

How to Write an Essay

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(Dedicated to my first English 121 students at Front Range Community College, Jan. 2002.)

When I think about teaching people how to write essays, one of my first thoughts is about expectations: not only those of my students, but the expectations that may lie in wait in their futures. I feel a burden to do this right. Most students have a purpose for writing well, beyond that of just getting through my class. They could be planning to transfer to a university or other four-year college, where standards for writing are quite high, and could be assigned to write a research paper in a science class or a business plan in a marketing class. Most will need to write a résumé at some point, or even an essay in application for employment or to attend another college. On the job, they might need to write a grant proposal or a training manual. The student could have a goal of becoming a teacher or a writer. On a more basic level, the student may simply someday want to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper or create a memoir for his or her children. English composition, essays, writing in general, pervades our lives; writing well is a tool for expressing ourselves, advancing in the culture, and engaging more effectively in what I call the global conversation of life.

How do I teach other people how to write? The least I can do is give them the basics, the structure, the philosophy behind the essay as a form of prose.

I keep hearing my old high school teacher's words in my head: "The first paragraph is the thesis paragraph." The thesis paragraph has to have a strong thesis statement, that is, a point that will be supported and explained throughout the rest of the essay. But when I read the sample essays in the text for this class, I note that quite a few of them don't follow the set-in-stone, has-to-be-done-this-way-only style I learned over and over again in high school and college. Am I supposed to tell my students "Well, just ignore that—I know those are famous, established authors and all, but they obviously don't know what they're doing"?

Academic essays, essays of literary criticism, and the direct argumentation style almost always have explicit thesis statements that appear in the last sentence of the first paragraph. Creative and personal essays don't need to follow as stringent a structure.

As beginning essay writers, it is best to lean on the idea that the thesis should be in the first paragraph. It helps to follow a set structure, to start from the solid base of a strong thesis paragraph, and then to move logically into the body of the essay. In practice (and that's what this class is for, right?), students can play with the style, rearranging the essay's structure to support their own voices.

For now, we'll say that the thesis paragraph goes first. The thesis paragraph contains the main point and directs the reader's attention, giving the reader an idea of what is to come. Next, is the body of the essay. The body of the essay can be anywhere from one paragraph up to—I don't know—what's the longest essay I've ever read? Better: what's the longest essay I'm willing to read and grade when I've got a stack of essays in front of me? Okay, for this class, limit the word count to 2,500 or less.

What's the body of the essay for? I suppose a person could just write the point and the conclusion and be done with it. But some ornery, curious readers will want to know the whys and wherefores and details, details, details. If the point of the essay is that football is the greatest sport ever, well, I want examples—I want to know why you think a 330-pound defensive back is more interesting than a seven-foot tall basketball center. I want to know if you think quarterbacks have more responsibility than pitchers. I want to know if you enjoy the loud crack of a good tackle more than the thwap of a baseball hitting a mitt at 95 miles per hour.

Details, details, details, yes, but not every single detail, and not a single detail that doesn't follow from the thesis statement or main point. If I'm to learn why homemade pudding is better than instant, do I need to be taken down the meandering path of grandma's Thanksgiving dinners, past and present? If I'm to be told about your fishing trip, don't string me along with mundane and minute matters, like that you brushed your teeth at 4:30 in the morning before loading the fishing gear and had to go back to the house to turn off the lights and water the begonias, and then you dug the worms.

When is the body of an essay finished? How do you tell if it still needs some fleshing out? Read it over. Have you said everything worth saying? Have you said more than enough? Is there something missing that is key to supporting your thesis or to enlightening the reader? Does the essay fizzle out at the end because you ran out of time? Is there something that could be cut, better used in another essay, another day? Be concise, but not stingy. Structure yourself, but don't limit yourself. Give yourself time to think about what needs to be said.

This is when keeping a journal can come in handy. Jot down notes to yourself, brief paragraphs, descriptions, thoughts, shorter essays that you can bring together to form a cohesive, thoughtful, composition. Start now—for your first essay, the personal essay: what kinds of ideas come to mind? An autobiography, a day in the life, a description of a place you love, a significant personal experience, how far you've come in life and where you want to go... there are many possibilities. Then comes the profile essay. Whom would you write about? Who is important or has been important to you? What kinds of things do you remember about him or her (or them)? Scent is a significant sense tied to memory: what scents come to mind when you think about this person? For me, when I think of my grandmother, I think of bacon frying in the morning. When I think of my mother, I think of *Emeraude* perfume. What about textures? My father is rough wool; my brother is grit from working with his hands. Make note of these things; expand on them as you consider what you will write over the course of the semester. These kinds of details don't always come to you under the pressure of a looming deadline.

Finally, essays must have a clear conclusion, a paragraph or two that helps clarify the “so what,” that reiterates, restates, and ties things together. Some authors are more lax on this point than others. In this class, the concluding paragraph is essential. Really, it's necessary in every essay, but how it's written differs. The standard of style for an essay conclusion is to “echo your main idea, without dully repeating it” (Hacker 16). Along with that, try to add a little something extra: ask a question, make a quick statement that causes your reader to think about what you've written in a different light, or build on the body to add an extra punch of understanding to your main point or create a realization of the significance of your essay beyond what might otherwise be mundane, day-to-day, or commonplace.

As your teacher, it's my goal to teach you to *like* writing and to write with flair. But I know that depends a lot on you, your personality, your goals, where your interests lie. If nothing else, through this class I can point out the rules, the style, and the tools for writing a good essay. Maybe, as an added bonus, somewhere along the way, I might get you to enjoy essays as much as I do.

Works Cited

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference (4th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.