

THE "WRITE" STUFF

Springfield College

School of Human Services

WHAT'S AN ESSAY?: A HELPING "HAND"

It probably sounds like a silly question. We've all written a lot of essays—some excellent, some mediocre, some lousy. Yet, most of us don't know what we did well when we got an "A," or where we fell short when we didn't. In fact, if someone were to ask us, "What is an essay, anyway?" most of us would have trouble giving a clear answer. If we're not sure what an essay is, we might feel intimidated when we sit down to write; we might even put off writing assignments until the last minute, to our detriment.

Understanding what an essay is can help us overcome our fear of writing one. Although there are many types of essays, most require that you state your thesis and then go on to explain, support, and/or prove it. It's truly that straightforward. Therefore, essays require these basic elements:

- title,
- introduction,
- thesis statement,
- main ideas that explain, support, and/or prove the thesis statement,
- development of main ideas,
- conclusion.

(See other editions of *The Write Stuff* for more on introductions, conclusions, and development of main ideas.) Of course, your instructor may require additional items—but you'll always need these.

THE THESIS STATEMENT

Your "thesis statement" is your overarching idea—the message you want to convey to your readers, or the point you want to make. Here's an example: "I'm going to get more out of college now that I'm an adult student than I did when I was a traditional-aged student." Most writers announce their thesis statement toward the beginning of their essays—often in the first paragraph. That way the reader knows what to expect. Announcing your thesis statement early in the essay can also help you, the writer, stay focused when you write the rest of your essay.

You might compare your thesis statement to the palm of your hand—it holds your fingers (which are like your main ideas) in place and makes it possible for them to work together.

MAIN IDEAS

Your "main ideas" explain, support, and/or prove your thesis statement. Therefore, every main idea in your essay should have a clear connection to your thesis statement. Your main ideas will answer "the 'w' questions" related to your thesis, like "what?," "who?," "when?," "where?," "why?," and "how?"

In addition, your main ideas serve as the **topic sentences** of your paragraphs. For example, an essay with the thesis statement "I'm going to get more out of college now that I'm an adult student . . ." might include the following topic sentences:

- When I was younger, I didn't know what I wanted to do for a living; now that I've chosen my profession, I can take courses related to it, which increases my motivation to study.
- When I was younger, I went to college to satisfy my parents; now I'm going because I want to; therefore, I'm more invested in the process.
- Now that I'm an adult, I understand complex ideas better than I did before; therefore, my capacity to learn is greater than it was when I was a teenager.
- Now that I'm an adult, I want to do well in college to set an example for my children or my siblings—I have more reasons to succeed now than before.

As you can see, every one of these main ideas helps explain or support the thesis statement.

You might compare "main ideas" to your fingers—each one is connected to the palm and works together with the others.

So there you have it: an essay is like a hand—its "palm" is the thesis and its "fingers" the main points. In the words of Austin Powers, "Talk to the hand, Baby!"

SUPPORT FOR MAIN IDEAS

Now that you've stated your thesis and developed main ideas that explain, support, and/or prove it, it's time to "flesh out" your paragraphs. To develop your main ideas/topic sentences, you can use strategies like narration (telling a story or giving an example), explanation, description, chronology (giving background history or a timeline); comparison and contrast; cause and effect; and citing facts, statistics, and case studies.

Your goal is to convince your reader that your ideas are sound. (See the edition of *The Write Stuff* on development of main ideas for more information.)

INTRODUCTION, CONCLUSION, & TITLE

Finally, turn your attention to your introduction, conclusion, and title. As stated earlier, you'll probably opt to state your thesis in your introduction. Some writers also give a summary of their main ideas. Others try to grab their readers' attention by telling a little story or posing an interesting question. (See *The Write Stuff* on introductions for more ideas.)

Writers use conclusions to close out their essays smoothly. At the end of a long essay, some writers restate their main ideas. In an essay that probes a problem, a writer might suggest a possible solution. Other writers refer back to their introduction, to give their essay a sense of wholeness. (See *The Write Stuff* on conclusions for more ideas.)

Finally, try to come up with a title that gives readers a sense of your thesis, or that reinforces an important aspect of your essay. "Taking Myself Seriously" might be a good choice for that essay on returning to college as an adult—certainly it's better than "Homework Assignment"! Re-examine the title of this edition of *The Write Stuff*; it will help you remember to "give yourself a hand" whenever you write an essay.