



Writing a Great Essay

Did I scare you enough the first day about learning to write essays in this class? I didn't mean to scare you as much as I meant to warn you that essays and writing will be an important facet of learning in U.S. History, and I can't wait to see how your skills improve this year.

What to Remember About Writing:

Writing is a survival skill. How will you answer the questions on a job application if you don't know the best word choices? How will you survive college applications, college entrance exams, and college itself if you can't write a good essay? In general, how will you best communicate to the rest of the world on Twitter, Insta, Snapchat, and Facebook if you can't turn a great phrase? Writing is the common thread of every school subject and every method of communication. If you can write well, you will make a good impression.

Writing is work. It's a skill that takes practice—and practice and practice and practice. Don't be too hard on yourself if you need more practice at first. If you still confuse *their*, *there*, and *they're*, that's fine. If you still worry about the best words to express your ideas—totally cool. Good writing takes practice and revision. Take this as a challenge to improve and work hard, and you'll see your writing improve. Some of my students improve their scores from failing to As by the end of the first semester.

Writing is necessary. You can't escape it, so don't even try. If you think about writing as a way to communicate your ideas effectively instead of murderously difficult torture, it might make the process a little more enjoyable. None of us may end up a Thomas Jefferson or Alexander Hamilton, but there is sweet satisfaction when you write a piece that adequately (and sometimes perfectly) describes your point of view.

Essay Tests—The Basics

Evaluate the prompt. Find the pertinent information in the prompt and eliminate anything extra. What is the prompt asking? Narrow it down without eliminating important information.

Write a Thesis. A good essay has a strong thesis. A thesis distills your ideas into one sentence to better organize and develop your argument. It also acts as a guide to the reader of what to expect as they read your work. A good thesis takes a stand and expresses your specific idea. The thesis may change as you brainstorm your ideas.

Brainstorm. Allot yourself 5-10 minutes to think. Don't think of it as wasting your time; it most definitely is not a waste. This is an important step and will save you time in the long run. Think of anything and everything you can that relates to the topic and write it on the page. As you write and think, some ideas will gel together while others will not fit. Let it all work itself into a good idea. Good ideas take time. Divide your ideas into one, two, or three body paragraphs, marking what information you want to include in each.

Start writing. You don't have time to mess around here. Once it's time to write . . . WRITE. This step will get easier the more times you do it, but the biggest advice I have is this: **Don't be afraid to write.** Get words on the paper and don't really worry too much about it. Once you start writing, your ideas will flow. And if they don't, DON'T PANIC! Brain freeze happens. Take a few breaths, reread your notes, add a few more ideas to your note section, then start again. Use as many specifics as you can, and try not to use fluffy language just to fill the page. Teachers (me) can see through that.

Introduction Paragraph. Your writing needs a strong introduction to grab the reader's attention and to introduce your thesis statement. In the beginning, try to use your thesis statement as the last sentence in your introduction.

Two or Three Body Paragraphs. Use a topic sentence to structure your paragraph around the ideas in your thesis. This tool makes essay construction much easier to write (and to read). Most paragraphs need a topic sentence, 2-3 supporting sentences, and a clincher sentence.

Conclusion. You need to tie your ideas together at the end, so write a conclusion. Restate your thesis (in different words) and conclude strong.

Turn it in and stop stressing about it. It's over and you did your best. There will always be another test—think about what you learned on this test that you'll do better next time.

Helpful Hints

ROSE. Use this mnemonic to help you remember ways to back up your ideas.

- Readings—information learned from presentations and booklets
- Observations—Classroom discussions, debates, notes
- Studies—reading done outside that required for class
- Experiences—personal insights/experience with topic

Use specifics whenever possible. Essay tests (history tests especially) measure how much you know, and specifics show you know your stuff. If you don't know the exact answer but can remember the ballpark answer, instead of "many people died," use "more than 250 people died." Or instead of "before the Colonies were organized," use "in the 1600s." Know your details. The more evidence you use to support your ideas, the stronger the ideas are, but don't make the mistake of using too much evidence and not enough personal perspective. NEVER use these words: I, we, you, me, my, our, us.

The Art of Brevity. *Brevity* means "concise and exact use of words in writing or speech." Don't try to fill the paper with words; fill the paper with words that pack a punch. Try to use as few words as possible to express ideas. For more information about brevity, go to www.copymatter.com/embracing-brevity

Weak words. Some words are better than others when it comes to strong writing. Here's a short, not all-encompassing list of words you should learn to use sparingly. We will add to this list as the year goes along.

"to be" verbs
important
very
good/bad
really
just
many/some/a lot
did/do/done
that
thing
it
almost