

Essay

An essay is a short piece of writing that discusses, describes or analyzes one topic. It can discuss a subject directly or indirectly, seriously or humorously. It can describe personal opinions, or just report information. An essay can be written from any perspective, but essays are most commonly written in the first person (I), or third person (subjects that can be substituted with the he, she, it, or they pronouns). There are many different kinds of essays. The following are a some of the most common ones:

Descriptive:

Examples: A descriptive essay could describe . . .

- * a tree in my backyard;
- * a visit to the children's ward of a hospital;
- * a hot fudge sundae;
- * what an athlete did in order to make it to the Olympics.

The descriptive essay provides details about how something looks, feels, tastes, smells, makes one feel, or sounds. It can also describe what something is, or how something happened. These essays generally use a lot of sensory details. The essay could be a list-like description that provides point by point details. Or, it could function as a story, keeping the reader interested in the plot and theme of the event described.

Definition:

Examples: A definition essay may try and define . . .

- * the meaning of an abstract concept, like love;
- * the true meaning and importance of honesty;
- * how the meaning of family goes deeper than just your blood relatives.

A definition essay attempts to define a specific term. It could try to pin down the meaning of a specific word, or define an abstract concept. The analysis goes deeper than a simple dictionary definition; it should attempt to explain why the term is defined as such. It could define the term directly, giving no information other than the explanation of the term. Or, it could imply the definition of the term, telling a story that requires the reader to infer the meaning.

Compare/Contrast:

Examples: A compare/contrast essay may discuss . . .

- * the likenesses and differences between two places, like New York City and Los Angeles;
- * the similarities and differences between two religions, like Christianity and Judaism;
- * two people, like my brother and myself.

The compare/contrast essay discusses the similarities and differences between two things, people, concepts, places, etc. The essay could be an unbiased discussion, or an attempt to convince the reader of the benefits of one thing, person, or concept. It could also be written simply to entertain the reader, or to arrive at an insight into human nature. The essay could discuss both similarities and differences, or it could just focus on one or the other. A comparison essay usually discusses the similarities between two things, while the contrast essay discusses the differences.

Cause/Effect:

Examples: A cause/effect essay may explain . . .

- * why a volcano erupts, and what happens afterwards;
- * what happens after a loved one's death.

The cause/effect essay explains why or how some event happened, and what resulted from the event. This essay is a study of the relationship between two or more events or experiences. The essay could discuss both causes and effects, or it could simply address one or the other. A cause essay usually discusses the reasons why something happened. An effect essay discusses what happens after a specific event or circumstance.

The below example shows a cause essay, one that would explain how and why an event happened.

If this cause essay were about a volcanic eruption, it might go something like:

"Pressure and heat built up beneath the earth's surface; the effect of this was an enormous volcanic eruption."

The next example shows an effect essay, one that would explain all the effects that happened after a specific event, like a volcanic eruption.

If this effect essay were about a volcanic eruption again, it might go something like:

"The eruption caused many terrible things to happen; it destroyed homes, forests, and polluted the atmosphere."

Narrative:

Examples: A narrative essay could tell of . . .

- * my brother's and my fishing trips;
- * a boring trip to the grocery store;
- * my near-death experience at the beach.

The narrative essay tells a story. It can also be called a "short story." Generally the narrative essay is conversational in style, and tells of a personal experience. It is most commonly written in the first person (uses I). This essay could tell of a single, life-shaping event, or simply a mundane daily experience.

Process:

Examples: A process essay may explain . . .

- * how to properly re-pot a plant;
- * how an individual came to appreciate hard work.

A process essay describes how something is done. It generally explains actions that should be performed in a series. It can explain in detail how to accomplish a specific task, or it can show how an individual came to a certain personal awareness. The essay could be in the form of step-by-step instructions, or in story form, with the instructions/explanations subtly given along the way.

Argumentative:

Examples: An argumentative essay may persuade a reader that . . .

- * he or she should use public transportation instead of driving.
- * cats are better than dogs.

An argumentative essay is one that attempts to persuade the reader to the writer's point of view. The writer can either be serious or funny, but always tries to convince the reader of the validity of his or her opinion. The essay may argue openly, or it

may attempt to subtly persuade the reader by using irony or sarcasm.

Critical:

Examples: A critical essay may analyze . . .

- * how Shakespeare presents the character, Othello, in his play, Othello;
- * the strengths and weaknesses of the movie, Children of a Lesser God;
- * the use of color in Monet's painting, Sunflowers.

A critical essay analyzes the strengths, weaknesses and methods of someone else's work. Generally these essays begin with a brief overview of the main points of the text, movie, or piece of art, followed by an analysis of the work's meaning. It should then discuss how well the author/creator accomplishes his/her goals and makes his/her points. A critical essay can be written about another essay, story, book, poem, movie, or work of art.
