



Universität St. Gallen

How to write an academic essay

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Resource Toolkit

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1.
What is an essay
(for)?

1. What is an essay (for)? |

2.
Six steps to a
well-crafted
essay

2. Six steps to a well-crafted essay |

3.
Dos and Don'ts

3. Do and Don'ts |



What is an essay?

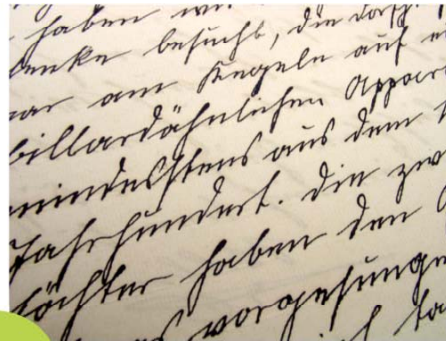
1.
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Dos and Don'ts

Short
piece of
writing

Centred
around a
main thesis



Expression of
a personal
point of view

Built on
evidentiary
support



What is an essay for?

1.
What is an essay
(for)?

Latin root: *exigere* – to examine, to test, to drive out

2.
Six steps to a
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*An essay is for examining and testing
ideas in a short form.*

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Dos and Don'ts

An essay develops a concise argument to convince the reader.



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Step 1: Your main thesis?



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Decide: What is your main thesis?
Write it down in one sentence!



“Managing the size of the Olympic Games is an essential task for the Olympic Movement in the near future.”

- The thesis takes a stand on the subject. It expresses an attitude toward the subject. It is not the subject itself.
- The thesis provides the glue of the essay. It defines what the essay is about and wants to prove. Without a clear thesis, it is impossible to write a good essay.



Step 2: The argumentative structure

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What are arguments that
support your thesis?

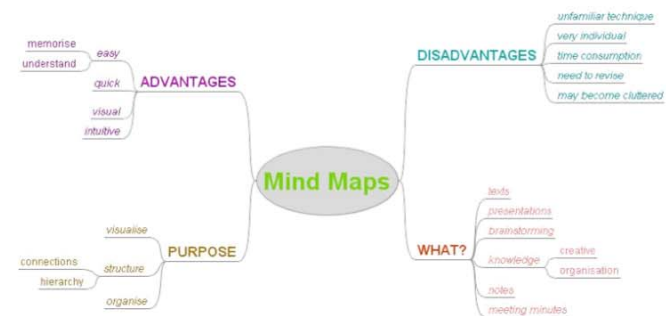


What are arguments that
challenge your thesis?



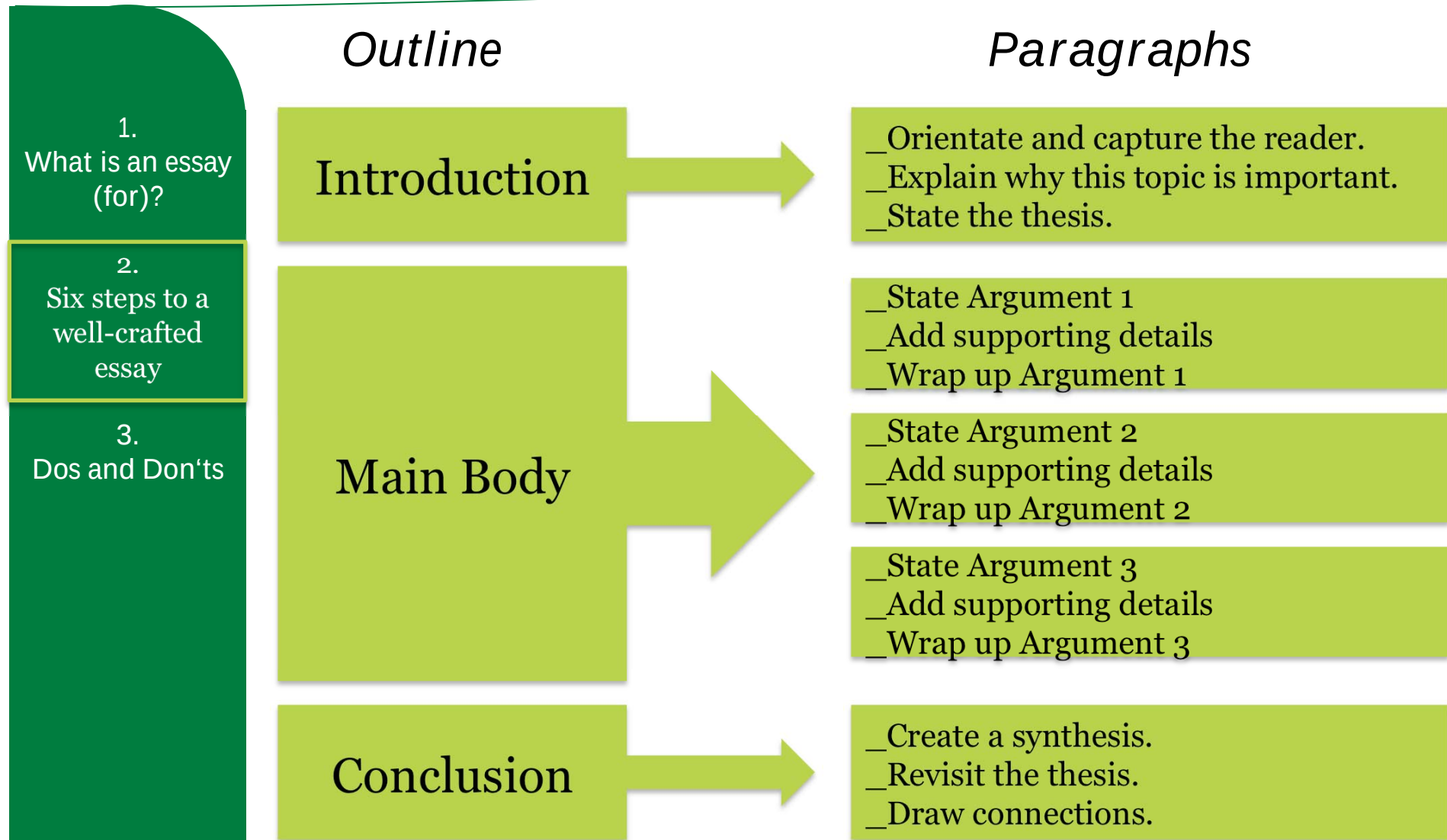
Make a list of the most important arguments!

*Tip: A good way to plan the
supporting structure could be
a mindmap.*





Step 3: The outline of a classic five-paragraph essay





Step 4a: A good introduction



A good introduction...

... is one in which interest and clarity cooperate, each nourishing the other.

... offers clues not only to the subject of the essay, but also to the way it is to be treated.

... arouses expectations that the body of the essay satisfies.

... states the thesis.

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Step 4b: Orientate and capture the reader

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~~“In this essay, I will explain why the Olympic Games have become too big for host cities.”~~

This is too general and boring.

Why not try this?



“With a total budget of more than \$30 billion, the Olympic Games in Sochi will become the most expensive Winter Games ever.”



Step 4c: Importance of the topic

Why is this topic worth worrying about?

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“This is by no means an isolated event. Over the past two decades, the Olympic Games have grown so much in scale that the preparation for them has a profound impact on urban development and risks creating huge budget deficits.”



Step 4d: Thesis

Towards the end of the introduction, state your thesis.

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“Managing the size of the Olympic Games is an essential task for the Olympic Movement in the near future.”

The introduction is the make-or-break point of your essay. Devote extra care to it!



Step 5a: Body



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*The body of the essay contains paragraphs
with evidence to back up your thesis.*

- Limit each paragraph to the exposition of one argument.



clarity and direction
conciseness
readability

- Check that each paragraph has a logical connection to the thesis.



Step 5b: First sentence of body paragraph

Start each body paragraph with your main argument.



“Security expenditure for the Olympic Games has ballooned over the past 20 years.”

By reading only the first sentences of your body paragraphs, the reader should be able to understand the whole argument.

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Step 5c: Evidential support

Back up your argument using evidence.

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“Whereas in Calgary in 1988 costs for security measures were less than C\$ 100 million, the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver cost almost ten times that amount. This is all the more reason for concern, considering that the number of spectators remained the same and that of the athletes merely doubled.”



Step 6a: Conclusion



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A good conclusion ...

... gives the essay a sense of completeness.

... leaves a final impression on the reader.

... closes the discussion without closing it off.

... establishes a frame by linking back to the beginning.

... does NOT repeat the arguments from the body of the essay.



Step 6b: Conclusion strategies

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What if?

What if this was not true?
What if the opposite
happened?

So what?

Why are you telling me this?
Why is this important?

What else?

How does this discussion
connect to the bigger picture?
What is the larger context?

Now what?

What implications does it have
for how we should act? What
should we do differently?



Step 6c: Sample conclusion

Example of a what-if-conclusion:

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“The Olympic Games live from being a great, stunning spectacle – no doubt. Yet, there is a life after the Games. Lest cities wake up to the cold reality of unused facilities and budget shortfalls, controlling the size of the Olympic Games is an urgent task. After all, escalating costs and the infrastructural burden could considerably dampen the appetite of cities to bid for the Games in the future. And that would be even worse for the Olympic Movement than white elephants.”



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Do: Revise, revise, revise.

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Nobody can write a good essay in a single shot. Having written a first version: revise!

Check...

- o... whether the essay body supports the thesis.
- o... whether there are any obsolete elements.
- o... whether the three parts of the essay are a coherent whole.

Essays can almost always be made more concise. Remember the French philosopher Blaise Pascal:



“I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.”



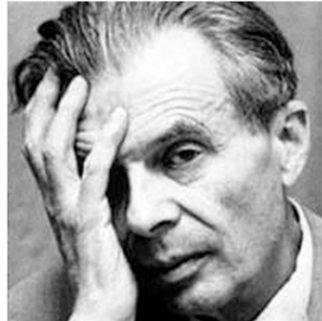
Do: Focus.



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“By tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece, and it is therefore impossible to give all things full play within the limits of a single essay.”

Aldous Huxley

Do not get carried away by adding ever more facts. All things being equal, a short essay is always better (and more difficult to write) than a long one.

Decide: Which arguments and evidence best support your thesis? Stick with those.



Do: Keep your balance.



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There is no need to pass over counter-arguments in silence. Acknowledge them. This can strengthen your own thesis even more, because you



anticipate doubts and pre-empt objections.
weigh alternatives before arguing for one.
confront difficulties instead of sweeping them under the rug.

Start your counter-argument with phrases like *one might object here that..., it might seem that..., it's true that..., admittedly,...* Or with an anticipated challenging question: *But how...? But why...? But isn't this just...?*

Then return to your argument, using phrases such as *but, yet, however, nevertheless or still.*



Do: Practice your essay writing skills.

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- Prepare for an exam by writing mock essays on the topic of the exam.
- When reading academic papers, analyse what argumentative techniques that paper employs to construct a convincing argument.





Don'ts



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- DO NOT use referencing or add a bibliography.



~~“Bidding to host the Olympic Games is part and parcel of urban entrepreneurialism (Hall 2006: 147).”~~

- DO NOT use trivial arguments that are common knowledge or belabour the obvious. This is an *academic* essay and as such requires careful analysis of evidence.
- DO NOT use sweeping generalisations. Why? Because they are always wrong.



And a final don't ...

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