

Essay writing

Introductory paragraph

You should begin your essay with an introductory paragraph that does two things:

- Introduces your reader to your theme.
- Presents your thesis (your argument).

Distinguish the theme (what you're writing about) from your thesis (what you will argue or 'prove'). A theme is the topic or subject that you've identified in the texts you're writing about. A thesis is an interpretation of your texts that you need to set forth in specific terms and then defend by argumentation and close reading. So your thesis is the position you are attempting to persuade your reader to accept. Try and summarize your thesis in one or two sentences in your introduction to make it clear and coherent.

Thesis/argument

- A thesis cannot be a statement of fact; if you think your reader could either easily agree or disagree with your thesis, you're probably working with a statement of fact, so there's no point writing an essay about it.
- A good thesis is specific not general; don't make sweeping or 'universal' statements about 'human beings', 'life', anything 'through the ages' or 'across time' as you'll find you're simplifying/generalizing.
- Your thesis should matter to you; if it seems trivial and/or provokes a 'who cares' attitude in you, reject it.
- Your thesis statement should also give the reader a sense of what the structure of your essay will be; if your thesis contains two or three parts, then your reader will expect you to discuss those two or three parts in the order in which you've given them in the thesis statement.

Starting the essay

- Identify your essay question and think about what it's asking.

- Choose the texts you want to focus on, re-read them, and make brief notes (and page numbers) of anything you find interesting or surprising, particularly in relation to your theme.
- Select four or five key extracts from your primary texts that deal with your theme. These will be the basis of the close reading that supports your argument. Spend time with these passages. Write about them. Look at the way that language, imagery, style, gender relations, moral qualities, included voices, excluded voices, tone (e.g. irony), use of metaphor, philosophical concepts, historical context, class relations, characterization, and so on are used in, or effect, these passages.
- Look at the problems that the text raises, its strangeness. It's in these places that you will often find the material for argument. Think about how the different passages interrelate. Is there continuity? Difference? Write notes! Don't try to do this in your head.
- Look at the notes and consider where the conflicts are. What could explain these fissures? Here you may find material for your argument. Does the criticism that you've looked at explain the fissures? Just partially? If so, how can you account for the conflicts here?
- Now start shaping the essay itself. Write it in a short form initially, say, 500 words.

Close Reading

Once you have a basic sense of what your essay is about, write out your close readings of the passages you've identified. The core of every essay you write should be careful, close readings that interpret the text (rather than summarize it). Make sure you do not simply repeat what the text says in your own words: you should be interpreting the text by producing your own ideas about how the text creates meaning. Interpreting (as opposed to summarizing) means:

- Quoting the text and writing out close readings of every passage you quote: discuss in concrete and specific terms the words, metaphors, images, tone, style of the passage; what is the passage doing and how is it doing it?
- Remembering that the purpose of your close reading is to support the main point (the 'topic sentence') of your paragraph (see below for a description of the 'topic sentence').
- Your aim in close reading should be to show your reader: (a) how you read the passage you have quoted; and (b) how your reading supports the larger point of the paragraph.

- Always analyze literature in the present tense: you are interpreting the text in the present and not summarizing what happened in it; literature, although written in the past, is still happening as you read it.
- Historical or background information should be discussed in the past tense

Developing the essay

- Always start with your close readings and work out from them, rather than thinking up a thesis and then trying to find it in the text.
- Write out your close readings in paragraph form: dedicate one rough paragraph to each passage you've chosen.
- Identify what links these paragraphs: underline the most important sentence in each and cut and paste them into a separate document. This will then give you a rough idea of your current essay structure: if it's not coherent, re-order it until it makes linear sense.
- In other words, your essay should go ABCDEFG, not AAACAAB. This logic should be clear within each sentence (from one phrase to the next); within each paragraph (from one sentence to the next); and within the essay (from one paragraph to the next).

Essay structure

- Each paragraph should develop one coherent point that relates clearly back to the thesis within the logical progression of your argument, and everything in the paragraph should be relevant to that one coherent point.
- In order to clarify this logical progression, every paragraph must have a key or topic sentence: the first sentence of each paragraph should clarify the one coherent point of that paragraph and provide a clear and explicit transition to that point from the point of the preceding paragraph.
- This topic sentence is like a mini-thesis and so cannot be a statement of fact. Rather it must present the point or idea that your paragraph should make within the logical progression of your argument (a point needs to be demonstrated; a fact does not).
- After you've written a first draft, go back and look at each paragraph you've written; check that there is a point that supports your main thesis.
- Check again that the paragraphs are connected and that you have provided a transition between your key points (the transition is the connection between the point of the preceding

paragraph and the point of your present paragraph - if you're struggling with this, write out what each point is in a list and then work out what links them: this is the transition).

- Write the first and last sentences of each paragraph in as clear a way as possible, as if you're addressing them to a friend or family member who is not that interested in literature, but whom you care enough about to want them to understand what you're arguing.
- In general your style should be accessible, even at its most academic. When reading back your essay, ask yourself: (a) 'Would I ever speak this way?', and (b) 'If someone said this to me, would I be able to understand them?' If the answer to either of these questions is 'no', rewrite.

Concluding your essay

- Literary critics often conclude their studies by considering how their reading of a text enriches or complicates our understanding of a larger literary, social, historical, or cultural movement (the Enlightenment, neoclassicism, sensibility, Romanticism) or our appreciation of the status of a significant issue (an emotion, class, death, gender, sexuality) in a particular cultural context.
- As you conclude your essay, think about how your reading of a given text or group of texts pertains to some of the larger issues you have addressed during your module or in seminars.
- Don't go on too much in your conclusion, however: simply pull together your ideas, suggest how your reading relates to larger issues and/or restate your key thesis in a new way: do not simply repeat what you have already written.

Finally

When you've finished the essay, check:

- That the essay actually addresses the specific subject it sets out to analyze.
- That the essay interprets the text, and does not simply paraphrase or summarize it.
- That the essay develops the thesis it sets out in the introduction.
- Whether you need to restructure the essay to more effectively argue your thesis.
- Whether the thesis needs to be changed to reflect the actual argument you've made.