

Writing a Great Essay: Some Advice from a Marker

Dr. Walter Dorn, Canadian Forces College

2 December 2016

Here is some advice for students writing a persuasive essay for courses or projects. It complements the grading rubric provided in the syllabus and summarized below.

After you have gained some familiarity with your chosen topic area, the intellectual challenge is to develop the thesis of your essay, as embodied in the thesis statement.

1. Choose a bold but arguable thesis. A thesis should try to say something that is not completely obvious. What is the purpose of putting an idea forward or arguing a statement that everyone already knows and agrees with? At the other end of the spectrum, a thesis that is overly strange, fanciful or outrageous becomes almost impossible to prove or to find supporting evidence (unless you're a genius). So somewhere along that "boldness spectrum," find wording for your thesis statement that you find comfortable. Usually it will be something that you are not completely certain about in the beginning (maybe curious yourself) but, alternatively, it could be something you feel strongly about. Keep in mind it should be sufficiently focused to allow yourself to do a competent job in a reasonable period of time before the deadline. Too wide means too much to study. You can tweak the thesis statement over time to provide the right level of challenge and scope. The thesis statement should be placed in your introduction, usually at the end but sometimes at the very beginning. It is usually a single sentence, though it should be preceded or followed by sentences describing the context and scope of the work.

2. Find key arguments and good supportive evidence. Think about the main arguments that will build your case. You can prioritize arguments and consider the sub-arguments (lines of argument), while trying to link them. You can build your outline accordingly. Your outline is the frame of the intellectual edifice that you are going to construct out of word-bricks. Seek support from important authorities (e.g., peer-reviewed articles and articles by recognized experts), facts, and figures. This helps to demonstrate your thesis. Do not shy away from using statistics, tables, graphs or diagrams, if they help convey evidence or a message. Definitions can be important for key term(s), but do not get caught in definitional traps by suggesting there is only one, absolute way of defining a word or concept. Also too much emphasis on definitions can make an essay look pedantic. You want to have an expansive, thought-provoking flow in your reasoning.

3. Make a smooth argument. Natural thought flow will make the essay easier to read, without large jumps in thought between sentences, between paragraphs and between sections. Just because a new section has a new title does not mean that you can omit a smooth segue from the end of the previous section. Connecting sentences can help your reader move from one point or section to the next. To make a good argument, well-chosen examples can be key. Anecdotal evidence can be useful, particularly if it has emotional pull. While arguments are not won by examples and anecdotes, they do help to show how some things work in practice. Actual cases can help make vague ideas concrete.

4. Demonstrate an understanding of counter-arguments. Really good essays give a sense of possible counter-arguments and responses to them. This shows an intellectual grasp of the subject and helps reduce the importance of the counter-argument and strengthen your own position. If a particular

counter-argument or counter-point is quite strong, feel free to give it some credence and acknowledge these strengths, but be sure to provide some form of counter-counter-argument.

5. Show some literary flourish. It is always more pleasurable to read work that is well written and that has a pleasing literary style. Feel free to put epigrams or relevant quotations at the front of sections. Add some spice to the essay, for example, with anecdotes or examples having emotional value. At the same time avoiding “fluff” or irrelevant details or digressions that loose sight of your argument. Design a title that gives not only a sense of the scope and thesis of the essay but also shows a bit of wit. In most cases brevity helps in titles so creativity is required to avoid dry descriptions.

6. Get the grammar, formatting and spelling right. An essay loses some of its appeal if it has numerous errors in the grammar, spelling or formatting. Formatting may be a small percentage of the overall grade but it has spill-over influence on the judgment of other factors, such as argument, evidence and style — though a few typos are certainly forgivable. Become familiar with the proper use of punctuation, particularly hyphens, en dashes (–) and em dashes (—). Students generally underuse hyphens, especially in three-word phrases. Avoid contractions (e.g., “it’s”) in formal writing. Apply the formatting rule in the CFC’s guide to academic formatting and referencing (CFC 225).

7. Enjoy the research! Exploring new subjects and lines of thought can be quite exciting. Choose a subject that genuinely motivates and interests you. Seek out the literature on different sides of your argument. Find out new facts and store stats/numbers for later use. Let your mind be curious and let your imagination soar. In the end, the research and writing is really not about getting an A but about learning and enjoying the intellectual adventure!

The JCSP Syllabus includes an “Academic Written Work Assessment Template” that describes what is required for an “A” grade. It complements what is written above. It is as follows:

Argument (45–70% overall weight)

Organization: Essay proceeds logically from start to finish and is coherent through-out.

Thesis Quality: Thesis, explicitly stated, is absolutely clear and highly original.

Objectivity: Essay demonstrates a masterful grasp of all sides of the issue.

Analysis: Analytical abilities on display are clearly superior and reflect an originality of thinking.

Evidence (15–40%)

Depth: Essay draws from sources that represent the best primary (if applicable) and most comprehensive secondary information on the subject. Quantity of sources exceeds expectations.

Breadth: Essay draws from an impressive variety of sources and perspectives.

Synthesis: Presentation of the evidence demonstrates a masterful understanding of its themes, both specific and general.

Relevance: Evidence is directly applicable to the analysis through-out.

Writing (10%)

Overall: Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are virtually flawless. Language and word choice are appropriate throughout.

Format (5%)

Overall: Essay follows CFC scholarly conventions, including proper citation methods, virtually flawlessly.