

Top Six Tips for Writing a Terrific Essay

1. *Start Early* - The later you wait to start your essay, the more stressed you'll be, and the more likely you will be to rush and make simple mistakes. It's better to do a little bit over the course of a couple of weeks than a lot in a couple days.

2. *Read the essay question carefully* - Highlight or underline task words that explain what you need to do (i.e. "explain," "discuss," "compare"), and topic words that specify the topic (i.e. "the character Claudius in Shakespeare's Hamlet," or "the theme of Huckleberry Finn").

3. *Brainstorm!* - Write down your main ideas and any quotes that provide evidence for them. Ask yourself questions and answer them (i.e. "What are the major events in *To Kill A Mockingbird*?" "What are the challenges Esperanza Cordero faces because of her race?"). Don't worry about writing in full sentences or making your thought seem "smart." Put down anything that comes into your head - the organization part comes next!

4. *Outline* - Pick one idea to be the focus point of your essay. This will be your thesis statement. Thesis statements have two parts: 1) The first part that states the topic of the essay, 2) and the point of the essay.

For example, if you were writing about every-day racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one thesis statement could be "Through the trial for Tom Robinson, Scout and Jem are exposed to the common, every-day racism of the 1930s."

Next, divide your evidence into three categories. These will be your body paragraphs. Each paragraph argues, explains, or describes your thesis. Start by writing a topic sentence for each paragraph and then bullet pointing your evidence. You can come back and develop each bullet point into a sentence later. Make sure that each bullet point is connected to the thesis statement - if it isn't, you either need to change the bullet point or tweak your thesis!

5. *Write!!* - Start with the introduction, which will act as a roadmap for the rest of your essay. Introduce the story, providing background information (title, publication date, author, short summary of plot) and ending with your thesis statement. Don't worry about making your introduction long - your reader will want to get to the good stuff, and long introductions can bog them down and lose sight of the point.

An example of an introduction for *To Kill a Mockingbird* using the thesis above could go something like this:

To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) by Harper Lee tells the story of Jean "Scout" Finch and her brother Jeremy "Jem" Finch as they grow up in Maycomb Alabama during the Great Depression. Scout and Jem have fairly typical childhoods - playing in the yard, struggling with issues at school - until their father Atticus, a lawyer, takes on the case of his lifetime. As Atticus defends Tom Robinson, a black man, accused of committing a crime against a white woman, Scout and Jem are exposed to the common, every-day racism of the 1930s.

Next, go paragraph by paragraph, using quotes and plot points to support your thesis statement. You can go in chronological order — in our running example, the different times Scout and Jem are exposed to racism as the plot progresses — or group your evidence into categories — things people said, things people did, the outcome of the trial, etc.

Finally, write your conclusion. This is often a student's least favorite part of the essay-writing-process. The good news is, as with your introduction, your conclusion does not have to be long. Write a sentence or two that wraps up the point of your essay, and then end with a memorable idea/thought, a quote that echoes the sentiment you are trying to convey, or a call to action (a statement that motivates the reader to take what she/he learned from your essay and use it to make positive change).

6. *Edit* - When you're all done, go back and read for spelling mistakes or grammatical errors. It helps to read your essay out loud; this will help you catch mistakes your brain might otherwise gloss over — for example, you might have only part of a thought written down, but since YOU know what you meant, your brain won't register it as a fragment. Get a friend or parent to edit your essay as well, since outside minds often provide the best feedback. Fix your mistakes, and congratulate yourself on a job well done!