

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

What is an essay? And why do we have to write them?

The word itself is from the French 'essai' – meaning an attempt (or try). It goes back to Michel de Montaigne, a French intellectual and nobleman who wrote the very first book of essays (1580). They were his 'attempt' to make thoughtful, personal statements on a range of important topics (like 'Friendship', 'Loyalty' and 'Old age').

The book rapidly became famous throughout Europe. It is the only book definitely known to have been in Shakespeare's library.

.....

Why do we need essays today?

Because Montaigne had invented a form of writing so useful that it survived and multiplied.

Today it has more uses than ever. Modern newspapers and magazines are **full** of 'essays'.

- A Expository essays ... they explain or describe a topic
- B Argumentative essays ... they try to persuade the reader of something
- C Personal essays ... they try to share a significant experience
- D Literary essays ... they discuss books, plays and films

At the end of this documentary are four full length examples. You can print them out and study them in detail.

.....

STRUCTURING AN ESSAY

Essays vary a lot. However there are always three distinct stages in writing one.

- A TOPIC ANALYSIS ... where you figure out *what* you have to write about
- B PLANNING ... where you develop the main ideas needed to deal with that topic
- C DRAFTING ... where you write the essay out in proper paragraphs

.....

A TOPIC ANALYSIS

Let's start with the topic.

**“There is no such thing as a typical Australian.”
Do you agree?**

It's a classic topic. There is a statement, followed by a simple question asking - do you accept the statement, or not?

We need to start by asking: **what** does the topic actually **mean**?

.....

It helps to ask lots of questions – **about the topic itself**.

- What do people think of as 'typically Australian'?
- Where did the stereotypes come from?
- Are *most* Australians like this stereotype? Why? Why not?
- Who *isn't* like the stereotype?
- Are there dangers in thinking of most Australians as the stereotype?
- Are there any shared Australian values?

These questions 'open up' the topic, and give you something to think about.

RULE 1: **Never** start writing an essay *before* you have **thought** about (or analysed) the topic and know exactly what you are being asked to discuss.

.....

B PLANNING OUT THE TOPIC IDEAS

Good news! If you have used questions to open up the topic, planning can be as simple as answering your **own** questions. What does that look like?

- What do people think of as 'typically Australian'?
 - People from English speaking backgrounds
 - Country or bush people
 - Surfies, cricketers and people who love sport
 - People who swear a lot and drink beer
- Where did the stereotypes come from?
 - The way Australia was in previous generations
 - The sort of characters in Australian films
 - What the media focus on
- Are most Australians like this stereotype?
 - No.

Why? Why not?

A big percentage of Australians come from non-English backgrounds

Most Australians live in the city

Only a few thousand people are surfies and cricketers

Who *isn't* like the stereotype?

People from Asia, Arab and African countries

Many of the population – in Sydney, Melbourne, etc

Are there dangers in thinking of most Australians as the stereotype?

It implies criticism of those who don't conform

It ignores the benefits of individuals

Are there any shared Australian values?

A belief in democracy, justice and free speech

A sense of humour and a belief in a 'fair go'

RULE 2: **Never** begin writing an essay before you have **planned** it out in detail.

.....

THE IMPORTANCE OF EVIDENCE

Before we finish with planning, there is one last point to be made. It can be represented like this.

Whatever you say about the topics (key questions or ideas) in the essay **must** be supported by **evidence** – examples (or proof) to show that you're not just 'making it up'. Here is a paragraph to show what that means.

People get their way of thinking about Australians from different sources. If we look at old pictures we tend to see bushmen on horses, or Anzacs in slouch hats. Our most famous poem, 'Waltzing Matilda', is about a 'swaggy', the one who jumped into the billabong. In previous generations, most Aussies were 'Anglo-Saxon' – white folks whose ancestors came from England or Ireland. These images stay around long after the reality has moved on. There are the sorts of people we see in Australian films – like 'Gallipoli' (Aussie soldiers) or 'The Man from Snowy River' (bushmen on horses), or 'Mad Max' (an angry white man in a car), or 'Crocodile Dundee' (a cocky white man with a big knife). There is also what the media focus on. How many stories are about cricketers and footballers do we see? How often to we see ads for beer? All these images add up to a sense of Australia as it once was, or is in pockets. But is it the current reality?

RULE 3: Always provide examples or 'evidence' for what you are saying. **Never** simply assert it – if you want to be believed.

.....

C DRAFTING

More good news! Once you have planned out the essay – which really just means

What are the key questions about a topic?

AND

What are the answers to those questions?

.....

WHAT ABOUT PARAGRAPHS?

Everyone knows what a paragraph is. Right?

It's a group of sentences all connected because they are about **a single topic or theme**.

A paragraph can be easily spotted. It makes a distinct 'block' of text on the page, and is always separated by a small space or indent from other paragraphs.

The topic of the paragraph is stated in the **topic sentence**).

The **discussion** or **explanation** of the topic occupies all the other sentences in the paragraph.

If you have planned your essay using the question and answer technique, **each major question** and its associated answers can become one paragraph.

Everyone knows that smoking is bad for you. The chemicals in a cigarette are full of poisons – acetone, the stuff they use in nail polish remover, ammonia, arsenic, the gas used by the Nazis, tars (which cause cancer) and a toxic brew of about forty other nasties. Then there's what happens to your lungs – clogging them up so you can't breathe properly. And your arteries – which smoking constricts – like standing on a hose. Then there's the addictive effect of nicotine, which means you can't give up even if you want to.

RULE 4: If you finish one main concept within the essay and move on to another, you **must** start a new paragraph, with a new topic sentence.

.....

Paragraphs are not all exactly the same though. By tradition, there are three types:

- Introductory paragraph ... which discusses in a general way what the topic is about and gives some indication of what your point of view is
- 'Body' paragraphs ... each one discusses in detail **a particular issue** *within* the topic (the questions and answers you worked out in planning)
- Concluding paragraph ... which sums up what you have been saying in a general way

RULE 5: A good essay must start with a clear introduction and end with a strong conclusion (or summing up).

.....

IMPROVING YOUR ESSAY

As we saw, essays have been around for a long time. Over the centuries, lots of 'tricks' have been developed. Here are some of the most effective.

1 QUOTES FROM EXPERTS

'The tobacco industry's behaviour has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, and cost the taxpayer millions and millions of dollars in health care expenditure.' (ACCC submission to Senate inquiry)

2 STATISTICS

About 20,000 people a year die from smoking in Australia – more than AIDS, road accidents and all hard drugs combined! That's 52 people a day! It is a massive loss of life, for no good reason.

3 ANECDOTES

You've heard of Dr Sigmund Freud – father of psychology – often shown with a pipe in his mouth. Well he died of smoking. He got cancer in the jaw, and then the tongue. He died in agony.

4 CASE STUDIES

My uncle smoked from the time he was a kid. He was a twenty-a-day guy. By the time he was forty, he had shortness of breath, clogged arteries and other health problems. The doctor said, 'Give it up before it kills you.' He took no notice. Then he got gangrene. They had to cut off his leg.

5 'LOADED' LANGUAGE

You have to be stupid to smoke. Tobacco is full of terrible toxins. Just look at the nick names for cigarettes: cancer sticks, coffin nails, tobacco torpedoes. Everyone knows they're killing you. Why not jump off a cliff now and save waiting for the end?

6 HUMOUR

Knock, knock. Who's there? Nick. Nick who? Nicotine.

What's the difference between Russian Roulette and smoking. None – except that smoking takes longer.

Cigarettes are killers that travel in packs.

.....

ESSAYS ... A TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE

Finally, what **not** to do?

Here are some 'no nos' when it comes to essays. A bad essay:

- 1 Doesn't answer the question (ie it shows no sign of topic analysis)
- 2 Just 'raves on' ... offering no evidence of any kind for the claims it makes
- 3 Is a mess ... has no sign of careful planning ... is impossible to follow
- 4 Is boring!!! ... has no enhancements like quotes, anecdotes, etc.

.....

Summing up

There are many different types of essay, but all of them require the same basic ingredients:

- Careful analysis of the topic – before you start
- Thorough planning – preferably by asking a series of questions and then working out the answers to them
- Well written paragraphs, including an introduction and a conclusion
- Some understanding of how to enhance the essay with things like quotations, statistics, anecdotes, case studies, rhetoric or humour

Follow these guidelines, and essays are not as hard as some people say. And good writing!