

Components of a Successful Essay

1. Thesis: an essay's main proposition. A thesis should not be confused with a *topic*, which represents only the subject area of an essay. A good thesis must be arguable; there must be intelligent ways to disagree with it. Arguability distinguishes a good thesis from a fact (clearly demonstrable in the text) or an observation (an interpretation so obvious that no intelligent reader would challenge it). Although writers often wish to delay announcement of the thesis, good academic writing generally states the thesis explicitly on the first page, then returns to a more nuanced and complex form of it later in the text.

2. Problem or Question: the intellectual context in which your thesis matters. In academic essays, the problem usually arises from a current misunderstanding of an important issue. The author of an essay promises to clarify something that would otherwise remain obscured or mistaken. Establishing the problem or question is the primary role of an essay's first few paragraphs. If it doesn't promise to illuminate, deepen, or solve a problem, an essay risks irrelevance.

3. Evidence: the material a writer works with in exploring a thesis. Evidence that has been overlooked or previously undiscovered may serve to *prove* a thesis. Frequently, however, academic writers re-examine evidence that others have looked at before, in which case the evidence is more likely to *suggest* or *persuade* readers that the writer's approach is a fruitful one. Since a good thesis must be arguable, academic writers are especially obligated to consider *counter-evidence*, to grapple directly with facts, patterns, or passages that resist or complicate the essay's main argument. Writers must *orient* readers to the source of the evidence, which must be cited.

4. Analysis & Reflection: the work a writer does to turn evidence into argument, to show the reader how the evidence supports, develops, or extends the essay's thesis. Since a thesis must be arguable, no evidence in a good academic argument can speak for itself—all of it must be processed by the writer. Typical moves of analysis are to highlight significant details of the evidence and to name patterns that might otherwise be undetected. When working with written evidence, it's good to observe the rule of two: the writer should supply at least two words of analysis for every word of a citation, and usually more.

Analysis generally refers directly to the evidence ("Describing his actions with such words as 'growled' and 'stalked' suggests an underlying animal savagery"), while *reflection* builds upon analysis to support larger claims ("This imagery seems to contradict the narrator's stated assessment that Paul is a 'gentle soul'"). Other moves that indicate reflection are consideration of a counter-argument, definitions or refinements of terms and assumptions, and qualifications of previous claims. Reflection is important throughout an essay, but should be especially rich and full in between sections of the argument and in the essay's conclusion.

5. Structure: how the sections of an essay are organized and stitched together. College essays are frequently organized either by repetition (where each paragraph develops evidence of the same proposition: "X is clearly present") or by chronology (where evidence appears in the essay in the same order that it appears in the text): both of these patterns are inadequate. Sections of a good argument proceed in a logical way, but also develop the implications of a thesis more deeply as the essay progresses. The reader should understand how each new section extends the argument that's come before and prepares for the argument that's still to come. Reflective sentences at moments of transition often guide this review/preview, and complex essays frequently include 1-2 sentences of this type in their introductions.