



## Parts of an Essay

Detailed below are the key components of an academic, college-level essay. As you draft and revise your essays, keep in mind these fundamental parts so you can construct a stronger, more effective, and convincing essay.

- **Purpose and Audience**—Virtually all aspects of writing are governed by these two concepts. The **purpose** of any piece of writing can be determined by the writer asking the simple question: “What am I trying to accomplish with this piece of writing?” Of course, the writer must think beyond the mechanical particulars of the writing assignment. For example, some mechanical answers would be “I want to get an ‘A’ in the class,” or “The professor made me write this.” Instead, the writer should focus on what she or he wants the writing to do, such as “I want to show someone how *Heart of Darkness* is about racism” or “I want to explain to my readers why Nicholas Ray uses vibrant color in his climactic scenes.” The **purpose** of the essay is fundamental to all other decisions the writer makes about writing and revising.

The **audience** of a piece of writing is sometimes very specific, and this is especially true of “real-world” writing. A business plan is written to convince a bank to give you money, a financial plan is written to convince a client to make certain investments, a legal brief is written to convince a judge of some fact or course of action, a laboratory report is written to describe some phenomenon or explain some procedure, and so on. For most writing done at the college or university level, the assumption is that the audience is the instructor. While this is often true, the writer might find it useful to expand the concept of audience beyond the instructor to include everyone in the class and perhaps even people not in the class—some of whom will be familiar with the text and ideas and some of whom will not. It may be useful to ask your instructors if they have a particular **audience** in mind for the assignment and to thus convey your ideas to that audience.

- **Thesis**—The thesis of any piece of writing is a clear and relatively brief statement of the purpose of the essay. The thesis might be one concise statement that expresses the argument of the essay (what the essay will prove/describe/explain/persuade) or several sentences that work together to articulate the argument of the essay. In shorter pieces of writing (a few pages or so in length), the thesis is usually found early in the essay—ideally in the first (or introductory) paragraph. In longer essays, the writer may need first need to introduce key concepts about the overall topic of the paper as a way to lead into or “set up” the argument/thesis; thus, in longer essays the **thesis** may not appear until the second or even third paragraph. In any case—whether the essay is short or long—it is vital to orient the reader to your argument early in the paper.
- **Focus**—The focus of an essay helps the reader understand how the different parts of the essay fit together. The thesis provides the initial focus of the paper, but frequently writers lose focus as they proceed through the essay, adding or developing ideas without explaining how the added details, examples, or the direction of the paper relate to the thesis. Loss of focus results in essays that are unclear, and that seem to digress from the writer’s main point. Clear and effective transitions from one idea to the next or from idea to example (or evidence) help maintain **focus**. Focus becomes more challenging to maintain in longer or more complex writing tasks.
- **Development**—Development refers to the use of details, evidence, and specific information to support a particular point in an essay. A poorly developed point will sound vague, too general, and

unsubstantiated, while a well-developed point will answer any questions a reader might have and will lead to a conclusion (of sorts) before the end of the paragraph or section. Well-developed essays not only answer a reader’s questions but also anticipate them by responding to the “naysayer” set of concerns inherent in every piece of writing.

- **Use of other texts**—When we incorporate ideas, terms, and arguments from other writers, we involve ourselves in a scholarly or critical community by participating in an ongoing debate or dialogue about a particular topic. **Citation**—the noting and recording of words or ideas taken from another writer—is central to the idea of academic or scholarly dialogue. The need for citation is obvious when the writer is quoting material from another writer—quotations marks identify the “speaker” of the text as someone other than the writer of the essay. The need for citation is perhaps less obvious (but no less important) when the writer paraphrases or summarizes another writer’s words or ideas. Failing to correctly cite the source leads to confusion about who is speaking and whose idea is being presented, and the result constitutes plagiarism (which is legally termed intellectual property theft).

The best way to avoid plagiarism to is to be clear on the rules for citation. Here is a brief and partial list of materials that do and do not require acknowledgment, adapted from Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors book, *The Everyday Writer: A Brief Reference* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 282-3.

<b>Materials not requiring citation</b>	<b>Materials requiring citation</b>
Common knowledge: If most readers are likely to know a particular fact or idea, you do not need to cite a source (such as: George Washington was the first President of the United States).	Direct quotations from another writer or text.
Facts available in a variety of sources: If you find the same fact or idea in a number of different reference sources, you can assume that it is a kind of “common knowledge” and therefore does not require citation (for example, George Washington was President from 1789-1797).	Judgments, opinions, and claims of others. Whenever you summarize or paraphrase someone else’s opinion, you must cite the source.
Your own findings from original or field research (although you will still need to document or cite any materials you used in reaching your conclusions).	Statistics, charts, tables and graphs from any other source: cite the source of all statistical or graphical material, even if you create the chart, table or graph from data in another source.