



The Four Main Types of Essay | Quick Guide with Examples

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An [essay](#) is a focused piece of writing designed to inform or persuade. There are many different types of essay, but they are often defined in four categories: argumentative, expository, narrative, and descriptive essays.

Argumentative and expository essays are focused on conveying information and making clear points, while narrative and descriptive essays are about exercising creativity and writing in an interesting way. At university level, argumentative essays are the most common type.

Argumentative

- ✓ Forming an opinion via research
- ✓ Building an evidence-based argument

Has the rise of the internet had a positive or negative impact on education?

Expository

- ✓ Knowledge of a topic
- ✓ Communicating information clearly

Explain how the invention of the printing press changed European society in the 15th century.

Narrative

- ✓ Creative language use
- ✓ Presenting a compelling narrative

Write about an experience where you learned something about yourself.

Descriptive

- ✓ Creative language use
- ✓ Describing sensory details

Describe an object that has sentimental value for you.

In high school and college, you will also often have to write textual analysis essays, which test your skills in close reading and interpretation.

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Argumentative essays

An [argumentative essay](#) presents an extended, evidence-based argument. It requires a strong [thesis statement](#)—a clearly defined stance on your topic. Your aim is to convince the reader of your thesis using evidence (such as [quotations](#)) and analysis.

Argumentative essays test your ability to research and present your own position on a topic. This is the most common type of essay at college level—most papers you write will involve some kind of argumentation.

The essay is divided into an introduction, body, and conclusion:

- The [introduction](#) provides your topic and thesis statement
- The [body](#) presents your evidence and arguments
- The [conclusion](#) summarizes your argument and emphasizes its importance

The example below is a [paragraph](#) from the body of an argumentative essay about the effects of the internet on education. Mouse over it to learn more.

Argumentative essay example paragraph

A common frustration for teachers is students' use of Wikipedia as a source in their writing. Its prevalence among students is not exaggerated; a survey found that the vast majority of the

students surveyed used Wikinedia (Head & Eisenberg. 2010). An

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- ✓ Academic style
- ✓ Vague sentences
- ✓ Grammar
- ✓ Style consistency

[See an example](#)

Expository essays

An [expository essay](#) provides a clear, focused explanation of a topic. It doesn't require an original argument, just a balanced and well-organized view of the topic.

Expository essays test your familiarity with a topic and your ability to organize and convey information. They are commonly assigned at high school or in exam questions at college level.

The introduction of an expository essay states your topic and provides some general background, the body presents the details, and the conclusion summarizes the information presented.

A typical body paragraph from an expository essay about the invention of the printing press is shown below. Mouse over it to learn more.

[Expository essay example paragraph](#)

The invention of the printing press in 1440 changed this situation dramatically. Johannes Gutenberg, who had worked as

Narrative essays

A **narrative essay** is one that tells a story. This is usually a story about a personal experience you had, but it may also be an

imaginative exploration of something you have not experienced.

Narrative essays test your ability to build up a narrative in an engaging, well-structured way. They are much more personal and creative than other kinds of **academic writing**. Writing a **personal statement** for an application requires the same skills as a narrative essay.

A narrative essay isn't strictly divided into introduction, body, and conclusion, but it should still begin by setting up the narrative and finish by expressing the point of the story—what you learned from your experience, or why it made an impression on you.

Mouse over the example below, a short narrative essay responding to the prompt "Write about an experience where you learned something about yourself," to explore its structure.

Narrative essay example

Since elementary school, I have always favored subjects like science and math over the humanities. My instinct was always to think of these subjects as more solid and serious than classes like English. If there was no right answer, I thought, why bother? But

Descriptive essays

A **descriptive essay** provides a detailed sensory description of something. Like narrative essays, they allow you to be more creative than most academic writing, but they are more tightly

focused than narrative essays. You might describe a specific place or object, rather than telling a whole story.

Descriptive essays test your ability to use language creatively, making striking word choices to convey a memorable picture of what you're describing.

A descriptive essay can be quite loosely structured, though it should usually begin by introducing the object of your description and end by drawing an overall picture of it. The important thing is to use careful word choices and figurative language to create an original description of your object.

Mouse over the example below, a response to the prompt "Describe a place you love to spend time in," to learn more about descriptive essays.

Descriptive essay example

On Sunday afternoons I like to spend my time in the garden behind my house. The garden is narrow but long, a corridor of green extending from the back of the house, and I sit on a lawn chair at the far end to read and relax. I am in my small peaceful

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Textual analysis essays

Though every essay type tests your writing skills, some essays also test your ability to read carefully and critically. In a [textual analysis](#) essay, you don't just present information on a topic, but closely analyze a text to explain how it achieves certain effects.

Rhetorical analysis

A [rhetorical analysis](#) looks at a persuasive text (e.g. a speech, an essay, a political cartoon) in terms of the rhetorical devices it uses, and evaluates their effectiveness.

The goal is not to state whether you agree with the author's argument but to look at how they have constructed it.

The introduction of a rhetorical analysis presents the text, some background information, and your thesis statement; the body comprises the analysis itself; and the conclusion wraps up your analysis of the text, emphasizing its relevance to broader concerns.

The example below is from a rhetorical analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech. Mouse over it to learn more.

Rhetorical analysis example paragraph

King's speech is infused with prophetic language throughout.
Even before the famous "dream" part of the speech, King's
language consistently strikes a prophetic tone. He refers to the
Lincoln Memorial as a "hallowed spot" and speaks of rising "from



Literary analysis

A [literary analysis](#) essay presents a close reading of a work of literature—e.g. a poem or novel—to explore the choices made by the author and how they help to convey the text's theme. It is not simply a book report or a review, but an in-depth interpretation of the text.

Literary analysis looks at things like setting, characters, themes, and figurative language. The goal is to closely analyze what the author conveys and how.

The introduction of a literary analysis essay presents the text and background, and provides your thesis statement; the body consists of close readings of the text with quotations and analysis in support of your argument; and the conclusion emphasizes what your approach tells us about the text.

Mouse over the example below, the introduction to a literary analysis essay on [Frankenstein](#), to learn more.

Literary analysis example introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is often read as a crude cautionary tale about the dangers of scientific advancement unrestrained by ethical considerations. In this reading, protagonist Victor Frankenstein is a stable representation of the callous ambition of

Other interesting articles

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Frequently asked questions about types of essays

How do I know what type of essay to write?



What type of essay is most common at university?



What's the difference between an expository essay and an argumentative essay?



What's the difference between a narrative essay and a descriptive essay?



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Jack is a Brit based in Amsterdam, with an MA in comparative literature. He writes for Scribbr about his specialist topics: grammar, linguistics, citations, and plagiarism. In his spare time, he reads a lot of books.

Other students also liked

How to write an argumentative essay | Examples & tips

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argumentative essay presents a complete argument backed up by evidence and analysis. It is the most common essay type at university.

How to write an expository essay

An expository essay provides an explanation of a topic. It's usually a short essay designed to give clear, reliable information on its topic.

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How to write an essay outline | Guidelines & examples

An essay outline involves writing a quick summary for each point covered in each paragraph, showing how your argument will unfold.

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