How to write an essay

Step 1: Understand the assignment

Don’t assume, and don’t underestimate how easily you can misinterpret instructions. A misunderstanding is costly; you can’t get good grades if you’re not responding to the correct questions in the first place. When you’re tasked with a writing assignment, take a few minutes to read through and digest what your professor is looking for.

Read the instruction thoroughly, and highlight keywords that indicate the true purpose of the assignment. Are you writing a discursive essay, a précis, or a book review? Your writing style, tone, and formatting will need to conform to what’s required in the paper. If you’re still unclear about what you need to do, always ask your professor for clarification before proceeding.

Students can avoid over-researching by listing specific questions that will help narrow down certain viewpoints in a research topic.

**Step 2: Research the topic**

Now that you’ve cleared the confusion, it’s time to dive into the actual pre-writing work. Researching allows you to go in-depth into a subject beyond what is studied in class, hence why it’s usually the most fun part of the entire writing process. There’s such a thing as over-researching though, and you don’t want to be overwhelmed with more information than necessary.

The key to avoiding falling into the rabbit hole of endless research is by starting smart. Put yourself in the reader’s shoes: what would you like to know most about your subject matter? Begin with a list of inquiries that are specific to your topic, eliminating anything that is too generalized.

As you research, it’s crucial to keep track of your sources and compile a reference list so you can have your facts at hand when you start writing them in your essay. Your writing process will be more streamlined if you start organizing your sources early on.

Step 3: Construct your thesis statement

An essay is as good as its thesis statement. Think of your paper as building a case in a defense trial. What’s the central argument or purpose of your paper? Does it invite the reader to hear your side of the story?

The thesis statement has to be something that is debatable, but not too broad. It isn’t a fact, nor an opinion, but rather a claim that can be expanded on both sides of the fence. A well-crafted thesis is a prelude to how your argument will develop, and gives readers a glimpse into where you’re going with your evidence.

Step 4: Outlining, structuring, and concluding

You’ve got your thesis statements and painstaking research to back it up — the next step is putting them all together. A convincing essay is one that can deliver coherence and consistency throughout the pages. You want your arguments to read like they develop organically, so think about ways you can order them. If there is a timeline involved, structuring your points by chronology will make your points easier to follow.

Sectioning your paragraphs with topic sentences is another way to signal transition between ideas before introducing new supporting evidence in your writing. End each idea with real-life examples obtained from your research, and anticipate counterarguments to your claims by addressing them as much as you can in your essay.

When writing your conclusion, don’t regurgitate your previous ideas. Use the space to make a lasting impression on your readers by summarizing your arguments and providing a good closure by offering a unique perspective on the larger scholarship of your subject.

Step 5: Proofread your draft

While it’s tempting to submit your essay and not look back, taking time to proofread and edit your writing is a critical step in your overall writing procedure. Try to not edit immediately after finishing your draft — let it sit for a day or two if you have the time. You’ll notice more subtle mistakes with a fresh set of eyes, and won’t lose marks in stylistic errors.

Some professors are more than happy to give feedback and suggestions to improve your draft, so make use of that if you have time to spare before the deadline. Getting professional input could be the game-changer between a lower and a higher grade for your essay.

Once you’re happy with your final draft and have cited all your sources accordingly, you’re all good to go! Remember, learning how to write an essay gets better with practice if you plan accordingly from the beginning.