Writing Skills

Academic Essays

An academic essay should explicitly state its purpose and outline the way in which it plans to achieve that purpose. It should then methodically move through critical points supported by evidence until it supports all its claims and achieves its purpose. The strength of an academic essay lies in its logical argumentation through sound evidence and clear structure.

Quick tips

General to specific: Each paragraph should move from a topic sentence to a specific piece of evidence, to a focused commentary, and then a transition to the next topic (in a new paragraph). In this way, your whole essay can move from more general writing (introducing) to more specific writing (citing evidence, supporting claims).

Paragraph length: If your paragraph lasts for an entire page, think about breaking it up. If you cannot summarise each paragraph into a few words easily, think about reorganising it.

Sentence length: Avoid too many complex sentences. Prefer simple sentences with fewer commas and conjunctions wherever possible.

Word choice: Avoid overuse of common verbs (is, are, was, were, has, have, had), because there is often a better, more specific verb that makes the writing clearer and more interesting.

Structure

Here are the basic parts of an essay:

Title: If you have a chance to write your own title, make it short, but pertinent. Don’t just write the essay question. Capitalise it. Bonus points for clever puns.

Introduction: Introduce us to your topic, your main argument, and how you plan to support that argument. Avoid citing others in your introduction paragraph(s). Let your own voice explain what you plan to write and why it matters.
Body paragraphs: Each paragraph should have a central focus. You should move methodically through the evidence that best supports your thesis statement from the introduction. If your paragraph is a whole page, think about changing it.

Conclusion: Some people like a conclusion that reiterates the thesis and summarises the evidence. Other people like the conclusion to offer a new synthesis of the evidence to propose a solution. Others like a conclusion that offers new questions that have been raised. Ask your tutor which they prefer.

Argumentation

There are different ways to understand different arguments. The Greeks had a famous triad of components informing the appeal of a specific argument: ethos, pathos, and logos. The identity and background of the writer is often referred to as their ethos. Expertise is proved in the academic world through research, publication, and experience. Pathos refers to the emotional component of a piece of writing - does the text make its argument by causing panic, fear, love, comfort, etc.? And lastly, logos refers to the ability of the evidence to support a logical conclusion based on facts to remove doubt/disagreement.

Perhaps the most common place we see all of these traits working together is in the courtroom. Think of legal dramas and how sometimes lawyers appeal to the identities and emotions of the jurors, or how they attack the character of a witness, or when they argue that the evidence in the case itself is all that matters. Some people say that a trial is merely a war of competing narratives, but it could also be called a war of argumentation styles. Understand how each case requires its own approach based on the people involved, the evidence, and the audience.

In academic writing, logos is the most important element. Any scholar wishing to publish based more on their name than on their evidence will find themselves in trouble eventually. Also, any academic writer wishing to appeal to the reader’s prejudices or desires will also find that their writing, however exceptional it may be, does not meet the required level of argumentation. It is through sound reasoning and quality evidence, communicated clearly, that academic writers most often succeed. That is not to say there isn’t a place for compelling writing or the power of experience to support an argument. But, there must always be a foundation of solid evidence and reasoning in academic texts.

For some more good tips on strong and weak arguments, be sure to check out our Writing Critically guide!