

Writing Analytical Essays

GETTING STARTED

1. Turn OFF your computer. Go into another room with a pen, the prompt, and some scratch paper.
2. Acknowledge the existence of the question. Do you know not only what the question is asking you, but how it's giving you "clues" as to how to answer it?
 - a. Is there a thesis embedded in the prompt? [easy]
 - b. Is the prompt guiding you to a thesis? [moderate]
 - c. Does the prompt ask you to create your own original thesis without providing clues? [difficult]

If you're given a *choice* of questions, why not choose the easiest one (or at least the one you think will be easiest *for you*)?

3. Map out the components of the question – what two or three basic things is the question asking you to address? Decide the best logical order in which to address these things. In considering what order to address them, you might rank them in order of importance.
4. Map out your response. In five page essay, you'll write about 11-13 paragraphs. One paragraph will be the introduction; one will be the conclusion. Parcel out the rest keeping in mind what components of the question you think deserve more attention (and will end up getting more paragraphs).
 - a. Brainstorm and jot down 13-15 ideas that you'll want to discuss in your paper and that you will be able to develop in a paragraph [They can be words, phrases, fragments – don't worry about sentences yet.]
 - b. Look at your list and see if you can identify similar ideas that could be developed in the same paragraph; then draw arrows linking them.
 - c. Look at your list for ideas that seem logically connected. Does one lead naturally to another? Where do the easiest transitions seem to be? Does it make sense to discuss one idea before another? Can you group your ideas into three clusters and then decide on which cluster to discuss first, second, and third?
 - d. Draw arrows connecting the ideas you've jotted down (a "concept map") to create a visual blueprint of your paper.
5. Decide on how you plan to order your ideas. (By ordering your ideas ahead of time, you will avoid writer's block once you start typing your paper.)
 - a. Draw a ladder diagram, a visual representation of the logical flow of your essay. On each step of the ladder, write a fragment (or if one comes to mind, a sentence) that states the main idea you want to develop.
 - b. Think about how you will transition from one idea to the next:

- i. “Not only....but also
 - ii. “As a result...” “Consequently...” “Accordingly...”
 - iii. “Since...”
 - iv. “Nonetheless...”
 - v. How NOT to transition: “Another example of “X” is....
 - c. Consider where you might find evidence to support each idea and whether you will have enough specific evidence to **SHOW** your reader that your point is not only plausible but compelling.
6. Look over your ideas and then “move the camera back” to get the Big Picture
- a. Can you group your ideas on the ladder diagram into two or three “big ideas” (or themes)?
 - b. What is the best way to express these ideas in a phrase or two?
 - c. Once you’ve answered “b,” think about how you can “introduce” your reader to these “big ideas”
 - i. One way to do this is to complete this sentence: “In writing this paper I hope to convince you that...” Talk it out to yourself – keep spontaneously finishing the sentence in different ways until you come up with a way that best captures *exactly* what you want to say.
 - ii. Once you’ve got a way to finish the sentence, get rid of the first clause (“In writing this paper I hope to...”) since you should never have the first-person “I” in a formal essay.
7. **NOW** you’re ready to turn on your computer. Seventy percent of the “heavy lifting” for your essay is already done, and you don’t have to worry about:
- a. Writer’s block/running out of things to say
 - b. Stream of consciousness rambling as you struggle to get to your point [typing not writing]
 - c. Tangents you don’t need
 - d. Repeating yourself

OK, I’M DONE. NOW WHAT?

1. **DO NOT** hit “print” or “send” and consider yourself done. A simple edit can raise your grade significantly.
2. Instead, print a hard copy and read it through – marking up the copy as you go. (It’s far easier to edit a hard copy – you catch a lot more than when scrolling through an essay on a computer screen.)
3. What should I be looking for?

Here’s a checklist:

- a. Read aloud ONLY the topic sentences of every paragraph. If you (or someone else) can easily follow the logic of the paper simply by listening to the topic sentences, your paper is PROBABLY coherent.
- b. Look at the sentences in each paragraph. Is each sentence DIRECTLY related to the topic sentence of the paragraph? Is each sentence in some way developing or supporting or elaborating on the ONE idea expressed in the topic sentence? If not, the offending sentence needs to go or the topic sentence needs to be modified.
- c. Circle every time you see the word “by” – usually an indicator you’ve used passive voice. See if you can rephrase the sentence where “by” appears so that it takes on the form of “Who did What to Whom” (subject does the action of the sentence) and you no longer need the word “by” in the sentence.
 - i. Usually, the word after “by” should be your subject:
The finicky professor was annoyed by students who wrote in passive voice.
Students who wrote in passive voice annoyed the finicky professor.
- d. Circle every time you see a form of the verb “to be” – is/are/was/were and consider rewriting the sentence to eliminate it.
 - ie: The children **were** successful at confronting the reformers.
→ The children succeeded at confronting the reformers.
→ The children successfully confronted the reformers.
- e. Circle words that you use more than once on the same page (not common words such as “an,” “a,” “the”) and consider replacing them with a similar word (Shift + F7 helps!)