

# Guide to Writing a Basic Essay

An essay can have many purposes, but the basic structure is the same no matter what. You may be writing an essay to argue for a particular point of view or to explain the steps necessary to complete a task. Either way, 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.
- Prepare an outline or diagram of your ideas.
- Write your thesis statement.
- Write the body.
  - Write the main points.
  - Write the subpoints.
  - Elaborate on the subpoints.
- Write the introduction.

Think about the type of paper you are expected to produce. Should it be a general overview, or a specific analysis of the topic? If it should be an overview, then you are probably ready to move to the next step. If it should be a specific analysis, make sure your topic is fairly specific. If it is too general, you must choose a narrower subtopic to discuss.

For example, the topic "KENYA" is a general one. If your objective is to write an overview, this topic is suitable. If your objective is to write a specific analysis, this topic is too general. You must narrow it to something like "Politics in Kenya" or "Kenya's Culture."

Once you have determined that your topic will be suitable, you can move on.

## ***Topic Has Not Been Assigned***

If you have not been assigned a topic, then the whole world lies before you. Sometimes that seems to make the task of starting even more intimidating. Actually, this means that you are free to choose a topic of interest to you, which will often make your essay a stronger one.

### Define Your Purpose

The first thing you must do is think about the purpose of the essay you must write. Is your purpose to persuade people to believe as you do, to explain to people how to complete a particular task, to educate people about some person, place, thing or idea, or something else entirely? Whatever topic you choose must fit that purpose.

### Brainstorm Subjects of Interest

Once you have determined the purpose of your essay, write down some subjects that interest you. No matter what the purpose of your essay is, an endless number of topics will be suitable.

If you have trouble thinking of subjects, start by looking around you. Is there anything in your surroundings that interests you? Think about your life. What occupies most of your time? That might make for a good topic. Don't evaluate the subjects yet; just write down anything that springs to mind.

### Evaluate Each Potential Topic

If you can think of at least a few topics that would be appropriate, you must simply consider each one individually. Think about how you feel about that topic. If you must educate, be sure it is a subject about which you are particularly well-informed. If you must persuade, be sure it is a subject about which you are at least moderately passionate. Of course, the most important factor in choosing a topic is the number of ideas you have about that topic.

Even if none of the subjects you thought of seem particularly appealing, try just choosing one to work with. It may turn out to be a better topic than you at first thought.

Before you are ready to move on in the essay-writing process, look one more time at the topic you have selected. Think about the type of paper you are expected to produce. Should it be a general overview, or a specific analysis of the topic? If it should be an overview, then you are probably ready to move to the next step. If it should be a specific analysis, make sure your topic is fairly specific. If it is too general, you must choose a narrower subtopic to discuss.

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## **Organize Your Ideas**

The purpose of an outline or diagram is to put your ideas about the topic on paper, in a moderately organized format. The structure you create here may still change before the essay is complete, so don't agonize over this.

Decide whether you prefer the cut-and-dried structure of an outline or a more flowing structure. If you start one or the other and decide it isn't working for you, you can always switch later.

## **Diagram**

1. Begin your diagram with a circle or a horizontal line or whatever shape you prefer in the middle of the page.
2. Inside the shape or on the line, write your topic.
3. From your center shape or line, draw three or four lines out into the page. Be sure to spread them out.
4. At the end of each of these lines, draw another circle or horizontal line or whatever you drew in the center of the page.
5. In each shape or on each line, write the main ideas that you have about your topic, or the main points that you want to make.
  - If you are trying to persuade, you want to write your best arguments.
  - If you are trying to explain a process, you want to write the steps that should be followed. You will probably need to group these into categories. If you have trouble grouping the steps into categories, try using Beginning, Middle, and End.
  - If you are trying to inform, you want to write the major categories into which your information can be divided.
6. From each of your main ideas, draw three or four lines out into the page.
7. At the end of each of these lines, draw another circle or horizontal line or whatever you drew in the center of the page.
8. In each shape or on each line, write the facts or information that support that main idea.

When you have finished, you have the basic structure for your essay and are ready to continue.

## **Outline**

1. Begin your outline by writing your topic at the top of the page.
2. Next, write the Roman numerals I, II, and III, spread apart down the left side of the page.
3. Next to each Roman numeral, write the main ideas that you have about your topic, or the main points that you want to make.
  - If you are trying to persuade, you want to write your best arguments.
  - If you are trying to explain a process, you want to write the steps that should be followed. You will probably need to group these into categories. If you have trouble grouping the steps into categories, try using Beginning, Middle, and End.
  - If you are trying to inform, you want to write the major categories into which your information can be divided.
4. Under each Roman numeral, write A, B, and C down the left side of the page.
5. Next to each letter, write the facts or information that support that main idea.

When you have finished, you have the basic structure for your essay and are ready to continue.

## Compose a Thesis Statement

Now that you have decided, at least tentatively, what information you plan to present in your essay, you are ready to write your thesis statement.

The thesis statement tells the reader what the essay will be about, and what point you, the author, will be making. You know what the essay will be about. That was your topic. Now you must look at your outline or diagram and decide what point you will be making. What do the main ideas and supporting ideas that you listed say about your topic?

Your thesis statement will have two parts.

- The first part states the topic.
  - Kenya's Culture
  - Building a Model Train Set
  - Public Transportation
- The second part states the point of the essay.
  - has a rich and varied history
  - takes time and patience
  - can solve some of our city's most persistent and pressing problems

Once you have formulated a thesis statement that fits this pattern and with which you are comfortable, you are ready to continue.

## Write the Body Paragraphs

In the body of the essay, all the preparation up to this point comes to fruition. The topic you have chosen must now be explained, described, or argued.

Each main idea that you wrote down in your diagram or outline will become one of the body paragraphs. If you had three or four main ideas, you will have three or four body paragraphs.

Each body paragraph will have the same basic structure.

1. Start by writing down one of your main ideas, in sentence form.  
If your main idea is "reduces freeway congestion," you might say this:  
Public transportation reduces freeway congestion.
2. Next, write down each of your supporting points for that main idea, but leave four or five lines in between each point.
3. In the space under each point, write down some elaboration for that point.  
Elaboration can be further description or explanation or discussion.

### Supporting Point

Commuters appreciate the cost savings of taking public transportation rather than driving.

### Elaboration

Less driving time means less maintenance expense, such as oil changes.

Of course, less driving time means savings on gasoline as well.

In many cases, these savings amount to more than the cost of riding public transportation.

4. If you wish, include a summary sentence for each paragraph.  
This is not generally needed, however, and such sentences have a tendency to sound stilted, so be cautious about using them.

Once you have fleshed out each of your body paragraphs, one for each main point, you are ready to continue.

## Write the Introduction and Conclusion

Your essay lacks only two paragraphs now: the introduction and the conclusion. These paragraphs will give the reader a point of entry to and a point of exit from your essay.

### **Introduction**

The introduction should be designed to attract the reader's attention and give her an idea of the essay's focus.

1. Begin with an attention grabber.

The attention grabber you use is up to you, but here are some ideas:

- **Startling information**  
This information must be true and verifiable, and it doesn't need to be totally new to your readers. It could simply be a pertinent fact that explicitly illustrates the point you wish to make. If you use a piece of startling information, follow it with a sentence or two of elaboration.
- **Anecdote**  
An anecdote is a story that illustrates a point. Be sure your anecdote is short, to the point, and relevant to your topic. This can be a very effective opener for your essay, but use it carefully.
- **Dialogue**  
An appropriate dialogue does not have to identify the speakers, but the reader must understand the point you are trying to convey. Use only two or three exchanges between speakers to make your point. Follow dialogue with a sentence or two of elaboration.
- **Summary Information**  
A few sentences explaining your topic in general terms can lead the reader gently to your thesis. Each sentence should become gradually more specific, until you reach your thesis.

2. If the attention grabber was only a sentence or two, add one or two more sentences that will lead the reader from your opening to your thesis statement.
3. Finish the paragraph with your thesis statement.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion brings closure to the reader, summing up your points or providing a final perspective on your topic.

All the conclusion needs is three or four strong sentences which do not need to follow any set formula. Simply review the main points (being careful not to restate them exactly) or briefly describe your feelings about the topic. Even an anecdote can end your essay in a useful way.

The introduction and conclusion complete the paragraphs of your essay.  
Don't stop just yet! One more step remains before your essay is truly finished.

## **Add the Finishing Touches**

You have now completed all of the paragraphs of your essay. Before you can consider this a finished product, however, you must give some thought to the formatting of your paper.

### ***Check the order of your paragraphs.***

Look at your paragraphs. Which one is the strongest? You might want to start with the strongest paragraph, end with the second strongest, and put the weakest in the middle. Whatever order you decide on, be sure it makes sense. If your paper is describing a process, you will probably need to stick to the order in which the steps must be completed.

### ***Check the instructions for the assignment.***

When you prepare a final draft, you must be sure to follow all of the instructions you have been given.

- Are your margins correct?
- Have you titled it as directed?
- What other information (name, date, etc.) must you include?
- Did you double-space your lines?

### ***Check your writing.***

Nothing can substitute for revision of your work. By reviewing what you have done, you can improve weak points that otherwise would be missed. Read and reread your paper.

- Does it make logical sense?  
Leave it for a few hours and then read it again. Does it still make logical sense?
- Do the sentences flow smoothly from one another?  
If not, try to add some words and phrases to help connect them. Transition words, such as "therefore" or "however," sometimes help. Also, you might refer in one sentence to a thought in the previous sentence. This is especially useful when you move from one paragraph to another.

- Have you run a spell checker or a grammar checker?  
These aids cannot catch every error, but they might catch errors that you have missed.

Once you have checked your work and perfected your formatting,  
your essay is finished.

**Congratulations!**