

Writing Essays

A GOOD ESSAY CONTAINS:

1. An introductory paragraph
2. A clear thesis statement
3. A body consisting of supporting paragraphs
4. A concluding paragraph

Step 1: Review Assignment

Read the assignment and be sure you understand what you are being asked to do. What topics will you need to cover? What questions will you need to answer?

Step 2: Research

Research the subject of your essay. Sit down and think about what information you will need to include in your essay, then go out and find it. Look for and write down facts that will help you answer your question. For this class you can use information from lecture, discussion and the text. In addition, you will be expected to find outside sources of information such as newspaper and magazine articles, books, other textbooks and websites. Remember to keep track of where you find your information so that you can cite it properly in your bibliography.

Step 3: Develop a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement consists of one (or at most two) sentence(s), that state your overall point or argument, and, briefly, what your main body paragraphs will be about.

One way to think about a thesis statement is that it is an answer to the question you are answering. A thesis statement should help you organize your argument and help guide your reader through your essay. You must limit your entire essay to the topic you have introduced in your thesis statement. In other words, any argument presented in your thesis statement should be discussed in the body of your essay and every argument discussed in the body of your essay should be presented in your thesis statement.

A thesis statement generally has two parts:

1. the topic or question - the dog was able to eat the sandwich
2. your argument or answer - because I was not careful and did not consider the dog's presence

Keys to a strong thesis:

- DO ... be specific
- DO ... focus on one main idea (the topic)
- DON'T ... be vague about your topic or your argument

Step 4: Organize Your Ideas

Organizing your paper before writing it down is important because it helps you make sure your argument is complete and organized. There are two main methods for organizing your paper: outlines and concept maps. You should use whichever method you are most comfortable with.

Outlines:

- Write down your thesis statement (see above)
- Make a category for each of your main supporting points (supporting your thesis). These points will become the paragraphs for the body of your paper.
- Fill in each category with facts, explanations, examples, etc. which will help you support that point.

Concept Maps:

1. Make a box at the top of the page with the essay topic/question
 2. Connect smaller boxes containing your thesis
 3. Connect even smaller boxes to your thesis containing your supporting arguments
- Connect boxes to your supporting arguments containing the facts and examples you plan to use to support your arguments, etc.

Step 5. Writing Your Essay

Every essay has three main components, the introductory paragraph, the body (usually consists of several paragraphs) and the concluding paragraph.

Introduction:

Your introductory paragraph should contain a few sentences explaining your topic in general terms. Each sentence should become gradually more specific, until you reach your **thesis**. The function of these first sentences is to engage your reader and to lead the reader to your thesis statement. Finish the paragraph with your thesis statement.

- About one paragraph
- Introduce your topic and give some background information
 - Tip: open with a fitting quotation, challenge your readers with a thought provoking question, or begin with a dramatic anecdote or scenario. Offer a little of what is to follow. Provide important background information.
 - Re-evaluate after the paper is complete to be sure it accurately introduces the paper you wrote.
- State your **thesis**:
 - The thesis establishes the focus of the essay.
 - The thesis should include all the major points you will cover in the essay.

Body:

The body paragraphs will explain or support your argument. Each main idea that you wrote down in your diagram or outline will become one of the body paragraphs. If you had four main ideas or supporting arguments, you will have at least four body paragraphs. Start each paragraph by stating one of your supporting arguments. Then develop that point within the paragraph with

supporting facts and examples. Each paragraph should begin with a clear topic sentence (a mini thesis that states the main idea of the paragraph).

Make sure your supporting paragraphs are presented to the reader in a logical order. To connect your supporting paragraphs, it can help to use special **transition words**. Transition words link your paragraphs together and make your essay easier to read. Use them at the beginning and end of your paragraphs. (See below for examples of transition words).

- Usually one or more paragraphs for each point you outlined in your thesis.
- Make a plan based on your thesis
- Specific details add substance and depth to your writing and make it worth reading. Writing that lacks effective detail only gives a partial picture of a writing idea. Types of details that you can use include facts, examples, anecdotes, definitions, analysis, and so on.

Conclusion:

The conclusion serves to give the reader closure by summarizing or restating the main idea of the essay. You want to leave the reader with a sense that your essay is complete. The conclusion should consist of three or four convincing sentences. Clearly review the main points, being careful not to restate them exactly. You may also briefly describe your opinion about the topic or include an action plan. It is important to avoid presenting any new information in your conclusion (*excluding* your personal opinion or action plan). If there is information you want to include in your conclusion, but you have not discussed it previously in your essay-you need to go back and find a place to discuss it before the conclusion.

- Usually one paragraph
- Tie up any loose ends or clarify certain points in your essay. Successful closings say more than “in summary...” They help the readers appreciate the importance of the essay or, perhaps, help readers relate the writing to their own experience.

Step 6: Finishing

You have now completed all of the paragraphs of your essay. Before you can consider this a finished essay, however, you must review your paper.

1. 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.
 - Have you answered all parts of the assignment?
 - Is your paper formatted as directed (line spacing, margins, etc.)?
 - What other information (name, date, etc.) must you include?
2. Check your writing. By reviewing what you have done, you can improve weak points that otherwise would be missed.
 - Read and reread your paper. Maybe try reading it aloud or to a friend.
 - 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 transition words and phrases to help connect them.

- Do you use the same word too often? Use a thesaurus to help you find new words.
- Run a spell checker and a grammar checker

Now you are finally ready to turn in your essay!

Writing Hints

If you have a difficult time with paper writing or if English isn't your first language and you could use a bit of extra help with verb tense and such, you can get some help from specialists at the Learning Skills Center, on the 2nd floor of Dutton Hall. You can either make an appointment with them or use their drop-in services. Find out more online at www.lsc.ucdavis.edu or call at 752-2013.

These are a list of problems that frequently occur in papers. Go through the list and use the tips to tighten up your papers and avoid these problems in the future.

Wording, sentence structure, run-on, etc. -

- Read your paper out loud to yourself and ideally to a friend. How does it sound? Does every sentence make sense? Is every sentence really a sentence (complete with a noun and verb)?

Colloquial –

- Some wording is too casual for these papers. The tone of your paper should sound natural, but making it too casual isn't appropriate for this format and it can make your arguments seem weaker than they are. Rephrase.

No new information in the conclusion –

- Do not introduce any new information in the conclusion of your paper. Conclusions are for reiterating the points made in your paper – for gathering all your main points in one place and restating how they support your arguments. No new information!

Faulty reasoning –

- If you are arguing a position, make sure you are really backing up that position with convincing arguments or relevant facts, not simply appealing to emotion or stating a position with no reasoning.

Paper structure –

- Work on your paper structure. Within a paragraph, you should have an introductory sentence that gives the general topic, then the following sentences should all relate to this same topic, closing with a sentence that ties the current and next paragraphs together.
- You should also group related paragraphs together in some logical way and think about how the paper should flow from introduction to conclusion. Clearly introduce your main points in the introduction – lay out a roadmap for your readers, let them know what they should expect from your paper. Reiterate it in your conclusion.

Plagiarism –

- You must give credit for any material you use, even if you paraphrase the words and ideas of an author. Many students only change the wording of the original text to avoid plagiarism. *This isn't enough!* You're still using the same ideas, sentence structure, phrases, etc. of the author.
- Example

- Original source: “In research writing, sources are cited for two reasons: to alert readers to the sources of your information and to give credit to the writers from whom you have borrowed words and ideas.”
 - Plagiarism: In research writing, sources are cited to alert readers to the sources of your information and to give credit to the writers from whom you have borrowed words and ideas.
 - Also plagiarism: In research writing, we cite sources for a couple of reasons: to notify readers of our information sources and give credit to those from whom we have borrowed.
 - Possible solution: A researcher cites her sources to ensure her audience knows where she got her information, and to recognize and credit the author’s original work. (Hacker, 1995, p. 260).

Incomplete Thoughts/Arguments

- Completely think through and finish any statements or arguments. For many of you this will just mean adding a concluding or summarizing sentence; this is an essential element of argumentation – don’t expect your reader to do it for you.