

ESSAY WRITING

What is an essay?

A complete definition of an essay would run several pages in length. One brief definition, from Harmon and Holman's *Handbook to Literature*, defines an essay as "a moderately brief prose discussion of a restricted topic." Another (M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*) declares that an essay is "a brief composition that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, or persuade us to accept a thesis."

The operative word in both definitions is "discussion," which implies thought. When you write an essay, you are producing a written account of your knowledge, your considered judgment, even your doubts. You do so in hopes of engaging the attention of readers and persuading them to agree with you.

Among the sure-fire ways to reach readers is to meet their expectations. Readers expect to find structure in an essay. They are culturally conditioned to look for--and expect to find--a **thesis**, a **topic sentence** for each paragraph, a **point-by-point argument** that supports the thesis. When a writer sets down thoughts just as they occur to him or her, without submitting them to rigorous ordering and development, readers tend to find themselves confused, intolerant--and unconvinced. Therefore, you should expect to give as much attention to the form and structure of your argument as to its substance, in short, to write a conventionally structured thesis-and-support essay.

How can I help myself write a good essay?

READ your professor's assignment carefully. Be sure you have full understanding of your professor's requirements and expectations.

THINK about your topic. This stage of pre-writing includes selective re-reading, taking notes on relevant specific details, and locating significant passages you might quote. Most of all, it means questioning yourself about the topic to help yourself think about it as fully and deeply as possible.

> [click here](#) for ways to improve your critical thinking

PLAN your essay. Organize your notes. Generate a trial thesis and a scratch outline that gives logical structure to your ideas and information. Do all this BEFORE you try to write a first draft.

> [click here](#) for advice about writing a thesis

> [click here](#) for advice about writing an outline

WRITE more than one draft of your essay so that you have a chance to adjust your thinking, your supporting evidence, your essay structure, and your word choice and grammar.

> [click here](#) for information about the writing process

> [click here](#) for a revision checklist

Get help from a professional writing tutor at the Learning & Advising Center. To make an appointment, drop in or call (215) 951-2799. A tutor can help you at any stage of the writing process. Make sure there is time after your tutoring appointment to think about and incorporate what you learned in the tutoring session.