

Basic guide to writing an essay

Written by Tonia Walls



The necessity to write an essay, to develop a term paper or to work on a course assignment often times evokes frustration and stress. The easy way to avoid such negative influence of your high school or college experience is to learn and to follow the basic guidelines of essay writing, which form the foundation for any research paper you'll ever get assigned. Once you study, memorize and start implementing these guidelines in practice, you'll get three benefits at one stroke when receiving a new assignment: you'll escape the frustration; you'll start getting A+ grades; you'll be having fun working on your paper.

Getting prepared

The guideline I observed being truly helpful is changing your attitude towards the assignment you got from your teacher or professor. Stop thinking its boring, don't be lazy and try to find something interesting in the topic you are about to develop. "There are no boring subjects, there are boring people". Don't be one.

If you get to choose your topic independently, you are very lucky, because then it's time to freely express your thoughts on a subject of particular interest to yourself. If you become confused and cannot decide upon a topic, start brainstorming ideas and eventually pick up the most interesting, easily researched or most relevant to the subject you are studying at high school or college.

Try to be creative and innovative. Don't follow the pattern of previously researched papers on the same subject; try to do it differently, in your own way and following your own convictions. Find something that hasn't been covered yet and emphasize this discovery. Avoid reflecting the public opinion or common view; get opposed to it by putting forward your own arguments. That's what your professor would really like about your work.

Another suggestion I have to offer from the personal experience is getting inspired before writing a paper. Have you ever tried to do something

without inspiration? Did it turn out to be good? Well, the same implies to writing an essay. There are different ways to get inspired. One way is to stay home alone on a rainy day, make yourself a cup of tea or coffee and get in the mood of writing your thoughts on a subject of your essay. Another way is to do a good research, find some interesting facts and write down quick thoughts about these facts. Lately you'll get to the point of organizing these thoughts into a formal essay, but they will be a valuable source for your further work. Whatever works best for you, get inspired before writing your essay, otherwise you'll waste a lot of time and will get nothing valuable. However, do not forget what Thomas Edison once said: "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration".

Getting Started

Before you start developing your essay, look once again at the topic you have selected or have been assigned. It is important to know what type of paper you are expected to produce: whether it is a general overview, or, let's say, a specific analytical essay. If you are about to prepare a specific analysis, be sure to work with more specific subject in case your topic is too general. For example, the topic "MEDIA" is a general one, which is perfect for an overview. If you are assigned to write a specific analysis, you need to narrow this topic to something like "Media's exposure to world events".

During library research on your topic you may also want to write down some quotes or paragraphs to be paraphrased. Do not forget to put the sources next to your notes, so that you'll be able to properly reference them in your paper. For links to different referencing styles, please, refer to the Appendix.

Outline

Very important part of developing an essay is a well-organized approach. You may have many ideas and a lot of information, but that will produce nothing without organizing those ideas and information in a particular order. That's what you need an outline for. Besides, you may actually use it in a ready-made essay, so that your professor or instructor would see the structure of your paper and the main ideas presented.

An outline usually begins with a topic of your essay at the top of the page. Then you make a list with Roman numerals and write main topic-related ideas or points right next to each numeral.

- If it is a persuasive essay, write the main arguments.
- If it's a guide for some actions, write the steps that should be followed.
- If it's an overview, divide it into major categories and write them down.

Each main idea may contain several facts or pieces of information supporting it. They should be written using the, B, C listing under the main idea with Roman numeral.

Thesis statement

Once you have your topic and outline, you are ready to develop a thesis statement. In general, thesis statement tells a reader the point you are making in a topic-related discussion of your essay.

For example, your topic is “Media's exposure to world events”, then your point would be “...has increased an awareness for wars and disasters and influenced the current international politics”.

Body paragraphs

A body of an essay is a place where you get to express all your topic-related ideas or arguments. In other words, each idea in your outline will become a paragraph in your essay. Each paragraph must have the following component parts:

- 1 It starts with one of your main ideas (written in the outline).
- 2 It contains several supporting points for this idea.
- 3 Each supporting point must be explained and clarified in several sentences.

If each paragraph represents an argument or a persuasive content, it is recommended that you put the strongest one first, then you may put the weakest in the middle and end up your body with the second strongest paragraph. Such is the best way to retain attention of a reader.

Introduction

Now that you have your body paragraphs, you can be certain of what to introduce to a reader. A good introduction should attract reader's attention and clearly point out the focus of an essay. This is where you get to express your creativity.

Typically, the introduction starts with some general remarks related to the topic, then it gently leads to a thesis statement. On the way to your thesis you get more specific with each new sentence.

However, if you truly want to grab someone's attention to your essay and to get extra credit from your professor, you should do some research and start your introduction with one of the following:

- Quotation of a famous person;
- Sensational facts or startling information (which should be true and verifiable);
- Anecdote or dialogue.

Whatever way you use to introduce your essay, be sure that information is related to your topic and can lead a reader to your thesis statement without any extra efforts. In order to have a complete introduction, you need to connect such information with your thesis statement using several elaborate sentences. Thesis statement finishes the introduction.

Conclusion

A conclusion should not be a summary of what has already been said and it should not be a rephrased thesis statement without any substantive changes. Do not introduce a new idea or topic in the end of your essay as well. It simply should close the topic and contain three or four strong sentences, which may include brief summary of the main points presented, call for action, warning or universalization (comparison to other situations), suggestions or consequences, provocative question or related quotation. You may refer to the introduction using key words or parallel concepts.

Finishing touches

Now that you have finished your essay and done a great deal of work, it's important that you don't screw up submitting it without spell checking or proofreading. No matter how hard you tried on the context, you may not get an "A" just because you didn't format the paper or misspelled several words.

Check your assignment instructions or consult your professor as for the required format and structure of the paper. Is your paper complete and formatted in terms of title page, margins, double-spacing and putting some additional information (name, subject, date, etc.) in it?

After all, do the proofreading of your paper, so that you can improve and add some finishing touches to it. It may lack some smooth connections between paragraphs or may not have some logical sense in certain parts. Sometimes things you write at night, may seem absolute nonsense in the morning. Read your paper several times and submit it only when you are completely satisfied with it. Do not forget to run the spelling and grammar checker.

Now, that you've gone through this essay-writing process, you may consider your paper complete and ready for submission!

Good luck!

Appendix

- Modern Language Association (MLA)
- American Psychological Association (APA)
- Chicago Manual of Style
- Turabian