

# Essay Writing Basics

**I**n this section, you will learn what an essay is and what the basic steps involved in writing an essay are. You will see that a good essay has a strong topic, a specific purpose, and that it is written for a specific audience. You will learn that writing is a process that requires planning, revision, and time.

## I WHAT IS AN ESSAY?

### A Define an essay

Work with a partner to take this quiz about essays and writing. Circle the best answers. Then discuss your answers with your classmates.

- The definition of the word *essay* is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a long paragraph on a single topic
  - a piece of writing that is long enough to cover many topics and present different viewpoints
  - a piece of writing on a single subject, usually presenting the personal view of the writer
- An essay is a type of writing that you normally do \_\_\_\_\_.
  - in a work situation
  - at the high school or college level
  - when you want to tell a story
- When writing an essay, it is \_\_\_\_ acceptable to write in the first person (using *I* and *me*).
  - almost always
  - sometimes
  - never
- It's a good idea to write \_\_\_\_ of an essay.
  - just one draft
  - several drafts
  - at least eight drafts
- A *topic* is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a specific subject; what the essay is about
  - an opinion; what you think
  - a broad field; all of your ideas in a given area
- A *topic sentence* is a sentence that \_\_\_\_\_.
  - is the first one in a paragraph
  - is the most interesting
  - tells what the paragraph is about
- In an essay, the *introduction* \_\_\_\_\_.
  - introduces the writer
  - introduces the topic and your opinion about it
  - introduces the reason you chose your topic
- The *thesis statement*, or main idea, of an essay appears in the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - title
  - introduction
  - body (middle paragraphs)

- 9 The *conclusion* of an essay often \_\_\_\_.
- a restates the thesis
  - b is not indented
  - c presents details about a new topic
- 10 Most of the *examples* and *support* in an essay appear in \_\_\_\_.
- a the introduction
  - b the body paragraphs
  - c the conclusion
- 11 Most essays in high school and college are about \_\_\_\_ long.
- a three paragraphs
  - b five to ten paragraphs
  - c five to ten pages
- 12 When you write an academic essay, your *audience* is usually \_\_\_\_.
- a yourself
  - b your friends and family
  - c your teacher and classmates

## B Notice essay format

### ESSAY FORMAT

Essays follow a certain format; that is, they are written in a standard style that is easy to read. Your teacher may give you specific instructions for the essays you write in your class, but here are some general guidelines.

- **Required information:** Follow your instructor's directions for information to include at the top of your essay, such as your name, the class name, date, and so on.
- **Title:** Your title should be centered. Do not capitalize every letter of the title. Capitalize only the first letter of major words (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). Capitalize only short words like *the* and *a* if they are the first word in the title.
- **Spacing:** Use double-spacing on a computer or, if handwriting, write on every other line. This way, your instructor can easily write comments on your essay.
- **Indentation:** Indent the first sentence of every paragraph by leaving a space about  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch wide (about 1.25 cm). On a computer, this length is usually preset as five spaces with the tab key.
- **Margins:** Leave margins of about 1 inch or 2.55 cm on the left, right, top, and bottom of your essay. On a computer, margins are preset.
- **Fonts:** If you use a computer, use 12-point regular (not bold or italic) style font. Don't use unusual fonts or more than one font.
- **Alignment:** Format your essay *flush left*: The left side of each line starts at the same place (except for the indented first line of new paragraphs). Lines on the right side should be *ragged* – that is, they do not have to end at the same place.

## Practice 1

Read the model essay below. Label the parts with letters from the box. The number in parentheses shows a term that is used three times.

<b>a</b> body paragraph (3)	<b>e</b> indent	<b>i</b> right margin	<b>m</b> top margin
<b>b</b> bottom margin	<b>f</b> introduction	<b>j</b> support	<b>n</b> topic sentence (3)
<b>c</b> conclusion	<b>g</b> left margin	<b>k</b> thesis statement	
<b>d</b> example	<b>h</b> required information	<b>l</b> title	

1 → Sunsanee Anuchitpailin  
 English Composition II  
 Dr. Evans  
 March 6, 2008

2 →

3 → Credit Cards: Convenient or Dangerous?

4 → Credit cards make life easy. You can purchase many goods, even though you don't have any money in your purse. You just take out your credit card and sign your name. However, a lot of people don't think about the negative effects that can come from using credit cards. Personal debt in Thailand is increasing sharply every year, and I think one major reason is credit cards. These days it's quick and easy to obtain a credit card due to increased competition among banks. However, these cards can be dangerous for adolescents, businesspeople, and others who can't control their spending.

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8 → Many adolescents today suffer from materialism, and when these young people have credit cards, it often affects their lives negatively. For example, some groups of Thai university students pressure their friends to buy expensive brand-name accessories such as clothes, shoes, bags, and cell phones. They also go out to parties at pubs or restaurants. Because these students use credit cards to pay for their clothing and parties, they don't realize the true costs of these bad habits. To pay their credit card bills, some of them work part-time jobs after classes or on weekends. They exhaust themselves and neglect their studies, and still the amount of money that they spend is more than their wages. They can find themselves in serious debt in just a few years.

9 →

10 — If students have troubles with their debts, their parents may be able to help them. However, businesspeople who have trouble with debt face the risk of ruining their financial reputations. For example, they may end up on a blacklist, which is a record kept by financial companies. A blacklist shows if a person has had credit troubles. Banks will not approve a loan for a person who is on a blacklist, so that person won't be able to borrow money to run a business or to buy real estate. In addition, employees can also get into trouble at work if they have credit problems. For example, one of my co-workers owed money to his credit card company. Accordingly, the company phoned him at the office every day. He refused to receive his calls and told me to inform the creditor that he was in a meeting. After that, he asked to borrow some money from friends, but nobody trusted him. Fortunately, he later got a new job that earned him enough money to solve his credit problems. I am sure, though, that there are other businesspeople who were not as fortunate as my friend.

11 — Credit card problems affect not only adolescents and businesspeople, but also average people who can't control their spending. Advertising leads people to believe that they need fancier products and more of them. If they just used cash, they would not be able to buy products they couldn't afford. However, credit cards allow them to spend money they don't really have. Then when they can't pay their monthly credit card bills, they must pay fees as well as high rates of interest on the money they still owe. In some cases, the interest rates can be 20 percent per month. Paying off their debt makes people poorer, which actually encourages them to use their credit cards more. This growing cycle of debt causes all kinds of social problems.

12 — Credit cards can bring you convenience if you can manage your money and control your spending. But using credit cards will affect you in negative ways if you buy everything that you desire. They can lead you to debt, hurt your ability to do business, and damage your social stability. For these reasons, I believe that people should be better educated and also counseled about the risks when they apply for a credit card.

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18 —

## C Understand the purpose

### PURPOSES FOR ESSAYS

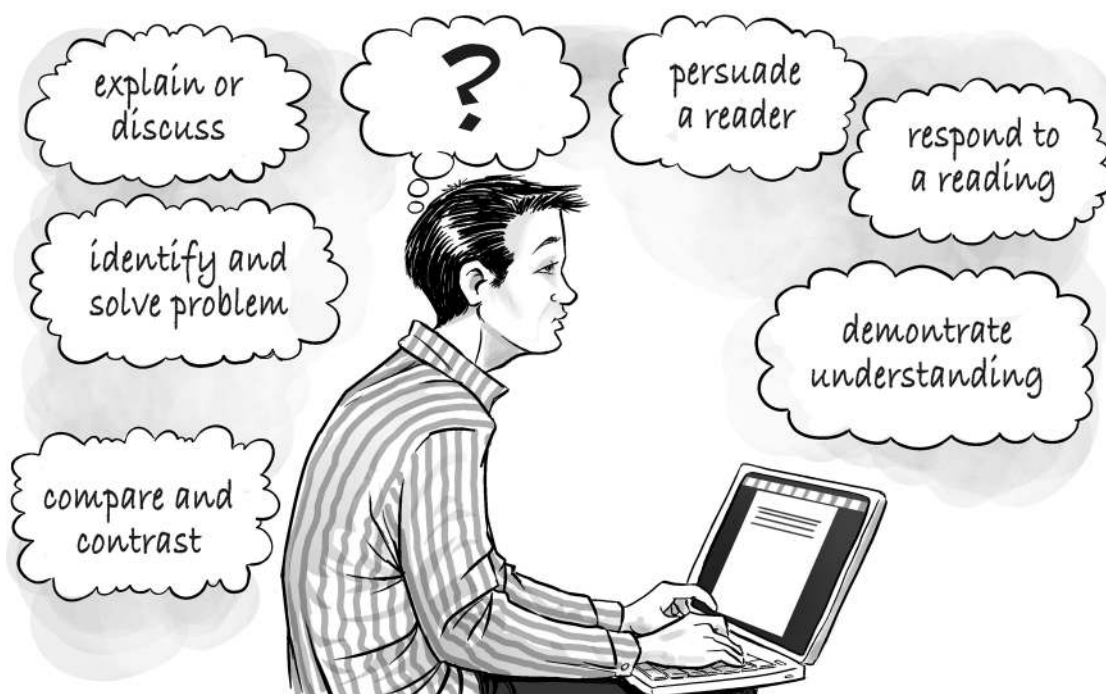
The word *essay* comes from a French word meaning “to attempt,” or “to try.” Writing instructors therefore ask students to write essays that make a point and are written with a specific purpose in mind. The most common essay purposes are to:

- explain or discuss a topic and give a personal opinion
- identify a problem and its causes, and propose a solution
- compare and contrast two or more things
- persuade a reader to hold a certain opinion or take a certain action
- respond to a reading or lecture
- demonstrate understanding or writing skills by writing a timed essay in class

Although a writer may have several purposes, essays ultimately aim to persuade their readers. For example, by comparing and contrasting two things, the writer hopes to persuade readers of the superiority of one over the other.

For most essays written in high school or college, you will be required to express your personal opinion and include arguments to support it. Stating your opinion is important even when your essay includes factual information or focuses on another author’s point of view.

Make sure that you understand the purpose of your essay before you begin to write it! Always ask your instructor if you are not certain.



## Practice 2

Read the writer's idea for an essay. What is the purpose of the essay? Circle the letter of the purpose.

- 1 Korean and Chinese people have some similar physical features, but others that are often different. I want people to know the differences so they understand that we don't look the same.
  - a to persuade the reader
  - b to compare and contrast
  - c to respond to information from a reading
- 2 I play the drums. Some of my friends think that I chose an easy instrument. I want people to know about playing drums so they understand why drumming is just as challenging as playing any other instrument.
  - a to explain or discuss a topic
  - b to demonstrate understanding or writing skill by writing a timed essay
  - c to identify a problem and offer a solution
- 3 In my school, all articles in the student newspaper must be approved by the school administration before publication. I think this shows that the school doesn't respect students. Students should have complete freedom to express themselves in the student newspaper.
  - a to identify a problem and offer a solution
  - b to respond to information from a lecture
  - c to compare and contrast
- 4 I read an article about different events leading up to the women's rights movement in my country. I want to summarize those causes and identify the major ones.
  - a to compare and contrast
  - b to identify a problem and offer a solution
  - c to respond to information from a reading, lecture, or other source
- 5 *Prompt:* Think of an issue that you and your parents disagree about. Take 30 minutes to explain your different positions. *Writer's idea:* My parents consider "study" time to be time that I am sitting at a desk with my head in a book. However, there are other ways to study that are better for me.
  - a to respond to information from a lecture
  - b to explain or discuss a topic
  - c to demonstrate understanding or writing skill by writing a timed essay
- 6 High school sports teams are too competitive. Only the good athletes can participate. School should have non-competitive sports teams, for health and fun. Teams should get points for attitude and effort, rather than goals or baskets.
  - a to explain or discuss a topic
  - b to persuade the reader
  - c to compare or contrast

## II AUDIENCE AND TOPIC

### A Identify your audience

#### AUDIENCE

When you write an essay, someone is going to read it: your audience. Naturally, your instructor is one part of your audience. If your classmates will read your paper, they are also your audience. In addition, your instructor might ask you to imagine another audience; for example, a government official, the readers of your school newspaper, or the readers of a certain magazine.

When you write your essay, identify your audience. Think about what they might already know about your topic.

- Do they need any background information?
- Do they know a lot or a little about your topic?
- Do they have opinions about your topic? If so, are those opinions likely to be the same as or different from your own?

After you consider your audience's knowledge and beliefs about your topic, then you can choose the information and arguments that are most likely to interest and persuade your reader.

### Practice 3

Imagine you are writing a paper to convince readers to change to a vegetarian diet. In the box are some elements you could include in your paper. Discuss the questions on the next page with a partner or in a group.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>a</b> a brief definition of <i>vegetarianism</i>                                 | <b>g</b> descriptions of vegetarian diets in other countries                |
| <b>b</b> a detailed definition of <i>vegetarianism</i>                              | <b>h</b> examples of famous vegetarian people                               |
| <b>c</b> arguments about how raising meat is harmful to the environment             | <b>i</b> explanation of how vegetarian diets can be introduced into schools |
| <b>d</b> arguments to show that eating meat is not good for your health             | <b>j</b> explanations of the health benefits of a vegetarian diet           |
| <b>e</b> arguments to show that being vegetarian is less expensive than eating meat |   |
| <b>f</b> arguments to show that changing to a vegetarian diet is easy               |   |



- 1 Which elements from the box would you include for these different audiences? Which would you not include? Why?
  - People who have no knowledge about vegetarianism
  - People who are concerned about the environment and health
  - People who are interested in world cultures
  - People who don't have much time for cooking or money for food
- 2 Which audiences would be easiest to write for? Which would be the hardest?

## Practice 4

Reread the essay "Credit Cards: Convenient or Dangerous?" on page 4 - 5. As you read, ask yourself, "What kind of reader did the writer imagine would read this essay?" In other words, who is the audience for the essay? Then answer the questions below. Discuss your answers with a partner. You don't have to agree on your answers, but be sure to explain your ideas.

- 1 Who is the intended audience for the essay?
  - a only students
  - b only business people
  - c both students and working people
- 2 Before reading the article, what do many readers probably think about credit cards?
  - a They are convenient.
  - b They are dangerous.
  - c They have mixed benefits and drawbacks.
- 3 What does the reader know about the problems the writer discusses?
  - a a little; does not know about words like *blacklist*
  - b some; might understand the problems with only a little explanation, but has not thought about them before
  - c a lot; is looking only for details and new solutions to a very familiar problem
- 4 Why did the writer choose this topic?
  - a She wanted to warn people about a problem and suggest a solution.
  - b She wanted to criticize some kinds of people for being irresponsible.
  - c She wanted to complain about the use of credit cards in Thailand.
- 5 What does the writer hope the reader will do or think after reading?
  - a stop using credit cards
  - b be careful when using credit cards
  - c change some laws about credit card use

## B Choose a topic

### TOPIC SELECTION

The topic of an essay is often assigned. Your instructor may assign you a specific topic; but more often you will be assigned a more general topic or type of essay, and you will be free to choose the specific topic.

There are several criteria for selecting a good topic, but one key is that you choose something that is interesting to you. If you like your own topic, you will have more energy and interest in writing about it. When you choose a topic that interests you, you will probably write a better essay.

### Practice 5

Work with a partner. Read through the list of general topics below. Then make a quick list of two or three more focused topics for each. Compare your topics with another pair. Finally, from among your topics and those of the other two classmates, choose the one topic that interests you and your partner the most.

- 1 Take a position on education in your country.

*university entrance exams in my country*

*the value and cost of "cram schools"*

*the importance of getting into a good high school*

- 2 Identify a threat to the environment *or* propose a solution.

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- 3 Argue for or against using a certain type of technology.

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- 4 Explain a useful piece of advice you received.

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- 5 Describe a holiday in your country.

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