

How to turn out an essay

Jay Shepherd is a 20-year-old freelance writer who briefly attended York. He has no degree, but says he has "this knack for writing A essays without even trying, no matter what the subject." He tutors high school and university students in essay-writing. This is his formula to essay success — and possibly a way to beat both the system and the rip-off term paper business.

By J.C. SHEPHERD

One of the worst hassles in high school or university is essay writing and it has caused the downfall of many erstwhile geniuses. However, with an ordered, logical approach to essay-writing, even the worst writer can consistently pass and often get B's and A's. If you believe me, read on.

Here follows a summary of how to write an average essay, from start to finish, in the most logical order I could think of. From research to final draft, the keynote is order and logic.

Before starting, you generally have to choose a topic. You have a wide choice here: choose the one the prof likes best; choose the hardest; choose the easiest one; or, choose the one that most interests you. In most cases, the last method is best. If a topic interests you, your essay will be better. Simple as that.

By the way, it helps if you read the topic before you write, so that your essay has something to do with it.

Research

There is only one overriding concern in the research end of the essay: the person who doesn't know his subject, nine times out of 10 doesn't get the marks. Let us not kid ourselves, the professors have spent many years studying the things you write about and bullshitting past them is not going to be at all easy. Oh, it can be done, but it's generally much easier to do things the orthodox way in the first place. Certainly the gamble is less.

The first major type of research is interviewing and here there are three points to remember:

1. Don't be afraid to ask people to be interviewed. Most people like to air their views, or even just talk to someone new. Besides, very few people bite.
2. Make notes if you can't remember all that is said. Remember, you are out to get the truth, not a garbled version of what you think was said.
3. The idea in an interview is for the other person to talk, so shut up.

Another more difficult type of research is what is termed observational. In science, this often involves lab experiments or studies, where you are asked to observe what happens and form conclusions and make explanations. In the sociological and psychological fields, it involves observing the behavior of a single person, or a group of them, either from inside or outside the group. In either case, there is one dominant rule: Never report what would or should have happened; only report what actually did happen. If you want to write on the basis of how things should have gone, then you can either keep trying the experiment or whatever until it works out, or use books for reference. Never say you observed something when you didn't.

For the more timid or more overworked student, two other avenues of research are open: periodicals and books. These are much easier than the first person methods, but generally require better writing for the same marks. The average prof is impressed by in-person research and forgives many other faults in an essay because of it. However, due to time and facilities, it is often necessary to write an essay relying on secondary sources.

Library research can be very complex, but a few points stand out in the mind:

1. Take your time. Give yourself a whole afternoon in the library, rather than a couple of one-hour stints.
2. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance from the librarians (not the assistants). In the larger libraries (where you should be), the librarians generally know their way around pretty well.
3. Get comfortable. If there are easy chairs, sprawl out in one with your books around you. Relax. Libraries should be very easy-going and relaxing places.
4. Don't overlook smaller periodicals, clipping files, house organs and scholarly works. Often they will have really new insights into your subject.

These are the main methods of research. However, often the best essays come from totally unorthodox methods of information gathering, ones that have required imagination and creativity. Don't sell originality short; if you have a new idea or approach, try to use it. Film, encounter

sessions and a number of other original ideas have produced A and A+ essays for people whose writing ability is limited. Fear not your own head. Use it. That's what it's there for.

Outline

When you have bribed the prof to give you an A regardless, then you can dispense with an outline. Until then, think of it as totally essential. A clear, well-thought-out outline will more than half the time mean the difference between a pass and a failure and almost always will make the difference between a B+ and an A.

Take a look at your material — notes, interviews, questionnaires, (if any), and anything else you have; think hard about the subject; play around with it in your mind; let it form ideas and connections. Often a natural order for the essay will form itself from this. A historical essay, for example, is often naturally chronological and anything else spoils it. Similarly, an opinion essay using a syllogistic chain (A causes B, B causes C, etc.) has its own built-in pattern. If such a

with this is governed by your skill as a writer. The better writer needs only a sketchy point form, but the poorer writer should put down every single point he wishes to say, in the order he intends to say them.

The outline cannot be stressed too much. Ask anyone who regularly gets high marks on their essays and the vast majority of them will be working from outlines.

Introduction

Don't fool around with introductions. They are dangerous things when not in the hands of experts and most people should get rid of them in a hurry.

Except in opinion essays (and even then, sometimes), the introduction should be a brief statement of what is going to be said in the essay. No points should be made, or arguments put forward. Two or three sentences is quite enough and short ones at that.

The only exception to this hard and fast rule is the literary essay, one in which the style is all-important. Generally an opinion essay, this type is probably the hardest to write and

going to turn you right off and you'll never make your point. If anything, understate your points slightly. A reader often likes to think that the conclusions are coming from his head and a good teacher sees this technique.

4. Avoid adjectives and adverbs, in favor of nouns and verbs. The latter have much more power, so use more of them and less of the others. Also, any good prof will recognize the use of descriptive words for padding in a short essay. Remember, if your essay is good, the length doesn't matter.

5. Don't plagiarize anyone. You can rest assured that the professor is well-read in your essay topic and is apt to spot copying on first glance. Result: good-bye course.

6. Original forms — don't be afraid to use them. If point form or numbered points are necessary, use them. Can you imagine this article if all my points were in paragraphs? However, don't use these other methods because they're easier, or faster, and never use them if the prof says he doesn't like them.

7. Most important, don't be afraid to revise and rewrite. If something isn't quite right, make it right. This is marks you're talking about, not just a lark. A professional writer will spend as much as 10 times as many hours on revisions as on the first draft. That's why he gets paid for writing.

Of course, there are more points to consider: spelling, grammar, and all that nonsense. Above all, try not to be boring, but still make your points. Actually, it's not all that difficult, as writing a couple of essays this way will soon tell you.

Conclusion

The easiest conclusion is a rephrasing of the introduction. Say what you have told the reader, in case he didn't get it the first time. This works when your opinions (secondary conclusions) are contained within your points.

If this is not the case — if your points lead up to one big conclusion — then make it and sign off quickly. In this situation, the "Big Point" should be in the last or second to last paragraph.

The same problems apply to conclusions as they do to introductions. The easiest way to solve them is to make your conclusion short and get it out of the way fast. It is to be hoped that, in the future, introductions and conclusions will somehow be miraculously abolished. In the meantime, cultivate a healthy fear of them, for your own protection.

Presentation

Perhaps a friend has come to you some time with their handwritten rough draft of an essay and asked you to read it, even though the handwriting is totally illegible. This should tell you something about the format of your final draft.

It would be useless to go into all the weirdo rules that some profs have for essays: size of margins, placement of footnotes and all sorts of nonsense that has nothing to do with learning. The only way you find out those things is to ask the man. Then follow his rules. It can't hurt.

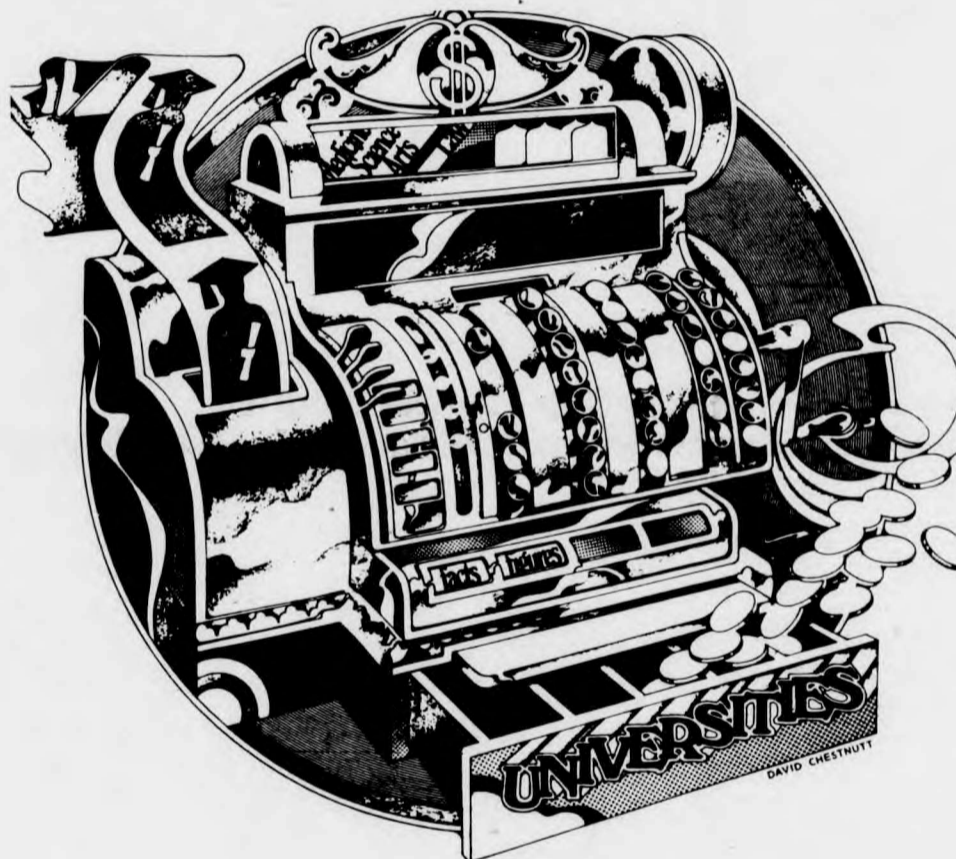
But there are a couple of overall things that you can do to help your marks. A typewritten essay will get about half a mark (C+ to B-) more than a handwritten essay, no matter how good your longhand is. Type double-spaced, on one side of the paper only. If there are more than five pages, you should have a title page (name, class, title — that sort of stuff). Don't forget to number every page and put your name on every page. Better than all of this, if you have the bread, is to get a good typist to do it up properly. They cost about two bits a page and do a great job.

Incidentally, a coffee ring on your title page may make it look like you were working into the early morning hours, but it won't get you any more marks.

Let's face it, writing a good essay is not the easiest thing in the world. If it was, there wouldn't be so many failures. But a little more effort and an analytical approach generally will solve the essay-writing problem for the average student.

If you need more detailed help, there are three methods. First is the private tutor. Usually a grad student or some other person will do it for three or four dollars an hour. If you can't afford this, try the writing workshops. Contact Michael Rehner, in S712 of the Ross Humanities building for York's writing workshop on campus. They aren't as good, but better than nothing and usually free. Failing these two choices, the library has lots of books on the subject, most of which are boring and totally useless. The best of the lot, in my opinion, is *Elements of Style*, by W. Strunk. Only 70 pages and good ones at that.

By the way, don't be afraid of writing an essay. After all, the worst that can happen is that you flunk.



pattern comes up in your essay, use it without argument.

Failing this, there are several stock methods of ordering your facts. Pick the best one for your essay;

1. Chronological.
2. From the weakest (least important) point to the strongest (most important) point.
3. From the strongest point to the weakest.
4. Strongest, then weakest to second strongest.
5. Second strongest, then weakest to strongest.
6. Random order (all points equal and unrelated). Avoid.

Once you have chosen the best order, fit in your points. Pare out those you don't need and put aside those that don't fit into your order. When you have finished this, the topics should flow freely from one to the other.

There are often things that don't fit. Most often it is some related topic that must be included, but is not part of the main topic. Such things are best put between your last point and your conclusion. Alternatively, they can be disposed of right at the beginning, but this is more difficult and less effective.

Add to your outline an introduction and a conclusion and you have a basis for writing. All that remains for your outline is to put down a couple of the major points for each topic, as reminders. The detail you go into

introductions are the hardest part. No one can help you with this. There is only one thing that can be of guidance to you: don't be flashy. As we will see later, simplicity, clarity and brevity pay much higher rewards than florid, adjective-ridden prose. If your introduction is short and to the point, leave it. Don't spoil a good thing.

Contrary to public belief, the body is not the hardest part of writing an essay. Frankly, if you have followed the previous points with any degree of success and you speak English, you already have a pass essay guaranteed.

The body of the essay generally writes itself and shouldn't take too much time or effort. In order to increase that pass to a B or an A, though, there are a number of pointers that help:

1. Clarity. Strive for it. In an essay, there is not a single more important aspect than being understood. Try something out on a friend who doesn't know the subject, if you are in doubt as to how clear it is.
2. Related to the first point, avoid redundancies. With a few exceptions, repetition of arguments and points bores the reader and your mark goes right down. Also, a redundant piece is often very confusing and we can't have that.

3. Avoid using superlatives and overstatements. If you continually say something is the "best", or the "greatest", people are