

Keys to College Essay Writing

Why do instructors ask students to write essays?

If you don't understand the point of writing essays, you might find your essay assignments pointless or frustrating. Furthermore, if you're trying to improve your essay-writing skills, you likely want to understand what your instructor hopes to see in an excellent student essay.

Students will probably find it worthwhile to think about what skills are needed to write a good essay. These, after all, are the skills your instructor wants to see whether you've acquired.

Writing a good essay requires the following:

1. A reasonable and compelling claim about the topic in question. An essay isn't just a collection of unrelated thoughts and facts about a topic: it states a claim about some specific aspect of the topic. In order to make a reasonable, compelling argument, the writer needs to have understood the topic's context and relevance his or her field of study. The writer demonstrates his or her familiarity with the subject matter by stating something about the topic that seems reasonable to someone familiar with the subject matter, and would interest someone in that field (i.e. not something that's obvious or vague, nor something overly specific or relatively inconsequential).

Instructors know that this requires

- Extensive knowledge of the topic
- Appreciation of the context and relevance of this topic to the field of study
- Strong reasoning skills

2. Appropriate and convincing support for the essay's central claim. In order for a writer's position on a topic to be convincing, it needs support to back it up.

A well-written essay provides a few good reasons for the reader to believe the writer's central claim – in other words, reasonable, compelling supporting arguments (more specific than the main argument) that explain why the central claim makes sense and is important. The supporting arguments further demonstrate the writer's comprehension of the topic in question: these demonstrate the writer's ability to answer questions like, "Why should I believe this claim?", "Why does it matter?", and "What reasonable objections might someone in the field raise against this claim, and how would you respond?" To do this effectively, the writer has to be willing to investigate his or her own biases or assumptions, and consider what someone else might think about this topic.

Each supporting argument *also* needs to be supported: the writer needs to provide evidence and explanations that demonstrates what he or she is trying to say. Depending on the topic, evidence might take on any number of forms: results from academic studies conducted by specialized

researchers; statements from experts in the field; statistical analyses; excerpts from a text under investigation; quotations from interviews; statements of personal experience, and many more. In order to supply appropriate and convincing evidence, the writer has to be good at finding evidence related to the topic in question, and also good at discerning whether the evidence he or she finds is from a credible source and how it applies to his or her argument. These are the primary skills of good researchers.

Instructors know that this requires

- Knowledge, comprehension, and reasoning skills (as was the case for the previous point)
- Sufficient familiarity with the topic to anticipate questions from others in the field
- Willingness to investigate one's own biases and assumptions
- Excellent research skills
- Critical thinking and evaluation skills

3. A logical, easy-to-follow organization of the writer's thoughts. A disorganized collection of thoughts and facts, no matter how reasonable or interesting these might be on their own, is not an essay. An essay has structure and organization: the writer has chosen the best way of organizing the arguments and evidence in order to achieve the desired effect on the reader (and in most cases, to "prove" the validity of the writer's claim).

Not only does this require that the writer be an effective, thoughtful, and self-critical communicator, but it also requires that the writer plan what he or she wants to say in advance, and then consider the best way to say it. Good essay writing takes careful planning, and planning takes time. Students who succeed in this area begin preparing their essays well ahead of the deadline, so that they can take every opportunity to improve the organization of their essays.

Writing a good essay requires that the writer have a strong sense of the logic of their argument, as well as an ability to anticipate when their reader will require further explanation to understand a particular point. Awareness of one's audience, and the ability to adjust one's message to achieve a desired effect on that audience, is at the heart of effective communication.

Instructors know that this requires

- Strong logic and reasoning skills
- Reflection and forethought
- Time management skills
- Awareness of one's audience and the ability to tailor a message to the audience's needs

4. Clear and correct writing. Most writers are aware that good grammar and clear writing are some of the keys to writing an excellent essay. One mistake some writers might make, however, is to think, "Either I'm good at writing, or I'm not, and that's that." This is far from the whole story.

First, writing is a skill that needs to be learned and developed, the same as any other skill. Whatever a writer's writing skills are now, they could always improve. Instructors know that students who write

well have devoted a lot of time to developing their skills – by reading, writing, and carefully considering feedback.

Second, even a writer with less-than-excellent writing skills can craft a well-written essay if he or she takes enough time to write multiple drafts and get feedback from peers and instructors. There are plenty of resources available to a writer who isn't confident in his or her grammar skills: grammar textbooks and websites; tutors and writing assistants; and classmates, friends, or others who might be willing to help proofread an essay for grammar. It should be noted that even if a writer doesn't have the opportunity to get a second person to proofread an assignment, if he plans in advance, he can check the grammar of his own writing using textbooks and online resources. Of course, this is all dependent on a writer's ability to manage time and begin projects well in advance of a deadline.

Instructors know that this requires

- Time management skills
- Resourcefulness and initiative
- Commitment to developing good writing skills
- Attention to detail

5. Clear and correct formatting. As was the case for clear writing, correctly formatting an essay requires that a writer allow himself enough time to check all the formatting requirements in detail and make any necessary corrections. It also usually requires writers to carefully document their sources and make note of when they use these sources in their essays. Attention to detail is a key to success in this area, as is willingness to make use of resources to find out exactly how to format an essay.

Some students may become frustrated with the strict formatting demanded by, for example, APA or MLA formatting rules. These might seem arbitrary or pointless. It's worthwhile to remember that these formatting rules exist in order to draw the reader's attention to the paper's content (i.e. the author's writing), rather than letting them be distracted by the way the document looks or is organized. Furthermore, these are the requirements in place for professionals in various fields when they submit their research for publication. By asking you to abide by these formatting rules, your instructor is asking you to take seriously the idea that you're preparing for a career that may require you to submit your writing to be published.

Instructors know that this requires

- Attention to detail
- Time management skills
- Resourcefulness and initiative
- Professionalism

Consider this list of all the things we've said a writer needs in order to write a good essay:

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Extensive knowledge of the topic
(sufficient to anticipate questions from others in the field) | <input type="checkbox"/> Reflection and forethought |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Appreciation of the context and relevance of this topic to the field of study | <input type="checkbox"/> Time management skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strong logic and reasoning skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Awareness of one's audience and the ability to tailor a message to the audience's needs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Willingness to investigate one's own biases and assumptions | <input type="checkbox"/> Resourcefulness and initiative |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent research skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to developing good writing skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Critical thinking and evaluation skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Attention to detail |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Professionalism |
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Given this list, is it any wonder that instructors assign essays as learning and evaluation tools? Furthermore, is it any wonder that employers value college and university degrees that require students to write essays?

If you know you need help improving in any of these areas, make an appointment to see one of the **Learning Centre** tutors.

Look for other Learning Centre handouts on Keys to Writing College Essays.

- Beginning to write an essay: Brainstorming, researching, outlining, and drafting
- Writing excellent introductions
- Revising and editing your first draft