

Essay writing doesn't have to be hard. Following a formula can take you from the beginning of the essay writing process straight through the final copy with a minimum of stress.

First, some basics.

What Is an Essay?

An essay is a piece of nonfiction writing with a distinct introduction, body, and conclusion. The essay provides a forum for the writer to convey information about and analyze a topic. Essays are concise summaries of a student's knowledge and understanding of a topic.

There are two major types of essays:

A. Expository, Factual, and Research Essays

- This type of essay can describe a person, object, or place; or it can analyze research to reach a conclusion about a topic or event.
- This type of essay relies entirely on facts and expert analysis to support its major claims.
- Each claim in this type of essay must be documented. This means that a scholarly source must include the information you are using in your essay.
- Personal opinions are not allowed in factual essays.
 - "*Pride and Prejudice* is Jane's Austen's best work" is an opinion and would not be allowed.
 - "Many literary critics believe *Pride and Prejudice* is Jane Austen's best work" is a fact, as long as you have documentation to prove it.

B. Interpretive Essays

- This type of essay can provide an analysis, interpretation, or reflection on ideas and events.
- An interpretive essay utilizes facts, but also allows the writer to offer his or her own opinion, with supporting reasons.
- The claims in this type of essay do not need scholarly citation, but if you do offer your opinion, you should explain your reasons for doing so.

The Steps to Writing an Essay

PART ONE: PREWRITING

I. Brainstorming

- Thinking about the topic**
 - The assignment should give you some ideas about the general areas to explore.
 - Think about what subjects within those areas are most interesting to you.
 - Interesting subjects make for easier research because you will stay focused.
- Generating ideas**
 - Make a list of subjects that are interesting to you that address the essay topic.
 - Try to list as many subjects as you can—don't worry if some don't seem as good as others.
 - Review your list and select the topic that you think will work best.
 - Narrow your topic. Specific topics are easier to research than broad topics.
 - For example, "The History of Russia" is very broad; "The Role of Peter the Great in Modernizing Early Modern Russia" is very specific and much easier to research.
 - If you aren't sure if a topic is right for the essay, check with your instructor and follow his or her advice.

C. Creating a list of areas to research

- Once you have selected a topic, begin thinking about what you'll need to know to write the essay.
- Write a list of the subjects you'll need to research and the types of facts you'll need to know.
- Be prepared to modify or change your subject if something in your research gives you a new idea or calls into question some of your theories and assumptions, or if you find there is not enough material on your topic to fill an essay.

II. Reading about the Topic

A. Read a wide range of sources

- Don't rely on a single book or website; check many different sources.
- Be sure to think "outside the box"—for example, if your paper is on zebras, there might also be interesting information on zebras in sources about lions, which eat zebras, and not just in the zebra sources.

B. Develop a background knowledge of your topic

- Make sure you can put your topic in context. For example, if you are writing an essay on Alexander the Great, be sure you have background knowledge on ancient Greek and Macedonian culture to place Alexander in historical context.

- You don't need to know *everything* about your subject's background, but you should be able to think about the subject in a general way when you are done with your reading without needing to go back to the books.

C. Hone in on specific area for research

- After you have developed background research, you should be able to hone in on your specific topic and select sources that are most directly related to it.
- Select the websites, books, articles, etc. that you think will provide the best information about your specific essay topic.

III. Research Question

A. Develop a specific question based on research

- A research question is the main idea you will research.
- The research question should be prompted by your reading—what does what you have read make you wonder about?
- It should be simple but very specific.
 - "What is the history of the computer?" is not very specific.
 - "How did the computer change the global economy?" is more specific.

B. This question should become your focus for in-depth research

- Use your question to help select sources to consult.
- Use your question to think about major topics to cover in the essay.

C. Examples of research questions

- Why did Germans elect the Nazis to the Reichstag in the 1932 elections?
- How has high fructose corn syrup impacted Americans' nutrition?
- Did Mars ever have an environment that would have supported life?

IV. Detailed Research

A. Read in-depth about the topic

- Now that you have your topic, you can select the final sources to use in your paper.
- You should read carefully about your topic and develop your understanding of it in its broader context.

B. Identifying proper academic sources

- Academic sources are professionally produced books, articles, etc.
- See section on "Working with Sources" below.

C. Take effective research notes for references and citations

- Don't rely on memory! Be sure you have carefully noted down the page numbers and bibliographic information for each source, and put all word-for-word quotations in "quotation marks" so you never mix up your words with the words of your sources.
 - Organize your notes by topic. Try using index cards with each fact written on a separate card so you can move them around and reshuffle as needed.
- D. Answer the research question**
- When you are done researching, you should be able to answer your research question.
 - If you can't, you need to do more research, or pick a new research question based on your further reading.

V. Thesis Development

A. Use your answer to craft a thesis

- A thesis statement is the most important sentence in your paper.
- It is the key to your essay, telling the reader what your topic is and how you will explore it.

B. Your thesis should outline what the essay will demonstrate or prove

- A typical essay thesis is a single sentence with four parts:
 - A brief summary of what the essay's topic is
 - The three most important arguments that will support the topic

C. Example of a thesis statements

- Peter the Great transformed Early Modern Russia into a European power by building a new capital, breaking the power of the nobles, and importing European ideas and techniques into Russia.

PART TWO: WRITING

I. Outlining

A. Develop an outline of the whole essay

- The essay will have the following parts, which you should fill in as you outline:
 - Introduction
 - Thesis
 - Body (with three to five main topics)
 - Restatement of thesis
 - Conclusion

B. Use proper outline form with points and sub-points

- An outline looks like this section, with major points listed first and supporting points listed underneath the major ideas.
- There are many good guides for outlining, but you don't have to be too specific about Roman numerals versus letters and numbers as long as you have your outline structured in a way you understand.

- There is more detailed information on outlining and an example of an essay outline in the section "The Outline" below.

II. Crafting an Introduction

A. Can be done first or after writing the body

- If you know how to start, go for it!
- If not, wait until you're done and use your work to help you.

B. Choose an effective opening strategy

- Pick an introduction that will make readers want to read more.
- Make sure it will lead readers into your essay.

C. Examples of opening strategies

- Open with a relevant quotation.
- Open with a startling or unusual fact about your topic.
- Set the scene by relating an anecdote or event.

D. Integrate the thesis

- At the end of the introduction, give your thesis statement so readers will know what comes next.
- For short essays, the thesis is part of the introductory paragraph; for longer essays it may need to be its own paragraph.

III. Developing Body Paragraphs

A. Each body paragraph should present one main idea that supports your thesis

- Do not try to include multiple ideas in a paragraph
- Each paragraph should be fully developed and fully support the main idea
- You can do this with the "sandwich" model of paragraph writing

B. The sandwich model breaks down a paragraph into three parts:

- Topic sentence (bread)
 - This sentence tells the reader the paragraph's main idea.
- Supporting details (meat)
 - These sentences provide supporting details that prove that your main idea is true.
 - These can include quotations, facts, and analysis.
- Closing sentence (bread)
 - This sentence reiterates the main idea and links it to the next paragraph.

C. Cite your sources in your paragraphs (see "Working with Sources" below).

IV. Transitions

A. Link paragraphs through transitional words and phrases

- Transitions are little words that show the reader how your new idea connects to the previous idea.
- The idea is that the reader needs to be shown how your paragraphs fit together—connect the dots for them.

B. It is important to guide reader from thought to thought

- Your ideas may be clear to you, but your readers need to be shown.
- Assume the reader knows nothing about the topic and needs you to tell him or her how your ideas fit together.

C. Examples of transition words

- Some transition words include "therefore," "however," "similarly," "in contrast," and many more.
- You can also use whole phrases to transition, such as "Unlike what was discussed in the previous section, ..."

D. In long papers, a sentence or a short paragraph might be needed to transition between major sections.

V. Conclusion

A. Restate the thesis

- Remind the reader what your essay intended to demonstrate or prove.
- Use different wording from the original thesis statement to avoid repetition.

B. Use an effective closing strategy

- This is similar to the introductory strategies.
- Pick a different closing strategy than you opened with.

C. Examples of closing strategies

- Close with a relevant quotation.
- Close with the most important fact the reader should remember.
- Close with a statement about the relevance of your topic now and in the future.

PART THREE: REVISING

I. Rereading

A. Read your essay again to get a sense of flow and how it sounds

- The top tip for catching mistakes is actually taking the time to read your own work again carefully—you'd be surprised how many people never do this!
- Try reading your work out loud. Sometimes hearing it makes it easier to catch errors.

B. Look for mistakes, lapses in logic, or where it doesn't make sense

- Anywhere you stop and say "what?" is a good place for revision.

2. Make sure your evidence supports your thesis.
3. Pretend you are a reader who knows little about the material. Would this stand on its own, or do you need to add more explanation?

II. Revising

- A. Rewrite areas that don't work**
- B. Add additional material when and where needed to "flesh out" the draft and ensure it makes good sense**
- C. Fix any mistakes**

III. Rereading Again

- A. Read work over to see how new version reads, like you did in step 1**
- B. Fix any mistakes**

IV. Proofreading

- A. Carefully examine every word for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors**
 1. Watch for homophones (words that sound the same but are used differently, like "there," "their," and "they're").
 2. Know the rules for possessives.
 - Singular: The cat's toy (one cat)
 - Plural: The cats' toy (two cats)
- B. Fix any mistakes**

V. Finalizing

- A. Reread a final time and submit a clean copy**
- B. Special for electronic submissions: Paste into a new document so previous drafts can't be retrieved or changes tracked**
 1. This way only your final copy will be visible by the instructor.
 2. It also prevents any formatting problems when opening the file.
 3. But be sure to save your work before you copy and paste.

Can you cite too much? Yes, you can. If you find yourself citing every sentence, you are citing too much and need to add more of your own original thoughts and analysis.

III. Citation of Sources in Bibliography

Even though you have cited your sources in-text, you still need a bibliography at the end of your paper. This means providing all the information a reader needs to find your source in convenient list form. Many students think that an author and title or URL are good enough. A lot of reference lists look like this:

1. Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*.
2. <http://www.dickensmuseum.com/>

A good reference list provides full publication information in addition to the author and title, like this:

Charles Dickens Museum, The. The Charles Dickens Museum. 2005. 31 Mar. 2010 <<http://www.dickensmuseum.com>>.
Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Ed. A. B. DeMille. The Academy Classics. New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1922.

With this information, you know the name of the website, the editor of the book, when the materials were published and a wealth of other information to help you pick out these references from other, similarly-named sources.

IV. The Major Writing Styles

There are several academic organizations that provide rules for how to cite sources in your essay and bibliography. Each of these styles is slightly different. Below are a few of the most important writing styles. Check with your instructor to find out what style you should use.

A. APA Style

- a. This style uses the author's name and the year of publication in-text, like this (Smith, 2010).
- b. The bibliography is called "References" and items are listed by author and then year, like this:
 - Smith, J. (2010). *A book of lists*. New York: TP Publishing.
- c. It is commonly used for psychology and social science papers.

B. Chicago Style (or Turabian Style)

- a. This style uses footnotes to list full citation information for a source, like this:
 - Jasper Smith, *A Book of Lists* (New York: TP Publishing, 2010), 17.
- b. The bibliography is called "Bibliography" and items are listed by author and then title, like this:
 - Smith, Jasper. *A Book of Lists*. New York: TP Publishing, 2010.
- c. It is commonly used for history papers and some science papers.

C. Harvard Style

- a. This style uses the author's name and the year of publication in-text, like this (Smith 2010).
- b. The bibliography is called "References" and items are listed by author and then year, like this:
 - Smith, J. 2010. *A Book of Lists*, New York, TP Publishing.
- c. It is most commonly used outside the United States by international universities.

D. MLA Style

- a. This style uses the author's name and the page in-text, like this (Smith 17).
- b. The bibliography is called "Works Cited" and items are listed by author and then title, like this:
 - Smith, Jasper. *A Book of Lists*. New York: TP Publishing, 2010.
- c. It is commonly used for literature and other humanities papers.

There are many rules for citing sources in each of these styles. There are many good online guides for each style, but one great resource is: <http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/>

V. Plagiarism Concerns and Academic Honesty

The essay you turn in needs to be your own work, and everything in the paper not placed in "quotation marks" needs to be written in your own words. Information that you learn from outside sources needs to be cited according to the citation rules above.

Plagiarism is the use of others' words, ideas, or information without proper attribution and documentation. Every school has an official plagiarism policy, and you should be sure to consult your school's plagiarism policy for more information about your school's specific requirements. Plagiarism can result in failed assignments, failed classes, and even expulsion in the worst case scenario.

When you use the internet to do research, it is very tempting

to use the copy and paste function to add your research to your paper. This makes it exceptionally easy to forget to put "quotation marks" around borrowed words, or to add proper documentation to your quotations.

Sometimes, students try to paraphrase by copying material from the internet and then changing words one by one when they are in the paper so that the text looks different. This is still plagiarism, even if you change the words and even if you add a citation. A true paraphrase must use completely different sentence structure and syntax, something the find-and-replace method can't do. Let's look at an example:

A. Original: "The horror story has its origins in the Gothic literature of the eighteenth century, when Horace Walpole produced his famous romance, *The Castle of Otranto*."

B. Bad paraphrase: "The horror tale had its beginning with the Gothic writers of the 1700s, when Horace Walpole wrote his popular book *The Castle of Otranto*."

a. *This is too close to the original. Changing just a few words isn't enough. A good paraphrase does not follow the same structure or use the same words.*

C. Good paraphrase: "Horror literature began with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, the first Gothic novel and one that achieved great popularity."

Ultimately, the best policy is to write out paraphrases and even quotations by typing them yourself instead of relying on copy-and-paste. This will force you to be more careful about sources, and you'll have a better change of avoiding accidental plagiarism.

Working with Sources

Working with sources can be challenging, but there are a few easy steps to making incorporating research into your essay easy.

I. College Level Sources

Essays should use high quality, college level sources. College level sources can be broken down into a few categories:

A. Books

- a. Books written for an adult general audience are good to use, especially those written by scholars or professors.
- b. Exceptions: General interest encyclopedias and "For Dummies" books. These are not good sources.

B. Academic Journals

- a. These are the publications of academic societies and have research articles written by professors.
- b. You can usually find these by visiting your school's library site and searching the research databases.

C. Newspapers and Magazines

- a. For most assignments these are good sources.
- b. However, for formal research papers use these with caution to supplement material in your essay because they are not always at the academic level.

D. Educational or Scholarly Websites

- a. This requires judgment. You have to evaluate if the online material is at a scholarly level. Sites ending in .edu are generally academic in nature.
- b. A blog or personal website probably isn't a good choice, but a scholarly project or government site usually is.
- c. *Wikipedia* is not a college level source and should be avoided. Don't cite *Wikipedia* in your paper no matter how much you want to. Since anyone can change it, you can never tell for sure whether a fact you read in it is true.

II. Citation of Sources in Text

When you refer to information you learned from outside sources such as books, articles, or websites, you need to provide a citation. Citations tell the reader where you got your information. Usually these are done using an academic style of documentation like MLA or APA (check with your instructor to find out what to use). They generally give the author's name and the page where you found the info.

There are three places where you cite information:

1. Whenever you quote someone, you must tell readers who said it and where you found it, like this: "The sky is blue" (Smith 35).
2. When you borrow ideas or information from a source, like this: Scholars say that the sky is blue (Smith 35).
3. When you report someone else's opinion, like this: But some, like Smith, feel that blue skies are overrated (35).

The Outline

Writing a research paper is easier than it looks once you know the secret formula that makes it as easy as plugging in names and dates. What is this great secret to writing the perfect research paper easily? The answer is: developing a clear, concise outline. An outline begins by ordering the information to present in an essay. You do this by arranging your information in order of importance, from main ideas to supporting details.

Most research papers follow a standard template, which you will find below. Short essays make a paragraph out of each of the Roman numerals in the sample below. Longer essays would make a section out of each Roman numeral and a paragraph out of each capital letter. Thesis-length manuscripts might make a chapter out of each Roman numeral. In other words, you can scale the sample outline for a research paper up or down for an essay of any length.

I. Introduction

- A. Opening Thought**
- B. Thesis**

II. First Major Topic

- A. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
- B. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
- C. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)

III. Second Major Topic

- A. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
- B. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
- C. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)

IV. Third Major Topic

- A. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
- B. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
- C. Supporting Detail**
 - a. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)
 - b. Specific detail, quotation, reference, etc. (if needed)

V. Conclusion

- A. Restate Thesis**
- B. Closing Thought**