



STUDY SKILLS: WRITING AN ESSAY

Read the instructions carefully. Before you begin working on your essay, it is crucial to understand what the assignment is about, and to learn if there are any specific rules you need to follow. Read your assignment thoroughly and assess what you need to do. For example:

- Does your essay need to answer a specific question or questions?
- Is your essay supposed to present a critical analysis of a source, such as a book, poem, film, or work of art?
- Is the objective to demonstrate your ability to present an original argument based on research?
- Have you been asked to compare and contrast two ideas, events, or literary or artistic works?

Make an outline.

Outlining Your Essay

The next step is to outline what you are going to write about. This means you want to essentially draw the skeleton of your paper. Writing an outline can help to ensure your paper is logical, well organized and flows properly.

Start by writing the essay topic at the top and then write a summary sentence for each paragraph below it. This means you should know exactly what each of your paragraphs are going to be about before you write them.

- Don't jumble too many ideas in each paragraph or the reader may become confused.
- You also want to ensure you have transitions between paragraphs so the reader understands how the paper flows from one idea to the next.

Fill in facts from your research under each paragraph which you want to write about when you write the essay. Make sure each paragraph ties back in to your thesis and creates a cohesive, understandable essay.

Once you have narrowed down your topic and done your research, start organizing your thoughts. Write a list of the most important points that you would like to touch on, in the order in which you plan to address them. The basic structure of your outline could look something like this:

- Introduction – what the essay is about, often rewriting a question as a statement. Try to avoid first person (I am going to....) just do it e.g. *I am going to explore why social media is so successful* could be written as *Social Media is so successful because*
- Point 1, with supporting evidence – this is your first point, but not necessarily your strong point.
- Point 2, with supporting evidence – evidence could be statistics or a quote for example
- Point 3, with supporting evidence – this is often your strongest point.
- Counter-argument(s) – what might someone who disagrees with you say?
- Your refutation of the counter-argument(s) – why is this counter-argument wrong?
- Conclusion – sum up what you have said in an interesting way but differently to how you have already said it.

Write academically

Another common issue – particularly amongst younger students – is that they tend to use rather non-academic language:

“In this essay I will look at how people who buy art use cultural capital. My theory is that having more cultural capital will change their taste in art, as they are able to understand the pieces differently to other people.”

Examples such as the above are unfortunately rather common and should give you a good idea of what to avoid. The sentiment behind the text is good, but it reads more like a second-rate blog post than an academic essay. An academic might instead write:

"This essay explores the role of cultural capital in the consumption of art, and the impact of cultural capital on consumers' perception of artistic expressions."

Persuasive Essays: The whole point of this kind of paper is to convince your audience to agree with you about something. Everything you write, every fact and quote you use, should be focused on strengthening your argument and the persuasive power of your essay.

Literary Analysis: These essays are about a particular book or other text, but this isn't a book report. You'll want to summarize the book briefly, but the bulk of the paper needs to be about analyzing and interpreting it (or certain aspects like a particular character or theme).

Compare and Contrast Essays: This is pretty straightforward—in this type of essay you'll need to compare and contrast two or more things (books, time periods, countries, paintings, etc). The most common issue students have with these papers is focusing too much on comparing and forgetting to contrast, or vice versa.

Reflective Essays: Also called personal essays or narrative essays, these papers are about your personal experiences. They will be structured more like a story, and so won't follow the usual five-paragraph format. Also, this is the only kind of essay you probably won't need to do any research for.

Structure, flow and focus

How you present your argument is nearly as important as the argument itself, which is why it is imperative that your essay follows a logical structure. A classic piece of advice is to "tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, and tell them what you told them" – this, in essence, summarises the core introduction, main body, and conclusion structure of your essay.

Having a clear and logical structure will help ensure that your essay stays focused and doesn't stray from the question being answered. Each section, paragraph, and sentence should add value to the argument you are presenting. As you are writing, it's good to take a step back and ask yourself "what value does this sentence/section add? How does it link to my overarching argument?" If you find that you can't answer that question, there is a high risk that you have strayed from your core argument, and you may want to reconsider the path you are taking.

You should also make sure that all the different parts of your essay fit together as a cohesive and logical whole, and that the transition from one argument to the next is fluid. Students often treat essays as lists of arguments, presenting one after the other with little consideration for how they fit together, which inevitably leads to a lower grade. Make sure to tell your reader why you are transitioning from one argument to the next, why they are in this particular order, and how each argument helps shed light on a particular aspect of what you are discussing.

After writing your conclusion, you might think that you have completed your essay. Wrong. Before you consider this a finished work, you must pay attention to all the small details. Check the order of your paragraphs. Your strongest points should be the first and last paragraphs within the body, with the others falling in the middle. Also, make sure that your paragraph order makes sense. If your essay is describing a process, such as how to make a great chocolate cake, make sure that your paragraphs fall in the correct order. Review the instructions for your essay, if applicable. Many teachers and scholarship forms follow different formats, and you must double check instructions to ensure that your essay is in the desired format. Finally, review what you have written. Reread your paper and check to see if it makes sense. Make sure that sentence flow is smooth and add phrases to help connect thoughts or ideas. Check your essay for grammar and spelling mistakes