

# GUIDE TO WRITING AN ESSAY

## CHOOSE A TOPIC FOR YOUR ESSAY

### Topic Has Not Been Assigned

If you have not been assigned a topic, then the whole world lies before you. Sometimes that seems to make the task of starting even more intimidating. Actually, this means that you are free to choose a topic of interest to you, which will often make your essay a stronger one.

### Define Your Purpose

The first thing you must do is think about the purpose of the essay you must write. Is your purpose to persuade people to believe as you do, to explain to people how to complete a particular task, to educate people about some person, place, thing or idea, or something else entirely? Whatever topic you choose must fit that purpose.

### Brainstorm Subjects of Interest

Once you have determined the purpose of your essay, write down some subjects that interest you. No matter what the purpose of your essay is, an endless number of topics will be suitable.

If you have trouble thinking of subjects, start by looking around you. Is there anything in your surroundings that interests you? Think about your life. What occupies most of your time? That might make for a good topic. Don't evaluate the subjects yet; just write down anything that springs to mind.

### Evaluate Each Potential Topic

If you can think of at least a few topics that would be appropriate, you must simply consider each one individually. Think about how you feel about that topic. If you must educate, be sure it is a subject about which you are particularly well-informed. If you must persuade, be sure it is a subject about which you are at least moderately passionate. Of course, the most important factor in choosing a topic is the number of ideas you have about that topic.

Even if none of the subjects you thought of seem particularly appealing, try just choosing one to work with. It may turn out to be a better topic than you at first thought.

Before you are ready to move on in the essay-writing process, look one more time at the topic you have selected. Think about the type of paper you are expected to produce. Should it be a general overview, or a specific analysis of the topic? If it should be an overview, then you are probably ready to move to the next step. If it should be a specific analysis, make sure your topic is fairly specific. If it is too general, you must choose a narrower subtopic to discuss.

For example, the topic "KENYA" is a general one. If your objective is to write an overview, this topic is suitable. If your objective is to write a specific analysis, this topic is too general. You must narrow it to something like "Politics in Kenya" or "Kenya's Culture."

Once you have determined that your topic will be suitable, you can move on.

## ORGANIZE YOUR IDEAS

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The purpose of an outline or diagram is to put your ideas about the topic on paper, in a moderately organized format. The structure you create here may still change before the essay is complete, so don't agonize over this.

Decide whether you prefer the cut-and-dried structure of an outline or a more flowing structure. If you start one or the other and decide it isn't working for you, you can always switch later.

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## Diagram

1. Begin your diagram with a circle or a horizontal line or whatever shape you prefer in the middle of the page.
2. Inside the shape or on the line, write your topic.
3. From your center shape or line, draw three or four lines out into the page. Be sure to spread them out.
4. At the end of each of these lines, draw another circle or horizontal line or whatever you drew in the center of the page.
5. In each shape or on each line, write the main ideas that you have about your topic, or the main points that you want to make.
  - If you are trying to persuade, you want to write your best arguments.
  - If you are trying to explain a process, you want to write the steps that should be followed.  
You will probably need to group these into categories.  
If you have trouble grouping the steps into categories, try using Beginning, Middle, and End.
  - If you are trying to inform, you want to write the major categories into which your information can be divided.
6. From each of your main ideas, draw three or four lines out into the page.
7. At the end of each of these lines, draw another circle or horizontal line or whatever you drew in the center of the page.
8. In each shape or on each line, write the facts or information that support that main idea.

When you have finished, you have the basic structure for your essay and are ready to continue.

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## Outline

1. Begin your outline by writing your topic at the top of the page.
2. Next, write the Roman numerals I, II, and III, spread apart down the left side of the page.
3. Next to each Roman numeral, write the main ideas that you have about your topic, or the main points that you want to make.
  - If you are trying to persuade, you want to write your best arguments.
  - If you are trying to explain a process, you want to write the steps that should be followed.  
You will probably need to group these into categories.  
If you have trouble grouping the steps into categories, try using Beginning, Middle, and End.
  - If you are trying to inform, you want to write the major categories into which your information can be divided.
4. Under each Roman numeral, write A, B, and C down the left side of the page.
5. Next to each letter, write the facts or information that support that main idea.

When you have finished, you have the basic structure for your essay and are ready to continue.