

How to write an essay

What is an essay?

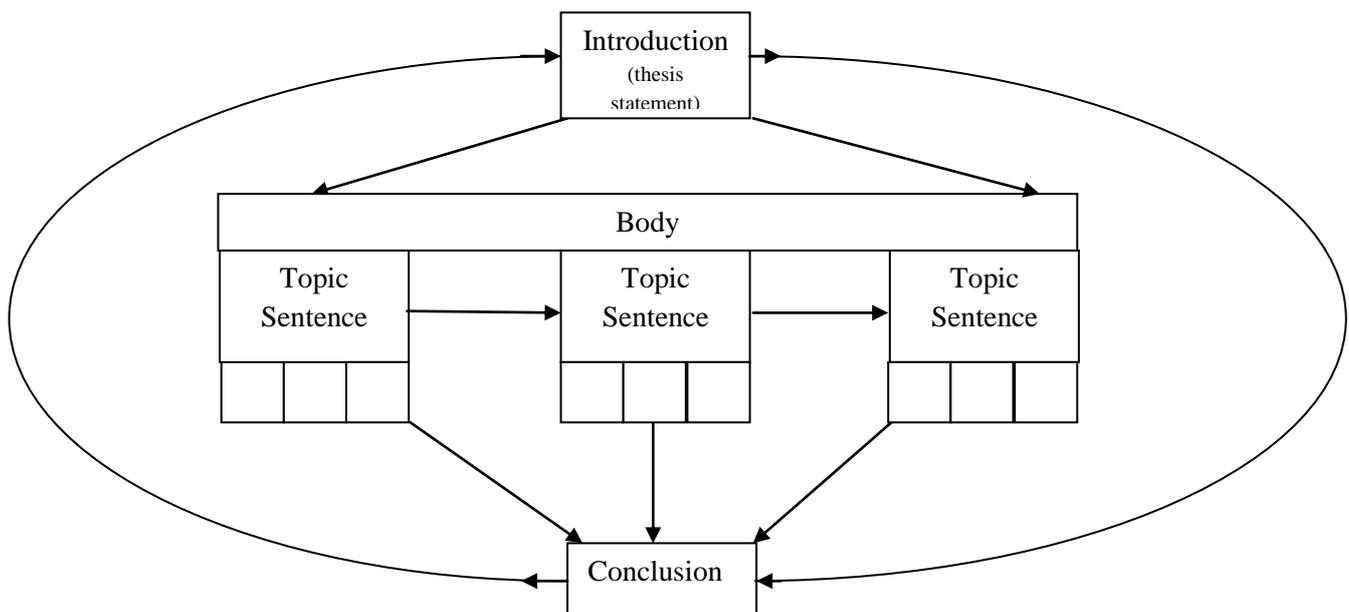
The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* describes an essay as being a short piece of writing by a student as part of a course of study.

There are various types of essay, such as:

- The Argumentative Essay
- The Cause and Effect Essay
- The Compare and Contrast Essay

How to write an essay:

Overview



Introduction

The topic of the essay is explained or placed in context. The point of your essay should be made clear in a sentence in the introduction (this is known as the **thesis statement**). An outline of your essay should also be included, in which you plot the steps you will be following in order to complete your essay.

Body

Each paragraph represents a single idea within your essay. The first sentence of each paragraph introduces the idea of the paragraph (this is known as the **topic sentence**). The remaining sentences of the paragraph expand on the topic sentence. The last sentence of the paragraph usually leads to the next paragraph.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, the main points or arguments of your essay are summarised (this task is made easier if you have used **topic sentences** throughout the body of your essay) and shown to be important. The last sentence of the conclusion sums up the point of the essay and links back to the topic.

Other important things to remember:

- The style of your essay should be academic; therefore colloquialisms, obscenities and slang should not be used. In the case of any of any one of these things featuring in the topic of your essay, they should be placed in ‘single inverted commas’.
- Essays are generally written in the present tense.
- Use *italics* for emphasis.
- Use a minimum of 1.5 line spacing and leave a margin adequate enough for your marker to leave comments.

Exercises

1. Identify the **thesis statement** in the following introduction:

In Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, the eponymous character steals the silver entrusted to him. Although it may seem that Nostromo was pressured into making this decision by the loss of four ingots of silver (Conrad, [1904] 2000:331), it is the aim of this essay to make evident the other motivating forces that were in play before this incident occurred, their relationship to each other, and how they can be linked to the change of character Nostromo undergoes. These forces will be explored in relation to what happens before, during and after what Nostromo terms as being the most desperate affair of his life (p.172).

2. Create a **thesis statement** by making use of the following topic:

Write an essay in which you compare the positive and negative aspects of receiving a tertiary education in South Africa.

3. Place the following paragraphs in order according to the introduction given in Question 1 (HINT: pay attention to the **topic sentences**):

A change in Nostromo's character becomes evident, especially when he renounces his title as the Capataz, saying, 'The Capataz is undone, destroyed. There is no Capataz' (p.292). He becomes embittered and sarcastic – 'a ruined and sinister Capataz' (p.315), his personality lost due to equating himself with the silver. Nostromo's return is seen as 'providential,' though Doctor Monygham does not see him as a person, but rather as a useful object once again – 'the only possible messenger to Cayta' (p.289).

Nostromo believes that the lives of Teresa Viola and Martin Decoud have been abandoned 'for the sake of this accursed treasure,' and that he is the only one who can pay the price – by becoming a 'faithful and lifelong slave' of 'the silver of the San Tomé' (p.335). It is here that the intention to steal the silver is expressed in reference to the 'bargain' Doctor Monygham describes the silver as: 'He made up his mind that nothing should be allowed now to rob him of his bargain' (p.335). Nostromo supports this thought in his meditation: 'I must grow rich very slowly' (p.336).

When the silver is 'lost', Charles Gould later says that he is glad of it: 'It would have been a danger and a curse' – although this means that he will not have to fight for it, Gould neglects to realise that it becomes a curse for Nostromo (p.275). Nostromo frequently associates the silver with negativity, although he is simultaneously its slave. He asks what bargain Doctor Monygham would have made, were he in his shoes. His reply – '... for taking the curse of death upon my back, as you call it, nothing else but the whole treasure would do' – is indicative of Nostromo's value in terms of the desperate affair which he undertakes (p.174), and this remains with him, as the burden of the silver remains with him, being 'tied for safety round Nostromo's neck' (p.178) and essential to his reputation (p.202).

4. Write an essay on the importance of receiving a tertiary education in South Africa.

VISIT THE HUMANITIES WRITING CENTRE (HSB 17-18) TO HAVE YOUR ANSWERS REVIEWED BY A WRITING CONSULTANT.

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