

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

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!

~~It is not clear~~ In order to think the body paragraphs you must be clear in your own mind about the evidence and the

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.