

Some Elements of an Essay*

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1 Introduction

An essay is a means of communication. With an essay, we present a specific point of view on a specific topic. Our point of view is a way of looking at things that we think has merit, and it can be referred to as our *thesis*. The thesis is something can be stated easily and succinctly. The ultimate purpose of the essay is to show why this thesis is true. In other words, an essay functions as an argument in favour of a thesis.

1.1 Choose a Topic

A common problem of beginning writers is wallowing around in a topic too wide for their purposes. However, students often begin to write essays with nothing more in mind than a general concept, and the result is a vague and generalized essay, of little interest to the student and less to the instructor. If you start with a broad area, concentrate on narrowing your subject. This will also help you deal with your topic within the length of the paper assigned and the time you have been given to complete it.

1.2 State a thesis

At the beginning of your essay, you should present an issue that you wish to address. This is your thesis. Ideally, it should be simple enough to address in the space of an essay, yet it should be one on which other important issues hinge.

Once you have discovered a thesis, sharpen it into a concise statement. The thesis statement usually appears in the introduction of your essay, and is best expressed in one sentence as a definition of your position, or the point you intend to prove in your essay. A good thesis statement will help organize your essay and give it direction; it is the central idea around which the rest of the essay is built.

The ideal thesis (like the topic itself) will be neither too broad nor too narrow for the compass of your essay. One of the most common problems with essays is that they are based on a thesis that is too obvious to be worth arguing.

*The material presented here is based upon a number of sources. The three primary sources are *Elements of the Essay* by Harvard's Expository Writing Program, examples provided by Stephen Donatelli in Cornell's Writing program, and a website <http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/EssaysToc.html> on essay-writing available at the University of Victoria, Canada.

Generally, your thesis should be (1) true, but (2) arguable—not obviously true, and (3) limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence.

1.3 Motivation

The importance & relevance of your essay within your field or discipline should be made apparent. Your reason for writing, suggested at the start of the essay and echoed throughout, should establish why you thought the topic needed taking up and why the reader should care (the "so what" factor). Perhaps

the truth isn't what one would expect, or what it might appear to be on first reading
the standard opinion of this work needs challenging
there's a contradiction, or paradox, or tension here that needs some sorting out
there's an ambiguity here, something unclear, that could mean two or more things
there's a mystery or puzzle here, a question that presents itself
we can learn something interesting about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one
there's a published view of this that's mistaken, or needs qualifying
the published views conflict
this seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is actually interesting, or important

1.4 Assumptions

You should be aware of the assumptions that are an inevitable part of any essay. These assumptions are often manifested in the key terms that you use in your essay. You should be able to defend the legitimacy of your assumptions, if necessary.

1.5 Develop your essay as a logical argument

An essay is essentially an argument. You propose a particular thesis whose truth you wish to establish. You do so from by drawing a conclusion as a logical consequence of a set of premises. These premises will often themselves be sub-arguments, making use of evidence or examples. the shape your idea takes, the sequence of sub-topics and sections through which it is unfolded and developed.

We can think of the structure of the essay through the complementary activities of CONVINCING your reader and EXPLORING your topic. Convincing requires you to push forward insistently, marshalling evidence for your idea, in a firm, logical structure of clear sections—each section proving further the truth of the idea. Exploring requires you to slow down and contemplate the various aspects of your topic—its complications, difficulties, alternatives to your view, assumptions, backgrounds, asides, nuances and implications. The challenge is to make your essay's structure firm and clear while still allowing for complication—without making it feel mechanical or like a laundry list.

1.6 Use evidence

Evidence makes up the content of your essay, and takes the form of facts or details, summarized or quoted, that you use to support, demonstrate, and prove your main idea and sub-ideas. Evidence needs to be ample and concrete—enough quotation and vivid summary so readers can appreciate, for example, the studies to which you are referring. It also needs to be explicitly connected to the idea so it's always clear exactly what inference is being made from the evidence, exactly how the details support the idea or sub-idea.

1.7 Consider complications

Consider counter-evidence or counter-arguments to your point of view. If necessary, address these within your essay,

1.8 Avoid Tangents

Your essay should proceed in a logical manner. If you deviate from this path, always eventually return to the main argument of your essay. Avoid tangents that consider ideas not particularly relevant or central to your argument.

1.9 Orientation

Be aware of your audience and help them follow your essay. Provide appropriate introductions or backgrounds whenever providing new ideas or evidence. Guide the reader through the main argument of your essay. Use transition sentences that show how the next paragraph or section follows from the preceding one, thus sustaining momentum. If appropriate, echo key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier.

1.10 Style

Adhere to the conventions of the language, be correct in grammar and diction. Always keep your essay clear. Avoid ambiguity, obfuscation and verbosity.

Informal English can be colourful and highly expressive, but it is out of place in most writing. Everyday speech is usually characterized by imprecision of meaning or poverty of vocabulary.

1.11 Sources

When using external materials, always unambiguously detail the sources in footnotes or end-notes. No particular referencing format is necessary, but remain consistent with whichever format you use.

1.12 Conclusion

At the end of your essay you should draw a conclusion. If your essay is an argument in support of a thesis, the conclusion is where you establish how the truth of your thesis follows as a logical

consequence of the the truth or legitimacy of your sub-arguments and evidence.

In the conclusion, you should speculate on the general significance of your particular analysis of a particular text; you suggest what issues your argument raises generally, or about works of its kind, etc.

2 Problems

The most common problems that students encounter with essays are:

- Thesis

There is no thesis at all.

The thesis is too general, or a truism.

The thesis is too narrow.

- Organization

There is no sense of direction, no reason why one paragraph follows another.

There are few, or inadequate transitions.

There are too many generalizations, and too little support for them.

The introduction or conclusion is weak, or one simply repeats the other.

- Presentation

The essay is poorly set out, with inadequate space for the instructor's comments.

There are frequent typos or misspelled words.

2.1 Checklist: Good

The thesis is outlined clearly and well, and it is well-motivated and relevant.

The essay works well as an argument in favor of the main thesis.

The logical structure and the essay's main argument is succinct, concise and parsimonious.

The evidence used throughout the essay seems to be strong and indisputable.

Counter-arguments, where relevant, are properly addressed.

The essay reads easily and the reader is oriented properly to new ideas and arguments.

The overall style is clear, free from obfuscation and has a confident and intelligent voice.

2.2 Checklist: Not so good

The thesis of the essay is not as clear as it should be.

The essay does not seem overall to be an argument in favor of the main thesis or idea.

The essay lacks an overall coherent structure. It is not clear how the individual paragraphs work as a logical structure.

The evidence used throughout the essay is not as compelling as it could be.

There is insufficient mention of important and obvious complications to the main argument.

The essay is somewhat disorienting.

The overall style of writing is not as clear as it could be.

2.3 Checklist: Further questions

Is there a proposition whose truth is being proved. Is this proposition well motivated and interesting for practicing science? Is the essay a logical argument for the truth of this proposition? Is the logical argument or inference valid? Is the argument succinct, concise and parsimonious? Is it free from tangents, lost thoughts? Are the premises true? Is this truth of the premises proved by way of valid logical inference? Is the evidence hard and indisputable, are the examples that make this evidence compelling? Are the assumptions on which the essay is based sound? Are the keyterms and dichotomies open to scrutiny and untendentious. Is the author working for the advancement of science, is the author aware of counter-arguments, objections and counter-evidence or are all of these being conveniently ignored just to tell a riveting story? Is the essay edifying and inspiring? Are we being educated and being invited by the essay to explore further? Is the author sensitive to the reader, helpful as a guide through the idea without being strict and pedantic. Is it clear, free from obfuscation and have a commanding confident and intelligent voice?