

Sources for the Quick guide to report writing:

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Quick guide to academic

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Writing academic essays made easy

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At some time in your education or career you will be commissioned to write an essay. An essay is often a pedagogic instrument but principally it is a short work of writing that treats a single topic from the author's point of view: an argumentation on paper that conveys your or your commissioner's opinion. It's a chance to make an impression! Constructing an argument, supporting it and writing it down can be a tough challenge, especially if the topic is new to you. Here is a crude strategy that structures your efforts and makes writing that essay easy.

Writing an essay is a thought process rather than a document creating process. If that thought process is carefully planned, executed and put well in writing people will be interested in reading it

and leave a lasting impression. Otherwise, your efforts will be unappreciated.

This document gives guidelines on how to turn the thought process into opinionated writing. The proposed strategy is a five step approach to successful essay

writing. Following that strategy will not only help you control the process but make it a fun exercise to study your topic and use writing to make your point.

What's keeping you? Get started and make an impression!

**What is NOT here**

The strategy here is limited to written academic essays with an argument. Descriptions, narratives, observations, manifestos, or literature may have different objectives or starting points. You can find more detailed information on writing essays in your local library.

Correct formulation and correct use of language is outside the scope of this guide. So is the correct use of local style guides or tem-

plates.

The strategy is no guarantee for a good essay, clear formulation and argumentation define the quality of the result.

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Contents

General strategy	2
Phase 1: Preparation	2
Phase 2: Gather information	3
Phase 3: Construct the argument	3
Phase 4: Write the essay	4
Phase 5: Revise and finalize	4

General strategy: turn your topic into an academic essay

Essays

The term 'essay' covers a wide variety of texts that is intended for a wider audience or for professional publication. In essence, an essay is a literary composition on a special subject, analytical, expository, critical or reflective and personal. It may be a short piece but may also cover a complete book.

There are several types of essays and names for essays but they all boil down to being an opinionated text on a single topic. An argument on paper if you will.

Academic essays

An academic essay is often an assignment to a student on a special subject. It is often between 2000 and 7000 words and should demonstrate insight

and understanding of learning aims from a course. As a result academic essays tend to be discursive and contain many descriptions or concepts.

The topic

You may have been given a topic to write about or have to select a topic that relates to your work area, either way you may be unfamiliar to the topic and need to research it before you can start working. Topic research is the backbone for your essay and needs to be conducted well to make an impression.

Your opinion

By formulating an opinion you choose a standpoint or a viewpoint that you relate to. Make it your priority to research the topic thoroughly before you

formulate that opinion. Any preconceptions you may have are probably based on partial knowledge, single-sided views or outright false information. Do not rely on that, it hinders the presentation and diminishes the impact of your work.

Strategy

Here is a five step strategy for your academic essay writing. Phase one is the preparation; phase two is the information gathering; phase three is the construction of the argument; phase four the writing of the essay; and phase five deals with checking, revising, and finalizing the essay. These five phases are described in the sections below. They do not eliminate the research or writing efforts but make you control the essay creation process better.

Topic research is the backbone for your essay and needs to be conducted well to make an impression

Phase 1: Preparation

The following points deserve attention in your preparation. It helps to write them down. It is assumed that you have little previous knowledge on the subject you are writing about.

COMMISSION

Probably you have received a commission by a teacher or your boss to write an essay. Read the instructions carefully and check for unclarity. What topics can you choose from? What elements are obligatory? How long should the essay be? When does it have to be finished? Ask for clarification when needed.

SELECT THE TOPIC

Probably, your commissioner tells you what subjects are in the scope of your essay: a process, a technology, a science, or a recent development. Try to estimate just how difficult it would be to acquire information on those topics and how

difficult it would be to construct an argument. Do you have entry points into the subject matter? Is it widely published? Is it a subject that is easy to have an opinion about? If you have freedom of choice, choose a subject that personally interests you since your motivation will be better.

AUDIENCE

Formulate who is the audience as exact as possible. Who will read your essay and what is their background? You will have to use language, structure, and content in a way that your audience can understand the message you are conveying. Note that good essays should be suitable for printing as an article or paper in a journal or newsletter.

STRUCTURE

Essays do not follow rigorous structures by definition but it helps to sketch what parts

might go in. This helps focusing your efforts but be prepared to add or delete parts later. Academic essays have four basic parts as shown later.

FORMATTING

Find out whether a special format is required (e.g. company profile). If not, you can construct your own format. Simple formatting is usually the best for since elaborate designs tend to distract the reader.

WORKPLACE

Organize the tools you need for writing the essay that you are comfortable with. Use a convenient, or readily available word processor suitable for your needs. Try to find an office desk or equivalent. Be mindful for repetitive strain injuries (RSI). Check the printer you will be using since eventually, your essay will end up on paper.

TIME

Phase 2: Gather information

RESEARCH

Find as much information about the topic as you can and document your actions in a notebook. Identify relevant information sources (library, newspapers, magazines, internet, databases or any other source). Extract relevant information or articles from the sources. Use selection criteria based on your current knowledge about the topic: titles or abstracts are a great help here. Structure your information well and document it in your notebook so you do not get lost in your own notes. After you collected a sizable number of documents, start to read. Read actively to analyze, use a notebook again and take (many)

notes. Look critically at the information: find commonalities and conflicts, judge claims and opinions, find evidence, judge reasons, analyze the logic and its strengths and weaknesses. Develop your insights and become the expert.

BRAINSTORM

This is where you get creative. Develop your personal ideas about the topic based on your research insights. Form your opinion or opinions and think about them. Think hard, think well, think creative and think original. Take your time for it and use any brainstorming instrument that works for you: walks, word-games, topic-lists, discussion, free associations or whatever. Be mindful for the

impact on your readers. If necessary, re-read your sources or redo all or parts of your research. The goal is to generate an interesting subject for your essay, one that is interesting, original, remarkable and sticks to your readers minds.

FORMULATE CLAIMS

By now you may have a notebook jotted full with notes, remarks, ideas, and brainstorm sessions. Select a subject that works best for the topic, the audience, and making an impression. Formulating titles can be a great help for selecting the subject. Make sure you end up with a number of ideas or theories or claims that might work and formulate them as a statement: a claim.

Phase 3: Construct the argument

The main story in an essay is the argument. Make your arguments stick and the essay will stick.

The main story in an essay is the argument. Make your arguments stick and the essay will stick. Here is a suggestion of how to do that.

AN ARGUMENT

An argument consists of two main components: a claim, and reasons for that claim. Neither a claim without reasons, nor reasons without a claim, is an argument. Only when your reasons give leverage to your claim do we say that an "argument" is taking place.

STRATEGIES

Argumentation is a science of its own that you can research in your local library. Here are a few guidelines that are not necessarily complete or compelling. Over 2000 years ago Aristotle identified three main strategies for argument:

- logic and reason;
- the character and credentials of the communicator and;
- emotion.

For academic essays appeal to logic and reason but the other two help to make the essay more colorful.

TYPES

Two basic types of argument are:

- argument of fact or;
- argument of policy.

The first type relates to something that *exists* or *is* (or variations: not exists, not is, is not true, necessary, justified... well you get the picture). It usually treats claims on existence, definition, or quality. The second type relates to something that *should* or *should not* be and treats claims of worth or goodness, expediency, advantage, or use.

DATA

Selecting an argumentation strategy and type can help you in maintaining focus and unity of argument in your essay but in the end you must rely on the data from your research. The data provides proof for your reasons to assist your claim.

BUILDING A CASE

You build the case by presenting the argument in a coherent manner, as a case. These are few ideas that are by no means exhaustive:

- problem-solution case;
- compare and contrast case;
- chain of reasoning case;
- process of elimination;
- experimental research;
- improving the system;
- descriptive or narrative;
- persuasive or argumentative.

WRAP UP

Check for yourself if the argumentation works, if it doesn't, change the topic or the claim. Once you decided on the subject and found a way to construct your argumentation and mold it into a nice story you can start the writing process. Take that story and start designing the essay in a draft layout and argumentation.

Phase 4: Write the essay

Once you made a good effort in the previous phases and know what message to convey, the writing process becomes straightforward. Here are some points to consider.

PARTS

An essay is essentially poorly structured but here are some common parts:

- *Introduction;*
- *Body text or Content;*
- *Conclusion;*
- *References.*

The *introduction* will explain the academic problem as you see it, and says how you intend to handle it. It tells the reader what to expect, and what to look for. Try to make it a teaser for the reader so that he will become interested in reading the rest of the essay.

The *contents* will contain the points you want to make, with supporting arguments and evidence. It must show the reader that you know your subject. You do this by explaining the subject to the reader. It should also present the evidence for the essay's argument. It may be split into several parts or paragraphs that have individual headers or titles. It is uncommon to use 'contents' as a title. Again, snappy titles invite readers.

The *conclusion* is the part where you exit your essay by making a quick wrap-up sentence, and then end on some memorable thoughts, perhaps a quotation, or an interesting twist of logic, or some call to action. Is there something you want the reader to walk away and do? Let him or her know exactly what.

The (literature-) *references* give a complete and clear listing of the sources you used in the report. References can be numbered or alphabetical. Check the formatting.

STRATEGY

Start *outlining* your essay. Sketch out your essay before straight-way writing it out. Use one-line sentences to describe parts or paragraphs, and bullet points to describe what they will contain. Play with the essay's order. Map out the structure of your argument, and make sure it is presented in a clear way.

Once you are satisfied with the outline start *filling the text*. Use visual elements only when necessary but if you use them, make them contribute to the argument or proof.

VISUAL ELEMENTS

One figure can say a thousand words. First decide whether visual elements will benefit your argument. Start constructing the pictograms before writing so that you are flexible to

fit it in the text. Be ready to have to change the pictograms later.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

It is beyond the scope of the quick reference to describe the writing process at length but here are some elements that may help you.

- The reader must be able to read the essay without consulting other documents.
- Maintain focus on argument.
- Emphasize important elements.
- Use key words prominently and correctly.
 - Ensure an adequate use of language. Formulate clearly and concisely.
- Make sure that visual elements are clear and unambiguous.
- Make style of writing figures, and layout constant and simple.
- use uniform typography and not too many letter types.
- Use a dictionary if you are uncertain about the meaning of words.
- Omit needless words.
- Use anecdotes or quotes only when they increase the impact of the story.
- Avoid wording as you would use in speeches and conversations.

Make sure that your readers receive the essay in a neat and adequate fashion.

Phase 5: Checking, revising and finalizing

Start checking and revising the text *after* you are sure that nothing is left out to make your case. In this process you keep updating the essay for text, typography, language, and visual elements until it is a presentable end product.

Define your final layout. Check whether the essay presents your case clearly and adequately.

Check your argumentation again. Check whether the numeration of your figures, tables, and texts is correct and correctly given in the contents. Double check whether the essay is easy to read and whether the chain of thoughts is adequately explained. Also:

- Make sure that the visual elements are clear and fit in with

the text.

- Eliminate sloppiness.
- Let colleagues give advice.
- Make sure that your commissioner receives the essay in a neat and adequate fashion.
- Don't overdo it: finish on time.
- Impress your audience.