Essay: Definition, qualities and types

**Definition**:

An **essay** is a short piece of writing that discusses, describes or analyzes one topic. It can discuss a subject directly or indirectly, seriously or humorously. It can describe personal opinions, or just report information. An essay can be written from any perspective, but essays are most commonly written in the first person (I), or third person (subjects that can be substituted with the he, she, it, or they pronouns).

**FIVE IMPORTANT QUALITIES OF GOOD WRITING:**

1. Writing should have **focus:** An essay should have a single clear central idea. Each paragraph should have a clear main point or topic sentence.
2. Writing should have **development:** Each paragraph should support the central idea of the paper. Individual sentences should support the main point of the paragraph.
3. Writing should have **unity:** Every paragraph in an essay should be related to the main idea. Each paragraph should stick to its main point.
4. Writing should have **coherence:** An essay or paper should be organized logically, flow smoothly, and "stick" together. In other words, everything in the writing should make sense to a reader.
5. Writing should have **correctness:** A paper should be written in generally correct standard English, with complete sentences, and be relatively error-free.
6. One additional quality, not part of this list, but nevertheless, very important, is **creativity**. The best writing is that which carries some of the personality, the individuality of its author. Follow the above guidelines, but always strive above all to make your writing uniquely your own.

**Structure of an 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.

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| These simple steps will guide you through the essay writing process:   * [Decide on your topic](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/topic.html). * [Prepare an outline or diagram of your ideas](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/outline.html). * [Write your thesis statement](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/thesis.html). (Discussed towards the end) * [Write the body](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/body.html).   + Write the main points.   + Write the subpoints.   + Elaborate on the subpoints. * [Write the introduction](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/intro.html). * [Write the conclusion](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/intro.html#conclusion). * [Add the finishing touches](http://lklivingston.tripod.com/essay/finish.html). |

**Types of Essays:**

There are many different kinds of essays. The following are a some of the most common ones:

1. *Descriptive:*

Examples: A descriptive essay could describe . . .

\* a tree in my backyard;

\* a visit to the children's ward of a hospital;

\* a hot fudge sundae;

\* what an athlete did in order to make it to the Olympics.

The descriptive essay provides details about how something looks, feels, tastes, smells, makes one feel, or sounds. It can also describe what something is, or how something happened. These essays generally use a lot of sensory details. The essay could be a list-like description that provides point by point details. Or, it could function as a story, keeping the reader interested in the plot and theme of the event described.

1. *Narrative:*

Examples:A narrative essay could tell of . . .

\* my brother's and my fishing trips;

\* a boring trip to the grocery store;

\* my near-death experience at the beach.

The narrative essay tells a story. It can also be called a "short story." Generally the narrative essay is conversational in style, and tells of a personal experience. It is most commonly written in the first person (uses I). This essay could tell of a single, life-shaping event, or simply a mundane daily experience.

1. *Argumentative:*

Examples: An argumentative essay may persuade a reader that . . .

\* he or she should use public transportation instead of driving.

\* cats are better than dogs.

An argumentative essay is one that attempts to persuade the reader to the writer's point of view. The writer can either be serious or funny, but always tries to convince the reader of the validity of his or her opinion. The essay may argue openly, or it may attempt to subtly persuade the reader by using irony or sarcasm.

1. *Expository:*

Examples: In an expository essay you may be asked to explain:

\* why you admire a particular person.

\* why parents are sometimes strict.

\* how moving from place to place affects teens.

While expository is just a synonym for information, strict guidelines of the expository essay ensure that the information it contains is clear and concise. An easy way to get off on the right foot in writing an expository essay is to remember that the root of expository is expose. The writer’s job is to totally expose the topic in a way that makes the information unmistakably clear to his/her audience.

The expository essay is a totally objective composition. Differing from many other types of essay, the writer’s job is to explain and inform without offering an opinion or developing an argument. To that end, the expository essay is an impartial analysis of facts and evidence. Further evidence of its impartiality is that the expository essay is always written in the third person.

**What is a thesis statement?**

A thesis statement is the basic stand that an author takes, the opinion that he expresses, and the major point that he wishes to make about his subject. It contains the controlling idea of the essay, and therefore, gives the direction and the unity to all the separate elements of the writing. The purpose of the essay is to convince the reader that the thesis is indeed a valid one.

1. The first step in writing an effective thesis statement involves the focusing, limiting, or narrowing of the topic. The scope of the thesis will depend on length, purpose, audience, occasion, and knowledge (see handout—Narrowing the topic)
2. Each thesis will (a) state the subject clearly and specifically so that it can be broken into parts; (b) take a stand or attitude about the subject; and (c) provide the direction by indicating, implicitly or explicitly, the order in which the essay will develop the points.
3. The controlling idea in the thesis is a word, phrase, or clause that states the opinion, attitude, or stand that the writer takes about the subject; it provides the angle from which the writer wishes to approach his subject.
4. The thesis is always a single declarative statement:

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| **A thesis is not a title** | | |
| **Poor:** |  | The Decline of Baseball |
| **Better:** | Baseball, once a national pastime and even an addiction, has lost its popularity because of the new interest in more violent sports. |
| **Poor:** | Homes and Schools. |
| **Better:** | If parents want better education for their children, they must be willing to commit their time to working with the schools. |
| **A thesis is not an announcement of the subject** | | |
| **Poor:** | I want to share some thoughts with you about our space program. |
| **Better:** | Since the space program has yet to provide the American people with any substantial, practical returns, it is a waste of money and should be dissolved. |
| **A thesis is not a statement of absolute fact** | | |
| **Poor:** | William Shakespeare wrote King Lear. |
| **Better:** | King Lear exemplifies the finest development of Shakespeare's dramatic talent. |
| **A good thesis is restricted: It limits the subject to a manageable amount** | | |
| **Poor:** | People are too selfish. |
| **Better:** | Rush hour traffic exemplifies human behavior at its worst. |
| **Poor:** | Crime must be stopped. |
| **Better:** | To stop the alarming rise in the number of violent crimes committed every year, our courts must hand out tougher sentences. |
| **A good thesis is unified: It should express one major idea about one subject** | | |
| **Poor:** | Detective stories are not a high form of literature, but people have always been fascinated by them and many fine writers have experimented with them. |
| **Better:** | Detective stories appeal to the basic human desire for thrills. |
| **A good thesis is specific** | | |
| **Poor:** | The new Denver Art Museum is impressive. |
| **Better:** | The new Denver Art Museum is a monument to human folly. |
| **Poor:** | Hemingway's war stories are very good. |
| **Better:** | Hemingway's war stories helped to create a new prose style. |

**Beginnings: Things to Avoid and Things to Do**

Don’ts:

1. Avoid high sounding truisms about life in general.  
2. Avoid the traditional complaint about the difficulty of writing on either the assigned or chosen topic.  
3. Avoid the personal apology to the teacher (or to any reader). In fact, never apologize to your reader for your lack of knowledge or your poor style. Why should the reader waste time reading something that even the writer believes is bad.  
4. Avoid the dictionary definition.   
5. Avoid boring your reader with such openings as "I am going to tell you about."  
6. Avoid leading up to your subject through a string of irrelevancies. Stay with your subject and its implications.

Do's:

1. Do directly state the facts and details.  
2. Do announce your subject in an effective introduction.  
3. Begin with a blunt statement of fact intended to startle your reader, as long as the fact relates to you subject.  
4. Begin with a dramatic incident followed by the steps leading up to it.  
5. Present an answer to some pending problem.  
6. Begin with a quotation but make sure that the quotation is intimately related to your subject.  
7. Begin with a narrative, a relevant experience that can lead to your subject.  
8. Use the first paragraph to direct your essay, but do not crowd too many details into it. Leave something for the body of the paper.  
9. Use description, if it relates to your subject.