

Essay Writing Guide

What is it?

This guide is designed to teach you to write and edit an essay, or another argumentative piece, from start to finish. It will help you align your motivations with the work and to choose a topic that grips you.

This page will take you on a journey designed to convince you that writing an essay is a worthwhile endeavour, and to guide you through the process of doing it well. If you follow it, you will improve your ability to read, write, and think critically.

Who developed it?

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson is the bestselling writer of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, a clinical psychologist, and Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto.

"You can use this guide to write an excellent essay from beginning to end, using a ten-step process. Most of the time, students or would-be essay writers are provided only with basic information about how to write, and most of that information concentrates on the details of formatting. These are necessary details, but writing is obviously far more than mere formatting. If you write your essay according to this plan, and you complete every step, you will produce an essay that is at least very good. You will also learn exactly how to write an essay, which is something very valuable to learn."

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson

When to use it?

This guide recommends to writers highly-specific processes for outlining, reordering, and rewriting. You can reference it when you have a quick question, or if you want to improve your writing holistically you can take a deep dive into the guide. These processes can be performed in any reasonable word processor, however, to streamline the processes, Dr. Peterson and his team created Essay, which has specialized tools to help writers execute these steps.

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Why bother writing an essay?

So, you're considering writing an essay.

Before you start, you will need to convince yourself that doing so is worthwhile. This is extremely important, because your genuine belief in what you are doing will help organize your motivation and actions, and will make it much easier for you to write.

Most of the time, students write essays only because they are required to do so by a classroom instructor. They then come to believe that essays are important primarily to demonstrate their

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knowledge to a teacher or professor. This is not the case. It is simply, and dangerously, wrong.

The primary reason to write an essay is so that the writer can formulate and organize an informed, coherent and sophisticated set of ideas about something important.

Why might it be important to bother with developing sophisticated ideas? It is because doing so is a form of thinking.

Writing is a psychological technology which has evolved to help us think abstractly. Writing extends your memory, facilitates critical examination of your ideas, and clarifies your thinking.

"If you want to have a life characterized by competence, productivity, security, originality and engagement rather than one that is nasty, brutish and short, you need to think carefully about important issues. There is no better way to do so than to write."

Writing is thinking.

Consider this: you can write down far more than you can remember at one time. Writing therefore increases your capacity to consider a number of ideas at the same time.

Once those ideas are written down, you can move them around and change them, word by word, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph. You can reject ideas that don't hold up to your careful scrutiny.

If you do this, then all you will have left will be good ideas. You can keep those, and use them. Then you will have good, original ideas at your fingertips, and you will be able to organize and communicate them.

Thinking is powerful.

If you learn to write and to edit, you will also be able to tell the difference between good ideas, intelligently presented, and bad ideas put forth by murky and unskilled thinkers.

Then you can be properly influenced by profound and solid ideas instead of falling prey to foolish fads and whims and ideologies, which can range in their danger from trivial to mortal.

If you can think and communicate, you can defend yourself, and your friends and family, when that becomes necessary, and it will become necessary at various points in your life.

The person who can formulate and communicate the best argument almost always wins. This is true in many of life's domains.

If you want a job, you have to make a case for yourself. If you want a raise, you have to convince someone that you deserve it. If you are trying to convince someone of the validity of your idea, you have to debate its merits successfully, particularly if there are others with other competing ideas.

Our capacity to write and think is what makes us human.

Your mind is organized verbally, at the highest and most abstract levels. Thus, if you learn to think, through writing, then you will develop a well-organized, efficient mind – and one that is well-founded and certain.

This also means that you will be healthier, mentally and physically, as lack of clarity and ignorance means unnecessary stress.

"Unless you want to stay an ignorant, unhealthy lightweight, learn to write (and to think and communicate). Otherwise, those who can will ride roughshod over you and push you out of the way. Your life will be harder, at the bottom of the dominance hierarchies that you will inevitably inhabit, and you will get old fast."

Don't ever underestimate the power of words. Without them, we would still be living in trees. So when you are writing an essay, you are harnessing the full might of culture to your life.

That is why you write an essay (even if it has been assigned).

Forget that, and you are doing something stupid, trivial and dull.

Remember it, and you are conquering the unknown.

Before you start, set yourself up for success.

Now that you believe writing an essay is important, or you are at least willing to give it a real shot, there are some things you should know about your mindset and environment. The following is advice for how to set yourself up for success.

Leverage technology.

Most university students these days have a laptop, or a tablet, that they use for completing schoolwork.

Laptops are an excellent way to work on the go, but they are not always the most ergonomic, or the most efficient, right out of the box.

Consider using an external monitor, keyboard, and mouse. These will make writing more ergonomic and efficient, while minimizing frustration.

Monitors

Most monitors are height-adjustable, which allows better posture while working.

Ideally, you want two monitors. The idea is that you need space to look at your reference material at the same time as you are writing and taking notes. If you are not able to afford this kind of a setup, research how to do split screen on your particular OS, and make do.

Keyboard

The built-in keyboards that come with laptops are typically not as efficient or as ergonomic as an external keyboard. This keyboard doesn't need to be expensive, but it should be comfortable. There are many different options available: some people swear by mechanical keyboards, some prefer low-profile keys, and some enjoy unusual keyboards that are split by hand or which curve.

Mouse

It is also worth considering whether you would benefit from an external mouse. The trackpads on most modern laptops are usable, but are still not optimal for long writing sessions. If you are going to sit at a desk with a monitor and keyboard you will definitely need an external mouse or trackpad.

Finally, learn to toggle the mouse settings on your computer. A faster mouse tracking speed can make you more efficient.

Text Editor

We have produced a companion app that offers all the features you will need to produce an excellent essay using this guide.

Essay allows users to easily and intuitively outline, draft, rewrite and reorganize your essay.

You can still follow this guide without the specialized software.

Take care of your body while writing.

Most people find they are the most effective at writing in the morning.

It is important to sleep enough while you are undertaking a writing project. This ensures your brain is functioning at peak performance.

Before you start work, it is a good idea to eat something. This shouldn't be something fast-burning and carby, but rather something with a good amount of protein and fat that can sustain you.

Make the effort to have something filling and nutritious before you start working. If you're not in the habit of making breakfast, or if this problem will stop you in your tracks, perhaps you want to

go out and buy breakfast somewhere. Eat by whatever means necessary.

Commit to undistracted writing.

You should prepare to spend between 90 minutes and 3 hours writing. This may be difficult at first, so smaller chunks may work better while you are developing your focus.

There will always be distractions beckoning: Facebook. Instagram. YouTube. Internet porn. Texting an old flame. Getting chores done.

Each part of your mind that is concerned with such things will make its wants known, and attempt to distract you. But if you refuse to be tempted for fifteen minutes (25 on a really bad day) you will find that the clamor in your mind will settle down and you will be able to concentrate on writing.

If you do this day after day, you will find that the power of such temptations do not reduce, but the duration of their attempts to distract you will decrease.

You will also find that even on a day where concentration is very difficult, you will still be able to do some productive writing if you stick it out.

Align your expectations with reality.

Do not expect yourself to write all day. Three hours a day is a maximum, especially if you want to sustain it day after day.

Don't wait too late to start your writing, so you don't have to cram insanely, but give yourself a break after a good period of sustained concentration. Three productive hours are way better than ten hours of self-deceptive non-productivity, even in the library.

Finished beats perfect.

Most people fail a class or an assignment or a work project not because they write badly, and get D's or F's, but because they don't write at all, and get zeroes.

Zeroes are very bad. They are the black holes of numbers. Zeroes make you fail. Zeroes ruin your life. Essays handed in, no matter how badly written, can usually get you at least a C.

So don't be completely self-destructive. Hand something in, regardless of how pathetic you think it is.

Take the actions you need now.

What have you learned from reading this?

Is there anything you need to do to set yourself up for success?

Whether it is a trip to the grocery store or a decision about your bedtime, take the time to figure out if there are any actions you need to take before starting your essay-writing journey.

Your choice of topic is extremely important.

An essay is an answer to a question, and choosing the proper question to answer is arguably the hardest part of writing an essay.

You must choose a topic that is important to you. This should be formulated as a question that you want to answer.

Phrasing your topic as a question is important, because it helps organize your thoughts toward the goal of answering the question.

Perhaps your instructor has provided you with a list of topics, and you think you are off the hook.

Unfortunately, you're not. You still have to determine how to write about one of those topics in a manner that is compelling to you.

It's a moral, spiritual endeavour.

Choose a topic or an approach that speaks to your soul.

"If you properly identify something of interest to you, then you have put yourself in alignment with the deeper levels of your psyche, your spirit. If these deeper levels do not want or need an answer to the question you have posed, you will not possibly be interested in it. So the fact of your interest is evidence of the importance of the topic. You, or some part of you, needs the answer – and such needs can be deep enough so that life itself can depend upon them."

It is extremely important to ensure your topic is lined up with these deeper parts of your mind. This interest is what will motivate you to do a good job of writing and editing.

Don't waste your time with ideas that do not grip you.

If you can't find a way to become interested in a topic, it's possible that you need to read more. If you're experiencing this feeling consistently, it might be worth considering whether you are pursuing the wrong field of study.

"There is no such thing as reader's block. If you can't write, it is because you have nothing to say. You have no ideas. In such a situation, don't pride yourself on your writer's block. Read something. If that doesn't work, read something else – maybe something better. Repeat until the problem is solved."

You can begin the process of choosing a topic in two ways.

1. List the topics you have been assigned (or list ten or so questions that you might want to answer, if you are required to choose your own topic).
2. Start creating your reading list.

If you think you can already identify several potential topics of interest, start with topics. If you are unsure, then start constructing your reading list.

If you can't do this, then you have to do some more reading (which you will likely have to do to complete the essay anyway, so don't fret).

When you have listed your topics of interest, the last step is to choose one.

Write more than your word limit, then cut it down.

When you write your first draft, it should be longer than the final version.

This is so that you have some extra writing to throw away. You want to have something to throw away after the first draft so that you only have to keep what is good.

It is NOT faster to try to write exactly as many words as you need when you first sit down to write. Trying to do so merely makes you too aware of what you are writing. This concern will slow you down.

Aim at producing a first draft that is 25% longer than the final draft is supposed to be.

Essay makes it simple to calculate the right word count to aim for in your first draft.

Compile a reading list.

The next step is to determine what you need to read in order to write your essay. This step may come before choosing a topic, if you are not sure what you'd like to write about yet.

Your sources should be books or articles, generally speaking. If you don't know what articles or books might be appropriate or useful, then you could start with Wikipedia articles or other encyclopedic sources, and look at their reference lists for ideas about further reading. These sources are fine as a beginning.

A good place to find academic journal articles is Google Scholar. However, in order to access the

full-text, you will likely have to search for the titles you are interested in through your institution's website.

If you find someone whose writing is particularly interesting and appropriate, it is often very useful to see if you can find out what authors they admired and read. You can do this by noting who they refer to, in the text of their writings or in the reference list. You can meander productively through wide bodies of learning in this manner.

Assume you need 5–10 books or articles per thousand words of essay, unless you have been instructed otherwise. A double-spaced page of typing usually contains about 250 words. List your sources now, even if you have to do it badly. You can always make it better later.

An outline is not optional.

Now you have to write an outline.

This is the most difficult part of writing an essay, and it's not optional.

The outline of an essay is like the skeleton of a body. It provides its fundamental form and structure. Furthermore, the outline is basically the argument (with the sentences and the words serving that argument).

Your outline should be 10–15 sentences.

A 1,000-word essay requires a ten sentence outline. However, the fundamental outline of an essay should not get much longer than fifteen sentences, even if the essay is several thousand words or more in length.

This is because it is difficult to keep an argument of more than that length in mind at one time so that you can assess the quality of its structure.

So, write a ten to fifteen sentence outline of your essay, and if it is longer than a thousand words, then make sub-outlines for each primary outline sentence.

Here is an example of a good, simple outline:

Topic: Who was Abraham Lincoln?

1. Why is Abraham Lincoln worthy of remembrance?
2. What were the crucial events of his childhood?
3. Of his adolescence?
4. Of his young adulthood?
5. How did he enter politics?
6. What were his major challenges?
7. What were the primary political and economic issues of his time?
8. Who were his enemies?
9. How did he deal with them?
10. What were his major accomplishments?
11. How did he die?

Here is an example of a good longer outline (for a 3,000-word essay):

Topic: What is capitalism?

- How has capitalism been defined?
 - Author 1
 - Author 2
 - Author 3
- Where and when did capitalism develop?
 - Country 1
 - Country 2

- How did capitalism develop in the first 50 years after its origin?
 - How did capitalism develop in the second 50 years after its origin?
 - (Repeat as necessary)
- Historical precursors?
 - (Choose as many centuries as necessary)
- Advantages of capitalism?
 - Wealth generation
 - Technological advancement
 - Personal freedom
- Disadvantages of capitalism?
 - Unequal distribution
 - Pollution and other externalized costs
- Alternatives to capitalism?
 - Fascism
 - Communism
- Consequences of these alternatives?
- Potential future developments?
- Conclusion

Write a bad draft.

Now that you have your outline, the next step is to write your first draft.

Many people struggle with the first few words of an essay. They can put it off until the very last minute because of how uncomfortable it makes them feel to see their imperfect initial ideas.

It is therefore important that you embrace the idea of a “bad draft”.

A bad draft is a start. It can easily become a good essay, but it’s easier to start when the expectations are low.

When you’ve convinced yourself that it’s okay to write a bad draft to start, you can begin writing.

For each of your outline headings, you will write a paragraph composed of 10–15 sentences.

Don’t worry too much about how well you are writing at this point.

You may find it helpful to add additional subdivisions to your outline, and to work back and forth between the outline and the sentences, editing both. This is the time where you will want to make use of your notes, as well.

Try not to focus on the niceties of sentence structure, spelling, and grammar. That is all best left for the second major step, which is editing. You should think of the essay writing process as twofold, because it is. It is composed of production and editing, which are separable processes in the brain.

Production and editing are separate, and it is important to keep them that way.

When you infect your production with the process of editing, you can really impair yourself. This is because each interferes with the other. The purpose of production is to produce. The function of editing is to reduce and arrange. If you try to do both at the same time then the editing stymies the production. It’s not faster to combine them, nor is it better, and it is bound to be frustrating.

Your first draft can be relatively quick and dirty. You can use your notes, extensively, and rough out the essay. If you get stuck writing anywhere, just move to the next outline sentence. You can always go back.

Once you have completed 10–15 sentences for each outline heading, you will have finished your

first draft. Then it's time to move to editing.

The process of editing is what makes an essay excellent.

The next step is to edit your essay. This is where you will make massive improvements to the writing and ideas, and really hone your work. First, we will go over the philosophy behind the software's editing process.

An essay, like any piece of writing, exists at multiple levels of resolution, simultaneously. First is the selection of the word. Second is the crafting of the sentence. Each word should be precisely the right word, in the right location in each sentence. The sentence itself should present a thought, part of the idea expressed in the paragraph, in a grammatically correct manner. Each sentence should be properly arranged and sequenced inside a paragraph, the third level of resolution.

Your essay has to nail it at every level of resolution, from the sentence to the context and every paragraph in between.

As a rule of thumb, a paragraph should be made up of at least 10 sentences or 100 words. This might be regarded as a stupid rule, because it is arbitrary. However, you should let it guide you, until you know better.

"You have very little right to break the rules until you have mastered them."

A paragraph should present a single idea, using multiple sentences. If you can't think up 100 words to say about your idea, it's probably not a very good idea, or you need to think more about it. If your paragraph is rambling on for 300 words, or more, it's possible that it has more than one idea in it, and should be broken up.

All of the paragraphs have to be arranged in a logical progression, from the beginning of the essay to the end. This is the fourth level of resolution. Perhaps the most important step in writing an essay is getting the paragraphs in proper order. Each of them is a stepping stone to your essay's final destination.

The fifth level of resolution is the essay, as a whole. Every element of an essay can be correct, each word, sentence, and paragraph—even the paragraph order—and the essay can still fail, because it is just not interesting or important.

"It is very hard for competent but uninspired writers to understand this kind of failure, because a critic cannot merely point it out. There is no answer to their question, "exactly where did I make a mistake?" Such an essay is just not good. An essay without originality or creativity might fall into this category. Sometimes a creative person, who is not technically proficient as a writer, can make the opposite mistake: their word choice is poor, their sentences badly constructed and poorly organized within their paragraphs, their paragraphs in no intelligible relationship to one another – and yet the essay as a whole can succeed, because there are valuable thoughts trapped within it, wishing desperately to find expression."

There are two more levels worth considering.

An essay necessarily exists within a context of interpretation, made up of the reader (the sixth level), and the culture that the reader is embedded in (the seventh level), which is made up in part of the assumptions that he or she will bring to the essay.

These levels are important because you must consider your audience. Part of the purpose of the essay is to set your mind straight, but the other part, equally important, is to communicate with an audience.

Next, you will learn exactly how to create an essay that succeeds on all these levels.

"For the essay to succeed, brilliantly, it has to work at all of these levels of resolution simultaneously. That is very difficult, but it is in that difficulty that the value of the act of writing exists."

Rewrite, reorder, reread.

This section will explain exactly how to edit an essay into perfection.

Rewrite each sentence and choose the best version.

Choose a paragraph to edit. Start by rewriting each sentence within that paragraph.

You might find that the meaning of the sentence has been changed slightly, during the rewrite. It may be that the second sentence flows better than the first, and is also more precise and meaningful.

Compare the two versions, and try to choose the best one.

"Better [means] shorter and simpler. There is almost nothing a novice writer can do that will improve his or her writing more rapidly than writing very short sentences. See if you can cut the length of each sentence by 15–25%."

Using Essay, you can then drag and drop (or cut and paste) each of the sentences into a new order within the paragraph.

You can also eliminate sentences that are no longer necessary.

When you are satisfied with the first paragraph (which means that the sentences are necessary, short and punchy, and in the correct order) then go ahead to the next paragraph and do the same thing.

Reorder your paragraphs within the essay.

Next, you'll look at the order of the paragraphs themselves (as you just did with the sentences within each paragraph).

You may find that the order of the subtopics within your original outline is no longer precisely appropriate, and that some reordering of those subtopics is called for.

So, move around the newly improved paragraphs until they are ordered more appropriately than they were.

Rinse and repeat.

So now you should have produced a pretty decent second draft.

You have identified the appropriate sources, written the proper notes, outlined your argument, roughed in a first draft (paragraph by paragraph), rewritten your sentences to make them more elegant, and reordered those sentences, as well as the paragraphs themselves.

This is much farther than most writers ever get.

You may even think you're finished—but you're not.

The next step will take you from a "B" essay to an "A" essay. It may even help you write something that is better than you have ever produced.

Reconstruct your argument from memory.

Try to write a new outline of 10–15 sentences.

Don't look back at your essay while you are doing this.

If you have to, go back and reread the whole thing, and then return to this page, but don't look at your essay while you are rewriting the outline.

If you force yourself to reconstruct your argument from memory, you will likely improve it.

Generally, when you remember something, you simplify it, while retaining most of what is important.

Thus, your memory can serve as a filter, removing what is useless and preserving and organizing what is vital. What you are doing now is distilling what you have written to its essence.

Fill in a new essay.

Following this process, you'll be able to import material from your first draft into your new outline.

You may find that you don't need everything you wrote before. Don't be afraid to throw unnecessary material away. You are trying to get rid of what is substandard, and leave only what is necessary.

Once you have finished cutting and pasting your old material into the new outline, you will have a new and improved version. That will be your final essay.

If you really want to take it to the next level, then you can repeat the process of sentence rewriting and reordering, as well as paragraph reordering and reoutlining.

Often it is a good idea to wait a few days to do this, so that you can look at what you have produced with fresh eyes.

Then you will be able to see what you have written, instead of seeing what you think you wrote.

When you can no longer improve your writing, it's finished.

Here's a test to tell if you're finished with your essay: can you make it better?

You are not genuinely finished until you cannot edit so that your essay improves. Generally, you can tell if this has happened when you try to rewrite a sentence (or a paragraph) and you are not sure that the new version is an improvement over the original.

Don't forget to format your essay properly, and to create your bibliography.

If you got this far, good work.

If you write a number of essays using this process, you will find that your thinking will become richer and clearer, and so will your conversation.

We hope that this guide has helped you to read, write, and think more clearly.

"There is nothing more vital to becoming educated, than learning to write, and there is nothing more vital than education to your future, and the future of those around you."

Start using Essay

Want to write better essays? Try Essay now.

Use the tools at your disposal

This guide recommends to writers highly-specific processes for outlining, reordering, and rewriting. These steps can be performed in any reasonable word processor. To streamline the processes, Dr. Peterson and his team have produced a web app that offers specialized tools to help writers execute these steps exactly as suggested.

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