

Basic Guide to Writing an Essay

What is 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.

Don't let the thought of putting pen to paper daunt you. Get started!

Essay Format

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.
- Write the conclusion.
- Add the finishing touches.

Choosing a Topic

You may have no choice as to your topic. If this is the case, you still may not be ready to jump to the next step. 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.

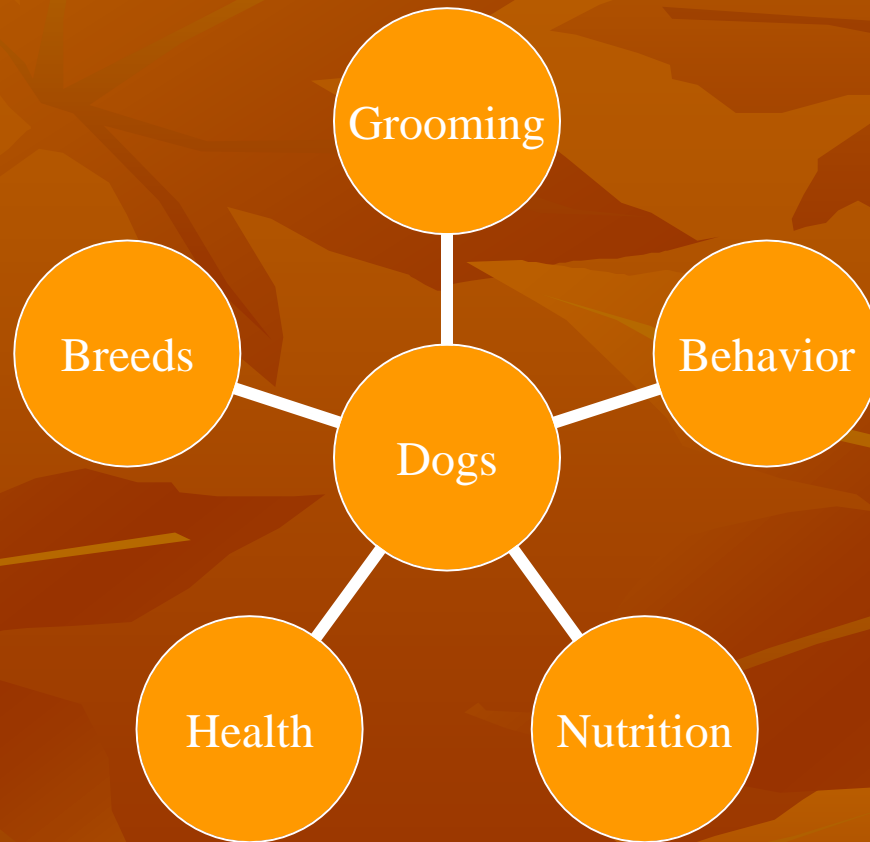
For example, the topic "KENYA" is a general one. If your objective is to write an overview, this topic is suitable. If your objective is to write a specific analysis, this topic is too general. You must narrow it to something like "Politics in Kenya" or "Kenya's Culture."

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

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.

Organizing Your Ideas



Writing Your Outline

- Begin your outline by writing your topic at the top of the page.
- Next, write the Roman numerals I, II, and III, spread apart down the left side of the page.
- 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.
- Under each Roman numeral, write A, B, and C down the left side of the page.
- 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.

Composing 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?

Thesis Statements

- 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.

Writing 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.
 - Start by writing down one of your main ideas, in sentence form. Next, write down each of your supporting points for that main idea, but leave four or five lines in between each point.
 - In the space under each point, write down some elaboration for that point. Elaboration can be further description or explanation or discussion.
 - Once you have fleshed out each of your body paragraphs, one for each main point, you are ready to continue.

Example

- If your main idea is "reduces freeway congestion," you might say this:
 - Public transportation reduces freeway congestion.
- 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.

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. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
 - Check the instructions for the assignment.
 - Check your writing.



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

Congratulations!