

The Essay

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of the essay. We will discuss what essays are, and explore the components of an essay, as well as common forms that they can take. We will also discuss the ways that essays allow for creative expression. Finally, we will cover how to respond to essay prompts in and out of an academic setting.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. What Is an Essay?
2. Components of an Essay
3. The Five Paragraph Essay
4. Creativity and the Essay
5. Essay Prompts

1. What Is an Essay?

The term "essay" is a commonly used one, so let's begin by defining it to make sure we understand exactly what it is. An **essay** is a piece of nonfiction writing, generally written in prose and focused on a single topic. Does this definition sound a little broad? It is. That's because, as you'll see, essays can vary greatly.



TERM TO KNOW

Essay

An essay is a piece of nonfiction writing, generally written in prose and focused on a single topic.

Essays can take many different approaches, including:

- Interpretations
- Speculations
- Analyses
- Polemics
- Manifestos
- Descriptions

- Personal reflections
- Persuasions

About the only thing essays like these have in common is their length, as the term "essay" generally refers only to short works -- at least shorter when compared to books.



DID YOU KNOW

The essay is a relatively young genre of writing, younger than poetry, drama, myth, and even short fiction. It came into being around the same time as the novel, but didn't really come into its own until the Enlightenment period, as the emphasis of the time on individualism and intellect tended to make people seek and value a new way to reason through ideas, and to share their ideas with other thinkers and the public. That sentiment is still behind the writing of many, or arguably all, essays written today.

Today, essays take different forms, depending on the context and purpose under which they're written. Two of the most common and different types of essays are the academic essay and the polemical essay, or polemic, for short. You likely have a fairly good sense of what academic essays are, and we will cover them in more detail soon. For now though, a **polemic** is an aggressive, controversial, or contentious argument.



HINT

An essay that makes a polemical argument is generally considered not to be academic, as the differences between the detached, intellectual prose style favored by academics is typically not found in the incendiary styles of the polemic.



TERM TO KNOW

Polemic

A polemic is an aggressive, controversial, or contentious argument; an essay that makes a polemical argument.

2. Components of an Essay

Like other forms of prose writing, essays use sentences and paragraphs, and should include a structure of ideas that flows logically from one point to the next. As they follow their structure, most essays end up with three primary components, though of course there's room for variation, even within the confines of traditional academic essays.

1. **Introduction.** Essays generally begin with an introduction that lays out the primary purpose, goal, or point of the essay. Most include a thesis statement somewhere in the introduction, given its centrality to the essay's purpose.
2. **Body Paragraphs.** Essays also include what are usually called body paragraphs, which are paragraphs that contain the primary points or ideas of the essay, making up the body of the work.
3. **Conclusion.** After the body paragraphs usually comes a conclusion, which is a final paragraph or two that wraps up the main points of the essay, and may also include a call to action. The conclusion may point to further questions, ideas, and areas of thinking that are beyond, but linked to, the essay's scope.

In terms of qualifying as an essay, there are no rules regarding length or number of paragraphs, or even the

structure of an essay. Obviously, the length and depth of any of these components is likewise variable, depending on the writer's needs and the occasion for writing.

3. The Five Paragraph Essay

One of the most common forms of essay is the five paragraph essay. This type of essay includes an introduction as its first paragraph with the thesis, followed by three body paragraphs that each make a single point or express a single idea, and also support the introduction's thesis. A final, fifth paragraph concludes the essay, often by summarizing a repeating part of its introduction. They tend to look something like this:



Note the introduction with a clearly stated thesis leading to three separate body paragraphs, each with its own topic and topic sentence, and a conclusion that refers back to what's already been said. This is a form that's widely taught to beginning writers and it's a useful one to know, especially in a testing environment, as these tend to reward adherence to structures like the five paragraph essay's framework.

However, there is a lot more to essays than this particular form, as many ideas, arguments, and explorations would suffer to be constrained by the sometimes limiting structure. Often, writers who've mastered this form are hesitant to part with it, but they should, as a five paragraph essay format can limit the depth and nuance with which their thoughts can be expressed. In addition, because it's been taught so often and for so long, more advanced writers -- and some beginning students, too -- tend to think of the five paragraph essay as cliché and boring. This isn't necessarily correct, though often it's not wrong. That being said, it's actually quite rare to find an experienced writer using this format, unless specifically required to do so.



BIG IDEA

There is, of course, no one form of essaying that's more correct than another; there are simply different forms that are best suited for different functions. Therefore, students of writing should do what every other writer does: construct their essays based on the needs of the thesis and their goals for the writing project itself.

4. Creativity and the Essay

Though essays aren't always associated with high levels of creativity -- at least not as often as their fictional and poetic counterparts -- there's still a lot of room for creative expression, even with the somewhat regimented single thesis structure.

➦ **EXAMPLE** For example, essays can make use of figurative language, description, dialogue, and other so-called fictional writing techniques. Interesting word choice and sentences written in an engaging, elegant, or diverse style can do as much for an essay as they can for any piece of creative writing.

In addition, nontraditional introductions are becoming more and more acceptable in academic circles. These introductions can include various hooks or ways of engaging the reader, and they often take up more than one paragraph. Likewise, nontraditional conclusions are on the rise, including various approaches to wrapping up ideas and engaging readers. These, too, may include more than one paragraph.

Many of the essays being written and published do much more to experiment with voice, persona, and style than could be accommodated by a more traditional format. Because there are no set rules for essays, at least in a broad sense, students have a lot of control over what goes into their essays and how they express their ideas and points, just like other writers.

5. Essay Prompts

All that being said, the fact is that many of the essays that beginning writers will ever write are written in response to prompts and assignments. These prompts often identify the topic to be written about or provide other parameters for the essay.

➦ **EXAMPLE** For example, students receive prompts from college admission exams and applications, applications for scholarships, fellowships, grants, and internships, as well as tests like the SAT or ACT, and of course, during courses as homework.

Truthfully, after school, this often doesn't change much, as many professional situations place similar demands on graduated writers, responding to items like cover letters, business proposals, and grant applications. The point is that students, and all beginning writers, need to learn to read any given prompt for what it is; understanding its meaning and goals, and to see how best they can respond to it given their knowledge, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Here are several useful strategies for responding to a prompt:

- Seek out as much information as possible before beginning

➦ **EXAMPLE** If, for example, an in-class prompt or assignment seems ambiguous or unclear, a student could seek out the teacher or teacher's assistant and learn more about his or her expectations for the assignment.

- Use the prompt during the brainstorming prewriting phase of the process
- Return to the prompt when drafting, as well as during the revision and editing processes in order to confirm that the essay in progress still meets the requirements of the prompt and the expectations of the teacher or evaluator



THINK ABOUT IT

Suppose a student in an introductory history class was assigned a short personal essay about what life would have been like for him or her living in ancient Greece. Would he or she respond to that prompt differently than they would to an advanced biology lab report that will take all semester to perform and record? Likely yes. Similarly, the only thing that either prompt would have in common with an assigned research paper on a linguistic history of English would be the fact that they're all prompts, and as such, they're all subject to the same strategies of interpretation and response.



SUMMARY

Today we learned all about essays. In addition to defining an essay, we learned about the components of an essay: the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. We learned about the common forms of essays, from the five paragraph form to others that allow for more creative expression. Finally, we learned about how to respond to essay prompts, both in and out of college.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

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