expense of producing robots, the lack of qualified personnel to service them, and the moral problems of replacing workers with them—all cloud the future of robots in American industry

Note that the theses above are clear and focused. They also list three reasons supporting each thesis. These are known as three-part theses. A three-part thesis gives the reader an overview of what is to follow in the essay. It also helps you clarify what you are going to be writing about. Try to develop a three-part thesis for the essays you write in college.

And an example of a weak thesis:

Topic: New York City

Thesis: New York City is an interesting place.

This thesis is too broad and too vague. What, exactly, is so interesting about New York? In addition, it doesn't tell the reader anything new, since most people would agree that, in general, New York is interesting. A student trying to write a paper with this thesis would find it difficult to write a clear, concise, focused essay.

The body paragraphs

1. Role and composition

The paragraphs in your essay that come after the introduction and before the conclusion are often referred to as "body paragraphs" because they form the body of the essay. Here's what goes into body paragraphs and the role each plays in your essay:

- The body paragraphs present the evidence, arguments, examples, and reasoning that go to proving the thesis.
- Body paragraphs have two parts: the topic sentence and the supporting detail.
- The topic sentence tells what the paragraph is about; it introduces the part of your thesis you are going to discuss in that paragraph. A topic sentence can appear anywhere in the paragraph, but it's a good idea to place it at the beginning. The idea in the topic sentence must be directly related to the thesis.
- The supporting detail in a paragraph develops the point made in the topic sentence. This supporting detail must be relevant to the topic sentence.

2. Arranging the body paragraphs

The body of your essay is where you do the real work of the essay. The body contains the evidence and arguments that support your thesis. It is, therefore, important to present that evidence and those arguments in the best manner possible. Usually, the most effective way to organize your body paragraphs is to start with your weakest argument and end with your strongest. Doing so will give your essay a feeling of irresistible movement. Your readers will see your essay growing in strength until they can no longer argue against you. At least that's what you're aiming for.

3. Transitions

As you move from paragraph to paragraph it's important to make sure not only that each paragraph is directly relevant to the thesis, but that each paragraph is linked to the one that follows. Linking one paragraph to the next makes for a smooth, logically flowing essay. If the paragraphs are not linked they will appear as no more than a series of random paragraphs. You don't want that!

In order to link the body paragraphs you must be clear in your own mind about how each piece of your argument fits together. To show the reader these connections, it can be helpful to use one or more of the transition words or phrases you will find in our writing assistance resources.

4. The conclusion

The conclusion ties together your essay. This is the last chance you have to convince your reader, so make it good. To write an effective conclusion:

- Sum up your feelings on the topic.
- Give a summary of the main points of your essay.
- Draw a conclusion from the arguments in your essay.
- Restate your thesis in a slightly reworded fashion.
- End your conclusion with an amusing or insightful observation on your topic.
- Combine any number of the above.
- Avoid beginning your conclusion with phrases such as: "In conclusion," "To conclude my essay," and so forth.

5. The audience

Think about who will read your essay. This is crucial if you are writing something for others to read. (You can skip this section if you'll never let anyone read your writing.) A list of things to consider regarding your audience.

- Is your audience familiar with your topic? If so, you will need to provide little or no background information. If they aren't, then you will have to fill them in. This can be tricky, for if you provide too much background information you may bore your audience. Too little, and you'll confuse them.
- Is your tone too elevated or too simplistic? Tone is a funny thing. It's difficult to describe. Like irony, though, once you realize what it is you can easily spot it. Basically, "tone" reflects a writer's mood or attitude toward his subject (or audience). If your tone is too elevated you may end up writing over the heads of your readers. If it's too simplistic you may sound patronizing.
- Is your writing filled with slang or jargon (technical terms)? If it is and your audience is not familiar with those terms, you will lose them. If you know your audience is familiar with those terms then go ahead and use them. Keep in mind, though, that the more slang and jargon in your essay, the narrower your potential audience.

For most of the papers you write in college your instructor will be your main audience. In this case you should consider your instructor to be the average intelligent reader. The degree of specialized knowledge of your topic that you should attribute to your instructor will depend on what you are writing about. When in doubt, ask your instructor.

6. Revision

Very rare is the writer who can get it right, or even “good enough,” on the first try. The vast majority of writers have to write more than one draft of their work. Many of the greatest writers agonize over passages, revising them again and again. Vladimir Nabokov, probably the greatest prose stylist of the century, said “I have rewritten, often several times, -every word I have ever published.”

The point is...*Don't hand in your first draft!*

Some tips on revising your paper:

- a. After completing your first draft, put it aside for a day or two. This will help clear your mind and give you a more objective point of view.
- b. Think about your paper from your reader's viewpoint. Is it well organized, clear, and logical? Does it say anything new or important?
- c. Type (or word process) your first draft. This too will distance you from your paper, giving you more objectivity when you revise. Printing it out really helps, because your work looks different when it is neatly printed on white paper.
- d. Read your paper aloud to yourself. This is another technique to distance yourself from your work. It allows you to hear the rhythms of the language in your paper. Ungrammatical, illogical, or awkward passages will tend to stand out in ways they wouldn't if you were merely reading it silently.
- e. Let someone else read your paper. A friend will bring a fresh perspective to your work.
- f. Make a topic sentence outline of your paper. Write down, in order, the topic sentence of each paragraph in your paper. This is a quick way to check the logical flow of your essay.
- g. Make sure every single word in your paper is there for a purpose. If it isn't, cut it or change it.
- h. Give yourself enough time to go through as many drafts of your paper as you need to get it right.

7. The title

Give your paper a title. The title should indicate, in a direct manner, the topic or thesis of your paper. Creative titles can work well, but if you're not sure whether your creative idea really works, go for a straightforward title. Keep in mind:

- a. Don't make the title too long.
- b. Don't make the title too cute.
- c. Don't underline or place quotation marks around your own title.
- d. If you incorporate the title of another work into your own title, then underline that portion or enclose it in quotation marks as appropriate for the work mentioned.

Prepared in part by James Delaney, English specialist, Academic Support Center, Cayuga Community College, with material found in the following works:

Clouse, Barbara Fine. *The Student Writer: Editor and Critic*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992.

Greenberg, Karen. *Effective Writing: Choices and Conventions*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1992.

McWhorter, Kathleen T. *The Writer's Express: A Paragraph and Essay Text with Readings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.