

Guide to Writing an Essay

Prewriting

- I. **Select a topic**
 - A. Explore a topic that interests you
 - B. Choose a topic that suits your audience (your classmates)
- II. **Brainstorm**
 - A. **Freewrite:** Express your ideas on paper. Write without stopping and do not worry about punctuation, spelling, or organization. This will allow you to elaborate on your ideas and to explore new ones. Write down any facts, personal experiences, or questions you might have about your topic.
 - B. **Journalistic Questions:** Ask yourself the questions *Who? What? Where? When? Why?* and *How?* Write your answers to these questions into lists or in paragraph form. Some questions may be omitted depending on the purpose of your paper while other times, you will only need to use the answers from one or two questions.
 - C. **Listing:** If you already know the topic ideas to be discussed in your paper, list your supporting details under each one.
 - D. **Clustering:** Write your main topic in the middle of the paper and draw a circle around it. Next, branch your topic ideas from it. From your topic ideas, branch your supporting details.
- III. **Organize ideas**
 - A. **Write an Outline:** Your outline may consist of either complete sentences or key words and phrases. It should be organized to clearly show the structure of your paragraphs. Use Roman numerals to categorize the introduction, body and conclusion; capital letters for the topic sentences; lower case letters for supporting ideas; and numbers for the supporting details and examples.
 - B. **Write a tentative controlling idea or a thesis statement (an attitude, opinion, or direction):** The thesis statement should specifically state your topic and the details that are covered in your paper about your topic. Usually the thesis is at the end of the first paragraph, and it is only one sentence in length. Use your outline to find your main points or topic sentences and then summarize these into your thesis. The thesis should act as a map, providing the reader with the direction you want your paper to take.

Writing

IV. Introduction

- A.** The introduction is usually 3-6 sentences long, and it establishes the mood and setting of the essay. Try to utilize one of the following creative approaches to introduce the subject:
1. A meaningful quote
 2. A personal experience
 3. A universal idea
 4. A vivid description
 5. An analogy
 6. Historical background of your topic
 7. An anecdote
 8. A question
 9. A shocking statistic
 10. A statement stressing the significance of your topic
- B.** The thesis statement will usually follow the creative opening; consequently, there should be a smooth transition from one to the other. The thesis statement is conventionally placed at the end of the introductory paragraph.

V. Body

- A. Write 3 or 4 paragraphs which contain details and supporting information:** The paragraphs in the body of the essay should support your thesis. Each paragraph within the paper should have a clearly stated topic sentence as the first sentence. Remember to use sequence words such as *first*, *second*, and *third* and also transitional words such as *therefore*, *moreover*, and *for example* within the body.

VI. Conclusion

- A. Write a final paragraph which concludes the essay:** The concluding paragraph, similar to the introduction, usually contains 3-6 sentences. Use this paragraph to question the significance of the paper and deliver a personal statement regarding any solutions, questions, or predictions you may have. Do not introduce any new facts or statistics. Refer back to your creative introduction, reemphasize your thesis, and summarize your main points. You may even use an anecdote or quotation at the end of the conclusion. Do not end the essay with a question.

Revising

VII. Proofread

A. After writing your first draft, it is now time for proofreading. First, review and revise the essay for organization, content, and language effectiveness. Then, edit for mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Use the computerized spell checker, but remember that mistakes such as run-on sentences and comma splices are often undetected by spell check. Spell check also will not correct homonyms (such as *seen* instead of *scene*). While proofreading, you might try to read your paper out-loud, to yourself, or to a peer. Feel free to rewrite your paper as many times as needed after each proofreading. (*See attached form for more tips on proofreading*)

VIII. Recopy

A. Incorporate the changes you have made in the proofreading process, and write your final draft.

Proofreading

IX. Over-all view

Read the paper through quickly and then answer the following questions:

- Is the thesis a workable idea (is it too specific, too general, not a valid concern, etc.)?
- How many specific points are made about the subject? Are any repeated? Did the writer leave out any significant points or include any irrelevant points?
- How many paragraphs are focused on each point?
- Why did the writer choose this order--is it logical? What is the natural progression of the paper?
- Why is the topic interesting to the reader? Does the writer make it interesting or significant?
- Who is the audience? Is the tone appropriate for such an audience?
- Does the writer reveal a thorough understanding of the topic?
- Does the writer offer any innovative ideas on the topic?

X. Organization

- Does the introduction set up the problem? Does it provide reason to read further?
- Do the following paragraphs support the thesis? Do they adhere to one single idea?
- What job is each paragraph supposed to do? How does it relate to the paragraph before it and after it?
- How well does each paragraph hold together?
- How does the writer get from one thought to the next? What signposts does he give the reader?
- Does the conclusion do its job? Does it provide an effective ending to the paper, or is it merely a paraphrase of the introduction?
- What part of the paper do you like the best? Why? How can you apply it to the rest of the paper?
- Can the writer combine any of the sentences?
- Can the reader “see” clearly what the writer is saying?
- Can the writer substitute “more lively” verbs?

XI. Last-Minute Polish

- Are there any spelling errors (if you are unsure, check the dictionary)?
- What kinds of punctuation errors did you make in your last paper? Are there any in this one?
- Read the paper out loud to make sure it flows smoothly.
- Read the assignment again; did you miss anything?
- What did you learn from writing this paper--what do you need to work on in the next paper?