

How To Write an Essay: Some Suggestions

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After speaking, writing is the most pervasive form of person-to-person communication. Since writing is so culturally important, it seems only logical that students have formal, easy to understand instruction and guidance relevant to writing well. Basic composition and literature classes do a good general job; however, little time in these classes is devoted to classroom essay writing. This essay devoted its attention to what one professor expects of his students in the form of classroom papers. Readers are cautioned that complete transference between assignments types, classes, and professors is not possible. There is, I strongly believe, a likelihood that the vast majority of what is urged in this paper is transferable across classroom situations. This essay includes several writing suggestions organized by major category: content, organization, mechanical, and style/delivery.

If you follow these guidelines for essay writing, your odds of producing a good paper are greatly enhanced. These guidelines are designed to lead you step-by-step through the minefield of paper writing. If you start tasks early and learn to work more methodically, the trauma of writing will be greatly lessened.

Introduction

Your first task is to clearly understand assignments; their goals, parameters, and limitations. Each assignment will be introduced in writing, and you will be asked to read that assignment in class. Take that request seriously. You will be given an opportunity to clear up anything that seems incomplete, vague, unfamiliar, or otherwise questionable. Later, if any of the instructions still

seem unclear, see your professor about your confusion right away; delays only cause predictable anguish later on.

Pay close attention to specific assignment requirements (ie: study focus; specific volume of and types of evidence required to support claims or arguments; essay length; required citation format; and due date). Is the essay expected to be informative or persuasive? Are you asked to examine both sides of a question or to be an advocate for only one side? Are you expected to take an historical, critical, or analytical view of some person, event, or concept? Have specific paper subtopics been suggested or required in the assignment?

Once answers to these questions are clearly and completely understood, it is time to search for a specific topic. Quality topic selection is not a snap decision. Following are a series of questions to be asked before embarking on the essay writing journey: (1) what relevant topic areas am I interested in pursuing? (2) what do I already know that would be useful for this assignment? (3) what resources (ie: books, journals, popular periodicals, personal knowledge, interview prospects, and campus experts) do I have available to me? and (4) what topics best fit my skills?

It is often useful to seek several workable topics in the initial stage. Commonly, dead ends are encountered, insufficient resources are discovered, and topics that are either too broad or too complex become exposed after the initial search. Also, some initial topics generate ideas for even more stimulating subjects. Once you have settled on one topic that you are interested in, that seems doable, and which meets assignment parameters, it is time to write a clear thesis sentence, a statement of your overall essay intentions. A thesis is the argument, assertion, claim, or proposition you are forwarding. Your

thesis is your major thrust, what you strive to accomplish. This thesis statement should help guide you in searching for resource materials, in outlining, and in choosing appropriate stylistic devices when the actual writing process progresses. A thesis statement should be clear, concise and declarative.

Your next step is to outline what you want to accomplish. An outline can be thought of as a blueprint. If you try to build a house without a blueprint, you likely will have a disaster on your hands. The higher the quality of your outline, the better are your chances for a high caliber essay. A high quality out-line is the consequence of methodical work, logical thinking, and plenty of time. An outline helps to accomplish several goals including: (1) forcing you to logically sequence ideas, (2) assuring relative balance/imbalance of major ideas, (3) pointing out when major or minor ideas are redundant or not distinct from one another, (4) revealing omissions of needed points, and (5) pointing out possible idea categories that were not evident before. Just as with high quality papers, outlines frequently are done in multiple drafts; the first outline draft is seldom a polished, finely honed product. Outlining may, at first, seem like a tedious, time wasting effort; but if you will earnestly work at producing a detailed plan of your essay, your actual writing time and revision work likely will be reduced and made more pleasant.

Of the three major essay components: content, organization, and delivery/style, CONTENT is, in your professor's opinion, the most important. If you have nothing worthy to say, the rest is fluff. It is necessary that you have something new, exciting, useful, and relevant to say in order to secure reader interest and respect. Nothing is more maddening than a writer who wastes readers' time with trivia or

redundant information. A quality academic essay informs and lifts the audience's spirit. Do not choose a topic because it seems easy; choose your focus because it is important, interesting to you and your prospective audience, and because it will provide evidence to the reader that you have learned something from the task.

Content

It is your responsibility to be honest, accurate, precise, timely, local, and open about what you have to say. Honesty means being truthful and thorough; admitting to biases or prejudices; and also includes not lying by omission and admitting that there are opposing viewpoints. Accuracy and precision relate to the detail and sophistication used as well as to the thoroughness of your claims or evidence. You owe it to your audience and to yourself to use current evidence when appropriate; and it almost always is the proper strategy! When possible, choose examples and illustrations that are close to home rather than distant ones; these help maintain interest and assist audience members in better relating to your arguments. Sources for factual information and for borrowed interpretations should be clearly and completely disclosed. It is desirable, when primary sources are available, to use these rather than secondary or more distant sources. It is understood that genuine occasions arise where primary sources are unavailable; but "unavailable" does not equate with laziness or starting late!

Quotations should be held to a minimum. Only those specific words from others that can not be readily paraphrased should be used. Necessary, lengthy, block quotes are a rarity. Essays are your interpretations, inferences, claims, and conclusions, not a litany of

others' assertions. There are infrequent times when someone else has said something so well and so relevant that it merits repeating as an example or in support of your claims, but those occasions are rare.

Evidence (support) comes in several forms: facts, examples, inferences, statistics, testimony, observations, and personal experiences. Facts are statements that are verifiable by observation, experimentation, or experience. Inferences are guesses that we make based on incomplete knowledge. Examples are actual instances or hypothetical cases used to illustrate points you are making. Statistics are either numerical descriptions of populations or samples of things, events, or people or predictions based on probability. Observations are the objects, people, or events that you personally as well as vicariously witness; while experiences are events where you are centrally involved. That these forms of evidence exist needs to be clearly established in your writing as well as the reliability of such evidence used as support for particular arguments, claims, and assertions you make in your papers. Fraudulent, misleading, incomplete, and hearsay evidence and claims are unethical and need to be avoided. Gathering proper support is hard work and usually takes a great amount of time and energy to garner.

Just providing reasons (evidence) is insufficient. Evidence needs to be organized like building blocks. Each paragraph should relate to your thesis; should be fully developed; and should help the reader follow your reasoning. Your conclusions should follow established reasoning patterns (ie: chronological, spacial, topical, cause-effect, analogy, problem-solution, etc). Your essay's conclusions should come as no surprise to readers; they should be obvious based upon your paper's thesis statement, preview, presented evidence, and logical idea

sequence.

Content, then, includes topic selection, claims and evidence chosen to support arguments, developed ideas that support your thesis, and conclusions drawn from your evidence. Content is the "meat on the bones."

Organization

In addition to the content component of your writing, organization is a crucial element of concern for the audience. It is imperative that your ideas be easy to follow. Following are some suggestions for making your ideas flow smoothly and logically. An essay needs to have an introduction; this beginning is more involved than merely saying: "... I am going to" An effective introduction provides a rationale for your study, sets the context for the topic, states the paper's purpose, seeks reader attention and interest, and forecasts major ideas to follow.

Audience attention and interest are not always easy to achieve. Some topics are common, potentially dull, complicated, foreign to many readers, or initially contrary to reader values, opinions, or attitudes. It is necessary that you analyze your audience carefully and then frame your topic in such a way as to spark interest, grab attention, and promise a result that will warrant their continued reading.

After you have secured audience attention and interest, you need to supply readers with a rationale for your paper. A rationale provides the "why" for your study; this may include personal interest, intervening events between recent literature and your study, a discovered omission or flaw in others' studies, or extensions of others' work. Contexts commonly involve political, social, ethical, economic,

religious, philosophic, or ideo-logical concerns. The context provides a perimeter for your topic, limits that guide your search. Your purpose needs to be clear; you need to state whether you seek an answer to a problem, hope to advocate one idea over others, are proposing that a problem exists, etc. Your purpose often is your thesis sentence.

Major ideas, argument flow, and essay purpose should not come as a surprise to the reader. Briefly informing your audience of things to come is called a preview or forecast. Forecasts of ideas often consist of more than just saying: "...I will A, B, and C..." Previews provide reasons for sequencing ideas in a given way unless the order is self evident. Previews define terms that readers may be unfamiliar with, or that may be ambiguous, that are essential to understanding the essay. The forecast need not be exhaustive, but it ought to give a reader a general map of your intentions (it is also wise to remind them of where on that map you are from time to time. These reminders are called "signposts." Signposts help readers follow direction, appreciate idea hierarchy, and better sense relationships in your study).

Another section of your paper that should precede your arguments and analysis is what is called the literature review. This section provides an overview of others' studies that are relevant to your topic; it's part of the essay that usually comes just prior to your study itself. This literature review allows readers who desire more background into your subject to know what sources to consult.

New ideas should not be encountered abruptly; transitions are means of preparing audiences for the end to one idea and the beginning of another thought. Transitions within an essay need to be varied; the same tried and true connective, repetitively used, makes for dull reading and detracts from your writing effectiveness.

Major papers typically embark on subjects requiring complex, extensive sub-issues. Such issues may require what amounts to mini introductions; these are distinct from the overall essay introduction. These internal previews typically show how particular major ideas are important, why those ideas are needed in the study, and illustrate relationships to other major ideas. Such issues may also need to be summarized within the essay. Internal summaries wrap up individual major points within the study and are commonly followed by a transition to the next major point.

Your essay, being goal oriented, needs a forceful summary; one that punches home your main thrust, one that leaves readers with a sense of resolution, one that leaves one focal idea in the audience's mind -- the idea that is most central to your writing.

Tightly organized ideas need to be presented in ways that invite readers' attention. Sloppy, arcane, unexciting, or erroneous ideas tend to turn readers off and may leave even great ideas unattended to by your audience. Organization, then, can be seen as the skeleton of your essay. A sound structure enhances reader comprehension and helps secure acceptance of your work. Sloppy organization may cause your ideas to be dismissed or severely depreciated.

In addition to content and structure issues, several stylistic matters need addressing. After choosing relevant ideas and then organizing them appropriately, a writer or needs to choose ways to deliver a message so that it will gain interest and induce agreement/acceptance in audience members' minds. Some examples of stylistic/delivery matters that students commonly have difficulties with are discussed below.

Mechanics

One of the basic style/delivery difficulties is the writing format. Following are several general guidelines that will apply to most of your college writing. Writers need to attend to proper spelling, punctuation, grammar, and word usage. Papers are to be neatly typed following a consistent writing style (ie: APA, MLA, Turabian, ...). Essays should be typed on a single side of white 8½" X 11" paper, double spaced, with one inch margins on all sides of the page. A separate title page should include: the essay title, the author's name and class indicator, and the submission date. All essays should use endnotes rather than footnotes on each page. Each paper should include numbered pages and the author's name (most easily accomplished by using "headers" or "footers in wordperfect) on each page. Please do not put papers in plastic covers or binders; simply paper clip pages together.

In addition to mechanical considerations, there are several other stylistic issues that are important to know about. These stylistic matters render your writing easier to read, make the work more interesting, and produce, for the reader, a more favorable impression of the writer. These are discussed in the following section.

Style/Delivery

All pronouns need antecedents; some antecedents are explicit, others are implicit. Antecedents need to be clear and unambiguous. An example of poor pronoun usage is: "Mary bought a new car; Susan purchased a new TV; and Joan made a down payment on a sea cruise. She said it was too expensive." Who is "she" and what is "it?" Typically, pronoun antecedents are assumed to be the most recently used noun or pronoun; if such is not the case, you need to rework the reference to assure clarity.

Please refrain from using popular or colloquial wording (ie: "stuff;" "guys" when referring to people; "things like that;" "awesome," "neat," "out of sight," et cetera). These do not convey clear messages and they are contrary to accepted and expected academic writing standards.

Run-on sentences are to be avoided. A run-on sentence is a series of clauses and/or phrases that belong written in separate sentences, but instead are connected by "and," "therefore," "but," "...in addition...," etc. Shorter, crisper sentence structures are preferred over lengthy, overly complex sentences. Paragraphs should be introduced, developed, and concluded as discrete units of the essay. Headings should indicate essay sections when there is sufficient length and/or complexity to your paper to warrant this segmenting device.

Authors should write in active voice. Unless a specific effect is desired and is appropriate, writing in passive voice should be avoided. Possessives should be in direct form, not in preposition form. Most prepositional use is unnecessary; it is likely that over 50% of first draft prepositions easily can be eliminated (maybe even more!). Qualifiers, when called for, are essential; however, many students overly use qualifiers (ie: sometimes, possibly, maybe, etc.). When qualifiers are over used, they lose their authority. Try not to write extremely lengthy or overly complex sentences. They are difficult to read and they often cloud good ideas. Keep your writing crisp, direct, goal centered, and even flowing. Shorter sentences and simple structures do not mean that you are simple minded, but instead indicate that you are interested in seeing to it that your readers are informed, not impressed by grandiose writing.

There is a specific difference between "I feel..." and I

believe..."; "feel" is a word designating emotion; while "believe" (or "think") suggests a cognitive process. This is not entirely a stylistic matter; it is an accuracy concern as well.

Try not to use ornate, intricate, or fancy words when plain, simple, and familiar ones will do. In specific instances where particular attention to verbal precision is needed/desired, less common vocabulary is acceptable, but not in most cases. Use your thesaurus to understand others' words, not to construct hard to read papers.

Verbal variety helps keep reader interest. Note my interchangeable use of the terms paper, essay, and study. Do not extend this advice too far and attempt to never repeat words; too much versatility is just as problematic as too little variety.

Metaphors that help readers understand concepts or examples more clearly are encouraged. Well chosen metaphors can add richness to your language use. Metaphors that try to be cute or that confuse the reader are strongly discouraged. Parallel structure is encouraged. This aids readers in visualizing concept relationships. Parallel structure is made easier if you construct sentence outlines before you begin writing. Be sure that when you use analogies, they are relevant and appropriate to the occasion. Readers need to be clearly familiar with both the subject of your analogy and with what that analogy refers to. Otherwise do not use that analogy. Be prudent when using the term "cause." Causation is a specific relationship type. Other relationships exist, but these should not be mistaken for or mis-labeled as cause. Causation implies a specific linkage and sequence between two or more variables. Be sure these conditions exist when using the term "cause."

Non sexist language is appreciated by most readers; this shows a writer's rhetorical sensitivity and will enhance author and message

credibility. Avoid "he/she", "s/he", "him/her" whenever you possibly can. Careful sentence structuring and thoughtful planning will help you avoid these bothersome patterns.

Try to draw clear, distinct pictures in the reader's mind; this is called vividness. Vividness can be achieved by employing emotive words and figurative language. Your readers are idea consumers; you have an obligation to do as much for them as you can. Readers then are better prepared to learn, evaluate your ideas and claims, and to use your conclusions.

Writing can be fun. Once you devote the necessary time, the required energy, and the requisite thoughtfulness to producing worthy messages, your efforts likely will be praised by most readers.

Style allows an author's personality to be seen. Style includes formality level, person, voice, vocabulary, and chosen literary devices. Part of the writing process is to capture and keep readers' attention and interest. Good style enhances a writer's chances of being noticed, believed, and remembered.

Conclusion

Other than through listening to the spoken word and speaking, writing and reading are the most prevalent forms of idea exchange. It behooves us to be competent writers and readers. Reading and writing are complementary and symbiotic. Each aids the other. Quality reading is enhanced by acquiring good writing skills; improved writing is acquired, in part, by exposure to a breadth of good writing.

Writing is not a mere mechanical task. Writing requires audience analysis, a striving to understand what audience members will desire, understand, and spend the time and energy reading. This is not an easy

task; it requires thought and effort.

Content, organization, and style are all important essay components. The discussion of these three components followed, in descending order, your professor's personal bias as to their relative importance. Remember, each essay audience has its own understanding level; its personal biases, expectations, and demands; and its unique reactions to and evaluations of an author's work. Do your best to know your audience; this is called audience analysis. The more you know about your audience; who they are; what their needs, wants, expectations, values, beliefs, attitudes, and histories (personal and group) are, the better prepared you will be to address their concerns. The more you show common ground with your audience, the more receptive they are likely to be to your ideas.