



ESSAY WRITING GUIDE

For students. For tutors. For teachers.
For anyone who wants to know a little bit more
about essay writing



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Part 1

The Essay

A non-fiction piece of writing is by definition, an essay. They are generally of a scholarly or academic nature, and express the author's point of view or argument. An essay can also resemble an article, a pamphlet or sometimes, a short story.

An essay is written in prose. They are a major part of a formal education and in many academic circles, follow specific criteria. While they are usually subjective, an essay can take the form of being expository and in some cases a narrative.

The key to a quality essay is that it be well structured. The presentation of the prose must lead the reader clearly and easily. It must be free of distractions and not cluttered. The style of the writing is a critical key to the overall presentation.

Most importantly, a quality essay must consist of the author's ideas and thoughts on the topic. And it must stay on topic. When an essay is being evaluated, it will be receive a high grade if has a clear and readable point. This will all be supported by references, quotes, facts and data, but at the heart of the good essay, is the message.

Part 2

Topic Selection

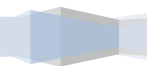
The topic of any essay is key. It will determine where and how the content is perceived and how it is indexed. For a student about to produce an essay, a topic can be assigned by an instructor, or sometimes students are given the freedom to choose and develop their own topic. In both cases, the process is the same.

Assigned Topics

When the topic of an essay is given, unless it is very specific, there can be many approaches to cover within the realm of that topic. If there is some leeway for movement or variation within the topic, this can be a great opportunity.

For example – If a topic is “Causes of World War I”, there would be many avenues to choose from. They could range from the causes in each of the countries involved, to the perspective of economical, political or social influences. Each of these would be an specific enough topic to develop an essay.

Ideally, the assignment will dictate whether the essay is to be a general overview or a more specific analysis of the topic. A topic that is too general can be overwhelming, as the broadness of the material available for the topic can be immense. A narrower topic is much easier. Here’s another example.



A topic such as “Brazil” would be a suitable general one if the intent is to provide an overview essay. But for a more specific analysis, a smaller topic such as “Brazil’s Political Changes”, or “Brazilian Fashion Trends” would be much easier to work with, and likely more appealing as a discussion in your essay.

In either case, teachers, professors and tutors are often open to more innovative topics, so always try to initiate the opportunity to explore a subtopic with their approval.

Topics Not Assigned

Having the freedom to write about *anything* is wonderful... but perhaps a little overwhelming. It can actually prevent you from starting the work when a topic has not been determined.

The greatest advantage of having freedom in choosing a topic is that you can write about something you have expertise in, have experiences, are familiar with or just have a genuine interest in learning more about. Sometimes a topic can come from a previous assignment where another avenue presented itself, but you were not able to explore that as you wrote about the topic at hand.

To *find* a topic, it may be beneficial to begin with a list of topics or subjects that interest you. Within these headings, you may also find sub topics or other avenues of thought or arguments.

Still stuck? Look at your environment – home, school, work, family, outdoors, hobbies, the news, opinions or viewpoints you

have... and never let go of this list. Return to it whenever you are stuck.

When something suitable strikes you, consider it carefully. Evaluate and question how you feel about the topic and how it relates (or doesn't relate) to the purpose of the essay you need to write.

Is the essay an argument, with valid points that will persuade people in a particular direction?

Is it about explaining something or instructing how to do something?

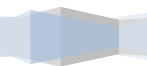
Is it an exposition about something that happened or a person or place of interest?

Or is it about a brand new theory or idea?

Choose a topic that fits the essay you can write.

When you decide on a topic that is intended to educate, be sure you are well informed and able to conduct the necessary research to thoroughly explore the topic.

Be passionate – The key to a strong essay that expresses an opinion or argument is that it is apparent the author feels strongly about what they are expressing and the points they are making. If you truly have conviction, it will show in the phrasing you use in your writing.



Surprise yourself – If none of your topics from your idea list seem to be suitable, push yourself. Try investigating a few to see what you can learn on the surface, and it is likely something will emerge that is worth writing about. Follow your instincts. A topic may surprise you once you get started.



Part 3

Materials and Content

Almost all essay writing requires sources. These come in two forms: books and articles.

You will need to become familiar with the electronic catalogue available at most libraries to access this information. Librarians are great resource people to assist you.

Books – Historically, books and author’s works have been the best sources for material, but this is changes as the world moves faster, information changes daily and the publishing world struggles to keep up. This can lead to material being out-of-date and can be overwhelmingly large bodies of material that you will have to filter through to find relevant material. Reading a whole book about a topic is time consuming and may not bring you the material or references you need.

Articles – Much is to be gained by focusing your research on articles. Articles are current and can range from periodicals, to academic journals. They can be available on library shelves or digitally. Articles are generally more specific; full of interesting, original, and up-to-date ideas and you may actually be using new information not known the reader of your essay. Bonus! Even if the articles you read are full of less pertinent details, they’ll still provide you with plenty to disagree with in your arguments.

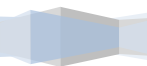


Online Sources – The Internet is jam-packed with information; some of which is useful and reputable, and plenty of less useful and less reputable. Wikipedia is the modern substitute for the encyclopedia, and can provide plenty of sourced information; but the entries are not all written by published authors or institutions. Many of the sources will provide the necessary details about where the information was gathered or taken from. What it does provide is a quick understanding on controversial and contemporary issues. The Web has now become a plethora of resources but must be used with the understanding that not everything published there is reputable.

Plagiarism – Copying content from books, the Internet, and the materials found there is an unacceptable and illegal practice. Many universities now have special anti-plagiarism software, which is used to find stolen content in essays and other assignments. Every year, numerous careless (and sometimes unknowing) students are expelled from secondary and post-secondary education due to plagiarizing content, mostly from the Web. To be safe, you can use only ideas from the Internet with exact references to the sources, but you cannot copy the content.

Getting Started

Gather the books, periodicals, and a list of the websites you will be using. As you start reading, keep a notebook! Use a wide variety of



categories to jot down all your ideas, thoughts, perspective and notes about what you read that led to certain things you will write about. As you start immersing yourself in your topic, ideas of thoughts may come to you at unlikely times, even away from your writing, so keep the notebook handy for recording these great thoughts.

Start your *Bibliography List* as soon as you start reading, researching and note making. It can be frustrating later to want to use an idea, and not recall where you read the idea, or saw the study, or learned of the quote.

The notebook can also act as a sort of censor, or a muse. It can be where you generate ideas or work through your writer's block. Not all the ideas that accumulate here will make it to the essay, but having more than you need is a real benefit of the notebook.

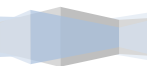
Making Notes

While you are reading through your sources, most of the best ideas will come to you. They will be rough and in your own style of note taking. This is a big part of the process!

Don't make notes in the form of summaries. Instead, read through material twice to seek out the key ideas you want to work with. When a thought occurs under these circumstances it will be in reaction to a piece of the text at hand: a quotation. Copy out the quote, and a page reference so you can find it again to check it if

necessary, and then put your idea underneath it. If you tie the idea in with the quote in this way, then your ideas will always be text-based and close to the concrete life of the text, as

Spread out your ideas in your notebook. You will need plenty of space between subtopics to develop the ideas. Deal with the sorting later, or if it works well, go through all of the notes every few days after they have accumulated. Take them out of the shorthand notebook: tear them out, or remove the spiral. Ensure you are including the sources for all and any of the content you are sourcing. Include where all the quotes and other materials are from, with author's names, editions, page numbers, and URL information.



Part 4

References and Bibliography

Everything you read about your topic must be noted in your essay. This could be a handwritten list or more efficiently it could be done with a spreadsheet on your computer.

Include the name of the source, the author(s), date, publisher, shelf mark, place of publication. Include a note or two about how useful the book or article was. You may want to find more materials from a particular author, or another article on a similar topic. Keep these working notes for years! They can be helpful in other essays as well.

Later, this chart will become the essence of your bibliography. You will need this data to fulfill the requirements of effective bibliography formatting.



Part 5

Planning

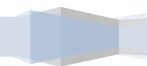
Ideally, you should be ready to start composing the essay. Around your workspace, gather your notes, your resources and start reading through them again. This primes your thought process and will likely stimulate your writing too.

Perhaps you will find a way to organize your notes based on the topic, subheadings and the arguments and points you are trying to make. If they don't have headings, give them new ones or decide which headings to include them in. The organizing of these notes will blossom into the beginning of an outline.

If you find you are ready to start writing, even parts of the essay, go ahead. Don't worry about order, and never begin with the introduction. That will come later. These parts of the body of the essay are the real meat of the paper. The beauty of word-processing programs is that ordering is as easy as cutting and pasting later.

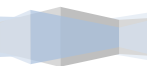
The Outline

Somewhere along the process a plan will formulate in your head. It will likely take the form of a series of heading with subheadings, derived from your notes. Just like the best lectures you may have



attended, or the best presentations, it is the plan that leads you, or a reader, from beginning to end. And the end is usually more satisfying when it has been travelled to along this path.

It should be your goal to lead the reader of your essay gracefully through your paper. A degree of concentration is required for someone to grade or evaluate an essay, and you want to make this process as easy as possible for the grader to garner your paper with praise.



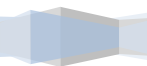
Part 6

The Body

Writing style is not easily taught, but develops. We speak before we learn to write and this is where our thoughts changes slightly into complete prose that is intended to communicate to another. Another person might not read what we put into writing right away, so it must be sustained until it is read, or reread at another time.

Start with a writing style that feels natural but a little more formal than ordinary speech. Avoid incomplete thoughts and dialogue. Stay on topic and avoid slang, generalizations or exaggerations, sarcasm, jokes or humor that are too casual and likely not necessary. Use a slightly authoritative tone and you will feel more like an expert on what you are trying to convey.

Try to be original as you express your thoughts; not just the summarizing of the ideas of a book or someone else. Use the quotes or references of other sufficiently but not too copiously. They are backing up *your* thoughts, not reiterating someone else's. No more than a few per page.



Paragraphs

The body of your essay is the paragraphs. Every paragraph should develop from one of your headings or subheadings.

Paragraphs need to be concise. (Use this document as an example.) Each paragraph is not too lengthy and each topic deserves its own new paragraph. Each paragraph is constructed with a topic sentence followed by three to five points that explain or further discuss the point of the topic sentence.

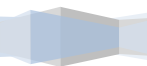
In a new paragraph, the first sentence should be linked to, or contrasted with the last thought of the previous paragraph. Don't hesitate to use a variety of sentence styles. Variety keeps the reader alert and helps with overall attention. Pepper the essay with references and quotes only as they apply.

Best tip! A good assessor will easily recognize what is "filler" in an essay, parts that were added to make the overall essay longer or to meet a required length. If it is not relevant information or discussion about the topic, don't use it!

Introductions and Conclusions

A strong essay is well crafted, concise and engaging. This is best done by putting the reader first. In particular, if the reader is a teacher or instructor, and your essay is one of a pile they have to work through, a high mark will be given to an essay that is:

- relevant and interesting



- authentic and accurate
- thought provoking
- free of technical errors and distractions

Your ideas matter, but if they are not frame in a presentable way, they will not get communicated effectively to the reader, and ultimately someone who will evaluate and grade it.

The **introduction** to an essay is critical. Think of it the same way you might think of an opportunity for a first impression upon meeting a new person. It must attract the reader's attention, pique their interest and keep them engaged.

A few strategies that might do this are:

- lead with a quote to be argued
- provide a startling statement
- use an anecdote or narration to illustrate a point

When using a quote choose one that is fresh and current, and ideally from someone well known in the field of study your essay entails. A well-known person or personality with something to say is a good place to start.

If you intend to start with something shocking, be sure to be true, factual and verifiable in your choice. It could be as simple as a pertinent fact that will be a strong launching point for you to you to continue with a discussion that will illustrate the points you wish to make.

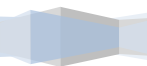


In the anecdote style of introduction, a short but thought-provoking story can be effective. This can be a rather casual approach so care must be taken if the essay is to be more formal.

The **conclusion** or closing to an essay is the last thing the reader absorbs so it is very important that it leaves the reader with just the right tone and opinions. A degree of satisfaction is necessary.

A strong conclusion actually refers to the thesis statement said or implied in the introduction. This brings closure to the reader. It is done with a summing up of the major point(s). It provides a final, and strong, perspective.

An effective conclusion should not be too long – just three or four well-crafted statements. A review of the main points, not exactly replicated, concludes the essay with your strong feelings about the topic of the paper.



Part 7

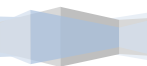
Styling the References

When submitting essays to be graded in academia, you will soon discover that many teachers and professors are very particular about the formatting and style of the essay itself, and particularly how the reference (Bibliography) gives specific credit where it is due. After all, these experts themselves are sometimes the ones being quoted or having their works summarized, so giving credit accurately is respectful and expected.

The most widely used styles are as follows:

Modern Language Association (MLA Style)

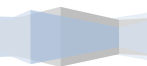
- used in most academic style essays and documentation in the humanities.
- Commonly used in English essays and other modern languages
- Used in language related studies such as media studies, cultural studies, comparative literature and literary criticisms



- features a Works Cited Page which lists all the works cited in the essay, even those in footnotes or endnotes.
- Placed at the end of the main body of the work, essay or article.
- Brief citations in parentheses must include: author(s), short titles, page numbers used.
- Citations are keyed to direct the reader to the title of the work, in alphabetical order, and the page number for easier locating
- When more than one author of the same name is cited, a first name or initial is sufficient

Format for MLA

- for ease of flow, maintain a series of guidelines when using a word processor
- choose a easy-to-read standard font and align to the left rather than justified. Centre titles.
- Use double spacing and don't hyphenate
- Use one space after periods and other punctuation marks.
- Don't allow your computer to automatically underline your URLs with the hyperlink feature



- Use italics for website addresses, in brackets

Citations

- title this section “Works Cited” in a normal font
- keep entries alphabetized and double-spaced
- date the entries consistently
- keep consistent

Books – author’s surname, first name, book title punctuated, place of publication: publisher, year.

Periodical/Magazine/Journal – author’s surname, first name, “Title of the Article” in quotations, title of periodical, date of periodical, pages.

Dictionary/ Encyclopedia – author surname, first name, “Title of Entry “ in quotation, Title of reference book, the edition, year of publication.



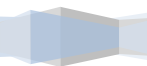
Website – author of webpage, “Article Title” in quotations, title of webpage, date of publication it was last modified. Institution it might be associated with, date or retrieval.

American Psychological Association (APA style)

- used mostly for research papers
- common in manuscripts and theses in the social sciences
- uses parentheses citations within the text
- uses headings to organize article and gives them ranking structure (learn more about this from an APA guide)
- names and order of heading are specific, as are tables, footnotes, figures and appendices.

Chicago Manual of Style (CMS)

- used mostly in humanities, history and widely in the publishing industry
- commonly uses endnotes or footnotes, followed by a Bibliography
- concerns editorial practice and its concerns
- does not use references in the text



Turabian Styling

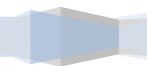
- popular for research papers, and very similar to CMS, but more simplified
- more specific, and preferred, for papers written for a class or course of study rather than for publication
- many more journals are accepting of the newer Turabian style
- used in art history, women's studies, theology, musicology and history

Harvard Referencing System

- brief citations are given within the text itself
- provide the author's name and year of publication, a page number, which refers to the work listed at the end of the essay
- full citations are collected under a "References" section at the end of the essay

Vancouver Style

- references are numbered in the order in which they are mentioned in the text.



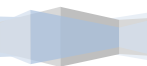
- Subsequent references are indented in sequence, particularly for use with data or tables
- Referencing a journal includes : author's name, title of article, journal title abbreviated, year of publication, (month and day if applicable) volume number, issue number, page numbers

Council of Biology Editors (CBE)

- uses two systems : one is author- date system, one is citation-sequence system with a numerical listing of sources based on how they are used in the essay

With all forms of referencing, it is crucial to know exactly which style of referencing is required in the assignment. If done incorrectly, a meticulous person who is assessing your essay will likely be distracted, and even annoyed, if the correct protocol is not followed. This can led to a bad impression on all your hard work and effort.

Looking for **examples**? Every source you are using will have footnotes, endnotes and cited references. Use these!



Part 8

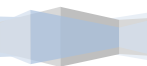
Editing and Proofreading

No matter how clever or thought provoking your writing is on the page, it can take as little as one spelling error to turn off a reader. An occasional typographical error can be excused, but a paper that is rife with errors in the usage or words, the spelling, the punctuation, the use of tenses, can all be distractions that will lead your reader, and assessor away from a great impression of your ability.

Tips for getting your essay to perfection!

- use a dictionary and spell check program on your computer
- have a friend or family member read it over for technical errors in spelling, grammar and even formatting
- subscribe to an online editing service, some are free, others have minimal charges that are worth it.
- Review your old graded papers for comments that may have pointed out mistakes...learn from them

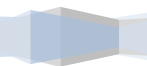
Learn about common writing errors. These are the ones most people don't recognize in their own writing, and even speaking - which can evolve into the way we write.



Submitting -

Keep a hardcopy of your essay, not just the one that may still be in a file on your computer. It may have to be submitted twice, or a teacher may ask for another copy for another instructor to review!

This guide aims to help you improve your writing skills and get better grades. Becoming a better writer it is not easy. It takes a lot of labor and determination. Besides that, today's academic load is very heavy - sometimes you have to submit several writing assignments in a single day! That is too much! Remember, there's another way - Essaymama.com.



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