



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

Essay Writing

The term **essay** was first used during the Renaissance by Michel Montaigne (1533-92) as he attempted to weigh or “assay” his thoughts regarding human perception and individual opinion. In our modern era, as we continue to make advances in many fields, we maintain that tradition of scrutiny with the modern essay.

Why Write Essays?

You probably have ideas and opinions on a wide variety of subjects. How well you express your ideas and opinions can have a great deal to do with how successful you may be in your career.

- / Politicians, lawyers, doctors, and most other professionals (even professors), rely on their ability to write reports and summaries in order to stay in business.
- / Anyone who submits written material depends on their writing ability for success, whether they’re sending a job application or a proposal for funding.

As a college student, the quality of your writing will directly affect your grades. However, as important as it is to develop your skills, it need not be something you view as a chore. After all, the written essay is one place where you get to say what is on your mind!

Step 1: Understand the Assignment

Make sure you understand your assignment. Take the time to read the prompt slowly. If there is any confusion regarding the assignment, ask your instructor to clarify.

- / If you are lucky, your assigned essay will be about something that interests you. However, even when an assigned topic seems boring at first, there is often some aspect of it that is unusual or out-of-the-ordinary. When you figure out what that is, inspiration hits and it is time to start writing!
- / Okay, so sometimes inspiration may still be lacking. When that happens, you can rely on your **prewriting process** to generate ideas that you will use to construct your essay. (See handout on the Writing Process available from the Writing Center.)

Step 2: Your Perspective: Choose an Aspect of Interest

Review the information you have gathered while researching your assigned topic. Choose an aspect of the topic that you find most interesting, so that your paper will reflect your interest.

- / As an example, consider the topic of garbage dumps, otherwise known as landfills. You may have zero interest in landfills until you start researching them. You may then discover that landfills produce huge amounts of methane gas through the decomposition of organic matter. You may also discover that the methane can be used to create electricity, and that this benefits the environment. If you are interested in environmental issues, you have found your “aspect of interest,” and are ready to start **brainstorming**.

Step 3: Brainstorming and Prewriting

Brainstorming, also known as **prewriting**, is simply the act of jotting down thoughts and ideas **as fast as they occur** to you. It can seem like a strange exercise, but what often happens during a brainstorming session is that issues will come to mind that can be included in your essay.



Figure 2 Cartoon man with an idea

- / Turn off your “deep thinking” ability when you brainstorm.
- / **Don’t pre-judge your ideas**, just get them down on paper as fast as they occur. You can always throw them out later if they don’t seem usable.
- / After your brainstorming session, you will have a list of words and phrases. **Put them in an order** from “most important” to “least important.”
- / You may find that the most important idea in your list will develop into a good thesis. Use the other ideas from your brainstorming session as possible **paragraph topics**.
- / Alternately, you might like to create **thought clusters**. A thought cluster is simply a series of circles. Within each circle you write a possible topic title. When brainstorming, words are added within the circles that relate to each specific topic. The thought circles can then be used to form paragraphs.

Step 4: Crafting a Thesis

You may often find something interesting because you have an **opinion** about it.

So:

Subject + Opinion = Thesis

- / Your thesis will usually reflect your opinion on the subject you have chosen. (See handout on how to write a Thesis Statement available from the Writing Center.)
- / In the research that you have read, notice that the writers always support their statements with statistics, results from experiments, or other forms of **evidence. This is why their opinions are taken seriously.**
- / For your opinion (and therefore, your thesis) to be taken seriously, you must include supporting research. The good news is that you don't have to do the experiments or create the statistics; usually, it has been done for you. As long as you cite your sources correctly you can use evidence already uncovered by the experts. (See our handouts on correct MLA and APA citation.)
- / One day, you may be one of those experts!

Step 5: Paragraphing and Structure

With essay structure, we consider how paragraphs are arranged and in what order they are presented. This is where previous brainstorming sessions really pay off.

- / Usually, **a paragraph covers a complete idea or topic**, so the number of paragraphs you have in your essay may be decided by how many ideas or topics you want to share with the reader.
- / Paragraphs may be presented in the order of “most important,” to “least important.”
- / The first paragraph is called the **Introduction** paragraph. It often begins with an attention getting statement, and it usually ends with your **thesis statement**. Your most important idea is often your thesis.
- / The following paragraphs should reflect ideas that relate to your thesis. The first sentence of each paragraph usually **introduces the topic of that paragraph.**

- / Sometimes, you don't really know which paragraphs are going to seem more important until after you have written them. That's okay; you can write about what you know first and then rearrange the paragraphs in a way that makes the most sense later.
- / Each paragraph should lead smoothly into the next in order for your essay to "flow." This can take some practice so don't worry if your writing is not perfect at first, but try and arrange paragraphs so that the idea in one is somehow related to the idea in the next.
- / Use **transition phrases** to add style and unity. These include phrases such as: *although, because, therefore, however, finally, for example, in contrast*. (See handouts on Transitions, and Paragraphing, available from the Writing Center.)

Step 6: The Body of the Essay

As your essay progresses, and **after** you have developed your main argument, your paragraphs can cover ideas that are less directly related to the thesis. These ideas may seem less important, but they can add **contrasting perspective** to your essay. In the example of the garbage landfills, utilizing the methane gas might benefit the environment, but that doesn't necessarily mean that extra garbage would be a good thing.

- / Remember that the body of the essay should provide support for your thesis and main argument of the essay.
- / Being able to see both sides of an argument is closely associated with **critical thinking**, and you are more likely to persuade people toward your point of view when you show them that you can see things from an alternate perspective. Demonstrating only one point of view indicates that you haven't thought analytically about your subject.

Step 7: Concluding

The last paragraph of your essay is your summary. The summary draws **conclusions** from the information you have just shared with the reader in the body of your essay. It may also remind the reader of your thesis and is a way of **reaffirming your opinion** of the subject.

- / The goal in writing your conclusion is to remind the reader that **you have proved your thesis** and that you have demonstrated your views through careful examination of evidence.
- / Consider the main ideas you have shared in each paragraph, and sum them up in several sentences. This will be your concluding statement.
- / Some concluding statements may express an interest in the future of the topic, leaving the reader with something to ponder.
- / You can also briefly discuss the **implications** of the information you have shared and the **consequences** of ignoring the view you have put forward.

Essay writing can be a highly rewarding experience. It is one of the few platforms where we truly get to examine ourselves and our place in the world.

Paragraph Organization.

First paragraph:

Introduction statement - This introduces the broad subject covered in the essay. Try to engage your reader; catch their attention with a well chosen phrase.
Body of paragraph – supports introduction. This may pose a question, or add general information on the topic.
Thesis statement - Main point, argument, or area to be discussed. This lets the reader know specifically what the essay is about.

Second paragraph:

Topic sentence - This introduces the topic of this paragraph. As it is the second paragraph, it covers the first main point of your argument. Like other topic sentences, it needs to be directly related to your thesis statement.
Body – this includes facts, and other information, that helps the reader understand your perspective, or supplies the reader with more knowledge about the topic.
Concluding sentence – a very brief summary of the paragraph, and may also introduce the next paragraph.

Following paragraphs:

Topic sentence - This introduces the topic of this paragraph.
As you progress, topics must be related to the thesis statement, but may cover contrasting opinions or perspectives that show both sides of your argument.
Concluding sentence – a very brief summary of the paragraph, and may also introduce the next paragraph.

Final, concluding Paragraph:

The concluding paragraph does not necessarily need a topic sentence. Your final
concluding paragraph reminds the reader of your thesis statement, and also summarizes the whole essay. As part of the summarizing process, you can ponder the
future of your thesis subject, or look at possible outcomes of research and experiments.

This handout is based on the following texts:

Fawcett, Susan and Alvin Sandberg. Grassroots with Readings: The Writer's Workbook. 6th Ed. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1998. p 13, 52.

Clouse, Barbara F. Working It Out: A Troubleshooting Guide for Writers. 2nd Ed. New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 1997. p 17-21, 59-61.

All of the above texts are available at the Writing Center. Please visit our website at www.lavc.edu/wcweb/index/html for additional resources and services.

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