

## Five Steps to Writing an Essay

Comments Welcome! Many thanks to Martha Banwell, Chair of the Shady Side Academy English Department for her help in the construction of this document.

1. **Brainstorm**
  - a. List all thoughts that enter your head about the essay topic.
  - b. Clearly, some of these thoughts will be random and worthless. Many of your thoughts, however will be inspired and critical for your essay. Do not waste time and energy determining just which thoughts are valuable, potentially valuable, or clearly worthless. List them all.
  - c. Do not worry about complete sentences, spelling, grammar, or other such stylistic issues. The goal here is to generate ideas quickly.
  - d. You know that you are close to done when you have at least two pages of binder paper filled with ideas.
  
2. **Organize List**
  - a. Take the ideas on your binder paper and organize them into categories. Categories include “ridiculous ideas that will clearly not work in an essay”, controversial ideas (i.e. ideas that contradict points raised in lecture or in the readings”, “non-controversial ideas”, etc.
  - b. This step is tedious, but it will make writing the essay much easier as it will clarify your thinking: rewrite the organized groupings on a clean sheet of paper.
  - c. Start looking for patterns and for a point of view that best reflects your take on the topic
  - d. Scribble a rough thesis somewhere on this tidy version.
  - e. Write down the kind of evidence you would need to find in the library and/or on the Internet that would support and undermine your thesis.
  
3. **Outline**
  - a. This is clearly the TOUGHEST part of the writing process. If you have written a good outline, then you will find that essay almost “writes itself”. Give yourself enough time to do a first rate job.
  - b. Look at the groupings in your organized list. Look at your rough thesis statement. Find connections; find support for your thesis; develop an argument that refutes your thesis; finally, develop an argument that over-rides this devastating argument and rescues your rough thesis statement.
  - c. The outline will contain six parts: I. Introduction; II Supporting Argument; III Potentially Devastating Counter-argument; IV. Counter to the Counter-argument; V. Conclusion; VI. Bibliography. It must be double-spaced and typed with 12-point font.

- d. Introduction – This is the “stage-set”. Set up your reader so that he cares about your thesis statement. There are several ways to do this. Introduce the reader to the importance of your topic. For example: small privatization is important because it has been used in many post-socialist countries to encourage small-scale entrepreneurship. Introduce the particular situation or policy under discussion. More hints on just how to do this are available in the writing resources listed in the syllabus. Next comes your thesis statement. Make it strong. Do not equivocate and do not show the reader both sides of the argument. Next comes your road map where you tell your reader in two or three points what to expect. Do not write a sentence about each body paragraph, because this is lethally boring for your reader.
- e. Supporting Argument – Here you need to provide a logical argument and evidence that supports your thesis statement. For example: if your thesis statement is that small-scale privatization effectively provided the correct incentives for efficient entrepreneurs to contribute to economic growth, you will need to find evidence for a particular region and/or country in which that was in fact the case. You must collect source materials, cite this material, and then place these sources in a bibliography using the MLA format.
- f. Potentially Devastating Counter-Argument – Here you will provide a logical argument and evidence that potentially undermines the logic and argument in the previous section. For example: you may find evidence that in your particular region, an important reason that small-scale entrepreneurs operated effectively is that there was substantial foreign investment and that small-scale privatization was not critical. Again, cite source material and place these sources in a bibliography using the MLA format. You should cite at least five different sources in the supporting argument and potential devastating counter-argument sections. Sources taken from the Economics 1670 syllabus should be cited but DO NOT count as one of these five sources.
- g. Counter to the Counter-Argument – Make a logical argument backed with evidence that your original argument is more convincing than your potentially devastating counter-argument. For example: you might argue that the small-scale privatization not only encouraged entrepreneurs to buy up small shops that they effectively restructured, but it also attracted foreign investment that financed infrastructure such as telecommunications that enabled these domestic entrepreneurs to operate efficiently. Show some respect for the counter-argument. For example: if you are looking at a particular region in Russia such as Samara, you should note that while the counter-argument fails and your initial argument works in Samara, the counter-argument might have more explanatory power in other regions.
- h. Conclusion – This is hard, although not as difficult as the introduction. First, summarize your argument. Then, argue why your point is the only reasonable one to make for the topic under discussion.
- i. Hand in this five-point outline and bibliography in-class on the due date. Come to class prepared to discuss your outline on the scheduled tutorial day.

- j. After the tutorial discussion and after receiving written comments on your outline, be prepared to sharpen your thesis statement and find more evidence. Be prepared, if necessary, to re-organize the outline if the counter-argument is more convincing than the supporting argument.
4. Write the First Draft
    - a. Using your revised outline as a guide, start writing. Be sure not to stray from your revised outline.
    - b. The best evidence that you can use is based on reliable statistical evidence or a careful description of the operation of actual institutions. Such evidence is most reliable at a regional, household or firm level.
    - c. If you are using regional, household, or firm level statistical or institutional data, you need to comment on just how representative this is for an entire country. If the data is not highly representative this is fine as long as you persuade your reader that it is still important to consider this region or this set of households or this sample of firms.
    - d. Do an initial proofreading and editing job on your first draft.
    - e. Put away your first draft, preferably overnight.
    - f. This is optional but a good habit to develop: Take your draft to Professor Berkowitz during office hours or after class at least once during the semester. Do not expect him to correct your punctuation and spelling, but ask him to look at content issues. The major issues are, of course, “Does this essay make sense?” and “Is it cohesive?” Seeking this kind of help is part of your job. You are not being a “sycophant” (i.e., suck-up) for doing this.
    - g. Hand in this first draft and revised bibliography on the due-date. Come to class prepared to discuss your first draft on the scheduled tutorial day.
  5. Final Draft
    - a. After receiving written and oral comments on your first draft, you will start to write the final draft.
    - b. This step is mainly a marketing and packaging job. The thinking has been done, so make sure that your idea gets the shot it deserves.
    - c. Run a spell check program on your draft.
    - d. DO NOT use a grammar check program. These programs do not always promote clear and concise writing. For help, consult the writing sources on the syllabus or make an appointment with a writing consultant in the Pitt writing lab.
    - e. Make sure that your bibliography and citations conform to the MLA style. Make sure that your thesis statement, supporting argument, potentially devastating counter-argument, counter to the counter-argument and conclusion are all clearly and elegantly stated.
    - f. Hand in your final paper on time!

NOTE: About the time that you have begun to write the first draft, it would be useful to talk to Professor Berkowitz (tele: x87072; email: [dmberk@pitt.edu](mailto:dmberk@pitt.edu)) and/or make an appointment with a writing specialist at the Writing Center (tele: 412-624-6556; email: [mano@pitt.edu](mailto:mano@pitt.edu))

