

Writing an Essay

Writing an essay in a clear and concise manner is one of the important skills a social science course requires that will continue to be useful to you. Your essay should be analytical rather than descriptive in that it should attempt to prove a central thesis. You will be demonstrating your ability to deal with concepts and information in a critical manner. It will not suffice to summarize and describe ideas. You must logically develop an argument using convincing evidence to support your thesis. Part of the purpose of a General Education course is to encourage you to think and write critically about what you read and hear. A well-written essay will receive better results than one which is awkward and hard to understand, even if the content appears to be the same in both.

THE INTRODUCTION

If you write a clear and well-organized introduction, the rest of the essay will be much easier to write. State clearly and concisely the issues you are addressing. State briefly and chronologically (in the order you will follow) what you will do in the body of the paper. For example, if you are arguing for a particular position in a controversy, first state the issues in the controversy. Then assert your own position and summarize how you will support your position. If you choose to compare two or more things, specify what you are comparing, why you are comparing them, and what you will achieve by making the comparison. If you are answering a question, restate the question in your own words. The introduction should be short, clear and provide an outline for the rest of the paper. The following is an example of a good introduction:

The publication of Richard Lee's work on the !Kung of the Kalahari desert has contributed significantly to correcting three misconceptions about foragers long held by anthropologists. In this essay I will first discuss each of these three misconceptions. Second, using specific examples from his work, I will evaluate Lee's contribution to correcting these misconceptions. Finally, I will argue that these misconceptions were linked to biases of particular schools of thought in anthropology.

THESIS STATEMENT

The thesis statement is the most important part of the introduction. It asserts the major point of your essay—what you are trying to demonstrate. The thesis statement takes the form of a brief argument outlining the logic that supports your position. If you have a clear thesis, you are likely to write a more coherent essay. Your essay must have a thesis.

THE BODY

The body of the essay is a logical development of the introduction. You simply do step by step what you said you would do in the introduction and in the same order you laid out. If you are evaluating a problem or issue, present the material relevant to the points you outlined in your thesis statement. Use the appropriate anthropological terminology giving definitions of specialized terms as needed. Use examples and information only if you can demonstrate how they advance the argument. One measure of critical thinking is your judgment of what is relevant information. Do not quote extensively. A measure of your understanding of the material is that you can say it in your own words. However, always reference ideas that are not your own. The body of the essay should be clear and coherent, following a logical progression. A test of good organization is that you cannot switch the paragraphs around without affecting the logic of the argument.

THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion is a synthesis of your essay. You briefly restate the thesis, summarize how you supported your position and clearly state the conclusions that you have reached. Here you draw the whole essay together to demonstrate that you have achieved what you set out to do in the introduction. In the conclusion you may also suggest some of the more general theoretical or practical implications of the argument and findings. A solid conclusion indicates that you have control over the question, the argument and the evidence.

The structure of the essay might be pictured in this manner:

