

Crucial Elements of the Academic Essay

1. Thesis: your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), be limited enough in scope to be argued in the space given and with available evidence, and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early in some form and at some point recast sharply (not just be implied), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).

2. Motive: the intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone, besides your instructor, might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued--why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses (that you think are wrong). Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won't necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic. Indeed it's where you suggest that your argument *isn't* idiosyncratic, but rather is generally interesting. The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would genuinely overlook.

3. Evidence: the data--facts, examples, or details--that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently *concrete* for the reader to trust it; and if summarized, it needs to be summarized *accurately* and fairly. The language of the text is the primary form of evidence in literary studies.

4. Analysis: the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it supports a thesis (*is evidence* for something). Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.
Evidence without analysis is not evidence.

5. Keyterms: the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon, usually literal but sometimes a ruling metaphor. These terms usually imply certain *assumptions*--unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. that the essayist doesn't argue for but simply assumes to be true. An essay's keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned halfway); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple--a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). The attendant assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

6. Structure: the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (see "stitching"). But it should also be a progressive order--there should be a direction or *development* or *complication*, not simply a list or a series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious *here*; and he's ambitious *here*; and he's ambitious *here*, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just

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hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.)

7. Stitching: words that tie together the parts of an argument, most commonly 1) by using *transition* (linking or turning) words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also 2) by *recollection* of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.

8. Sources: persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of 1) factual information or data, 2) opinions or interpretation on your topic, 3) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or 4) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation.

9. Reflecting: when you pause in your demonstration to reflect on it, to raise or answer a question about it--as when you 1) consider a *counterargument*--a possible objection, alternative, or problem that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; 2) *define your terms or assumptions* (what do I mean by this term? or, what am I assuming here?); 3) handle a newly emergent concern (but if this is so, then how can X be?); 4) draw out an *implication* (so what? what might be the wider significance of the argument I have made? what might it lead to if I'm right? or, what does my argument about a single aspect of this suggest about the whole thing?), and 5) consider a possible *explanation* for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated (why might this be so? what might cause or have caused it?); 6) offer a *qualification* or limitation to the case you have made (what you're *not* saying). The first of these reflections can come anywhere in an essay; the second usually comes early; the last four often come late (they're common moves of conclusion).

10. Orienting: bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn't expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned. The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully. **For the purposes of this class, assume an informed general reader who has a basic familiarity of your texts (no need to summarize plot, introduce characters, etc.).**

11. Title: It should both interest and inform. To inform--i.e. inform a general reader who might be browsing in an essay collection or bibliography--your title should give the subject and focus of the essay. To interest, your title might include a linguistic twist, paradox, sound pattern, or striking phrase taken from one of your sources (the aptness of which phrase the reader comes gradually to see). You can combine the interesting and informing functions in a single title or split them into title and subtitle. The interesting element shouldn't be too cute; the informing element shouldn't go so far as to state a thesis.

Adapted from Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay" for the Harvard University Expository Writing Program