

Essay Writing Guide

DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT

You should never write your thesis statement immediately after reading the essay prompt/question. Your thesis is the statement that identifies your argument, and choosing an appropriate thesis involves a lengthy thinking process. **You must do the following tasks to get from the essay prompt to the thesis:**

- **Task 1:** Read the essay prompt carefully, underlining the key terms, so that you fully understand what your teacher wants. If the prompt is not in the form of a question, try to rephrase it to help you to understand what is being asked of you.

For example

Essay Prompt: *The theme of endurance has been embodied in many great works in the history of literature. Examine the hardships faced by the protagonist, Alex, in *Forbidden City* and assess his strength based on this response.*

Underlined Essay Prompt: *The theme of endurance has been embodied in many great works in the history of literature. Examine the hardships faced by the protagonist, Alex, and assess his/her strength based on this response.*

Essay Prompt as a Question: *How does the protagonist endure hardships and become stronger?*

- **Task 2:** Brainstorm everything you know about the topic; find all of the evidence you can to respond to the question you formed.

- **Task 3:** Read over all of your brainstormed points and determine what you learned about the topic. Learning more about a topic is called gaining insight.

For example

The topic is endurance and, after reading my points, I learned that every time Alex is faced with a conflict or hardship (cause), instead of giving up, he changes his perspective, and he gains strength from understanding the world from a less idealistic point of view.

- **Task 4:** Turn your insight into a working thesis statement (this is your rough thesis statement which is permitted to change as you develop the essay and gain more insight into your topic).

For example

William Bell, in *Forbidden City*, demonstrates that enduring hardships leads to a maturation of one's world view.

- **Task 5:** Test your thesis. Go back to your brainstormed points to determine if you have enough evidence to support this thesis. Ask yourself the following three questions:

1. Can I find three subtopics to support this thesis?
2. Are my three subtopics similar (ex. three symbols, three characters etc.)?
3. Can I find two quotes from the text to support each subtopic (so six quotes in total)?

- If your answer to these questions is yes, then go to Task 6.
- If the answer is no, then go back to Task 3 and create a new thesis statement.

- **Task 6:** Before moving on to build your essay, make sure your thesis meets the criteria of a “strong thesis statement”. A strong thesis statement should be:

1. **Specific** – be specific to the text and to the topic, do not make general statements (ex. “Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy” or “*Forbidden City* is a coming of age novel”). To be specific, you provide your specific insight into an argument rather than restating a topic or general idea.
2. **Singular** – make sure that you have one focus: avoid statements like “Alex becomes realistic and mature” as these are separate foci
3. **Supportable** – there is enough evidence in the text to provide two examples for three different subtopics
4. **Significant** – you address the central lesson/message that the author is trying to impart on the reader, and you have created a statement that is arguable. Your reader should not read your thesis statement and ask “So what?” because if your thesis is significant, then the “so what” question is answered in the thesis statement already.

IF YOUR THESIS STATEMENT MEETS ALL OF THE REQUIREMENTS ABOVE, REVIEW THE ESSAY STRUCTURE BELOW AND THEN GO TO THE ESSAY TEMPLATE TO START ORGANIZING YOUR BRAINSTROMED POINTS INTO AN ESSAY.

ESSAY STRUCTURE

PART 1 - INTRODUCTION

State your introduction in ONE paragraph.

- **Lead:** One to three opening sentences providing general information on the topic that grabs the reader’s attention and makes him/her want to read on.
- **Link:** One sentence that introduces your text as it relates to your topic and lead. This is NOT a statement of your opinion or argument.
- **Thesis:** One sentence that clearly states your position/argument of the text as it relates to the topic.
- **Plan of Development:** Write a sentence or two to introduce each of the subtopics. This is the road map of your essay and so the subtopics must be introduced in the order in which they appear in the body.

PART 2 - BODY

You will prove your thesis with three **areas of support**, which you will express in a series of **body paragraphs**. For each area of support you must provide TWO examples (stated in point-proof-comment format).

Paragraph structure for Subtopic 1, 2, 3:

- **Topic Sentence:** One sentence that states the topic of that paragraph and connects it to your argument.
- **Point:** Introduce your first quote. State the example in your own words, establishing context for the quote.

- **Proof:** State the quote from the text using proper **MLA format**. Select quotes that illustrate a drawn conclusion as opposed to a fact. For example, do not write, *Piggy clearly has the conch, which is evident when he says, "I've got the conch" (Golding 42)*. Instead, write, *Jack believes he is the more qualified candidate to be chief when he explains, "I can sing C sharp" (21)*.
- **Comment:** Explain how the quote supports your point and your argument. Be sure to analyze specific elements of your quote.
- **Transition:** Provide a phrase, or sentence, to move from your first point to your second. For example, 'in addition to', or, 'similarly to point a, point b demonstrates'...
- **Point:** Introduce your second quote. State the example in your own words, establishing context for the quote.
- **Proof:** State the quote from the text using proper **MLA format**. You may also decide to **integrate** your quote into your explanation of the point. Avoid choosing quotes that simply provide plot details.
- **Comment:** Explain how the quote supports your argument. Be sure to analyze specific elements of your quote.
- **Concluding Statement:** one or two sentences restating your analysis/examples in a way that connects your area of focus as a whole back to your thesis. Here you should be stating clearly and directly how this area of focus has proven your argument.

PART 3 - CONCLUSION

State your conclusion in ONE paragraph.

- **Restate Thesis:** One sentence that restates your position/argument. It should include the title and the author's name.
- **Summarize your argument** either in one statement or in three separate statements (one for each subtopic).
- **Closing statement/final thought/clincher:** Connect your topic to a real world event or another text that relates to your general topic and argument. Be sure to make a statement that is significant, interesting, and that leaves your reader with something to think about.

WRITING CONVENTIONS

DO NOT:

- Use contractions (it's, don't, haven't, etc.)
- Use personal pronouns ("I", "you", "us", "we", "me", "our")
- Use passive voice ("The hat of Tommy" vs. "Tommy's hat")
- Use the same word to start two sentences in a row or the same word twice in a sentence
- Refer to the author by his/her first name (authors aren't your friends)
- Begin your essay with "Throughout the history of humankind" (unless you have a PhD in the History of Humankind); instead, you could say, "According to..." Do not make general or vague statements that you cannot prove. Use statements that are specific and measurable.
- Use clichés or slang ("kill two birds with one stone" "that really bugged him")
- Use quotes as arguments: use quotes to support your argument/insight
- Overuse longer quotes: only use them when you cannot argue your point with a shorter version of the quote or in your own words.

DO:

- Make clear, concise statements.
- Identify titles properly (quotation marks vs. underlined vs. italics)
- Use present tense ("Ann **walks** into the cave", not "Anne **walked** into the cave)
- Use transitional words when introducing additional examples (first, second, next, also, furthermore, third, last, finally, in conclusion)
- Introduce a character by his/her full name the first time he/she is mentioned.
- Read your essay OUT LOUD to yourself. This will help you identify and edit awkward
- Use an appropriate "title page" that meets the requirements of MLA style (Appendix B)
- Number each page in the top right hand corner using your last name and the page number
- Follow the MLA guidelines for referencing quotes (Appendix B)

MLA STYLE

The Modern Languages Association is a professional association formed for educational, scientific, literary, and social objects and purposes, and more specifically for the promotion of the academic and scientific study of English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and other so-called modern languages and literatures.

This association publishes a Literary Style Guide which establishes the rules and guidelines for formatting academic papers in the subject areas listed above.

Your ability to apply these rules in your essays will be evaluated

The following aspects of MLA will be evaluated on your essay and can be found in the Literary Style Guide on the school [website](#).

1. Format and Appearance (pages 3&4 of style guide).
2. Incorporating quotes and in text citation (page 18)
3. Works Cited (pages 21-24)

Format and Appearance of MLA format

Here is an example of the first page of an essay (note the page below is not to scale):

John A. Smith
Mrs. Howe
ENG 4U-01
Oct 27/09
Friar Lawrence's Role in the Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet
Far too often destructive actions are caused by good intentions that cloud one's logic. At times, one can become so obsessed with the desire to correct an injustice that

Smith 1

Double-space

1"

1/2"

1"

Setting up quotes and in text citation

- Direct quotations - are the exact words said by someone or the exact words you saw in print and are recopying. Use a set of quotation marks around a word(s), phrase(s), line(s) or passage(s) to enclose direct quotations in your essay. In brackets after the quote, write the author's last name and page number. If the same resource is used immediately after, only use the page number. The reader will automatically understand that you are referring to the text referenced previously.

For example: At the end of the novel, "Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart" (Golding 202).

For example: Piggy is "so full of pride in his contribution to the good of society" (118).

- Longer quotes (although used sparingly) need to be introduced and indented one inch from the margin. Longer quotes are those quotes that exceed four lines in length.

For example: At the conclusion of *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph and the other boys realize the horrors of their actions:

The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected by that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too. (186)

*Note that the quote is set up through the use of a colon, and the page number reference is after the period, not before.

- When quoting Shakespeare, use a slash to indicate the start of a new line in the play and include the act, scene, and lines in the in text citation.

For example: Mercutio realizes his fate when he responds to Romeo that his cut is “not so deep as well, nor so wide as a / church-door; but ‘tis enough, ‘twill serve. Ask for me / tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man” (3.1.95-97).

- When using a quotation that switches speakers, be sure to introduce, indent, and copy it out as it is written in the book.

For example: A foreboding note of tragedy hangs in the air as Romeo and Juliet exchange bittersweet farewells:

JULIET. O, think’st thou we shall ever meet again?
 ROMEO. I doubt it not; and all these woes shall serve
 For sweet discourses in our time to come.
 JULIET. O God, I have an ill-divining soul!
 Methinks I see thee, now thou are below,
 As one dead in the bottom of a tomb. (3.5.51-56)

WORK CITED PAGE

This page must be a new page attached to the end of your essay. The entries on this page are listed in alphabetical order. The following pointers are taken from the Holy Trinity Literary Style Guide. See the school website and this document for a more thorough exploration of the expectations for this page.

CITING NON-PERIODICAL PRINT PUBLICATIONS

Entries for a non-periodical print publication, such as a book, consist of several elements in a prescribed sequence. This list shows most of the possible components of a print entry and the order in which they are normally arranged:

1. Name of the author, editor, compiler, or translator
2. Title of the work (italicized)
3. Edition used
4. Number(s) of the volume(s)
5. City of publication, name of the publisher, and year of publication
6. Medium of publication (Print)
7. Supplementary bibliographic information and annotation

A Book (One Author)

Franke, Damon. *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883-1924*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008. Print.

*For more examples on how to cite various print sources, refer to pages 21-24 on the Holy Trinity Literary Style Guide on the school website.

CITING A WEB PAGE

An entry for a publication on the Web usually contains most of the following components, in sequence:

1. Name of the author, compiler, director, editor, narrator, performer, or translator of the work
2. Title of the work (italicized if the work is independent; in roman type and quotation marks if the work is part of a larger work)
3. Title of the overall Web site (italicized), if distinct from item 2
4. Version or edition used
5. Publisher or sponsor of the site; if not available, use N.p.
6. Date of publication (day, month, and year, as available); if nothing is available, use n.d.
7. Medium of publication (Web)
8. Date of access (day, month, and year)

A Work Cited Only on the Web

Committee on Scholarly Editions. "Guidelines for Editors of Scholarly Editions." Modern Language Association. MLA, 25 Sept. 2007. Web. 15 May 2008

"What To Look For" Holy Trinity Literary Style Guide

- Review the punctuation rules regarding short, direct quotes. Punctuation Rules with quotes (p.14)
- Sic = mistakes inside quotes
- Use [square brackets] for added information, but only if necessary
- Use of ellipses – notice how this differs when leaving out a line of poetry or a Shakespearean play (p.16)
- When writing a quote within a quote use single quotation marks inside the double quotations marks.