

Guidelines: Planning and Drafting the Critical Essay

An essay is a carefully organised answer to a question. If your topic is not a question, rethink it so that it is. There have developed a number of accepted conventions about what an essay should look like. They provide a useful framework for presenting ideas.

The conventions of the essay

Conventions about structure

- It has an introductory paragraph, which shows the focus of the essay and indicates the main points to be covered.
- The body of the essay consists of a number of paragraphs, each of which:
 - deals with one main point about the text
 - has a topic sentence.

It has a concluding paragraph

Conventions about language

- Language is generally formal
- Full paragraphs and sentences are used rather than numbered points and headings.
- Although formal, the essay should be interesting to read.

Conventions about references and quotations

- Titles of full length works, such as films or novels are underlined or placed in *italics*.
- Titles of shorter works such as articles, stories and chapters are placed in 'quotation' marks.
- Authors are referred to by their full name or surname.
- Where words, phrases or sentences from the text are used in analysis, they are placed in quotation marks. Reference with the page number in brackets.

Structure

- Helps you organise your thoughts in a logical manner
- Makes it easier for the reader to follow your essay.

The Introduction

The introduction is more than just a beginning. Just because a paragraph starts an essay does not mean that it is an effective introduction. The point of the introduction is to tell your reader:

- Where you are coming from
- Where you are going

How shall I do this?

1. Briefly introduce the text you are writing about, including the title and writer
2. State the focus/ point of view of your answer to the question. This is the **controlling idea** of the essay. Your sentence may use some words from the essay question; better still use your own words.
3. Outline the **main points** (3-4), in order, that you will make in explaining your answer. This is called your **planning** sentence(s) because it contains the plan for the body of the essay.

The Body of the Essay

The body of the essay will have a number, 3-4, of paragraphs each dealing with one of the **main points** outlined in your planning sentence in the introduction.

The well –constructed paragraph, one that is easy to follow, has:

- a **topic sentence** which is like a sign post because it lets the reader know that you have finished with one point and are moving on to another. It often has three parts:
 - a transition part , linking words to lead into the new idea (words like: ‘*in addition*’, ‘*however*’, ‘*secondly*’, ‘*another aspect of*’ . . .)
 - words that refer back to the **controlling idea**
 - and the **main point** for this paragraph
- the topic sentence is followed by supporting sentences that explain the **main point**, often using evidence from the text and which may include a short (1-2 line) quotation.

The Conclusion

The conclusion is your final paragraph. It should:

- sum up the **main points** of the essay
- give a sense of completion

The conclusion is often the hardest part of the essay to write because it can end up sounding exactly like the introduction and that can be rather repetitive. The trick is to put a slightly different ‘spin’ on the **controlling idea** indicating the importance of what you have written. The final sentence needs to be strong, showing your conviction about the **answer** you have given to the essay **question**.

Language

Essays use formal language so slang and contractions (don’t = do not) are best avoided. Your essay *is* your opinion on the topic so do not waste words with “I think” or “in my opinion” or “my view is”, in fact while it is not forbidden, not using “I” helps you write in a formal way.

Formal writing does not mean that you should use long unfamiliar words; good writers rely mostly upon short simple words. Take care to avoid cliched worn out phrases like “a picture is worth a thousand words”.

This way of writing an essay works, and if this is your very first essay, do not read further! However some students are writing so confidently that they do not need to follow the formula so rigidly. It is quite possible to write with structure without the bones showing through the fabric. You can write about a theme without actually using the word “theme”, you can write about symbolic language without using the exact terms Of course you can, and you can enjoy implying rather than plainly stating your point of view. An essay is an opportunity for carefully crafted writing; perhaps this will be your best piece so far. RMcC