

If you read primarily fiction, you may find essays difficult to follow at first, because they are organized by thought or ideas, not by narrative. Here are some points to consider:

Identify the topic. The title is often-although not always-the first predictor of the topic and may even provide clues to the thesis (the position taken in relation to the topic).

Determine the writer's viewpoint, and ask yourself if you agree.

Consider how the writer supports his or her view. Do you find the evidence convincing? If possible, underline or highlight and make brief notes in order to help you grasp the structure of the essay and the flow of its ideas.

Consider what you like about the writer's style, and why. How is it effective in conveying the writer's viewpoint?

The essay's primary function is the clear communication of thoughts, ideas, or information. Yet it is a remarkably flexible genre; people write essays for a variety of reasons using a variety of forms and writing styles.

Why Non-fiction is Written

- ~ to express new ideas or points of view
- ~ to teach or explain
- ~ to reflect on or express opinions about people, events, or situations
- ~ to raise awareness of social issues or injustices
- ~ to persuade or influence readers on political issues; for example, by presenting arguments from a particular point of view
- ~ to entertain or amuse by presenting topics in original or clever ways

The key to understanding the essential meaning of any particular essay is to identify its central thesis. This will enable you to grasp how the overall flow of its ideas relates to and support this main idea.

Introduction

The first paragraph or two of the essay should present the thesis and a big-picture overview of what the essay will be about. The thesis is usually expressed in the form of a sentence. This is why it is often referred to as the thesis statement. It includes the topic of the essay, as well as the writer's position in relation to this topic. Sometimes the thesis is not explicitly stated, and so you may have to reread the essay a few times to put all the pieces together into a full and coherent thesis statement.

Since the thesis is the lynchpin of the essay, accurately identifying it is critical. Take time to ensure that the thesis you identify is the right one.

Identifying the Thesis

- ~ Does the thesis include all the material in the essay or only part of it?
- ~ Is the thesis restatement in the conclusion similar to what you have identified as the thesis?
- ~ Does each topic sentence directly relate to and support the thesis?

Body Paragraphs

The body or main section, of the essay follows from the introduction and leads up to the conclusion. The body of the essay is where its thesis is developed: arguments are put forth, evidence is given, and ideas are connected into a cohesive whole.

Conclusion

The concluding paragraph should summarize or restate the thesis of the essay and provide some insight or statement of the importance of the topic.

Beginnings and endings are the most important parts of an essay.

The reader remembers these best.

They contain the ideas you most want to emphasize.

The beginning is what draws the reader in.

The ending leaves the reader with a strong final image, thought, or insight.

Four Main Types of Essays

Whether they are formal or informal, essays can be divided into four basic types depending on the writer's purpose. These purposes are: to explain, to recount a story, to argue or a position, or to persuade. The line between these purposes can sometimes be blurred (for example, a writer may choose to tell a story in order to explain something).

The **expository** essay (explanation) describes or explains a topic. For example, an essay entitled "The Care and Maintenance of a Bicycle" would be an expository essay.

The **narrative** essay (recounting) uses a single well-told story as the basis for drawing a conclusion or making a statement of opinion. For example, "My Most Exciting Bicycling Adventure" would be a narrative essay.

The **argumentative** essay presents a reasoned series of arguments in support of a position. For example, an essay entitled "Cars or Scooters: Which Is the More Efficient and Safe Method of Urban Transport?" would be an argumentative essay.

The **persuasive** essay combines reasoned arguments with the emotion required to persuade the reader to take action. For example, an essay entitled "Save the Ozone and Stimulate Your Heart: Leave Your Cars at Home and Bicycle" would be a persuasive essay.

Developing an Argument

The development of arguments is the main structural component of the essay. Employing different methods can indicate a sophisticated and lively thinking process.

analogy - compares something less familiar with something more familiar in order to help the reader understand the former

cause-effect - explains why something happened by showing the direct causal relationship between two or more things

definition - explores in greater depth the significance associated with the term or concept under consideration in order to give as full a picture as possible of its characteristics

example - illustrates a point with reference to a personal or shared experience, an allusion, statistics, analogy, or quote from an authority

comparison - points out similarities and differences between two or more ideas, things, people, etc.; point-by-point comparison is a more effective organization in that similarities and differences are clearly pointed out

contrast - points out differences between two characters or ideas; because this method can sharpen and clarify an argument it is frequently more powerful than comparison

categorize/classify - places together under a single heading concepts or things that share sufficient key characteristics as to be considered similar

Non-fiction Terminology

Rhetorical devices include techniques that help persuade the reader to agree with the view presented. Knowledge of the nature and effect of these devices is critical to effective writing. Use rhetorical devices appropriately and carefully, since overuse can result in an unnatural or even unintentionally humorous effect.

Abnormal Word Order gives variety and emphasis to your writing by changing the usual subject-verb sentence pattern.

Example: normal word order (subject-verb): "The actor's worst nightmares stood laughing at him from the shadows."

abnormal word order (verb-subject): "Laughing at him from the shadows stood the actor's worst nightmare."

Allegory is a narrative in which the characters and sometimes the setting represent general concepts and ideas.

Example: fables in which personified animals are used allegorically to teach lessons of human conduct (e.g., "The Hare and the Tortoise")

Alliteration draws attention to a string of words through repetition of their initial sounds.

Example: "As Frankenstein, Boris Karloff rambled, raged, and roared."

Allusion is an indirect reference to a well-known event, person, thing, place, or quality. By suggestion, it may enhance the significance of a poetic image or prose passage.

Example: T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* alludes to the Garden of Eden after the fall (and includes many other allusions to mythology, the Bible).

Analogy helps the reader understand something unfamiliar by comparing it to something well-known.

Example: Comparing an anthill to an urban centre helps to convey the fact that anthills are heavily populated, busy, and have regular patterns of movement.

A **balanced sentence** expresses two or more equal and parallel ideas.

Example: "Many TV actors work hard all through the season; they play in films all through the hiatus."

Climactic Word Order presents several facts in order from least to most important.

Example: "The young politician's career rise was meteoric; after beginning as a municipal councillor, she became mayor, and three short years later a Member of Parliament."

Denotation is the thing or situation to which the word specifically refers; **connotation** is the associated meanings it implies or suggests.

Example: Home **denotes** the place where a person lives, but **connotes** intimacy, privacy, coziness.

Exaggeration (Hyperbole) emphasizes a fact.

Example: "He was going to live the life of a tree or vegetable."

Image/Imagery appeals to one or more of the senses by creating a vivid impression through the use of concrete details, adjectives, and figures of speech (e.g., metaphor, simile, personification)

Example: The beauty of the daisy is conveyed using imagery such as "a nun demure" and "a silver shield with boss of gold." (William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud")

Metaphor compares two things without the use of like or as; it is more subtle than the simile and thus requires more interpretation.

Example: "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright" (from William Blake's poem "Tyger! Tyger!")

Opposites contrast two opposing ideas.

Example: "Clint Eastwood, a star in front of the camera, has also had a successful career behind the camera as a director."

Onomatopoeia draws attention to the sound of the word by imitating or suggesting sounds that correspond to its meaning.

Example: "buzz," "splash," "slurp"

Oxymoron places words that mean the opposite of one another side by side so that they create a new meaning.

Example: "jumbo shrimp," "wise fool"

Parallel Structure (Parallelism) repeats specific words, phrases, or clauses in a series, giving emphasis to key words and making them memorable.

Example: Abraham Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (preposition, definite article, and noun are repeated in a series)

A **periodic sentence** withholds an important part of the sentence until the end so that it doesn't make complete sense until the last word is read.

Example: "Whether playing a young wild adventurer, a fugitive from the law, or a U.S. president, there is one actor whose films always make money - Harrison Ford."

Personification gives human traits to an inanimate object or animal.

Example: "The fingers of ice scraped the window."

A **pun** is a play on words with the same sound but different meanings.

Example: "Sticks float. They would."

Repetition is used for emphasis and rhythm

example: It was a strange night, a hushed night, a moonless night, and all you could do was go to a movie."

Reversals (Chiasmus) make a balanced sentence even more memorable by repeating the words in reverse order.

Example: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." (John F. Kennedy)

A **rhetorical question** is one whose answer is already known or implied.

Example: "Can anyone deny that the microchip has revolutionized communication?"

Rhyme makes two or more words memorable by having endings that sound the same.

Example: "With might and right on his side, he approached the challenge."

Rhythm is the movement implicit in an arrangement of words, e.g., a regular beat deriving from the patterns of stress on the syllables, a rising or a falling inflection, a series of phrases that move quickly or slowly.

Example: "the moment comes ... bringing back all I have recently experienced to be explored and slowly understood, when I can converse again with my hidden powers, and so grow, and so be renewed, till death do us part." (May Sarton, "The Rewards of Solitary Life")

A **sentence fragment** places emphasis on key words to create an overall effect, such as humour or suspense.

Example: "A cold room. A lonely room. A bare room. No place to spend twenty years of a life."

A **simile** points out a similarity between two unlike things using like or as.

Example: "The cold stabbed like a driven nail through the parka's fold."

A **symbol** is an object or action that represents something other than what it is.

Example: "The green light at the end of the dock in *The Great Gatsby* represents the verdant hope of the new world and is therefore associated with the American Dream.

Understatement (Litotes) creates the reverse effect (and adds a touch of irony) by making the fact seem less significant.

Example: "Bruce Willis' onscreen characters frequently find themselves in a bit of a jam."

ANALYSIS

In order to **analyze** non-fiction, there are certain elements to consider:

subject matter - the thoughts and feelings contained in an essay. There are four areas within this element:

subject - what the essay is about; the topic

thesis - the central thought or impression the essay conveys about the subject. A more formal term is thesis statement, which is a single-sentence summary of the main point or impression with which the essay is concerned

subordinate points - the individual thoughts or impressions that develop the thesis

supporting details - the examples, illustrations, anecdotes, quotations, reasons, or other methods the writer uses to support the thesis and subordinate points in the essay

purpose - what the essay attempts to accomplish. Some of the more common purposes are these: to narrate, to describe, to express, to argue, to persuade, to instruct, and to report. In deciding and stating the purpose of an essay, students should go further and state *what* the essay narrates, describes, expresses, argues, etc. Recognizing purpose is the most central step in understanding how an essay works. **The remaining elements should be discussed and evaluated in terms of the purpose:**

audience - the audience to which an essay appeals or is directed

vehicle - the form of writing the author has selected - essay, letter, column, eulogy, speech, etc.

context - the circumstances (personal, historical, or social) of the essay's writer or speaker that influenced that content and form of that essay

structure - the arrangement of ideas and details in an essay; the pattern of development for the essay as a whole

diction - the choice of words used in the essay. Examining word choice includes such concepts as denotation and connotation, abstract and concrete, specific and general, and colloquial and formal, among others. Word choice, in terms of its contribution to the essay's purpose, needs to be examined.

figurative language - figurative devices such as simile, metaphor, personification, symbol

rhetorical devices - see preceding pages 3-5

sentences - this category includes two basic areas. First are the types of sentences that are used in an essay - short, long, fragments, loose, periodic, simple, compound, complex, compound-complex, declarative, interrogatory, etc. The second are the rhetorical devices used in the essay. Under rhetorical devices are included such items as parallelism, balance, and the rhetorical question.

tone - The tone of a text is created through a number of features, such as rhetorical devices, diction (word choice or vocabulary), and type of evidence presented. Tone is a major factor in establishing the overall impression of the piece of writing. Tones vary as much as there are emotions and attitudes. The tone of an essay may be ironic, frustrated, sincere, angry, self-mocking, encouraging, or nostalgic, for example. In reading and analyzing essays, it is important to identify the writer's voice and examine its impact on what is being said. There are times when a writer may adopt a persona - a mask - in order to add another dimension to his or her writing. In other words, there is a split between the surface meaning of the text and the deeper meaning - the writer's real message. This method is particularly useful in writing satirical pieces. Where the voice of an essay is that of the author or a persona, feelings are expressed. These feelings toward the subject matter or the audience are called tone.

style - Style refers to the overall selection and arrangement of sounds, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Style is affected by regional and cultural variations, by changing standards of usage, by the development of new words and new meanings in the language, and by the fertility of an author's imagination. A good writer chooses and arranges words to convey a particular shade of meaning and to produce a particular effect. Style is most strongly determined by the total result of the above elements - diction, figurative language, rhetorical devices, sentences and tone.

