

Suggestions for Writing an In-class Essay

An essay is a piece of explanation, in which you try to convey to the reader your knowledge of and thoughts on some subject, either one of your own choosing or, in the case of an essay examination, a subject assigned to you by the instructor.

First, consider the question. Consider it carefully. It asks you to write about something covered in class, about which you know something--or should know something. The question has been asked for a purpose, to give you an opportunity to show your stuff, to demonstrate that you know what has been going on in class and that you have been thinking about it at least occasionally and with some understanding. The question has been carefully selected, and you should address **THE PROMPT**. Responding to some other prompt that you think might be better, or misinterpreting the prompt is no way out. You should not attempt to re-write or re-define the prompt so as to give you something to work on; stick with the original assignment as the instructor gives it to you, and don't mess around.

Now that you have the prompt clearly in mind, **THINK** about it. What do you know about the subject, what views do you have and how can you best express and support those views? Recall and review all the information that you have, and select what you need, what you think will be important in writing your essay. Be sure that you select only important evidence relevant to the prompt, rather than everything that you know about the whole subject.

Next, it is recommended that you outline the essay that you are about to start writing. **An outline is simply a brief summary in list form of what you will say at greater length in the essay itself.** You write it to get the essential points down on paper and organized in a form that you can use as a framework for the essay itself. At least take a few minutes to jot down the main point of each individual paragraph.

An outline is a skeleton of an answer, but with all the main points already set forth. When expanding the outline into a completed essay, each word or phrase in the outline may be expanded into a sentence, paragraph, or pages and pages of good sound writing. If you have a good outline, with everything remembered, logically arranged and set down in order, you have most of what will be required for a good answer. Keep in mind the basic three-part form of the essay as described in the last paragraph--introduction, body and conclusion. Each is necessary in a good essay; each plays its part in fulfilling the purpose of the essay, which is to explain. Now consider each one of the three separately in the light of what each part is intended to do.

1. Introduction.

This is the attention-getter, the paragraph with which you have your first and possibly your last chance to interest the reader in what you are about to say. A good introduction does a lot of things, and you should not neglect this part of the essay. Not only may it interest the reader; properly written it may get you interested enough in the subject to write the rest of the essay well.

An introduction should state the problem, the question, the subject upon which the essay will focus. It should indicate the limits of the question and answer, people, period, and the types of data that are available. It should also state in preliminary fashion the conclusion you expect to reach. That conclusion is your thesis, the assertion you are trying to prove; you should state it as easily and as clearly as you can in the introduction. Briefly indicate what you hope to prove--if there is anything to

prove, a viewpoint to be argued. But remember, if you do have something to prove, some opinion or conclusion to support, make that absolutely clear to your reader in your introduction.

2. Body.

This is likely the longest part of your essay, but can require less labor than the introduction or conclusion. In it you state the facts you've learned in class, what you've read—it consists of information, evidence for and against the position that you're taking, the conclusion that you're trying to reach. Putting all this down on paper is mostly memory work—you have to do it but, if you've done the assigned work and outlined properly, recall should be easy. Evidence to support your thesis is important. You have to pay particular attention to this aspect of the essay. Unless you can support your argument with provable, compelling evidence, you will convince no one.

3. Conclusion.

This is where you pull it all together. You have presented the evidence above, and now you attempt to reach a logical conclusion that shows **insight**. Consider the meaning or implication of what you have claimed. Explain what you believe and why you think that the evidence supports your view.

insight: a clear understanding of the inner nature of some specific thing.

That's it. You've written an in-class essay. Here are a few other points to keep in mind.

If it's handwritten:

Try to make your handwriting as legible as possible. If a reader who has to stop every three words to figure out whether you've written "on" or "or," she will lose both the thread of your thought and her good cheer. Write on only one side of the paper. You do not have to double space, as instructors do not generally write comments on in-class essays.

Good spelling and grammar count. Try hard. You may think that grammar and spelling are irrelevant, and that if you know the material, that should be enough, but here again, as in all matters human, reality falls short of the ideal.

Do not use slang and colloquialisms; they are out of place in an essay. Humor can be effective provided that it adds something to the answer and demonstrates in some way that you know the material well enough to joke about it, otherwise you should resist the temptation to attempt to be humorous. **Use the specific language you have been taught in class.**

Lastly, if you remember nothing else, remember this: an essay is an explanation. The more successful and convincing your explanation, the better the essay.

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