

## SOME GENERAL ADVICE ON ACADEMIC ESSAY-WRITING

1. Miscellaneous observations on a topic are not enough to make an accomplished academic essay. **An essay should have an argument.** It should answer a question or a few related questions (see 2 below). It should try to prove something—develop a single "thesis" or a short set of closely related points—by reasoning and evidence, especially including apt examples and confirming citations from any particular text or sources your argument involves. Gathering such evidence normally entails some rereading of the text or sources with a question or provisional thesis in mind.
2. When—as is usually the case—an assigned topic does not provide you with a thesis ready-made, your first effort should be to formulate as exactly as possible the question(s) you will seek to answer in your essay. Next, develop by thinking, reading, and jotting a provisional thesis or hypothesis. Don't become prematurely committed to this first answer. Pursue it, but test it—even to the point of consciously asking yourself what might be said against it—and be ready to revise or qualify it as your work progresses. (Sometimes a suggestive possible title one discovers early can serve in the same way.)
3. There are many ways in which any particular argument may be well presented, but an essay's organization—how it begins, develops, and ends—should be designed to present your argument clearly and persuasively. (The order in which you discovered the parts of your argument is seldom an effective order for presenting it to a reader.)
4. Successful methods of composing an essay are various, but some practices of good writers are almost invariable:
  - They start writing early, even before they think they are "ready" to write, because they use writing not simply to transcribe what they have already discovered but as a means of exploration and discovery.
  - They don't try to write an essay from beginning to end, but rather write what seems readiest to be written, even if they're not sure whether or how it will fit in.
  - Despite writing so freely, they keep the essay's overall purpose and organization in mind, amending them as drafting proceeds. Something like an "outline" constantly and consciously evolves, although it may never take any written form beyond scattered, sketchy reminders to oneself.
  - They revise extensively. Rather than writing a single draft and then merely editing its sentences one by one, they attend to the whole essay and draft and redraft—rearranging the sequence of its larger parts, adding and deleting sections to take account of what they discover in the course of composition. Such revision often involves putting the essay aside for a few days, allowing the mind to work indirectly or subconsciously in the meantime and making it possible to see the work-in-progress more objectively when they return to it.
  - Once they have a fairly complete and well-organized draft, they revise sentences, with special attention to transitions—that is, checking to be sure that a reader will be able to follow the sequences of ideas within sentences, from sentence to sentence, and from paragraph to paragraph. Two other important considerations in revising sentences are diction (exactness and aptness of words) and economy (the fewest words without loss of clear expression and full thought). Lastly, they proofread the final copy.

## **Organizing an Essay**

### **Some basic guidelines**

The best time to think about how to organize your paper is during the pre-writing stage, not the writing or revising stage. A well-thought-out plan can save you from having to do a lot of reorganizing when the first draft is completed. Moreover, it allows you to pay more attention to sentence-level issues when you sit down to write your paper.

When you begin planning, ask the following questions: What type of essay am I going to be writing? Does it belong to a specific genre? In university, you may be asked to write, say, a book review, a lab report, a document study, or a compare-and-contrast essay. Knowing the patterns of reasoning associated with a genre can help you to structure your essay.

For example, book reviews typically begin with a summary of the book you're reviewing. They then often move on to a critical discussion of the book's strengths and weaknesses. They may conclude with an overall assessment of the value of the book. These typical features of a book review lead you to consider dividing your outline into three parts: (1) summary; (2) discussion of strengths and weaknesses; (3) overall evaluation. The second and most substantial part will likely break down into two sub-parts. It is up to you to decide the order of the two subparts—whether to analyze strengths or weaknesses first. And of course it will be up to you to come up with actual strengths and weaknesses.

Be aware that genres are not fixed. Different professors will define the features of a genre differently. Read the assignment question carefully for guidance. Understanding genre can take you only so far. Most university essays are argumentative, and there is no set pattern for the shape of an argumentative essay. The simple three-point essay taught in high school is far too restrictive for the complexities of most university assignments. You must be ready to come up with whatever essay structure helps you to convince your reader of the validity of your position. In other words, you must be flexible, and you must rely on your wits. Each essay presents a fresh problem.

#### **Avoiding a common pitfall**

Though there are no easy formulas for generating an outline, you can avoid one of the most common pitfalls in student papers by remembering this simple principle: the structure of an essay should not be determined by the structure of its source material. For example, an essay on an historical period should not necessarily follow the chronology of events from that period. Similarly, a well-constructed essay about a literary work does not usually progress in parallel with the plot. Your obligation is to advance your argument, not to reproduce the plot. If your essay is not well structured, then its overall weaknesses will show through in the individual paragraphs.

## USING THESIS STATEMENTS

When you are asked to write an essay that creates an argument, your reader will expect a clear statement of your position. Typically, this summary statement comes in the first paragraph of the essay, though there is no rigid rule about position. Here are some characteristics of good thesis statements, with samples of useful and inadequate ones. Note that the better examples substitute specific argumentative points for sweeping general statements; they indicate a theoretical basis and promise substantial support.

**1. It makes a definite and limited assertion that needs to be explained and supported by further discussion.**

*trite, irrelevant* Shakespeare was the world's greatest playwright.

*intriguing* The last scene in *Midsummer Night's Dream* adds a political dimension to the comedy ending by incorporating subtle linguistic and theatrical references to Elizabeth's position as queen.

**2. It shows the emphasis of your argument and indicates its methodology.**

*emotional, vague* This essay will show that the North American Free Trade agreement was a disaster for the Canadian furniture industry.

*worth attention* Neither neo-protectionism nor post-industrial theory explains the steep reversal of fortune for the Canadian furniture industry in the period 1988-1994. Data on productivity, profits, and employment, however, can be closely correlated with provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement that took effect in the same period.

**3. It shows awareness of difficulties and disagreements.**

*sweeping, vague* Having an official policy on euthanasia just causes problems, as the Dutch example shows.

*suitably complex* Dutch laws on euthanasia have been praised for their use of the principle of self-determination. Recent cases, however, show that these laws have not been able to deal adequately with issues involving technological intervention on unconscious patients. Hamarckian theory is needed to enlarge the framework used in creating the Dutch law. It provides one way to examine the key question of how to assign rights.

## Introductions and Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions play a special role in the academic essay, and they frequently demand much of your attention as a writer. A good introduction should identify your topic, provide essential context, and indicate your particular focus in the essay. It also needs to engage your readers' interest. A strong conclusion will provide a sense of closure to the essay while again placing your concepts in a somewhat wider context. It will also, in some instances, add a stimulus to further thought. Since no two essays are the same, no single formula will automatically generate an introduction and conclusion for you. But the following guidelines will help you to construct a suitable beginning and end for your essay.

## **Some general advice about introductions**

1. Some students cannot begin writing the body of the essay until they feel they have the perfect introduction. Be aware of the dangers of sinking too much time into the introduction. Some of that time can be more usefully channeled into planning and writing.

2. You may be the kind of writer who writes an introduction first in order to explore your own thinking on the topic. If so, remember that you may at a later stage need to compress your introduction.

3. It can be fine to leave the writing of the introduction for a later stage in the essay-writing process. Some people write their introduction only after they have completed the rest of the essay. Others write the introduction first but rewrite it significantly in light of what they end up saying in the body of their paper.

4. The introductions for most papers can be effectively written in one paragraph occupying half to three-quarters of the first page. Your introduction may be longer than that, and it may take more than one paragraph, but be sure you know why. The size of your introduction should bear some relationship to the length and complexity of your paper. A twenty page paper may call for a two-page introduction, but a five-page paper will not.

5. Get to the point as soon as possible. Generally, you want to raise your topic in your very first sentences. A common error is to begin too broadly or too far off topic. Avoid sweeping generalizations.

6. If your essay has a thesis, your thesis statement will typically appear at the end of your introduction, even though that is not a hard-and-fast rule. You may, for example, follow your thesis with a brief road map to your essay that sketches the basic structure of your argument. The longer the paper, the more useful a road map becomes.

## **How do I write an interesting, effective introduction?**

Consider these strategies for capturing your readers' attention and for fleshing out your introduction:

1. Find a startling statistic that illustrates the seriousness of the problem you will address.
2. Quote an expert (but be sure to introduce him or her first).
3. Mention a common misperception that your thesis will argue against.
4. Give some background information necessary for understanding the essay.
5. Use a brief narrative or anecdote that exemplifies your reason for choosing the topic. In an assignment that encourages personal reflection, you may draw on your own experiences; in a research essay, the narrative may illustrate a common real-world scenario.
6. In a science paper, explain key scientific concepts and refer to relevant literature. Lead up to your own contribution or intervention.
7. In a more technical paper, define a term that is possibly unfamiliar to your audience but is central to understanding the essay.

## **In fleshing out your introduction, you will want to avoid some common pitfalls:**

1. Don't provide dictionary definitions, especially of words your audience already knows.
2. Don't repeat the assignment specifications using the professor's wording.
3. Don't give details and in-depth explanations that really belong in your body paragraphs. You can usually postpone background material to the body of the essay.

## **Some general advice about conclusions**

1. A conclusion is not merely a summary of your points or a re-statement of your thesis. If you wish to summarize—and often you must—do so in fresh language. Remind the reader of how the evidence you've presented has contributed to your thesis.

2. The conclusion, like much of the rest of the paper, involves critical thinking. Reflect upon the significance of what you've written. Try to convey some closing thoughts about the larger

implications of your argument.

3. Broaden your focus a bit at the end of the essay. A good last sentence leaves your reader with something to think about, a concept in some way illuminated by what you've written in the paper.

4. For most essays, one well-developed paragraph is sufficient for a conclusion. In some cases, a two-or-three paragraph conclusion may be appropriate. As with introductions, the length of the conclusion should reflect the length of the essay.

### **How do I write an interesting, effective conclusion?**

The following strategies may help you move beyond merely summarizing the key points of your essay:

1. If your essay deals with a contemporary problem, warn readers of the possible consequences of not attending to the problem.
2. Recommend a specific course of action.
3. Use an apt quotation or expert opinion to lend authority to the conclusion you have reached.
4. Give a startling statistic, fact, or visual image to drive home the ultimate point of your paper.
5. If your discipline encourages personal reflection, illustrate your concluding point with a relevant narrative drawn from your own life experiences.
6. Return to an anecdote, example, or quotation that you introduced in your introduction, but add further insight that derives from the body of your essay.
7. In a science or social science paper, mention worthwhile avenues for future research on your topic.

## **Developing Coherent Paragraphs**

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Paragraph structures provide a map for your ideas, guiding readers through your reasoning. Keep this simple set of principles in mind while you write, and use it as a checklist when you're revising.

### **Use Topic Sentences**

State the central idea of each paragraph explicitly in a topic sentence. That's one way to show that you have thought through your material.

In academic writing, the topic sentence nearly always works best at the beginning of a paragraph so that the reader knows what to expect. Don't count on your readers to guess what your paragraph is going to be about.

NOTE: The first and last paragraphs of an essay are exceptions to this rule. In both instances, readers already know you're leading up to something, and you can save the topic sentence to make a strong paragraph ending.

### **Expand on the Topic Sentences**

The body of a paragraph develops and demonstrates what your topic sentences state. Here are some common patterns:

- Explain more fully what you mean, giving definitions or indicating distinctions.
- Offer details, examples, or relevant quotations (with your comments).
- Follow through a logical sequence, showing the connections among your ideas in a recognizable pattern such as cause and effect or comparison and contrast.

### **Show Connections**

Be sure your intended logic is clear. Often the simplest words do the most to pull together ideas.

- **Pronouns** such as *it* and *they* and *this* keep the focus on the ideas announced at the beginning of the paragraph—as long as they are clearly linked to specific nouns.
- **Deliberate repetition** of key words also helps.

Certain **specialized linking words** can also be powerful tools for pulling ideas together. But don't just sprinkle them into your sentences—use them to support your logic.

Here are some examples:

**To signal a reinforcement of ideas:** also/ in other words/ in addition/ for example/ moreover/ more importantly

**To signal a change in ideas:** but/ on the other hand/ however/ instead/ yet/ in contrast/ although nevertheless/ in spite of [something]

**To signal a conclusion:** thus/ therefore/ accordingly/ in conclusion/ finally/ so [informal]

### **Choose Appropriate Paragraph Length**

A series of long paragraphs can make prose dense and unpleasant to read. Check any paragraph that is longer than a page to see if it would work better as two or more paragraphs. Break it at a logical place (e.g., where your focus shifts), and see whether you need to create new topic sentences to make the shift clear

Also look for paragraphs only two or three sentences long. They make academic writing seem disjointed or skimpy. Try combining a few short paragraphs into one, using a single topic sentence to hold them together.

## **Using Topic Sentences**

### **What is a topic sentence?**

A topic sentence states the main point of a paragraph: it serves as a mini-thesis for the paragraph. You might think of it as a signpost for your readers—or a headline— something that alerts them to the most important, interpretive points in your essay. When read in sequence, your essay's topic sentences will provide a sketch of the essay's argument. Thus topics sentences help protect your readers from confusion by guiding them through the argument. But topic sentences can also help you to improve your essay by making it easier for you to recognize gaps or weaknesses in your argument. Topic sentences usually appear at the very beginning of paragraphs.

### **How do I come up with a topic sentence? And what makes a good one?**

Ask yourself what's going on in your paragraph. Why have you chosen to include the information you have? Why is the paragraph important in the context of your argument? What point are you trying to make?

Relating your topic sentences to your thesis can help strengthen the coherence of your essay. If you include a thesis statement in your introduction, then think of incorporating a keyword from that statement into the topic sentence. But you need not be overly explicit when you echo the thesis statement. Better to be subtle rather than heavyhanded. Do not forget that your topic sentence should

do more than just establish a connection between your paragraph and your thesis. Use a topic sentence to show how your paragraph contributes to the development of your argument by moving it that one extra step forward. If your topic sentence merely restates your thesis, then either your paragraph is redundant or your topic sentence needs to be reformulated. If several of your topic sentences restate your thesis, even if they do so in different words, then your essay is probably repetitive.

### **Does every paragraph need one?**

No, but most do. Sometimes a paragraph helps to develop the same point as in the previous paragraph, and so a new topic sentence would be redundant. And sometimes the evidence in your paragraph makes your point so effectively that your topic sentence can remain implicit. But if you are in doubt, it's best to use one.

## **Using Quotations**

### **How much should I quote?**

The focus of your essay should be on your understanding of the topic. If you include too much quotation in your essay, you will crowd out your own ideas. Consider quoting a passage from one of your sources if any of the following conditions holds:

1. The language of the passage is particularly elegant or powerful or memorable.
2. You wish to confirm the credibility of your argument by enlisting the support of an authority on your topic.
3. The passage is worthy of further analysis.
4. You wish to argue with someone else's position in considerable detail.

Condition 3 is especially useful in essays for literature courses.

If an argument or a factual account from one of your sources is particularly relevant to your paper but does not deserve to be quoted verbatim, consider

- **paraphrasing** the passage if you wish to convey the points in the passage at roughly the same level of detail as in the original
- **summarizing** the relevant passage if you wish to sketch only the most essential points in the passage

### **Why is it important to identify my sources?**

Quotations come from somewhere, and your reader will want to know where. Don't just parachute quotations into your essay without providing at least some indication of who your source is. Letting your reader know exactly which authorities you rely on is an advantage: it shows that you have done your research and that you are well acquainted with the literature on your topic.

### **What verbs and phrases can I use to introduce my quotations?**

Familiarize yourself with the various verbs commonly used to introduce quotations. Here is a partial list:

argues writes points out concludes comments notes maintains suggests insists observes counters assert

states claims demonstrates says explains reveals

Each verb has its own nuance. Make sure that the nuance matches your specific aims in introducing the quotation.

There are other ways to begin quotations. Here are three common phrasings:

In the words of X, . . .

According to X, . . .

In X's view, . . .

Vary the way you introduce quotations to avoid sounding monotonous. But never sacrifice precision of phrasing for the sake of variety.

### **How do I introduce a long quotation?**

If your quotation is lengthy, you should almost always introduce it with a full sentence that helps capture how it fits into your argument. If your quotation is longer than four lines, do not place it in quotation marks. Instead, set it off as a block quotation.

The full-sentence introduction to a block quotation helps demonstrate your grasp of the source material, and it adds analytical depth to your essay. But the introduction alone is not enough. Long quotations almost invariably need to be followed by extended analysis. Never allow the quotation to do your work for you. Usually you will want to keep the quotation and your analysis together in the same paragraph. Hence it is a good idea to avoid ending a paragraph with a quotation. But if your analysis is lengthy, you may want to break it into several paragraphs, beginning afresh after the quotation.

### **How do I let my reader know I've altered my sources?**

If you need to alter your quotations in any way, be sure to indicate just how you have done so. If you remove text, then replace the missing text with an **ellipsis**—three periods surrounded by spaces:

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Abrams comments that the “diversity of aesthetic theories . . . makes the task of the historian a very difficult one” (5).

If the omitted text occurs between sentences, then put a space after the period at the end of sentence, and follow that by an ellipsis. In all, there will be four periods.

Many people overuse ellipses at the beginning and end of quotations. Use an ellipsis in either place only when your reader might otherwise mistake an incomplete sentence for a complete one:

Do not use an ellipsis if you are merely borrowing a phrase from the original.

If you need to alter or replace text from the original, enclose the added text within **square brackets**.

### **How is punctuation affected by quotation?**

You must preserve the punctuation of a quoted passage, or else you must enclose in square brackets any punctuation marks that are your own.



There is, however, one important exception to this rule. You are free to alter the punctuation just before a closing quotation mark. You may need to do so to ensure that your sentences are fully grammatical. Do not worry about how the original sentence needs to be punctuated before that quotation mark; think about how your sentence needs to be punctuated. Note, for example, that if you are using the MLA system of referencing, a sentence always ends after the parenthetical reference. Do not also include a **period** before closing the quotation mark, even if there is a period there in the original.

In Canada and the United States, commas and periods never go outside a quotation mark. They are always absorbed as part of the quotation, whether they belong to you or to the author you are quoting: “I am a man / more sinned against than sinning,” Lear pronounces in Act 3, Scene 2 (59-60).

However, stronger forms of punctuation such as **question marks and exclamation marks** go inside the quotation if they belong to the author, and outside if they do not:

Bewildered, Lear asks the fool, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.227).

Why is Lear so rash as to let his “two daughters’ dowers digest the third” (1.1.127)?

Finally, **use single quotation marks for all quotations within quotations:**

When Elizabeth reveals that her younger sister has eloped, Darcy drops his customary reserve: “‘I am grieved, indeed,’ cried Darcy, ‘grieved — shocked’” (Austen 295).

## Writing about Literature

Like all university essays, the English paper requires critical thought and strong argumentation, but its focus on language and close textual analysis makes it unique. Here are some tips that you’ll want to keep in mind when writing about literature.

**Avoid plot summary.** The main purpose of an English paper is to advance an argument. As a general rule, mention only plot details that are relevant to your argument. You may occasionally need to

contribute a small amount of additional information about the storyline to make your analysis coherent, but keep the summary to a minimum, and leave plenty of space for your own ideas. You can usually assume that your reader knows the narrative well.

**Master the art of the analytical thesis.** A good thesis is a statement of roughly one to three sentences that says something intelligent about a literary work. It is not sufficient simply to identify a theme in your thesis. For instance, saying that a text deals with the theme of love or death or betrayal is not enough. (Instead, though, you might consider the ways in which love or death or betrayal come to be understood within the text.) A thesis must be complex enough that it would not be immediately obvious to a casual reader, but it must be simple enough that it can be stated in a relatively short amount of space.

Here is a list of possible questions around which you might construct a solid thesis: How does the author's or narrator's perspective on a given theme shift as the text develops? Are there any apparent tensions or contradictions within the text? If so, how might they be resolved? How does the text engage with the major political or cultural ideas of the era in which it was written? How does the text challenge or undermine the dominant conventions of the genre in which it was written? These are just a few suggestions. There are thousands of ways to craft a thesis, so don't feel limited to the questions above. Here are two examples of effective thesis statements:

By incorporating novelistic techniques—such as sustained imagery and character development—into a non-novelistic work, Alice Munro, in her short story collection *Who Do You Think You Are?*, subverts the narrative conventions of novelistic discourse.

Yeats's "Easter, 1916" appears both to condemn and to celebrate the revolutionary impulse in early-twentieth-century Ireland. It is neither a nationalist rallying cry nor an anti-nationalist cautionary tale. Rather it conveys profound ambivalence toward the Easter uprising.

**Let the structure of your argument determine the structure of your paper.** In most cases, you will best serve your argument by deviating from the chronology of events in the text you are critiquing. It is fully acceptable to pluck pertinent evidence from the beginning, middle, and end of a literary text and to use these disparate examples in the same paragraph. Sometimes you may be asked to provide a close reading of a given literary work. Often a close reading is structured the same way as any other English paper: you present a thesis and then defend it through detailed analysis of the text. But occasionally, your professor might ask you to do a line-by-line or paragraph-by-paragraph reading of a poem, passage, or story. This is one of those rare instances in which a more sequential approach is appropriate.

**Opt for analysis instead of evaluative judgments.** When writing a paper, focus on analyzing the work, not celebrating it. Instead of telling your reader that a given work is beautiful, lyrical, or timeless, focus on the ideas the text conveys and the ways it goes about conveying them. You may come across a line in a poem or novel that is so beautiful, or so sloppy, that you cannot resist commenting on it. If you're burning up to make an evaluative point, then do so. But keep it short and sweet (or short and snarky), and don't let it become the focus of your paragraph.

**Don't confuse the author with the speaker.** Often, particularly when you are analyzing a poem, it is tempting to assume that the author is also the narrator. This is usually not the case. Poetry, like the novel or short story, is a creative genre in which authors are free to inhabit the voice(s) of any character(s) they like. Most poems do not identify a narrator by name, but the fact that the speaker is unnamed does not necessarily imply that he or she stands in for the author. Remember, the person doing the writing is the writer, and the person doing the speaking is the speaker. In some cases, you may choose to treat the speaker as a stand-in for the writer. In these instances, make sure you have a reason for doing so—and consider mentioning that reason somewhere in your paper. Pay attention

to both content and technique. Content refers to plot: to the chronological sequence of events in a literary work. Technique refers to the various other ways in which the work creates meaning—for example, through grammar, syntax, imagery, metaphor, genre, and even extra-textual features like typesetting or illustrations. When quoting a text, consider both how the passage advances the plot and how it manipulates language to create meaning. Whatever helps you to make your argument is fair game, but strong essays will engage with both content and technique.

**Integrate quotations fully into your argument.** Whenever you incorporate a literary quotation into your writing, you must justify its usage. First, be sure to contextualize the quotation by giving some information about it (who is speaking, what part of the text it comes from, etc.). Then, follow each quotation with a few sentences in which you unpack the passage and relate it back to your argument. In other words, a quotation should never speak for itself: you must do the necessary work to demonstrate what the quotation means in the context of your argument.

For more go to [www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing)