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Guide to Writing a Basic Essay

An essay can have many purposes, but the basic structure is the same no matter what. If you follow a few simple steps, you will find that the essay almost writes itself. You will be responsible only for supplying ideas, which are the important part of the essay anyway.

These simple steps will guide you through the essay writing process:

- Decide on your topic
- Prepare an outline or diagram of your ideas
- Write your thesis statement
- Write the body
 - Write the main points
 - Write the sub-points
 - Elaborate on the sub-points
- Write the introduction
- Write the conclusion
- Add the finishing touches

Choose a Topic for Your Essay

Topic Has Been Assigned

You may have no choice as to your topic. If this is the case, you still may not be ready to jump to the next step.

Think about the type of paper you are expected to produce. Should it be a general overview, or a specific analysis of the topic? If it should be an overview, then you are probably ready to move to the next step. (Hint: If you are writing an essay for a history class, your assignment is more likely to be a specific analysis of the topic.) If it should be a specific analysis, make sure your topic is fairly specific. If it is too general, you must choose a narrower subtopic to discuss.

For example, the topic "Louisiana History" is a general one. You must narrow it to something like "Politics in North Louisiana" or "Indian Culture in Northwest Louisiana." The narrower your topic, the easier it will be to write a concise, detailed essay. (Hint: You can narrow a topic easily by limiting the setting (time and space). For example, you can narrow "Politics in North Louisiana" to "Politics in Caddo Parish" or even narrower to "Politics in Caddo Parish in the 1950s.")

Once you have determined that your topic will be suitable, you can move on.

Topic Has Not Been Assigned

If you have not been assigned a topic, then the whole world lies before you (or in your case the whole state). Sometimes that seems to make the task of starting even more intimidating. Actually, this means that you are free to choose a topic of interest to you, which will often make your essay a stronger one.

Brainstorm Subjects of Interest

If you have trouble thinking of subjects, start by looking around you. Is there anything in your surroundings that interests you? Is there anything in your textbook that you would like to know more about? Don't try to evaluate the subjects yet; just write down anything that springs to mind.

Evaluate Each Potential Topic

If you can think of at least a few topics that would be appropriate, you must simply consider each one individually. The most important factor in choosing a topic is the number of ideas you have about that topic, or in this case, the amount of information that is available to you about that topic.

Even if none of the subjects you thought of seem particularly appealing, try just choosing one to work with. It may turn out to be a better topic than you at first thought.

Before you are ready to move on in the essay writing process, look one more time at the topic you have selected. Think about the type of paper you are expected to produce. Should it be a general overview, or a specific analysis of the topic? If it should be an overview, then you are probably ready to move to the next step. If it should be a specific analysis, make sure your topic is fairly specific. If it is too general, you must choose a narrower subtopic to discuss.

Organize Your Ideas

Once you have researched your topic, you will need to organize the information you have accumulated. The purpose of an outline or diagram is to put your ideas about the topic on paper, in a moderately organized format. The structure you create here may still change before the essay is complete, so don't agonize over this.

Decide whether you prefer the cut-and-dried structure of an outline or a more flowing structure. If you start one or the other and decide it isn't working for you, you can always switch later.

Diagram

Begin your diagram with a circle or a horizontal line or whatever shape you prefer in the middle of the page.

1. Inside the shape or on the line, write your topic.
2. From your center shape or line, draw three or four lines out into the page. Be sure to spread them out.
3. At the end of each of these lines, draw another circle or horizontal line or whatever you drew in the center of the page.
4. In each shape or on each line, write the main ideas that you have about your topic, or the main points that you want to make.
 - If you are trying to persuade, you want to write your best arguments (Hint: most history essays are persuasive).
 - If you are trying to inform, you want to write the major categories into which your information can be divided.
5. From each of your main ideas, draw three or four lines out into the page.
6. At the end of each of these lines, draw another circle or horizontal line or whatever you drew in the center of the page.
7. In each shape or on each line, write the facts or information that support that main idea.

When you have finished, you have the basic structure for your essay and are ready to continue.

Outline

Begin your outline by writing your topic at the top of the page.

1. Next, write the Roman numerals I, II, and III, spread apart down the left side of the page.
2. Next to each Roman numeral, write the main ideas that you have about your topic, or the main points that you want to make.
 - If you are trying to persuade, you want to write your best arguments.
 - If you are trying to inform, you want to write the major categories into which your information can be divided.
3. Under each Roman numeral, write A, B, and C down the left side of the page.
4. Next to each letter, write the facts or information that support that main idea.

When you have finished, you have the basic structure for your essay and are ready to continue.

Compose a Thesis Statement

Now that you have decided, at least tentatively, what information you plan to present in your essay, you are ready to write your thesis statement.

The thesis statement tells the reader what the essay will be about, and what point you, the author, will be making. What do the main ideas and supporting ideas that you listed say about your topic?

Your thesis statement will have two parts

- The first part states the topic:
North Louisiana politics
Red River
Oil
- The second part states the point of the essay:
have a rich and varied history
was both a blessing and a curse to north Louisiana
brought dramatic changes to Louisiana

Once you have formulated a thesis statement that fits this pattern and with which you are comfortable, you are ready to continue.

Write the Body Paragraphs

In the body of the essay, all the preparation up to this point comes to fruition. The topic you have chosen must now be explained, described, or argued. Each main idea that you wrote down in your diagram or outline will become one of the body paragraphs. If you had three or four main ideas, you will have three or four body paragraphs.

Each body paragraph will have the same basic structure.

1. Start by writing down one of your main ideas in sentence form.
If your main idea is "reduced freeway congestion," you might say this: Public transportation reduced freeway congestion.
2. Next, write down each of your supporting points for that main idea, but leave four or five lines in between each point.
3. In the space under each point, write down some elaboration for that point. Elaboration would be facts, explanation, or discussion.
 - Supporting Point
Commuters appreciated the cost savings of taking public transportation rather than driving.
 - Elaboration
Less driving time meant less maintenance expense, such as oil changes. Of course, less driving time meant savings on gasoline as well. In many cases, these savings amounted to more than the cost of riding public transportation.
4. If you wish, include a summary sentence for each paragraph.

This is not generally needed, however, and such sentences have a tendency to sound stilted, so be cautious about using them.

Once you have fleshed out each of your body paragraphs, one for each main point, you are ready to continue.

Write the Introduction and Conclusion

Your essay lacks only two paragraphs now: the introduction and the conclusion. These paragraphs will give the reader a point of entry to and a point of exit from your essay.

Introduction

The introduction should be designed to attract the reader's attention and give him/her an idea of the essay's focus.

1. Begin with the attention grabber.

The attention grabber you use is up to you, but here are some ideas:

- **Startling information**
This information must be true and verifiable, and it doesn't need to be totally new to your readers. It could simply be a pertinent fact that explicitly illustrates the point you wish to make. If you use a piece of startling information, follow it with a sentence or two of elaboration.
- **Anecdote**
An anecdote is a story that illustrates a point.
Be sure your anecdote is short, to the point, and relevant to your topic. This can be a very effective opener for your essay, but use it carefully and avoid clichés.
- **Summary Information**
A few sentences explaining your topic in general terms can lead the reader gently to your thesis.
Each sentence should become gradually more specific, until you reach your thesis.

2. If the attention grabber was only a sentence or two, add one or two more sentences that will lead the reader from your opening to your thesis statement.
3. Finish the paragraph with your thesis statement.

Conclusion

The conclusion brings closure to the reader, summing up your points or providing a final perspective on your topic. All the conclusion needs is three or four strong sentences which do not need to follow any set formula. Simply review the main points (being careful not to restate them exactly) or briefly describe your conclusions about the topic.

Add the Finishing Touches

You have now completed all of the paragraphs of your essay. Before you can consider this a finished product, however, you must give some thought to the formatting of your paper.

Check the order of your paragraphs

Look at your paragraphs. Which one is the strongest? You might want to start with the strongest paragraph, end with the second strongest, and put the weakest in the middle. Whatever order you decide on, be sure it makes sense.

Check the instructions for the assignment

When you prepare a final draft, you must be sure to follow all of the instructions you have been given.

- Are your margins correct?
- Have you titled it as directed?
- What other information (name, date, page numbers etc.) must you include?
- Did you double-space your lines?

Check your writing

Nothing can substitute for revision of your work. By reviewing what you have done, you can improve weak points that otherwise would be missed. Read and reread your paper.

- Does it make logical sense? Leave it for a few hours and then read it again. Does it still make logical sense?
- Do the sentences flow smoothly from one another? If not, try to add some words and phrases to help connect them. Transition words, such as “therefore” or “however” sometimes help if they are used appropriately (cause/effect or condition) and not overworked. Also, you might refer in one sentence to a thought in the previous sentence. This is especially useful when you move from one paragraph to another.
- Have you run a spell checker or grammar checker? These aids cannot catch every error, but they might catch something you’ve missed.
- Is your documentation thorough, accurate, and properly formatted?

Once you’ve checked your work and perfected your formatting, your essay is finished. Good job!