

Suggestions for Writing Essays

An essay does not require the use of outside sources, laboratory experimentation, or questionnaire analysis; it is not a research paper. It is generally a paper which requires some original thinking or evaluation. In English literature, for example, it might be the close study of a text, writing of a short story, or simply a summary of some outside reading.

Before starting, be certain that you understand what is expected of you. The length and nature of the essay will be affected by your professor's guidelines and suggestions. Ask questions.

Select and narrow or broaden your topic

Some professors give students a list of essay topics; some ask students to choose their own. In either case scan some articles or books for ideas. Consult your instructor if you need further help.

When there is too much information on your topic, analyze your topic in order to narrow it. If too few sources are found, broaden your topic by using related synonyms or concepts. As you search for information on your topic, take notes of what you learn about your topic. Keep track of the bibliographic references for the information you use and make notes on what is contained in the book, article, Web site, etc. There is nothing more frustrating than knowing you read something earlier about a particular point and failing to locate it again when you decide you need it.

Find out what kind of citations are required by your instructor and make sure you are recording what you will need to do your bibliography. Consult a style manual:

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/units/dafoe/citing.html>.

The planning stage

This is the most important stage of the essay writing process. It leads to an organized and creatively written paper.

- **Read primary material.** Primary material is the direct evidence, usually books or articles, on which the essay is based. Before reading this material from cover to cover, review the table of contents, scan the index, and read the preface or introduction to get a sense of the author's purpose and plan. Make notes as you read.
- **Read secondary sources.** Always be sure you have a firm grasp of the primary material before you turn to secondary sources which are commentaries on or analyses of the primary source. Make notes as you read.
- **Analyze your subject: ask questions.** The best way of analyzing an essay topic is to ask questions that will lead to useful answers. Try using the 5-W approach used by journalists: who? what? where? when? why?
- **Develop a thesis.** Once you have done some exploratory reading and focused on a topic, begin to develop a thesis - the central idea of the essay.

Prepare an outline

The way you outline your essay is very important. It must have definite sections:

- ***Introduction*** or ***Purpose of the paper***: Statement of the problem. Thesis sentence.
- ***Body of the essay***: Generally broken down into various headings and sub-headings that deal with aspects of the topic. For example:
 - Heading 1**: History of the problem. May include past attempts at solutions.
 - Heading 2**: Extent of the problem. Who is affected? How bad is it?
 - Heading 3**: Repercussions of the problem.
 - Heading 4**: Future solutions.
- ***Conclusion***: Summarizes your findings and answers your essay question.

Write your first draft

Instead of labouring for excellence from scratch, write the first draft as quickly as possible and do extensive revisions later.

Remember that the main point of writing an essay is not simply to quote or interpret others, but to evaluate their work and provide your own arguments in your own words. Your analysis is extremely important. When quoting, paraphrasing or taking ideas from sources make sure to indicate this by quotation marks and a note to avoid plagiarism.

Revise and edit

To edit your work well you need to see it as the reader will. Look to see if the ideas are well organized, well documented, and well expressed.

Put it in a proper essay form

A well-typed, visually appealing essay often gets a higher mark. Double-space your lines and leave wide margins on sides, top, and bottom. Number each page at the top right-hand corner and provide a neat, well-spaced cover page that includes the title, your name, and the name of your professor and course.

Provide a list of notes (also referred to as footnotes and endnotes) and a list of works cited or a bibliography. For information on how to prepare these lists go to: Citing sources at: <http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/units/dafoe/citing.html>.

For more detailed information on writing essays consult the following publications:

Meyer, Michael. **The Little, Brown Guide to Writing Research Papers**. 3rd ed. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994.
UML Dafoe Library Reference -- CALL NUMBER: LB 2369 M42 1994

Northey, Margot. **Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Research, Writing and Style**. 3rd ed. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993.

UML Dafoe Library Reference -- CALL NUMBER: LB 2369 N67 1993

Teitelbaum, Harry. **How to Write a Thesis: A Guide to the Research Paper**. New York: Arco Publishing, 1989.

UML Dafoe Library Reference -- CALL NUMBER: LB 2369 T36 1989

Turabian, Kate L. **A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations**. 6th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

UML Dafoe Library Reference -- CALL NUMBER: LB 2369 T8 1996

For additional publications check our library catalogue: <http://bison.umanitoba.ca>