

Writing Essays:

Introduction

The approach I have taken in these notes on writing essays is to first identify what an essay is and then break it down into its basic parts explaining each in turn. I emphasize several tips throughout these notes so please read all the notes to get a sense of the priorities I'm presenting. The companion sample essay I've written is an important part of these notes because we all tend to learn better from examples. Theory is nice but we must get to the heart of the matter through examples and by specifics. If I had to reduce these notes to a handful of key words I would use the following qualities: **concision, personable, simple, and focused**. If you can describe your essay in those terms you will get good marks and have happy readers. Please read on.

Types of essays include:

- **Definitions** - Can be technical or semi-formal
- **Classifications** (categories) - Identify a topic as being part of some larger group and explain its place there.
- **Description** - Informal to formal where the focus is a single topic being described.
- **Sequence** (steps of a process) - Showing how things are done in a step by step fashion.
- **Compare & Contrast** - Take an argument or position on something and compare and contrast with alternatives.
- **Choice** (Preference) - focus is on a choice and supporting that choice.
- **Explanation or persuasion** - more than facts (teaching and convincing the reader) - similar to choice but emphasizes the "correctness" and preference for an idea
- **Evaluation** (supported opinion or judgment) - Evaluating the work of others with a clear opinion and support for it.

An essay can have more than one classification. For example, an essay could include both evaluation and compare & contrast qualities.

So where do we begin?

- A. START WITH AN OUTLINE:** Before writing an essay you should always organize your thoughts using an outline and plan. It doesn't need to be a fancy, structured outline but it should capture your brainstorm on the topic. Don't restrict your brainstorming to purely mental notes. The four steps below is one effective approach anyone can follow.

Step 1:

What is your reaction to the topic or debate/issue? Regardless if it is strong (quick point of view is triggered) or weak (conflicting points of view that blur or weaken your stand on the topic) you must resolve the reason why it is this way. Let's consider the strong scenario. In general, a strong reaction to the topic suggests a possible bias and a corresponding interest in the topic (the interest could be negatively charged). This is good but it can also blind you to the larger perspective on the subject. So be careful to source the reason(s) for your strong reaction and identify the bias and the objectivity you have on the issue. Write these down in your notes. What if your reaction was weak? Weak reactions are also warning signs that you have conflicting views and unresolved feelings surrounding the topic. You might also have no interest in the topic issue and have little background to help focus a perspective on the topic. Lack of interest in the topic must be overcome by reflection on the larger perspective that connects you to a more relevant subject area. You will need your imagination

to pull out a reasonable perspective allowing you to re-challenge the topic issue with a refreshed point of view. If your weak reaction is coming from conflicting opinions then write them down in your notes and question each reason for its logic, reasonableness and bias. You will usually see clarity in this exercise allowing you to get "off the fence" and commit to one side of the debate or issue. In all cases the writing down of these reasons behind your reaction to the topic leads to clarity, focus and a balanced perspective.

Step 2:

Now that you are clear on your opinion and the reasons why you have it, you are ready to confirm or detail the conditions under which you have your opinion. Much of our reaction to a topic issue comes from conflicts of reason that stem from conditions or limits we have respecting our opinion. We generally are not unconditionally agreeing to any point of view. We have limits and conditions that must exist before we are comfortable with our opinion. These conditions and limits must be communicated to your reader in the introduction. In a short essay these would be found in the first paragraph (introductory paragraph). In larger papers your introduction could span several paragraphs where such conditions and reference points (to the topic) can be developed and discussed. The example essay that accompanies this guide illustrates this thinking process for a short essay.

Step 3:

The outline should identify the type of essay that is being considered and then in point form write out all the ideas, messages, facts and opinions you want to include. Check them for relevancy and then order them for placement in your essay. This step should be relatively straight forward if you have fully developed your opinion following steps 1 and 2.

Step 4:

The next step can be your draft introduction. Re-read your introduction to check that it covers only the topic and sets the stage (conditions and scope) for the details (content) section of the essay. The introduction should be provocative enough to encourage the reader to continue, yet complete enough to satisfy the reader on what he is learning. The bold statement of opinion is an invitation to the importance of the topic. The thesis statement should include brief summary phrase(s) of key reasons for your opinion or stand on the topic or issue. Your draft introduction can be in point form to save time and allow easier review.

You are now ready to write your essay. All basic essays have three parts, follow along with these guide lines and you likely complete a first rate essay you'll be proud of.

B. WRITING YOUR ESSAY

Three essential parts:

Introduction, supporting paragraphs, summary or concluding paragraph. See sample essay with analysis. "Sample_Essay_PEH.doc" found on this site.

a) **Introduction** describes the main topic or purpose (depends on the type of essay). You often need to reference the topic scope (limits to the topic) or identify the conditions under which you limit your opinion or point of view (as described above). By doing this you inform the reader of the bias (your own preferences, considerations and values) you take on this topic as it influences your **thesis statement**.

a₁) the **thesis statement** must clearly state your position or opinion on the topic. But you don't stop there. The thesis statement should summarize the basic reason why you have this opinion or position

(on the topic). Remember, your thesis statement (sentence) must set the stage for what you will defend or make clear in the body paragraphs.

After completing your introduction reread it and ask yourself; if I was the reader would I get it? Would I basically know the essential point being made and why? If not, then you need to improve the clarity and ensure that your summary reasons make sense.

a₂) the introduction should, on its own, leave the reader feeling "I get it". If the reader didn't read any further they would still know the topic, the author's position on the topic, and the basic reason(s) for taking that position. This principle also holds true in journalism. Read a newspaper and notice the completeness of the introduction to any news item.

b) **Supporting paragraphs** must be restricted to explaining, describing, proving, comparing and contrasting, showing the steps, etc. of your topic or thesis. This is where you prioritize the three types of facts¹ you are going to use to support your topic thesis (see page two of this guide). An important aspect of supporting your thesis is to consider the *counterpoint arguments* or polar opposite views held by others and demonstrate, using your own logic and perspective, how they do not possess a strong enough argument to change your views or judgments on the debate or topic issue. Alternatively, you can expose the opposing views reasoning and contrast it with your point of view in order to reveal flaws and weaknesses in logic, reasoning and/or appropriateness.

c) **Summarize** the essential point or opinion or message that captures the purpose or importance for writing the essay. *Do not simply restate the thesis statement* in the same way you did in the introduction, rather add a fresh idea that makes your thesis seem even more reasonable or believable by connecting your position with your personal experience (where possible). The **concluding paragraph** can open the discussion to other related topics or refer to the larger context of the topic as food for further consideration or research. This leaves the reader feeling as though you have a balanced and far reaching view of the topic or debate or issue.

If a reader was to only read the conclusion paragraph they should be left with the feeling "I get it", because they will have a summary of the main points made in reference to the topic, and they would also be able to see an overview of how this topic issue fits into a larger context (subject).

Reread your concluding paragraph and ask yourself; does this conclusion create a feeling of completeness and provide a respectable balance on the issue(s) which respects both sides of the debate but clearly favours your perspective, opinion, stand or understanding of the topic? Shorter essays (200-600 words) need not summarize all main points but rather reflect on the central reasoning behind your thesis (opinion) with a possible thought to the bigger picture concerning the topic. In general the conclusion should move outwards and carry the reader to the larger context from which your opinion originates. Interestingly, the introduction does the opposite. It tries to move into a focused point (topic not a subject) and narrow the field of view to allow you to carve a clear perspective with the limits and conditions behind your opinion clearly stated.

Tips on style:

- Keep your sentences clear and concise,
- Avoid repetition of your key reference phrase or thesis unless absolutely needed to make another point, or for literary effect.
- Use standardized phrases for common points and remarks. Avoid weird or unique phrases that could cause confusion, especially mixed metaphors, and

¹ The three types of supporting *facts* you can include in support of your thesis (main opinion) are a) objective information that is referenced, b) common knowledge or values held by society at large, and c) personal experience (direct or indirect) See section C for detailed information..

- Check for appropriate voice, tense and person to ensure parallel structure and clear grammar. When retelling a story use the present tense as the base tense.
- Keep your essay feeling personal and organic avoid the strong theoretical and aloof style of writing. Most people don't enjoy this type of writing 'mood' and often are turned off by it. Start with the cold facts if you have them but be sure to connect them to your personal experience and feelings on the topic.

C. SUPPORTING YOUR THESIS

Be sure to let the reader know where your supporting ideas come from. Avoid making a general statement of fact without giving some idea of where you got the information from. See below for the three source areas that are possible.

Three sources of support

1. **Factual statements** are good to include at the beginning of your essay after the introduction. Be sure these statements are sourced. The sources can be very general. They include "a recent newspaper article", "I learned in school", "A CBC documentary last fall on ...", "the Internet site for NCAR", etc.
2. **Generally held beliefs or common knowledge** understood by most people. This type of source is very useful in reminding readers of known ideas and attitudes and common behaviour that we mostly are acquainted with but may not realize fits into your essay thesis. Use this source liberally to carry your arguments to a logical conclusion.
3. **Personal experience.** Your experience with the topic will always carry the greatest weight and be the most persuasive element in your thesis argument. For this reason reserve your personal experiences to the end. Personal experiences can be second hand, that is they can be stories related to you first hand from others such as close friends and family members.

D. SUMMARY NOTES

Grammar and Spelling

1. Check your spelling.
2. Check your grammar.
3. Read your essay again.
4. Make sure each sentence has a subject.
5. Make sure your subjects and verbs agree with each other.
6. Check the verb tenses of each sentence.
7. Make sure that each sentence makes sense.
8. Make sure each paragraph completes a point and leaves the reader satisfied.
9. Build smooth transitions between paragraphs that helps reader sense the logical flow of ideas, events, steps, etc.

Style and Organization

1. Make sure your essay has an introduction, supporting paragraphs, and a summary paragraph.
2. Check that you have a thesis statement that identifies the main idea of the essay. It often is the opinion or conclusion you have about something, so make it bold! Remember to add the basic reasons or basic principle behind your thesis.

3. Check that all your paragraphs follow the proper paragraph format.
4. See if your essay is interesting. If you challenge the reader and make your point with power and conviction then it will be interesting. Add personal experience and describe the feelings associated with your experiences to make them come alive and therefore more believable.

http://www2.actden.com/writ_den/tips/essay/

<http://members.tripod.com/~lklivingston/essay/>

Please read the sample essay(s).