

## Writing a Humanities Essay

Few good writers complete their work—even on a short essay—in one sitting. A good essay requires time to construct a compelling argument, to marshal the appropriate evidence, and to present it in a clear and effective way. It is best to divide the task of writing into several stages, preferably completed in short sessions over several days. This makes writing less daunting than if you attempt to complete it all at once.

Every writer develops his or her own preferred process for writing. The following is one recommended sequence of activities for developing and composing an essay.

### Argument-Building

1. **Study the prompts.** Read the prompts carefully and select the one you find most interesting. Break it down. What *exactly* is the prompt asking? Are there any words that seem important and require clarification before you start?
2. **Formulate a provisional thesis.** What are your preliminary views on the prompt? This thesis is a *hypothesis*. Be as specific as you can, but it is provisional—there is no need to perfect it yet. It is a starting point for constructing your argument. This version of your thesis will change as you gather evidence and make your argument more precise.
3. **Gather evidence.** Review your lecture and reading notes. Reread relevant passages in the texts. Are your general ideas about the prompt supported by the text itself?
4. **Talk to your TA.** An essay must communicate clearly. A discussion with your TA in office hours is a good way to test your preliminary ideas and to clarify what you need to make clearer and more precise. Talking to your TA can be helpful at many points throughout the process, but the TA's feedback is most helpful after you have some idea about what you want to argue and before you finish the essay.
5. **Select the evidence that best supports your argument.** You often have more evidence than can be included in a short essay. Look at the evidence you have gathered. Which pieces are most clearly related to your thesis? Which evidence works together to reveal different supporting claims for your thesis? Exclude all the other evidence.
6. **Revise your thesis.** Once you have collected and selected the evidence, you can substantially revise your provisional thesis. Does your thesis provide a *unified argument* connecting the evidence you have selected in a substantive way?

7. **Counterarguments.** Consider what arguments a critical reader might use to oppose your thesis. If you cannot think of any counterarguments, your thesis is either too obvious or merely a summary of the text, not an argument. If you locate a strong counterargument, consider how one making it would interpret the text and evidence you have used. What evidence can you use to show why your interpretation makes better sense of the text?
  
8. **Outline.** Not everybody needs to make a formal outline, but it is helpful as a final organizing step before writing. An outline allows you, the writer, to see more clearly what you want to argue and how the information is best organized to communicate the argument most effectively. Your outline should include *sections* (topics or themes you discuss) and *paragraphs* (the subunits of each section). Note where each piece of evidence fits best. Here are four principles to help you determine the best organization of your evidence:
  - **Relationship.** Is there a clear relationship between any of your themes and evidence? If so, keep the discussions of them near one another in the essay. Link them with a transition that shows the close relationship (*similarly* or *nevertheless*, etc.).
  - **Avoid duplication.** Ask yourself: “Does each piece of evidence advance my argument, or is it merely repeating the same point with other words?”
  - **Clarity & Forcefulness.** Some evidence is easier to connect to your thesis, while other pieces of evidence might require more work to fit. Consider where each piece of evidence is most effective in establishing your case in defense of your thesis. For example, do you have a foundational example? Consider using that evidence first. Do not leave your weakest evidence for last because it is an anticlimax, and it leaves the reader disappointed and less persuaded.
  - **Avoid linear presentation of the evidence.** Organize your essay around ideas. If you prioritize the text’s chronological order over the ideas you are arguing about, then your argument will be divided and, as a result, very difficult for the reader to follow.

## Drafting & Editing

1. **Two-Draft Policy.** Plan on writing a complete rough draft that you thoroughly revise at a later sitting. The process of reworking a rough draft is critical to catching mistakes in logic, presentation, and wording. Humans need time away from a task in order to gain perspective on it.

2. **Introduction & Conclusion.** It is good practice to make sure that the argument in the introduction and the conclusion match. You often learn about your argument while writing your essay. As a result, your conclusion sometimes captures your argument in clearer and more forceful terms than your original introduction did. On occasion, you find that your argument has evolved into something else entirely during the course of writing!
3. **Proofreading.** Edit your essay at least twice. While you revise your rough draft, do some basic editing of sentences and grammar, but stay primarily focused on your essay's argument. Then, after revising the rough draft, proofread your essay one more time, looking specifically for grammatical mistakes and poor word choice.

### **Campus Writing Resources**

If you need help with your essay, talk to your TA and use one of these campus resources:

- **Writing + Critical Expression Hub** in the Teaching + Learning Commons
  - <https://commons.ucsd.edu/students/writing/index.html>
- **OASIS** (Office of Academic Support & Instructional Services)
  - <https://students.ucsd.edu/sponsor/oasis/>
- **Humanities Peer Tutors**
  - <https://revelle.ucsd.edu/humanities/humanities-peer-tutoring/index.html>