

Writing Essays

An essay is essentially a methodical and organized attempt (from the French verb *essayer*, “to try”) to prove an argument of some sort. It should therefore revolve completely around a specific, concrete, central argument of your choice. This is the *thesis*. It is literally a statement, an assertion, a claim, or an argument of some sort.

1. It can be quite narrow and specific.
 - a. E.g. “The antennae of the Galapagos Sea Snail wiggle differently from the antennae of other sea snails, and this evolutionary adaptation gives it a competitive advantage in its unique environment.”
2. Or it can be broad and encompassing.
 - a. E.g. “Contemporary Aboriginal law is quite ambivalent in that it offers the potential to affirm rights which have been disrespected in the past, but it also seeks to manage and limit the potentiality of those rights.”

Either way, every essay should have a thesis, or central argument.

Pre-writing: The Research Process

Before you begin writing your essay, be sure to invest an adequate amount of time and effort in the research process. You want to write your paper with the benefit of having reviewed the literature and having familiarized yourself with the academic debates and controversies that characterize your discipline’s engagement with the topic. In fact, this is how you will find your thesis: as you assess data and other research, you will arrive at something that you want to say, an argument that you want to contribute to the academic literature on this topic. *Your paper should revolve entirely around this thesis.*

Before you write the paper, take the time to write an outline for it *which centres squarely on your thesis statement*. It will force you to think about how best to organize your arguments before getting lost in “directionless” writing. This will help you write an essay that is more focused and better organized than it otherwise would be – and with fewer rough drafts!

If your essay assignment requires you to conduct independent research and make use of sources outside of the course reading list, keep in mind these bits of advice:

- Scholarly sources (especially “peer-reviewed” scholarly sources) are most often valued and emphasized in academic writing; your professors may react poorly to the use of sources such as blogs or magazine articles.
- When instructed to conduct independent research and make use of sources outside of the course reading list, avoid basing your entire essay on *one or two books* from the library or one or two sources from the course materials. Students limit their research like this when they are intimidated by the vast online research databases accessible through the library web site. The university pays a lot so that we can have access to online databases and peer-reviewed academic journals—learn to navigate the library’s online system and use them! Not only are journal articles shorter, but they are often more specific to your topic, more recent and up to date, and they are available to all sixty students who are currently trying to research a paper on the same topic as you!

If you don't know how to use these online resources, there are experts in the library there to help you. **Cody Fullerton**, at Elizabeth Dafoe Library (Room 112), is the current librarian specialist in criminology, sociology, data, education, and government publications. Find him at cody.fullerton@umanitoba.ca or 204-474-9248.

The UM Libraries *criminology* subject guide is: <http://libguides.lib.umanitoba.ca/criminology>

The subject guide for *sociology* is found at: <http://libguides.lib.umanitoba.ca/sociology>

The Introduction

Generally speaking, a good **introduction** indicates (a) what the essay is going to address, and (b) how it will address it. And it does all of this while (c) stimulating interest in the topic!

(a) Unlike most mystery novels or crime dramas, academic papers generally give the ending away right at the beginning: the thesis statement, which is presented somewhere in the introduction, indicates your central argument. Academics have largely given up on the surprise ending format because the “suspense” actually makes for a more tiresome read. This is because it is more difficult for your brain to make connections (i.e., to learn and to engage with the writing) when it doesn't have a central claim or conclusion to which it can connect the various arguments.

(b) In addition to the thesis, the introduction establishes a frame of reference for the reader by giving a sense of the (inter)disciplinary perspective you have adopted, as well as the type of terminology, evidence, logic, and argumentation one can expect throughout the paper. This frame of reference can be explicit or implicit. Nevertheless, the introduction should give a sense of some defining characteristics for the paper, such as whether the analysis is quantitative or qualitative, critical or conventional, or what type of theoretical framework is employed, etc.

(c) Try to come up with an introduction that stimulates your reader's interest in the topic. A well written introduction grabs the reader's attention, directs that attention to the central argument, and stimulates interest in the topic by showing what is at stake in the debate. You can use the introduction to provide necessary background information, which might include defining terms, giving a historical overview, or informing the reader of a controversy. In essence, when planning your introduction, reflect on this question: *What context or background information do I need to talk about before I transition into my supporting arguments for my thesis?* Also, you might want to create a “hook” with an interesting anecdote or a challenging rhetorical question. Academic writers often introduce *a gap* that exists in the research literature—a gap which their paper, of course, is meant to fill. (i.e. “While much of the research literature talks about X, there is little published research on X in relation to Y...”)

Lastly, many choose to write their introduction after having written a draft of the body of the paper. If not, you can at least reread and edit your introduction at this point in order to ensure that it is still appropriate for the paper.

The Body

The body of the essay contains all the necessary steps/arguments, in a logical order, that flow with purpose from your thesis. This is where making an outline is key: what facts, arguments, or claims form the necessary steps for you to find your way to the conclusion? Is there a logical order that the supporting arguments belong in, or do you want to begin or end with the strongest argument, etc.? Ultimately, you decide.

Finding academic sources that reinforce your various arguments is an asset, but be sure to offer your own analysis and interpretation as well, thereby avoiding the ‘leap-from-one-quote-to-another’ style of writing.

The Conclusion

Although it encapsulates the central argument, just as your introduction does, the tone of your conclusion is different because the reader has finished your paper. It is a chance for you to present your thesis in its final, most persuasive form. In the introduction you were giving the reader an idea of what was to follow, trying to attract interest. In the conclusion, you have the weight of the essay behind you, and you can state your case succinctly, knowing that the reader has all the information you have provided. The introduction is a forecast; the conclusion is a final analysis. Don’t let a strong essay fizzle with a weak conclusion, end with a definite statement.

While the conclusion does offer a summary of the writing preceding it, try to move beyond simple summation. Some of the ways in which you can expand on your thesis are:

- revealing the ways in which it might have significance in the world outside it.
- showing how it serves as a call for action;
- intentionally (but carefully) complicating the issues you have already introduced;
- indicating how we must rethink the ways we have understood the topic or issue in the past;
- introducing a relevant and interesting quote, or an appropriate anecdote (but not too long).

For the portion of the conclusion where you do re-encapsulate your main argument, avoid repeating, word-for-word, statements you made earlier. New material may enter a conclusion occasionally, but it must be closely related to everything else you have said. Never make a claim in your conclusion that is unsubstantiated or unmentioned anywhere else.

Finally, what you say in your conclusion should match what you said when you introduced the essay. It should be a restatement, but not a mere repetition, of your thesis—ideally in a way that shows more fully and clearly what you have been arguing. If the process of writing the essay has changed what you are arguing—and this is surprisingly often the case—you may have to go back and reword your thesis and/or introduction.

Citing Sources

Formats that make use of parenthetical references (such as APA and ASA), as opposed to footnotes or endnotes, are intended to accommodate a lot of referencing while preserving flow, since it is much easier for the reader to read through a complex line of argumentation without having to constantly redirect his or her attention and sift through a barrage of footnotes or endnotes. On the other hand, formats for citing legal cases generally don’t allow for using parenthetical references, so dealing with this type of data might compel a writer to use a footnote or endnote-friendly format such as Chicago.

It is acceptable, and most often necessary, to present other people’s ideas and findings in your work. Keep in mind, though, that **your paper should be liberally strewn with parenthetical references** (Patzer, 2016), **footnotes, or endnotes**, even if it does not contain a single direct quote! Why should papers be liberally strewn with references/citations? Well, if there is a really good point made in a particular passage, the reader should know whether it is truly your idea or

the idea of (Cormier, 2009). And if the reader is particularly struck by a great point made by Wilkinson (2015), he or she can find the full reference, at their leisure, in your list of works cited (i.e. references, bibliography), and locate the publication for their own benefit.

In practical terms, there is both a positive and a negative line of reasoning for a student to cite sources so diligently. The positive line of reasoning is that, since you have performed an extensive review of the literature concerning your topic, citing your sources is a chance for you to shine and demonstrate to the prof your extensive research and knowledge. (Picture yourself at an academic cocktail party, *Chablis* in hand, ready to get pedantic, drop names of famous thinkers, and impress the other intellectuals.) The more ominous reason for citing sources thoroughly, of course, is the risk of *plagiarism*. Plagiarism can involve taking another person's words (written or spoken), ideas, theories, facts (that are not considered general knowledge), statistics, art work, etc. and presenting them as your own. *It can be inadvertent just as easily as it can be intentional*. Simply changing the wording of the information you are using still constitutes plagiarism if you do not acknowledge your source.

You should provide a citation/reference in each of the following cases:

- any direct quote of someone other than yourself;
- any close paraphrases of statements by someone other than yourself;
- any important ideas, points, arguments, or information taken from another author's work.

If you copy the exact words of another author, "you must place these words in quotation marks and the reference must provide a page number" (Patzer, 2008, p. 11). Of course, if it is a long quote most style guides will tell you to remove the quotation marks and make it a "block quote" by indenting the passage in order to set it off from the rest of the text in your paper.

Post-writing: Things to reflect on...

Paper has a title which suggests the topic/thesis.

Clear thesis statement is found in the introduction.

Paper takes a position on a debatable point (not just observation/description).

Introduction provides context and direction.

Thesis makes sense (and is defensible).

Paper presents logical arguments in support of thesis.

All necessary steps in argument are included (no leaps in logic).

Transitions between paragraphs are logical.

Important ideas/concepts are addressed.

Points are made in logical order.

Summaries are provided only to make a point.

Sources are documented consistently/accurately.

Citations are woven smoothly into your prose (e.g. no fragments, clear pronoun references).

Evidence is properly quoted.

Paragraphs are unified and coherent.

Textual evidence is followed by analysis (interpretation of quoted passages).

Purpose of each paragraph is clear (represents a logical step in argument).

Conclusion is emphatic, relevant, and logical.

Paper is of appropriate length for assignment.

Margins, line spacing, & formatting are correct.