



Victory Bible Colleges International
Essay Writing Tips



Essay Writing Tips

Table of Contents

Ten Steps for Writing An Essay

Read the Essay Question	3
Construct the Initial Plan	5
Read and Research	6
Think	7
Develop a Thesis Statement.....	7
Plan	7
Write First Draft.....	8
Edit the First Draft	10
Write the Final Copy.....	10
Reflect and Review Feedback	10
Bibliography.....	11

Essay Editing Checklist

Essay Editing Checklist	12
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Ten Steps for Writing an Essay

1. Read the essay question carefully

- A. **Read the assignment carefully** – This will save you time, stress and problems later on. Ask the instructor anything that you don't understand.
- B. **Highlight key words.**
- C. **Use the dictionary** to check the meaning of any unfamiliar words.
- D. **Identify the subject or topic** - Identify the topic words that indicate the particular subject of the essay, e.g. the character of 'Juliet' in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the 'causes' of World War 1.
- E. **Identify the task words** that indicate what needs to be done, e.g. 'discuss', 'explain', 'compare', 'analyze'. Pay attention to words such as how, what, where, and why; these words specify tasks.

Defining Key Task Words:

INFORMATION WORDS ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject, such as who, what, when, where, how, and why.

- Define—give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something). Sometimes you have to give more than one view on the subject's meaning.
- Explain—give reasons why or examples of how something happened.
- Illustrate—give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each is connected with the subject.
- Summarize—briefly list the important ideas you learned about the subject.
- Trace—outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form.
- Research—gather material from outside sources about the subject, often with the implication or requirement that you will analyze what you have found.

RELATION WORDS ask you to demonstrate how things are connected.

- Compare—show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different).
- Contrast—show how two or more things are dissimilar.
- Apply—use details that you've been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation.
- Cause—show how one event or series of events made something else happen.
- Relate—show or describe the connections between things.

INTERPRETATION WORDS ask you to defend ideas of your own about the subject. Do not see these words as requesting opinion alone (unless the assignment specifically says so), but as requiring opinion that is supported by concrete evidence. Remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretation.

- Assess—summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something.
- Prove, justify—give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth.
- Evaluate, respond—state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with examples and reasons.
- Support—give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe).
- Synthesize—put two or more things together that have not been put together in class or in your readings before; do not just summarize one and then the other and say that they are similar or different—you must provide a reason for putting them together that runs all the way through the paper.
- Analyze—determine how individual parts create or relate to the whole, figure out how something works, what it might mean, or why it is important.
- Argue—take a side and defend it with evidence against the other side.

F. **Identify any limiting words** that restrict the discussion to a particular area, e.g. in 'Chapters 1-3', during the 'nineteenth century', discuss 2 perspectives, write 2,000 words, etc.

G. **Identify any format rules** or guidelines required – Such as title page, double spaced, point 10 font, bibliography, etc.

H. **Identify what type of essay** you will be writing:

- **Descriptive Essay** – Usually specific e.g. describe a method; describe what happened; describe the main features or functions or summarize the main points or a theory, article or book.
- **Expository Essay** – explains a subject or ideas. It explains something to the reader by giving directions or instructions, or acquaints your reader with knowledge about how to complete a task or how something is done. You are demonstrating your own knowledge and explaining with facts, not your opinion. It is very important that your tone be reasonable and that your presentation be factual and believable.
- **Argumentative (Persuasive) Essay** – presents a point of view with the purpose of persuading the reader. It answers the questions what and why. It presents different opinions – for and against. These opinions need to be supported by examples or evidence (use journals, internet, books, your own views, etc.). Your approach is to take a stand on an issue and use evidence to back up your stance, not to explore an unresolved topic. You must choose a side, make a case for it, consider and refute alternative arguments, and prove to the undecided reader that the opinion it presents is the best one. You must be aware of other sides and be fair to them; dismissing them completely will weaken your own argument. It is best to take a side that you believe in,

preferably with the most supporting evidence. E.g. Should everyone go to university?

- **Compare and Contrast (Evaluative) Essay** – can discuss both similarities and differences, or it could just focus on one or the other. A comparison essay usually discusses the similarities between two things, while the contrast essay discusses the difference. It is usually an unbiased discussion or an attempt to convince the reader of the benefits of one thing, person, or concept. E.g. Write an essay comparing the weather in London and Barcelona.
- **Cause and Effect Essay** – explains why or how some event happened, and what resulted from the event. This essay is a study of the relationship between two or more events or experiences. The essay could discuss both causes and effects or it could simply address one or the other. A cause essay usually discusses the reasons why something happened. An effect essay discusses what happens after a specific event or circumstances. Sources are often required in a cause and effect paper to validate the argument.
- **Critical Review** – evaluates a work such as an article or book. Your personal, informed opinion plays a significant role in the process. However, a certain objective standard needs to be maintained and, as in an argumentative essay, your assertions need to be proved. A good review will discuss both the qualities and the importance of a given work.
- **Research (Analytical) Essay** – leads you into the works of others and asks you to compare their thoughts with your own. Writing a research paper involves going to source material and combining what you learn from it with your own ideas. You must find sources on the subject and use them to support the topic you have been given to explore. A research paper should demonstrate what you have learned, but it should also show that you have a perspective of your own on the subject.
- **Personal Essay** – These are not usually academic papers. Use only if your course requires it. These are based entirely on personal experiences. It involves a description of your personal experience. Provide an analysis of your experience and its relation to your work, study, a theory, etc. E.g. How did you find your placement? Discuss how it relates to your field of study. Points to consider when including personal experience: How typical is your experience? (Any research done? Any relevant reports or articles?) How does your experience compare with other people's? How relevant is it? How does it link to theories you have studied? How does it support or contradict theories and views you have studied? Can any lessons be drawn from it? Can any valid generalizations be drawn from it?

2. Construct Initial Plan

- A. **Identify the key ideas** you will be discussing. Drafting an initial essay plan allows you to break down the task into manageable chunks, identify the main points and focus your research.
- B. **Identify key words** based on the key ideas that you will look for when researching.
- C. **Plan word count** - Some students find it useful to allocate the word count as part of their planning. For example, a 1200 word essay will have approximately 120 words dedicated to the introduction (about 10% of total word count), 120 to 180

to the conclusion (about 10-15% of the total word count), leaving 900 for the body (about 75-80% of the total word count). These 900 words are divided across the main points according to emphasis and depth required.

- D. **Manage your time** – A 2000-3000 words essay should be started 3 to 4 weeks before the due date to allow for planning, research, first draft and revision. Plan to spend about 50% of your time on analysis, research and planning, 25% on developing a first draft and 25% on revising, editing, referencing and proofreading. It takes the average person 1 hour to write about 500 words of an essay (excluding research).
- A. **Ask yourself questions** – Why did your instructor ask you to do this particular assignment? What is your purpose in completing this assignment? Is it to gather research from a variety of outside sources and present a coherent picture? Is it to take the material you have been learning in class and apply it to a new situation? Is it to prove a point one way or another? (Key words from the assignment can help you figure this out.) Why should people be interested in this topic? Why is this topic important? Who is your audience? (This determines the tone casual or objective as well as level of information you want to convey, how you organize your material and how to best support your point.) What kind of evidence do you need to support your ideas? What kind of writing style will best suit this assignment? What reading or research will I need to do to complete this assignment? What resources are available? What do I already know? Try to look at the questions from the point of view of the instructor. Recognize that your instructor has a reason for giving you this assignment. He/she may want you to demonstrate an ability to think clearly, do research, understand the content of a book, etc. Asking these questions in advance will help you understand the assignment and focus in on exactly what you need to do.

3. Read/Research

- A. **Finish any necessary reading or research** as background to the essay.
- B. **Be selective**: use sources which are relevant and accessible. Don't lose yourself in research/reading – stay focused on what you need.
- C. **Some research options** include:
- Turn main points into questions, so when researching you are looking for answers to questions.
 - Work from keywords in your plan
 - Use a series of research worksheets (one for each main point).
- D. **Write notes** in your own words.
- E. **Write down quotations** that may be particularly useful, but ensure the source of these quotes is acknowledged.
- F. **Take note of sources** so they can be provided in footnotes/bibliography. When you quote or paraphrase something, you need to cite the author's last name, the year of publication and page reference (in brackets). Example of book: Heinz Edward (2000) *A History of Baked Beans*, London: Arnold. Book Heinz, Edward (2000) *A History of Baked Beans*, London: Arnold.

Example of article from the internet: Holmes, Amy (2000), 'Greenpeace wins media war', at <http://www.independent.co.uk/international/green25.htm> (accessed: 25 November, 2000). These are examples from the Harvard system.

4. Think

- A. **Brainstorm ideas** in response to the question
- B. **Jot down any relevant points.**
- C. **Make note of any relevant evidence or quotes** that come to mind.
- D. **You may want to use a mind map or spider diagram** to help stimulate thought and organize your ideas.

5. Develop a thesis statement

- A. **Ascertain if you need to include a thesis statement** - If your assignment asks you to take a position or develop a claim about a subject, you may need to convey that position or claim in a thesis statement. When an assignment asks you to analyze, to interpret, to compare and contrast, to demonstrate cause and effect, or to take a stand on an issue, it is likely that you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively.
- B. **Develop a thesis statement** (idea/argument) that directly answers the question asked of you. It is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader and tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper. It makes a claim that others might dispute and then spends the rest of the paper proving this claim. Avoid a thesis that's too simplistic – show thought has been put into some of the complexities behind the question.
- C. **The thesis is the backbone of the essay** – It will be stated in the introduction. The body of the essay will refer to it several times as it persuades the reader of the logic of your interpretation by means of examples and evidence. In the conclusion, it is finally restated and demonstrated how it has been proven.

6. Plan

- A. **Develop a key argument or idea for your essay** – if you haven't already. This would be the specific perspective or position that you will be taking on the subject.
- B. **Break down the essay into main points** – write down phrases which summarize all of your thoughts about the subject, the different questions and ideas or problems you have or discovered. Then look for similarities and related items and group them together in a way that makes sense to you. These become your main points.
- C. **Have supporting details** - Each main point may have several supporting details containing facts, details and examples.
- D. **Stay on Point** - Make sure every point in the plan is relevant to the question or assignment.

- E. **Order ideas in a logical order.** Take your main points and number them in an order that is logical; the order in which you will weave your way through the material. Rework the order until it makes sense, is logical and you are happy with it.
- F. **Make up an outline** for your essay with the main points and supporting details in the order that you will present them. It should be clear where the essay is going.

7. Write a First Draft

A. Write the introduction

- Purpose - The purpose of the introduction is to engage the reader by introducing the topic, presenting information from general to specific and so leading the reader towards the essay's focus. You want to arouse the reader's interest. The introduction may be written before or after the whole structure of the essay is known. Either way it should be revised after the body is complete to ensure it adequately introduces all main points.
- Gain the reader's attention and provide background information - The first few sentences gain the audience's attention and 'sets the scene' for the topic by providing background or contextual information. This might be achieved by stating the importance or relevance of the subject or mentioning previous relevant literature. You may want to include a famous quote, proverb or rhetorical question. Name any texts to be discussed, if appropriate. Define or explain key terms if necessary.
- Introduce the central theme - the central theme of the essay is introduced with focus on the essay question and title. Make sure to define central terms and concepts.
- Give a brief outline of which issues or main points you will explore and in which order. You could use verbs such as: discuss, outline, develop, examine or evaluate to show how you will address the main points.
- A thesis statement usually appears at the end of the introductory paragraph and it offers a concise summary of the main point or claim for the essay.

B. Write the main body of the essay

- Address each main point as outlined in the introduction - Ensure each point is given a new paragraph. Use words or phrases at the start of each paragraph that will indicate to the reader how it relates to the previous paragraph, e.g., 'however', 'in addition', 'nevertheless', 'moreover'. Like all good paragraphs, each supporting paragraph should have a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a summary sentence.
- Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that introduces the main idea of the paragraph and that clearly links the paragraph to the rest of the essay.
- Provide supporting evidence for each main point that you make. Include relevant examples, details, evidence, quotations, references, etc. Keep illustrations and examples brief and well connected to the points made. Present credible author's arguments from your research and if your own opinion is called for justify your opinion with valid research and logical

argument. Don't cheat by plagiarizing where you use other people's words and ideas without acknowledging where you got them from. In presenting your information you can summarize, paraphrase and/or use a few short quotes. Don't, however, just repeat what some books said. Your own words and your own voice must also be evident. What is your analysis of the subject or point?

- Stay on Topic – Avoid wandering off the subject. Answer the question and only the question or assignment. Keep checking that you are remaining on track throughout the essay. If there's something you want to include but the relevance to the main point of the essay is questionable, put it in a footnote.
- Be Concise – Don't use unnecessary words, phrases or sentences. People can have a tendency to use a lot of little "filler" words that don't actually have anything to add to the meaning of the sentences. If a sentence or paragraph means the same thing with a word, phrase or sentence taken out, take it out. Don't try to pad the essay by rambling on and on in order to get your word count up. EXAMPLE – The following is a wordy sentence: "Nevertheless, we can certainly see that he clearly wields a considerable and substantial degree of direct power, influence and the ability to change things around within the organization." This would be a concise sentence, "Nevertheless, he clearly has a considerable degree of direct power within the organization." Here are some tips to avoid wordiness:
 - Don't overuse qualifiers such as very, often, hopefully, practically, basically, really, mostly, etc. Example – instead of saying, "Most people usually think that many puppies are generally pretty cute," say, "Most people think that puppies are cute."
 - Don't overuse proportional phrases such as – as, in, over, of, for, at, etc. A few are okay but several in a sentence make the reader struggle to find and follow your subject and point.
 - Don't use two words in the same sentence that mean the same thing such as hopes and dreams.
 - Certain stock phrases are better replaced with one word. Examples – Use the word "because" instead of the phrase "due to the fact that." Use the word "since" instead of the phrase "in light of the fact that."
- Ensure ideas flow from one point to the next, with sequence of ideas following the outline in your introduction. You need to organize your material so that it flows from one area, sub-section or argument to the next in a logical order. Each part should build upon or at least reasonably follow on from the previous parts and the whole should be pulling the reader, clearly and inescapably to your triumphant conclusion. To connect your supporting paragraphs, you should use special transition words such as: first, second, third, however, even though, on the other hand, nevertheless, another, in addition to, furthermore, consequently, etc.
- Revisit the thesis, and express it in different ways if possible, to emphasize how the question is being addressed.

C. Write the essay conclusion

- Draw everything together – In your conclusion you want to tie together everything you have talked about in your essay.

- Summarize the main ideas or points made in the body. Restate the strongest points of your essay that support your main idea. This is not just a repeat of the introduction. Rather than stating the topic you will discuss, summarize the content of the discussion. Keep the conclusion content focused. Do not introduce new material
- Show how these main points relate to the essay topic or question.
- State your general conclusions and make it clear why those conclusions are important or significant.
- Demonstrate how you have proven your thesis. You want to leave the reader with a sense that your essay is complete.
- Conclude your essay by restating the main idea or thesis in different words. Sum up your argument very briefly, linking it to the title.
- Finish with an interesting or thought-provoking, but relevant, comment. You might want to suggest further questions of your own. Give your personal opinion or suggest a plan for action.

8. Edit the draft

- Don't rush** – make sure that you have left plenty of time to both write the essay and edit it. Don't try to start the essay the night before it is due. Your essay will be substantially better if you start reading, researching and then writing days or weeks in advance.
- Redraft** as many times as needed.
- Proofread**. Read it aloud. Does it make sense?
- Check for spelling, punctuation and grammar**. Make sure each sentence has a subject, that your subjects and verbs agree, your verb tense is consistent, etc.
- Delete** any sections that are not particularly relevant.
- Change** vocabulary to improve expression.
- Seek feedback** from peers or a teacher before writing the final copy. It is a good idea to get someone else to read over your essay for any language or logical inconsistencies of which you might not be aware.

9. Write the final copy

- Add any **footnotes or bibliography** if required.
- Present a clean, neat copy** – Save a copy for yourself in the unlikely event that your assignment is lost.
- Submit** on time.

10. Reflect and review on feedback

- Use feedback to help you with your next essay.

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Essay Editing Checklist

When editing through your first draft consider the following:

Introduction

1. Does your essay have a good opening/introductory paragraph?
2. Have you set the scene and given necessary background information or contextual information?
3. Is the topic clear?
4. Have you explained how you interpret the question or the position you're taking?
5. Is the thesis statement clear?
6. Are key terms defined if necessary?
7. Does it provide the reader with a map or a brief outline of where your essay is going (issues or points you will explore and in which order)?
8. Does it capture the reader's attention?

Body

1. Does the main body do what the introduction says it will do?
2. Does each paragraph have one and only one main idea? Is it clear what each paragraph is about?
3. Do all the sentences in each paragraph contribute to that main idea (relevant to the main topic)?
4. Do the points you are making follow logically?
5. Does each paragraph follow in the order laid out in the introduction?
6. Does each paragraph have a topic sentence (introducing the main idea of the paragraph), supporting details and a summary sentence?
7. Is the connection between one paragraph and another clear? Does each paragraph relate clearly to the others?
8. Is there strong arguments/evidence presented? Are the arguments convincing?
9. Is there enough evidence to support the topic?
10. Is your argument consistent?
11. Is any one section too long or repetitious?

Conclusion

1. Do you have a conclusion that sums up your answer and refers back to the title?
2. Is the conclusion clear?
3. Does the conclusion draw everything together?
4. Does it summarize the main themes?
5. Does it state your general conclusions?
6. Does it make clear why those conclusions are important or significant?

7. Does it leave the reader in doubt about your position?
8. Does the conclusion restate the thesis?
9. Does the conclusion give the reader closure?

Overall

1. Have you accurately and effectively accomplished what the assignment asked you to do?
2. Is the essay interesting?
3. Have you used your own words rather than just copied them from the course material or a book?
4. Have you properly documented quotes and sources?

Proofreading, Spelling and Grammar

1. Does it make sense?
2. Are your sentences complete, clear and concise?
3. Is there a more concise way to say what you have written?
4. Is there a better way to say it?
5. Did you use a variety of words rather than repeating the same words or phrases over and over again?
6. Are there run-ons, fragments, comma splices, endless sentences?
7. Does each sentence have a subject and a verb? Do they agree?
8. Have you used the singular or plural appropriately; is everything consistent?
9. Have you followed the proper rules for commas, colons, semi-colons and quotation marks?
10. Do your sentences start with a capital letter and end with the proper punctuation?
11. Are there grammatical errors?
12. Are there spelling errors? (Not all errors are picked up by a spell-checker.)