

The Academic Essay: A Tool for Scaffolding Argument

The essay is a ubiquitous form in Anglo-American (English-language) writing traditions and the most common form of assigned writing on the university level, particularly during the transitional stage at the onset of university study. The reason it is so highly valued is its “ability to display critical thinking and development of an argument within the context of the curriculum” (Nesi/Gardner 2006, p. 108). This handout offers an overview of academic essay writing and provides a guide to assigning it.

Table of contents

1. Genre description.....	2
2. The Essay’s Role in Student Development and Assessment.....	2
2.1. The Essay Scaffolds Discipline-specific Argumentation	3
2.2. The Essay and Research-based Writing Skills.....	3
3. Formal Expectations of the Academic Essay.....	4
3.1. Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay” (2009)	5
3.2. The Shortfalls of the 5-paragraph Essay.....	6
4. Assigning the Essay.....	7
4.1. Suggested Essay Writing Assignments.....	8
4.2. Sample Assignment with Rubric.....	10
4.3. Where to find student essays from across the curriculum.....	11

1. Genre Description

The essay is a broad, inclusive, fluid genre, and written just as often outside educational institutions as it is within them. The label “essay” rarely appears without a qualifier, which broadly identifies the mode of writing readers should expect—personal essay, literary essay, persuasive essay, academic essay, narrative essay, etc. **All kinds of essays** are expected to

- be focused and relatively brief,
- manifest a strong sense of the author’s presence (through voice, originality of ideas, creativity of expression), and
- express the author’s clearly defined perspective and arguments.

In the **academic essay**, the subjective perspective of the student writer and her strategies of persuasion are sharpened and constrained by **academic argumentation** and scientific method. The expression, arrangement, and methodology of students’ arguments will vary across disciplines, but all effective academic essays

- develop a thesis,
- support that thesis with relevant evidence and methodologically coherent analysis or interpretation, and
- anticipate relevant objections or counterarguments.

2. The Essay’s Role in Student Development and Assessment

The essay foregrounds the writer, her ideas, her particular perspective, her discretion and processes of critical thinking and argumentation. Thus, **the purpose of the essay as a writing assignment is to develop in students the ability to “reason independently and construct a coherent argument”** (Nesi/Gardner 2012, 94). It is useful to contrast this purpose with those of other frequently assigned undergraduate writing assignments, like “critique” genres and “explanatory” genres.

<i>Umbrella genre</i>	Explanatory	Critique	Essay
<i>Sub-genre</i>	Summary/Exposé Encyclopedia entry Historiography Annotated bibliography Literature review	Scholarly article/ book review Theory/method evaluation Book/film/art piece/etc. review	Expository Discussion Challenge Personal narrative
<i>Academic skills emphasized</i>	Summary Description Synthesis	Analysis Evaluation/assessment Discipline-specific application of methods	Analysis/interpretation Independent reasoning/ application of critical thinking skills Argumentation

- In **explanatory** genres, students must display an *understanding* of established, shared knowledge.
- When writing **critique** genres, students are expected to *assess* the significance of an object of study and/or *evaluate* knowledge produced by their own discipline, a task that presents their relative grasp of disciplinary values and application of disciplinary methods.
- In the **essay**, where the essential task is to persuasively defend an original central claim, students must substantiate an argument with supporting evidence and claims, which requires moving beyond description and summary to *analysis* and *reasoning* (Nesi and Gardner 2012; Hyland 2009; Wingate 2012).

2.1. The Essay Scaffolds Discipline-specific Argumentation

- **Effective academic argumentation is always embedded in disciplinary practices.**

According to Stephen Toulmin (1958) academic arguments are made up of three basic parts: The **claim** (argument) is based on certain **grounds** (or evidence) and supported by a **warrant** (or generally held theory). Claims have to be supported, and the connection between claim and evidence must be justified by theories of the disciplines. In other words, “*to learn academic argumentation is to develop a discipline-based understanding of what counts as evidence, and which warrants can be used to build an argument*” (Nesi/Gardner 2012, pp. 91). More advanced students must also learn how to judge the *relevancy* and *significance* of their claims to their discourse community.

- **Essays provide a meaningful opportunity for students to apply disciplinary-based knowledge and argumentation in writing, and for instructors to scaffold and guide that process.**

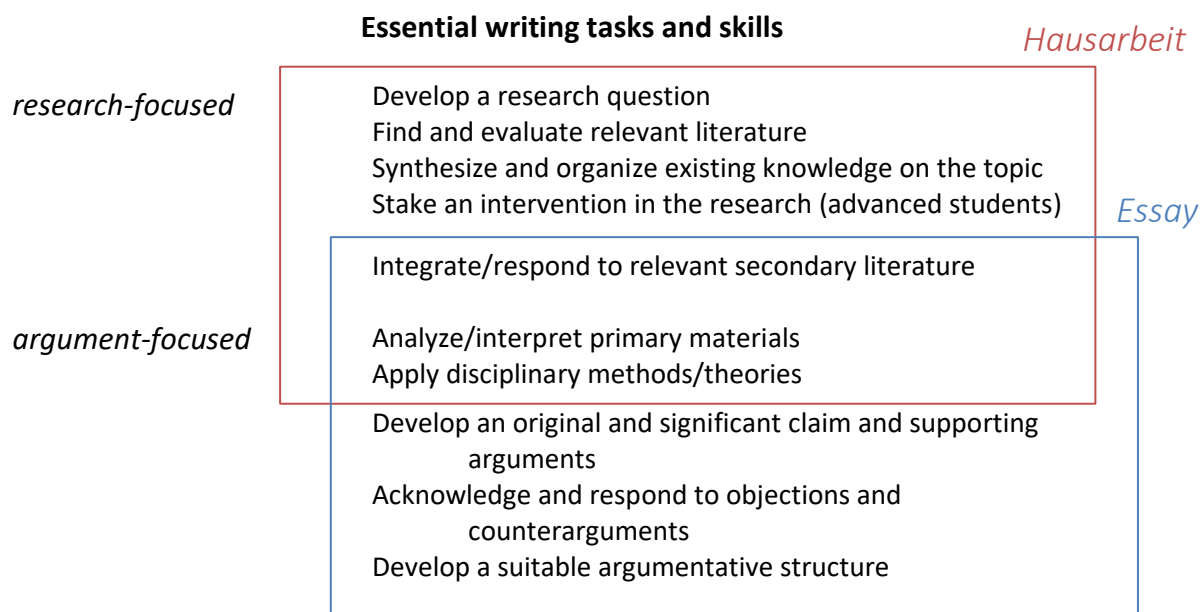
Outside of Philosophy, disciplinary argumentation is rarely taught explicitly; students instead absorb this knowledge passively, through course readings and observing their professors and more advanced students argue a case. Seminar discussions are a space for students to try out their newfound understanding, but it is through writing that students’ ability to apply disciplinary methods and clearly communicate original arguments is really tested, and many students’ greatest leaps in development occur through writing.

2.2. The Essay Scaffolds Research-based Writing Skills

Essays do not invite the same kind of independent and wide-ranging research that a *Hausarbeit*¹ would. However, **essay assignments can be designed to develop specific research-based**

¹ German professors and lecturers often translate “Hausarbeit” as “Research Paper” or “Term Paper.” However, there are significant differences between German Hausarbeiten and the Anglo-American Research Paper, namely the necessity of argument. A *Research Paper* without an original thesis statement and supporting arguments would be unacceptable, whereas it may be acceptable and is sometimes preferred by German faculty for students to turn in

argumentative writing skills necessary for longer writing projects. In a comparison of the essay and the *Hausarbeit*, we can see how overlapping skills can be scaffolded by first assigning essays:



- **The *Hausarbeit* is a cumulative genre.**

It asks a lot of students; in addition to conducting and organizing extensive research, they must integrate the rhetorical skills of critique, explanation, *and* often argumentation as they pursue and present the research on a particular topic.

- **The essay is a relatively limited writing assignment that can be used to develop writing skills relevant to research-based writing and/or to scaffold a longer writing project.**

Essays are particularly suited to developing students' ability to interpret primary materials and introducing students to secondary source use. Applying disciplinary methods to and engaging with secondary material in an original argument (as opposed to simply summarizing its ideas) is a difficult task for novice writers. Isolating tasks like these allows students to gain experience and confidence and prepares them for research-intensive writing.

3. Formal Expectations of the Academic Essay

As discipline-specific essays vary widely, there is no one formal template for the academic essay. (Although there is the general expectation that they be short, 800 – 1,200 words.) However,

Hausarbeiten that review others' arguments and have non-argumentative structures. *Hausarbeiten* are also organized around a research question; while a Research Paper may pose a research question, it will nevertheless present a thesis.

essays in the Anglo-American tradition generally follow a basic thesis-based structure that inverts the basic structure of a European paper:

European	Anglo-American
Question	Thesis
Review of possible answers to question in an evaluation/analysis/interpretation of evidence	Justification of thesis in an evaluation/analysis/interpretation of evidence; acknowledgement/response to counterarguments
Conclusive answer to question	Restatement of thesis

The Anglo-American model is **reader-oriented**: it presents a clear, succinct argument from the beginning, easing the reader's burden of understanding and saving them time (Rieneker, Jørgensen, and Skov 2013). This is not to say that one model is superior to the other; in fact, it could be argued that the writer-oriented model of European texts allows for more ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity in scientific writing. When assigning the essay to your students, it may be useful to discuss this difference between the two writing traditions, and to make clear your own expectations for their papers.

3.1. Gordon Harvey's Elements of the Academic Essay

Harvey's anatomy of the essay has been influential in American university composition classrooms and provides a useful vocabulary for discussing the components of the essay and elements of argumentative writing with students and when **commenting on student papers**. Below is a shortened version of Harvey's "Elements" (2009):

Thesis	The central argumentative assertion governing an essay.
Motive	The problem or question to which the thesis responds, or the circumstances that make it significant (what's at stake), thus establishing for readers <i>why the thesis matters</i> .
Key terms	The recurring concepts upon which an argument relies.
Evidence	The raw material—facts, examples, details derived from primary sources—referred to, quoted, or summarized in support of the thesis.
Analysis	The work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the raw material—of going beyond summary and observation to saying what can be inferred from the data such that it is <i>evidence</i> for a thesis.
Structure	It should follow a logical order apparent to the reader. This order should have a direction of <i>development</i> or <i>complication</i> , not be simply a list of

examples or series of restatements of the thesis (“Hamlet is ambivalent: he’s ambivalent here; and he’s ambivalent here; and he’s ambivalent here, too; thus, Hamlet is ambivalent”).

Stitching— transitions & signposts

Words that tie together the parts of an argument by indicating how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous (transitional words and phrases); and by offering “signposts” that refer back to ideas or statements and thus signal the paper’s structure to the reader.

Sources

Texts (or persons) referred to, summarized, or quoted that writers use to support or complicate their arguments.

Reflection/ Complication

General terms for when a writer **develops her argument**, as when writers

- consider a *counterargument*.
- define their *terms* or *assumptions*.
- handle a *newly emergent concern*.
- draw out an *implication*.
- consider a possible *explanation* for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated.
- offer a *qualification* or limitation to what they are saying.

Orientation

Bits of information, explanation, and summary that enable the reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is: *what does my reader need here?*

Stance

The implied relationship of the writer to her readers and the subject. Stance is communicated by such features as style and tone (e.g., familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of format and style. Stance should be established early on in a paper and remain consistent.

Style

Choices made at the word and sentence level that determine how an idea is stated.

3.2. Shortfalls of the 5-Paragraph Essay Form

The 5-paragraph essay is a common template taught in American secondary education (equivalent to Gymnasium). These essays state a thesis at the end of its introductory paragraph, and this statement includes three supporting reasons. Each of these reasons is then elaborated in its own paragraph. The final paragraph concludes by restating the thesis and its justification. This form is highly teachable and eminently grade-able, and thus wide-spread, and is often conflated with the essay itself.

As many secondary teachers and university professors have written, an over-emphasis on the 5-paragraph form can defeat the purpose of the essay: independent reasoning and critical thought.

It can also give students **false impressions of academic writing**—e.g., that an argument is sufficiently supported if the writer simply provides three reasons, or that, regardless of length, a paper should be 5 paragraphs—and **neglects the importance of *development and complication to academic argumentation***, leaving them unprepared for advanced university writing tasks (see Wesley 2000; Moss 2002; Wiley 2000; Rowlands 2016; Hillocks, Jr. 1984; Thomas 2000). In introducing the essay to your students, be wary of reducing it to a single possible form, and instead discuss with students the essay’s purpose, what it should achieve (e.g., the kind and quality of argument), and necessary requirements (thesis, supporting evidence, well-written paragraphs, etc.).

4. Assigning the Essay

Clear assignments lead to clear student writing. As you compose or review your writing assignments, you might consider how they fulfill and communicate the following components, informed by extensive research collected by the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College on effective writing assignments (Anderson, Anson, Gonea, and Paine 2009, qtd. in Bean 2011).

Purpose of Assignment	<p>Why are you assigning this task? What learning outcomes do you have in mind? These may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To demonstrate understanding of key concepts. • To assert and effectively support an original argument. • To apply key methods or theories. • To convincingly interpret primary materials. • To synthesize complex ideas. • To develop the ability to clearly communicate complex thinking.
Task	<p>The subject matter addressed by the assignment. What is the disciplinary problem, question, debate, etc. that the student must address/answer/respond to/resolve? What kind of critical thinking are you expecting students to demonstrate? For the essay, these may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate • Analyze • Compare and contrast • Describe • Explain
Role	<p>What is the student writer’s role or purpose? Should they aim to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform readers of new information? • Clarify or analyze a complex issue, process, or problem? • Persuade the reader of a particular position, interpretation, or analysis? • Deepen the reader’s sense of an issue’s complexity? And so on.

Audience	For whom are students writing (peers, instructor), and what is that audience's initial stance or understanding toward the writer's subject? It should be the student's goal to change this stance/understanding in some way. A few examples of how to set this up from Bean (2011): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are a research assistant to Mayor Pete, who needs to decide X. Write a policy brief that... • Scholars are divided about X. Write a formal academic paper presenting your position on this disciplinary problem. Imagine presenting the paper at an undergraduate research conference where listeners will likely be skeptical of your thesis.
Scope and Format	How expansive or limited should the paper's treatment of its subject be? Should they include outside research, or will the course's reading material suffice? Address questions students may have about genre (organization, style, tone), length, citation style, etc.
Process	What opportunities will students have to discuss their ideas/pitch a thesis to you, receive feedback from you or peers, and revise? What is the deadline?
Evaluation Criteria	How will the paper be evaluated? Attaching a rubric is particularly helpful.

4.1. Suggested Essay Writing Assignments

The following writing assignments, adapted from examples collected in Bean (2011), encourage thesis-governed writing and scaffold disciplinary argumentation.

Present a thesis for students to defend or refute. These should engage students in disciplinary controversies and encourage them to consider opposing views.

- The American constitution is (is not) democratic. [Political science]
- Nabokov's *Lolita* is (is not) exemplary of post-modern literature. [Literature]
- Gender did (did not) play a role in bringing about the French Revolution. [History]

Present a problem or question that requires students to find the best solution or answer. This assignment should invite a variety of arguments.

- Henry James often wrote about Americans' innocence and naivete when compared to Europeans. Throughout *Daisy Miller*, the American Daisy's innocence is frequently referred to and commented upon. Analyze the Jamesian understanding of "innocence" vis-à-

vis Daisy's character and answer the question: *Is Daisy Miller innocent?* Be sure to establish a thorough and textually supported definition of "innocence" before beginning your analysis.

[Literature]

- Imagine there are 5 people about to be run over by a train. If you press a button, the train will be diverted, but one person on the other track will die. Given how Kant derives the morality of a given action from the categorical imperative and that he rejects the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, how do you imagine he would evaluate pressing the button?

[Philosophy]

Ask students to develop a convincing interpretation of primary material in a thesis-governed paper (film, poem, data sets, graphs, etc.). The ultimate meaning induced from the material or data will become the writer's thesis, and the paper should not be merely description.

- Your task is to develop a formal analysis of an artwork discussed in class. Relying only on your visual reading (no outside research allowed!), interpret the artwork for your reader. By the end of your paper, your reader will have a clear picture of the artwork based on your description *and* a clear understanding of your interpretation. Your paper should clearly articulate a thesis statement that answers questions like: What is the meaning of this work? What is the message that the work or artist sends to the viewer? [Art history]

Ask students to write a "strong response" paper based on one or more scholarly articles or other readings. The students' task is to effectively summarize the argument(s) and respond, scaffolding academic reading and showing them how to position themselves within a scholarly conversation.

- Is death bad? Read the assigned article by Epicurus. In a short essay that sets up whether death is harmful to us, summarize Epicurus's argument in response to this question and present the strongest objection a naysayer might make to Epicurus.

[Philosophy]

- Read Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Summarize the main argument of his speech and analyze how his appeals concurred or diverged from contemporary abolitionist views. [History]

4.2. Sample Writing Assignment and Rubric

The following writing assignment and rubric was developed by historian Marc McLeod (Seattle University) for a first-year seminar in Latin American history and published by Bean (2011, p.138).

One of the most prominent topics in the historiography of colonial Latin America has been the nature of the encounter between Amerindians and Europeans beginning in 1492. According to a recent review essay by historian Steve J. Stearn, one of the three main paradigms or frameworks for interpreting the conquest has been that of the conquest as an “overwhelming avalanche of destruction,” characterized by the military defeat and demographic collapse of indigenous populations, the brutal treatment and ruthless economic exploitation of surviving natives by rapacious conquistadors, and the forced disappearance of pre-Columbian cultural, political, and social ways. Based on your reading of Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1515-1570*, would you agree with this view of the conquest as one of extreme destruction and trauma? If so, why? If not, what is the best way to describe the nature of the encounter between Spaniards and Amerindians in colonial Latin America?

Using Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Encounters*, as well as the other readings, lectures, and discussions we have had in the course, write a **4-6 page (typed, double-spaced, stapled) essay** answering the above question. The assignment is due **October 10**. Assume that you are writing an academic paper for an undergraduate conference on Latin America. Also assume that your audience has NOT read this assignment and will attend your conference session because your title hooked their interest. Your introduction should explain the problem-at-issue before presenting your thesis. Because this is an academic paper in history, follow the manuscript form of the *Chicago Manual of Style* and Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. I will grade your paper using the following rubric:

Introduction and Thesis Statement										
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
Explains problem to be addressed; provides necessary background; ends with contestable thesis statement; thesis answers question in prompt			Problem statement missing; problem poorly focused; thesis unclear, not contestable, and/or does not fully answer question in prompt				Paper begins without context or background; paper lacks thesis statement; reader confused about what writer is attempting to do			
Quality of ideas and argument										
20	18	16	14	12	10	8	6	4	2	0
Strong insights; remains focused on questions; effectively links course materials to question; good [disciplinary] reasoning			Some good insights; loses focus on question or gaps in argument; connections between question and course				Fails to adequately answer question; contains no clear argument; descriptive rather than analytical; tends to summarize course materials			

		material vague; unsupported generalization	
Use of evidence			
10	9	8	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
Excellent use of different course materials to support argument; effectively provides relevant examples, evidence, and appropriate quotes		Uneven use of evidence and examples; evidence not always directly relevant; over-reliance on a single source; significance of quotes not readily apparent	Lack of evidence and examples; evidence, if provided, not related to overall argument; limited reference to course materials
Organization and clarity			
10	9	8	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
Clear, well-organized paper; paragraphs begin with topic sentences related to thesis; topic sentences fully developed in each paragraph; paper flows logically, reader doesn't get lost		Generally sound organization; some topic sentences strong, others weak; some paragraphs not fully developed; reader occasionally confused by awkward organization; unclear sentences, fuzzy ideas	Poor organization, lacks clarity; paper not organized around coherent paragraphs; paragraphs lack topic sentences; prose is hard to follow and understand
Editing and manuscript form			
10	9	8	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
Flawless paper, or an occasional minor error. Looks like a professional history paper; notes follow assigned formal; contains an academic title.		Distractions due to spelling, punctuation, grammar errors; writer seems a bit careless. Varies from assigned style and format in a few ways; contains non-academic title.	Paper seriously marred by mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation; lack of editing. Paper does not follow assigned style and format; paper lacks a title.

4.3. Where to find student essays from across the curriculum

You might use model essays to show students concrete examples of the elements of the genre and to demonstrate how to fulfill your expectations.

- The [Yale Writing Center](#) maintains a collection of award-winning student essays from across the disciplines.
- [HarvardWrites](#), a digital initiative of the Harvard Writing Center and the Harvard Center for Teaching and Learning, likewise features exemplary award-winning student essays in its asynchronous lessons on academic argument.



Works Cited

- Bean, John C.: *Engaging Ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. 2nd Ed. San Francisco 2011.
- Harvey, Gordon. "A Brief Guide to the Elements of Academic Writing." *A Harvard Writing Project Brief Guide Series*. Cambridge 2009.
- Hillocks, Jr., George: "What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies." In *American Journal of Education* vol. 93, no. 1 (1984), 133-170.
- Hyland, Ken: *Academic discourse*. London 2009.
- Moss, Glenda. "The Five-Paragraph Theme." In *The Quarterly* vol. 24, no. 3 (2002), np.
- Nesi, Hillary and Sheena Gardner: *Genres across the Disciplines: Student writing in higher education*. Cambridge 2012.
- Nesi, Hillary and Sheena Gardner: "Variation in Disciplinary Culture: University tutors' views on assessed writing tasks." In R. Kiely, G. Clibbon, P. Rea-Dickons, & H. Woodfield, eds., *Language culture and identity in applied linguistics*. London 2006, 99-107.
- Rieneker, Lotte, Peter Stray Jørgensen, and Signe Skov: *The Good Paper: A handbook for writing papers in higher education*. Gylling 2013.
- Rorschach, Elizabeth. "The Five-Paragraph Theme Redux." In *The Quarterly* vol. 26, no. 1 (2004), np.
- Rowlands, Kathleen Dudden: "Slay the Monster! Replacing Form-First Pedagogy with Effective Writing Instruction." In *The English Journal* vol. 105, no. 6 (2016), 52-58.
- Thomas, P.L. "The Struggle Itself: Teaching Writing as We Know We Should." In *The English Journal* vol. 90, no. 1 (2000), 39-45.
- Toulmin, Steven: *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge 1958.
- Concept for worksheet: Carly Crane, Goethe University Schreibzentrum. Frankfurt a.M. 2020.