

# EXPOSITORY ESSAY

## A BASIC GUIDE TO WRITING THE SHORT ESSAY

### WHAT IS AN EXPOSITORY ESSAY?

#### Four things first

- For expository essays, give the reader directed information about a specific topic. It's your chance to explore a subject to your audience. Another name for the expository essay is the five-paragraph essay, because that's the amount of space you have to make your point – five paragraphs.
- Expository essays can be used to:
  1. Explore a point of view
  2. Communicate a fact or series of related facts in a logical way
  3. Explain an organization or a system
  4. Clarify a complex idea
- When writing an expository essay, some of the ways you can get your point across include:
  1. Explaining a process
  2. Comparing or contrasting two ideas
  3. Identifying a relationship between two people or things
  4. Using examples
  5. Classifying and defining a concept or item
- You can find examples of expository essays in magazines, newspapers, textbooks, some marketing materials and many high school and college classes.
- All expository essays rely on facts. Facts can include that are not facts but direct quotes, statistics, illustrations, definitions, names, dates and events.
  1. The facts must work together to support your position. Never contradict facts to make your point. If the facts do not support your original idea, you will need to re-examine the idea.
  2. Facts and how you use them will become increasingly important as your essay progresses, especially during the rough draft and writing stages. In short, expository essays use facts to give your reader information on a given subject.

### DEVELOPING THE IDEA

#### The next step

- The subject: The general idea you plan to write about.
  1. The subject can be anything you are interested in.
  2. Interest in the subject is important because if you're not interested your reader won't be interested either.
- Some possible choices:
  - Civil unrest
  - Abortion rights
  - The future of the space program
  - Toxic lands for politicians
  - Addictive
  - Storage of spent nuclear fuel
- An expository essay doesn't have to be about serious subjects. Don't forget the lighter side of things, such as:
  - Choosing a job
  - Customs through the years
  - Business in Superman
  - Movies vs. books
  - Mountain biking
  - Playing golf
- The topic: Once you have the general subject, it's time to narrow it down. In some cases, such as a class assignment, the topic is assigned and narrowing down the choices isn't too difficult. For those cases where you have to start from a larger pool of ideas, a few questions you can ask that follow the five-paragraph will help you pick a topic from the overall subject you have chosen.
  1. **What?** What? Who did or said something about the subject that made an impact on you? What was it about? What again or different with your position?
  2. **What?** What happened? What has been said about the subject? What new information has come to light? What caused something to occur? What have you learned about the subject?
  3. **Where?** Where did it happen? Where was the last debate on the subject? Where does the subject become a topic of conversation? Where will the subject have the greatest effect?

4. **Where?** Where does the subject affect the lives people? Where does it happen? Where was it successful? Where was it a failure? Where is the subject dragging for imagination?
5. **Why?** Why did it take place? Why does it matter? Why do people tend to be interested? Why don't people get involved? Why does the subject happen at all?
6. **How?** How did it happen? How did it begin? How did it end? How did it succeed or fail? How can it be repeated? How does it affect people's lives?
7. As you start to think about the subject, narrow your focus to a particular aspect of the subject that becomes the topic.
  - a. Example: Your subject may be "the Internet." That is too broad to cover in five paragraphs. So, you could focus on the topic "How the Internet Influences Education."

#### Finding the topic in your subject

**Subject:** The use of imagery in modern literature.

**Topic:** The battle between good and evil in Stephen King's books.

**Subject:** Recombinant DNA research.

**Topic:** The importance of DNA research in the treatment of diseases.

**Subject:** War and economics.

**Topic:** How the threat of war affects the stock market.

**Subject:** Superhero powers.

**Topic:** I could become that superhero in a hot minute!

- The Reader: Once you have narrowed the subject down to a workable topic, it's time to narrow the focus a little more. The focus is the most point and defines your position on the topic you have chosen.
  - Often answers the questions "how" and "why." The focus answers a particular question about the topic and identifies your reason for writing and your point of view.
    - i. The focus in our example, the subject is "The Internet." So narrow that down ask, "What is the Internet?" "Why is the Internet important?" "How has it made our lives easier?" "Where do we use it the most?"
    - ii. Now possible, this way be, "The Internet is a valuable educational tool." Now you have a topic.
    - iii. To put a sharper point on the topic, read your reader focus into words. How can you show the Internet is a valuable educational tool? How does it make life easier? How does it help you? The answer could be, "It makes research easier. It opens up thousands of sources that would have taken days or weeks to accumulate in the past." That leads to an even more defined and manageable idea... the Internet has revolutionized how we conduct research. That's your focus.
      - **Subject:** The Internet.
      - **Topic:** The Internet is a valuable educational tool.
      - **Focus:** The Internet has revolutionized how we conduct research.
- By now that you have a focus based on your topic, that comes out of your general knowledge about the subject, the next work begins...

#### In Summary

- The subject is...
- ...the broadest part of the essay; the reader never sees the majority of the information
  - ...the large pool of knowledge you will draw from to make your point
  - ...reflected in the essay even if it is never fully examined in the essay
- The topic...
- ...comes from your general subject
  - ...is more focused than the general subject
  - ...is usually addressed by the focus
- A good thesis should...
- ...be clear: your reader should have no doubt about where you stand on the issue
  - ...take a definite stand: this is a place to be really mean
  - ...keep the essay heading toward a single conclusion
  - ...be strong
  - ...be the glue that holds the essay together



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