

C & W Skills

National University of Modern Languages

How to Write an Essay

Essays are common in middle school, high school and college. You may even need to write essays in the business world (although they are usually called "reports" at that point). An essay is defined as "a short piece of writing that expresses information as well as the writer's opinion."

7 Steps to Writing an Essay

For some, writing an essay is as simple as sitting down at their computer and beginning to type. But, a lot more planning goes into writing an essay successfully. If you have never written an essay before, or if you struggle with writing and want to improve your skills, it is a good idea to follow a number of important steps in the essay writing process.

For example, to write an essay, you should generally:

- Decide what kind of essay to write
- Brainstorm your topic
- Research the topic
- Develop a thesis
- Outline your essay
- Write your essay
- Edit your writing to check spelling and grammar

While this sounds like a lot of steps to write a simple essay, if you follow them you will be able to write more successful, clear and cohesive essays.

1. Choose the Type of Essay

The first step to writing an essay is to define what type of essay you are writing. There are four main categories into which essays can be grouped:

- Narrative Essay: Tell a story or impart information about your subject in a straightforward, orderly manner, like in a story.
- Persuasive Essay: Convince the reader about some point of view.
- Expository Essay: Explain to the reader how to do a given process. You could, for example, write an expository essay with step-by-step instructions on how to make a peanut butter sandwich.
- Descriptive Essay: Focus on the details of what is going on. For example, if you want to write a descriptive essay about your trip to the park, you would give great detail about what you

experienced: how the grass felt beneath your feet, what the park benches looked like, and anything else the reader would need to feel as if he were there.

Knowing what kind of essay you are trying to write can help you decide on a topic and structure your essay in the best way possible. Here are a few other types of essays:

- Argumentative Essay: Take a position on a controversial issue and present evidence in favor of your position.
 - Compare and Contrast Essay: Identify similarities and differences between two subjects that are, typically, under the same umbrella.
 - Problem Solution Essay: Describe a problem, convince the reader to care about the problem, propose a solution, and be prepared to dismantle objections.
- If you've been assigned an argumentative essay, check out these [Top 10 Argumentative Essay Topics](#).

2. Brainstorm

You cannot write an essay unless you have an idea of what to write about. Brainstorming is the process in which you come up with the essay topic. You need to simply sit and think of ideas during this phase.

- Write down everything that comes to mind as you can always narrow those topics down later.
- Use clustering or mind mapping to brainstorm and come up with an essay idea. This involves writing your topic or idea in the center of the paper and creating bubbles (clouds or clusters) of related ideas around it.
- Brainstorming can be a great way to develop a topic more deeply and to recognize connections between various facets of your topic.

Once you have a list of possible topics, it's time to choose the best one that will answer the question posed for your essay. You want to choose a topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow.

If you are given an assignment to write a one-page essay, it would be far too much to write about "the history of the US," since that could fill entire volumes of books. Instead, you could write about a specific event within the history of the United States: perhaps signing the Declaration of Independence or when Columbus discovered the Americas.

Choose the best topic idea from among your list and begin moving forward on writing your essay. But, before you move forward, take heed of [these topics to avoid](#).

3. Research the Topic

Once you have done your brainstorming and chosen your topic, you may need to do some research to write a good essay. Go to the library or search online for information about your topic. Interview people who might be experts in the subject.

Keep your research organized so it will be easy for you to refer back to. This will also make it easier to cite your sources when writing your final essay.

4. Develop a Thesis

Your thesis statement is the main point of your essay. It is essentially one sentence that says what the essay is about. For example, your thesis statement might be "Dogs are descended from wolves." You can then use this as the basic premise to write your entire essay, remembering that all of the different points throughout need to lead back to this one main thesis. You should usually state your thesis in your introductory paragraph.

The thesis statement should be broad enough that you have enough to say about it, but not so broad that you can't be thorough.

To help you structure a perfectly clear thesis, check out these These Statement Examples.

5. Outline 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.

If you've been tasked with an argumentative essay, here's the best formula for an Argumentative Essay Outline.

Start by writing the thesis statement at the top, and then write a topic sentence for each paragraph below that. This means you should know exactly what each of your paragraphs is going to be about before you write them.

- Don't jumble too many ideas in each paragraph or the reader may become confused.
- Ensure you have transitions between paragraphs so the reader understands how the paper flows from one idea to the next.
- Fill in supporting facts from your research under each paragraph. Make sure each paragraph ties back to your thesis and creates a cohesive, understandable essay.

Does your teacher follow the APA guidelines for writing papers? If so, these APA Outline Format Examples should help you pull it all together. As you progress into the meat of the essay (following our tips below), these APA Format Examples should prove beneficial!

Of, if MLA is your teacher's preferred style, check out these MLA Format Examples.

6. Write the Essay

Once you have an outline, it's time to start writing. Write based on the outline itself, fleshing out your basic skeleton to create a whole, cohesive and clear essay.

You'll want to edit and re-read your essay, checking to make sure it sounds exactly the way you want it to. Here are some things to remember:

- Revise for clarity, consistency, and structure.
- Support your thesis adequately with the information in your paragraphs. Each paragraph should have its own topic sentence. This is the most important sentence in the paragraph that tells readers what the rest of the paragraph will be about.
- Make sure everything flows together. As you move through the essay, transition words will be paramount. Transition words are the glue that connects every paragraph together and prevents the essay from sounding disjointed.
- Reread your introduction and conclusion. Will the reader walk away knowing exactly what your paper was about?

In your introduction, it's important to include a hook. This is the line or line that will lure a reader in and encourage them to want to learn more. For more on this, check out How to Write a Hook.

And, to help you formulate a killer conclusion, scan through these Conclusion Examples.

7. Check Spelling and Grammar

Now the essay is written, but you're not quite done. Reread what you've written, looking out for mistakes and typos.

- Revise for technical errors.
- Check for grammar, punctuation and spelling errors. You cannot always count on spell check to recognize every spelling error. Sometimes, you can spell a word incorrectly but your misspelling will also be a word, such as spelling "from" as "form."
- Another common area of concern is quotation marks. It's important to cite your sources with accuracy and clarity. Follow these guidelines on how to use quotes in essays and speeches.
- You might also want to consider the difference between quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Quoting is reserved for lines of text that are identical to an original piece of writing. Paraphrasing is reserved for large sections of someone else's writing that you want to convey in your own words. Summarizing puts the main points from someone else's text into your own words. Here's more on When to Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize.

Use of various rhetorical modes including exposition, argumentation and analysis

Rhetorical modes (also known as modes of discourse) describe the variety, conventions, and purposes of the major kinds of language-based **communication**, particularly writing and speaking. Four of the most common rhetorical modes and their purpose are narration, description, exposition, and argumentation.

Definitions

Different definitions of mode apply to different types of writing.

Chris Baldick defines mode as an unspecific critical term usually designating a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre. Examples are the *satiric* mode, the *ironic*, the *comic*, the *pastoral*, and the *didactic*.

Frederick Crews uses the term to mean a type of essay and categorizes essays as falling into four types, corresponding to four basic functions of prose: *narration*, or telling; *description*, or picturing; *exposition*, or explaining; and *argument*, or convincing. This is probably the most commonly accepted definition.

Susan Anker distinguishes between nine different modes of essay writing: *narration*, or writing that tells stories; *illustration*, or writing that gives examples; *description*, or writing that creates pictures in words; *process analysis*, or writing that explains how things happen; *classification*, or writing that sorts things into groups; *definition*, or writing that tells what something means; *comparison and contrast*, or writing that shows similarities and differences; *cause and effect*, or writing that explains reasons or results; and *argument*, or writing that persuades.

Each fiction-writing mode has its own purposes and conventions. Literary agent and author Evan Marshall identifies five different fiction-writing modes: action, summary, dialogue, feelings/thoughts, and background. Author and writing-instructor Jessica Page Morrell lists six delivery modes for fiction-writing: action, exposition, description, dialogue, summary, and transition. Author Peter Selgin refers to *methods*, including these six: action, dialogue, thoughts, summary, scene, and description.

Narration

The purpose of narration is to tell a story or narrate an event or series of events. This writing mode frequently uses the tools of descriptive writing (see below), but also exposition. Narration is an especially useful tool for sequencing or putting details and information into some kind of logical order, traditionally chronological. Working with narration helps us see clear sequences separate from other modes.

A *narrative* essay *recounts something that has happened*. That something can be as small as a minor personal experience or as large as a war, and the narrator's tone can be either intimate and casual or neutrally objective and solemn. Inevitably, a good part of narration is taken up with describing. But a narrative essay differs from a descriptive one in its emphasis

on *time* and *sequence*. The essayist turns storyteller, establishing when and in what order a series of related events occurred.

Essays whose governing intent is descriptive or narrative are relatively uncommon in college writing. *Exposition* and *argument* tend to prevail.

Exactly the same guidelines that hold for a descriptive or narrative essay can be used for the descriptive or narrative paragraph. That is, such a paragraph should be vivid, precise, and climactic, so that the details add up to something more than random observations.

Examples of narration include:

- Anecdote
- Autobiography
- Biography
- Novel
- Oral history
- Short story
- Travel literature

Description

The purpose of description is to re-create, invent, or visually present a person, place, event, or action so that the reader can picture that which is being described. Descriptive writing can be found in the other rhetorical modes.

A *descriptive* essay aims to *make vivid* a place, an object, a character, or a group. The writer tries, not simply to convey facts about the object, but to give readers a direct impression of that object, as if they were standing in its presence. The descriptive writer's task is one of translation: he wants to find words to capture the way his five senses have registered the item, so a reader of those words will have a mental picture of it.

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Examples include:

- Journal writing
- Poetry

Exposition

Main article: Exposition (narrative)

Expository writing is a type of writing where the purpose is to explain, inform, or even describe. It is considered one of the four most common rhetorical modes.

The purpose of expository writing is to explain and analyze information by presenting an idea, relevant evidence, and appropriate discussion. In narrative contexts (such as history and fiction), exposition provides background information to teach or entertain. In other nonfiction contexts (such as technical communication), the purpose is to teach and inform.

The four basic elements of expository writing are the *subject* being examined; the *thesis*, or statement of the point the author is trying to prove; the *argument*, or backing, for the thesis, which consists of data and facts to serve as proof for the thesis; and the *conclusion*, or restatement of the proved thesis. There are two types of subject, according to Aristotle: *thesis*, or *general question* such as, "Ought all people to be kind to one another?" and *hypothesis*, or *specific question*: "Ought Elmer to be kind to his enemy Elmo?" One may be aided in the proper formation of a thesis by asking the questions *an sit*, "Does it exist?"; *quid sit*, "What is it?"; and *quale sit*, "What kind is it?"

Examples include:

- Business
 - Business letters
 - Reports
 - Press releases
- Journalism
 - How-to essays, such as recipes and other instructions
 - News article
- Personal
 - Personal letters
 - Wills
- Academic and technical communication
 - Scientific writing
 - Scientific reports
 - Scientific journal articles
 - Academic writing
 - Term papers
 - Textbooks
 - General reference works
 - Encyclopedia articles
 - Technical writing
 - User guides
 - Technical standards

An *expository* essay is one whose chief aim is to present information or to explain something. To *expound* is to set forth in detail, so that a reader will learn some facts about a given subject. However, no essay is merely a set of facts. Behind all the details lies an attitude, a *point of view*. In exposition, as in all the other modes, details must be selected and ordered according to the writer's sense of their importance and interest. Though the expository writer isn't primarily taking a stand on an issue, he can't—and shouldn't try to—keep his opinions

completely hidden. There is no interesting way of expounding certain subjects without at least implying a position.

Argumentation

An argument is a discussion between people representing two (or more) sides of an issue. It is often conducted orally, and a formal oral argument is a debate.

The purpose of argumentation (also called *persuasive writing*) is to prove the validity of an idea, or point of view, by presenting sound reasoning, discussion, and argument to thoroughly convince the reader. Persuasive writing/persuasion is a type of argumentation with the additional aim to urge the reader to take some form of action.

Examples include:

- Advertising copy
- Critical reviews
- Editorials
- Job evaluation
- Job application letter
- Letter of recommendation
- Letters to the editor
- Résumés

When an essay writer's position is not implied but openly and centrally maintained, the essay is *argumentative*. An argument is simply *a reasoned attempt to have one's opinions accepted*. The ideal is to present *supporting evidence* which points so plainly to the correctness of one's stand that one can afford to be civil and even generous toward those who believe otherwise.

Another form of persuasive rhetoric is the use of humor or satire in order to make a point about some aspect of life or society. Perhaps the most famous example is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal".