

The Best Way to Write an Essay

You have to write an essay for a class.... "Oh no! Where do I start?" echoes in your mind. "I'm not even sure I know how to write an essay: much less figure out what I'm going to write about!!" you think. Well, the best place to start is to know why you are writing. The most basic purpose for writing an essay is to inform your audience of something. This information can be entertaining, persuasive, amusing, or pretty much any style you want, but it is still a way of informing your readers. In college, most of us will be required to write at least a few of these. If not in an English class, then probably on a test or as a paper for another class. Knowing how to write a well-structured essay is a very important skill to have. Even if you never use this skill in college, you may be required to write one for a job application. "Why are you qualified for this job?" might be a question you see on the otherwise blank back page of that application. Or, you may wish to write an article for a magazine or distribute information to your employees in a clear and understandable manner.

Before You Begin Writing:

There are two things you must decide upon before writing your essay. First, you must identify your audience. Second, you must choose a rhetorical mode(s). Your audience are the folks that you are writing to. In order to reach who you are trying to reach with your paper, you must keep these people in mind. For example, if you are writing to common laborers, you will use different language and sentence structure than if you are writing to scientists. Now, though this example is a little exaggerated and probably sounds obvious, it is amazing how a writer can get off of track if he or she is not keeping his or her audience in mind while writing. Rhetorical mode(s) are the method(s) you use to convey your information. Each rhetorical mode is a different way of presenting the material, and these modes can be used alone or combined with one or more of the others. If you are in an English class, a rhetorical mode for your paper will probably be assigned, but in another class, the presentation will be mostly up to you. The rhetorical modes are as follows:

Narrative: When a writer uses a narrative rhetorical mode in an essay, he or she is usually telling a story in order to make a point or to show the reader how the writer's experience has relevance to the reader's life. The important things to ask yourself when using this mode are: Why am I telling this story? What did I learn from this experience?

Descriptive: When this rhetorical mode is used, the writer is usually trying to get the reader to feel as if he or she is actually there. You want your reader to experience what happened or is happening. The important thing here is to ask yourself how did this experience affect your five senses. What is the main reason you want your reader to feel, touch and see these things.

Definition: In this rhetorical mode, the writer seeks to identify something for his or her reader. It is usually used to either identify the personal definition of a word, or explain the concept behind a word. An important question here is what does my audience need to know or understand about this term.

Examples: An examples essay sets out to support some idea through examples. In an examples essay you try to show that a concept, assumption or idea is true by giving your reader concrete proof. Your basic purpose is to demonstrate why your idea is truthful. An important question before using this rhetorical mode is What things have happened in the real world that make this idea really ring true?

Comparison/Contrast: In a compare/contrast essay, the writer is laying two things, ideas or people side by side in order to show something. Perhaps the writer is trying to show one is better than the other or that these things/ideas/people are just as good as one another. The writer should ask himself "What two things/ideas in comparison to each other form an interesting or unique connection?" Remember, a comparison/contrast essay does not need to be an either/or essay, nor does it need to be a blend of both, it can be a comparison or a contrast essay.

Classification: Here, the writers purpose is to set up a collection of ideas or things in a way that can be understood and manageable. In a classification essay, the reader will see order in an otherwise potential jumble of facts and/or information. The writer should ask himself before writing; how can I make this information clear and put it in such a way that it makes sense?

Cause/Effect: The main purpose with a cause and effect rhetorical mode is to explain to the reader why something is the way it is. Here, you explain either the causes of some situation, event or thing and/or the effects of a situation, event or thing. In a shorter paper, you will probably want to do one or the other. Ask yourself "Why did this thing or these things happen?"

Argument (persuasion): In this rhetorical mode, the writer uses reason and logic to help bring the reader to some conclusion. The writer will want the reader to think critically about what is being said in order to understand and perhaps, agree with it. An important question to ask yourself here is "What specific things have I experienced or heard about that brought me to this conclusion? What sort of things would my audience understand and relate to that might convince them that my opinion is worth considering?"

Coming up with A Thesis;

The next, and most important, step is to have a clear thesis. The thesis statement of an essay is the central point or main idea of the paper. This statement must be clear and understandable as well as specific. Most writers begin their paper with a broad idea of what they want to write about and work down to a specific topic.

For example: Let's say that you have an idea of what you want to write about.

General topic:

Rock and Roll Music

Well, then the question is: What about rock and roll music?

Less general topics:

Men in R&R
Women in rock
Rock in the 80's

These topics are still a little general, and we need to make them as specific as possible:

Specific:

Bob Dylan's music
Pat Benetar's music
How rock has changed from the 70's to the 80's

Better/More specific:

How Bob Dylan's music affected teenagers
How Pat Benetar got started in music
Pop music changed a lot from the 70's to the 80's

These topics, however are not yet thesis statements. The thesis statement must state a specific idea as well as point the reader in a specific direction. These topics give a specific idea, but they don't tell the reader which direction the writer is going in.

Thesis statements:

Bob Dylan's music encouraged teenagers to go out and party.
Pat Benetar started in music because her third grade teacher encouraged her to sing
Pop music has grown more commercial since the 1970's.

Do you see the difference between the specific topics and the thesis statements? The thesis statements come out and state specific ideas (hypothetical ones, anyway), but it is done in such a way that the writer's own idea comes through. In the specific topics box, it simply states that Bob Dylan's music has affected teenagers, but it doesn't say how and therefore, doesn't really tell the reader anything at all. In the thesis statement example, we learn from the writer, that he or she will show that Bob Dylan's music encouraged teenagers to party.

The essay writer's duty now is to show the reader the truth of his or her statements. Why did Bob Dylan's music encourage teenagers to party? The writer must have some ideas as to why this is true. That is where the prewriting stage comes in.

Prewriting

Prewriting is a very good idea for any essay writer who is not positive how to put together his or her paper. There are different ways of prewriting. Feel free to use all methods available to you if they will help you organize your paper better. Also, remember that your thesis will probably undergo a few revisions during this process, so remain open to the possibility that it may need changes.

Freewriting:

This is the process of sitting down with pen in hand for a set amount of time and simply writing anything that comes to mind concerning your topic. It is usually a good idea to write your thesis statement at the top of the page in order to keep yourself focused.

One of the best ways to use this method is to set your writing time to intervals of ten to fifteen minutes and take a break in between the intervals. Keep doing this until you have enough material there to use for your paper.

Once you are finished, try mapping or outlining to organize the material.

Mapping:

This process involves writing your main topic in the center of the page and drawing lines to the sub-topics. Add subsequent ideas wherever they are appropriate.

Laying out the framework of your paper in a spatial manner can be very helpful in encouraging thought and visualizing exactly how your ideas relate to one another. It can also draw your attention quickly to a topic that is too broad or specific and aid in revision of your thesis.

Outlines:

Outlines are often a very important part of the writing process, especially when they are used for essays.

The important thing to remember when outlining for an essay is that a formal outline structure is not as important as getting down a framework for your paper. It doesn't have to have perfect form, numbers and letters, or complete sentences to work for you.

If you are writing an in-class essay, outlines will not only be important, but will probably be a necessity. Here is an example of a possible outline for a paper:

Bob Dylan's music encouraged teenagers to party

- I. Intro.
- II. Body
 - A. His lyrics were suggestive
 - 1. Sex w/ women
 - 2. Drugs
 - 3. Drinking
 - B. His attitude toward music
 - 1. He dressed like a partier when he sang
 - 2. and so on.
 - 3. another example
 - C. Videos
 - 1. example of videos that encourage partying.
 - 2. example
- III. Conclusion

Your outline can be brief or detailed. In this outline, the roman numerals stand for the different sections of an essay, the capital letters for main points and the numbers for supporting details. Your outline should be designed to help you, so if you want to just use very brief phrases and indentation only to indicate ideas or long specific phrases and a thorough outline, do it! As long as it helps you, there are no hard fast rules for outlines.

Writing the Essay:

An essay consists of three parts: an introduction, a main body and a conclusion.

Once you have prepared as much as possible, the key is to just start writing. Errors can be corrected later. You should start with whichever part you feel the most comfortable writing first. There are no laws which state that you must start at the beginning and write all the way through to the end. However, if you are writing an in-class or test essay, you will want to know enough about how your paper will be organized and what it will contain to start with the introduction.

A standard essay format will consist of five to six paragraphs. (Otherwise known as the five paragraph essay format) A five paragraph essay is an essay that contains three main points, a one to two paragraph introduction, three paragraph main body with one main point per paragraph, and a one paragraph conclusion. This kind of essay is probably the easiest to put together and works well for in-class essays. It is also one of the best places for a beginning essay writer to start since the format is very easy to utilize. However, once you become more familiar with writing this type of paper, you will want to experiment with and expand on the five paragraph format.

Introduction:

The introduction of your essay serves two main purposes. The first, most important purpose, is to set up a framework for your reader. This framework contains definitions for any concepts you may need to explain to your reader before he or she gets to the meat of your paper. The introduction lays out the context and tone of your paper as a framework also. If you need to move from a general idea to your thesis in order to show connections, this is the place to do it.

The second purpose is to catch your reader's attention and make them want to read further. People are likely to walk into a room that looks interesting at first glance through the doorway as opposed to a glance that only reveals blank walls. Same with a reader, he or she will be more interested in what you have to say if the very first words they read are ones that intrigue them. You can do this with anecdotes (stories), rhetorical questions, a surprising fact, or a controversial idea. The handout called "The Introduction, the Conclusion, and the Title" contains valuable exercises and more information on how to write a good introduction.

The introduction is also the standard place to put your thesis -- either at the beginning or the end. The thesis does not need to go in your introduction; however, for beginning English classes, it should. It should go here, also, if you are not experienced in writing essays. Once you are familiar with writing essays, though, feel free to experiment with putting the thesis in other places. Just remember, it is a key that your reader can locate your thesis.

The Main Body: The main body of your essay is the meat of your paper. This is where the main purpose behind writing an essay (to inform) really comes through

When writing your main body, there are some key things that, you, as the writer need to keep in mind:

The Thesis Statement: Whereas your introduction set up your framework, your thesis serves the function of the thread that holds the paper together. Each main point of an essay must relate to the thesis. Your main points should serve to support the main topic of your paper instead of distracting from it. If your main points do not support it, either change the thesis so that they do, the main point itself, or throw out the idea all together.

Topic Sentences: Topic sentences are the ones that identify the main point of your paragraphs. There should be one and only one per paragraph. This is true regardless if there is two or twenty sentences in that paragraph.

Supporting Details: Supporting details back up your topic sentences, just like main points back up your thesis. If these details do not support your main point in any way, get rid of them or find a way to incorporate them. Students often have trouble doing this because sometimes, what seems to be the most interesting tidbit of information is actually only a tidbit and isolated from the rest of the paper. Be careful not to become too attached to any sentence or phrase, because you may end up having to take it out.

Transitions: Transitions are words and phrases that link ideas to each other (like also, next, too, therefore). Paragraphs should always contain a transition between them and if your sentences within a paragraph jump abruptly from one idea to another, you must link them with a transition. Good transitions will make the paper "flow."

Examples: Even if you are not writing an examples essay, you will still have to use examples in order to back up your statements. Supporting your opinions and statements is very important. The key here, is to use concrete examples to back up your ideas. Concrete examples are examples of things that exist or happen in the real world. They are things that your audience can relate to.

The Conclusion:

Your conclusion, like the introduction, serves two main purposes. The main purpose is to tie up the paper so that you remind the reader of what you were writing about in the first place. This is commonly called "restating the thesis." When you restate the thesis, you do not necessarily have to keep it to one sentence, but you do have to restate the paper's topic.

It also signals the end of the paper for the reader. Your conclusion must very clearly let the reader know that you have said what you have to say.

It is important to remember that new ideas are not to be introduced here. That is what the main body of the paper is for. If you want to restate one of the ideas contained in the body as a "food-for-thought" question or in a fresh way, feel free, but remember-- no brand new ideas.

Proofreading the Paper

Once you are done writing your rough draft, the next step is to set it aside for awhile, or give it to another person to read if you can. Setting the paper aside at least overnight is best. This way, you can come back to the paper with an objective viewpoint.

Once you pick the paper up again, proofread, proofread, proofread!!! Feel free to read the paper out loud, it can help a great deal. You should also check for the following things in the following order (unless you are in a class that emphasizes one of these over the others. For example, English 99 and 100 often have a heavy emphasis on grammar):

1. Check your thesis. Make sure it is clear and easily found. Make sure that you have a clear and specific point the reader will understand
2. Check the content of your paper. Make sure that everything relates to the thesis. Are your tone and viewpoint consistent? Have you kept your audience in mind. Make sure that you aren't repeating yourself, or being redundant. Keep in mind that metaphors, rhetorical question and other similar "devices" are much much more effective and have greater impact if they are used sparingly.
3. Check the structure of your paper. Are your introduction, body and conclusion clear and understandable. Is it clear where one ends and the next begins?
4. Check the paragraphs. Make sure that all the sentences back up the main point and that only one main point exists per paragraph. Are the paragraphs too long or too short. Can long paragraphs be broken down? Can really short ones blend with any of the other paragraphs? Make sure that short paragraphs or long paragraphs are deliberately used.
5. Check for transitions. Make sure that you have transitions between paragraphs and sentences. does the paper move smoothly from one idea to another.
6. Check grammar. (Spelling/punctuation/sentence structure) Make sure of verb agreement (tenses) and that you follow basic grammatical rules. Look especially for comma splices and sentence fragments. Make sure that if you decide to bend the rules of grammar, that it is deliberate and that you mark these for your instructor to let him or her know that you did it on purpose.
7. Check for style. Are your sentences varied in length? Does every sentence have an "and", "however" or a "but"? If so, vary the sentences so that they don't all contain these words. Check for redundancy either in reusing words over and over or unnecessarily repeating ideas in the same sentence. Cut out adjectives and adverbs that don't really clarify. For instance, there is no need to say "a huge skyscraper:" skyscrapers are huge by nature.)

The next thing to do is to give the paper to at least one other person to proofread, even if you have already done so. Often others may see things that you do not or cannot. It is important to get feedback.

An Afterthought:

One more thing....

When writing an essay, it is obvious that you are writing about your topic. Do not tell the reader "I am writing this paper on" It's awkward and weakens your point. An effective essay writer states his or her point and leaves it at that. When you tell the reader "I am writing about..." it pulls the reader out of the paper and distracts him or her. It shows the reader that you aren't comfortable with your topic and this often causes the reader to doubt your credibility. Trust that your reader will get the message without a blatant statement on your part.