

Handouts

Teaching Expository and Persuasive Texts Gateway Resource TEPT0003

General Guidelines for Drafting Essays

Note: *These general guidelines apply to writing a variety of genres or text types across content areas. Specific elements of expository essays, persuasive essays, and personal narratives are included as separate handouts. These guidelines are designed to help students become thoughtful and process-oriented, rather than product-oriented, readers and writers. These guidelines are not meant as a strict sequence for writing an essay. Writing is a recursive process, and a student may choose to write the body of the essay before writing the introduction or may even start by writing the conclusion.*

Beginning of the Essay: Drafting the Introduction

The introduction is the author's chance to grab the reader's attention, show why ideas are worth considering, and give a brief overview of the subject or argument. There are, of course, many ways to write an introduction, and some types are better suited than others for certain essays.

Students' essays will get off to a good start when they include the following in the introduction:

- A "hook" to get the reader's attention
- Background information the audience may need about the topic
- A thesis statement—a central or controlling idea

Begin with a concise, yet intriguing, first sentence.

Remember, the introduction is just an introduction—not the entire essay. Start with something interesting, rather than just summarizing the essay.

Be specific.

Being too general can affect the overall quality of the essay. If you generalize, the development of ideas will be weak or minimal. A good essay presents specific and well-chosen ideas and examples that substantially support the main points and the argument or position.

Do not restate the prompt or question.

For most prompts and assignments with specified topics, the reader more than likely knows what the prompt is. Restating it only takes up space and can be interpreted as a lack of creativity.

Avoid using clichés.

Clichés are overused expressions that often are considered boring or uncreative and may even result in the reader not wanting to read the rest of the essay.

Stay away from dictionary definitions to introduce the topic.

Using a dictionary definition is often a sign that the author is having difficulty beginning the essay. The dictionary also may not be considered an appropriate source for some topics.

Avoid extraneous information on the subject.

Throwing in irrelevant information signals that the author is just filling up the required number of paragraphs or pages.

Do not drive the reader away.

The introduction should make the reader want to read the rest of the essay. For instance, although beginning an essay with, "This essay is about. . ." may appear straightforward, it falls short of motivating one to read on. Wordiness and simple grammar errors also leave a poor first impression.

Revisit the introduction after drafting the entire essay.

Reread the introduction. As you develop ideas and craft the essay, your understanding of the topic may change. Adjust the first paragraph and/or thesis, if necessary.

Middle of the Essay: Drafting the Body

In the body of the essay, authors develop ideas that focus on the topic and the thesis or central/controlling idea. Teach students to fully develop and sustain this focus throughout the essay. Usually, there is no set number of paragraphs that authors need to write.

Here are some tips for writing clear and concise paragraphs and using meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections.

Vary the length of the paragraphs.

There is not a set number of sentences per paragraph. Often for a paragraph to be well developed, it needs more than five sentences; sometimes a one-sentence paragraph is appropriate.

Consider the white space on the page when writing. Try to break down the thoughts as much as possible. A series of long paragraphs can be intimidating to readers and can make it more difficult for them to process the argument. Vary the length of paragraphs to make the essay more reader friendly. Balance the paragraphs according to the length of the essay.

Focus and develop one idea in each paragraph.

A well-written paragraph becomes its own independent "chunk" of writing. Introduce a thought with an opening sentence, develop it throughout the paragraph, and then wrap it all up in a concluding sentence.

Vary sentence length within the paragraphs.

Avoid entire paragraphs of choppy, simple sentences or lengthy, rambling, complex sentences filled with commas and conjunctions. Interspersing long and short sentences makes an essay more interesting.

Use meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections.

Meaningful transitions help to establish logical connections between ideas, sentences, and paragraphs in the essay. Meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections enhance the flow of the essay by clearly showing the relationships among the ideas. Transitions also help the reader understand those relationships. A transition can be a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph.

Although transitions are not a substitute for good organization, they can make the organization clearer and easier to follow. Transitions help to bind the essay into a unified, coherent, well-developed whole. Transitions help readers to connect with what has come before in a sentence, paragraph, or section and to anticipate and better comprehend what is coming next.

Examples of Different Types of Transitional Words and Phrases

Transitions that mean “to add”	<i>and, furthermore, in addition to</i>
Transitions that mean “to compare”	<i>also, likewise, as well</i>
Transitions that mean “to contrast”	<i>but, however, alternatively</i>
Transitions that mean “to prove”	<i>consequently, thus, therefore</i>
Transitions that mean “to show relationships in time”	<i>first, second, third, finally, then</i>
Transitions that mean “to give an example”	<i>for example, for instance</i>
Transitions that mean “to summarize, conclude”	<i>finally, in conclusion</i>

End of the Essay: Drafting the Conclusion

Good conclusions can be tricky to write. They provide closure and review important information. Conclusions need to accomplish these tasks without being boring, redundant, or off topic. A concluding paragraph supports the thesis or central/controlling idea.

The following tips can help your students write a strong conclusion that leaves a lasting impression.

Do not stretch to fit the page requirement.

Stretching the conclusion until you meet the page limit results in irrelevant fluff that only weakens the essay. If the essay is not long enough, go back and further develop the content by elaborating on the main points. Always add to and strengthen the evidence or idea development, rather than simply extending the conclusion.

Avoid adding new information and leaving loose ends.

Do not introduce new information in the conclusion. Writers have little time in a conclusion to adequately develop new ideas, which can leave the audience hanging. Instead, take the thesis or central/controlling idea a step further (e.g., discuss its implications; re-emphasize the significance and relevance of your topic, position, or argument).

Do not repeat the thesis or central/controlling idea.

The reader has already read the thesis or central/controlling idea, so it does not need to be repeated verbatim. The conclusion should state the thesis in a new way or further develop it. You can sum up the important points made throughout the essay, but for short essays, this summary usually is unnecessary. Ask yourself: “Will readers remember what I wrote, or do I need to remind them?”

Avoid resorting to clichés.

The conclusion should be memorable. Clichés (i.e., old metaphors and tired phrasing such as “In conclusion . . .”) typically make the essay sound unoriginal. As a result, a reader may discount what the author has to say. Instead, use vivid images and colorful language that will leave an impression on readers. Because these are the last words the audience will read, make them count.

Source: The University of Texas at Austin Undergraduate Writing Center. (2001–2005). *Virgil: Online writing tutorial*. Retrieved from <http://uwc.utexas.edu>

Expository Essay Elements

English Language Arts and Reading Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Glossary Definition

Expository essay: a type of informational text that clarifies or explains something

Elements

An expository essay is a multiparagraph essay that conveys information about a topic. The number of paragraphs is not predetermined. The essay includes a beginning, a middle, and an end. The writer explains, describes, and informs the reader about a topic by using facts, details, and examples in a clear and concise way.

1. Clear, concise, and defined thesis statement

The thesis is typically stated in the first paragraph of the expository essay. To narrow the focus or topic, writers need to determine which aspect of a topic they will write about. For example, if the topic is music, the writer needs to ask, "What kind of music?" Then, the writer can ask, "What do I want my readers to know about that kind of music?"

Common approaches for developing a thesis or controlling idea statement include the following:

- **Make a connection.** Compare your topic with something you learned or studied in class or know a lot about. Consider making a connection that the reader might not normally make.
- **Refute an accepted idea.** Present new evidence or interpret existing evidence in a new way.
- **Find something new.** Look at a topic from a new perspective. Think of an aspect that has been overlooked.
- **Define.** Offer a definition of a key term that will get readers to see a controversial issue in a new way.
- **Evaluate.** Make an assessment about something's quality or utility.
- **Argue cause and effect.** Explain how something happened or will happen because of something that was done.
- **Propose a change.** Suggest that something needs to be done that has never been tried before.

2. Specific supporting details

Supporting details explain the thesis and the topic. Details should be specific; add substance to the essay; and are presented in a logical, organized way. Writers may use their own unique experiences or view of the world as the basis for writing or to connect their ideas in interesting ways.

Details are often brainstormed before the author begins to write. These supporting details help the writer to determine the main points or ideas in the essay that support the thesis and which organizational structure would best suit the topic.

Types of supporting details include the following:

- Examples
- Facts and statistics
- Reasons
- Causes and effects
- Incidents
- Definitions
- Comparisons and contrasts
- Definitions
- Steps in a process

Supporting details are often then grouped into categories based on commonalities. The groupings or categories typically become the main points or ideas that the writer will fully explain in the essay.

Each paragraph should be limited to the explanation of one general idea.

Writers should focus on the thesis. Writers should include paragraphs (no set number) that have topic sentences directly related to the thesis and details that present the following:

- Main ideas that develop or support the thesis statement
- Evidence from the text (embedded quotations) to support these ideas, including examples, illustrations, statistics, and so forth
- Analysis of the evidence and central ideas in which the writer integrates his or her own ideas, values, beliefs, and assumptions

The type of evidential support (whether factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal) varies. Because students are often required to write expository essays with little or no preparation, essays may not have a great deal of statistical or factual evidence.

Writers should include enough details to fully explain each piece of information. Writers should also try to “show and not tell.” They should not assume that the reader has prior knowledge or understanding of the topic. Writers should use words that clearly explain and describe in detail, rather than just state ideas. Writers should try to leave no reader question unanswered.

Writers should keep their writing interesting and not focus on the formulaic nature of expository writing. The goal should be to leave readers with a better understanding and lasting impression.

There should be no inconsistencies or extraneous information. The details should support the main points or ideas to fully explain the thesis statement.

3. Clearly organized structure

Expository essays need an organizing structure that logically presents the main ideas and supporting details related to the thesis statement. Writers should select the structure that is best suited to a thoughtful and engaging explanation of the topic.

Common expository organizational patterns include the following:

- **Concept and definition.** Describe a topic by listing characteristics, features, and examples.
- **Sequence.** List items or events in numerical or chronological order.
- **Compare and contrast.** Explain how two or more things are alike and/or how they are different.
- **Cause and effect.** List one or more causes and the resulting effects.
- **Problem and solution.** State a problem and list one or more solutions for the problem. A variation of this pattern is the question-and-answer format, in which you pose a question and then answer it.

The writer also should use meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections to enhance the logical movement of the essay and clearly show the relationships among ideas, making the writer's train of thought easy to follow.

4. Strong introduction

Expository essays need an introduction that grabs the reader's attention. The introduction should show why the writer's ideas are worth considering and provide a brief overview of the topic.

Common ways to introduce expository essays include the following:

- **Solve a problem.** Problem solving will almost always grab your reader's attention, especially in an academic context. It is also a good way to set up your thesis statement, which will then help the reader better understand it. This type of introduction can set up your conclusion by allowing you to return to the problem and show how the things you wrote solve the problem or that the problem needs further inquiry.
- **Start with an anecdote, a quotation, a question, or an interesting fact.** This form of introduction often will appeal to a reader's emotions. Interesting anecdotes, quotations, questions, and facts can quickly interest readers and make them want to read more. Try to think of an interesting, shocking, or weird fact about your topic.
- **Acknowledge what others have said on the subject.** For some topics, the amount of literature available can be overwhelming. If you are writing about a popular topic, it is best to acknowledge in your introduction that much has been written on the subject. Your introduction needs to convey why your essay is important and how it is different from all the other literature that already exists on the subject.
- **Point out an irony or a paradox.** Paradoxes are seemingly contradictory statements. They are great to use in introductions to get the reader's attention.
- **Use an analogy.** If your topic is a bit obscure or abstract, try connecting it to something more familiar to your reader.
- **Jump into the content.** This strategy is good for audiences who do not like to read anything they do not have to. Sometimes, it can be more dramatic to start with your thesis.

5. Strong conclusion

The conclusion should not simply restate the thesis, but rather readdress it based on the evidence provided. Because this is the part of the essay that will leave the most immediate impression on the reader, it should be effective and logical.

Writers should not introduce new information in the conclusion; rather, writers should synthesize and resolve the information already presented in the body of the essay.

Writers use many types of conclusions. Below is a list of ideas for bringing closure to an essay. Writers can incorporate more than one of these types into a conclusion.

Common types of conclusions include the following:

- **Summary.** Sum up all of your main points. This is the most basic and popular type of conclusion, but be careful not to repeat your thesis.
- **Link to beginning.** This type of conclusion is a nice companion for an introduction that features anecdotes, quotes, problem solving, and so forth. Tying the ending to your beginning gives readers a satisfying sense of closure. You might refer back to a certain image or phrase in your introduction. Keep in mind that this method works better in some essays than in others. In other words, if you try too hard to connect your conclusion to your introduction, it may come off as contrived and artificial.
- **Larger context.** This type of conclusion is good for obscure and abstract topics for which the details cause readers to lose sight of the main point. This type of conclusion reminds your readers of the big picture by answering the following questions: Why does my topic matter? What are the consequences of what I am suggesting or proposing?
- **Call to action.** This is a common approach for proposal essays that asks your readers to respond to your position or argument with a specific action.

6. Purposeful and precise word choice

The writer's word choice in an expository essay should be accurate, concise, clear, and concrete. Effective word choice reflects a keen awareness of the expository purpose and maintains a tone appropriate to the purpose and audience. Writers often focus on word choice to improve their first drafts.

To improve writing, writers can replace overused words with stronger, more powerful ones or use phrases and sensory details that describe, explain, or provide additional detail and connections.

7. Varied sentence structure

Sentences are the building blocks of writing. The ways sentences are constructed affect the fluency or the flow of the writing. Expository essays are enhanced when the writer uses purposeful sentences that are varied in both length and structure.

Examples of how writers can vary sentences to improve their writing include the following:

- Using a variety of sentence patterns: simple, compound, and complex
- Combining short sentences with prepositional phrases, appositive phrases, or participial phrases
- Combining short sentences by linking items of equal importance with a coordinating conjunction
- Combining short sentences containing ideas that are of unequal importance with a subordinating conjunction
- Starting sentences in different ways
- Using an adverb
- Using prepositional, participial, or infinitive phrase
- Using an introductory clause
- Breaking up long, rambling sentences (often run-on sentences) into two or three shorter sentences

Expository Essay Elements Mini-Chart

- Clear, concise, and defined thesis statement
- Clearly organized structure
- Strong introduction
- Specific supporting details
- Strong conclusion
- Purposeful and precise word choice
- Varied sentence structure

Solidarity and Support

Susan Newman is a social psychologist, a blogger for “*Psychology Today Magazine*,” and the author of “*Under One Roof Again: All Grown Up and (Re)learning to Live Together Happily*.”

December 26, 2011

Not since the Great Depression have so many young adults turned to their immediate relatives as an economic lifeline. In the 1960s, for example, independence was the strived-for virtue—returning home, “unthinkable.” If children didn’t grow up, find jobs, and live independently, parents were seen as enablers, the children as failures. That stigmatized view has faded fast during the recession.

Family of origin has become a lifeboat for roughly one in five 25- to 34-year-olds who move in with parents to wait out the economic storm. Sure, there are potential complications and emotional minefields left over from the parenting years, but once the kinks are sorted out, the benefits for young and old are clear.

Some argue that living with parents stunts development and prolongs adolescence. I see the camaraderie as an opportunity to get to know each other in ways not possible when living together as parent and child. Delayed maturity in young adults happens only if parents continue to cater to their adult children’s needs as if they were still 10-year-olds. Living with parents as young adults provides the chance to know parents as people and similarly for parents to see their adult children as grownups with ideas, skills, and talents to admire.

Bunking in with parents allows struggling young adults to save for an apartment or house, to hold out until they find a meaningful job, or to start to pay down student loans—the average being \$24,000, but soaring over \$100,000 for some. In return, most adult children assist parents in-kind.

Rather than having a negative effect, the recession has renewed values with the emphasis on family solidarity and support. The advantages of the multigenerational family, a model immigrant families have always practiced, will keep more parents and young adults together. Even when young adults can afford a place of their own, many say, “I’m still here.” Money will be saved on housing but will be spent on consumer goods, aiding the economy. However, living under the same roof for the long or short haul will remain a configuration that defines American families in the foreseeable future.

Source: Newman, S. (2011, December 26). Solidarity and support. *The New York Times*. Reprinted with permission.

Model Lesson: Analyzing Expository Essays Tool

Note: The questions below are useful when teaching students to read mentor texts like a writer. As the essay is analyzed, help students notice how the author crafts the different elements and how these elements might be used in their own writing.

TITLE: Solidarity and Support

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Clear, concise, and defined thesis statement	
What is the author's main thesis or central/controlling idea?	Newman's overall thesis seems to both observe a trend and argue that the trend is positive: "That stigmatized view [of adult children living at home] has faded fast during the recession."
Which approach (make a connection, refute an accepted idea, find something new, define, evaluate, propose a change) did the author use in building this thesis? Elaborate.	Newman reveals her plan to refute an accepted idea in the second paragraph when she chooses her side in the debate. She writes: "Sure, there are potential complications and emotional minefields left over from the parenting years, but once the kinks are sorted out, the benefits for young and old are clear." So, in a sense, she is dismissing what some people expect to come out of living under one roof ("complications and emotional minefields") and arguing that, in reality, "the benefits for young and old are clear."
Is this approach effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, why not?	I do think this approach is effective. The author takes a topic that many people feel anxiety about and gives reasons for hope.

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Strong introduction	
<p>What type of introduction does the author use?</p>	<p>The author jumps into the content by immediately introducing the recent shift in U.S. living arrangements.</p>
<p>Is the author's introduction effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, what would improve it?</p>	<p>I like the way the introduction puts the topic in its historical context. I do think, however, that more specifics might have made it even stronger. The author also could have hooked the reader with an anecdote, possibly outlining one family's circumstances.</p>
Specific supporting details	
<p>Do all of the body paragraphs have a logical connection to the thesis? Is each one limited to the explanation of one general idea?</p>	<p>Yes. The author uses each paragraph to approach a different element of the larger topic of multigenerational living.</p>
<p>List some of the supporting details and explain whether they are effective in supporting the author's thesis. If so, what makes them effective? If not, what would improve them?</p>	<p>The author uses specifics as evidence to back up her points. In the second paragraph, she says, "Family of origin has become a lifeboat for roughly one in five 25- to 34-year-olds who move in with parents to wait out the economic storm." And later in the essay, she discusses the average student loan debt. These facts and figures make her argument more convincing.</p>

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Clearly organized structure	
<p>Is the essay well organized? Describe the type of organizational pattern that the author uses.</p>	<p>It is well organized. Each paragraph tackles a specific issue. In the third paragraph, for example, the author directly addresses critiques of her argument. In the fourth, she explores the financial effects of the topic. In the fifth, she presents her conclusion, summing up her argument and projecting into the future.</p>
<p>Are the transitions effective in forming connections among ideas and sections of the essay? If so, what makes them effective? If not, what could improve them?</p>	<p>Although the author’s organization makes the essay fairly easy to read, she does not use many transition words or phrases. Her essay’s readability might be improved if she inserted more transition language between her various points.</p>
Strong conclusion	
<p>What type of conclusion does the author use?</p>	<p>She concludes with a summary and the larger context.</p>
<p>Is the author's conclusion effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, what would improve it?</p>	<p>The conclusion is effective at summing up her argument and projecting it into the future when the author writes that “living under the same roof for the long or short haul will remain a configuration that defines American families in the foreseeable future.”</p>

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Purposeful and precise word choice	
<p>Is the author's word choice effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, what would improve it?</p>	<p>The author uses strong and powerful words to explain why she thinks multigenerational living arrangements are beneficial. She uses words such as <i>stigmatized</i>, <i>lifeboat</i>, <i>economic storm</i>, <i>camaraderie</i>, <i>bunking in</i>, <i>renewed values</i>, and <i>configuration</i>. These words are effective because they help convince the reader that her position has merit.</p>
Varied sentence structure	
<p>What types of sentences does the author use?</p>	<p>The author uses a majority of complex sentence structures. The sentences are rather long and rambling. She does not vary the length.</p>
<p>Is the author's use of sentences effective? If so, what makes them effective? If not, what would improve them?</p>	<p>The author's use of sentences is not that effective. Their complex structure and her overuse of dependent phrases and clauses make it difficult to read and understand. She needs to simplify the structure and provide both long and short sentences.</p>
Author's style or craft	
<p>Which aspects of the author's writing style do you plan to incorporate in your next essay?</p>	<p>I plan on incorporating the use of specific evidence into my work. I also liked how the author used counterarguments to directly address critiques of her argument.</p>

Analyzing Expository Essays Tool

Note: *The questions below are useful when teaching students to read mentor texts like a writer. As the essay is analyzed, help students notice how the author crafts the different elements and how these elements might be used in their own writing.*

TITLE:

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Clear, concise, and defined thesis statement	
What is the author's main thesis or central/controlling idea?	
Which approach (make a connection, refute an accepted idea, find something new, define, evaluate, propose a change) did the author use in building this thesis? Elaborate.	
Is this approach effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, why not?	

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Strong introduction	
What type of introduction does the author use?	
Is the author's introduction effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, what would improve it?	
Specific supporting details	
Do all of the body paragraphs have a logical connection to the thesis? Is each one limited to the explanation of one general idea?	
List some of the supporting details and explain whether they are effective in supporting the author's thesis. If so, what makes them effective? If not, what would improve them?	

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Clearly organized structure	
Is the essay well organized? Describe the type of organizational pattern that the author uses.	
Are the transitions effective in forming connections among ideas and sections of the essay? If so, what makes them effective? If not, what could improve them?	
Strong conclusion	
What type of conclusion does the author use?	
Is the author's conclusion effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, what would improve it?	

Expository Elements	Analysis and Responses
Purposeful and precise word choice	
Is the author's word choice effective? If so, what makes it effective? If not, what would improve it?	
Varied sentence structure	
What types of sentences does the author use?	
Is the author's use of sentences effective? If so, what makes them effective? If not, what would improve them?	
Author's style or craft	
Which aspects of the author's writing style do you plan to incorporate in your next essay?	

Writing an Introductory Paragraph for an Expository Essay

Prompt

Read the following:

If you are like many Americans, you have just spent a few days in close quarters with your parents, grandchildren, siblings, etc. You are ready to go home or ready for them to go home. But for a growing number of families in which adult children cannot afford to live on their own, this is the new normal.

These “boomerang” children have been the butt of jokes on late-night television and even in commercials, but what is so bad about moving back in with your parents?

Think carefully about the following question: Could extended families under one roof—a common arrangement in years past—be the way of the future?

Write (the introductory paragraph of) an essay explaining the benefits of extended families living under one roof becoming a common arrangement in America.

Be sure to do the following:

- Clearly state your thesis or controlling idea
- Organize and develop your explanation effectively
- Choose your words carefully for the purpose and audience
- Use correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and sentences

Source: Various authors. (2011, December 26). The whole family under one roof? *The New York Times*.

Introductory Paragraph

(You may also write on the back of this handout.)