Organizing Your Essay[1]

The purpose of this document is to provide you with an overview of the features, elements, and organization of an essay for a humanities course .

Courses in the humanities involve a great amount of reading and the writing of complex essays. Because such courses are not primarily concerned with teaching composition, you are expected to arrive at university with some writing skills and to work on improving these skills throughout your studies. Pay close attention to the comments, corrections, and tips your instructor provides when he or she marks your essays. Most instructors are happy to assist students during the planning, research, and writings stages of their term papers.

Concordia University College's library website provides excellent information and friendly advice on improving one's writing. Many students benefit from consulting this source. You can also improve your communication skills by modelling your papers on the scholarly books and articles you read throughout your studies.

Purpose of Essay Assignments

There are two major purposes for essay assignments. First, the process of researching, planning, and writing an essay is an excellent way to learn material and develop skills in critical thinking and clear communication. Second, instructors assign essays to evaluate a student's knowledge of material and skills in reasoning and communicating.

Features of an Essay

Whether it is a monograph hundreds of pages long or a one-page job application letters, essays share the same basic features.

- develop a logical and fair argument supported by evidence in order to persuade a reader
- synthesize information from a variety of sources and present facts and interpretations accurately and clearly
- analyze evidence, in the case of classics, by explaining the meaning and significance of primary source evidence, and by clearly summarizing and comparing the interpretations of classicists
- carefully and precisely document sources by providing citations and bibliography

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[1] This skills module was written by Dr. Marc Cels of Athabasca University. It has been adapted to fit the content of this course.

Title Page

At the centre of the first page, place the title of your essay. Like the title of a book or article, it should indicate the topic or even main point of your essay.
At the bottom of the page write "Submitted by" and give your name.
Also provide the course name and number, your tutor's name and the date of submission.
Start numbering your essay after the title page, in the top, right corner.

Introduction

The first paragraph introduces the topic of your essay, states your thesis, and indicates the parts of the argument found throughout the essay that supports the thesis. The introduction gives the reader a solid preview. When writing your essay, start with a provisional draft introduction, but expect to develop and change it as you refine the argument of your essay. The final draft of your introduction will likely be written after you have completed your essay.

Introduce the Topic

Pay attention to how scholars start the introduction to their essays or book chapters. Some writers announce the topic briefly but directly. Some use an interesting anecdote or quotation. Others highlight a current scholarly debate. A common mistake among inexperienced essay writers is to introduce too broad a topic. For example, never begin your essay with hackneyed phrase such as, "Since the beginning of time…" or "Mankind has always…."

Thesis

A proper essay has a main point which answers the research question it raises: this is the thesis and it is clearly and briefly articulated in the introduction. After you establish a topic, think, research, and read about it, and you will begin to develop a provisional thesis statement. This will help you to focus your research. As you think, read, and write more on the topic your thesis should gradually become more refined. This is why it takes time and thought to produce a good essay.

You may notice that some articles do not appear to have a clear thesis statement—instead, the statement appears in the conclusion as an answer to a clear question asked in the introduction. Nevertheless, the whole article argues for the concluding thesis. In North America, most instructors insist that a definitive thesis statement appears in the introduction and guides the balance of the essay.

Thesis Statement

It can be challenging to compose a strong thesis statement. A preliminary thesis can start off casually with a short description. For example, "Christianity encountered varying

degrees of acceptance and resistance in its formative years." But instead of answering a question, this particular thesis raises more questions. How did its reception differ? Why?

A stronger thesis statement would argue an explanation, for example, "The reception of early Christianity varied from acceptance to resistance, depending upon social, political and economic conditions at any given time."

The second thesis statement is more robust because it offers a rational explanation for the differences between the situations discussed. If you find that your thesis statement is too descriptive, try adding a "because" clause—then make sure that the rest of your essay supports this new explanation.

Parts of the Argument

Sometimes a well-developed thesis will make clear the parts of the argument found in the essay. A weaker introduction would fail to indicate what a reader should expect, either by including points that do not appear in the essay's argument or by omitting those that do.

Context

It is common in humanities writing for the introductory paragraph to be followed by a brief background section that provides readers with a context for the essay's argument. The section will summarize the main events and people, or perhaps give an overview of the scholarly views or theories that the essay will test or challenge. As you read articles, you notice scholars often provide this information. However, this should be a minor part of your paper, and you should not devote too much space to it.

The Body of the Essay

The body of an essay consists of logically organized paragraphs that argue the essay, explain examples, discuss evidence, raise problems, etc. Each point in the essay's argument as outlined in the introduction should correspond to a part of the body or main part of the essay. In shorter essays, each paragraph corresponds to a point in the argument. In longer essays, several paragraphs may be needed to develop each point. Indeed, there may be sections and subsections within the essay.

Some inexperienced essay writers learned in grade school that an essay should make three points—this is not the case. If your research turns up five factors that explain your research question, then your essay should address them. Some writers prefer to use headings to mark each section, but this is optional.

Each paragraph of the body should focus on a single point and be carefully organized. Once the topic sentence has introduced the main point of the paragraph you may research and interpret the evidence further to develop the point in the sentences that follow. In a classics paper, this type of writing involves referring to primary and secondary sources. The last sentence of a paragraph might offer a conclusion or summary, or it may include

a phrase that links to the idea of the next paragraph. Such links help your reader to follow the parts of your essay's argument.

Organization of the Parts of the Argument

The two most common ways to organize a classics paper are chronologically and topically. Another common way would be geographically, for example, if one were comparing writers from Greece and Rome. Chronological organization works very well when we compare different periods, or when we are explaining change over time.

If you find that your essay is simply narrating a story rather than arguing an explanation, try to select factors that will explain what you are describing. Sometimes it is helpful to make an analytical table organized chronologically, geographically, or topically in order to find new ways to organize the information you found when researching. This can be a helpful way to develop a better thesis and to experiment with different ways of organizing your paper.

Outlining the Argument

It is helpful to work from an outline when planning your essay and composing the body of the essay. The outline will likely change as you research, think, and write, but it will help you to remain focused. Outlines also help you to develop a stronger thesis. An essay that is poorly organized will be difficult for a reader to follow. Ideas will be out of order, repeated, or omitted. A poorly planned essay may also be difficult for a student to research or write.

Elements of Clear Writing

While the structure of your essay is important, a good essay must also consist of clearly written sentences. Clear writing is inseparable from clear thinking. A classics course is not a writing course or an English grammar course, but it will require you to think and write clearly, and provide rational arguments that are clearly stated and easily understood.

When proofreading your essays, ensure that they contain the features and elements described in this module and that they conform to the standards for organizing classics essays. Check to see that your sentences and paragraphs are carefully composed and organized to support your clearly articulated thesis. If they do not, revise your essay before submitting it.

Conclusion

After the body of the essay, the final section draws the conclusion. In a shorter term paper, this will consist of one or two paragraphs. In longer essays the conclusion may be a page or more in length.

The conclusion begins by very briefly recalling the initial question or problem raised in the introduction. It will then summarize the parts of the essay and remind the reader how evidence supports the thesis of the essay. Be concise. If any of these elements are missing, the conclusion will be weak and the essay may not convince the reader.

At this stage, avoid introducing any new points or evidence in your conclusion—they belong in the body. Sometimes, expert authors of scholarly essays will state the broader implications of the essay's conclusion or make suggestions for further research. This is not usually one of the goals of an undergraduate term paper. Although the study of the past has implications for how we understand the present, classics students should probably also avoid moralizing.

To summarize, a classics essay will have these elements:

Title Page

Introduction

- introduction to topic
- thesis statement
- parts of the argument

Context Paragraph

Body of the Essay

Section/Paragraph 1

a. (Linking sentence or phrase)
b. Topic Sentence
c. Supporting evidence (sequence of events, examples, quotations, summary of scholarly interpretations)
d. Summary of main point
e. (Linking sentence or phrase)

Section 2/Paragraph 2

a. (Linking sentence or phrase)
b. Topic Sentence
c. Supporting evidence (sequence of events, examples, quotations, summary of scholarly interpretations)
d. Summary of main point
e. (Linking sentence or phrase)

Section 3/Paragraph 3

Section 4/Paragraph 4

Etc. **(use as many paragraphs as required)**

Conclusion

a. Reminds reader of initial problem or issue
b. Summarizes the parts of the argument to show how they support the thesis
c. General conclusion, which restates the thesis

Endnotes (unless the essay cited using footnotes)

Bibliography of Works Cited

Suggested Resources

Barzun, Jacques, and Henry F. Graff. *The Modern Researcher*. 6th edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2004.
This book is a manual on thinking and writing in the humanities.

Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th edition. Toronto: Longman, 2000.
"Strunk and White" is an excellent, short presentation of the rules of basic grammar, with good advice on composition, form, and style.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.* 7th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
This guide explains the *Chicago Manual of Style* and also has sections on composing essays.