

Critical Essays

In general...

- An essay is a short piece of personal writing:
- personal in the sense that it expresses your own thinking,
- short in the sense that it generally can be written in one class period.
- In academic settings, essays are generally written in response to a prompt.

(continued)

- Essays are used to evaluate your writing skills.
- More importantly, they are used to evaluate your thinking skills.
- This is why a good essay prompt cannot be answered quickly, nor will it have just one answer.

Style

- Essays are carefully structured
- Good essays always have a clearly defined claim.
- Good essays are organized around carefully thought out ideas that appear in the topic sentences of the body paragraphs.
- Good essays always contain quotes to show the reader the point the writer is making.

Style (continued)

- Good essays don't assume that the reader will fill in blanks; they clearly and explicitly explain the writer's thinking.
- Academic essays should be written in formal third person voice.

Structure

- The first thing an essay writer needs to do is to learn to craft a clear introductory paragraph that ends with a claim/thesis.
- The next thing is the choice of some important sub-points. These sub-points of your claim become the topic sentences of your body paragraphs.
- These should not be haphazardly presented, but should be carefully organized.

Structure (continued)

- Choosing evidence, quotes from the works about which you are writing, and then using it well is a sign of a student who both thinks and writes well.
- Evidence must be explained and interpreted so that the reader comes to see how the evidence supports the writer's thinking.

Structure (continued)

Having introduced the topic and your claim,
And having then led the reader through several
paragraphs with quotes and explanation and
interpretation,

The essay ends with a conclusion paragraph that
brings the thinking full circle.

Summary

- Writing good essays is a skill that is gradually built by practice, practice, practice.
- The exercise of thinking and planning, organizing your thoughts, supporting your thinking with evidence, then explaining your thinking is difficult.

