

ESSAY CONSTRUCTION: A CHECKLIST

Most good essays are not *written* but *rewritten*—often more than once. Try to finish your essay a few days before it is due; before you hand it in, reread it carefully, asking yourself the questions suggested below. You should reread your rough copy at least twice, paragraph by paragraph, to make sure that your essay is organised and that the organisation is evident, and sentence by sentence, to make sure your grammar is correct and your style is effective.

I. ORGANISATION

- **TITLE PAGE:** is it correctly formatted? (See *The Nature of Writing*, “Format” chapter for specific details).
- **TITLE:** does it express the theme of the essay and name the work(s) to be discussed?
- **INTRODUCTION:** (4-5 sentences generally, for an essay of 500-1500 words).
 - does the introductory paragraph name the topic and the work(s) to be discussed?
 - does it present the thesis that you intend to pursue, and suggest the order in which your ideas will be presented?
 - does it use the first person sparingly, the mechanical ('The following three ideas will be discussed'), and the general ('Shakespeare, the greatest poet who ever wrote, was born...')
- **BODY OF THE ESSAY (MIDDLE PARAGRAPHS)**
 - does each paragraph contain a **topic sentence** which is clearly related to a point in the introduction?
 - is each paragraph **unified** (does every sentence deal with the same topic for that paragraph) and **coherent** (is the logical relation between sentences clear?)
 - does each paragraph contain **evidence** to support the topic sentence and the other sentences in the paragraph or **details** and **examples** to clarify?
 - if direct literary evidence is used as support, is it introduced effectively, quoted correctly and punctuated properly?
 - do the paragraphs follow one another logically, in the order suggested by the introduction?
 - are there effective transitions from paragraph to paragraph?
- **CONCLUSION** (4-5 sentences, generally, for a 500-1000 word essay)
 - does the conclusion **sum up** the evidence presented in the body of the essay and show its relationship to the thesis statement in the introduction?
 - does it suggest the **significance** of this relationship?

- does it avoid introducing new ideas or new evidence?
- does it avoid the person 'I hope I have shown') and the mechanical ('Thus the following three ideas have been discussed')?

II. STYLE AND GRAMMAR

• POINT OF VIEW

- Is the essay written in the 3rd person ('the story...'; 'the character...'); normally 1st person ('I believe) and 2nd person ('It makes you think') should be avoided in formal writing unless you are stating a key point in your Intro or thesis.
- is it written **in the present tense** (the soldier dies)) except where there is good reason for using past or future tense?

• LANGUAGE

- is the tone appropriate and consistent, neither slangy nor pompous?
- does the sentence structure vary to indicate shifts in emphasis and movement from point to point?
- can words be eliminated to make the writing more forceful or changed to make the meaning clear?

• GRAMMAR, SPELLING, AND PUNCTUATION

- are there any sentence fragments, comma splices, or fused sentences?
- are pronoun references clear?
- are there any misspelled words?
- is the punctuation correct?
- are apostrophes used to show possession?
- have unnecessary commas been eliminated?

• STYLE AND TONE

- have worn and mixed metaphors, clichéd and colloquial expressions been avoided?
- are there too many instances of passive voice and not enough of active voice?
- can words be changed to make the meaning more precise?

HAVE YOU DONE A FINAL CHECK FOR FORMATTING ERRORS AND TYPOS?