

— Essay Writing Guide —

WHAT IS AN 'ESSAY'?

An essay is a way of showing your teacher that an opinion you have formed, one that is based on an interpretation of a text you have read, is valid and solidly rooted in the text itself. Nothing more.

THINK OF YOUR ESSAY LIKE THIS

For a moment, imagine you're back in class and, instead of being asked to *write* your answer to the essay, you've been asked to *say* your answer. What would be expected of you? A thousand-word reply? No – it's **home-time** in five minutes after all!

What's **needed** here is a 'super-condensed-in-a-nutshell' answer. And this is what your *written* essay needs to open with, too. It's your 'take' on the essay question and might **begin with**, 'As I see it, I think it's likely that the writer...'

- ▶ This 'super-condensed-in-a-nutshell' opinion becomes a kind of '**controlling idea**' that flows through each and every paragraph of the essay. It will need support from a series of points and textual references, as well as a discussion of the effects of these.

WRITING THE ESSAY

- ▶ In the opening paragraph, explain your understanding of what you think the essay question is asking and then give your '**super-condensed-in-a-nutshell**' answer to it. Remember, this is merely a brief 'overview answer' (properly called a '**thesis statement**').
 - What's needed here is a confident statement of **your overall 'take', 'answer' or 'point of view'** on the essay title or question, something along the lines of: 'Overall, my interpretation of this text leads me to think that...'
 - This kind of statement, made in the opening paragraph, **sets up your essay's argument perfectly**.
 - To be able to create such a statement, you'll need a sound knowledge of the text(s). If you **don't** know your texts well enough to create such an '**answer**', then (if this is coursework), re-read the text(s) and, if needed, read a study guide, too.
 - You'll also need to search your text(s) to find a series of quotations or examples that will help you support your viewpoint and show that it is firmly rooted in the text(s) itself. Use Post-It notes to keep tabs on these quotations and write on each note a brief explanation that will help when you use the quotation in the essay.
- ▶ Still in the opening paragraph, add in a little more detail about what aspects or parts of the text brought you to your stated '**conclusion**' and **show how you will use these to help support your 'answer'**.
 - For example, you might write, depending on the essay title, 'I formed this interpretation from the ways the author creates the characters of X, Y and Z: by analysing each of these in turn, I hope to show...'
 - The idea here is to give the general direction that your essay will take and show how your argument will progress.
 - If carefully done, this will provide you with a series of '**signposts**' that will guide the structure of your essay.

FOR A MOMENT... STEP BACK INTO THE IMAGINARY CLASSROOM

What might follow on from the '**super-condensed-in-a-nutshell**' conclusion you gave to your teacher? The teacher might add:

'Good, that's a fair view to hold; but tell me why your interpretation leads you to think that. Show me how some aspects of the text brought you such insights and to that interpretation.'

In the *written* version of the **essay**, you'll need to provide a good deal of this kind of '**evidence**'. Most often this will be in the form of *quotations*, with each one accompanied by an introductory point that **links to the essay's argument or thesis**. The quotation should be followed by a substantial explanation or commentary in which you explore the

methods the writer uses, the **effects** the quotation creates on the reader and suggest their likely **purpose** – that is why the effects were created.

- ▶ This will often require a two-fold **consideration as there will be a ‘local’ purpose** (at the point the quotation occurs structurally within the text) as well as a more general purpose that will be to develop a theme of the text.
- ▶ **You’ll also need to add** a comment on the effective literary and linguistic merits of the quotation.
- ▶ **To do this effectively, you’ll need to use what** is called the PEE technique.

The ‘P.E.E.’ Technique

Needless to say, the ‘PEE’ technique has nothing to do with, well... you know.

- ▶ **This technique should form the basis for each and every ‘body paragraph’ of your essay.**
 - *‘Body paragraphs’ are those that follow the opening paragraph and precede the concluding paragraph. They are **the ‘meat’ of the essay and need to be well seasoned with interpretations and insights that you have derived from a close analysis of your text(s).***



Each body paragraph should open with a **Point**. This point will add support for the **‘super-condensed-in-a-nutshell’** thesis you have already stated in the opening paragraph.

- ▶ **It needs to clearly and obviously develop the essay’s overall argument.**

Following this opening point, you now need to explain it better and show how and why you think it supports your overall view. Usually, this means giving an **Example** from the text (most often as a **brief quotation**, but in a play it could be a description of the stage action, or of how dramatic irony is working on the audience, for example. Make certain that the quotation is as short as it can be – but equally, make sure it does *clearly* help you make your point).

- ▶ Following the quotation, certain things now need exploring to complete the PEE structure and gain those high marks you deserve. Here is a checklist you could consider (not all will apply all of the time):
 - What **techniques** have been used to make the language of the quotation effective?
 - *This means discussing the writer’s methods, e.g. their creation of realistic dialogue; their use of effective metaphors; their vivid descriptions, onomatopoeia, alliteration, effective stage directions, etc.*
 - How does the **writer’s choice of method** shape **the reader’s** interpretation of key aspects of the text, including its themes?
 - *E.g. ‘the effect of this passage on the reader is to create a sense of ‘being there’...’.*
 - Why might this particular **method** have been chosen by the writer (i.e. **what was the writer’s purpose**)?
 - *E.g. ‘At this point in the story, the author is developing this character and creating a sense of atmosphere and tension; also, at a deeper level, this quotation helps develop the theme of ...’.*

TOP TIP! Keep in mind that you only have one chance to make a favourable first impression. So how can you impress the examiner? One very effective way is to use **“embedded quotations”**. These work well especially in your introduction. It’s a word or phrase from the text (shown inside quotation marks) that fits fluently into your own sentence. Embedded quotations help to suggest a confident knowledge of the text and create an authoritative tone. Here is an example: **“Blanche Dubois might claim she wants “magic” rather than “realism” but, in his play “A Streetcar Named Desire”, Tennessee Williams provides his audience with an extra large helping of reality”**.