Essay Elements and Types of Essays

Inquire: How did the Post-Reconstruction South resemble the Antebellum South?

Overview
The simplicity of the essay form is a versatile tool with many different applications. However, there are many different types of essays that build on its basic elements, and can be used for many different, albeit specific purposes. Knowing how to write an effective essay, as well as knowing what type of essay to use and how best to apply it, starts with understanding the three basic parts of every essay, and then understanding the different types of essays and the subjects and discussions for which they are best used.

Big Question: What elements are required for the various types of essays in order to make them effective?

Watch: Choosing the Correct Tool
Anyone who’s done handy work around the house knows that there are many different kinds of wrenches. From socket wrenches to monkey wrenches, pipe wrenches, and lug wrenches, the diversity of the wrench is rather overwhelming. However, each of these wrenches has a particular purpose, and completing any specific task with one requires you to know not just how to use a wrench, but which kind of wrench is best for that job. In much the same way, the essay has many different types that can be used for numerous purposes, but also require some knowledge of how best to use them.

The simplicity of the basic elements of the essay makes this form a versatile tool with many different applications. Every essay will have an introduction, which engages the reader’s interest and states the subject to be discussed, a body, where the subject is broken down into subtopics and explored in detail, and a conclusion, where the reader is given a final overview of what they’ve read and then left with a final thought about the subject.

These basic elements are used in pretty much the same way regardless of what type of essay you are writing, so they provide an excellent groundwork that can be applied to any discussion about any topic. Knowing how to write an effective essay, as well as knowing what type of essay to use and how best to apply it, starts with understanding these basic parts, and then understanding the different types of essays and the subjects and discussions for which they are best used.
Writing an essay takes hard work, but having the knowledge of the basic elements in every essay and the diverse ways in which they can be applied will be a big help to organizing your ideas and getting started on your paper.

What types of essays have you encountered in the past? How did the basic elements of each essay seem similar? How were they different?

Read: The Parts and Types of Essays

Elements of the Essay

The basic elements of any essay are the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. Each of these sections has a specific function and form that, when well-crafted, work toward the goal of presenting an effective discussion for your reader.

Introductions

While the main purpose of your introduction is to present the main subject of your discussion, also known as the thesis, it is also vital that your introduction catches the interest of your reader by showing how your thesis relates to them and why they should care about what you have to say. The main focus of your introduction is your thesis statement, where you will directly state your point of view on your subject or the purpose of your exploration of it.

The Body

The body of your essay is generally the longest section, and is made up of the key points that you use to support the main topic of your discussion. Depending on the type of essay you are writing, you will usually present a subtopic that supports your thesis, then introduce and examine evidence that supports or proves that point. Each of these subtopics is usually examined individually, then related to the main subject before transitioning into the next subtopic in the discussion. The sequence in which these subtopics are discussed is usually established at the end of the introduction.

Conclusions

The conclusion of your essay is meant to be a summation of what you have discussed throughout your paper, reiterating your main subject and the subtopics that supported it. The purpose of this is to give your reader a big picture idea of what they have just read.

Types of Essays

The essay as a basic form has a very broad range of types, each with its own unique structure or purpose, that can be applied depending on what kinds of ideas you want to explore. Like any tool, you want to select the type that best fits what your main subject will be and how you want your reader to engage with it.

Narrative

Narrative essays are essays which are driven by a story. They are often personal narratives that have a core thesis or personal statement, which the narrative structure helps to illuminate for the reader. The structure of these essays is similar to a short story, so they will follow a plotline that includes a set-up, rising action, and then a climax followed by a dénouement. If they are based on the personal experience of the author, they will almost always be written in the first person.
Descriptive

Descriptive essays are centered around giving the reader a vivid impression of a particular thing. This thing can be anything from a place, to an object, to an experience. In any case, the goal is to incorporate as much detail about whatever you’re describing as possible, whether that detail is based on the physicality of an object, the sensory experiences of a place, or your thoughts and emotions during an event. Crafting these essays effectively requires you to think very carefully about your language and how best to create the fullest picture for your reader.

Definition

Definition essays are similar to descriptive essays in that you are describing something in exhaustive detail. With definition essays, however, the thing you are describing is a word or concept that you are closely examining for its meaning. This could be defining what this word means to you personally, or exploring the diverse meanings of a concept in different settings or contexts.

Compare and Contrast

Compare and contrast essays are used to examine two closely related subjects in tandem by exploring their similarities and differences. These types of essays are usually organized in a point-by-point way, where each similarity or difference is examined in both subjects, rather than by examining each subject independently. These essays can be used to make a conclusion about the relative quality of one subject over another, or they can simply be used to illuminate how these two subjects are related.

Cause and Effect

Cause and effect essays closely examine an event with the goal of explaining either how this event took place, or what happened afterwards that this event caused. Because they are focused on observation and explanation, these types of essays can be used to explore a wide variety of real-world topics, such as economics, politics, history, and scientific phenomena.

Argumentative

Argumentative essays are written to prove a point based on evidence. They can involve research and will almost always have at least one source that the author is using to support their argument. While the main focus of these papers is to take a position and present evidence to support that position, the language should also be engaging, working to keep the reader intrigued by your points even if they don’t initially agree with them.

Persuasive

Persuasive essays differ from argumentative essays in that they usually start from a position and then find evidence that supports that position, rather than determining a position based on the evidence. This is a fine line, but the language used in the essay can be very different for a persuasive essay. Here, the goal is to get the reader to agree with your position, even if you don’t necessarily have the evidence to support it. These types of essays will use emotionally charged language that will be aimed at making the reader feel differently about something, rather than thinking differently. For this reason, persuasive essays are often used as political treatises.
Critical

Critical essays analyze another work by closely examining the elements of craft used in the work and interpreting from it a larger point, meaning, or context. These are a subset of argumentative essays in that they will usually argue for a specific interpretation that the author has found in the primary source, using evidence found in that source, as well as occasionally using secondary sources that have made similar observations. Critical essays are most often used to examine written material, but are also used to examine other media such as films, artwork, music, and even cultural movements.

Reflect: What Interests You?

Poll

Of the different types of essays we've discussed, which do you think is/would be the most interesting to write?

- Narrative
- Descriptive
- Definition
- Compare and Contrast
- Cause and Effect
- Argumentative
- Persuasive
- Critical

Expand: Applying the Essay

Discover

As mentioned before, the essay has a wide variety of ways in which it can be applied. From academic essays to professional essays, and even personal essays, the form can be found in practically every area of life. This versatility allows you to explore your ideas in no matter what setting or context you want to apply them.

Academic Essays

These essays often, but not always, have a formal tone as they are generally written to exchange ideas with peers and others interested in whatever subject is related to the thesis. The level of their formality, though, can depend on many things, including the subject, intended audience, and the personal voice of the author.

Any essay written in an academic setting can be an academic essay. This usually refers to essays you may write as assignments for a class, but can also include essays written to discuss ideas related to a specific practice. For instance, professors and researchers will often write essays about new discoveries in their field of study, or to present an interpretation of a piece of literature or history, or even to argue a counterpoint to another essay.

Professional Essays

Like academic essays, professional essays generally have a formal tone and are written in business settings or other contexts where the audience is expected to give a great deal of scrutiny to the content of
the essay. Analyses of business trends, reports on internal or external company practices, and articles written for trade journals are all examples of professional essays. Journalistic essays would also fall under this category, as they are usually written by professional journalists for publications that generally require a professional tone.

Non-Literary Essays

Not all essays need to be written for a formal setting. Non-literary essays use an informal or conversational tone and can be written for a wide audience or to a specific person or group of people. If not written for a general audience, the author will usually be personally familiar with the reader. While these essays are often written from a personal point of view, non-literary essays may be published in essay journals or collections. They can also appear as social media posts, personal journal entries, or even letters to friends or family. These types of essays can be about any subject, but differ from a simple letter or note in that they will stick to a specific idea and unravel in a way that mimics the author’s train of thought.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Elements of an Essay
- A detailed rundown of the basic elements in an essay
- https://literarydevices.net/elements-of-an-essay/

Types of Essay
- A list of essay types, some of which haven’t been covered here, with a layout of a simple essay structure
- https://literarydevices.net/types-of-essay/

How is academic writing different to other kinds of writing?
- While this doesn’t cover essays specifically, it does give good advice about the differences between academic writing and other forms of writing

Lesson Glossary

essay: a written composition that presents a specific point of view on a particular topic, idea, or theme
thesis: the main subject or argument of an essay

Check Your Knowledge

1. Persuasive essays require you to take a position that is fully supported by evidence.
   A. True
   B. False
2. Which two types of essays are similar in purpose?
   A. Descriptive and Definition
   B. Compare & Contrast and Cause & Effect
   C. Narrative and Descriptive
   D. Argumentative and Persuasive
   E. Both A and D

3. Critical essays are most often used to examine different types of art and cultural movements.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. E  3. A

Citations

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