

# Essay Writing

a quick guide



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## – a quick guide



Essay writing doesn't have to be hard. Following a formula can take you from the beginning of the essay writing process straight through the final copy with a minimum of stress.

*First, some **basics**.*

### **What Is an Essay?**

An essay is a piece of nonfiction writing with a distinct introduction, body, and conclusion. The essay provides a forum for the writer to convey information about and analyse a topic. Essays are concise summaries of a student's knowledge and understanding of a topic.

An essay can have many purposes, but the basic structure is the same no matter what. Whatever the purpose, your essay will have the same basic format.

If you follow a few simple steps, you will find that the essay almost writes itself.

You will be responsible only for supplying ideas, which are the important part of the essay anyway.

Don't let the thought of putting pen to paper daunt you. Get started!

These simple steps will guide you through the essay writing process:

- Decide on your topic (if no set question)
- Prepare an outline or diagram of your ideas.
- Write your argument statement.
- Write the body.
  - Write the main points.
  - Write the subpoints.
  - Elaborate on the subpoints.
- Write the introduction.
- Write the conclusion.

# The Steps to Writing an Essay

## Part ONE:

**PREWRITING** – if you have to develop your own essay question  
(if you have a question – go to Part TWO - WRITING)

### I. Brainstorming

#### A. Generating ideas

1. Make a list of subjects that are interesting to you that address the essay topic.
2. Interesting subjects make for easier research because you will stay focused.
3. Try to list as many subjects as you can—don't worry if some don't seem as good as others.
4. Review your list and select the topic that you think will work best.
  - Narrow your topic. Specific topics are easier to research than broad topics.
  - For example, "The History of Russia" is very broad; "The Role of Peter the Great in Modernising Early Modern Russia" is very specific and much easier to research.
  - If you aren't sure if a topic is right for the essay, check with your teacher and follow his or her advice.

#### B. Creating a list of areas to research

1. Once you have selected a topic, begin thinking about what you'll need to know to write the essay.
2. Write a list of the subjects you'll need to research and the types of facts you'll need to know.
3. Be prepared to modify or change your subject if something in your research gives you a new idea or calls into question some of your theories and assumptions, or if you find there is not enough material on your topic to fill an essay.



### II. Research Question

#### A. Develop a specific question based on research

1. A research question is the main idea you will research.
2. The research question should be prompted by your reading—what does what you have read make you wonder about?
3. It should be simple but very specific.
  - a. "What is the history of the computer?" is not very specific.
  - b. "How did the computer change the global economy?" is more specific.

#### B. This question should become your focus for in-depth research

1. Use your question to help select sources to consult.
2. Use your question to think about major topics to cover in the essay.

#### C. Examples of research questions

1. Why did Germans elect the Nazis to the Reichstag in the 1932 elections?
2. How has high fructose corn syrup impacted Americans' nutrition?
3. Did Mars ever have an environment that would have supported life?

### III. Detailed Research

#### A. Read in-depth about the topic

1. Now that you have your topic, you can select the final sources to use in your essay.
2. You should read carefully about your topic and develop a background knowledge of your topic.

#### B. Read a wide range of sources

1. Don't rely on a single book or website; check many different sources.
2. Select the websites, books, articles, etc. that you think will provide the best information about your specific essay topic.
3. Be sure to think "outside the box"—for example, if your essay is on zebras, there might also be interesting information on zebras in sources about lions, which eat zebras, and not just in the zebra sources.

#### C. Identifying proper academic sources

1. Academic sources are professionally produced books, articles, etc.
2. See section on "Working with Sources" in Part FOUR.

#### D. Take effective research notes for references and citations

1. Don't rely on memory! Be sure you have carefully noted down the page numbers and bibliographic information for each source, and put all word-for-word quotations in "quotation marks" so you never mix up your words with the words of your sources. (use WHSPA notemaking guide)
2. Organise your notes by topic.

#### E. Answer the research question

- a. When you are done researching, you should be able to answer your research question.
- b. If you can't, you need to do more research, or change or refine your research question based on your further reading.



### IV. Argument (proposal) Development

#### A. Use your answer to craft an argument statement

1. An argument statement is the most important sentence in your paper.
2. It is the key to your essay, telling the reader what your topic is and how you will explore it.

#### B. Your argument should outline what the essay will demonstrate or prove

1. A typical argument statement is a single sentence with four parts:
  - a. A brief summary of what the essay's topic is;
  - b. The three most important arguments that will support the topic.

#### C. Example of argument statements

1. Peter the Great transformed Early Modern Russia into a European power by building a new capital, breaking the power of the nobles, and importing European ideas and techniques into Russia.



## Part TWO:

### WRITING

#### I. Outlining

A. Develop an **outline** of the whole essay

1. The essay will have the following parts, which you should fill in as you outline:
  - Introduction
  - Argument statement
  - Body (with three to five main topics)
  - Restatement of argument
  - Conclusion

B. Use proper outline form with points and sub-points

1. An outline looks like this section, with major points listed first and supporting points listed underneath the major ideas.
2. An outline begins by ordering the information to present in an essay. You do this by arranging your information in order of importance, from main ideas to supporting details.

#### II. Crafting an Introduction

A. Can be done first or after writing the body

1. If you know how to start, go for it!
2. If not, wait until you're done and use your work to help you.

B. Choose an effective opening strategy

1. Pick an introduction that will make readers want to read more.
2. Make sure it will lead readers into your essay.

C. Examples of opening strategies

1. Open with a relevant quotation.
2. Open with a startling or unusual fact about your topic.
3. Set the scene by relating an anecdote or event.

D. Integrate the argument

1. At the end of the introduction, give your argument statement so readers will know what comes next.
2. For short essays, the argument is part of the introductory paragraph; for longer essays it may need to be its own paragraph.



#### III. Developing Body Paragraphs

A. Each body paragraph should present one main idea that supports your argument

1. Do not try to include multiple ideas in a paragraph
2. Each paragraph should be fully developed and fully support the main idea
3. You can do this with the “sandwich” model of paragraph writing

B. The sandwich model breaks down a paragraph into three parts:

1. Topic sentence (bread)
  - This sentence tells the reader the paragraph's main idea.
2. Supporting details (filling)

- These sentences provide supporting details that prove that your main idea is true.
  - These can include quotations, facts, and analysis.
3. Closing sentence (bread)
- This sentence reiterates the main idea and links it to the next paragraph.
- C. Cite your sources in your paragraphs (see “Working with Sources” in Part FOUR).*

## **IV. Transitions**

### *A. Link paragraphs through transitional words and phrases*

1. Transitions are little words that show the reader how your new idea connects to the previous idea.
2. The idea is that the reader needs to be shown how your paragraphs fit together—connect the dots for them.

### *B. It is important to guide reader from thought to thought*

1. Your ideas may be clear to you, but your readers need to be shown.
2. Assume the reader knows nothing about the topic and needs you to tell him or her how your ideas fit together.

### *C. Examples of transition words*

1. Some transition words include “therefore,” “however,” “similarly,” “in contrast,” and many more.
2. You can also use whole phrases to transition, such as “Unlike what was discussed in the previous section, ...”

*D. In long papers, a sentence or a short paragraph might be needed to transition between major sections.*

## **V. Conclusion**

### *A. Restate the argument*

1. Remind the reader what your essay intended to demonstrate or prove.
2. Use different wording from the original argument statement to avoid repetition.

### *B. Use an effective closing strategy*

1. This is similar to the introductory strategies.
2. Pick a different closing strategy than you opened with.

### *C. Examples of closing strategies*

1. Close with a relevant quotation.
2. Close with the most important fact the reader should remember.
3. Close with a statement about the relevance of your topic now and in the future.

## Part THREE:

### REVISING



#### I. Rereading

A. Read your essay again to get a sense of flow and how it sounds

1. The top tip for catching mistakes is actually taking the time to read your own work again carefully—you'd be surprised how many people never do this!
2. Try reading your work out loud. Sometimes hearing it makes it easier to catch errors.

B. Look for mistakes, lapses in logic, or where it doesn't make sense

1. Any place you stop and say "what?" is a good place for revision
2. Make sure your evidence supports your argument.
3. Pretend you are a reader who knows little about the material. Would this stand on its own, or do you need to add more explanation?

#### II. Revising

- A. Rewrite areas that don't work
- B. Add additional material when and where needed to "flesh out" the draft and ensure it makes good sense
- C. Fix any mistakes

#### III. Rereading Again

- A. Read work over to see how new version reads, like you did in step 1
- B. Fix any mistakes

#### IV. Proofreading

A. Carefully examine every word for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors

1. Watch for homophones (words that sound the same but are used differently, like "there," "their," and "they're").
2. Know the rules for possessives.
  - Singular: The cat's toy (one cat)
  - Plural: The cats' toy (two cats)

B. Fix any mistakes



#### V. Finalising

A. Reread a final time and submit a clean copy

B. Special for electronic submissions: Paste into a new document so previous drafts can't be retrieved or changes tracked

1. This way only your final copy will be visible by the teacher.
2. It also prevents any formatting problems when opening the file.
3. But be sure to save your work before you copy and paste.

## **Part FOUR:**

### **Working with Sources**

Working with sources can be challenging, but there are a few easy steps to making incorporating research into your essay easy.

#### **I. Sources**

Essays should use high quality sources. These can be broken down into a few categories:

##### *A. Books*

- Books written for an adult general audience are good to use, especially those written by academics.
- Exceptions: General interest encyclopaedias and “For Dummies” books. These are not good sources.

##### *B. Academic Journals*

- These are the publications of academic societies and have research articles written by academics.
- You can usually find these by searching research databases at places like Wollongong Library & State Library.

##### *C. Newspapers and Magazines*

- For many assignments these are good sources.
- However, for formal research papers use these with caution to supplement material in your essay because they are not always at the academic level.

##### *D. Educational or Scholarly Websites*

- This requires judgment. You have to evaluate if the online material is at a scholarly level. Sites ending in **.edu** are generally academic in nature.
- A blog or personal website probably isn't a good choice, but a scholarly project or government site usually is.
- Wikipedia is not a high level source and should be avoided. Don't cite Wikipedia in your paper no matter how much you want to. Since anyone can change it, you can never tell for sure whether a fact you read in it is true.



#### **II. Citation of Sources in Text**

When you refer to information you learned from outside sources such as books, articles, or websites, you need to provide a citation. Citations tell the reader where you got your information. Use the WHPSA Bibliography Sheet for guidance.

There are three places where you cite information:

1. Whenever you quote someone, you must tell readers who said it and where you found it, like this: “The sky is blue” (Smith 35).
2. When you borrow ideas or information from a source, like this: Scholars say that the sky is blue (Smith 35).
3. When you report someone else's opinion, like this: But some, like Smith, feel that blue skies are overrated (35).

Can you cite too much? Yes, you can. If you find yourself citing every sentence, you are citing too much and need to add more of your own original thoughts and analysis.

### III. Citation of Sources in Bibliography

Even though you have cited your sources in-text, you still need a bibliography at the end of your paper. This means providing all the information a reader needs to find your source, in convenient list form.

Refer to the WHSPA Bibliographic sheet for the correct citation process.

### IV. Plagiarism Concerns and Academic Honesty



The essay you turn in needs to be your own work, and everything in the paper not placed in “quotation marks” needs to be written in your own words. Information that you learn from outside sources needs to be cited according to the citation rules above.

Plagiarism is the use of others’ words, ideas, or information without proper attribution and documentation. Every school has an official plagiarism policy, and you should be sure to consult WHSPA’s plagiarism policy for more information about our school’s specific requirements. Plagiarism can result in failed assignments, failed classes, and even expulsion in the worst case scenario.

When you use the internet to do research, it is very tempting to use the copy and paste function to add your research to your paper. This makes it exceptionally easy to forget to put “quotation marks” around borrowed words, or to add proper documentation to your quotations.

Sometimes, students try to paraphrase by copying material from the internet and then changing words one by one when they are in the paper so that the text looks different. This is still plagiarism, even if you change the words and even if you add a citation. A true paraphrase must use completely different sentence structure and syntax, something the find-and-replace method can’t do.

Ultimately, the best policy is to write out paraphrases and even quotations by typing them yourself instead of relying on copy-and-paste. This will force you to be more careful about sources, and you’ll have a better change of avoiding accidental plagiarism.

**Happy Writing!**

Source: [thepaperexperts.com](http://thepaperexperts.com) & Kathy Livingston



## Other great Helpful Guides available at WHSPA Library:

- How to write a Bibliography
  - An easy version
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