

Writing Center

Essay Planning and Writing Guidelines

An essay (also called a theme or composition) is a group of paragraphs that develop an support one central idea. An essay includes a fully developed **introduction**, paragraphs of support in the **body**, and a **conclusion**. To plan and write an essay on any subject, follow these guidelines. **Note:** These are general guidelines—always follow any specific requirements given by you teacher.

Planning an Essay

Note that some people prefer to brainstorm or freewrite before developing a thesis; vary these suggestions to fit your needs.

1. Develop a **thesis statement** of at least one sentence that expresses your **limited subject** and your **controlling idea** (usually an opinion, comment, or point of view about the subject). If you are unable to think of a thesis statement, write your topic now and add your controlling idea later.
2. Generate ideas and information by listing (brainstorming), freewriting, clustering, journalistic questioning, or mind mapping (see separate handout on Development: Generating Ideas for Writing). Do not be concerned about grammar or mechanical or spelling at this point; instead, strive to write down as much as you can in relation to your topic.
3. Use the information to develop a plan.
 - a. If you have not written a thesis statement, write one now to provide focus and unity for your essay
 - b. Eliminate any ideas that do not support your thesis. This step helps provide unity for your essay.
 - c. Add further details and examples if necessary. At this point, strive to include specific cases, names of persons or places or products, numbers, reasons, results, and sense impressions. This step helps provide adequate **development or support** for your essay.
 - d. Arrange your details and examples in logical order according to time, space, emphasis, or causation. Add transitions to indicate the relationship among the elements. Logical organization and appropriate transitions provide **coherence**.

Drafting an Essay

1. Prepare a first draft, using your plan for guidance. Concentrate on content, not on mechanics.
 - a. Prepare an **introduction**. Introductions may be a sentence or two in short essays, but most academic essays have a separate introductory paragraph.
 - (1) Include an opening to attract readers' attention to your subject and to entice them to want to read more. For suggestions, consult the Writing Center handout titled Essay Openings.
 - (2) If background information is necessary, include it in the introduction. Readers need to understand the context of your discussion.
 - (3) Write your thesis statement at the end of the introduction to present your controlling idea.

- (4) Either in the thesis statement or in a separate sentence, you may include a summary of the main points you plan to discuss in the essay. Some teachers require this information; others do not.
- b. Write the **body** paragraphs.
 - (1) For each major point you are presenting, write at least one paragraph.
 - (2) For each body paragraph write a topic sentence that expresses that controlling idea of the paragraph. Usually, the topic sentence is one of the first sentences of a paragraph. Be sure that you begin the paragraph with a transition from the previous idea and a reminder of the controlling idea expressed in your thesis.
 - (3) In each paragraph, include sufficient information to support the point presented in the topic sentence. Use specific examples, reasons, names, numbers, and cases as well as concrete details that appeal to the senses. Be sure this support is sufficient (plentiful), specific, and relevant.
 - (4) Include transitions to clarify the connections among the ideas and sentences.
 - c. Write **a conclusion**. A conclusion is sometimes added to the end of the last paragraph of an essay; however, most academic essays have a separate paragraph on conclusion.
 - (1) Summarize the key points of the essay or reach some conclusion about the issue (use any combinations of these methods).
 - (2) Relate the conclusion to the subject and opinion expressed in the thesis statement in your introduction.
 - (3) Write an interesting closing, either a dramatic example or a reference back to your opening, remembering not to introduce new topics at the end of the paper.

Editing and Revising Your Draft

1. Evaluate your first draft.
 - a. Rewrite any unclear or incomplete information
 - b. Add transitions to clarify connections among ideas.
 - c. Ensure that you have provided enough support for each of your points—including plenty of specific examples and details with names, numbers, and sense appeals such as colors and sounds when appropriate.
 - d. Ensure that the arrangement of the information is logical.
 - e. Edit to improve style and expression for clarity and emphasis.
 - f. Correct your grammar, spelling, and mechanics. This step should follow the development of ideas and information and should be given careful attention.
2. Write as many additional drafts as necessary to improve the expression of your ideas and your grammatical and mechanical accuracy.

Preparing the Final Paper

1. Prepare your final paper in an appropriate format—check with you teacher for special requirements.
 - a. Include your name, course information, teachers name, and due date in the upper left corner.
 - b. Give your paper a title that reflects the subject and purpose, capitalizing and punctuating it according to scholarly conventions and centering it one inch from the top.
 - c. Type your paper (or write neatly in ink if your teacher permits) on one side of standard-sized white paper. Maintain one-inch margins, number pages in the upper right corner, and staple pages together in the correct order. Double-space typed work. Remember that computer-generated papers should look like typed papers; spacing and numbering conventions are the same.

3. Proofread your final paper and make any last-minute corrections neatly. Most teachers will accept work with a few neat corrections

Question

Ask thought-provoking questions only if you answer them immediately, for example, in your thesis.

Have you ever wished the telephone could have an automatic screening device to discourage exterminators, siding salespeople, and political pollsters from calling your house during dinner? Do you wonder how such callers manage to time their interruptions for the hour you've reserved for a leisurely bath or for the turning point in the 650-page novel you're reading? If so, you would probably agree that telephone solicitation should be illegal.

Journalist's Lead

Although journalists, especially feature writers, may use other types of openings, their training encourages them to open with "who, what, when, where, why, and how"—an opening strategy that is also useful for other writers.

They are trained to sound sincere—these telephone solicitors who spend hours interrupting other people's meals. Employed by political pollsters, siding sales companies, and exterminators, these callers sit at banks of telephones in dingy offices for three or four hours an evening, earning minimum wage by invading the privacy of others. Unwanted telephone solicitations should be illegal.

Analogy

A comparison with something familiar or interesting, analogy sometimes includes a descriptive image.

The telephone is like a house guest: sometimes welcome and other times overstaying its welcome or interfering in matters that are none of its business. When it becomes an intrusion from businesses soliciting money at meals and other inconvenient times, the telephone is an interloper. Unwanted telephone calls should be prohibited by law.

Contrast

Challenge reader with a view that is the opposite of the one you plan to develop in your paper—a strategy that is especially appropriate with controversial subjects because you seem to be discussing the "typical" attitude until your reader sees the "however."

Telephones are lifelines for Americans. Direct ties to the police and other emergency services may literally mean the difference between life and death. For many people, the soft glow of a bedside telephone with a built-in night light is the only safe soporific. Indeed, loved ones who are far away seem nearer when the telephone is near. Salespeople and pollsters, however, have turned this symbol of comfort into an intruder. Unwanted telephone solicitations should be illegal.

Combinations

Of course, you may use more than one of these methods. For example, you may wish to open with a striking statement, present a clear thesis, and then offer a list or summary of the ideas you plan to develop.

Has your dinner ever been interrupted by telephone salespeople? Have you ever torn yourself away from your math homework to answer a call from a termite policy seller? These callers, as well as computerized intrusions into the lives of American citizens, have become more than annoyances; they have become an assault on time and an invasion of privacy. Legislation should be enacted to forbid telephone solicitations, which interrupt meals, disturb private conversations, and ask personal questions that are none of the callers' business.