

# The Basics: The Anatomy of a Good Essay

## Writing Resources



### A Title

Titles should be short, inviting, and intriguing; they should act as springboards or signposts. Titles should sound like other titles of published books or articles, not like exam questions.

### A core idea and argument

It is the task of each essay to explain and communicate clearly a single idea or argument through engagement with a primary text or texts, situated within a historical or critical context. Crucially, a good essay doesn't progress through plot summary—resist shadowing the novel, story, or poem's chronology in your own essay.

### A fluid, logical structure

An essay should have an introductory section during which the essay's central idea or argument is hinted at. The development - and complication - of this initial idea or argument should also be accounted for in the essay's

conclusion.

Each paragraph should proceed logically from the one preceding it and lead logically into the one following it.

Most effective paragraphs are less than a page in length.

### Rigorous, creative, attentive close analysis

The heart of any good essay is creative, attentive and rigorous engagement with the primary text(s).

It is not advisable to analyse more than two or three primary texts. Analysing a small number of texts specifically is preferable to speaking about several texts generally.

### Research

Always gather your own ideas about the text through close reading and note-taking before consulting secondary criticism.

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It is important that an essay engage with works of criticism, but the aim of the essay is the elaboration of the essay's original idea or argument. Do not give too much space to other critics.

Engage with criticism; do not simply cite it. The best essays may often disagree with published criticism or point out its shortcomings.

Research can - and often should - include works of history, theory and other broader contextual scholarship, and, of course, other texts from the period. Research is not restricted to the field of literary criticism.

An essay may include reference to other forms of artistic production (e.g., painting, film, music). If such material is introduced, then it is essential that it be engaged with seriously and specifically, not just used to illustrate superficial similarities with a literary text.

## Basics

- All essays should be typed, double-spaced; pages should be numbered.
- Essays should be properly and carefully proof-read.
- Essays must adhere to standard grammatical, linguistic, and syntactical usage.

## Citation and referencing

Students at York are required to use either the MLA or Chicago Style of referencing. Please indicate on the front of your essay which style you have chosen (remember you also need to give a word count and your candidate number).

## Boost your confidence

For support with your writing, students at York are encouraged to make contact with the Royal Literary Fund fellows, who can meet with students to work on their writing.