

Assignment instructions: Essay #1 (Expository – Reporting Information)

What You'll be Doing for Our First Essay Assignment

For many, our approach to writing in this course will seem foreign. Instead of just slapping words on a page and then handing in the essay with a “one down three to go!” attitude, you’ll actually learn how to research, plan, draft, revise, and proofread an essay. In other words, you’ll learn the basics of college level writing.

If this sounds like work, it is. But we’ll be breaking “an essay” into parts with specific instructions which provides the time and direction necessary for effective thinking and writing. My students tell me that if they complete the assignments, the essay “writes itself.” If they don’t complete them . . . have you heard of the phrase “crash and burn”?

To avoid trips to the burn unit, we’ll first work on gathering research and taking notes: in this case, reading essays about the purpose of college and taking detailed notes on their central themes. This will take about a week.

You’ll spend another week or so reviewing your notes, deciding on a central focus for your essay (called a thesis), and looking to your notes from the essays to support your thesis.

With all of this material in front of you, the next step – writing the rough draft – will be easy. No more scratching your head deciding what to write or being worried about word counts: you’ll have much of the work already done.

After getting feedback from both me and your classmates, we’ll spend the next week revising your essay – moving from a focus on getting it done, to a focus on making it interesting to a reader. Then, after careful proofreading, you’ll submit the essay for grading.

Purpose of Essay

This first assignment will address a topic that should be near and dear to your hearts: “what am I in college for?” Now that you’re here and have committed to higher education, just what does it entail? What’s the purpose, according to those who write about, teach, and administer them? What should you look for and focus on as you wander the halls – or links – or a college?

That’s the topic, more specifically, you will report what a selection of authors believe is the purpose of a college education. Note the word “report.” It hints at the rhetorical (method of writing) approach you’ll be using for this assignment – reporting information or expository writing. This means that instead of offering your own opinion about this topic, you’ll be looking for connections among the different readings and then discussing these connections in your own essay. This kind of intellectual work – making connections – is known as synthesizing, and that’s where your own intellect comes in: noticing similarities among a variety of sources. Instead of stating your own view, you’ll be reporting on the views of others.

This doesn’t mean you’ll merely summarize the essays in a paragraph – we’re going for higher order thinking skills here. The goal, as noted above, is on finding connections among different essays. Thus, your paragraphs will not focus on individual authors or essays, but on an *idea* noted by *at least two authors/sources* and contained in the essays you’ve read. This last point is so important it bears repeating: the focus for your paragraphs is on the ideas contained in the sources, not the sources or the authors themselves.

This kind of writing is a basic part of academic writing; you’ll encounter it in assignments such as a short biography of Cleopatra for a History course, a review of current research on neonatal care in Nursing, or a description of the latest interrogation techniques in Criminal Justice.

And speaking of objectives . . . remember that the goal in this essay is to remain objective: your purpose is to report on the ideas and opinions of others, not state your own. You’ll be using phrases such as “Educational critics argue,” “The writers believe,” “Professors agree that,” to separate yourself from the material you’re presenting.

And speaking of words and phrases brings me to the next topic: discourse.

Discourse

Burning a disk. Keyboard. Mouse.

Am I talking about pyromania, a piano, and a small furry mammal that makes people scream?

No.

You know that the words above all refer to computers because the discourse (words used to describe activities or items associated with a particular subject) of computers includes such vocabulary.

Higher education, as a field of its own, also has a discourse that you need to familiarize yourself with and then use in your own essay. Academic writing assumes that you'll dive into the particular field of study, expanding your thinking as you expand your vocabulary. This expansion is connected more broadly to thinking: as the 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

To help enlarge your world, you'll notice at the end of the Writer's Notes a section labeled "Discourse." You'll include words the sources use that are associated with the topic of higher education. You can then include them in your own essay.

To get started on the discourse of education, note how often the word "critical thinking" appears in the readings. What does it mean?

The Writing Assignment: Essay #1

You will write an essay which focuses on a central idea on the purpose of college from the assigned readings. As noted above, this essay will not include your own opinion: you'll be objectively reporting the information. You must decide the most effective way to categorize the information these writers offer in order to effectively communicate their ideas to your readers.

The most important part of this assignment – and all assignments involving reporting information – is narrowing down your topic. You'll encounter many different views of what a college education should be: your job is to focus on one of them. And since the focus is on reporting information from others, it may be a view you don't even share.

Much of this essay will consist of cited material – it's what readers expect when you're reporting information from other sources.

Again, remember that your purpose is not to present all of the information you've read or argue with the views expressed in the readings; instead, it's to narrow down and find connections among the readings and then to objectively present their views to your readers. (Have I mentioned objectivity enough? Good.)

Unfortunately, this kind of writing can have a narcotic effect on readers – try using examples, specific details from the essays, and specific descriptions to keep the reader from using your essay as a pillow.

Assume that your readers have not read these essays; it is your job to focus on *one* connection among them and show the connections so that the reader doesn't have to read them all.

Directions

For starters, read the assigned essays, taking copious notes (the more notes you have, the easier it is to write a rough draft). Follow the suggestions on the course site to plan, draft, revise, and proofreading an essay. Check over the definitions of Thesis, Body Paragraph, Citation, Division/Forecasting statement, Essay, Parenthetical Citation, Topic sentence, Revision, Proofreading, and Works Cited Entries in the Glossary.

Requirements

Final draft, minimum of 1,150 words. Your essay needs to include citations from at least three of the assigned readings, though you will probably use more to effectively present the information. Essay should include

- a title;
- an introduction which describes the context/basis of research (with forecasting/division statement);
- body paragraphs which focus on the division statement;
- a conclusion;
- and a Works Cited page. You must correctly cite your sources using MLA format.

Feedback

At the core of writing for others (as opposed to journals or diaries) is getting feedback. This feedback allows you to test ideas and writing techniques, refine your thinking, and finally, present this in clear prose.

To help you with this, there will be several layers of feedback for each essay including peer reviews, written comments from myself, and work with online reviewers. Follow the instructions in the modules for submitting your essay to get these review.

Learning Objectives

After successfully completing this assignment, you will have learned how to

1. annotate readings and accurately summarize their main points
2. recognize and define the key terms (discourse) of a particular topic
3. find connections among different readings and organize them in categories
4. decide on an organizing principle, expressed in a thesis and forecasting/divisions statement, which effectively communicates information from a group of readings to a reader
5. accurately summarize, paraphrase, and use direct quotes in your writing; establish credibility of sources
6. correctly document sources using MLA parenthetical citation
7. begin to identify your grammatical error patterns
8. revise an essay to suit the expectations of your readers
9. use analogies, comparisons, and detailed examples to help readers understand material from other sources
10. separate revision from proofreading
11. manage your time and complete each draft by the assigned due date

Grading Criteria

To receive a passing grade, your essay should include the following:

Organization: A thesis and forecasting/division statement which clearly states a central theme you will focus on how you will explain it; topic sentences that group your information into logical categories which refer back to the forecasting/division statement.

Content: Clear definitions of any specific terms; specific examples that connect to your thesis; accurate summarizations, paraphrases, and direct quotations of the sources; body paragraphs focused around a clear topic sentence; descriptive language to keep reader from dozing off; and clear in-text references to identify a particular writer with his or her idea.

Proofreading: Sentences that are clear and no more than 5 major errors (these include sentence fragments, run-on sentences, verb-tense error, subject-verb agreement error, unclear phrasing, and spelling/wrong word error. Formatting errors. Each documentation error counts as 1/2 of a major error).