

How to Write an Essay



Kathi Wyldeck

Contents

The Art of Writing	5
Warm-Up Writing Exercises	6
Further Warm-Up Writing Exercises	7
How to Write a Story	8
Essay Procedure	11
The Different Types of Essays	13
Good and Bad Essays	19
How to Write a Letter to a Friend	22
How to Write a Business Letter	23
How to Write a Letter to the Editor	24
How to Write a Scientific Report	25
Writing Topics for Practice	28
More Writing Practice	29
How to Write a Short Essay	32
An Example of a Short Essay	33
Topics for Short Essay Practice	34
Writing Test #1	35
An Example of a Longer Essay	36
How to Write a Résumé	38
How to Write a Job Application Letter	41
An Example of a Comparative Essay	42
An Example of a Film Review	44
A Note on Book Reviews	46
An Example of a Science Essay Written as a Story	47
An Essay Based on Graphical Information	49
Further Essay Topics to Try	51
Writing Test #2	53
Writing about Short Stories	54
How to Present On-Screen Data	57
Writers' Techniques	58
How to Write a Poetry Essay	61
An Example of Poetry Analysis, using the SAFSLIO Method	63
Another Example of a Poetry Analysis	65
Poems for Poetry Analysis Practice	67
Argumentative Essay Topics	70
The Six Components of Literary Analysis	72
Literary Analysis Summary Sheet	75
An Example of a Basic Prose Analysis	76
Booklists	80
About the Author	83

The Art of Writing

Learning the art of good composition and written expression takes years of practice. Adults can guide you along the long road to effective writing, but you and your brain have to do the hard work, through regular trial and error, making mistakes, doing corrections, trying again and again, and learning to turn the thoughts in your mind into words on paper. The earlier you start this long, difficult process the better, preferably by the age of eight. If you find you are in secondary school, and still haven't had much practice in essay writing, don't despair. If you try to write at least one or two short essays a week, your brain will soon start making new verbal connections, and you will notice that words will begin to come more easily to you. Even short writing tasks, such as the sentence and paragraph exercises shown on the next page, can make an enormous improvement to your writing if they are done regularly. A small amount of daily writing practice is more beneficial than an enormous essay written only once per term.

If possible, try to have your work corrected thoroughly by a person who can write well, so that you are made aware of all your errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, essay layout and essay content. By noting your mistakes and trying not to repeat them, your writing will slowly improve.

If there is no-one to check your work, don't worry. By doing regular writing practice, your brain will be given the important exercise it needs to help you improve your writing style. You will still become a better writer even without someone to guide you, although maybe not quite as quickly.

This book provides an assortment of lessons on the various essays, letters and reports you might be asked to write at school, and in the job world. There are also several examples of model essays to show you what to aim for, as well as plenty of topics to try for yourself.

If you attempt every essay in this book, to the best of your ability, you will be well on your way to becoming a better writer.

“Warm-up” Writing Exercises

Sentence Writing:

Write good, clear sentences using the following words:

microscope, telephone, website, volcano, skyscraper, parents, lawyers, doctors, teachers, telescopes, Sun, Moon, Earth, flowers, trees, pets, criminals, babies, wheelbarrow, diving board, exams, silence, war, terror, boredom, bicycle, ship, cars, aeroplanes, mothers, fathers, grandparents, America, China, Korea, Australia, Britain, spiders, snakes, Saturn, dangerous, smelly, horrid

Paragraph Writing:

Write paragraphs of five or six sentences about the following:

eggs, poverty, hospitals, education, careers, favourite foods, insects, sports, games, mountains, the beach, snow, hail, maths, science, history, geography, friends, holidays, bullies, dragons, ghosts, tornadoes, computers, mobile phones, the shops, the post office

Descriptive Writing:

Write descriptive paragraphs to describe the following:

- My Thoughts as I Fall off a Tall Building, Knowing that I am Plunging to My Death!
- The Taste of a Ripe Peach
- The Smell of Rotten, Sour Milk
- The Feel of Clean Sheets on a Freshly-made Bed
- The Sight of the Craters on the Moon as I Step from My Lunar Lander
- The Sound of Thunder as I Lie in Bed at Night

Further “Warm-up” Writing Exercises

1) Description of a Scene:

Imagine a detailed scene which includes two or three characters. These characters could be people, animals or plants. When ready, write a paragraph about the scene you have imagined, giving as much detail as possible. Look at the scene described below, and then try to write one of your own:

A City Street in New York City:

I am in a taxi, stuck in a traffic jam on a busy New York street. The meter is ticking over and I am anxious about how much this trip is going to cost me. Cars are honking their horns, and I can hear an ambulance siren about a hundred metres behind us, obviously getting nowhere fast. On the footpath to my left is an old man sitting on some steps. He is unshaven, dirty, bedraggled, and has a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag beside him. A dog is barking now, as he chases a terrified cat across the street, and on the other side of the road, I notice a young business woman striding confidently down the street in her fancy stilettos with pointy toes, wearing an expensive, black corporate suit and carrying a leather briefcase. A man walks past our taxi and throws his cigarette butt into the gutter. It lands just beside a discarded hot dog, complete with stale bread, a half-eaten frankfurt and one lucky ant.

2) The Same Scene from a Different Point of View:

Using the same scene, choose one of the other characters in your picture, and in another paragraph re-write the scene as seen from that particular character’s point of view. This could include the character’s thoughts and feelings, as well as the physical view as seen from their perspective. An example is shown below:

New York City as Seen by the Ant on the Hot Dog:

It’s dinnertime and the others haven’t found this piece of meaty paradise yet, which means that I can have a head-start. I’m standing in a field of red which stretches out for miles in front of me and miles behind. If I walk to the left or right, the field slopes gently down to the horizon. Now for a delicious bite, before the others get here. Ahhh, life is so good!

You could try the same scene again, as viewed by the: taxi driver, dog, cat, old man, career woman, cigarette smoker, ambulance driver or his patient.

Remember: Small amounts of writing every day are better than a lot of writing only now and then. Every time you write, you are stimulating the language pathways in your brain and making them faster and more efficient, in the same way that regular physical exercise makes you fitter and stronger.

How to Write a Story

If you follow the method shown below, it will help you to write stories more easily. There are just five simple steps to follow:

- Look at the title of your story and use your imagination to plan a good narrative about it, with a beginning (introduction), middle (development), and end (conclusion). Jot down rough notes when you have made up your story. If you want to include a really exciting part to your story, this is called the climax, and it will be placed after the development and before the conclusion.
- Write your introductory paragraph, possibly telling your reader when and where the story takes place, and hint at where the story might be heading.
- Write your development in several paragraphs, using a logical order to help the reader understand the story clearly. If there is a change in time, setting or topic, start a new paragraph. Give as much detail as you can to draw your reader into the story.
- Write your climax paragraph, if your story has a very exciting part, and make it as dramatic as possible, so that the reader will enjoy reading it.
- Write your concluding paragraph to tell the reader how the story ends.

Look at the example below to see how this method works:

Title: “The Day I Turned into a Cactus!”

Plan:

Introduction

- I have a dream that I have turned into a cactus, only to wake and find that this is true!

Development

- *Paragraph #1:* I am growing on someone’s farm with other plants around me. They are all prettier or taller than I am. I’m ugly.
- *Paragraph #2:* The day gets hotter and hotter, the soil dries out, and the pretty flowers wilt, wither and die. I store water in my fat trunk and leaves, and I don’t mind the heat or lack of water.

Climax

- A donkey and two goats come over and eat the leaves off the trees and bushes, but they don’t touch me because of my prickles.

Conclusion

- At the end of the day, I am the only plant that looks healthy. The others are either dead or half eaten. I might be ugly, but I’m strong and hardy, and I can stand up to anything.

Story:

The Day I Turned into a Cactus!

Introduction: (Paragraph #1):

I've always been a bad sleeper, and often have strange dreams and nightmares. Last night, I dreamt that I had turned into a cactus! What a ridiculous dream, you might say, but most dreams are ridiculous, when you think about them. This dream was no more ridiculous than most of my other dreams, except for one thing. This dream came true! When I woke up in the morning, I was no longer in my cosy bed, nor was I in my comfortable house – I was outside, rooted to the ground, unable to move. When I looked down at my feet, I saw, to my horror, that I had no feet. I was fat and green, with prickles all over me. I had become a cactus!

Development (Paragraph #2):

I looked around me and saw that I was on some sort of farm. I could see a tractor in the distance, and a shed containing bales of hay. Surrounding me were several trees. They had beautiful, soft, green leaves, not like mine, which were all fat and swollen and prickly. Birds had made nests in their branches and were singing sweetly. Near where my fat trunk sank into the ground, I noticed some pretty, little flowers. Some were yellow with red stamens and others had dark purple petals, with elegant leaves and stems. Their pretty fragrance wafted into the air, and made me realise, with even more conviction, just how grotesque I was in comparison to these other plants.

Development (Paragraph #3):

As the sun rose in the sky and the day became hotter and hotter, I could feel the moisture evaporating from the soil. I wasn't worried because I had plenty of water stored in my fat leaves. As a cactus, I am a desert plant, and little things like heat and lack of water don't bother me. I looked up at the trees, and they seemed not to be bothered either, but when I looked down at the flowers - the sweet, fragrant, delicate, little flowers - I realised that they were in trouble. Their leaves were drooping, their stems were sagging, and they didn't look at all well. The sun continued to rise, the heat became more intense and the soil dried out still further. By the afternoon, the fragrant perfume that the flowers had made was gone, yellow and purple petals lay on the ground, and the flowers' leaves and stems had withered into brown lifelessness. The flowers were dead.

Climax: (Paragraph #4):

In the mid-afternoon, I noticed a donkey and two goats approaching. Maybe they were coming over to stand in the shade of the trees to keep cool. The donkey arrived first. However, I quickly discovered that he wasn't interested in the shade at all. He went up to the first tree he came to, opened his big mouth and started eating the leaves off the poor plant. The tree screamed in pain, but the donkey couldn't hear him. The other trees started to shudder, fearing the same fate as their friend. Before long, the goats had arrived and were making a meal of the other trees. The

screams were unbearable. Such murder! I had always thought that donkeys and goats were harmless creatures, but now that I was a plant, I could see things from a different perspective. After a while, the animals turned and looked at me. Was I to be their next delicacy? The donkey tried first, but a prickle went right up his nose and he quickly backed away. Then the goats had a try at my lower leaves. Prickle, prickle, spike, ouch!! The goats also turned away and I was safe.

Conclusion: (Paragraph #5):

I breathed a sigh of relief, releasing a big gush of oxygen into the air. I felt so sorry for my little floral friends who had died of dehydration and heat exhaustion. I looked at what was left of my arboreal neighbours, and it was a truly shocking sight. Their leaves were in tatters, half-eaten and bleeding with sap. Some of their small branches were munched and crunched, and although their screams had stopped, the trees were moaning and in deep shock. And yet, there was I, unhurt, untouched, and still healthy, even in all my ugliness. I suddenly came to realise that maybe my appearance wasn't so important after all. Yes, my leaves were fat and swollen, but full of water to protect me. And, yes, I was covered in horrible prickles, but these had also saved me from being eaten alive by the animals. No, I wasn't pretty, but I was a survivor, and if I have to spend the rest of my life as a plant, then a cactus is what I want to be.

Essay Procedure

All essays follow the same basic procedure. You should:

- Make sure that you understand the essay question fully. Pick out all the *key words* in the essay question so that you know what to focus on in your answer. Essay questions often have more than one part, so make sure you know exactly *how many questions are being asked*. Decide *what type of essay* is required by looking at instructions such as “explain”, “discuss”, “compare” or “give your opinion”.
- Gather information that is relevant to the essay topic from books, magazines, newspapers, CD-ROMs and/or the Internet, and *write down rough notes*. Don't forget, at this stage, to *record the resources used*, and take note of the title, author, website or publisher, and date of publication. This will be used to make your bibliography later on.
- Make an essay plan by jotting down the *order in which you want to present your information and ideas*. Make sure the order is *logical and easy-to-follow*. Each point on the plan becomes a detailed paragraph, (or paragraphs), in the final essay.
- Write a good essay draft, following *correct essay layout* and using *formal, simple, clear, concise language*. While writing the draft, *keep re-checking your essay question to make sure that you are staying on track*. Also keep re-reading what you have written, to ensure that your *ideas and information link together and flow in a logical order*. *Correct any mistakes in spelling, punctuation and wording as you go*.
- Give references throughout the body of the essay, if you *refer to other people's quotes or findings*. To do this, you need to state the person's name and also the source of the information, *either in brackets after the quote, or as footnotes*.
- Re-check the draft, making *final corrections* to spelling, grammar, punctuation and paragraph layout.
- Ensure that the introduction and conclusion are interesting, and that they help *guide the reader into and out of the essay*.
- Write the final copy of the essay, either by *neat handwriting* or on the computer.

- Include a bibliography of all the information sources used in the essay. Arrange the bibliography *alphabetically in order of authors' surnames*. Include title of book, publisher and date of publication, or website address, after each author's name.
- Finally, re-read the entire essay to *check for any final mistakes*, and make sure that *your name is on the front page* before handing your work in for marking.

The Different Types of Essays

There are seven types of essays commonly given in secondary school. These are the:

- Information essay (or Report)
 - Explanation essay
 - Discussion essay
 - Argumentative (or Persuasive) essay
 - Narrative essay
 - Descriptive essay
 - Literary essay
-
- **Information Essays (Reports)**

With “information essays”, you need to find out as much as you can about the topic, set your information out in a *logical, clear order*, and describe the topic in a *factual, informative style*. The use of *diagrams, charts, graphs, maps or timelines* may be useful in presenting information clearly. Include a *bibliography* at the end of the essay.

(Use children’s and adult’s reference books and encyclopaedias for your information. Unless writing on current affairs, only use the Internet as a last resort, as it is slow, wastes time and may not have the information you want). Have a go at writing information essays on the following subjects:

- 1) Henry VIII and His Six Wives
- 2) Neutron Stars
- 3) The Pygmies
- 4) The Sport of Curling
- 5) The Life of Isaac Newton
- 6) Woodwind Instruments
- 7) The Periodic Table
- 8) Captain Cook’s Voyages
- 9) Martin Luther and the Reformation
- 10) Burma
- 11) The Safe Methods of Disposal of Nuclear Wastes
- 12) The Beatles
- 13) Cro-Magnon Man
- 14) Adolf Hitler
- 15) The Internal Structure of the Earth

- **Explanation Essays**

With “explanation essays”, you should study the topic thoroughly so that you can explain the reasons for a particular event or phenomenon. *Describe the topic* and then *examine reasons, causes and effects in a factual, well-organised manner*. Include a *bibliography* at the end of the essay. Have a go at these:

- 1) Explain the reasons for the outbreak of World War II.
- 2) Explain why nuclear power is the safest and cleanest form of large-scale electricity production.
- 3) Why are Australia, and to a lesser extent New Guinea, the only countries in the world to have native marsupial animals?
- 4) How was the Solar System formed?
- 5) Britain used to be on the Equator, Australia lay around the South Pole and India moved north, crashed into Asia and created the Himalayas. Explain how this happened.
- 6) What were the main causes of the French and Russian Revolutions?
- 7) Communist and Capitalist societies are run in very different ways. Explain these differences.
- 8) Explain how a fluorescent light works.
- 9) From evidence left by the “Big Bang”, the Universe is thought to be about thirteen thousand million years old. How did scientists come to this conclusion?
- 10) Describe the different types of white blood cells, and explain their role in protecting the body from disease.

- **Discussion Essays**

When writing a “discussion essay”, you should *look at the topic from all angles*, discuss each point of view, and then decide which angle or view you support. This type of essay *keeps all sides of a topic in balance and doesn't push one view more than another*. Look at the topics below and try to write your best discussion essay for each title. Your essays don't need to be long, just clear, simple and well written:

- 1) Attendance at school should be voluntary.
- 2) Most historians are too biased to be trusted!
- 3) Shops should be allowed to stay open as long as they like.