

The Basics of an Essay

The academic essay is a form of writing that helps both the author and the reader to delve deeply into an idea. Although the essay relies on some conventions of structure and approach, the power of an essay often lies in its novelty. Readers are engaged by essays that express old ideas in new ways, that examine the familiar with a hint of the strange, or that follow conventions initially for the purpose of later rejecting them. Your aim as an essay writer is to use conventions not as hard and fast rules, but rather as a center from which to begin your exploration.

There are four basic types of academic essay, each of which uses a different approach to explore the chosen topic or focus:

1. The *Expository Essay* investigates and evaluates an idea based in source material.
2. The *Argumentative Essay* goes a step further and uses evidence to convince the reader of a particular point of view.
3. The *Narrative Essay* explores an idea through the lens of experiences and stories.
4. The *Descriptive Essay* focuses on a subject (person, place, event, situation, etc.) and presents that subject to the reader through vivid and clear language.

When making an outline, pick an approach to suit your intended subject and then move on to consider the *Goals*, *Content*, and *Form* that drive a powerful essay.

Goals:

- To think on paper—your first objective is to explore an idea through writing.
- To further a spirit of inquiry, not merely of presentation.
- To enrich your audience—you want to instruct, inspire, and engage your reader.
- To answer the question “so what”—why should your readers care?
- To engage in a written conversation with other thinkers.

Content:

- Develop a central idea that is relevant to your reader.
- Use well-framed questions and solidly-formed arguments.
- Present evidentiary support for your assertions in the form of factual information, logical reasoning, or anecdotes (the last is the least reliable).
- Include interpretation and analysis of others’ ideas (especially in essays that respond to other writing).

Form:

- Essays should have an overall structure to guide the reader through the ideas.
- Ideas should be introduced and concluded, not simply thrown in free-form.
- Arguments should be founded on verifiable evidence rather than statements of opinion.
- Prose should be reader-focused rather than writer-focused (directed towards conversation rather than contemplation).

In the end, rely on your passion, enthusiasm, and curiosity to frame your work. The most compelling essays are those written by authors who were excited by the process of inquiry and discovery.

~by John Dunham, AUNE Writing Center