

## Compositions

An **essay** is a type of short composition which presents a particular viewpoint and supports it with examples. The main idea is called the **thesis** and it is usually an opinion rather than a fact.

A common form is the *five paragraph essay*. In this form, the first paragraph introduces and explains the *thesis* or main idea. The next three paragraphs, called the *body* support the thesis by giving evidence and examples. The final paragraph brings all of the ideas together into a *conclusion*.

Various cultures have different styles for short compositions. In American English, the essay expresses and supports an *opinion*. Clear, direct writing taking a firm, persuasive stand on an issue is valued. It is not necessary to balance the essay by presenting other views, and ideas that are not directly related to the thesis (digressions) should be avoided.

A good thesis will clearly express the writer's opinion or attitude toward a topic. It should be sufficiently interesting to capture the reader's attention. Also, it should be sharply focussed or narrowed to a single main idea which can be supported by facts, details, and examples.

**Water is a big problem in Southern California.** (too broad for an essay)

**Our local water supply has caused environmental problems.** (more focussed)

The introductory paragraph should give any needed background or *context* for the thesis. The writer should assume that the reader is an average well-informed person. It is not necessary to state the obvious, but the writer should not assume that the reader has any special knowledge of the topic.

**People need water.** (too obvious)

**Siphons have limited usefulness in transporting water.** (requires special knowledge)

The introduction also sets the *tone* of the paragraph. It might be: serious, humorous, persuasive, argumentative, hostile, conciliatory, formal, informal, etc. It should state the writer's point of view and capture the reader's attention. Do not waste time with tired expressions like:

**I am going to write about water.** (We already know that.)

**I will discuss aqueducts.** (Don't talk about what you are going to do, *do it*.)

The body paragraphs should support the thesis through evidence, facts, examples, and the like. The evidence should be strong and to the point. The writer's aim is to convince the reader to accept a particular viewpoint or opinion.

e v i d e n c e

**Thesis** →→→→→→→ **Conclusion** (the evidence should lead directly to the conclusion)

The concluding paragraph should restate the thesis in different words and mention the most important points of the body. Restating the entire argument is not necessary. It is better to be brief. The purpose of the conclusion is to bring all of the ideas of the essay together, so the final sentence should be strong and it should give the reader the sense that the essay is finished. This is not the place to introduce new ideas or to make generalizations that are not supported by the evidence already presented.