



## Essay Writing Step by Step

“Write an essay? But I don’t know how!” If you are unnerved by the thought of writing a college essay, remember that this task can be accomplished in the same way as any other—one step at a time. An effective essay is the result of careful thinking, planning, writing, and revising. If you work hard on the first two steps, the last two will be much easier. Your goal is to produce an essay whose content is focused, well-developed, and clear.



**THINKING** -- Many decisions must be made before you actually write anything down.

1. **Consider purpose:** The general purpose of your essay will usually be determined by your instructor. To be sure you know the specific purpose of your particular essay, complete this sentence: “The purpose of my essay is to . . . .”

Example:

- General purpose: Describe in detail an important characteristic of a person you know well.
- Specific purpose: The purpose of my essay is to describe my friend’s kindness toward her family, friends, and co-workers.

2. **Consider audience:** The identity of your audience will determine how much background information will be necessary and what terms need to be used or defined. For example, an essay written for nurses on care of the elderly will include less background and more technical information than an essay written for the general public on the same topic.

Unless directed otherwise, you should write for an uninformed audience. Even if your instructor is your audience, you still need to write as if he or she has little familiarity with your topic.

3. **Consider tone:** The tone of your writing reveals your attitude toward your subject. Definition essays are usually written in an objective tone, but a humorous tone may be appropriate for a personal narrative.
4. **Select and narrow a topic:** Your topic should have significance for the reader and should be specific enough for you to adequately discuss in the required number of words or pages. If research is necessary, you may find it easier to first gather material on your general topic and then narrow your topic. *These two steps may need to be repeated more than once as you work on your paper.*

For example, if you need to write a five-page essay on the effects of air pollution, you would severely limit the scope of your paper. The following example shows how to narrow your topic until the focus is specific enough for a five-page paper:

The effects of air pollution    (**most general**)  
The effects of air pollution on children’s health  
The effects of air pollution on respiratory diseases in urban children  
The effects of air pollution on the prevalence and severity of childhood asthma  
in urban areas    (**most specific**)



5. **Choose a writing strategy:** To communicate ideas to readers, writers employ many types of strategies, such as description, narration, comparison/contrast, definition, classification, argument/persuasion, analysis, and evaluation. The strategy (or “method” or “mode”) you choose for a particular assignment will be partly determined by the purpose of your assignment and the expectations of the instructor. Using primarily one strategy may be appropriate for one assignment, while using several strategies may strengthen the effectiveness of another essay.

**PLANNING** -- Write down a plan to guide you when you write your first draft.

1. **Create a tentative thesis:** Write out the main point you want to make about your topic in a complete sentence. This sentence is called a *thesis*; it should be a *mini-summary* of your whole essay. Everything else that you write will be related to this idea. If you are able to at this point, write out your possible sub-points in sentences, also. *Sub-points* are the ideas you present to support (prove) your thesis. In an argument essay the sub-points would be the reasons for your claim. The sub-points of a compare/contrast essay could be the similarities and differences between two or more subjects. You might not use these sentences word-for-word in your essay, but by writing out your ideas in this way you ensure that your thinking about your topic is crystal clear, which will assist you in remaining focused on your topic.

**Note:** If your thesis must be supported by research, you need to read widely and take notes by whatever method you prefer before writing your tentative thesis. Be sure to include all necessary citation information in your notes.

2. **Write down supporting content in a loosely-organized way:** In order to logically relate your own ideas or contents of your notes, it is helpful to create a list, chart, cluster, or whatever plan you prefer, as long as it is appropriate for your assignment. At this point you may find that you need to refocus your thesis, add or remove sub-points, and /or obtain more information.
3. **Create a detailed outline or other organizational plan:**
- Study your planning activity in #2 above to *determine a logical order* for presenting your material. Some common methods are least important to most important, simple to complex, and problem to solution. Your writing strategy will influence your sequencing decisions. For example, your reasoning regarding sequence will be different for a narrative essay than for an argument essay. In all cases your sequence should be logical and should strengthen the effectiveness of your essay.
  - *Write your outline*, basing it on the content of your planning activity.
  - *Examine your outline for weaknesses* in logic or development.
  - You may want to outline *the content of your introduction and conclusion* at this point, although some writers prefer to do this after writing the body of the paper.

**WRITING** -- Now it's finally time to write your essay!

1. **Write your first draft:** Your essay will include an introduction, the body, and a conclusion.
- A. **Introduction:** The introduction should engage your reader and fully prepare him or her for the rest of your essay. Its focus often moves from general to specific:
- *Capture the reader's attention* in your opening sentences by using such techniques as a question, quotation, general truth, startling statement, dramatic illustration, or an anecdote.

- *Provide background information* such as , historical context, character—any information which the reader needs to clearly understand your essay.
- *Convince the reader that your topic has significance.* If the relevance and importance of your topic are clear, the reader will be motivated to read your essay.
- *Write a strong thesis,* usually at or near the end of your introduction. Remember, the thesis is the core of your essay, stating your main point and often including a forecast of your sub-points in the same order in which you will present them. The thesis acts like a road map of your paper, letting your reader know the scope and limitations of your essay (what it will cover, what it won't cover) and how it is organized. The thesis should reflect your position or perspective, rather than simply stating a fact. It should also confirm the relevance and significance of your topic. Some instructors call this the “so what?” of your thesis. In the sample thesis below, the words “drastic increase” establish the significance of the thesis.

*Sample thesis:* “During the last ten years, air pollution in large cities has caused a drastic increase in the number of children who develop asthma and in the severity of their symptoms.”

**Note:** Do not “announce” your thesis with phrases such as “I am going to discuss . . . .” or “This essay is about . . . .”

B. **Body of Essay:** The body of your essay includes all the paragraphs that support (prove) your thesis and sub-points.

- Write *strong topic sentences:* Each paragraph has a topic sentence that expresses one of your sub-points (or part of a sub-point) in a general way. This sentence usually comes at the beginning of the paragraph. In a shorter essay you would probably devote only one paragraph to each sub-point. In a longer, more in-depth essay, several paragraphs might be needed to adequately develop support for your sub-point; however, each paragraph should still have its own topic sentence relating the paragraph to the sub-point.
- Present *supporting details* carefully: Just as the topic sentences need to fully support the thesis of your essay, the details (or “evidence”) in a paragraph need to fully support the topic sentence. These details should be effective in content, specific in focus, and adequate in amount. Furthermore, they should be expressed in specific rather than general language.
- Use *transitions* to establish logical connections: Transitions are words or groups of words that connect ideas in a logical way. They are like road signs that help the reader understand how the information to follow is related to what has already been said. *Transitional words and phrases* may be used within sentences to show many logical relationships, such as:

contrast	“on the other hand”
summary	“in conclusion”
time	“later”
order	“second”
example	“for instance”

In most cases, one or more *transitional sentences* are needed between paragraphs to link sub topics together or to the thesis.



C. **Conclusion:** The conclusion, like the introduction, should be more general than the body of your essay.

- It should *not introduce new ideas*.
- *Your own "voice"* should be strong.
- Reemphasize the main point of your essay by *restating the thesis and support points*.
- Remind the reader of the *significance of your topic*.

- If appropriate, include *forecast statements* concerning the future, a call for action, or other challenge to the reader.
- If you have used an *anecdote or image* in your introduction, returning to it in the conclusion can strengthen the unity of your essay.

- End with a strong sentence that has a satisfying *concluding sound*, letting the reader know that you are finished.

**REVISING** (Don't skimp on time and effort here if your goal is a quality essay.)

1. **Revise important writing issues** such as focus, thesis, organization, development, and coherence (clearness of your meaning). Strengthen your introduction and conclusion so that they will have the greatest impact on the reader. Examine your essay again to see if these steps need to be repeated.
2. **Edit for errors** in punctuation, grammar, spelling, capitalization, and format style (MLA, APA, Chicago, or other).
3. **Document sources if required** within the text and on a works-cited page, using the appropriate style format.

**NOW REWARD YOURSELF FOR A JOB WELL-DONE!**

