

Expository Essay Elements

ELAR TEKS Glossary Definition

Expository essay: a type of informational text that clarifies or explains something

Elements

An expository essay is a multiparagraph essay that conveys information about a topic. The number of paragraphs is not predetermined. The essay includes a beginning, a middle, and an end. The writer explains, describes, and informs the reader about a topic using facts, details, and examples in a clear and concise way.

1. Clear, concise, and defined thesis statement

The thesis is typically stated in the first paragraph of the expository essay. To narrow the focus or topic, writers need to determine which aspect of a topic they will write about. For example, if the topic is music, the writer needs to ask, "What kind of music?" Then, the writer asks, "What do I want my readers to know about that kind of music?"

Common approaches for developing a thesis or controlling idea statement include the following:

- **Make a connection.** Compare your topic/subject with something else that you've learned or studied in class or that you know a lot about. Consider making a connection that the reader might not normally make.
- **Refute an accepted idea.** Try to present new evidence or interpret existing evidence in a new way.
- **Find something new.** Look at a topic/subject from a new perspective. Think of an aspect that's been overlooked.
- **Define.** Offer a definition of a key term that will get readers to see a controversial issue in a new way.
- **Evaluate.** Make an assessment about something's quality or utility.
- **Argue cause and effect.** Explain how something happened or will happen because of something that was done.
- **Propose a change.** Suggest that something needs to be done that has never been tried before.

2. Specific supporting details

Supporting details are included to support the thesis and to help explain the topic. These details are specific; add substance to the essay; and are presented in a logical, organized way. Writers may use their own unique experiences or view of the world as the basis for writing or to connect their ideas in interesting ways.

Details are often brainstormed before the author begins to write. These supporting details help the writer to determine the main points or ideas in the essay that support the thesis and which organizational structure would best suit the topic.

Types of supporting details include the following:

- Examples
- Facts/statistics
- Reasons
- Causes/effects
- Incidents
- Definitions
- Comparisons/contrasts
- Definitions
- Steps in a process

Supporting details are often then grouped into categories based on commonalities. The groupings or categories typically become the main points or ideas that the writer will fully explain in the essay.

Each paragraph should be limited to the explanation of one general idea. This ensures clarity throughout the essay.

Keep the content focused on the thesis. Include paragraphs (no set number) that have topic sentences directly related to the thesis, as well as details that present the following:

- Main ideas that develop or support the thesis statement
- Evidence from the text (embedded quotations) to support these ideas, including examples, illustrations, statistics, and so forth.
- Analysis of the evidence and central ideas in which you integrate your own ideas, values, beliefs, and assumptions

The type of evidential support (whether factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal) varies. Because students are often required to write expository essays with little or no preparation, the essays typically may not have a great deal of statistical or factual evidence.

Writers should include enough details to fully explain each piece of information. Writers should also try to “show and not tell.” They should not assume that the reader has prior knowledge or understanding of the topic of their essays. Writers should try to use words that clearly explain and describe in detail what they are talking about rather than just stating their ideas. They should leave no question that their readers might ask unanswered.

Writers should keep their writing interesting and not focus only on “the formulaic nature” of expository writing. Their goal should be to leave their readers with a better understanding and lasting impression of their topic.

There should be no inconsistencies or extraneous information. The details should support the main points or ideas to fully explain the thesis statement.

3. Clearly organized structure

Expository essays need an organizing structure that logically presents the main ideas and supporting details related to the thesis statement. Writers should select the structure that is best suited to a thoughtful and engaging explanation of their topic.

Common expository organizational patterns include the following:

- **Description:** The writer describes a topic by listing characteristics, features, and examples.
- **Sequence:** The writer lists items or events in numerical or chronological order.
- **Comparison/contrast:** The writer explains how two or more things are alike and/or how they are different.
- **Cause and effect:** The writer lists one or more causes and the resulting effect or effects.
- **Problem and solution:** The writer states a problem and lists one or more solutions for the problem. A variation of this pattern is the question-and-answer format, in which the author poses a question and then answers it.
- **Proposition and support:** The writer first asserts an idea or opinion and then provides information to support the idea or opinion.

The writer also uses meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections to enhance the logical movement of the essay and clearly show the relationships among ideas, making the writer’s train of thought easy to follow.

4. Strong introduction

Expository essays need an introduction that grabs the reader’s attention. The introduction should show why your ideas are worth considering and provide a brief overview of your topic.

Common ways to introduce expository essays include the following:

- **Solve a problem.** Problem solving will almost always grab your reader’s attention, especially in an academic context. It is also a good way to set up your thesis statement, which will then help the reader better understand it. This type of introduction can also set up your conclusion by allowing you to return to the same problem and show how the things you’ve said in your essay solve the problem or could still need further inquiry.
- **Start with an anecdote, a quotation, a question, or an interesting fact.** This form of introduction often will appeal to a reader’s emotions. Interesting anecdotes, quotations,

questions, and facts can quickly interest readers and make them want to read more. Try to think of an interesting/shocking/weird fact about your topic.

- **Acknowledge what others have said on the subject.** For some topics, the amount of literature available can be overwhelming. If you are writing on a popular topic, it's best to acknowledge in your introduction that much has been written on the subject. Your introduction needs to convey why your essay is important and how it is different from all the other literature that already exists on the subject.
- **Point out an irony or a paradox.** Paradoxes are logic puzzles, seemingly contradictory statements. They're great to use in introductions as a way to get the reader's attention.
- **Use an analogy.** If your topic is a bit obscure or abstract, try connecting it to something more familiar to your reader.
- **Jump into the content.** This strategy is good for audiences who don't like to read anything they don't have to. Sometimes it can be more dramatic to just start with your thesis.

5. Strong conclusion

The conclusion should not simply restate the thesis, but rather readdress it based on the evidence provided. Because this is the part of the essay that will leave the most immediate impression on the reader, it should be effective and logical.

Do not introduce any new information into the conclusion; rather, synthesize and resolve the information already presented in the body of the essay.

Writers use many types of conclusions. Below is a list of ideas for how you can bring closure to your essay. You can incorporate more than one of these types into a conclusion.

Common types of conclusions:

- **Summary:** Sums up all of your main points. This is the most basic and popular type of conclusion, but be careful not to repeat your thesis.
- **Link to beginning:** A nice companion for an introduction that features anecdotes, quotes, problem solving, and so forth. Tying the ending to your beginning gives readers a satisfying sense of closure. You might refer back to a certain image or phrase in your introduction. Keep in mind that this method works better in some essays than in others. In other words, if you try too hard to connect your conclusion to your introduction, it may come off as contrived and artificial.
- **Larger context:** Good for obscure and abstract topics where the details may have caused the readers to lose sight of the main point. This type of conclusion reminds your readers of the big picture, which means that you're answering the following questions: Why does my topic matter? What are the consequences of what I'm suggesting or proposing?
- **Call to action:** Common approach for proposal essays that ask your readers to respond to your position/argument with a specific action.

6. Purposeful and precise word choice

The writer's word choice in an expository essay should be accurate, concise, clear, and concrete. Effective word choice reflects a keen awareness of the expository purpose and maintains a tone appropriate to the purpose and audience. Writers often focus on word choice to improve their first drafts.

Examples of how word choice can improve writing include the following:

- Replacing overused words with stronger, more powerful ones
 - Action verbs
 - Adjectives
 - Adverbs
- Inserting phrases and sensory details that describe, explain, or provide additional detail and connections

7. Varied sentence structure

Sentences are the building blocks of writing. The ways sentences are constructed affect the fluency or the flow of the writing. Expository essays are enhanced when the writer uses purposeful sentences that are varied in both length and structure.

Examples of how writers can vary sentences to improve their writing include the following:

- Using a variety of sentence patterns: simple, compound, and complex
 - Combining short sentences with prepositional phrases, appositive phrases, or participial phrases
 - Combining short sentences by linking items of equal importance with a coordinating conjunction
 - Combining short sentences containing ideas that are of unequal importance with a subordinating conjunction
- Varying sentence beginnings by starting sentences in different ways
 - With an adverb
 - With a phrase (i.e., prepositional, participial, or infinitive)
 - With an introductory clause
- Breaking up long, rambling sentences (often run-on sentences) into two or three shorter sentences