

ESSAY BASICS

Essay writing is an important aspect of college work. Essay skills are put to use in many major assignments (including term papers), in essay tests, and in the English Exit Exam. There are many different styles and approaches, and teachers' guidelines may vary, but there are some basic principles that should be useful in almost any essay assignment.

As a rule, your teacher will expect

- development of a single well-defined point (a thesis)
- effective, logical organization (good structure and paragraphing)
- an interesting, well-developed conclusion
- an appropriate level of language
- an objective tone

Teachers also expect essays to be well edited—as free of errors as possible—and neatly presented.

EFFECTIVE PROCEDURE: THE FIVE STEPS

Writing an essay is a five-step process:

- 1) planning (deciding on a thesis; outlining)
- 2) writing a rough draft
- 3) editing to correct and improve the essay
- 4) rewriting neatly, in proper format
- 5) proofreading as a final check for errors

A THESIS STATEMENT: BASIS OF THE ENTIRE ESSAY

An essay must have a thesis (a single main point). This point should be stated clearly in the opening paragraph, providing the focus for the entire essay. Every body paragraph must support the thesis.

STRATEGIC PLANNING: AN OUTLINE

Any essay should be planned before it is written. In some cases, a detailed formal outline is required. Even in the case of a brief essay, it is useful to write out your thesis statement, make a list of supporting points, and then consider the best order in which to present them.

TONE AND LEVEL OF LANGUAGE

As a rule, essays should be written in moderately formal standard English, without slang or contractions.

- e.g. Inappropriate casual language: *Kids can't be expected to know a lot about...*
 Appropriate language: *Children cannot be expected to know much about...*

Do not write with a personal tone (using *I, you, we*, etc.) Your opinions and judgments are often central to the essay, but they must be expressed in an objective tone.

- e.g. Inappropriate personal tone: *I like Freud's point because...*
 Appropriate tone: *Freud's point is valid because...*

EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHING

Each paragraph in the body of an essay should begin with a clear topic sentence representing the overall point of that paragraph. Everything that follows should support or explain that point.

At the end of a long paragraph, a wrap-up statement can be useful to restate the overall idea. In other cases, a transitional sentence may be used at the end to create a smooth connection with the next paragraph.

EDITING: AN ESSENTIAL STEP

Teachers expect any essay to be well edited. Clear expression and correct grammar are essential. Work closely on your rough draft, correcting and improving *everything*—from the order of its paragraphs, to sentence structure, to spelling, apostrophes, and capitalization. (An editing checklist is available from the Academic Skills Centre.)

Never hand in a rough draft in place of a properly edited essay.

DEVELOPING A GOOD CONCLUSION

At the end of an essay, sum up by restating your thesis and recapping your main points. Then draw your actual conclusions—your closing thoughts about key ideas raised in the essay. Comment on what has been proved and what can be learned from this; discuss the importance or the broad implications of these ideas.

Avoid clichés (overused phrases) and platitudes (naïve-sounding pleasant remarks). Make your closing points objective, meaningful, and interesting.

A USEFUL MODEL: THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH ESSAY

Many teachers recommend the five-paragraph system—a sensible model for nearly any short essay.

Paragraph 1:	introduction	
Paragraph 2:	first major point	
Paragraph 3:	second major point	body of the essay
Paragraph 4:	third major point	
Paragraph 5:	conclusion	

- The opening paragraph contains essential background information, the thesis statement, and a brief preview of the three main points which will support the thesis.
- Each of these points is then developed into a full paragraph, forming the body of the essay.
- The final paragraph consists of your conclusion.

This five-paragraph format is a model—but not the rule for *all* essays. If you have more main points to make, the essay will contain more body paragraphs. (It is a good general rule to have a *minimum* of three body paragraphs in any essay, to ensure that your thesis is well supported.)

Essay skills are important to your success. If your corrected essays show serious faults, see your teacher for advice, or visit the Academic Skills Centre.