

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF AN ESSAY

What is an essay?

In an academic setting, such as a school or university, an essay is a formal piece of writing that is a response to a question. It takes the form of an extended argument (thesis). The word 'essay' comes from the French *essayer*, to try, so you can think of it as trialling an idea.

What is the point of an essay?

Aside from getting a grade, the point of an essay is to trial out your idea. The best essays demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the text and also the context (background information which enhances your understanding of the work). So, partly the point of an essay is showing that you're knowledgeable about your topic and that you have done all the groundwork needed. Most students that want a good grade don't have trouble with understanding and reading about the text, but they do have trouble with the second part: answering the question. This sounds easy, but often essay questions have questions which require a complicated and developed response.

How do I write an essay?

The essay needs to be structured in three parts:

1. INTRODUCTION

This is an introduction to your ideas, **not an introduction to the text or the background of the text**. You have to introduce or explore the ideas of the question. Then, come up with a clear one sentence direct response. This is called a thesis.

2. MAIN BODY

This is the main bulk of your essay. It will contain a minimum of 3 paragraphs. Each paragraph has to be a different point that answers the question. Every paragraph should begin with a topic sentence. This tells you what that paragraph is about.

E.g.

Nichols has a positive relationship with her mother, though the mother is protective she does also know when to allow her daughter to become independent.

3. CONCLUSION

Summarise all your ideas, but don't include anything new, as you need to finish it soon, not to start all over again. Conclusions are the most important part of an essay, as it is the only chance you will get to get your point across, and answer the given question. Clearly elaborate your thoughts, explain why you think something is the way it is. Provide a balanced viewpoint, properly breakdown each point idea of your paragraph.

What kind of language do I use in an essay?

An essay requires a very specific vocabulary. As part of your studying, you need to learn good essay words and phrases along with reading and studying the texts. If you write whatever comes into your head and sound like you are speaking, the quality of your ideas will suffer. You have to demonstrate specific skills such as analysis, and to do these you absolutely have to use the right words and phrases.

Troubleshooting:

I don't really know what to say.

This is a common response that I get from my students. If you don't personally know what to say about the text, it means you need to do more research before you are confident enough to make your own ideas. Read the text again, use revision books and websites to help you get a deeper understanding of the main themes - understand what

other people typically say about it. Once you're more comfortable with the text you will begin to develop your own opinions.