

Expository Essay Format

Characteristics of an Expository Essay

- The purpose is to inform, describe, or explain
- Describes important facts
- Writer is a teacher
- Presents exhaustive information on a topic
- Written in 3rd person (using “it”, “he”, “she”, “they”), uses formal language to discuss someone or something

- Sample focus of the paper:
 - a medical or biological condition
 - a social or technological process
 - life or character of a famous person

WARNING: If the purpose of your writing is not to inform, but rather to analyze something or to persuade a reader about something, it is possible you have wandered into the wrong essay. Please check our other handouts on the Critical and Persuasive Essays to see which one is a better match for your writing purpose.

When writing any paper, you will most likely have to follow these six steps. This handout takes you through all six steps in the process of writing an Expository Essay.

- Step 1. Organizing your Thoughts (Brainstorming)
- Step 2. Researching your Topic
- Step 3. Developing a Thesis Statement
- Step 4. Writing the Introduction
- Step 5. Writing the Body of the Essay
- Step 6. Writing the Conclusion

Step 1: Organizing your Thoughts (Brainstorming)

Believe it or not, there is almost no topic on which your mind will draw a complete blank. Even if you know very little about the subject matter, you are likely to have something to say about it based on something you heard or read about it, or your basic values. It is imperative to take an inventory of what you know first. Sorting out what you know can be done in a number of ways:

- **Free writing** – writing quickly, without stopping, editing, or self-correcting to become aware of what you **already** know, think, or feel on a topic
- **Subject tree** – related ideas, connecting outwards from the main topic, in a tree form
(See illustration 1)
- **List** – free flow of ideas on a topic (See illustration 2)
- **Clustering** – main topic is in the middle circle, all related associations are linked to the main topic (See illustration 3)
- **Outline** – framework of an essay, which includes main points, followed by the breakdown into sub-points (See illustration 4)

Below are visual illustrations of these brainstorming methods. When using them, simply rely on what you already know on the topic – facts, opinions, emotions, and/or concerns.

Subject Tree

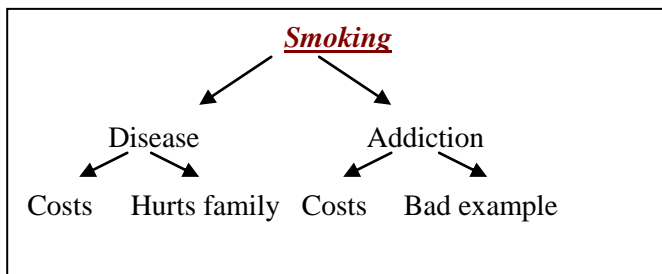


Illustration 1

List

<u>Summer</u>	<u>Winter</u>
Hot	Cold
Beach	Uncomfortable
Little clothes	Short days
Long days	Hypothermia
Lazy	Skiing
Sun radiation	Layers of clothes

Illustration 2

Cluster

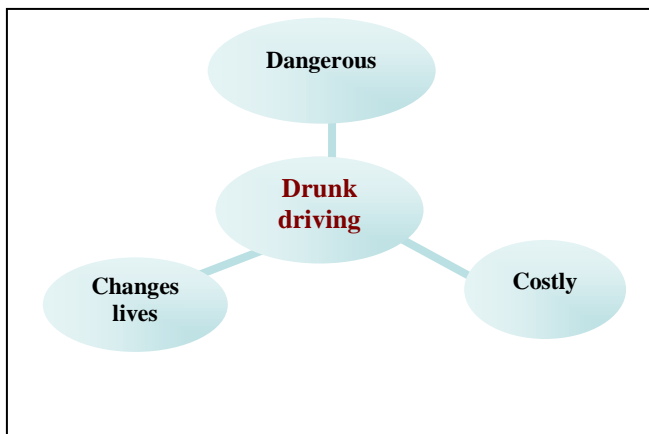


Illustration 3

Outline

- I. Introduction
 1. What is depression
 2. Thesis – Depression is a complex condition as evident in its causes/symptoms/treatments
- II. Body
 1. Causes of depression
 2. Symptoms of depression
 3. Treatments of depression
- III. Conclusion
 1. Why is studying depression important
 2. Reiterate causes/symptoms/treatments
 3. Consequences of depression

Illustration 4

This is not the time for evaluating your ideas; instead, it is the time for an *outpour* of ideas on all background knowledge you have on the topic. Once your thoughts are on paper, you can start organizing them by grouping ideas and identifying areas where more information is required.

Step 2: Researching your Topic

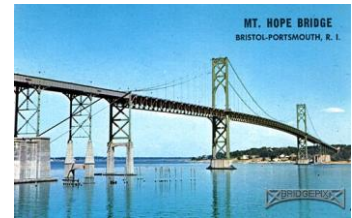
Research may require going to a library or searching online. All research should be current (check with your instructor for acceptable time frames). Acceptable sources are reference works, books, and scholarly articles by experts. Encyclopedias and popular magazines should not be used in academic writing.

When using information from a Web site, evaluate the site for timeliness and reputability. Also, consider the site’s purpose, the reliability of its sponsors, and credibility of the author. Make sure to collect all necessary reference information in order to give credit to the authors. Refer to our *Plagiarism* handout for tips on how to avoid plagiarism.

NOTE: The two steps – organization of thoughts and research of the topic – interrelate. In other words, organizing your thoughts may identify gaps in your knowledge, which may lead you to conduct necessary research. However, once you conduct research, you should re-organize your thoughts to evaluate the clarity of the topic.

Step 3: Developing a Thesis Statement

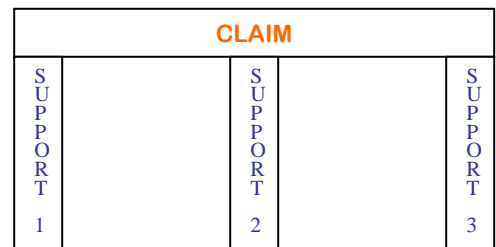
Developing a thesis is like building a bridge. In a bridge, the cross-beam (driveway) has to be held up by strong columns in order for the bridge to function. Similarly, **a thesis has two main components** – a claim and the supporting details that sustain it. In the bridge analogy, a cross-beam represents a claim, and the columns represent supporting details.



Claim

A claim is a one-sentence statement that

- Makes an assertion or takes a stance
- Is based on a generalization
- Is not a fact
- Is debatable
- Must be presented in the introduction of the essay



When making a claim, ask yourself any of the following:

- What point am I trying to make?
- What am I trying to say?
- What am I getting at?

Example

Depression affects people. (Weak because it is not debatable)

Depression is a complex condition. (Stronger because it presents an assertion that needs to be supported with evidence)

Supporting Details

Supporting details provide the means for reinforcing the claim, and can be organized in different patterns –

1) categories/topics, 2) time frames/chronological periods, or 3) cause/effect.

Thesis Statement

To create a thesis statement, combine the claim and the supporting details in one sentence. The direction of your essay can change depending on the pattern in which you organize the supporting details.

Example

Supporting details organized into categories:

Depression is a complex condition, understanding of which requires an in-depth look at its causes, symptoms, and available treatments.

*Supporting details organized into time frames:
the*

Depression is a complex condition, the treatment of which has undergone dramatic changes as the medical field progressed from late 19th century into the mid-20th century and finally into the early 21st century.

Supporting details organized into cause/effect:

Depression is a complex condition, which may be caused by any combination of biological, genetic, and environmental factors.

NOTE: Writing is a fluid process. As you complete your essay, you may realize that your thesis needs to be modified to reflect your position better.

Step 4: Writing the Introduction

The introduction is the most general part of the paper. It helps provide a roadmap for further discussion or analysis. This simplified formula offers components for a basic introduction:

- Definition:** Identify, define, and/or describe the topic, concept, or literary theme. What will you be talking about?
Relevance: Show the importance of your topic, concept or theme. How does it relate to or impact society?
Thesis: Copy the thesis statement generated in the previous step.

Example

- Topic:** Depression
Definition: Depression is a crippling condition that makes people feel despair in their lives.
Relevance: While 16% of all Americans experience depression during their lifetime, most remain undiagnosed and untreated.
Thesis: Depression is a complex condition, understanding of which requires an in-depth look at its causes, symptoms, and available treatments.

Step 5: Writing the Body of the Essay

The body of the essay is the most detailed part. It involves addressing each supporting detail in a separate, fully-developed paragraph. Make sure to include the necessary evidence from your research.

It is imperative that each supporting detail be announced or introduced within the text. This introduction is called a *topic sentence* and it is found at the beginning of a paragraph. The topic sentence is a statement you make about the supporting detail.

Example

- Topic sentence 1:** Depression is caused by several major factors.
Topic sentence 2: Though not always clearly evident, several symptoms can signal that a person is experiencing depression.
Topic sentence 3: A number of treatments are currently available for people who suffer from depression.

Step 6: Writing the Conclusion

Conclusion brings the paper to a close. It should be similar to the introduction, but worded differently. It allows you to reiterate and summarize the main points of the essay. The following components comprise a conclusion:

- Relevance:** Repeat the importance of your topic.
Review: Reiterate the points you discussed.
Summary: Summarize your conclusions.

Example

- Relevance:** Depression affects thousands of men, women, and children every year; many endure it without any help.
Review: This paper focused on the symptoms, causes, and available treatments of depression.
Summary: Depression can have devastating consequences not only for the people experiencing it, but for those around them as well. Education about this painful condition may allow us to reach out to a greater number of people suffering from it.