

How to Write an Essay

written by Daniel Hug

1. Introduction

This essay deals with the question of how to write essays. The importance of this topic lies in the necessity to bring material into a readable and structured form that is both helpful to the author in terms of getting an internal order into the material presented as well as providing the reader with a clear, readable text.

2. The Structure of an Essay

The point of writing an essay is to try and work out a thought on a certain subject. It is as important to the author as it is to the reader to clearly see the line along which the thought proceeds. After doing some reading and after meditating on the subject, it is usually helpful to ask oneself where and how to introduce the reader to the subject and where the journey is supposed to go. In this, it is indeed like planning a journey for oneself and for people who might wish to join in. The first question would be "Where on the map am I, where might my readers be?" This is where the essay will start in order to "pick them up." And then the traveller would have another look at the map to find the destination where the journey should end. Then, he would look for a route to travel that will lead to his planned destination.

We choose a bizarre topic in order to illustrate the method. If one wanted to argue that it is good to commit many sins, so that we can experience lots of God's forgiveness, one would probably start by describing certain life experiences and then explain why they are called sins and what makes something be a sin.

In this example, to describe the experiences is the starting point. The first argument is to say that these experiences are experiences of sin. Some readers might agree, others might disagree, but all should be able to understand the reasoning. Only those who understand 'stay on the bus' to travel on. Next, our traveller might argue that God has joy in forgiving our sins. Again, some readers might agree, others not. Lastly, the traveller might point out that we should strive to behave in a way that is God's joy (one argument) and therefore sin frequently, so that God may have the joy of forgiving as often as possible (a second argument).

The quality of the essay itself is almost entirely dependent upon how solidly it is based on facts, and how well the arguments are worked out. It is of lesser importance whether many people will actually agree.

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The author should always be aware what he is presupposing. In the above argument, for example, the existence of God is presupposed. When writing for an atheist or agnostic audience, this would be a serious mistake. In this case, there would have to be an argument for the assumption that there is something that can sensibly be called God. If one's readers believe in the existence of God, but don't believe that the Bible can be trusted, one cannot easily quote the Bible to support one's arguments. It is therefore of high importance for the author to keep in mind what he presupposes his readers to believe so that there is no need to argue for it. To argue for every single bit bloats a text and makes it almost unreadable. To not argue for something that a reader doesn't already hold to be true means that, in the eyes of this reader, there is a weak spot in the line of arguments. Both has to be kept in mind.

No argument and no line of arguments can be absolutely coercive. There is always the possibility for a reader to disagree and to counterargue. There will always be different perceptions, different interpretations of what is perceived, and different conclusions from that. To formulate an argument as if it was absolutely striking and totally irrefutable is usually rather annoying for the reader because it smells of arrogance on the side of the author. The reader wants to stay free whether to agree or not, and it is indeed his right to insist on this.

2.3 Structural Elements

An essay will in almost all cases have three elements: introduction, argument, and conclusion. The introduction will consist of the starting point with an outlook on what is to come. Here, it is important to explain to the reader why the subject has been dealt with and why it is important and worth inquiring into.

The second part is usually the main part where the author can unfold his arguments. This part usually requires some research and a lot of care. It is a common mistake to choose a subject, explain its importance, and then, after briefly listing some arguments in a perfunctory way, expound one's own opinion at length. However this might be for the author, it is not very interesting for a reader. He wants to *understand* how and why the author has arrived at his opinion. In the main part, the author may want to tell his reader which arguments have already brought forward by other authors concerning the subject in question. (Almost all subjects have already been dealt with extensively in the course of time.) Some of these arguments will support the position that the author himself intends to take, some will not. It is, rhetorically as well as morally, necessary to pass both types of arguments on to the reader. After all, the author will hopefully have chosen the position which is the more sensible one. If

the arguments he can bring forward don't show that, the author might have to think about his own position again.

It is one of the main benefits of writing an essay and of explaining how one has arrived at one's position, that one has the chance to become aware that this very position is not tenable after all. (In the essay itself, this change of positions would not show, as one would always argue for the position one has finally arrived at throughout the whole text.)

After throwing light on the subject from several angles, the reader should be informed enough to understand which problems are involved with the subject and how these problems have been met by different people with differing points of view.

It is then, to the thoroughly informed reader, that the author explains his own point of view and why he has taken it. This is what happens in the third part of an essay, which is traditionally called the conclusion. It contains a discussion of the information that has been passed on to the reader in the second part, including the author's weighing of the arguments. In the discussion, it should become understandable and plausible why the author has come to his point of view. The conclusion then contains the author's stating his point of view on the subject in question and giving a brief outlook on further consequences this might have. In the above example, the author who had argued for frequent sinful actions might propose changes in legislation or in the rearing of children, or he might state that we are actually doing very well and God must be very pleased and we should go ahead and do things as we are used to.

An essay generally ends with a very short summary of what has been dealt with and what came out of it. In most cases, a reader will read the summary first, then the introduction, and then decide whether it's worth reading the whole essay, so he should be given the most crucial information in the summary.

NB Fact Finding

It is helpful to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include autobiographical writings (e.g. St Patrick's Declaration) and Lives and histories of people which include information from people who knew them (e.g. Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People). Secondary sources are writings about texts (e.g. Ian Bradley's The Celtic Way). Folklore (e.g. many medieval Lives of saints) lacks the validity of history - it depends upon hearsay and opinion but cannot be verified. But secondary sources can helpfully highlight, expound or summarise certain topics.

University and other serious publishers (e.g. OUP and Penguin) often publish editions with indexes and footnotes which enable the reader to easily look up subjects.