

# Guidelines for Writing an Essay

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Third Millennium Ministries

ACADEMIC  
PACKET

RESOURCES FOR GROUPS  
USING THE ACADEMIC PACKETS



# Guidelines for Writing an Essay

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RESOURCES OF *THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES* FOR GROUPS USING THE ACADEMIC PACKETS<sup>1</sup>

*Guidelines for students to write essays or other written projects*

## **Introduction**

An essay is a literary form that analyzes a specific topic in order to inform, explain, persuade, defend an opinion, or to stir interest. It is a more serious style, formal and academic. It should make a contribution to the reader in terms of new concepts or information.

The following guidelines will help you edit an essay. Most of the same principles apply to other written projects, such as an analysis of a Bible passage.

### **1. Decide on a unique and specific idea.**

An essay should express the idea of you, the author, instead of simply repeating the ideas of others. It is not simply a report on your research, but includes your personal reflection. Of course, you should take into account the ideas of others, but you should utilize these ideas to support your own point, or maybe to make a contrast with your view.

You should have something in mind that you want to communicate, and normally focus on one main point. For example, the essay could have the purpose of convincing the reader that Christ is sufficient for our salvation, or that Augustine was the most important theologian of his time, or that Genesis 3 explains all the problems of humanity. The different parts of the essay present evidence or arguments that either support the central idea, illustrate the idea, or show contrasting views. However, the content of the different parts of the essay should not stray away from the main point of the essay as a whole.

### **2. Do careful research.**

You should reflect on the topic that you wish to study. Write down questions that occur to you regarding the topic, and begin reading and collecting information to help answer your questions. Write down the bibliographical data for any quotes or ideas, including author, title, place of publication, publishing company, and year. Use cards, a notebook, or even better, write notes in a computer word processor. Afterwards, organize the notes into groups according to topic. You should begin focusing on what you consider important and discard things that are not related to your topic, even though they may be interesting. Concentrate on a few ideas that are related to the central theme of the essay.

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<sup>1</sup> This document was written by Richard B. Ramsay, first in Spanish, then in English. It has been modified and distributed in various versions by *Universidad FLET* (whose program of studies is now a Spanish extension branch of *Indiana Wesleyan University*), *MINTS International Seminary* and *Third Millennium Ministries*, all with permission of the author.

### **3. Write an appropriate title.**

The title of the essay should clearly communicate the main theme. It should not be too *general*, but rather point to a specific topic. For example, if you want to write about the physical consequences of the Fall in Genesis 3, the title should *not* be, "Man's Problem," or "Genesis 3," but "The Physical Consequences of the Fall According to Genesis 3." Neither should the title be too *specific*, pointing only to one aspect of the essay. For example, if the author wishes to write about all the physical consequences of the Fall, the title should *not* be "Why Women Give Birth in Pain" but rather as mentioned before, "The Physical Consequences of the Fall According to Genesis 3."

### **4. Organize your ideas in a good outline.**

An essay should have at least three main sections: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. The introduction stirs interest in the essay and explains what it is about. The body is the main development of the theme, and normally has several subdivisions. The conclusion summarizes the argument of the essay and shows what the author considers to be most important.

If the essay is well organized, the ideas are easy to follow. The writer should imagine that he is dialoguing with the reader, anticipating his questions and presenting answers. The reader should be able to follow the thread of thought even with a quick glance at the introduction, the titles of the sections, and the conclusion.

There are various ways to organize an essay. You should decide how to organize your project and be consistent with the plan. Make an outline to express your plan for organization. 1) If the purpose is to deal with a theological question, you may want to give some historical background, then you may want to present the answers given by different authors, one by one, then present your own personal view and defend it. 2) If the project is an analysis of a Bible passage, you may deal with one, two, or three questions related to the interpretation of the passage. Analyze them one at a time. It would be good to explain different interpretations given by other authors regarding each question, then present your own personal view of each one and defend it. 3) If the purpose of the essay is to inform about something historical, it may be organized in chronological order.

To defend your view, it is always good to give biblical support. However, an essay should not be merely a list of Bible passages. It is also helpful to use illustrations. You may want to use a logical argument, first presenting a premise, then a second premise, and the logical conclusion. Other people organize their thoughts best by pointing toward a central idea, like the hands of a clock that meet in the center.

Write your outline, with some key notes under each topic. The body of the essay (all but the introduction and conclusion) normally has at least two main divisions, each with at least two subdivisions. If there is only one subdivision, it is not really a subdivision but the main point itself. The main divisions should contain ideas that are equal in importance, but distinct in content. The subdivisions should contain ideas that are subordinate to the main division, and equal in importance among each other.

The traditional system of numbering is to use roman numbers for the main divisions, capital letters for the subdivisions, numbers for the next subdivisions, and small letters for the next, as shown in an outline of Paul's letter to the Romans on the following page:

## **The Letter to the Romans**

### I. Doctrine

#### A. Sin

1. The wrath of God against sin

2. All men are sinners

#### B. Justification by faith

#### C. Sanctification by faith

#### D. Eternal security

### II. Practical exhortations

#### A. Love

#### C. Submission to authorities

etc.

The introduction of the essay does not have a number or letter. Neither does the conclusion.

### Introduction

#### I.

##### A.

1.

2.

##### B.

#### II.

#### III.

### Conclusion

Alternative classifications systems are acceptable. The student just needs to be consistent and not mix them. For example, the following numerical system is also acceptable.

INTRODUCTION

1.
  - 1.1.
  - 1.2
2.
  - 2.1.
  - 2.2.
3.
  - 3.1.
    - 3.1.1.
    - 3.1.2
  - 3.2

CONCLUSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

**5. Write coherent paragraphs.**

A paragraph is the key unit of the essay. Review each paragraph to make sure that:

- a. All the sentences of the paragraph deal with the same subject.
- b. The paragraph has normally from 3-10 sentences. If there is only one sentence, it should become part of another paragraph, or maybe other sentences can be added to complete the paragraph.
- c. The central idea of the paragraph is expressed in the first or last sentence (normally).
- d. The other sentences contribute to the point of the paragraph, supporting, showing contrast, or giving illustrations.
- e. The paragraph is well organized. The paragraphs may follow any of the same organization styles that were mentioned in point 4 regarding the essay as whole.
- f. The sentences are clearly readable. Long sentences should be divided into two or more sentences. Avoid incomplete sentences without a main verb.
- g. Transition words and phrases are included when there is a change in thought (such as "however," "furthermore," and "on the other hand.") The reader needs to see the relationship between different points. Try reading the paragraph out loud. If it is not smooth, you probably need to modify it.

Do not hesitate to eliminate sentences that are not related to the main theme of the paragraph. They might belong better in another paragraph, they might be material for a whole new paragraph, or they might be completely unnecessary.

## 6. Use footnotes properly.

You must indicate all sources of ideas with footnotes, even if it is not a direct quote. You may use one of the two possible formats. However, you must be consistent within the essay, always using the same format.

### a. *Chicago Manual of Style*

This style gives more information in the notes. You should put a number in the text, after the quote or information used, in superscript, as seen here<sup>8</sup>. Then at the bottom of the page, put the footnote. (The footnotes may also be put at the end of each chapter, or at the end of the book, but we prefer them at the bottom of the page.)

If you do *not* have full information in the bibliography, use the following pattern:

8 Author [first name, then last name], *Title of the book* [in italics] (city of publication: publishing company, year) [between parentheses, with a colon between city and publisher, then a coma before the year, just as it appears here], page or pages cited.

Here is an example:

8 Federico García Lorca, *Bodas de Sangre* (Barcelona: Ayma, S.A., 1971), 95.

On the other hand, if you *do* have full information in the bibliography, you may simply put the author, title, and page number. The reader can find the rest of the information in the bibliography at the back.

Here is an example:

8 Federico García Lorca, *Bodas de Sangre*, 95.

### b. *MLA Style (Modern Language Association)*

This style puts the minimum information in parentheses, and takes advantage of the full information given in the bibliography at the back of the book, article, or essay.

For example, if the book in the bibliography is the following, ...

Marcuse, Sybyl. *A Survey of Musical Instruments*. New York: Harper, 1975.

...then within the text, only the author's name and the page number are necessary. For example, if the quote is taken from page 197, after the quote within the essay there should be a parenthesis as follows:

(Marcuse 197)

If there is more than one book by the same author, a short version of the title should be included, as follows:

(Marcuse, *Survey* 197)

If the author's name is mentioned within the essay, only the page number is necessary:

(197)

## **7. Include a bibliography.**

At the end of the essay, you should include a bibliography, listing all the books, articles, and web sites that you used for the essay. The format for the bibliography is slightly different from the footnote. The last name goes first in this case. There are no parentheses and no page number. The author's last name should not be indented, but if the entry uses more than one line, the other lines are all indented. Look at the following examples.

García Lorca, Federico. *Bodas de Sangre*. Barcelona: Ayma, S.A., 1971.

Marcuse, Sybyl. *A Survey of Musical Instruments*. New York: Harper, 1975.

## **8. Resources**

You may want to use the following sources for other help with editing and style:

a. Joseph Gibaldi, ed., *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999. (Currently the 6th edition is the latest.)

b. *The Chicago Manual of Style*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

c. You may also use the following books for reference:

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, latest edition.

Kirszner, Laurie G., and Mandell, Stephen, *The Holt Handbook*. Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace.

**9. Style of Title Page and Table of Contents**

TITLE PAGE

<p style="text-align: center;"><i><b>TITLE OF THE ESSAY</b></i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>NAME OF THE AUTHOR</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">NAME OF THE COURSE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Name of the Educational Institution</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Date</p>
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TABLE OF CONTENTS (Example of Classical style)

<p><b><i>TITLE OF THE ESSAY</i></b></p> <p><b>INTRODUCTON</b></p> <p>I.</p> <p>    A.</p> <p>        1.</p> <p>        2.</p> <p>    B.</p> <p>        1.</p> <p>        2.</p> <p>II.</p> <p>    A.</p> <p>    B.</p> <p><b>CONCLUSION</b></p> <p><b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b></p>
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TABLE OF CONTENTS (Example of Numerical style)

**TITLE OF THE ESSAY**

**INTRODUCTION**

1.
  - 1.1.
  - 1.2
2.
  - 2.1.
    - 2.1.1.
    - 2.1.2.
  - 2.2.
3.
  - 3.1.
  - 3.2.

**CONCLUSION**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**A Final Word**

There are many ways to write a good essay, and creativity is welcome. However, there are certain guidelines that help you communicate better. Probably the greatest challenge is to make your writing clear and easy to understand. It should be pleasant to read, and not hard work. Read your essay over and over until you are satisfied. The more you work on it, the easier it will be to understand. Have a friend or family member read your essay before you send it in. Also, read the essay aloud to see if the sentences communicate what you want to say. Your essay should be so good that it could be published!

## **Guidelines for Grading a Written Project**

If the students of your group are turning in a written project, we suggest the following guidelines for grading:

a. **CONTENT (60% of grade)**

- Does the introduction interest the reader in the essay and identify the topic?
- In the rest of the essay, is the topic developed clearly and logically?
- Are all points related to the main subject of the essay?
- Does the conclusion sum up the main point and properly finish the essay?
- In general, is the content interesting and clear?
- Does the essay make practical application of the topic studied?
- Does the author give adequate support for his view?

b. **STYLE, GRAMMAR, EDITING (30% of grade)**

- In general, are there few grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors?
- Are the sentences and paragraphs structured well?
- Is the essay organized in a way that is easy to follow?
- Is there a good use of vocabulary?
- Are transitional phrases used properly?
- Are the title page, the contents, and the section titles properly formatted?
- Are the footnotes and the bibliography properly formatted?

c. **DOCUMENTATION (10% of grade)**

- Are quotations documented?
- Are borrowed ideas documented?
- Do the footnotes contain the proper information?
- Does the bibliography contain the proper information?

Note: Plagiarism should be taken very seriously. If the grader believes that the student has intentionally taken ideas or copied from another source without giving proper credit, the student should be confronted.