

Guide to Writing a Basic Essay

What is an essay?

An organised collection of YOUR IDEAS about literary texts nicely written and professionally presented.

An essay is a written argument, which consists of an introduction, a statement of a thesis, support for that thesis, and a conclusion. An analytical essay addresses an issue and employs a critical approach; to do this, it takes a stand on some issue and assesses strengths and weaknesses of the work or text under analysis.

In other words, the essay must be well structured (ie organised) and presented in a way that the reader finds easy to follow and clear: it must look tidy and not present any obstacles to the reader. It must have a clear readable interesting style. But, above all, it must consist of **your ideas** about literary texts. This is the centre of it: this, and this only, gets the marks. Not quotes from critics, not generalisations at second hand about literary history, not filling and padding; your thoughts, that you have had while in the act of reading specific bits of literary texts, which can be adduced in the form of quotations to back up your arguments.

The parts of an essay and their functions:

Introduction

Introductory paragraphs all go from general to specific, have a plot summary, and a specific thesis. They also identify the title of the novel (or literary work) and the author.

A thesis statement is a sentence that tells what you think about the topic of your essay. Your thesis statement should be a sentence that will prompt a response in a reader, or cause him/her to ask "why?" Your thesis sentence should also be a statement that contains the gist of your point of view on the subject you are going to write about.

Your introduction should be mainly the "explaining" part of your paper. You should be aiming to present your idea in the introduction (whatever it is, agreeing with an idea or disagreeing), and then explain how it generally works. Be Brief; give some suggestion of the direction you intend to take in your essay. Indicate the aspects of the book you intend to deal with. You don't want to get into specifics yet; you just want to establish the direction in which your essay is going to go.

The introduction should contain a precise statement of the subject (do not rely on the reader's familiarity with the title) and should move from a general discussion of the subject to an indication of your limited focus and the specific thesis. Stress the significance of the topic in relation to the work as a whole.

You may begin with general background on the subject, but don't be too general or vague or obvious (as in, "Irony is an important technique used by writers of literature," or "James Joyce was a great modern writer."). Avoid empty sentences such as, "In this essay I intend to discuss the differences and similarities in two poems." The reader knows this is your essay and these are your ideas; repeated references to your own process of thinking and writing are awkward and unnecessary, so instead state your precise ideas directly and support them well.

Main Body of the essay

Paragraphing

Support for your thesis will appear in the body of the essay, which is the "illustrating" part of your paper. In the body, you want to show how you know what you say you know, and to do this you are going to use examples. You should be as specific as possible. When writing your essay you should devote one or two paragraphs to each point. Try to make smooth links between paragraphs. Give several carefully-chosen examples, or if you have few, provide very detailed accounts of them. If your examples are well-described, it will be clear to the reader that you have excellent reasons for believing as you do; thus you will have shown how you know what you say you know. Evidence: When you make a point - you must prove it. When you make a point, refer to the text

The second thing, in order to maintain and make obvious a clear structure, is to be aware of the nature of the paragraph as the basic structuring unit in the essay. Basically, every paragraph should represent and flesh out a heading or sub-heading in the outline. The paragraph is the building block of the essay. Therefore:

It should be at least a third to half a page in length, but not too long or the reader will get lost. No one-sentence paragraphs!

It should have what's known as a topic sentence, near the beginning, that announces the theme of the paragraph. The paragraph should not deviate from this theme or introduce any new themes.

The first sentence should somehow be linked to, or contrast with, the last sentence of the previous paragraph.

Conclusion

At the end, try to draw all the strands of your various points together. This should be the part of your essay, which answers the question most directly and forcefully.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Always put the reader first.

Making notes: The best time to have ideas is when you are reading, either a literary text or a work of criticism. ALWAYS read with a pencil in hand. Take notes while reading, jot down ideas, make marks, underline.... This will help you with the organisation of your ideas later.

In the first draft, do not be concerned about grammar, punctuation, spelling, and style. It is more important at this stage to get your thoughts written out. If you have trouble with beginnings, skip the introduction and begin writing at a point where you feel confident about what you want to say on a particular subtopic.

Behind every essay there must be an outline. If you remember any lectures that use outlines, you will (I hope) remember how useful it was to have that written out in front of you so that you knew where you were in it. Now think of an examiner, having to read up to a hundred student essays. A decent level of concentration is hard to maintain. They get lost, and lose the thread, just as you do in lectures. It is essential therefore that an outline like that must be obvious to him or her, clearly perceptible in the way the essay is written. In order to achieve this effect the easiest way is to have one, written out for your own benefit beforehand.

Interpret, don't summarize the work of literature.

Avoid digressions and irrelevant references to personal experiences or beliefs.

Avoid cliches and unsupportable generalizations.

Use quotations sparingly to support your discussion.

Remember to introduce the quote with a colon and use quotation marks. It is important to lay out quotes correctly because it shows you are professional about what you are doing. Keep them short - no more than three or four lines each.

Answer the question: it sounds obvious, but it's so easy to forget the question and go off at a tangent. When you have finished a paragraph read it through and ask yourself. "How does this contribute to answering the question?" If it doesn't, change it so that it does address the question directly.

After you have written the first draft, go back to it and correct faulty grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Improve the style by making sentences clearer and smoother. Look carefully for inconsistent shifts in verb tense (a common error in essays describing literary characters and plots). You may cut or expand or rearrange passages of the essay to make it more effective.

Conclusion: At the end, try to draw all the strands of your various points together. This should be the part of your essay, which answers the question most directly and forcefully.

Style: Keep it formal. Try to avoid making it chatty

Be creative: If your ideas are original or different, so long as you develop them clearly, use evidence intelligently and argue persuasively, your point of view will be respected. We want literature to touch you personally and it will often affect different people in different ways. Be creative.

THE TITLES OF PLAYS, NOVELS, MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS, JOURNALS (things that can stand by themselves) are underlined or italicized. , but do not use both underlines and italics. The titles of poems, short stories, and articles (things that do not generally stand by themselves) require quotation marks.

Whenever possible, use strong subjects and active constructions, rather than weak verbal nouns or abstractions and weak passive or linking verbs: instead of "Petruccio's denial of Kate of her basic necessities would seem cruel and harsh...", try "By denying Kate the basic necessities of life, Petruccio appears cruel and harsh--but he says that he is just putting on an act." Don't forget that words and even phrases can serve as strong sentence subjects.

Checking the draft for completeness and high quality:

It is important to learn to edit your work; there are very few good writers who are not also good editors. Plan to spend some time checking your draft. Check for clarity; you want to make sure everything you've written sounds like it makes sense and is reasonably correct. You should first read your essay over slowly to yourself (or even aloud) and catch any mistakes you see.

Edit out anything in your paper that seems to be going in a different direction to what you want to say. You don't want to contradict yourself.

Don't leave a quote or paraphrase by itself-you must introduce it, explain it, and show how it relates to your thesis.

Make sure there are smooth transitions between parts of your essay. You want each paragraph to follow from the previous one, so your whole essay flows along. There's a simple way to do this: make the last sentence in each paragraph reflect or echo the first sentence in the next. Try practicing this a few times.

Watch out for sentence fragments. Where sentences begin with If, Since, Although, When, etc., make sure that they are properly finished. For example, "Although my dog died. My cat is still alive." should be, "Although my dog died, my cat is still alive."

Separate comma splices. When you have two complete sentences joined only by a comma, this is a comma splice error, as in the sentence, "I had no food for three days, I survived." Find ways to join the sentences in ways that show the relationship between them, such as, "I had no food for three days, but I survived." This is one particular error that is very common, students quite often are in the habit of running two or more sentences together and joining them with commas, it is really a very bad idea to do this, a teacher when he or she sees it will become very irritated, I hope you are by now with the strange breathless quality of this sentence. Don't do it. A sentence is a sentence. It should end in a full stop. Putting two sentences together with commas between them is becoming acceptable in creative writing, but it's still a bad idea to do it in an essay. Never confuse an essay with creative writing is a useful rule.

Be sure that you don't end up with subject and verb disagreement. This happens when the subject and verb are in conflict, such as in the sentence, "The trees is beautiful." There is subject/verb disagreement between the subject (trees) and the verb (is) because where the subject "trees" is plural, the verb "is" is singular. It should read, instead, "the trees (plural) are (plural) beautiful."

One side of the paper only

Copy it: Always keep a copy of any essay you hand in. Academics are very unreliable, and not uncommonly lose essays.

HOW TO WRITE A LITERATURE ESSAY

1. Look at the title - and read it carefully

Before you can write the essay, you need to know what you are required to do. Roughly speaking, there are three different kinds of essay question:

(a) Is the essay title a question of "substance"?

e.g. "Discuss what light is thrown by the 'Prolog im Himmel' on Faust's attitudes up to and including the scene 'Studierzimmer'."

Questions such as this primarily demand *knowledge*.

(b) Is it a question of "conjecture"?

e.g. [where the question is explicit] “To what extent is it justified to regard the 12th and 13th centuries as a period of great achievement in the arts?”

Questions such as this, which can involve an invitation to respond to a critical view or remark, require knowledge to be subordinated to interpretation.

(c) Are both types of question included in a single formulation?

e.g. “What is the moral problem illustrated by the fate of *Der arme Heinrich*? To what extent does the extract you have read indicate Hartmann’s attitude towards the knight and his role in society?”

2. Organise your argument – and structure your answer

The planning stage of your essay must be done in rough **before** you start writing. It is essential that you plan your essay. If you haven’t done your plan, you can’t begin to write.

Your essay plan should consist of:

- a brief sketch of your introduction (how you will get your “show on the road”);
- a list of the main points which you intend to make – list them and then enumerate them according to the order in which you want to discuss them;
- a brief sketch of your conclusion.

3. Essay structure

An essay has a beginning, a middle and an end.

(a) Introduction

The introduction has the following three functions:

- [i] to announce (and, usually, to limit) the interpretation of the question (your “take” on the question);
- [ii] to indicate the plan of the essay;
- [iii] to suggest the argument which you will pursue.

(b) The main body of the essay

Organising the middle of the essay will be no problem – *if* you have written an outline. Sometimes, the essay will take the form of a number of points *in favour* of a particular position; followed by a series of points *against*.

Careful paragraphing – one major point per paragraph – will help structure your essay *visually*, as well as *intellectually*.

Two useful kinds of phrase will help structure your essay:

[i] “Signposts” – these indicate what you have just done, what you are about to do, or what you are going to do later;

e.g. “I shall begin by...”, “Next I shall turn to...”, “Finally, I shall examine...”

[ii] “Transitions” – these indicate the change of thought involved in moving from one paragraph;

e.g. “Even more important than x is y”, “From x I shall turn next to a consideration of y.”

Use quotations carefully and sparingly: often, merely a reference or a phrase will suffice to establish a point.

(c) The conclusion

The conclusion has two main functions:

[i] to recapitulate (i.e. give a brief summary) of the argument;

[ii] to give judgement on the question posed – succinctly.

In the conclusion, you also have the opportunity – very briefly – to suggest why the question is important to the work(s) at hand; suggest a broader context of interpretation in which the question has a place; or situate the question within the broader frame of critical discourse.

4. Revising the essay

You must not neglect this part of composing your essay. Read through your work at least three times, making sure:

- (a) that what you have written makes sense – and is comprehensible to the reader;
- (b) that what you have written is grammatically correct and stylistically appropriate;
- (c) that you have styled references correctly and given quotations accurately:
 - put short quotations in inverted commas;
 - indent longer quotations;
 - titles of plays, novels and any separately published works are underlined or italicised;
 - titles of poems and works not published separately are placed in inverted commas.

Adapted from:

<http://www.ferrum.edu/thanlon/studyq/paperguide.htm>

<http://ezinearticles.com/?Essay-writing-----Argumentative-and-Persuasive-Essays&id=27647>

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